

# L. RON HUBBARD



## The Battling Pilot

GALAXY  
P R E S E N T S

## Invitation—by Gunfire!

PETER ENGLAND sat brooding over four throttles and a wheel. His eyes went restlessly from left to right and right to left, taking in a couple square yards of meter-studded panel, watching oil temperature on Engine Three, revs on Engine One.

A thin little fellow slid quietly into the copilot seat beside him. England glanced in that direction with some annoyance. "Huh. You're Tom Duffy. What—"

"On deck, Captain. I've been promoted to Number Ten," said Duffy, trying hard to hide his elation.

"Where's Nelson?"

"Sick list."

"You ever fly a kite?"

Duffy blinked. "Why, I've been copilot here for three years, Mister England."

"No time to break in punks. I've been on here for sixteen."

Duffy looked sideways with some misgiving. Pete England was top pilot on the line, a long, hard-jawed devil, moody as Atlantic weather.

"You bet," said Duffy. "Some day I hope to be tops."

"Don't," said England bitterly. "Nothing in it but grief."

"Grief? Why . . . I thought it was fun, scooting from New York—"

“New York to Washington,” said England. “Washington to New York. New York to Washington. Washington to New York. Lots of fun. You must be in a spin.”

“Oh, no,” said Duffy, his round face glowing. “I think it’s swell. Keeping up the tradition—”

“Tradition,” snorted England.

“Sure, tradition. You’re the idol of—”

“Of what?” snapped England. “The passengers? Hell, you’ll be telling me this job is romantic in a minute. La-de-da. You’re a punk.”

Duffy blinked and squirmed in the bucket seat.

“You’re dumb,” added England, as an afterthought. “A guy would have to be dumb to like this.”

“B-But you’re tops!”

“You’ve got to get on top to look back, don’t you? Fun! What kind of fun is what I’d like to know. New York to Washington. Washington to New York. Flying a kite. Lugging sixteen passengers north for a lunch date, sixteen passengers south for a session with Congress. What kind of fun is that? I know every silo from here to New York. I know every spot on every cow. I can take a bearing on the number of milk cans sitting outside a gate. What’s the fun about that?”

“B-But gee!” said Duffy. “You don’t seem to realize what an honor it is—”

“To what? Cart sixteen passengers around, and half of them airsick? ‘Mister Pilot, please don’t hit the bumps so hard.’ Damn the passengers. Maybe ten years ago this was romantic. But that was ten years ago. There was some element of danger then. Not now. This is as common as pushing a

locomotive from Podunk to Punkin Center. If it wasn't for the pay, I'd have quit long ago. Say, what in hell is keeping those damned passengers?"

Duffy looked down the tunnel made by the awning and saw a group of people standing around the dispatcher. An argument was evidently in progress.

"That fat dame," said England, "is Mrs. Blant. She's going to see her daughter's wedding. She better put a waddle on or she'll miss the bells."

"Gee, do you know all of them?"

"There's a fellow there in brown I don't know," said England. "But the rest of them . . . That guy in the blue overcoat is sealing a construction job this afternoon and he's just about got time to make it. That young gentleman is Secretary Lansing's boy, on his way back—"

"Here comes a girl and an old dame," said Duffy. "Know them?"

Pete England leaned forward and looked across Duffy's uniformed chest. He scowled and shook his head.

"Nope," said England, "and what's more, we haven't got room for them. Boy, that old gal sure would break a mirror."

"The girl ain't so bad. Look there, Mister England! If that isn't sable she's wearing, I'll eat it hair by hair."

"Probably rabbit," said Pete. "What the hell is Dan up to?"

The dispatcher was following the pair out to the ship. Above the mutter of the props, the pilots could hear the angry protest of the regular passengers.

"Now what in the name of the devil is this all about?" scowled England.

The dispatcher thrust his face through the door and balanced upon a wheel. "All right, Pete. On your way."

"All right hell," said Pete. "You sending me north empty?"

"You've got two," said the dispatcher.

"But what about Mrs. Blant?" said Pete. "Her gal's getting married this—"

"Never mind," said the dispatcher. "Number Six will hit here in about thirty minutes. We'll send Johnson right back with this bunch."

"You mean," said Pete, ominously, "that you'll gow up the whole day's schedule and maybe leave me overnight in New York just to send this dame and her grandma north? You're dizzy as a cuckoo clock, Dan."

"Never mind how dizzy I am. On your horse, Pete."

"She must be awful damned important," said Pete.

"She paid double for every seat in the ship. She's plenty important. Take it easy, Pete."

Savagely, England gunned the four throttles. The big kite rushed away from the awning, braked in a half circle, charged toward the end of the runway, whipped into the wind and stopped.

Out of habit, Pete swept his glance over the panel.

"Wait a minute," said Duffy.

"What the hell—"

A hand fell on Pete's shoulder. He turned and looked back into the cabin. Right behind him and looming over him stood the old lady. Her face was proud and haughty. She had the appearance of a battle-scarred general commanding troops in a charge. Her beady eyes drilled twin holes in England.

"I beg your pardon, sir," said the old lady, "but I must be quite certain that you are competent to fly this machine."

Pete gulped. He turned red. A blast of hurricane intensity almost left his lips. He swallowed it, choked on it and then managed, "Quite competent, I am sure, madam."

"I must see your pilot's license, sir."

Pete swallowed again. He dug angrily into his pocket and yanked out a compact folder stamped "Master Airline Pilot, D of C."

The old lady took it and carried it back to the girl.

Pete's view of the young lady was obscured by her companion's back, but he did see that the coat was really sable even at that distance. She was, he grudgingly muttered, a looker, damn her.

The old lady came back and handed Pete his license. "Her Highness is quite satisfied, sir. You may proceed."

Pete blinked at the title, but for a second only.

The old lady added in a wintery tone, "You will, of course, fly low and slow, sir. And please avoid the bumps."

"Yes, ma'am," gritted Pete.

The four throttles leaped ahead under his savage hand. The kite lashed down the runway, bit air, came off as lightly as a puff of smoke, streaked around to the north, climbing, and leveled out for New York.

"She said 'Her Highness,'" said the awed Duffy. "Gee, Mister England, you don't suppose she's royalty or something, do you?"

"I'd like to crown her with a crankshaft," vowed Pete. "There you go, Duffy. You was just sitting there yapping

about how romantic this job was. Now see what's happened. Mrs. Blant will miss half the wedding. Old man Lord will probably lose the construction job. Secretary Lansing's son will probably miss his date. All because some damned dame comes in and overawes those punks in the office. What the hell right has she got to bust into our schedule, huh? My God, what does she think we're running? A trolley car service? We've got schedules to make. We've a tradition of service to maintain. We've never slipped on a run for two years, and now look what happens!"

"You better take up the slack in that wheel," said Duffy in a faint voice. "We're rocking all over the sky."

"Let her rock," snarled Pete. "Let her bump. I hope those two dames get so sick Mary will have to—"

"Say, Mary isn't here," said Duffy, looking anxiously around at the cabin. "Gee whiz, what do you know about that?"

"Mrs. Blood-in-your-eye probably made them leave the hostess home," said Pete. "I never saw such a job in my life."

"Gosh," said Duffy, "I feel bad about that."

"Why? What's one hostess more or less?"

Duffy blushed and twisted. "Well, Mary and me were . . . That is, we thought . . . well . . . This was to be my first run with her and . . ."

"So you're the guy she's airsick over," said Pete. "Hostesses never were noted for having an overdose of brains. But she ain't a bad looker, Duffy. Not bad."

"She's wonderful," said Duffy, an ecstatic look in his big, baby-blue eyes.

"Nuts," said Pete. "Sure she's got the looks, but once you get

a dame tangled up in your controls, look out. It takes women to make trouble in this world. Now look what's happened here. This doll-faced babe throws around a lot of bunk about royalty in the office back there, and the boys fall for it. They disappoint sixteen regulars just to give this dizzy blonde a solo to New York. What's she want to get there for? Hairdressing appointment, probably. Maybe not even that important. But she's too good to ride with the common herd. Too high and mighty to make a reservation. Not her. She's got to bust the hell out of records and traditions, she has."

"Aw, she couldn't be so bad as that," protested Duffy. "Besides you just said you didn't give a fare-you-well about records and traditions. You said . . ."

Caught and caught fairly, Pete reddened, clamped his teeth together and made a hard, rough sound like a frozen piston.

The kite hurled northward, over the rolling green of Maryland, over stone walls and white houses, over big barns with false windows painted in them, over hills and valleys, chased on the ground by a shadow which accomplished prodigious leaps and twists.

Pete England let her rock. The ship had plenty of dihedral and could right herself. Why bother just to make a couple of damned dames comfortable?

The Maryland line was crossed. The squarer, cleaner farms of Pennsylvania fled behind them. A small range of hills loomed ahead.

Pete began to growl again. This was the first time in his life he had really been angry with a passenger, although he spent plenty of his time damning passengers in general. Somehow



his pride was touched, and that could not be accounted. He felt outraged.

His father had been a war pilot and had later pioneered the airways, incidentally teaching Pete to fly. Pete, starting his own career at an early age, just at the time the old flying circuses were folding up forever, had started on airlines. He had stayed with airlines and regular money and regular runs, and he rabidly stated that the only difference between himself and a locomotive engineer lay in the difference between overalls and a gold braid uniform.

He had, in short, no pride of profession whatever. The thing was as common to him as a cirrus to the sky. Eight years he had flown a steady schedule without a break. He did not realize the inconsistency of his present bitterness.

More than once he looked back at "Her Highness." The girl was young, about twenty-six, perhaps. She had a regal way about her, a well-bred composure. She was, as Duffy said, beautiful. Her hair was a yellow-blond color. Her eyes were kindly and deep. Her mouth—

Well, damn her anyway for being beautiful, muttered Pete. And he promptly found new reasons to hate her.

The big transport plane was over the hills now, along a deserted stretch of sky and earth. A clearing appeared now and then below. Abandoned farms, left because of the weather's severity and the lack of adequate flat fields. Pete knew them all, one by one.

"Look," said Duffy, bumping Pete's arm.

Pete looked in the direction of Duffy's pointing finger. A single ship was yowling down the sky from the north.

“One of those damned Army pursuits on our beam,” said Pete, banking slightly to get out of the way. “They’re blind as bats. Last week when we had that fog I almost plowed right into one. He was flying his instruments, head down in his pit—”

“That isn’t an Army plane!” stated Duffy. “It’s changed its course for us.”

Pete steepened his bank. The transport shot off its course to the right.

The approaching pursuit was coal black, sleek and fast, looking like it meant business and lots of it.

Pete scowled terribly, came around off his course and started north again.

The pursuit ship flashed down over them with a screaming engine, came up in a loop, banked and lanced by in the opposite direction.

“He’s nutty,” said Pete, a little pale at remembering the fatal playfulness of a pursuit pilot years before. A transport had been downed by a collision. . . .

A staccato rattle sounded above the droning transport’s motors. Straight black streaks fanned out just ahead of the nose.

Duffy gaped at the streamers as they broke and whipped into the slipstream.

“Tracer bullets,” said Pete.

The pursuit ship raced before them. A black-hooded head showed in the cockpit. A black arm pointed emphatically down.

“Say, am I dreaming?” said Duffy. “Is this the Western Front or is it the New York–Washington run? Are we a transport or a bomber?”

"Don't ask me riddles," snapped Pete. "That baby means business."

"We don't carry anything worth swiping," wailed Duffy. "The guy's nuts!"

The pursuit whipped around, bored straight up, flipped over and yowled down at them. The rattle sounded again. Black smoke trailed behind the bullets, making a momentary rail fence around the big kite.

The black arm was raised when the small plane ripped past them again. A black-gloved hand was patting a machine-gun breach with great promise. The emphatic gesture was final.

"There's a two-by-nothing field down there," said Duffy. "Right there by that old brick farmhouse. He wants us to land in it."

"Good God," said Pete, "I can't set her down in that! He won't dare shoot us down. Number Six will be over here in thirty-two minutes, and he knows the wreckage would be spotted. Shoot away, you damned buzzard."

It was as though the strange pilot heard the command. Glass went out from in front of Pete's face. The wind blasted in at him, cold on the small red cuts about his eyes.

Duffy snatched his wheel and righted the transport. Pete shook away the red film of blood and grabbed the wheel back.

A musical but afraid voice rang in Pete's ear. "Land! Land! They'll shoot you down if you don't."

Pete looked up at the girl. Fear was there on her face, almost hidden by a mask of ice, but not quite.

"You know that gent?"

“No, but . . .”

Pete snatched at the radio switch and bore down on the key fastened to the control column.

“Washington, Washington,” rattled the key.

*Blam!*

Engine One leaped out of its mount and hurtled earthbound, prop splinters whined into Engine Two.

The shaken transport staggered in the air. Pete grabbed the wheel in both hands. He threw the switch on Engine Two and cut it. The black ship was coming around again. Tracer was lacing the sky in front.

Pete could do nothing else. He had both hands full. Duffy tried to get at a key and suddenly realized that he had no juice for sending.

Pete sideslipped back toward the brick farmhouse.

Wires screamed. The bottom fell out of the sky. The transport flipped level, nosed down.

Trees cracked the undercarriage.

Pete cut the guns and hauled back on his wheel.

The transport whistled down to a ragged landing on the rough terrain.

Pete braked into a ground loop.

He could hear the old lady saying, “There, there, dear. I know you tried. But this isn’t the end. Somehow we’ll succeed.”

Men were running forward from the house with drawn guns.



*Trees cracked the undercarriage.  
Pete cut the guns and hauled back on his wheel.*