

The Flying Chance

By Gordon McCreagh

I.

The commandant of the Philadelphia navy-yard looked up from the sheaf of papers which bore the superscription of the Bureau of Naval Affairs, Washington, at the young man who stood at attention before his desk.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Rankin," he said simply.

The brown, alert face showed no surprise. Ensign Rankin belonged to those men who cannot afford to be easily shaken from their balance, but his passionate argument was already on his lips.

"But why?" he cried. "Why? I passed in everything else. My sense of balance was perfect. My nerve reactions were A No. 1. My blood pressure, hearing, everything! Only those paltry two points I fell short in."

Official dignity relaxed just a trifle before the bitterness of the young man's disappointment.

"I'm sorry," the commandant said again. "But this flying business is dangerous enough as it is without our adding to it by overlooking the slightest imperfection in the human machine. The service requires a full twenty in eyesight, and your test measures up only eighteen. Therefore you have been judged 'unfit for aviation.'"

The hundred and sixty pounds of hard, lean athlete stiffened yet further with the fighting spirit.

“Then, with your permission, sir, I shall appeal for a waiver. Because I’ve flown all kinds of machines long before I ever got this commission.”

The commandant’s eyes were steely.

“It will do you no good to appeal to Washington for a waiver, Mr. Rankin. There have been a few cases, I admit—a very few, like Williams and Steffanson—but only after the men concerned have proved themselves to be expert beyond all question in spite of their physical shortcomings.

“These orders are final. You have already been transferred to line duty, and you will report to Lieutenant-Commander Evans for further instructions.”

Even the rawest and scrappiest ensign could make no mistake about that tone. Rankin sensed vaguely that the authority of the whole United States stood behind that incisive, unruffled voice.

He went, and reported.

“Ha, Rankin,” Lieutenant-Commander Evans greeted him. “I’ve already received orders about you. I’m sure we shall be pleased to have you with us. If you will call for me at the mess some time this afternoon I’ll take you on board and introduce you in the ward-room.”

Rankin murmured a conventional thanks. But he meant not a word of it. His mind was full of the injustice of his case. He was not interested in line duties; he had come into the service for aviation.

“I guess there’s nothing you can do till then,” Evans continued. “Only don’t get lost. Stick around the yard somewhere; because we’re under orders to hold ourselves in readiness to put out at a moment’s notice, and all leave has been cut short.”

“Very well, sir.”

“All right. See you around three o’clock then.”

Rankin’s was a war commission. That is to say, his rating in the naval militia had been accepted at its face value by the navy. He was therefore a full-blown ensign, just the same as any Annapolis graduate, much to the indignation of those same graduates, who had spent many toilsome years in qualifying for the same rank.

Militia commissions were always looked upon with disfavor by the Annapolis men. Rankin, for instance, had put in just two months with the naval militia of his State, and had been elected to a commission by his fellows on account of his happy popularity and his superior experience in flying.

The sacred traditions of the service, therefore, meant nothing to him. Stern discipline and unquestioning obedience were vague unpleasantnesses, half understood, and in theory only. To “stick around the yard,” then, for the rest of the day with nothing to do didn’t have any sense in it; furthermore, there was a girl who lived in West Philadelphia—and there was loads of time before three o’clock.

II.

Within the hour Rankin was ringing that familiar bell on the other side of the river. The girl kept him waiting, to stride nervously up and down the veranda. A wry grin twisted his firm, straight lips. She hadn't forgotten that little difference, then, and her ultimatum.

When she finally came out, after fully five minutes' delay, Rankin knew at once from the hard, set look about her usually dimpled mouth, and the steadiness of her gray eyes, that she had been schooling her determination, and that she still considered the barrier to exist. He knew well enough what it was, too, and his first rueful words were meant to remove it.

"Well, Eileen, I'm out of it at last."

"Out of what?" There was a half hope and a hint of willing surrender in her eager question.

"Out of aviation—for keeps."

"Oh, Jack! Did you really? I—I never thought—" The joyous exclamation stammered down to a more diffident, almost apologetic statement with a rising color. "I never really thought you'd ever give up so much, just for me."

Now there was a whole lot of plain human in Jack Rankin. He didn't ordinarily lie without necessity; but here was a sudden, irresistible temptation positively thrust at him to steal at least a little credit out of a situation which held nothing but the

bitterest disappointment for him. His hesitation was just for a fraction of a second, and then he prevaricated by inference.

Nor was he overskilful about it. He was just wise enough to hold his peace and to squeeze her outstretched hand with a world of meaning. Her surrender was instant and complete. With radiant eyes in which there was just a hint of tears, she led him to the comfortable hammock, plethoric with pillows, which swung in the veranda breeze.

“I know it’s an awfully big thing to have asked you, Jack,” she comforted him with the half regretful confidence of a big-hearted girl who has just forced a sacrifice from her lover. “But you understand now how I felt about it, don’t you, dear? I just couldn’t marry you as long as you stayed in that horrible business.

“I could never sleep without seeing that awful grand stand and that field where poor Bob— Oh, I can’t bear to think about it. And with Jim sticking to it yet; he’s so obstinate. One in the family is bad enough. I just couldn’t bear it, Jack.”

Rankin just patted the round curve of her shoulder and still said nothing. Bob was one of the many who had paid the toll to the greatest of all games; Jim was the other brother. Rankin understood how the girl felt, and the scrupulous conscience which besets every decent young man when he is in love smote him.

Almost he confessed. But when a beautiful, tearful girl jumps to a conclusion and makes a self-sacrificing hero out of one, how shall a man who is ordinarily human disillusion her? Jack

Rankin stifled the still, small voice and postponed the telling to a vague, more propitious future. Sufficient to the day the evil thereof. He would have trouble enough explaining his absence from the navy-yard, should his commanding officer by any chance look for him before his return. In the mean while, there were matters of infinitely greater importance.

Given a beautiful girl, a hammock, and the impending prospect of an indefinite separation, three o'clock in the afternoon arrives all too soon. When Ensign Rankin came to the officers' mess, hurrying to make up for lost time, and trying to carry off an air of innocence as if he had been looking for his chief for quite a while, a couple of juniors looked furtively at him.

His guilty conscience was quick to catch the glance, and he knew that his nemesis had overtaken him. But of the full virulence of its malice he had no inkling as yet.

"Seen anything of my skipper?" he asked with an assumption of ease.

"No," said one of them shortly.

"Not for hours and hours," added the other with equally ominous brevity.

"Hours and hours?"

"Yes. He was looking for you. Making knots all round the yard."

"Why so anxious?"

"Commandant's looking for you now." Rankin hid his anxiety by threatening to slay the last speaker.

“But why? Why? Let me in on the mystery, won’t you?”

“Leggo, you deserting ruffian! Why? *Because your ship put out from her berth under telegraphic orders at just about five bells this afternoon.* That’s why. Now you’d better go hide till you can think up a good excuse.”

Smash! The bomb had fallen! No wonder the whole navy-yard had been looking for him. Missing ship was a serious enough thing in itself; and when it had happened in the face of direct orders it became a matter for the outraged attention of the commandant himself, with prospects of Court martial looming dark in the immediate background.

Even Rankin sensed that he had offended beyond his realization. With the instinct of quick thinking which is so essential to the man who takes his life up into the shifting air currents, his mind flashed to the wireless plant. Perhaps he would be able to communicate with his commanding officer and rejoin at the first port of call. He made the radio station in just two jumps. The operator saluted him quite hastily.

“Yes, sir. Crowded with official business just now, sir; but I’ll be able to put your message through in about fifteen minutes. Where can I send the answer, sir? I guess I’ll have no trouble pickin’ up your ship.”

“His ship” again. The words jarred with an indefinable sensation. It conveyed an impression of irrevocable divorce from his ambition—aviation. Everybody seemed to regard him already as a part of the line organization. And, what was more,

there was a distinct air of congratulation about it; as though it let him into an honorable and super-select fraternity.

He murmured an abstract instruction to send the reply to the quarters of Junior Lieutenant Mason, and went there to wait for it, dodging furtively behind the various yard buildings to avoid a possible message from the commandant before he should be able to produce the news of his rejoining as a measure of mitigation.

Fifteen minutes drifted on to thirty. But Rankin hardly noticed. His mind was occupied with that queer idea about "his ship." He saw the thing in vague pictures. Himself, in charge of a gun-crew directing practice; himself, officer of the deck; himself, again, a brother officer in the comfortable relaxation of the ward-room with some of the first gentlemen of the world. Always himself holding down some position of trust as a member of a great and proud organization—a United States fighting-ship!

The thing obsessed him. There was an illusive stirring of his emotions, a vague thrill about it all. But, hang it all, what had he to do with ships at all? His ambition was to be a flier.

Into his abstraction broke two men engaged in speech.

"Operator reports very sorry, sir, but he can't get in touch with your ship, sir. Somethin' must be wrong with her wireless for the present; or mebbe it's static in the air. All messages are bad just now. He'll try again in a half an hour or so."

The retribution which dogs the steps of the wrong-doer! Before Rankin could commiserate himself on his ill-luck the other man

saluted and spoke up. His belt and side arms proclaimed him an orderly at a glance.

“Commandant’s compliments, sir, and he’d like to see you immediately.”

It had come! The inevitable! Ensign Rankin had to face his fate without a single extenuating circumstance in hand! He strode to the interview with something less of carelessness than had been his habit. For some reason the fact of having missed his ship troubled him more than he had ever thought possible.

In the commandant’s office he waited for some minutes in silence. That stern, self-possessed autocrat let him stand unheeded. He was nervously agitated over the papers which he held, official radio forms. He bit his pencil, frowning. At last he scribbled a message on a pad, fired it at an orderly, and looked up sharply at the delinquent officer. His tone was snappily brusque.

“H-m. Just arrived, I suppose. Well, my message was meant to reach you hours ago. Sorry. Can’t attend to your case just now. Urgent matters come to hand. You will consider yourself confined to the officers’ mess till I can find time to send for you again.”

III.

Rankin tiptoed out, thankful as any schoolboy that his sentence should at least have been postponed. On his way to the mess he was determined to look in for a last chance about his message to "his ship." He was thinking of it in those terms himself now; though his anxiety to get in touch with her was quite beyond his own analysis.

In the little sending-room, heavy with ozone, there was an atmosphere of frenzied haste. The operator was working frantically at his sender and straining to listen for the answering whispers which came only in intermittent dashes or in blurred nothings. The man continued sitting at his instrument and shot broken sentences at the officer between the spasms of staccato raspings from his key.

"Sorry, sir—nothing yet—tried five minutes ago—try her again later. Urgent code stuff comin' in—awful jumble. Static is somethin' fierce, 'count o' this storm brewing."

In the intervals of hurried speech he worked his key with his right hand and scribbled simultaneously with his left. He tore the form from his pad and thrust it at his messenger.

"Commandant! Jump to it! Yes, sir; somebody's all excited up somewhere; coding like mad. Trying to give a bearing, but I can't get it. There she goes again! If you'll wait a bit, sir, I'll try your ship again soon's I'm clear."

Rankin waited, feeling vaguely uneasy about the breakdown of his ship's wireless. The key crackled on, harsh, powerful, suggestive of imminent mystery somewhere. Rankin's elementary study of the international Morse presently recognized the recurring dash-dot, dash-dot as "repeat." Suddenly the operator sprang to his feet and stood to rigid attention.

Rankin wheeled, and saw—the commandant! With him was the officer of the watch.

Once again he was caught. A little thing this time; but still it was dallying with the thin edge of obedience. Rankin was surprised to find himself feeling his guilt.

But the commandant noticed him no more than he did the stiff-standing messenger. That great man's usually impassive face was flushed with uneasiness. The sheaf of decoded messages was clutched into a crumpled ball in his hand.

It must surely be something of the most extreme urgency, thought Rankin, which would bring the lord of all the navy-yard universe hurrying to the radio station in person. The commandant's whole attention, in fact, was directed fiercely at the operator.

"Get me that bearing!" he shot at him. "I must have that bearing! Seventy-two west, you say; is that correct? But the latitude, man; what's the latitude?"

"Correct as I can catch it, sir. Receiver's somethin' awful to-day; but seventy-two's what I make it out. An' I just got latitude thirty-three, twenty."

The information seemed to upset the great man entirely.

“Great Heaven! Just what I thought. She’s steaming right into it! Call the destroyer Woodruff immediately and stand by to send this; my code number, precedence of everything!”

The operator’s face went blank at the thought.

“Destroyer Woodruff? Sorry, sir. Can’t pick her up. Been trying for an hour. Wireless must be out of commission.”

“You can’t pick— My God! Dead in her course, too!” The flush of excitement on the commandant’s stern face had paled. “Call again, man! Keep on calling, and don’t stop!”

The tenseness was broken by the flashing crackle which streamed again from the sender. The commandant waited, tapping his foot in his agitation. Into his ferment Rankin with all his inexperience of official propriety intruded.

“Pardon me, sir. May I ask what is the trouble?”

“Eh, what!” The commandant looked at him blankly for a moment. Then indignation added to his nervous irritation. “What the— Your curiosity is out of place, *Ensign Rankin.*”

“Pardon me. *My ship, sir.*” Rankin said it with a feeling of pride, as though it conferred a right upon him.

“Your—ah, yes. And you missed her! Well, sir, *your ship is steaming into a whole fleet of submarines!* That’s the trouble. Five of them; or maybe ten, or a hundred, as far as we can make out from these confounded code flashes.”

“Whe-e-ew!” The wireless operator whistled his startled amazement before he remembered that he was merely a machine who heard nothing and knew nothing of what passed in that little electric-charged room, a highly sensitized automaton, bound by many oaths to eternal dumbness; then he hid his confusion under the crisp hissing of his key.

Rankin echoed his whistle. But his was a personal interest. There was a danger; and he thought somehow that he ought to be there to share it. “His ship” had taken a definite meaning in his mind. In the strained silence which followed, broken only by the intermittent crackling calls into the void, he pictured her rushing into the peril, all unwarned and unsuspecting. Vaguely the commandant’s voice came to him, talking to the operator seemingly out of the distance.

“It is imperative to communicate. *We must* get in touch.”

It woke him out of his abstraction with a start. A wild idea had begun to take shape in his brain. Thoughtless of all pros and cons, he grasped at it with enthusiasm. Eagerly he burst out:

“How about an aeroplane, sir?”

“Ha, an aeroplane!” With the exclamation the commandant’s face cleared, and for a moment he contemplated the idea as an inspiration of Providence. Then he shook his head.

“Impossible! Why, man, the Woodruff is two hundred miles on her way to Havana by now!”

“I could make that easily, sir; I’ve flown more than that before now.”

“And if you should miss her?”

“With a hydro, sir, I could come down alongside and be picked up.”

“Nonsense, boy!” the commandant snapped testily at his thoughtless enthusiasm. “I don’t mean that. Think, man, think. In any case, with a sea running like to-day’s, you’d be smashed to splinters long before you could ever be picked up. But what I mean is, suppose you should miss her entirely?”

“From what I know of those things, your course is a matter of guesswork, anyway, and you have to keep checking up by landmarks all the time. Out at sea you’d lose yourself in ten minutes. And when you’ve missed her, how are you coming back? Two hundred out and two hundred back, to say nothing if another hundred or so lost in overhauling her and scouting around. Why, man, there’s not a machine in the service capable of making that. Certainly not without special preparation. No, sir; the chance is too desperate for me to order any man out on a thing like that.”

Rankin’s enthusiasm, fell with a cruel slump, and all the happy eagerness died out of his face. All these things he had overlooked in the first flush of his inspiration; and they were all true, too.

The older man, keen old veteran, with practised anticipation of all possible eventualities, had put his finger with unerring accuracy on each of the weak spots. Nor did he magnify their weakness at all. The thing was desperate, a forlorn hope.

Rankin turned them dully over in his mind, looking for a possible saving clause, but not a one could he find. The eagerness then died from his face. But slowly its place began to be taken by a cold determination.

“I—I’d like to volunteer, sir, anyhow—to convey a warning to my ship.”

“Hey, what? What’s that? You’d like to volunteer?” The snappy irritation in the commandant’s voice was tempered with a sudden human understanding. He looked with fierce appraisal into the pale, hard-set face. The drama had crystallized down to just the two of them, two strong men looking into each other’s wide eyes with a single vital question-mark between them.

The rest of the scene and the men in it were forgotten as far as these two were concerned. But the others stood in strained, expectant positions as though they had been frozen. The signaler ceased from his incessant crackle to hang on the commandant’s words. Twenty seconds—thirty—a full minute; and only the broken, noisy breathing of somebody was heard. Then the commandant shook his head slowly, regretfully.

“Impossible, boy! I can’t do it! No, we must find some other way. Besides”—there was a world of kindness in the tone—“you see—I’m sorry—but you’ve been officially declared ‘unfit for aviation.’ I couldn’t let you go, even if I could contemplate your plan for a second. No, no, my boy, I’m sorry.”

He walked slowly to the door. There he turned suddenly, and the voice was snappily terse again.

“Signaler! What have you stopped for? Keep calling, and don’t stop for anything under any circumstances. If your wrist gives out, get a relay; and let me know immediately as soon as you connect. Immediately, by cycle orderly—Mr. Tracy, will you see to that? And my compliments to the senior officers of the yard to confer with me in my office immediately, please.”

The officer of the watch saluted. The commandant strode from the room. And in the immediately following swift bustle Rankin was the only man with nothing on his hands.

But his soul was full of bitter disappointment and heart-burning. “Unfit!” The reminder was a cruel stab into his enthusiasm, however kindly it had been put. He stood inertly, wrestling with bitter indecision for whole minutes, and then a queer expression, half smile half grimness, stole slowly over his face and he crept out of the room.

His next movements certainly looked like desertion, urged by desperation and tinged with madness. For, once out of the radio-room, he raced about the yard like one demented. To the sacred precincts of the instrument-room he rushed, and, making some wild explanation to the man in charge, he removed therefrom several of the neat leather cases of queer shapes. Another swift foray procured him a chart. In like manner he *borrowed* a car from the long, neatly parked line of officers’ private conveyances. Whose it was he didn’t know, and he didn’t care; only he took the one which seemed to give promise of the greatest speed.

Within five minutes of the commandant’s decision he was disobeying for the second time that day his orders to confine

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