

Outward Bound

At first Gordon thought the fault lay with the clock above the world map with the pins stuck in it representing all the places they had read about during the year. There were far too few such markers as far as Gordon was concerned, the bulk in the southern end of the San Joaquin Valley, with just a sprinkling throughout the rest of the United States. Other parts of the world had felt not so much as a prick of interest and enthusiasm. At eleven years of age and in the fifth grade, Gordon had travelled further in his mind's eye than most of his classmates - indeed most of the people in the district - ever would in any real or imagined state. It was to be the bane of his existence and already he was becoming aware of the waste of such precious time in pursuits that did not include journeys to distant lands, recognizing such losses as irreplaceable. Already he had begun to realize there just wasn't any way to slow the passage of time.

But on this particular Friday, Gordon was having difficulty coming to grips with the other side of time's two-edged sword, being more immediately concerned with the barrier time threw between him and 4:35 that afternoon when he was to board an aircraft at the Bakersfield Airport for a flight to San Francisco. Uncle Joe and Pastor Jacobs were representing their small congregation at the great Baptist Convention that had somehow found its way out of the southeastern United States and, since it was ". . . on our door step" so to speak, the vestry had come up with the funds to send the pastor and one of the deacons to the "City by the Bay". Uncle Joe was selected because his name was picked from the hat and Gordon got to go along because Aunt Claire was sick enough of his carrying's on to intercede on his behalf. Unfortunately, none of them; Joe; Claire, Pastor Jacobs, Gideon the mule, not the Good Lord Himself; could do a thing about the clock that ground inexorably to a halt, any more than they could halt the advance of storm clouds that gathered to the north and stalked resolutely down the perennially fertile valley, spreading gloom and finally badly needed rain across the thirsty rangeland standing up from the irrigated pastures near the river bottom.

It didn't help a bit that the dripping of the down spout which began far slower than the clock's methodical "tick . . . tock . . . tick . . . tock" soon caught and then suppressed the mechanical cadence, reinforcing Gordon's suspicion that time was indeed coming to a standstill. Worse yet was Mrs. Jennings's fear of lightning, which meant that studies and recess were dropped from the regular curriculum, giving way instead to "games."

Those games, Gordon had long since decided, were punishments inflicted on those with imagination by those who lacked it, most of whom became teachers or their pets when there were puddles to be kicked and mud to be explored. Mrs. Jennings particularly liked "Charades" which made no sense at all to Gordon. If you played the game and guessed the answer, all that happened was that Mrs. Jennings started a new game. The longer the game went on, the slower the clock hands moved, until when Sandra Stryker got her turn, they stopped

completely. By the time Mr. Ferris rewound the spring and used his clock-setting stick to reposition the hands, school was over and they had to dash to catch the district bus monopolized by the noisy high-schoolers.

The airplane was a Ford Tri-Motor 8-passenger high-wing monoplane, with fixed landing-gear and corrugated sheet-metal covering. It was operated by Valley Airways headquartered in Visalia, a struggling company providing commuter service with its two airplanes among several Central Valley cities from Bakersfield to Sacramento and from there to San Francisco. There was nothing very fancy about the operation. The terminal doubled as maintenance hanger and crop spray storage depot, providing sanctuary to half-a-dozen aircraft and a sizeable population of sparrows. The old-timer mechanics could tell without raising up from their work what was going on with the weather by the music the wind made as it assaulted the tattered planking and lapped and eddied among the rafters each creaking and groaning in response to some mystic rhythm all its own.

When the weather was good, which it mostly was, passengers waited outside enjoying the parade of gaily colored aircraft making takeoffs and landings in a lively fashion, particularly during spring and fall with all the spraying and seeding going on. Bad weather was a different matter as the hanger offered less shelter than one would have expected from so competent a structure it appeared to be. The oval roof was in generally good repair, but even a minor leak took on serious overtones in the presence of wind. No matter how hard you tried, you couldn't button the hanger up tight enough to keep the wind out, and even when it wasn't driving water in from the outside, it collided with the inevitable drips with the result that the air would become super-saturated, developing a visible mist several degrees cooler than the outside air. Sometimes during the winter, you could barely see your hand in front of your face for the ice-crystals that fluttered down from rafter level. It was quite a sight to find that after the rain, the hanger walls were white with rime ice up to the twelve foot level but clear above. It was nearly this condition in which Gordon and the other passengers found themselves as they huddled together next to a kerosene stove and stamped to keep their feet from going to sleep.

Though he was scarcely aware of any physical discomfort, Gordon could hardly stand the torture of the wait. It seemed interminable, yet when the sound of the airplane came to them from the west, it was a scant fifteen minutes behind schedule. The three-engine contraption had followed Highway 99 down from Visalia, and as it passed the Camel Cigarettes billboard at the Cotati Ranch Road, the pilot banked sharply left, carving a seventy degree arc to line up with a windrow of eucalyptus then flew for three minutes on the new heading. It was here that he came to his decision point, either finding the airport and landing or abandoning the effort by reversing course and heading back to the highway to consider his options. Despite the rain, the visibility was good and the pilot was able to touch down on his first pass, splashing gaily through the ruts and potholes toward the hangar. Valley pilots became very good at scud-running and tip-toeing through tule fog or they didn't last long with the airline.

Despite dismal conditions, Gordon and the others trooped outside and lined up quietly in the rain awaiting instructions from the pilot whose immediate concern was to help the southbound passenger de-plane. Then, one at a time, Pastor Jacobs in the lead, the sodden band embarked and set about stowing their possessions and settling themselves in the wicker chairs. The pilot, Captain James, apologized for being late but went on to explain that the worst was past and that they would make up the time by Fresno. With that, he disappeared into the cockpit, started the engines, and added power for takeoff without further ado.

It was wonderful. After a short roll made more memorable by the thuddings and thunkings transmitted from the wheels to the metal structure, the tail came up and the airplane hopped into the air. At first, the dramatic change in the noise level was disconcerting, but soon the song of the engines and propellers became the sturdy background presence which would stay with them until their next destination. After Gordon satisfied himself that he wasn't going to be sick or frightened, he began to focus on the wonderful tapestry unfolding beneath him. Features that appeared haphazard from the ground began to make sense. Contours, patterns, stratifications, variegations; the richness and vibrancy of nature contrasted so sharply with the dull repetition of man's creations that he was astonished by the mismatch. At first, with the visibility reduced by the tail-end of the storm, his vista was limited to features straight down below the airplane. It was strange viewing houses and barns and fields from above. He giggled at the sight of a dog racing along a farm road going for all he was worth trying to stay up with the plane and being left quickly behind for all his efforts. It was different with a trio of horses flashing through a pasture and out onto open range allowing them to weave back and forth with breathtaking abandon in their headlong dash. By then the sun was dancing through thin spots in the clouds projecting the trace of the plane's shadow on the ground, and for a moment the apparition seemed to spur them on, but one after another they fell astern. They were still running when Gordon lost sight of them, but by then they had shied off toward the river bottom in search of new adventure.

By the third leg between Fresno and Stockton, the sun was a brilliant fiery yellow presence hopping between puffball cumulus which were in turns grey-black, pink-grey, silver-rimmed slate, and cotton white with gentle gradations to luminescence to accent their plumpness. The deepening shadows transformed the monotony of mile after mile fertility into a shimmering explosion of undulating fecundity whose beauty and whisper of wealth and prosperity filled Gordon with a mingled sense of reverence and omnipotence. In a moment of divine revelation, he glimpsed the march of epochs across the face of the land and sensed his place among the descendants of the primordial stuff of dark and light.

Uncle Joe and Pastor Jacobs talked for a while and then dozed. Visalia, Fresno, and Stockton came and went, inviting a clamor that became, if not comforting, at least routine, and it was fully dark when they landed at Sacramento. By then, all that remained of the storm were a few patches of cumulus, billowed by sudden rushes of the dry northwest wind and lit by the radiance of the near-full moon climbing swiftly above the snow-

capped Sierra Range. The Sacramento River spread out languorously through the Suisun lowlands, nipped tightly down through the Carquinez Strait, before giving way completely to the San Pablo brine and the jewel-like setting of the San Francisco Bay. To Gordon, each of a million beckoning lights became a kernel of mystery and longing; each a spark of desires still hidden behind the cloak dividing him from manhood; each a symbol of untarnished hope and lifelong hunger.

With the power cut back, the thrum of the propellers drew soft giving way to the songs of wind whistling and playing with the undercarriage; scrubbing and plucking at the sculptured skin; caressing the fabric and rubber and glass of this intruder of the magic realm. Down the aircraft came, gathering the lights into patterns that inched, then slid, then sped and finally whirled past through the darkness, producing in Gordon such a wonderful sense of cascading from the heavens that he was devoured. There, poised in the not quite world of dream and intuition, Gordon soared to sleep 400 miles from home and light years since he'd left.

The airplane shuddered to a stop outside the one-room San Francisco Air Terminal and the passengers stood gingerly testing their land-legs before walking uncertainly down the inclined aisle to the aft door - all that is but Gordon who was curled up fast asleep. Uncle Joe gently hefted Gordon to his shoulder, exchanged a knowing glance with Pastor Jacobs, thanked the pilot for the fine flight, and headed for the terminal unaware that the sleeping Gordon had already glimpsed a future light years distant from the one he'd just left