VARIATIONS ON A THEME
II

The Tale of the Man Who Was Too Lazy to Fail

He was a schoolmate of mine in a school for training naval officers. Not space navy; this was before the human race had even reached Earth's one satellite. This was wet navy, ships that floated in water and attempted to sink each other, often with regrettable success. I got mixed up in this through being too young to realize emotionally that, if my ship sank, I probably would sink, too—but this is not my story, but David Lamb's.* (* There is no record that the Senior ever attended a school for militaro-naval officers, or any military school. On the other hand, there is no proof that he did not. This story may be autobiographical to whatever extent it is true; "David Lamb" may be one more of the many names used by Wood-row Wilson Smith.

The details are consistent with Old Home's history so far as we know it. The Senior's first century coincides with that century of continuous war which preceded the Great Collapse— a century of much scientific progress paralleled by retrogression in social matters. Waterborne and airborne ships were used for fighting throughout this century. See appendix for idioms and technicalities. J.F. 45th)

To explain David I must go back to his childhood. He was a hillbilly, which means he came from an area uncivilized even by the loose standards of those days—and Dave came from so far back in the hills that the hoot owls trod the chickens.

His education was in a one-room country school and ended at thirteen. He enjoyed it, for every hour in school was a hour sitting down doing nothing harder than reading. Before and after school he had to do chores on his family's farm, which he hated, as they were what was known as "honest work"—meaning hard, dirty, inefficient, and ill-paid—and also involved getting up early, which he hated even worse.

Graduation was a grim day for him; it meant that he now did "honest work" all day long instead of spending a restful six or seven hours in school. One hot day he spent fifteen hours plowing behind a mule…and the longer he stared at the south end of that mule, breathing dust it kicked up and wiping the sweat of honest toil out of his eyes, the more he hated it.

That night he left home informally, walked fifteen miles to town, slept across the door of the post office until the postmistress opened up next morning, and enlisted in the Navy. He aged two years during the night, from fifteen to seventeen, which made him old enough to enlist.

A boy often ages rapidly when he leaves home. The fact was not noticeable; birth registrations were unheard of at that time and place, and David was six feet tall, broad-shouldered, well-muscled, handsome, and mature in appearance, save for a wild look around the eyes.

The Navy suited David. They gave him shoes and new clothes, and let him ride around on the water, seeing strange and interesting places—untroubled by mules and the dust of cornfields. They did expect him to work, though not as much, or as hard, as working a hill farm—and once he figured out the political setup aboard ship he became adept at not doing much work while still being satisfactory to the local gods, namely, chief petty officers.

But it was not totally satisfactory as he still had to get up early and often had to stand night watches and sometimes scrub decks and perform other tasks unsuited to his sensitive temperament.

Then he heard about this school for officer candidates— "midshipmen" as they were known. Not that David cared what they were called; the point was that the Navy would *pay* him to sit down and read books—his notion of heaven—untroubled by decks to scrub and by petty officers. 0 King, am I boring you? No?

Very well— David was ill prepared for this school, never having had four to five years' additional schooling considered necessary to enter it—mathematics, what passed for science, history, languages, literature, and so forth.

Pretending to four years or so of schooling he did not have was more difficult than tacking two years on the age of an overgrown boy. But the Navy wished to encourage enlisted men to become officers, so it had established a tutoring school to aid candidates slightly deficient in academic preparation.

David construed “slightly deficient” to mean his own state; he told his chief petty officer that he had “just missed” graduating from high school—which was true in a way; he had “just missed” by half a county, that being the distance from his home to the nearest high school.

I don’t know how David induced his See-Pee-Oh to recommend him; David never discussed this.

Suffice to say that, when David’s ship steamed for the Mediterranean, David was dropped at Hampton Roads six weeks before the tutoring school convened. He was a supernumerary during that time.. The Personnel Officer (in fact, his clerk) assigned David to a bunk and a mess, and told him to stay out of sight during working hours in the empty classrooms where his fellow hopefuls would meet six weeks later. David did so; the classrooms had in them the books used in tutoring in academic subjects a candidate might lack—and David lacked them all. He stayed out of sight and sat down and read.

That’s all it took.

When the class convened, David helped tutor in Euclidean geometry, a required subject and perhaps the most difficult. Three months later he was sworn in as a naval cadet on the beautiful banks of the Hudson River at West Point.

David did not realize that he had jumped from the frying pan into the fire; the sadism of petty officers is a mild hit-or-miss thing compared with the calculated horrors visited on new cadets—”plebes”—by cadets of the senior classes, especially by the seniormost, the first classmen, who were walking delegates of Lucifer in that organized hell.

But David had three months to find this out and to figure out what to do, that being the time upper classes were on the briny, practicing warfare. As he saw it, if he could last nine months of these hazards, all the kingdoms of the Earth would be his. So he said to himself, if a cow or a countess can sweat out nine months, so can I.

He arranged the hazards in his mind in terms of what must be endured, what could be avoided, and what he should actively seek. By the time the lords of creation returned to stomp on the plebes he had a policy for each typical situation and was prepared to cope with it under doctrine, varying doctrines only enough to meet variations in situation rather than coping hastily on an improvised basis.

Ira—”O King,” I mean—this is more important to surviving in tough situations than it sounds. For example, Gramp— David’s Grampaw, that is—warned him never to sit with his back to door. “Son,” he said to him, “might be nine hundred and ninety-nine times you’d get away with it—no enemy of your’n would come through that door. But the thousandth time—that’s the one. If my own Grampaw had always obeyed that rule, he might be alive today and still jumping out bedroom windows. He knew better, but he missed just once, through being too anxious to sit in on a poker game, and thereby took the one chair open, one with its back to a door. And it got him.

“He was up out of his chair and emptied three shots from each of his guns into his assailant before he dropped; we don’t die easy. But ‘twas only a moral victory; he was essentially dead, with a bullet in his heart, before he got out of that chair. All from sitting with his back to an open door.”

Ira, I’ve never forgotten Gramp’s words—and don’t you forget ‘em.

So David categorized the hazards and prepared his doctrines. One thing that had to be endured was endless questioning, and he learned that a plebe was *never* permitted to answer, “I don’t know, sir,” to any upper classman, especially a first classman. But the questions ordinarily fell into categories— history of the school, history of the Navy, famous naval sayings, names of team captains and star players of various athletic sports, how many seconds till graduation, what’s the menu for dinner. These did not bother him; they could be memorized—save the number of seconds remaining till graduation, and he worked out shortcuts for that, ones that stood him in good stead in later years.

“What sort of shortcuts, Lazarus?”

Eh? Nothing fancy. A precalculated figure for reveille each morning, a supplementary figure for each hour thereafter, such as: five hours after six o’clock reveille subtracts eighteen thousand seconds from the base figure, and twelve minutes later than that takes off another seven hundred and twenty seconds. For example at noon formation one hundred days before graduation, say at exactly twelve-oh-one and thirteen seconds, figuring graduation at ten. A.M. which was standard, David could answer, “Eight million, six hundred and thirty-two thou sand, seven hundred and twenty-seven seconds, sir!” almost as fast as his squad leader could ask him, simply from having precalculated most of it.

At any other time of day he would look at his watch and pretend to wait for the second hand to reach a mark while in fact performing subtractions in his head.

But he improved on this; he invented a decimal clock—not the one you use here on Secundus, but a variation

on Earth's clumsy twenty-four-hour day, sixty-minute hour, sixty-second minute system then in vogue. He split the time for reveille to taps into intervals and subintervals of ten thousand seconds, a thousand seconds, a hundred seconds, and memorized a conversion table.

You see the advantage. For anyone but Andy Libby, God rest his innocent soul, subtracting ten thousand, or one thousand, from a long string of digits up in the millions is easier to do in your head, quickly and without error, than it is to subtract seven thousand, two hundred, and seventy-three—the figure to be subtracted in the example, I just gave. David's new method did not involve carrying auxiliary figures. in the mind while searching for the ultimate answer.

For example, ten thousand seconds after reveille is eight forty-six forty A.M. Once David worked out his conversion table and memorized it—took him less than a day; just memorizing was easy for him—once he had that down pat, he could, convert to the hundred-second interval coming up next almost instantly, then *add* (not subtract) two digits representing the time still to go to the last two places in his rough answer to get his exact answer. Since the last two places were *always* zeroes—check it yourself—he could give an answer in millions of seconds as fast as he could speak the figures, and have it right every time.

Since he didn't explain his method, he got a reputation for being a lightning calculator, an *idiot-savant* talent, like Libby. He was not; he was simply a country boy who used his head on a simple problem. But his squad leader got so groused at him for being a "smart ass"—meaning that the squad leader couldn't do it—that he ordered Dave to memorize the logarithm tables. This didn't faze Dave; he didn't mind anything but "honest work." He set out to do so, twenty new ones each day, that being the number this first classman thought would suffice to show up this "smart ass."

The first classman grew tired of the matter when David had completed only the first six hundred figures—but Dave kept at it another three weeks through the first thousand—which gave him the first ten thousand figures by interpolation and made him independent of log tables, a skill that was of enormous use to him from then on, computers being effectively unknown in those days.

But the unceasing barrage of questions did not bother 'David save for the possibility of starving to death at meal times— and he learned to shovel it in fast while sitting rigidly at attention and still answer all questions flung at him. Some were trick questions, such as, "Mister, are you 'a virgin?" Either way a plebe answered he was in trouble—if he gave a straight answer. In those days some importance was placed on virginity or the lack of it; I can't say why.

But trick questions called for trick answers; Dave found that an acceptable answer to that one was: "Yes, *sir*—in my left ear." Or possibly his belly button.

But most trick questions were intended to trap a plebe into giving a meek answer—and meekness was a mortal sin. Say a first classman said, "Mister, would you say I was handsome?"—an acceptable answer would be, "Perhaps your mother would say so, sir—but not *me."* Or "Sir, you are the handsomest man I ever saw who was intended to be an ape."

Such answers were chancy—they might flick a first classman on the raw—but they were safer than meek answers. But no matter how carefully a plebe tried to meet impossible standards, about once a week some first clansman would decide that he needed punishment—arbitrary punishment without trial: This could run from mild, such as exercises repeated to physical collapse—which David disliked as they reminded him of "honest work" —up to paddling on the buttocks. This may strike you as nothing much, Ira, but I'm not speaking' of paddling children sometimes receive. These beatings were delivered with the flat of a sword or with a worn-out broom that amounted to a long, heavy club. Three blows delivered by a grown man in perfect health would leave the victim's bottom a mass of purple bruises and blood blisters, accompanied by excruciating pain.

David tried hard to avoid incidents likely to result in this calculated torture, but there was no way to avoid them entirely, short of quitting, as some first classmen awarded such blows through sheer sadism. David gritted his teeth and accepted them when he had to, judging—correctly—that he would be run out of school if he defied the supreme authority of a first clansman. So he thought about the south end of that mule and endured it.

There was a much greater hazard to his personal safety and future prospects of a life free from "honest work." The mystique of military service included the idea that a prospective officer must excel in athletic sports. Do not, ask why; it was no more subject to rational explanation than is any other branch of theology.

Plebes in particular had to—no choice!—go out for "sports." Two hours each day which were nominally free David could not spend napping or dreaming in the quiet of the school's library, but must perforce spend in sweaty exercise.

Worse still, some "sports" were not only excessively energetic but also involved hazards to David's favorite skin. "Boxing"—this is a long forgotten, utterly useless, stylized mock combat in which two men batter each other for a preset period or until one is beaten unconscious. "La Crosse"—this is a mock battle taken over from the savages who had formerly inhabited that continent. In it mobs of men fought with clubs. There was a hard missile with which points were scored—but it was the prospect of being sliced open or having bones broken with these clubs that aroused our hero's distaste.

There was a thing called "water polo" in which opposing swimmers attempted to drown each other. David avoided that one by not swimming more than well enough to stay in school—a required skill. He was an excellent swimmer, having learned at the age of seven through being chucked into a creek by two older cousins—but he concealed his skill.

The sport with highest prestige was a thing called "foot ball"—and first classmen sized up each new group of victims for candidates who might be expected to excel, or learn to excel, in this organized mayhem. David had never seen it—but now he saw it and it filled his peaceful soul with horror.

As well it might. It involved two gangs of eleven men facing each other on a field and trying to move an ellipsoid bladder down the field against the opposition of the other gang. There were rituals and an esoteric terminology, but that was the idea.

It sounds harmless and rather foolish. Foolish it was, harmless it was not—as the rituals permitted the opposing gang to attack a man attempting to move the bladder in a variety of violent ways, the least of which was to grab him and cause him to hit the ground like a ton of brick. Often three or four bit him at once, and sometimes inflicted indignities and mayhems not permitted by the rituals but concealed by' the pile of bodies.

Death was not supposed to result from this activity but sometimes did. Injuries short of death were commonplace.

Unfortunately David had the ideal physique for success in this "feet ball"—height, weight, eyesight, fleetness of foot, speed of reflex. He was certain to be spotted by the first classmen on their return from mock sea battles and "volunteered" as a sacrificial victim.

It was time for evasive action.

The only possible way to avoid "foot ball" was to be acceptably occupied with some other sport. He found one.

Ira, do you know what "swordsmanship" is? Good—I can speak freely. This was a time in Earth's history when the sword had ceased to be a weapon—after having been prominent for more than four millennia. But swords still existed in fossil form and retained a shadow of their ancient prestige. A gentleman was presumed to know how to use a sword and— "Lazarus, what is a 'gentleman'?"

What? Don't interrupt, boy; you confuse me. A "gentleman" is, uh—Well, now let me see. A general definition— My, you can think up some hard ones. Some said it was an accident of birth—that being a disparaging way of saying it was a trait genetically inherited. But that doesn't say what the trait is. A gentleman was supposed to prefer being a dead lion to being a live jackal. Me, I've always preferred to be a live lion, so that puts me outside the rules. Mmm…you could say in all seriousness that the quality tagged by that name represents the slow emergence in human culture of an ethic higher than simple self-interest—damn slow in emerging in my opinion; you still can't rely on it in a crunch.

As may be, military officers were presumed to be gentlemen and wore swords. Even fliers wore swords, although Allah alone could guess why.

These cadets were not only presumed to be gentlemen; there was a national law which stated that they *were* gentlemen. So they were taught a bare minimum about how to handle a sword, just enough to keep them from slicing their fingers or stabbing bystanders—not enough to fight with them, just to keep them from looking too silly when protocol required them to wear swords.

But swordsmanship was a recognized sport, called "fencing." It had none of the prestige of football, or boxing, or even water polo—but it was on the list; a plebe could sign up for it.

David spotted this as a way out. Under a simple physical law, if he was up in the fencing loft,then he was *not* down on the football field, with sadistic gorillas in hobnailed boots jumping up and down on him. Long before the upper clansmen returned to school Plebe Cadet Lamb had established himself as a member of the fencing squad, with a record of never missing a day, and was trying hard to look like a "good prospect" for the team.

At that time and place three forms of fencing were taught: saber, dueling sword, and foil: The first two used full-sized weapons. True, edges were dulled and points were bated; nevertheless a man could get hurt with them

—even fatally, though that was very rare. But the foil was a lightweight toy, a ‘fake sword with a limber blade that bent at the slightest pressure. The stylized imitation swordplay that used the foil was about as dangerous as tiddlywinks. This was the “weapon” David selected.

It was made for him. The highly artificial rules of foil fencing gave great advantage to fast reflexes and a sharp brain, both of which he had. Some exertion was necessary—but not much compared with football, lacrosse, or even tennis. Best ‘of all, it required no body-against-body pounding that David found so distasteful in the rough games he was avoiding. David applied himself single-mindedly to acquiring skill so that his haven would be secure.

So diligent was he in protecting his sanctuary that, before his plebe year was over, he was National Novice Foil Champion. This caused his squad leader to smile at him, an expression that hurt his face. His cadet company commander noticed him for the first time and congratulated him.

Success with the foil even got him out of some “punishment” ‘beatings. One Friday evening, when he was about to be beaten for some imaginary dereliction, David said, “Sir, if it’s the same to you, I’d rather have twice as many swats on Sunday—because tomorrow we’re fencing the Princeton plebe team and, if you do the job I know you can do, it might slow me up tomorrow.”

The first clansman was impressed by this because having the Navy win, at any time and for any purpose and in anything, took precedence by Sacred Law over anything else, even the righteous pleasure of beating a “smart ass” plebe. He answered, ““Tell you what, mister. Report to my room after supper on Sunday. If you lose tomorrow, you get a double dose of the medicine you’ve got coming to you. But if you win, we’ll cancel it.”

David won all three of his matches.

Fencing got him through his perilous plebe year with his precious skin unmarked save for scars on his bottom. He was safe now, with three easy years ahead of him, for only a plebe was subject to physical punishment, only a plebe could be ordered to take part in organized mayhem….

(Omitted)

One body-contact sport David loved, one of ancient popularity, which he had learned back in those hills he had fled from. But it was played with girls and was not officially recognized at this school. There were harsh rules against it, and .a cadet caught practicing it was kicked out without mercy.

But David, like all true geniuses, paid only pragmatic attention to rules made by other people—he obeyed the Eleventh Commandment and never got caught. While other cadets sought the empty prestige of sneaking girls into the barracks or went over the wall at night in search of girls, David kept his activities quiet. Only those who knew him well knew how industriously he pursued this one body-contact sport. And no one knew him well.

Eh? Female cadets? Didn’t I make that plain, Ira? Not only were there no girl cadets, there was not one girl in that Navy—except a few nurses. Most particularly there were no girls at that school; there were guards night and day to keep them away from the cadets.

Don’t ask me why. It was Navy policy and therefore did not have a reason. In truth there was no job in that entire Navy which could not have been performed by either sex or even by eunuchs—but by long tradition that Navy was exclusively male.

Come to think about it, a few years later that tradition *was* questioned—a little at first, then by the end of that century, shortly before the Collapse, that Navy had females at all levels. I am *not* suggesting that this change was a cause of the Collapse. There were obvious causes of the Collapse, causes I won’t go into now. This change either was a null factor or possibly postponed the inevitable by a minor amount.

Either way, it doesn’t figure into the Tale of the Lazy Man. When David was in school, cadets were supposed to encounter females but seldom, and only under highly stylized circumstances, rigidly bound protocol, and heavily chaperoned.* (* From the noun “chaperon.” This word ‘has two meanings,: (1) A person charged with preventing sexual contacts’ between males and females not licensed for such contacts; (2) a person superficially performing such disservice while, in fact acting as a benign lookout. It appears that the Senior uses the word here in its first meaning rather than in its antithetical second méaaning. See appendix. J.F.45th)

Instead of fighting the rules, David looked for loopholes and made use of them—he was never caught.

Every impossible rule has its loopholes; every general prohibition creates its bootleggers. The Navy as a whole created its impossible rules; the Navy as individuals violated them, especially its curious rules about sex —a publicly monastic life on duty, a slightly veiled life of unlimited voluptuousness off duty. At sea, even harmless

reliefs from sexual tension were treated most harshly when detected—although such technical violations of the mores were expected and condoned less than a century earlier. But this Navy was only a little more hypocritical in its sexual behavior than was the social matrix in which it was imbedded, more excessive in its outlets only to the degree that its public rules were more sternly impossible than those of that society as a whole. The public sexual code of that time was unbelievable, Ira; the violations of it simply mirrored in reverse its fantastic requirements. To every action there is an equal and opposite reaction—if you'll excuse the obvious.

I did not intend to discuss this other than to say that David found ways to get along with the school's regulations about sex without going completely off his nut, as too many of his classmates did. I'll add only this —and this is merely rumor: Through a mischance all too easy then although unheard of today, a young woman became pregnant, presumably by David. In those days—believe me!—this was a major disaster.

Why? Just stipulate that it *was* a disaster; it would take forever to explain' that society and no civilized human would believe it. Cadets were forbidden to marry, the young woman *had* to get married under the rules current then, intervention to correct this mischance was almost unobtainable and physically very dangerous for her.

What David did about it illustrates his whole approach to life. When faced with a choice of evils, accept the least hazardous and cope with it, unblinkingly. He married her.

How he managed to do this and not get caught, I do not know. I can think of a number of ways, some simple and fairly foolproof, some complex and thereby subject to breakdown; I assume that David selected the simplest.

It changed the situation from impossible to manageable. It converted the girl's father from an enemy, all too likely to go to the Commandant of the school with the story and thereby force David to resign when he had but a few months more to reach his goal, into an ally and fellow conspirator anxious to keep the marriage secret so that his son-in-law could graduate and take his wayward daughter off his hands.

As a side benefit David no longer needed to give planning to the pursuit of his favorite sport. He spent his time off in unworried domesticity, with perfect chaperonage.* (* Context implies second meaning. *J.F.45th)*

As for the rest of David's career in school, one may assume that a lad who could substitute six weeks of unsupervised reading for four years of formal schooling could also stand first in his class academically. This would pay off in money and rank as a young officer's place on the promotion list was determined by his standing at graduation.

But the competition for first place is sharp indeed, and— worse—makes the cadet who achieves it conspicuous. David became aware of this when he was a fresh-caught plebe. "Mister, are you a savoir?" that is to say: "academically brainy"—was another trick question; a plebe was damned whether he answered Yes or No.

But standing second—or even tenth—was practically as useful as first place. David noticed something else: The fourth year counted four times as much as the first, the next to the last year three times as much, and so on down—that is, a plebe's marks did not affect his final standing much—only one part in ten.

David decided to maintain a "low profile"—always the smart decision when one is likely to be shot at.

He finished the first half of his plebe year a little above midway in his class—safe, respectable, inconspicuous. He ended his plebe year in' the upper quarter—but by that time the first classmen were thinking only of graduation and paid no attention to his status. His second year he moved to the upper 10 percent; his third year he improved that by a few numbers—and his last year, when it counted most, he went all out and finished with a final standing for four years of sixth—but effectively second, for of those higher in ranking two elected to leave the line of command for specialization, one was not commissioned because he had damaged his eyes by studying too hard, and one resigned after he graduated.

But the care with which David managed his class standing does not show his true talent for laziness—after all, sitting down and reading was his second, favorite pastime, and anything which merely called for excellent memory and logical reasoning was 'no effort to him.

During the mock-warfare cruise that opened David's last year of school a group of his classmates were discussing what cadet ranks each would receive. By then, they knew pretty well which ones would be selected as cadet officers. Jake is certain to be cadet corps commander—unless he falls overboard. Who gets his battalion? Steve? Or Stinky?

Someone suggested that Dave was in line for that battalion. Dave had been listening instead of talking, a 'standard feature of his "low profile"—and very nearly a third way to lie, Ira, and easier than its equivalent —talking while saying nothing—and also tends to give the nontalker a reputation for wisdom. Never cared for it myself—talking is the second of the three real pleasures in life and the only thing that sets us apart from the apes. Though just barely.

Now David broke—or appeared to break—his habitual reserve. “No battalion for me,” he said. “No indeedy! I’m going to be regimental adjutant and stand out in front where the girls can see me.”

Perhaps his remark wasn’t taken seriously—regimental adjutant is lower than battalion commander. But it was certain to be repeated, and David knew it, perhaps by the prospective cadet regimental commander to commissioned officers making the selections for cadet officers.

No matter— David was chosen regimental adjutant.

In any military organization of that time, a regimental adjutant did stand out in front, all alone, where female visitors could hardly avoid seeing him. But one may doubt that this figured into Dave’s plans.

The regimental adjutant attends no formations other than full regimental formations. He goes to and from classes alone, instead of marching or being marched. Other first classmen are responsible each for some unit of cadets, be it squad, platoon, company, battalion, or regiment; the regimental adjutant has no such responsibilities and only one minor administrative task; he keeps the watch list for the most senior of the cadet officers.

But he is *not* on that watch list himself. Instead he is supernumerary who fills in when one of them is ill.

And *this* was the lazy man’s prize. Those cadet officers were perfect specimens and the chances that one would be too ill to take his day’s duty ranged from negligible to zero.

For three years our hero had been standing watch about every tenth day. These watches weren’t difficult, but they involved either getting to bed a half hour late or getting up a half hour early, and much standing on tired feet, all an affront to Dave’s tender regard for his comfort.

But his last year David stood only three watches, and he “stood” those sitting down, as “Junior Officer of the Watch.”

At last the Day arrived. David graduated, was commissioned—then went to the chapel and remarried his wife. If her belly bulged a little, that was not unusual in brides even in those days, and was always ignored, and condoned once a young couple married. It was widely known though rarely mentioned that an eager young bride could accomplish in seven months or less what takes nine for cow or countess.

Dave was safely past all rocks and shoals; he need never again fear going back to that mule and “honest work.”

But life as a junior officer in a warship turned out to be less than perfect. It had good points—servants, a comfortable bed, easy work that rarely got David’s hands dirty, and twice as much money. But he needed that and more, to support a wife, and his ship was at sea enough that he often lacked the pleasant compensations of marriage. Worst of all, he stood heel-and-toe watches on a short watch list; this meant a four-hour night watch about every other night standing up. He was sleepy much of the time and his feet hurt.

So David applied for training as an aeronaut. This Navy had recently grasped an idea called “air power” and was trying to grab as much of it as possible in order to keep it out of the wrong hands—the Army’s hands, that is. They were behind as the Army had grabbed first—so volunteers for flying were welcome.

David was quickly ordered to shore duty to see if he had the makings of an aeronaut.

He had indeed! He not only had the mental and physical qualities but also was highly motivated—as his new work was done sitting down, whether in classroom or in the air, and he stood no night watches and received pay-and-a-half for sitting down and sleeping at home; flying was classed as “hazardous duty” and extra pay was awarded.

I had best say something about these aeroplanes since they resemble not at all the aerodynes you are used to. In a way they were hazardous. So is breathing. They were not as hazardous as the automotive ground vehicles then in use, and not nearly as hazardous as being a pedestrian. Accidents, fatal and otherwise, usually could be traced to a mistake on the part of the aeronaut—David *never* let that sort of accident happen to *him.* He had no wish to be the hottest pilot in the sky; he merely wanted to be the oldest.

Aeroplanes were weird monstrosities looking like nothing in the sky today, save possibly a child’s kite—they were often called “kites.” They had two wings, one above the other, and the aeronaut sat between them. A small baffle helped to deflect wind from his face. Don’t look surprised; these flimsy structures flew very slowly, pulled through the air by a powered screw.

Wings were made of varnished cloth held rigid by struts— you can see from this alone that their speeds could never be any large fraction of the speed of sound—except on sad occasions when an overly eager pilot would dive straight down, then pull the wings off through trying too abruptly to recover a normal attitude.

Which David never did. Some people are natural fliers. The first time David examined an aeroplane he understood its strengths and weaknesses as thoroughly as he understood the milking stool he had left behind him.

He learned-to fly almost as quickly as he had learned to swim.

His instructor said, “Dave, you’re a natural. I’m going to recommend you for fighter training.”

Fighter pilots were the royalty of aeroplane fliers; they went up, and engaged enemy pilots in single combat. A fighter who did this successfully five times—killed the opposing pilot instead of being killed—was called an “Ace,” which was a high honor, for, as you can see, the average chance of doing this is the fifth power of one-half, or one in thirty-two. Whereas the chance of getting killed instead is the complement, close to certainty.

Dave thanked his mentor while his skin crawled and his brain went whir-click as it considered ways to avoid this honor without giving up pay-and-a-half and the comfort of sitting down.

There were other disadvantages to being a fighter pilot besides the prime hazard of getting your ass shot off by some stranger. Fighter pilots flew in one-man kites and did their own navigation—without computers, homing devices, or anything that would be taken for granted today—or even later that century. The method used was called “dead reckoning,” because, if you didn’t reckon it correctly, you were dead—since Navy flying was done over water, from a small floating aerodrome, with a margin of safety in fuel for a fighter plane of only minutes. Add to this the fact that a fighter pilot in combat had to choose between doing navigation or giving single-minded attention to attempting to kill a stranger before that stranger killed him. If he’ wanted to be an “Ace”—or even eat dinner that night—he must put first things first and worry about navigation later.

In addition to the chance of being lost at sea and drowned in a kite that was out of gas—did I say how these things were powered? The airscrew was driven by an engine powered by a chemical exothermic reaction —oxidation of a hydrocarbon fluid called “gas,” which it was not. If you think this unlikely, I assure you that it was unlikely even then. The method was woefully inefficient. A flier was not only likely to run out of gas with nothing around him but ocean, but also this temperamental engine often coughed and quit. Embarrassing. Sometimes fatal.

The lesser drawbacks to being a fighter pilot were not all physical danger; they simply did not fit David’s master plan. Fighter pilots were assigned to floating aerodromes, or carriers. In peacetime, which this nominally was, a flier did not work too hard nor stand many watches and spent much of his time ashore at a land aerodrome even though he was carried on the muster rolls of a carrier ship—thereby credited with sea duty, necessary for promotion and pay.

But for several weeks each year a flier assigned to a carrier ship would actually *be* at sea, practicing mock warfare— which involved getting up an hour before dawn to warm those cantankerous engines and stand by ready to fly at the first hint of real or simulated danger.

David hated this—he would not willingly attend Judgment Day if it was held before noon.

There was another drawback: landing on these floating aerodromes. On land, David could land on a dime and give back change. But that depended on his own skill, highly developed because his own skin was at stake. But landing on a carrier depended on another pilot’s skill—and David held a dark opinion of entrusting his skin to the skill, good intentions, and alertness of someone else.

Ira, this is so unlike anything you are likely to have seen in your life that I am at loss. Consider your skyport here at New Rome: In landing, a ship is controlled from the ground— right? So it was with aeroplanes landing on carriers—but the analogy breaks down because a landing on a carrier in those days used no instruments. None. I’m not fooling.

It was done by eye alone, just as a boy in a game of catch snatches a ball out of the air—but David was the ball, and the skill used to catch him was not his own but that of a pilot standing on the carrier. David had to suppress his own skill, his own opinions, and place utter faith in the pilot on the carrier—anything less brought disaster.

David had *always* followed his own opinion—against the whole world if necessary. To place that much faith in another man ran counter to his deepest emotions. A carrier landing was like baring his belly to a surgeon and saying, “Go ahead and cut”—when he was not sure that surgeon was competent to slice ham. Carrier landing came closer to causing David to give up pay-and-a-half and easy hours than any other aspect of flying, so torn was he by the necessity of accepting another pilot’s decision—and one not even sharing his danger, at that!

It took all his willpower to do it the first time, and it never became easy. But he learned one lesson that he never expected to learn—that is, that there were circumstances in which another man’s opinion was not only

better than his own, but incomparably better.

You see—no, perhaps you don't; I have not explained the circumstances. An aeroplane landed on a carrier in a controlled crash, through a hook in its tail catching a wire rope stretched across the top deck. But if the flier follows his own judgment based on experience in landing on a flying field, he is certain to crash into the stern of the ship—or, if he knows this and tries to allow for it, he will fly too high and miss the rope.

Instead of a big flat field and plenty of room for minor mistakes, he has only a tiny "window" which he must hit precisely, neither right nor left, nor up nor down, nor too fast nor too slow. But he can't see what he is doing well enough to judge these variables correctly.

(Later on, the process was made semiautomatic, then automatic, but when it was finally perfected, carriers for aeroplanes were obsolete—a capsule description of most human "progress": By the time you learn how, it's too late.)

(But it often turns out that what you have learned applies to some new problem. Or we would still be swinging from trees.)

So the flier in the aeroplane must trust a pilot on deck who *can* see what is going on. He was called "the landing signal officer" and used wigwag flags to signal orders to the aeroplane's pilot.

The first time David tried this unlikely stunt he chased around the sky three times for fresh approaches before, he controlled his panic, quit trying to override the judgment of the LSO, and was allowed to land.

Only then did he discover how scared he was—his bladder cut loose.

That evening he was awarded a fancy certificate: the Royal Order of the Wet Diaper—signed by the LSO, endorsed by his squadron commander, witnessed by his squadron mates. It was a low point in his life, worse than any his plebe year, and it was little consolation that the order was awarded so frequently that certificates were kept ready and waiting for each new group of still-damp fliers.

From then on he was letter-perfect in following orders of landing signal officers, obeying like a robot, emotions and judgment suppressed by a sort of autohypnosis. When it came time to qualify in night landings —much worse on the nerves as the pilot in the air couldn't see *anything* but lighted wands the ISO waves instead of flags—David landed perfectly on his first approach.

David kept his mouth shut about his determination not to seek glory as a fighter pilot until he completed all requirements to make permanent his flying 'status. Then he put in a request for advanced training—in multiple-engine aircraft. This was embarrassing, as his instructor who thought so well of his potential was now his squadron commander and it was necessary to submit this request through him. Once the letter started through the mill, he was called to his boss's stateroom.

"Dave, what is this?"

"Just what it says, sir. I want to learn to fly the big ones."

"Are you out of your head? You're a fighter pilot. Three months of this scouting squadron—one-quarter, so I can give you a good Fitness Report—and you do indeed leave for advanced training., As a fighter."

David didn't answer.

His squadron commander persisted. "Dave, are you fretting over that silly 'Diaper Diploma'? Half the pilots in the fleet have won it. Hell, man, I've got one myself. It didn't hurt you with your shipmates; it just made you look human when you were beginning to suffer from too tight a halo."

David still did not comment.

"Damn it, don't just stand there! Take this letter and tear it up. Then submit one for fighter training. I'll let you go now, instead of waiting three months."

Dave stood mute. His boss looked at him and turned red, then said softly, "Maybe I was wrong. Maybe you *don't* have what it takes to be a fighter—Mister Lamb. That's all. Dismissed."

In the "big ones," the multiple-engine flying boats, David at last found his home. They were too big to fly from a carrier at sea; instead duty with them counted as sea duty, although in fact David almost always slept at home —his own bed, his own wife—save for an occasional night as duty officer when he slept at the base, and still less frequent occasions when the big boats flew at night. But they did not fly too often even in daylight and fine weather; they were expensive to fly, too expensive to risk, and the country was going through an economy wave. They flew with full crews—four or five for two-engine boats, more for four-engine boats, and often with passengers to permit people to get flying time to qualify for that extra pay. All of this suited Dave—no more nonsense of trying to navigate while doing sixteen other things, no more relying on the judgment of a landing signal officer, no more depending on just one neurotic engine, no more worries about running out of, gas. True,

given a choice, he would always make every landing himself—but when he was ranked out of this by a senior pilot, he did not let his worry show and in time ceased to worry, as all big-boat pilots were careful and disposed to live a long time.

(Omitted)

—years David spent comfortably while being promoted two ranks.

Then war broke out. There were always wars that century—but not always everywhere. This one included practically every nation on Earth. David took a dim view of war; in his opinion the purpose of a navy was to appear so fierce as to make it unnecessary to fight. But he was not asked, and it was too late to worry, too late to resign, nor was there anywhere to run. So he did not worry about what he could' not help, which was good, as the war was long, bitter, and involved millions of deaths.

'"Grandfather Lazarus, what did you do during this war?" Me? I sold Liberty Bonds and made four-minute speeches and served both on a draft board and a rationing board and made other valuable contributions—until the President called me to Washington, and what I did then was hush-hush and you wouldn't believe it if I told you. None of your lip, boy; I was telling you what *David* did.

Ol' David was an authentic hero. He was cited for gallantry and awarded a decoration, one that figures into the rest of his story.

Dave had resigned himself to—or looked forward to, as may be—retiring at the rank of lieutenant commander, as there weren't many billets higher than that in the flying boats. But the war jumped him to lieutenant commander in a matter of weeks, then to commander a year later, and finally to captain, four wide gold stripes, without facing a selection board, taking a promotion examination, or commanding a vessel. The war was using them up fast, and anyone not killed was promoted as long as he kept his nose clean.

Dave's nose was clean. He spent part of the war patrolling his country's coasts for enemy underwater vessels—"combat duty" by definition but hardly more dangerous than peacetime practice. He also spent a tour turning clerks and salesmen into fliers. He had one assignment into a zone where actual fighting was going on, and there he won his medal. I don't know the details, but "heroism" often consists in keeping your head in an emergency and doing the best you can with what you have instead of panicking and being shot in the tail. People who fight this way win more battles than do intentional heroes; a glory hound often throws away the lives of his mates as well as his own.

But to be officially a hero requires luck, too. It is not enough to do your job under fire exceptionally well; it is necessary that someone—as senior as possible—see what you do and write it up. Dave had that bit of luck and got his medal.

He finished the war in his nation's capital, in the Naval Bureau of Aeronautics, in charge of development of patrol planes. Perhaps he did more good there than he did in combat, since he knew those multiple-engine craft as well as any man alive, and this job put him in position to cut out obsolete nonsense and push through some improvements. As may be, he finished the war at a desk, shuffling papers and sleeping at home.

Then the war ended.

Dave looked around and sized up the prospects. There were hundreds of Navy captains who, like himself, had been lieutenants only three years earlier. Since the peace was "forever," as, politicians always insist, few would ever be promoted. Dave could see that *he* would not be promoted; he had neither the seniority, the traditionally approved pattern of service, nor the right connections, political and social.

What he did have was almost twenty years' service, the minimum on which to retire at half pay or he could hang on until he was forced to retire through failure to be selected for admiral.

There was no need to decide at once; twenty-year retirement was a year or two off.

But he did retire almost at once-for medical reasons. The diagnosis was "psychosis situational," meaning that he went crazy on the job.

Ira, I don't know how to evaluate this. Dave impressed me as one of the few completely sane men I ever knew. But I wasn't there when he retired and "psychosis situational" was the second commonest cause for medical retirement of naval officers in those days but—how could they *tell?* Being crazy was no handicap to a naval officer, any more than it was to an author, a schoolteacher, a preacher, or several other esteemed occupations. As long as Dave showed up on time and signed paper work some clerk prepared and never talked back to his seniors, it would never show. I recall one naval officer who had an amazing collection of ladies'

garters; he used to lock himself into his stateroom and examine them—and another one who did exactly the same with a collection of paper stickers used for postage. Which one was crazy? Or both? Or neither?

Another aspect of Dave's retirement requires knowledge of the laws of the time. Retiring on twenty years' service paid half pay—subject to income tax which was heavy. Retiring for medical disability paid *three-quarters* pay and was *not* subject to income tax.

I don't know, I just don't know. But the whole matter fits Dave's talent for maximum results with minimum effort. Let's stipulate that he was crazy—but was he crazy like a fox?

There were other features of his retirement. He judged correctly that he had no chance of being selected for admiral—but that citation for gallantry carried with it an honorary promotion on retirement—so Dave wound up the first man in his class to become admiral, without ever commanding a ship much less a fleet—one of the youngest admirals in history, by his true age. I conjecture that this amused the farm boy who hated to plow behind a mule.

For at heart he was still a farm boy. There was another law for the benefit of veterans of that war, one intended to compensate lads who had had their educations interrupted by having to leave home to fight: subsidized education, one month for every month of wartime service.

This was intended for young conscripts, but there was nothing to keep a career officer from taking advantage of it; Dave could claim it and did. With three-quarters pay not subject to taxation, with the subsidy—also not taxable—of a married veteran going to school, Dave had about the income he had had on active duty. More, really, as he no longer had to buy pretty uniforms or keep up expensive social obligations. He could loaf and read books, dress as he pleased, and not worry about appearances. Sometimes he would stay up late and prove that there were more optimists playing poker than mathematicians. Then sleep late. For he never, never got up early.

Nor did he ever again go up in an aeroplane. Dave had *never* trusted flying machines; they were much too high in case they stalled. They had never been anything to him but a means to avoid something worse; once they had served his purpose, he put them aside as firmly as he had put aside fencing foils—and with no regrets in either case.

Soon he had another diploma, one which stated that he was a Bachelor of Science in agronomy—a "scientific" farmer.

This certificate, with the special preference extended to veterans, could have obtained him a civil service job, telling other people how to farm. Instead, he took some of the money that had piled up in the bank while he loafed in school and went way back into those hills he had left a quarter of a century earlier—and bought a farm. That is, he made a down payment, with mortgage on the balance through a government loan at a—subsidized, of course—very low rate of interest.

Did he work the farm? Let's not be silly; Dave never took his hands out of his pockets. He made one crop with hired labor while he negotiated still another deal.

Ira, the completion of Dave's grand plan involves one factor so unbelievable that I must ask you to take it on faith—it is too much to ask any rational man to understand it.

At that pause between wars, Earth held over two billion people—at least half on the verge of starvation. Nevertheless—and here is where I must ask you to believe that I was there and would not lie to you—despite this shortage of food which never got better other than temporarily and locally in all the years that followed, and could not, for reasons we need, not go into—in spite of this disastrous shortage, the government of David's country *paid* farmers not to grow food.

Don't shake your head; the ways of God and government and girls are all mysterious, and it is not given to mortal man to understand them. Never mind that you yourself *are* a government; go home tonight and think about it—ask yourself if you know why you do what you do—and come back tomorrow and tell me.

As may be— David never made but one crop. The following year his acreage was "soil-banked," and he received a fat check for not working it, which suited him just fine. Dave loved those' hills, he had always been homesick for them; he had left them simply to avoid work. Now he was being paid *not* to work in them—which suited him; he had never thought that their charms were enhanced by plowing and getting them all dusty.

The "soil bank" payments took care of the 'mortgage, and his retired pay left a tidy sum over, so he hired a man to do those chores a farm requires even though it is not being worked for a crop—feed the chickens, milk a cow or two, tend a vegetable garden and' some fruit trees, repair fences— while the hired man's wife helped David's wife with the house. For himself, David bought a hammock.

But David was not a harsh employer. He suspected that cows did not want to be waked at five in the morning

any more than he did—and he undertook to find out.

He learned that cows would happily change their circadian to more reasonable hours, given the chance. They had to be milked twice a day; they were bred for that. But nine o'clock, in 'the morning suited them for a first milking quite as well as five, as long as it was regular.

But it did not stay that way; Dave's hired man had the nervous habit of work. To him there was something sinful in milking a cow that late. So David let him have his way, and hired man and cows went back to their old habits.

As for Dave, he strung that hammock between two shade trees and put a table by it to hold a frosty drink. He would get up in the morning when he woke, whether it was nine or noon, eat breakfast, then walk slowly to his hammock to rest up for lunch. The hardest work he did was endorsing checks for deposit, and, once a month, balancing his wife's checkbook. He quit wearing shoes.

He did not take a newspaper or listen to radio; he figured that the Navy would let him know if another war broke out—and another *did* break out about the time he started this routine. But the Navy had no need for retired admirals. Dave paid little attention to that war, it was depressing. Instead, he read everything the state library had on ancient Greece and bought books about it. It was a soothing subject, one he had always wanted to know more about.

Each year, on Navy Day, he got all spruced up and dressed as an admiral, with all his medals, from the Good Conduct medal of an enlisted man to the one for bravery under fire that had made him an admiral—let his hired man drive him to the county seat and there addressed a luncheon of the Chamber of Commerce on some patriotic subject. Ira, I don't know why he did this. Perhaps it was *noblesse oblige.*

Or it may have been his odd sense of humor. But each year they invited him, each year he accepted. His neighbors were proud of him; he was the epitome of Local Boy Makes Good—then comes home and lives as his neighbors lived. His success brought credit to them all. They liked it that he was still just "home folks"—and if they noticed that he never did a lick of work, nobody mentioned it.

I've skipped lightly over Dave's career, Ira, had to. I haven t mentioned the automatic pilot he thought up, then had developed years later when he was in a position to get such things done. Nor the overhaul he made of the duties of the crew of a flying boat—except to say now that it was to get more done with less effort while leaving the command pilot with nothing to do save to stay alert—or to snore on his copilot's arm if the situation did not require his alertness. He made changes in instruments and controls, too, when at last he found himself in charge of development for all Navy patrol planes.

Let it go with this: I don't think Dave thought of himself, as an "efficiency expert" but every job he ever held he simplified. His successor always had less work to do than his predecessor.

That his successor usually reorganized the job again to make three times as much work—and require three times as many subordinates—says little about Dave's oddity other than by contrast. Some people are ants by nature; they *have* to work, even when it's useless. Few people have a talent for constructive laziness.

So ends the Tale of the Man Who Was Too Lazy to Fail. Let's leave him there, in his hammock under the shade trees. So far as I know, he is still there.