

TO HEAVEN STANDING UP

By PAUL ERNST

Illustrator ADKINS

Introduction by Sam Moskowitz

THE better magazines, commonly termed the "Slicks", in concert with television and the moving pictures, are dotted with names that first served apprenticeship in the pulps and now have moved on to greater prosperity. The roll call of such notables is long, including such names as Erle Stanley Gardner, F. V. W. Mason, Frank Gruber, John D. MacDonald, William P. McGivern, Cornell Woolrich, as well as our spotlighted author this month Paul Ernst.

In graduating to the big time, the pulp author sometimes loses a certain type of renown, particularly if he contributed to the science fiction magazines, which success does not always recapture. As far back as 1930 Ernst was copping covers on *ASTOUNDING STORIES* for novelettes with titles like *Marooned Under the Sea*, *Red Hell of Jupiter* and *Raid on the Termites*.

During the same period he familiarized himself to readers

of *AMAZING STORIES* with *Hidden in Glass* in April, 1931 and the satiric *The Incredible Formula*, (June, 1931) where the dead are sustained as active workers by a special method and eventually eliminate most of the living workers.

While Farnsworth Wright was editor of *WEIRD TALES* magazine, Paul Ernst contributed in addition to short stories and novels of science fiction, the famous *Doctor Satan* series concerning an arch criminal who employed the most advanced science for his machinations. Even in *WEIRD TALES* Paul Ernst usually wrote science fiction, but when he turned to a straight weird tale, such as the near-classic *The Way Home* in the Nov., 1935 issue of that magazine, he employed the nom de plume of Paul Frederick Stern.

At least four of his tales have been included in science fiction anthologies: *The Thing in the Pond*, *The 32nd of May*, *The*

Microcosmic Giants and Nothing Ever Happens on the Moon.

To Heaven Standing Up is a transition story. It appeared in ARGOSY, April, 1941. It was one of a half-dozen that Paul Ernst wrote for that magazine on his way to the slicks. ARGOSY was the "jumping off place" of the pulps. You either went from

there to bigger things or you fell back to whatever category of pulp you came from. To Heaven Standing Up displays the fine grasp of humanity and talent for the emotional nuance, that showed that Paul Ernst, like his lead character, Jed Perley, was ready to take wing. He never came back.

THE sun was warm on the porch of Walt Bailey's general store, and I let my topcoat slide open and put my feet up on a coil of rope. In the trees on Main Street the birds made songs about spring, and the young fellow stopping in front of the store with a clatter of worn brake rods wore only track shirt and faded khaki pants, it was that balmy.

A fellow named Jed Perley, I remembered vaguely. Worked back in from the shore about five miles for an invalid farmer named Cardwell.

Perley fiddled with the tailgate of his light truck, and I closed my eyes and let the sun get into my bones and drive out the ache planted by pneumonia in March. Nice to loaf a month in this little New Jersey village near the shore.

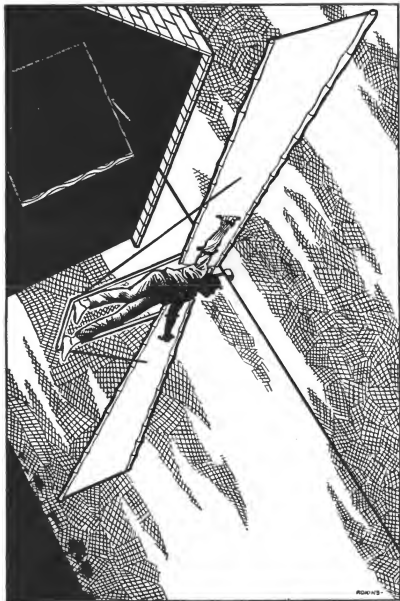
Perley stumped up the porch steps, nodded to me as he passed the bench on which I was sprawled, and went on in. I closed my eyes till a voice said:

"Hello, there. Letting Sol pound Vitamins A, D and G into you?"

Climbing the steps was Singer Smith, black hair uncovered, gray eyes lazy. Singer was a flier. He had a plane in a homemade hangar two miles out of Deer-ville and picked a free-lance living out of the air by instructing, hiring out for special trips, or dusting crops.

As Singer went in, Jed Perley came back out, carrying a hundred-pound sack of feed effortlessly on his left shoulder. Jed's body was slight but his arms were muscle-corded and his legs filled the legs of his khaki pants with their hard bulk.

He tossed the sack into the truck, stood a moment watching some birds perched on the rim of an old stone watering trough, then came back up on the porch with an odd look—almost of resentment—on his face. After a little hesitation, he sat on the bench next to me, moving his head to follow the short hops of



a couple of sparrows near the trough.

"The damn birds!" he muttered.

I looked at him. You get to know people fast in a village like Deerville, particularly when you're interested in folks anyhow, as I've always been. I'd heard Perley discussed. Usually with laughter.

JED was a nice fellow, but not too bright. Good mechanical sense. Old Cardwell, in a wheelchair with arthritis, would be helpless without him. But thick in the wits and inclined to let imagination run away with him.

Sometimes, as Bailey had expressed it, Jed got to imagining things and pretty soon got to thinking they were true. Hell, retorted a man with Bailey at the moment, Jed was just a plain liar. . . .

"Why 'the damn birds'?" I asked now. "Don't you like birds?"

"Oh, I guess so," he said. "But—it's silly."

"What's silly?"

"Well, look at em. Ain't got any brains at all. And a man's got lots of brains. But a bird can fly, and a man can't. It's plumb ridic'lous."

"Men fly," I shrugged. "Like Singer Smith—"

"Oh, that! I don't mean that, zooming along with a lot of

clanking machinery. I mean flying under your own power, like the birds do."

There didn't seem much to say to a thing like that, so I let it slide. Perley looked sideways at me.

"You've read a lot, I guess," he said. "I don't get much time for it, myself. Ever read where anybody tried to fly?"

"Sure," I said. "That's as old as dreams. A long time ago a man tried it. He made wings of wax."

Perley's face wrinkled up. It was a good, broad face with flaring, peasant's nostrils.

"Wax? Funny stuff to make wings of. What happened?"

"He flew too close to the sun," I said, "and his wax wings melted and he fell."

Perley got up jerkily. "Oh, all right. I was just askin' a polite question."

He went down the steps, stocky thighs filling the legs of his pants. The motor of the ancient truck rattled to a start and Perley drove huffily away. The store owner, Bailey came out, a thin, sad looking man with a handlebar mustache.

"Why do you suppose," he mumbled, more to himself than to me, "Jed Perley wanted a thing like that?"

"Like what?"

Bailey looked after the truck.

"Yesterday. Came in here and

got twenty-six yards of glazed chintz I'd ordered to sell the ladies for curtains. What would Jed want with twenty-six yards of glazed chintz? I'm still trying to figure it out."

I shrugged, and after a while I went up the street to my boarding house. Dinner was rich with broth and chicken and potatoes. I'd be hog-fat if I kept that up.

And I'd be even fatter if fate let me drowse on the store veranda bench another month—as I was doing again next afternoon at Bailey's. But my time was almost up, I was sorry to remember. . . .

BRAKE rods clattered at the curb, and Jed Perley climbed out of the ancient little truck. He passed me without nodding, and in the store I heard him ask for two more spools of that heavy waxed thread and a can of shellac. Color? He didn't care. Either orange or white, didn't matter.

He came out, paused, then sat next to me with his eyes on the sparrows at the watering trough. He was gloomy.

"Damn the birds?" I suggested.

"Huh?" he said. "Oh. Yeah. Look, I didn't mean to act sore yesterday, but I asked you a straight question and you kidded me."

"It was a legend," I said. "A fable. I've never believed a man

flew on wax wings, either, to tell the truth."

He thought that over, then dismissed it.

"Oh. Well, look. Has any one ever tried to fly under his own steam, no hooley?"

"A lot have tried, no hooley," I said.

"With wings, like a bird?"

"Yes."

"Anybody ever really do it?"

"No, Jed," I said. "And nobody ever will. You see, to fly like a bird a man would have to have arms like tree-trunks and breast muscles so heavy they'd require a breastbone sticking out about four feet to anchor onto."

"Arms?" said Jed, broad face wrinkling in puzzlement. "Why would anybody try to fly with his arms?"

It was my turn to look puzzled.

"You don't walk on the ground with your arms, do you?" said Jed. "Why would you try it in the air?"

"How else would a man try?" I said.

Jed slapped his solid thighs.

"Legs. That's where the big muscles are. That's where your strength is. You'd fly with your legs."

"I don't think I quite . . ." I murmured politely.

"You'd fly standin' up." I'd thought Jed's eyes were dull. They weren't dull now; they shone with jewel brilliance.

"You'd use your legs, mostly—"

He stopped. His eyes got veiled, secretive.

"I got to run along," he said, getting up. "Say, I'd as lief you didn't repeat what—I've been sayin'. Folks in Deerville think I'm not as bright as I ought to be. They'll be callin' me Crazy Perley next, and the kids runnin' after me. I wouldn't want that."

I looked thoughtfully after the ancient truck as it wheezed away from the curb. Jed wasn't as dull as folks thought him, it seemed. He certainly was onto the town's opinion of him, at any rate. Yet in a way he was more childish than most eight-year-olds.

Giving serious thought to the possibility of flying like a bird! And standing up, what was more! Of all the lunatic things to—

"Hi, loafer." Singer Smith was coming up the steps that creaked to so many feet each day.

I nodded to him, but kept thinking of Jed Perley, and of the feverish light in his eyes, and of Bailey's bewilderment at a farm hand's purchase of twenty-six yards of glazed chintz. Enough of the stuff to make a tent.

Singer came back out, tearing the top off a new package of cigarettes.

"Where's Cardwell's farm?" I asked.

Singer told me: west to Sling's

Corners, north to the third mailbox, lane over a hill to a hidden house. I got out my car, little used during my convalescence in Deerville, and drove there.

I DIDN'T KNOW quite what I was going to say as I walked in the late sun toward the figure in the vegetable patch at the rear of the house. After all, I didn't know, really, what the chintz was for. Maybe Jed was getting curtain-conscious too, and fixing up the windows for him and the arthritic Cardwell.

"Hello," said Jed, straightening up as I got to the edge of the patch. He stood with powerful, stumpy legs spread, holding his hoe crosswise in his hands. He looked at me calmly, and whatever laborious opening I'd planned to make went glimmering with his directness. Not as dull as Deerville thought him, this man.

"You came out to see *it*, didn't you?"

"It?" I stalled. But it was silly to evade. "Well, yes, I did. If you'd care to show it to me. Or if there is anything ready yet to show."

"She's ready," said Jed slowly. "I finished her last night. Almost eleven o'clock, and I have to get up at half-past four. But she's worth it."

He studied my face as if committing it to memory. Meanwhile

he chewed on his upper lip.

"Like I told you," he said, "I wouldn't want to get called around as Crazy Perley. So I ain't let on to a soul about this. I didn't really mean to let on to you. I just wanted to ask a couple questions because you'd read the books and all."

"I'll never let it out so it could get back to you," I assured him.

He led me to the barn and up to the high loft. It was as bad as I'd feared.

TH**ERE** was the twenty-six yards, approximately, of chintz. The gayly flowered stuff was stretched taut on a framework of fishpoles. Two frames, rather, each a wing. There were two long poles with the spindling ends bent together and bound. And down the middle was a third pole, for a stiffening spine.

At the thick end, the butts of the poles were split, bound with fishline to keep the split from lengthening, and bolted to a strip of shiny metal that I judged was duralumin. This had a heavy hinge riveted in its center.

"I just happened to see that there chintz," Perley said. He was looking at the pathetic apparatus of fishpoles and cloth as a man looks at his true love. "It's nice and close-wove. With shellac over it, you couldn't ask for a better wing."

The two twenty-foot lengths were lying almost atop each other. Off a little to one side was another part. It, too, was made of the shiny metal. The thing looked at first glance like a plain oval, like a big letter O, made from a bent tube. But a second glance showed that it was not quite that simple.

The top of the O was flattened and bent out like a neck-yoke for carrying two pails of water. At the bottom there were straps, obviously designed to go around feet and ankles. Furthermore, the top half of the frame fitted into the bottom half so the O could be lengthened and shortened like the slide of a trombone. It was about four feet long.

"A couple minutes to bolt the hinges, and she's done," Jed's feverish voice came to me.

I looked at him, and at the frail contraption of bamboo poles and glazed chintz.

"Look here, Jed," I said. "It's one thing to daydream of equipping yourself with wings. Better men than either of us have done that. But it's something else again actually to try. I suppose you're going to strap on those things and step off the barn roof?"

"Why, no, of course not," said Jed, looking almost as puzzled as he had when I'd spoken of flying in terms of arms. "Think I want to break my damn neck? Here,

I'll show you. I want to give 'er a little workout anyhow. Only take a minute. Show you what I mean right now."

He carried the wings and the O downstairs.

"No, you stay here," he said, when I started to follow.

"Here," was a spot next to the loft door, from which you looked down about twenty feet to the ground. Overhead, a beam ran out the door with a pulley in the end. Through the pulley went the rope to which the hayrack was fastened when hay was to be hoisted from a wagon to the loft.

From above, I watched him bolt the wings to the top of the oval. His hands were trembling a little. I felt sorry for Jed at one moment, and impatient with a grown man for harboring such an obsession in the next. It put him in among the inventors of such things as perpetual motion.

Jed slipped a hook in the top of the ring and tied the pulley rope to it. Then he made a last addition: a slim bar slanting in from about the center of each wing to the bottom half of the O, so that when the O was elongated the wings would flap.

He came back upstairs, hauled on the rope, and the ridiculous arrangement raised till the bottom of the O was level with the loft floor. Jed fastened the rope to a cleat, and there the thing hung, an O with a winged top:

—o—, and with a slanting support from the middle of each wing to the bottom section of the O.

CAREFULLY he swung out from the loft door till his feet were on the bottom bar. It went down with him till his legs were almost straight. He buckled the straps around his feet and ankles with his right hand, holding on with his left. Then he straightened.

The top yoke settled snugly around the back of his neck, over his shoulders. He thrust his arms along the middle spines of the flimsy wings, where a hoop came just above each elbow, another at each armpit, and a bar for each hand to grip.

How to fly standing up, in one easy lesson, I thought.

It was almost dusk now, but Jed looked carefully in all directions, as if fearing some one might see from a distance. This end of the barn faced away from the house, so no one could look from there.

"You see how she works?" said Jed, with a note almost of pleading in his voice. "I push down with my feet and at the same time pull down with my arms. That way I get arms and back, shoulders and legs—everything—into it when I haul down on the wings. There're heavy coil springs to go into the sliding

bars too, to help me shove down hard and quick. Just my weight hangin' on the wings will raise 'em on the upstroke. I won't trouble to put the springs in now."

I shook my head a little, but I was much relieved. At least Jed probably wouldn't kill himself. The rough common sense of the hook arrangement guaranteed that.

He stood there in the shiny hoop. Experimentally he fanned the crazy planes of gay chintz up and down, slowly, like a moth drying its wings after emerging from its cocoon. Legs and arms worked in unison, bringing the wings down in smooth, powerful sweeps, with a springy feathering at the ends as the pliant bamboo bent a little.

"If I can lift myself off the hook," he mused, "I can keep myself up at least a minute or two so I won't fall. If I can't raise off the hook—well, I won't fall that way."

As if impatient, or suddenly bursting with pentup energy, he brought the crude wings down with a whistling sweep of arms and legs. And then was stone-still, crouched in the hoop.

"Did you—see that?" he whispered, after a moment.

"See what, Jed?" Not for anything would I have laughed at him. This thing was too real, too tremendous, to him.

"The rope slacked up! I could

feel it! I *lifted* myself a little! Maybe only an inch. But if I can do it an inch, without even the coil springs to help the down shove, I can do it a foot. Or a hundred feet."

"It's pretty dark," I said apologetically. "I couldn't see."

I went out into the lowering night and drove back to Deer-ville, after assuring Jed I'd keep his secret. I'd seen what I came to see: Jed wasn't in any danger of killing himself with his fool notion. Beyond that, I washed my hands of it.

Funny, though, what the power of suggestion can do to you. There in the door of the hayloft, in the dusk, for just an instant in that last sweep of wings, I actually thought I *had* seen the rope slacken and the hook slide loosely in the ring of the flying frame.

OVERNIGHT, I forgot the silly business pretty completely, being reminded of it again only late next afternoon when Jed Perley rattled to the curb and passed my bench with a conspiratorial nod. He came out with a loaf of bread and a box of table salt, looked around cautiously, then paused beside me.

"I came in to tell you," he said, in a low, hurried tone. "I didn't really have no call to get bread. I just wanted to tell you."

I thought he didn't have quite

as much color as usual, and his eyes looked as if he needed sleep.

"I went on workin' them wings after dark," he breathed. "And I put the springs in the frame. I really put my back into it."

He stared at me with too-bright eyes.

"I got off that hook!"

I had, it appeared, let myself in for something by the purely natural desire not to let any man, even a fool, kill himself. I'd made myself a fellow conspirator by looking at Jed's flowered-chintz wings. The fact that I'd now lost all interest in Jed's delusions wasn't going to let me off.

I wondered what had happened to the hook, that it had failed him. Probably in his gyrations it had twisted sideways and his hoop had slid off.

"Don't you believe me?" said Jed.

"Oh, sure," I said. "What happened then?"

"Well . . . nothing much." Jed looked sheepish. "I batted back against the barn on the way down, but didn't hurt nothin'. It'll be a trick to steer, with no tail. But bats make out with nothing but wings, so I guess a man can. I put in some more hours, not trying to lift off the hook any more, just slanting the wings around to guide me."

I understood the sleepless look, then.

"When did you rest last night?"

"Two in the morning to four-thirty," he admitted. "Keeping the farm going is a long day's job. But gosh, I can't sleep all night when I got flying right at the tips of my fingers."

WALT BAILEY came out on the store porch, and Jed said so long and went to his truck. Bailey looked after him, then grinned at me. "Is Jed gassing about some new contraption?"

"Oh, is he given to contraptions?" I asked.

"Yeah. He's turned out some gadgets that were honeys. To hear him tell it, anyway. Last year it was heat from the sun so you'd never have to buy coal in winter."

"That would be handy," I said.

Bailey's eyes twinkled.

"Jed got twenty foot of four-inch pipe and a hundred-gallon tank from a junk yard. He capped one end of the pipe and led the other through the house wall to the tank, set in his back room. He braced a couple dozen big reading lenses in a row over the pipe, with an old clock to turn 'em with the sun, and they focused like burning glasses.

"All fall, to hear him tell it, the water got hot in the day's sun and stayed hot in his room till morning. Didn't need any other heat at all. Then a couple of us reckoned we'd drive out and see it."

Bailey laughed at the thought.

"He got out of it kind of smart, at that. Day before we were coming was hotter than November had a right to be. Jed raced in and said his tank had blown up, it got so hot, and Cardwell wouldn't let him set it up again because scalding water had flooded the whole first floor and scared the old man so he fell sideways out of his wheelchair. Jed said he just hadn't thought to put in a safety valve for the steam."

. . . Next day was rainy and unpleasant so I didn't go to the store. I stayed in my room and stewed, and knew I was well again. Time to get back to the city and my job. . . .

There was a tap at my door just before dinner. Jed Perley came in. I'd sure let myself in for something.

"I did it!" he said, voice quivering, before I could even say hello. "I flew last night! More'n a hundred yards. And I only stopped then because I was gettin' too high and didn't quite know how to handle myself. I came down behind the house after circling the barn." He laughed shakily. "I didn't make out so good when I landed. Skinned my knees."

"I wanted you to know," he said tensely. "She works. She goes like a dream. And easy? It's easiern' learning to ride a bike. More'n a hundred yards! You

know what I'm going to do to-night? I'm going clear to the shore and back. That's ten miles, but I can do it. It's hard to get up—hard as hell—but once you're there you don't have to work much. You can kind of coast, with only a flip once in awhile to keep up—"

There were steps and the door opened on Singer Smith.

"Hi," he began. Then he saw Jed. "Oh— Hello."

Jed's mouth clamped shut and his eyes got veiled.

"Just goin'," he mumbled to Singer. He looked at me with his face blank. "I just thought I'd tell you. . . . 'Night."

Singer looked at the door with raised eyebrows but didn't comment on the visit.

"Thought I'd drop in for a few words with the patient," he said. "Also I wanted to ask if you're well enough to take a ride. I'm to hop to Boston tomorrow. Be back fairly late, but surely before midnight. Want to go along?"

It was tempting but the papers had predicted rain and squalls, and I thought I'd better not spit in the pneumonia tiger's eye by accepting. "Thanks for the offer, though," I told him.

I HAD a hunch Jed would show up next afternoon. He did. He got to the store about four, looked around to see that we

weren't being watched, and sat down.

"Well, I did it," he said in a low tone. "I took a long one last night. Only the second night, too. You know, I feel as if I'd been doing that all my life. You got no idea how easy it is, once you get the feel of it. And once you're up."

"You took a long flight?" I said. "Where did you go?"

He looked shrewdly at me.

"You don't seem too excited about it."

"You wouldn't want me to raise my voice or do anything to draw attention to us, would you?"

"No . . . That's right. I went to the shore last night. Ten mile, there and back. I wasn't really sure I'd get that far, but it was so easy, once I was high, that I just kept on going. Besides there was a breeze last night, coming in from the sea. I thought it would be a help on the way back."

He was silent a moment, scowling.

"Well?" I prompted him.

"I rode her back, all right," he said. "But by the time I got near home the breeze was a spanking wind. Sailed me right on by. I couldn't do a thing till I got clear to Mooretown. Then she slacked a little and I landed. And that fixed me. I'd forgot I couldn't get up again."

"Why not?"

"I got to hang from something," Jed reminded me. "I got to have wing room. I can't just hop up like a damn bird because I got to use my legs for pulling, not hopping. So it looks like two things lick me. One is a hard wind—it carries me right along with it and there's nothing I can do about it. The other is settin' down away from home.

"I had to walk all the way from Mooretown carrying those damn wings. Sixteen mile. And every time a car came along I had to duck off the road. I'd have looked pretty funny in a pair of headlights carryin' them wings."

"You'd better get some sleep," I said.

"Sleep?" Jed shook his head, eyes fever bright. "When I can fly? Why, it's going' straight to heaven, that's what it is. Even taking off is wonderful." He drew his powerful legs up and shot them down in unison with his muscular arms.

"Like this and like this and like this. You strain and you grunt and you put everything you got into it. And then you're up there, and you sail a little like a chicken hawk while you rest, and you flap a little and turn your arms to slant your wings for a swoop down and a swoop up. . . . Mister, I couldn't sleep when I could be doin' that."

"I'd like to see that, Jed," I said.

"You'll see it. I got 'er down right now. I'm going up once again, tonight, to the shore and back. Then, day after tomorrow, Saturday afternoon, I'm goin' to give a public demonstration."

His jaw squared solidly. "There's some in this town that have called me a liar when I told 'em of things. This'll fix that. I'll let 'em have a look at me, soarin' like the birds—"

Bailey's steps sounded in the store on the way to the door. Jed gave me a quick nod, and got into his truck.

THE sky was lowering then, and the wind was freshening. We were going to have the squalls and rain predicted. I'd been sorry during the sunny forenoon that I hadn't taken Singer up on the Boston trip, but I was glad now.

I continued to be glad as it blew and spat till about ten that night. Singer would be jouncing in rough air. But it developed that he'd have the last leg in peace, because just after ten the sky cleared, with moon and stars bright.

Though I noticed as I went to bed at eleven that a hard, constant wind had suddenly come up out of the clear west, to blow out to sea with enough force to rattle the windows.

The wind suddenly reminded me of Jed—and I smiled. Good

old Jed. Imaginative Jed. He'd said the wind licked him, and he'd said he was going to fly to the shore again tonight. And here was a hard offshore wind suddenly sprung up out of nothing.

He'd have a tale to tell tomorrow! How he had been borne on the wind, past the shoreline, out to sea. Out, out, till he had finally managed to turn and struggle back, barely escaping a watery grave. It would be gorgeous.

The wind died some time in the dawn because when I strolled to the store about ten next morning it was sunny and calm. I sat regretfully on the bench; regretfully because this was my last day. Tomorrow I went back to town and to a job. . . .

Singer Smith waved genially at me as he came toward the porch. I watched him come up the steps, and inside the store I heard the phone ring.

"Have a good trip yesterday?" I asked Singer.

"Not good, not bad," he said. "Just as well you didn't go, though. Rough for a convalescent on the way home."

Walt Bailey appeared at the door.

"Say," he called, "either of you seen Jed Perley today?"

Singer shook his head. I said, No, why?

"Old man Cardwell just phoned a second time since seven o'clock

to ask if he's around here. He ain't been on the farm all morning and Cardwell's worried."

"Well, I haven't seen him" I shrugged.

"I guess he'll be back soon," Bailey said, turning away. "Cardwell says all his things are there, and the truck. Said for a while he thought maybe Jed had hurt himself out in the barn. Jed's been out there half of most nights, lately. But Cardwell managed to hobble out, and there was no sight of Jed. So he guesses Jed ain't hurt."

HE WENT back to his counters, and Singer looked at me half humorously and said, "What, would you say, is the biggest bird there is?"

"The condor, I guess," I answered. "They're said to get up to twelve foot wingspread. South America. Why?"

"Twelve feet, eh? That's smaller than— And you wouldn't see one around New Jersey, would you?"

I stared at him.

"Funny thing last night," said

Singer. "I was coming down the shoreline about midnight, not more than a thousand feet up, almost ready to swing inland to my hangar."

He lit a cigarette, and looked at the name of the match.

Suddenly I found that I wasn't breathing. And, suddenly, I found that my hands were clamped over the edge of the bench as if it were about to buck and throw me off.

"I thought I saw something like a great big bird, against the stars, for a couple of seconds. But a hell of a big thing, three times as big as your twelve-footer, riding the wind out and out to sea. So big that of course I couldn't have seen anything at all. . . ."

He laughed and flicked the match over the porch rail.

"Getting potty in my old age. Pink elephants, or something. I guess my eyes were tired. You know how your eyes can play tricks on you when—"

"What in the *world* is the matter with you?"

THE END

