

# THE GREAT PAN AMERICAN AIRSHIP MYSTERY, OR, WHY I MURDERED ROBERT BENCHLEY

David Gerrold

David Gerrold is best known for his Hugo and Nebula winning novelette, “The Martian Child,” which was adapted into a 2007 movie starring John Cusack. He’s also known for the intensely popular (and still unfinished—c’mon, David!) War Against The Chtorr series of books. The author has been writing stories and novels, television scripts, and even columns in computer magazines for almost half a century. He wrote and directed his first play in 2013, *Uncle Daddy Will Not Be Invited*. David will be one of the author Guests of Honor at this year’s World Science Fiction Convention in Spokane, Washington. He also wrote a script for *Star Trek, The Original Series* once. His first tale for *Asimov’s* takes us aboard the sumptuous flagship *Liberty* for a droll story about . . .

THE GREAT PAN AMERICAN  
AIRSHIP MYSTERY, OR,

# WHY I MURDERED ROBERT BENCHLEY

After all is said and done, I blame Nikola Tesla.

It's his fault.

Because—if we're going to talk about cause and effect, then we have to go all the way back to the original cause.

No, Nikola Tesla did not set out to invent an efficient method of low-cost helium extraction—it was a side-effect of his coal-fusion research—but if he hadn't discovered it, no one else would have. At least not in our lifetimes.

Tesla gave away many of his discoveries, but not this one—he patented the helium extraction process. The technology that followed created so many new industries and opportunities for profit that it pushed Tesla's own company into the Fortune 500 within eighteen months.

Knowing that Tesla was unlikely to invest in lawyers and lawsuits, patent violations started cropping up everywhere. The Third Reich, for instance, began extracting their own helium from the Ruhr, the large coal fields located in the west of Germany in North Rhine-Westphalia—they used the helium to lift over a dozen huge vessels, all modeled after the luxurious *Hindenburg*.

Not to be outdone, the United States Congress created the National Aeronautics Studies Administration—NASA for short—to fund research and development in aerial transport.

Three years later, in June of 1937, the Great Pan American Airship Line began operations at their expansive new terminal on Welfare Island. Due to rising international tensions, as well as considerable domestic pressures against foreign competition, the trans-Atlantic German airships would be restricted to the airfield at Lakehurst, New Jersey.

To demonstrate America's commitment to a new age of aerial transportation, Pan Am announced that the inaugural journey of their magnificent new flagship would be a coast-to-coast celebrity cruise. They held a nationwide contest to choose the name of the vessel they had nicknamed the Big Lady, and three lucky contestants would win berths on that first trip to prove that economical air travel for everyone was now a reality.

At 11:33 A.M. on Thursday, June 3, 1937, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt officially christened the vessel in a grand ceremony and the Pan American flagship *Liberty* lifted majestically into the air while the United States Marine Band played "America the Beautiful." The Chorus of St. Patrick's Cathedral accompanied, and WNBC broadcast the event on nationwide radio. RCA also broadcast an experimental television signal originating from the top of the Empire State Building. Receivers at Grand Central Terminal showed a grainy image of the *Liberty's* liftoff, although most people could have simply stepped outside onto Forty-second Street or Fifth Avenue for a better view.

Three times larger than the *Hindenburg*, she was a gleaming silver illusion. She circled Manhattan Island three times while tugboats below thumped their horns, fireboats howled their sirens and sprayed jets of water, and Mayor La Guardia read a poem of salute by Robert Frost on the WNBC radio station.

Most people assumed that circling Manhattan was a salute to the city. Actually, it was an opportunity for Captain Bradley to test all the systems of the airship, one after the other, and reassure himself that everything was operating up to spec. It was a second shakedown cruise, unofficial but necessary. Coming around Battery Park for the third time, finally satisfied that the ship was handling the way he wanted,

he spun the wheel to the left and the *Big Lady* turned gracefully to port. She was now officially on her way. We passed over the Statue of Liberty and out across New Jersey.

Aboard the vessel, a host of Broadway and Hollywood celebrities waved to the crowds below. George Jessel, Al Jolson, George and Ira Gershwin, and George M. Cohan waved from the portside windows. Dorothy Parker, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Robert Benchley, George S. Kaufman, Heywood Broun, and several other members of the notorious Algonquin Round Table waved from the starboard side. Also aboard were Charles Lindbergh, Amelia Earhart, and William “Billy” Mitchell. Sixty-five-year-old Orville Wright had been invited as well, but had politely declined. He still believed the foolish idea that heavier-than-air vessels would become the primary vehicle of modern air travel and felt it would be hypocritical to lend his name or support to this journey. Tesla had also declined the invitation, saying there was nothing in San Francisco to interest him right now.

Less notably, several high-ranking members of the army and navy were also among the complement of passengers, but were much less conspicuous. They seemed more concerned with the operational aspects of the *Liberty* than with the promotional aspects of the journey.

Pan Am’s official statements asserted that the average airspeed of the *Big Lady* would be 85 miles per hour, and that the non-stop voyage would take no more than 36 hours. The *Big Lady* would be going around the south end of the Rocky Mountains rather than over. But some of the engineers were betting that Captain Bradley would push the engines hard, hoping to average more than 100mph—as well as crossing over the peaks to give the passengers a spectacular view of the mountaintops, ultimately arriving at San Francisco at 10:30 A.M. the next day, a journey of only 26 hours. If that did happen, then despite traveling more than 24 hours, we would still arrive an hour earlier than our departure time, an artifact of our westward passage through three time zones.

Heading west over New Jersey, many of the passengers still crowded the windows and speculated about the crowds below. Tiny people came running out of their houses and their businesses, shouting and pointing and staring skyward. They cheered and hollered and waved. When the shadow of the *Liberty* passed over, some of them panicked. We saw a few small children crying. They were carried inside by their reassuring mothers—where they promptly leaned out of the upstairs windows to stare again.

After a half-hour or so, once the second or third tray of drinks had been passed around, the Gershwins commandeered the piano in the salon and started playing. Later, Oscar Levant took over the piano, providing accompaniment for Cohan, Jessel, and Jolson as they worked their inebriated way through an impromptu medley of popular songs.

When they finally tired out, Jack Benny and Fred Allen began trading quips—it started with Fred Allen asking Jack Benny why he hated the violin so much that he kept playing it. Benny responded with an observation that the bags under Fred Allen’s eyes were so big they required their own porters. Allen replied that Jack Benny couldn’t ad-lib a belch after a plate of Hungarian goulash. Benny promptly turned to him and grumped, “You wouldn’t say that if my writers were here.”

I wished his writers were aboard as well. I would have loved to have met them. I assumed they would be very funny men.

I was—at that time—a guest relations steward aboard the *Liberty*. My job was to keep the customers happy for the nearly two days it would take to travel the 2,600 miles from New York to San Francisco—actually a bit more, because our course would zig-zag to fly over several important cities and landmarks. That meant maintaining the well-being of everyone onboard who assumed they were entitled to special

treatment—and that was everyone onboard. In the case of my specific charges, that mostly involved keeping them drunk enough to be cheerful, but not so drunk as to be uncontrollable. Passed-out was not an option.

But holding a tray of martinis was not my career goal. I intended to bootstrap my career by writing a memoir of this adventure. I planned to sell articles wherever I could to establish a name for myself.

I was already making notes for a profile of the celebrity doings for *Life Magazine*, a revealing slice of salacious gossip for *The New Yorker*, a report on the amenities of a flying hotel for *Popular Science*, a complementary article about the maintenance of the onboard necessities for *Scientific American*, a description of how well the six electric propellers performed for *Popular Mechanics*, and possibly even—I'd have to do it under a pen name—a futuristic story for *Astounding* about a giant passenger vessel journeying through outer space to Venus or Mars—I just needed a plot.

I had to trade a few favors, including a couple of sexual ones (that was fun), but I did get myself assigned to take care of the Algonquin Round Table crowd—that might have happened anyway. It turned out they were a boisterous group, hard to deal with, and none of the other stewards wanted to accommodate them and all of their shenanigans. A couple of the Algonquin group were putting away enough booze that their breath had become flammable. I expected—hoped—that after they settled in and became comfortable they would start discussing important literary issues.

Lunch was delayed because of the unscheduled performances. None of the staff were brave enough to interrupt the entertainers—the rest of the passengers would have dropped us out the nearest window—so we didn't serve until we were well over eastern Pennsylvania and Oscar Levant remarked, "You can smell the cheese even from up here."

We weren't that high—he could have been right. The *Liberty* cruised below the clouds, usually only three or four hundred feet above the ground, mostly so passengers could have a great view of the landscape, but she was engineered to go much higher. Tanks of pressurized helium gas were stored along her keel to inflate additional lifting ballonets when more altitude was needed—such as flying over a mountain. To descend again, the extra helium would be released, or pumped back into the storage tanks. Large tanks of water were also used for ballast. This was the same water that passengers would use for washing. If the *Liberty* needed altitude quickly, it could be released in a massive shower. By the time it hit the ground, it would be little more than a mist. At worst, a momentary drizzle.

The *Liberty* carried two hundred passengers and eighty-five crewmembers. By comparison, a *Hindenburg*-class ship could carry only seventy-two passengers and required sixty-two crewmembers to manage the journey. The *Liberty* had been designed to carry four hundred souls, but Pan Am was using the inaugural journey to demonstrate the large cargo carrying capacity of the *Liberty* as well. A half-dozen new Fords were stored in her hold. None of the military officers would discuss it, but more than once I saw them scribbling numbers on yellow pads and arguing about balancing the weights of tanks, trucks, cannons, troops, and supplies.

Cross-country shipping by railroad could take anywhere from three days to two weeks, depending on how much you wanted to pay. For some industries, air transport would be both faster and cheaper—like fresh fruits and vegetables from the California fields to the New York markets. And then there were those lucrative mail contracts to consider.

After lunch, some of the passengers retired to their cabins to rest up for the rigors of dinner. The cabins were spacious and well-equipped, deliberately more luxurious than those found on any ocean-liner where space would be at a premium. The opposite was true aboard the *Liberty*. Here, weight was the limiting factor, not space.

Only the control gondola hung below the body of the craft. I'd delivered coffee and sandwiches to it on our training flight—it was a broad comfortable platform. All the other passenger and crew spaces were inside the *Liberty's* envelope. Because a massive framework of aluminum girders and steel tension cables was needed to provide a stable structure for the huge array of giant lift bags, there was also considerable space beneath the ballonets for accommodations. There was almost too much space.

When Tallulah Bankhead boarded, she looked around the lobby and asked the nearest steward—me—“What time does this place reach San Francisco?” She had the most amazing voice, as deep and husky as a velvet martini. Then she stared into my eyes and asked, “Who do I have to fuck to get a drink?” You can bet that sent me scurrying.

The interior of the airship and all of her trim and accessories were decorated in the latest Art Deco style—Streamline Moderne—very light and bright, all minimalist and futuristic, exactly the statement Pan Am wanted to make. William F. Lamb, one of the principal designers of the Empire State Building, had supervised the design of the passenger spaces of the airship. He was also onboard, somewhere.

A broad salon stretched across the front of the aircraft, outlined by a terrifyingly open horseshoe of glass. This was the main gathering place for the passengers. It was almost too sprawling, too wide, too open; it felt cavernous. Huge windows stretched across the front of the deck and circled wide around both sides—that and the high ceiling gave the whole chamber a broad spacious feeling, much like Hollywood's conception of a blissful afterlife.

A second level of walkways circled the high windows so every passenger could have a grand view without ever having to crowd. All the travelers could easily observe the ground through the large downward-angled panes. The sheer size of those glass walls made it feel as if we were not within a vessel, but simply drifting along on an airy platform, as removed from the mundane cares of the world as the gods of Olympus—well, we were—but the sense of a heavenly condition was deliberate. We floated gracefully across the sky, trailing a massive shadow that traversed the ground below, a visible reminder of the *Liberty's* astonishing size.

Across the main floor of the salon, there were step-up levels for service areas and step-down levels of various sizes for gatherings of passengers to discuss common interests. The chairs and couches were upholstered in muted shades of red, silver, and blue—all very Pan American. The floor was carpeted in a lighter blue, a reflection of the sky. The walls were eggshell-white with gold trim. Silvery murals portrayed Lady Liberty in a variety of heroic poses.

Just aft of the salon was a spacious dining hall. Behind that was a selection of smaller spaces: a cozier bar, a reading room, a smoking lounge for gentlemen, and a corresponding lounge reserved especially for the ladies. For overseas flights, the billiards room would be converted to a small casino. Further back, the airship contained a motion picture theater, a gymnasium, a quiet reading room stocked with many current magazines and a selection of popular books, even a bowling alley and a tennis court, and other lightweight amenities to alleviate the tedium of a long voyage. There was almost too much acreage on the main deck. The designers had run out of ideas before they had run out of space.

The original blueprints had included a swimming pool, with the water in it doubling as ballast. At the last moment, the airline had postponed the installation. It wasn't the weight of the water that concerned the engineers, it was the weight of the support structure of the pool and all the additional plumbing and pumps and filters needed to maintain it. The pool hadn't been completely ruled out, but the accountants at Pan Am had successfully argued that the loadweight could be more profitably used for cargo, and the company was still weighing the pros and cons.

After Pennsylvania, we headed across Lake Erie. Captain Bradley diverted course slightly south so that people all along the northern shore of Ohio—Cleveland, Lorain, Sandusky, and finally Toledo—could see the *Liberty* and cheer and wave. Beneath us, more boats tooted their horns and people waved flags and banners to catch our attention. Many of the passengers went to the windows to wave back.

But not the Round Table group. They had gathered themselves near the bar again and were proceeding to work their way through pitchers of martinis, as well as a heated discussion of something they called, “writer’s block.” That sounded promising. As a burgeoning author myself, I hoped to learn some of the wisdom of the sages, especially the hard part. How do you get the words onto the page?

Sometime after lunch, Dorothy Parker sent a radiogram to her editor: “I have not forgotten you. I have only forgotten to write the article.”

Two hours later, her editor wired back. I brought the radiogram to her myself. She plucked it from the tray, took a puff off her cigarette, and opened it nonchalantly. I had never seen anyone open a radiogram so nonchalantly before. She must have received so many of them in her career that she took them for granted. She looked around at the rest of the group. “He says,” she said, and read it aloud. “Put down the damn martini and find a typewriter. Benchley has one. He never goes anywhere without it, even if he has no intention of using it.” She frowned across the table. “Is that true, Robert?”

Benchley had the good grace to look embarrassed. “Well, yes. It’s impossible to procrastinate properly without a typewriter.”

Mrs. Parker looked up at me, still waiting with the tray held out. “Are you waiting for a tip?”

Yes, ma’am. But I didn’t say it aloud. “Will there be a reply?”

“No. Yes. Send this back. ‘Benchley and typewriter defenestrated over—’” She frowned. “Where are we? Oh, it doesn’t matter. Defenestrate him over someplace interesting. No, make that boring. Oh, never mind. He’ll have to look up defenestrate and he hates looking things up. Begone now.”

I bewent.

I bewent all the way back to my station next to the bar. As much as I would have liked to eavesdrop on their conversation, it would have been rude—and against the rules. I was only allowed to approach if summoned by a gesture, or if I was emptying ashtrays.

Nevertheless, snatches of conversation still floated over to the bar, enough to suggest that the topic of writer’s block was still circling the conversation like a maiden aunt.

Because lunch had been delayed for more than an hour, dinner was also delayed, but only thirty minutes. We were over the northern part of Indiana when the sun touched the horizon ahead of us. Oscar Levant advised against looking out the windows at the broad plains of Indiana. “It’s only the people we fly over.”

The entire meal service was scheduled for ninety minutes. Soup, salad, fish, three kinds of carvery meat, dessert, coffee, and after-dinner drinks. The Algonquin crew managed to stretch it out to two and a half hours. By the time they finally heaved themselves laboriously from their chairs, it was nine o’clock and we were approaching the Chicago flyover. The city was a bright sprawl of lights ahead, searchlights sweeping the sky.

As we approached, we could hear music coming from a band on the pier, but the distance kept it from being clear or identifiable. It sounded like a badly tuned radio. According to Fred Allen it was “an excited crowd of bagpipers, accordion-players, and Jack Benny fans.” Beside him, Benny replied, “I’m having trouble seeing your fans, Fred. Are there any?”

Over the city, we were blinded by searchlights hitting us from the ground. They blazed up at us from everywhere, especially along the shoreline and the major boulevards. “It looks like a dozen Hollywood premieres,” said Bankhead. “Louis B. Mayer should see this. He’d crap his pants.” She pronounced it “Louie.”

“I wonder what it looks like from down there,” said a tiny woman, one of the contest winners. The winners had been picked by their weight, a fact not made known to the general public.

I took the opportunity to answer. “Did you see the glow in the water as we passed over the lake? That was our lights. The entire airship is outlined with Nikola Tesla’s new illuminators—the ones that give off almost no heat. He calls them light-emitting-diodes. They print them on some thin panels of glass. From the ground the *Liberty* looks like a great silver spoon, blazing across the sky. The airship’s name is spelled out in lights like a Broadway star—only bigger than any marquee on Broadway. Each letter is twenty-four feet high.”

Beside her, a nondescript little man—the publisher of a pulp science fiction magazine, *Thrilling Wonder Stories*—spoke up. “Imagine if we could put a news-marquee on the side of the airship, like the one in Times Square. We could display messages to the people below.” He thought a moment. “Or perhaps we could put projectors inside the skin of the dirigible and show motion pictures on her sides. Of course, the skin of the ship would have to be translucent enough for the movie to show through. Perhaps someday we’ll have airships anchored above cities, projecting television programs to thousands of people at once.”

He frowned, another thought crossing his mind. “That would use a lot of electricity, wouldn’t it?” Still frowning, he added, “I wonder if Professor Tesla’s wonderful diodes could somehow be reversed to turn light into electricity? You could put rows of panels across the top of the airship and power its engines off sunlight all day long. Hmmm.” He pulled out a notebook and hurriedly scribbled his thoughts into it. “Perhaps I’ll write a sequel. Ralph 124C42+ . . .” He wandered off, lost in thought.

The woman, the one who’d won her passage in a contest, said, “What a strange little man. Is he an inventor?”

“His name is Gernsback. He’s a science fiction writer.”

She frowned in confusion. “Science fiction? What’s that?”

“Pulp fiction. The silly kind. The kind you don’t want to let your little boy read. Rocket ships to the moon. Giant mechanical brains. Robots. Silly things like that.”

She made a face. “Oh, that terrible stuff. No, we’d never let Jeffy read that trash.”

By ten, the Algonquins had reclaimed their place in the salon and another pitcher of martinis was meeting its olive-strewn fate.

“Do they ever stop?” the evening bartender whispered to me.

“I don’t know. I think Broun—or is that Woollcott?—got up to pee once. The rest of them must have iron kidneys.”

Between emptying ashtrays, retrieving empty pitchers and replacing them with full ones, occasionally delivering and sending telegrams, and always being as unobtrusive as possible, I managed to glean a sense of their evolving conversation. Tallulah Bankhead’s remark about Louis B. Mayer had sparked a conversation about writing for the movies, something that both Dorothy Parker and F. Scott Fitzgerald had dabbled with.

Before long, they were plotting a film of their own—or perhaps just plotting. The story involved, of course, a beautiful Broadway star traveling aboard a gleaming new airship when a terrible murder occurs. For the better part of an hour, the group argued about who to murder, perhaps someone in their own group? That ended abruptly when Bankhead declared, “Dah-ling, you can’t murder a writer. Nobody will notice. It has to be someone important.”

Oh, good grief. Didn't they realize? The writers are the *most important* people in Hollywood. If it isn't on the page, it isn't on the stage! You have to take the words seriously!

But instead, they wasted another hour of discussion about who might be worth murdering. The comedians were quickly dismissed, so were Jolson, Jessel, and Cohan. The Algonquins finally settled on George Gershwin as a suitable victim, then moved on to speculating about the identity of the murderer and what possible motive he (or she?) might have for killing America's most gifted composer.

"Possibly his brother, Ira?"

"What motive?"

"Over a girl maybe . . .?"

"How tawdry. How boring. Besides . . ."

"No, dear. George isn't gay. He's been bedding all those women—"

"—yes, trying to prove he's a man."

"What a wonderful way to prove it." That was Oscar Levant, who'd been passing by, but stopped for the gossip.

I didn't hear the end of that discussion—there were several other late-night gatherings that needed my attention, but none as interesting. The next time I passed by, they were arguing about writer's block again. That was something I really wanted to hear about—how did the great ones get past it?

It was either Broun or Woollcott—I never could figure out which was which—who said, "Oh, there's a very easy trick to break a block."

Benchley was already glowing with inebriation, had been since liftoff, but he looked across the table with all the interest he could muster. "What?" he said.

"Quite simple. You put a sheet of paper in the typewriter and you type the word 'The.' The human mind abhors a vacuum. It is incapable of leaving the sentence unfinished. You will find yourself typing something to complete the sentence almost immediately."

"Yes, dear fellow," said Benchley, "but what about the sentence that follows it? And the next after that? And the next and the next?"

The other one—Woollcott or Broun, or maybe it was George S. Kaufman—spoke up then. "Pablo Picasso says that all art is recovery from the first line. He was talking about drawing, of course, but I believe that's true of writing as well. Once you have that first sentence on the page, the rest will follow."

Benchley had already written quite a bit about his ability to procrastinate—that only the pressure of a deadline inspired true creativity—but in this group of trusted colleagues, he could admit that sometimes writing was difficult. Not the typing itself, but getting the right words in the right order. Others agreed. "There's an elegance that we aspire to achieve, but the limitations of our own selves remains our greatest challenge."

Benchley put his martini glass down. It was already empty anyway. "The . . ." he said. "The . . ." And then, "The the the the the." He nodded. "Yes. The . . ." And then he leapt up from his chair. "It's an admirable idea. I shall now proceed to test it." And he staggered off in search of his cabin.

The others went back to discussing murder, now arguing whether Jack Warner or Louis B. Mayer might be a better victim. There would be no shortage of suspects or motives. I did catch one line in passing. "No, not Walt Disney. If he doesn't like an actor, he tears him up."

By midnight, we were crossing Kansas—a dry state, it had the most restrictive alcohol laws in the nation. Legally, once we were in the state's airspace we were forbidden to serve liquor. When the company announced the flight itinerary of the *Liberty*, the Attorney General of the state had sent a letter of inquiry to Pan American's lawyers asking if the state's liquor laws would be observed while the *Liberty*

was flying over Kansas. Pan Am's lawyers had promptly sent back a note assuring the Attorney General that state officials, including county sheriffs, were free to board, inspect, and serve any necessary warrants on any Pan Am aircraft flying over the state of Kansas. So far, none had done so.

Captain Bradley had altered the course a few degrees south to avoid a rumbling storm system spreading across the Dakotas and down toward Nebraska, where it would probably turn into tornado weather. The big chart in the salon was automatically updated every fifteen minutes. It showed our location and also demonstrated that we were averaging 93 miles per hour, so we were ahead of schedule, but nowhere near the 100 miles per hour that some had predicted. The figures were also available in knots for the aviators aboard. Of which I was not one.

Along about 1:30 in the morning, the Algonquins finally started making noises that suggested they might be through for the evening. Two other stewards and I had to escort several of them to their cabins. When the last one had finally been tucked in, we looked at each other in exhaustion. "When do any of those people actually find time to do any of the things they're supposed to be famous for?"

We secured all the windows, checking to make sure that none were left open to the night—we couldn't risk a drunken passenger falling out—then adjourned to our separate bunks. Crew's quarters were nowhere near as luxurious as the passengers', but we each had a private space, a sink, and a shower—and a window! It was an uncommon luxury. Eventually, on a full flight with four hundred passengers, we'd be doubling up, two crewmembers to a cabin.

The cabins on the *Liberty* had what they called "picture windows." The windows in the salon were even larger, as broad as those in front of Macy's department store. By contrast, the windows on a passenger plane were little more than portholes—even on the newest aircraft under construction that Boeing was building in Washington state.

Pan Am had ordered six of those airplanes—the Boeing 314 Clipper long-range flying boat—for trans-oceanic flights. But with the success of the *Liberty*'s maiden voyage almost certainly assured, those planes might end up going to the army instead. Britain's Royal Air Force had also expressed an interest in picking up those contracts if Pan Am canceled as expected.

Unlike an airplane, it's easy to sleep aboard the *Liberty*. Her electrical propellers are so silent, and so distant from the passenger cabins, you can barely feel any vibration, just a gentle susurrus. Unlike the clattering internal combustion engines that keep airplanes aloft, the *Liberty*'s engines run on the same electricity that powers the lights and runs the radios. Everything aboard the airship runs off Professor Tesla's marvelous new graphite and lithium batteries. The batteries were kept charged by three diesel generators.

Although technically I was on a 24-hour shift, in practice I would not be needed until at least 10 A.M., maybe later, if the Algonquins slept in—as expected—but I was already up and ready to go at 8:30 A.M.

We had made it to the northwest corner of New Mexico, and were on course to pass over the Grand Canyon, then Boulder Dam, only two years old and already providing electricity for much of the southwest, then past Las Vegas, a small desert resort town, up over the Sierras, and eventually north up the coast toward an early evening arrival in San Francisco. Passengers could expect a glorious California sunset as we landed.

The course of the airship was primarily determined by weather, but the airline wanted everyone in the country talking about the airship. That meant flying over as many cities as possible so the people on the ground could see the *Liberty*. It also meant flying over the most spectacular scenery below so that passengers could take photographs to show their friends and families.

Of course, *Life Magazine* had photographers aboard the aircraft as well, two of them, and more stationed on the ground all along the route as well. We'd lifted off on Thursday, June 3. The next issue of the magazine would appear on Monday, June 7. We were guaranteed the cover, of course, and would likely have at least four pages of departure pictures, showing liftoff from the field as well as more photos of the airship over New York, then probably six pages of en route photos, especially aerial views of various landmarks, and another four pages for the arrival and landing.

According to the flight plan, we would head up the California coast, then sail in over the brand-new Golden Gate Bridge for even more spectacular photo opportunities. The bridge had opened on Thursday, May 27, exactly a week before our liftoff, so it was a grand occasion to demonstrate America's growing industrial future, the strength and know-how that was bringing us back from the Great Depression.

After crossing over the bridge, the *Liberty* would circle the entire bay so people in Sausalito, Berkeley, and Oakland could also get a good look at the airship, then back across the bay to the Pan Am terminal at San Francisco Municipal Airport. We expected to see large crowds everywhere, but especially at the airfield, where a motorcade awaited.

Governor Frank Merriam would be there to welcome us. He'd dedicated the bridge the week before, kissing every baby he could find. This week, he'd certainly make sure that the photographers would get pictures of him with George Gershwin and Al Jolson and Jack Benny—but not Tallulah Bankhead. She was developing an unsavory reputation among Republican voters, and Merriam needed all the good press he could get—he had a tough election coming up next year.

Not all of our celebrity passengers were placing themselves where photographers might find them. Some actually found the photographers a nuisance, but the photographers themselves were having no shortage of photo opportunities. Even if they couldn't find Gershwin at the piano or Cohan and Jessel and Jolson mugging together, there were always the huge, downward-angled windows. They had already taken enough aerial photos for a dozen special issues and were now arguing which side of the salon would be best for photos when we crossed the Golden Gate Bridge. The two *Life Magazine* photographers had the best plan; they would station themselves one on each side.

Most of the Algonquins slept through breakfast. Not surprising. But they missed a great view of the Grand Canyon from the air. That Gernsback fellow, the one who published *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, speculated aloud, "I suppose that's what the canals on Mars must look like, only larger, to be visible from Earth. What a grand civilization the Martians must have. We must make friends with them somehow."

Amazing, what some people thought about. I couldn't imagine anyone taking that science fiction stuff seriously.

The Algonquins did show up for lunch, one by one staggering bleary-eyed into the dining hall. Not the best argument for the life of a writer. These people were famous. They were role models. Why weren't they acting like it? I was beginning to hate them.

They had the best job in the world—they were the caretakers of culture, the shapers of opinion—and they were behaving like common drunks. But if writing is one of the best jobs in the world, it's also one of the hardest—it's all decision-making, all day long. This word or that one, over and over and over again, all the way to the end of the sentence. And even if you get to the end of a sentence, you still have to start again at the beginning of the next. It's exhausting.

Maybe that's why writers drink—to escape having to make any more decisions, except perhaps how many olives in the martini. Or maybe a twist or an onion instead.

And maybe what I was seeing was only an aberration. I couldn't expect these people to be brilliant and noteworthy everywhere, all the time, could I? This was a vacation

for them, a break from the stress. Maybe they just needed to recharge their creative batteries. Who was I to judge?

They took their coffee in the salon, along with a pile of fresh pastries that quickly disappeared. I circled regularly, alternating between brewing fresh pots of coffee and refilling their cups. They were now arguing about the best way to murder Louis B. Mayer. Throwing him out the window of the airship was quickly discarded. If there's no body to discover, you lose the scene where the French maid screams in horror.

That led to a discussion of why the maid had to be French. Woolcott—by now I was pretty sure it was Woolcott—noted that a young French maid was always going to be more fun to look at than a dumpy English maid. Bankhead responded that the dumpy English maid was a great part for a good character actress, and good contrast. “What she means,” Dorothy Parker pointedly observed, “is that the star should be the prettiest one. Not upstaged by the ingenue.”

Woolcott was undeterred. “Ah, but I have the perfect young actress—”

“Of course, you think she's perfect. She's sleeping with you and you're vain.”

Bankhead leaned in. “Not perfect. Desperate.” Then she added, “On the other hand, if you actually believe her orgasm, we should cast her—that proves she's a real actress.” Turning to the rest, she said, “What if the producer's body is found inside one of the—what do you call them—the big balloons that hold all that nice helium?” She turned to me and stroked my arm suggestively.

“Lift bags,” I said. “Or ballonets.”

“Oh, ballonets. I like that. How very French. There's a bit of French sophistication for you, dear. Without all that messy business of having to buy a maid's costume. We shall find Louis B. Mayer's body in a ballonnet. Suffocated because there's no oxygen. All blue in the face. Perhaps he has even been screaming. But no one could hear him.”

“Umm, if I may—” I politely lifted a hand.

The actress looked at me, her hand still on my arm. “Yes, dear boy?”

“If he were in the ballonnet screaming, the helium would affect his voice, make it higher pitched. It's the density of the gas.” She frowned in puzzlement. I demonstrated. “He'd sound like this. *Help me! Help me!*”

The entire group fell out laughing. “Oh my God, that's priceless. Can you imagine Louis B. Mayer sounding like Mickey Mouse?”

“More like Betty Boop.”

“Makes me think—maybe we should do this as a comedy.”

“Somebody go find Jack Benny. He's got the best writers—”

“We'd have to put him in the picture—”

“Oh, right. Never mind.”

“But if it's a comedy—”

“Who says it has to be a comedy—?”

“If we're murdering Louis B., it will be—”

“No, not a comedy, but certainly a feel-good movie. We could get Capra to direct—”

“No, we should get whatsisname, that little round English fellow, the one who does all those suspense movies—”

“I've met him.” Bankhead shuddered. “I have no intention of working for him. He's . . .” She searched for the word, finally found it. “He's creepy.”

She squeezed my arm, “Not you, dear boy,” and finally let go, but not before giving me the kind of delicious look that made me wish the dirigible was a lot slower so we'd have one more night in the air.

“I have a question . . .” I was pretty sure that was Heywood Broun, maybe. “How do we get him into the lift bag? If we slice it open, doesn't the gas escape? Wouldn't that create a risk of explosion?”

"No, that's hydrogen. Helium doesn't explode. Isn't that right, steward?" They all turned to me as if I was the expert.

"Yes, that's correct, sir. Hydrogen is too dangerous. But helium is perfectly safe."

"But the gas would still escape, wouldn't it?"

"Well, yes. But the lift bags are very big. You could cut a slice near the bottom, shove a person in, then seal it again with duct tape. We use it to repair small rips. They do happen sometimes, so there are rolls of tape everywhere—in all of the tool kits, and there are tool kits everywhere in the frame, for the convenience of the engineers. So that wouldn't be a problem. Unless the victim struggled. You'd have to knock him out."

"Or get him so drunk he passes out—" Parker pointed to Benchley, who was quietly snoring in his chair.

"No, we can't murder Benchley. He still owes me money."

"Well, we can't murder Louis B. either then. He owes me a picture."

"Yes, but now that we have a plan, we'll have to murder the steward too, because he knows too much. We could practice on him. Would you like a martini, lad?"

"I don't drink, sir," I said, and excused myself to refill the coffee pot again. When I returned, they had decided that murdering a steward had no inherent drama. A murder mystery is only riveting if the victim is important. "So, you're safe, dear boy," Bankhead reassured me. "You're not important enough to kill. Don't take it too hard."

"Thank you," I said, noncommittally.

"One of you wake up Benchley—"

"Why? He'll just start talking—"

"He's snoring!"

"You'd rather have him talking?"

And so it went. Somebody looked at me and asked why I was carrying a coffee pot instead of a martini pitcher, and they were off again. But they still weren't talking about writing. Or anything relating to the literary world. I didn't understand it. Every other profession, the people in it talk shop. These people, they just drank. They did wake up Benchley in time to see the huge white slab of Boulder Dam. "Impressive! You could project movies on it!"

"It's a long drive from Los Angeles. It'd better be one hell of a flick."

Then they retired back to their chairs in the salon. "Las Vegas? Nothing there to see. Just a wide spot in the road. It'll never amount to anything."

Somebody remembered that Benchley had been procrastinating his way through a writer's block—until he was told to go type the word "The" on a blank sheet of paper. Dorothy Parker puffed on her cigarette and asked, "So how did that work, Robert?"

Benchley frowned. "How did what work?"

"The great 'The' experiment, remember?"

"Oh, that. Yes. Thank you." He frowned again. "Well . . ." He cleared his throat, preparing himself for an extended explanation. "One has to be well-prepared for the task, you know. Procrastination is not for the faint-hearted. It takes genuine commitment. You cannot just sit and do nothing. You must make it appear as if you are preparing to do something. A pipe is very useful in that regard. It requires a great deal of attention. It's an excellent way to look like you are preparing to get busy. Lighting a pipe demands a specific ritual, an elaborate ritual, a very time-consuming ritual. There is the selection of tobacco, followed by the process of delicately filling the bowl, pinch by pinch, then the tamping. One cannot tamp the tobacco too firmly or it will be hard to light. Likewise, one cannot leave the leaves too loose or they will simply burn up. Then there is the application of the fire. As soon as the match has been applied to the tobacco, the smoke is

over. This necessitates refilling, relighting, and oh, yes—reknocking. The knocking out of a pipe is as important as the smoking. You have to have the appropriate surface to knock the pipe on. Not just any table will do. No, knocking the pipe is a whole other ritual, you see, all part of the process, and if you leave any part of it out, you're simply not serious about procrastinating."

"Yes, you've bored us with this story before." Kaufman yawned. "You really must write it and sell it someday so we won't have to listen to it again. But we didn't ask you how to procrastinate. Most of us already know how to do that, we've each developed our own specific set of skills. What we want to know is how well the experiment worked?"

"What experiment?"

"The one where you typed the word 'The' on a blank sheet of paper—remember?"

"Oh, that experiment. It worked very well. You were right. I typed the word 'The' and almost immediately, the rest of the words came flowing out as easily as if poured from a pitcher of martinis. Of which, I will have one, if you please, steward." To the rest, he said, "It's still sitting in my typewriter. Feel free to look."

Unable to resist the invitation, the rest of the group scrambled to their feet and headed for the corridor, leaving Benchley behind with a martini glass held high in his hand. He saluted me with it, knocked it back, then held it up again for a refill.

When the others returned from Benchley's cabin, filing back in like children after recess, they were smiling and nodding to each other, but they were already talking about something else. Benchley waited expectantly for their reactions. Parker glowered at him as she seated herself. "Too clever by half." A couple of the writers shook their heads as if Benchley had punned in public—a good pun, but still a pun, the literary equivalent of a fart. Bankhead gave him a scowl of approval. The one I'd identified as Kaufman parked himself, nodded and admitted, "Nice."

I was curious too, but I couldn't leave my station. By then we were coming out over the California coast and following U.S. Route 101 north. It ran all the way from Mexico to Canada, with portions of the route known as El Camino Real—"The Royal Road."

The Spanish had built their twenty-one missions in California each one a single day's travel from the next, so journeying missionaries would always have a safe place to rest each evening. Many of the state's coastal towns and cities still retained the names of the original missions: San Diego, San Juan Capistrano, San Gabriel, Santa Catalina, Santa Ysabel, San Pedro, San Fernando, Santa Clarita, Santa Barbara, Santa Clara, San Luis Obispo, Santa Inez, Santa Cruz, San Jose, San Francisco, and a few more that always fell out of my head. How did I know all of this? Because it was part of Pan Am's training for stewards. Passengers would always have questions about the scenery below. It was the stewards' job to provide accurate answers. Any question we couldn't answer was added to the training guide.

The rest of the journey was pretty much without incident. The Algonquins, exhausted from all their drinking, had given up their plans to murder Louis B. Mayer. For some reason, they were now muttering imprecations against several New York critics—individuals who were not aboard. "Murdering a critic would only be poetic justice—" Bankhead said, "They've murdered so many shows."

Benchley cleared his throat loudly. "I am a critic too, you know."

"When you're writing, yes. But most people know you as a humorist."

"I resent that," he replied, but without much emotion. He was giving more of his attention to his martini.

"Besides, you're too nice to murder."

"I resent that even more."

"We can't murder a critic. There would be too many suspects to make the plot workable."

"There would be even more suspects if you killed Louis B. Mayer."

"True, that. Maybe we *should* kill Benchley. Some people like him. That makes it even more of a mystery. Why would someone want to kill Robert Benchley?"

"I can think of—" Kaufman quickly counted off on his fingers. "—four reasons."

"Besides that—"

"I think the question isn't *why*, but *who*." Bankhead looked to me. "Oh, hello, dah-ling, bring those martinis over here. Tell me—would you like to murder Robert Benchley?"

Before I could answer, Dorothy Parker said, "Oh, no, no, no. He's not important enough—"

"But he's adorable enough. No one would ever suspect him. I know—" She waved her martini glass for effect, but to give her credit she didn't spill a drop. The woman could hold her liquor. "I'll tell you exactly why he wants to kill Robert Benchley. He's a frustrated young writer and he's jealous—that's it! Jealous of all of us! Robert is just the first. Before the journey is over, he'll kill every one of us. It'll be just like Agatha Christie. *Ten Little Indians*. Only on an airship." She turned to me. "Would you like that, dah-ling?"

As deadpan as I could manage, "It's against airline policy to kill passengers. It might be bad for business."

Bankhead guffawed like a choking foghorn. Quickly recovering herself, she turned to the rest, "You see, darlings. He's perfect! Nobody would ever suspect him."

Kaufman shook his head. "No, no, no. It won't work. He's scenery. The murderer has to be a lead, not a second banana. But I do like the idea of killing Benchley. There's a sadistic kind of elegance to it. Although once he's dead, you lose some of your best opportunities for comic relief."

Woollcott added, "Having the steward be the killer is too much like 'the butler did it.'"

"Has the butler ever done it?" Parker asked. "I mean, how can it be a cliché if nobody's ever written it? Maybe that's how we make it work. If Benchley is the victim, then the other suspects have to be us. And here we are saying, 'Oh, it couldn't be the butler, that's too obvious'—and it's the butler all along. But we never considered it because we don't like clichés."

Silence, while they all considered it. I waited patiently to find out if I was going to be a murderer or not.

"Well . . ." said Kaufman, "We'd have to build up his part a bit. I do like the line about it being against airline policy to kill passengers. Notice he didn't say he wouldn't do it—only that it's against airline policy. Nice bit of misdirection there."

"That little lecture about the Spanish missions—and all those other bits of trivia too. Electrical engines and lift bags and why helium makes your voice squeaky. We can use all of that—we'll play him up as stiff and boring. He'll be a dry comic presence for the first two acts. In act three, we reveal his seething core of resentment against those with real talent."

Bankhead slid her hand up my arm. "What do you think, dah-ling?"

I couldn't say what I was thinking. Fortunately, I was rescued by the chime announcing afternoon tea. Having missed breakfast, having drunk most of their lunch, the Algonquins agreed among themselves almost immediately that food was as good an excuse as any to relocate. They rose almost as one and headed for the dining hall, where trays of sandwiches and salads were being set out.

F. Scott Fitzgerald was the last to follow, still holding a glass of whiskey. He stopped and frowned at me, as if trying to figure something out. "Why would you want to murder Benchley?" he asked, very seriously. "I think I'd be a much better victim, don't you?"

“A very good point, sir. Shall I help you to your table?”

A southerly headwind slowed the *Liberty*, so we observed sunset while still passing over Santa Cruz. On the starboard side, we could see the Giant Dipper roller coaster, the highlight of the Beach Boardwalk amusement park. There were colored lights flashing, people shouting and pointing, and carousel music. After that, the hills darkened quickly, a color somewhere between emerald and blackened indigo.

On the port side, the sun went fireburst orange, then sullen crimson as it dipped into the horizon. For a few magic moments, the ocean glimmered with golden highlights across the surface of the waves. Several of the photographers got into a heated discussion about the limitations of monochrome and whether or not Kodak’s new color film—called Kodachrome, of course—would ever be able to capture the dynamic range of such a view.

The Algonquin group’s tea stretched on so long, they decided to remain in the dining hall and wait for dinner, now planned as a gracious evening affair over the San Francisco Bay, followed by a joyous welcome at San Francisco Municipal Airport—and apparently, I was no longer an accessory to their murder plot. This which might have been just as well, because I had already begun considering several better mechanisms of violence, including a way to frame Hugo Gernsback for the entire affair.

No, these people were not a good influence. Any last thoughts I had still been nurturing about the glamor of writing had begun to evaporate somewhere after their second pitcher of martinis. What was left was a sodden residue, about as appetizing as the last forgotten olive in Dorothy Parker’s glass.

But while they were at dinner . . . when no one was around, I took advantage of the opportunity to let myself into Benchley’s cabin, ostensibly to make sure he had clean towels and a last full bottle of gin.

His typewriter sat on the desk, a tidy stack of paper next to it. In the machine, a single sheet. I had to look.

There, at the top of the page, a single sentence.

\* \* \*

The hell with it.

\* \* \*

Now I did have a reason to kill him.

It was too late for this voyage.

I got him on the return trip.