

FIGHTING ACES OF WAR SKIES

WINGS

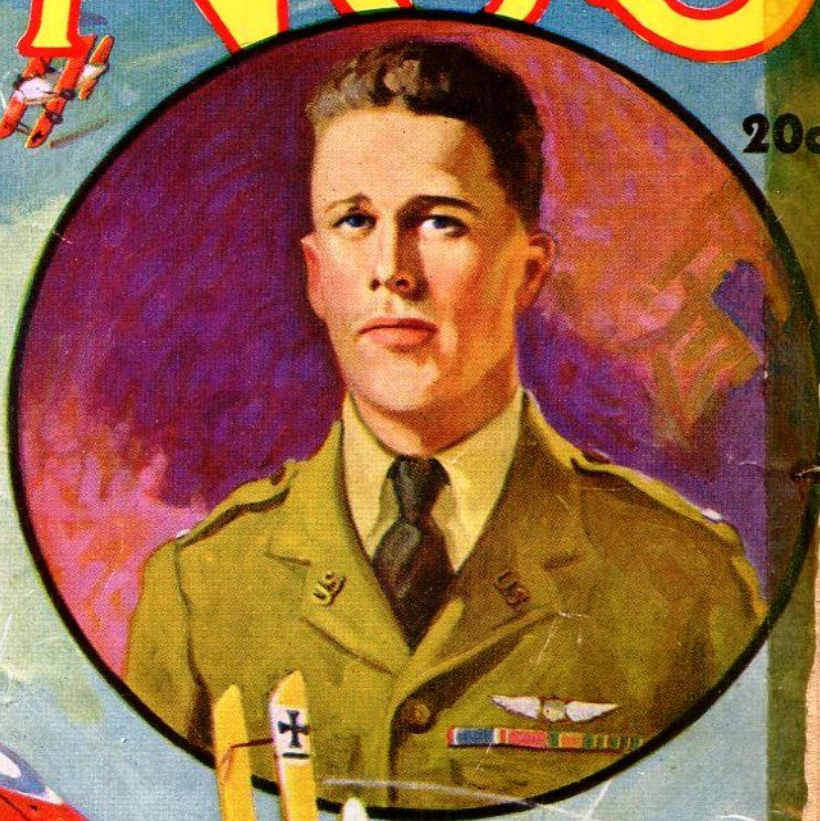
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THE CRIMSON COMET
by GEORGE BRUCE

MADMAN'S SQUADRON
by ROBERT LEITFRED

HANGAR OF HATE
by TOM O'NEILL



THE FIVE-A-DAY ACE

The true story of Dave Putnam
gallant hard-luck hero

by C. B. OGILVIE



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WINGS

DEDICATED TO AMERICAN FLYING MEN WHO HAVE
CARRIED THE STARS AND STRIPES TO THE SKY

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Winter Issue
1938-39

T. T. SCOTT, President and General Manager

MALCOLM REISS, Editor

- THE CRIMSON COMET** **George Bruce** 3
A Novel of War in the Air
A burning heritage of hate lifted bohunk Stan Kublik from the black-diamond sweat-pits to the front rank of fighting men, and gave him the golden wings of an eagle to blaze his smoky path across Mars' shell-rippen skies.
- MADMAN'S SQUADRON** **Robert H. Leifred** 37
Complete Air-Spy Novel
An unseen traitor ruled the 105th—marking its crates for sky-slaughter. One by one they fed the War God's hungry maw. Spy-crippled sparrows—helpless prey for the black-crossed Hun-hawks.
- HANGAR OF HATE** **Tom O'Neil** 62
A Big War-Air Novel
Lister flew with a madman's fury—lashing his battered crate into single combat with the Boche! And at his shoulder rode a wistful phantom—the ghost of the fledgling that he'd sent to Hell.
- FLAMING COFFINS** **Andrew A. Caffrey** 95
A Novel of War Over the Rhine
"Burned by Seidl!"—an old, bitter story to those battered air-knights. For the Boche fought with blazing tracers. But at last came the day when the Yanks trailed the hate-scorched skies with their own fatal flame.
- THE FIVE-A-DAY ACE** **Carl B. Ogilvie** 121
The story of a sky-rocket Ace who downed five Fokkers in as many minutes.

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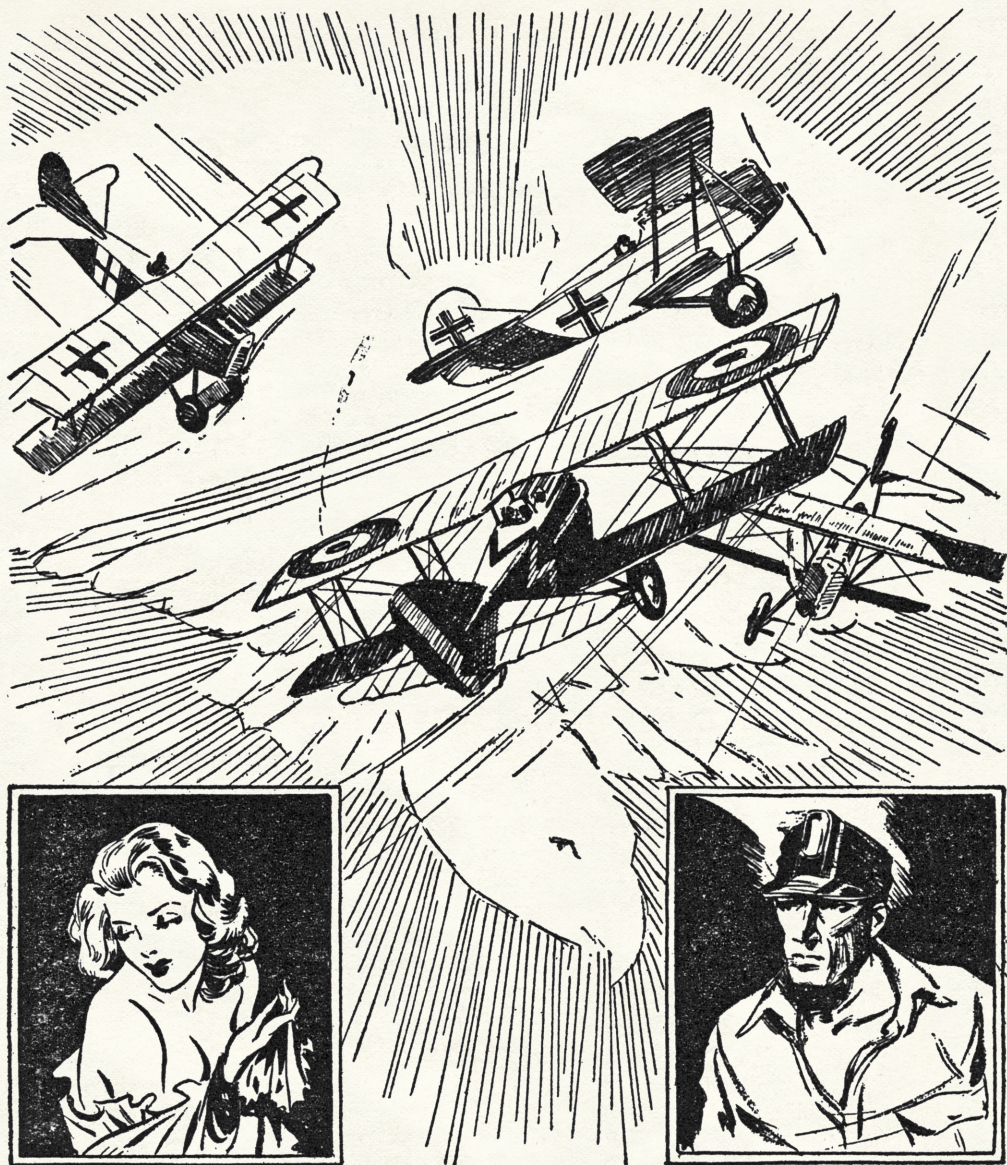
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THE CRIMSON COMET

By GEORGE BRUCE

A burning heritage of hate lifted bohunk Stan Kublik from the black sweat-pits of men! Gave him the golden wings of an eagle to blaze his fury path across Mars' shell-ripped skies!

A Novel of War in the Air

HE was a worm, and he wanted wings. This is his sky story. . . .

It is difficult to imagine a life so filled with darkness that the mere sight of

the sun is cause for thanksgiving. Yet such was the life of Stanley Kublik.

To him each sight of the sun was an event. A grave, reverent joy. Each time

he lifted his face to the blue skies and felt the cool, pine-scented breeze blowing on his sweat-wet cheeks, he drew great breaths deep into his lungs, and a tremulous something grew up within his soul . . . a hungry love for the warmth of that shining, golden disc above him, a sense of awe at the vastness of the inverted blue bowl which seemed to encompass the universe.

One who has the sun throughout every day knows nothing of the soul of Stanley Kublik. To such a one, the sun is merely a round hot heavenly body which provides heat and light. Something to be taken as a matter of fact, to pass without notice. To Stanley Kublik it was not only the sun . . . it was promise, reward, fulfilment. It was the symbol of Life.

He could hardly remember when Life had not been a thing of darkness. When it had not been a thing of stifling burial within a half-world filled with weird rumblings and groanings. A half-world inhabited by a furtive, dull-eyed people who walked hand in hand with fear, and who knew not when Fate would close its hand and cut them off entirely from the world above . . . the world into which they emerged in the graying darkness of evening and which they quitted in the grayish darkness before the true dawn.

Ghoul-like existence . . . if it might be termed existence. Blackened faces vomited up over the edge of a pit which resembled nothing more than some half-hidden entrance to hell. Blackened faces with gray streaks through the blackness . . . cut by streams of sweat. Hunched and rounded shoulders, as if from being squeezed into too little space for normal standing or sitting. Gnarled hands, scratched and cut, with the black ground into the abrasions . . . into the pores.

Startling ghouls, for no man could tell the color of their flesh. Most of them were blue-eyed . . . as if in mockery of the heavens they so seldom beheld. But the blackness was ground into the flesh of faces and neck, as it was ground into the animal-like hands . . . until the eyeballs stood out in bold relief—all about them that was not black.

And when they emerged out of the black pit and came into the world of men! They walked as if too weary to stand erect. Faces lined with toil, eyes blurred with fatigue.

Dry mouths gulping great draughts of air. Metal dinner buckets in hand . . . seeming like balls and chains attached to the black talons in which they were carried.

Each of the ghouls a pattern of another. Walking . . . shuffling rather . . . stumbling awkwardly at times . . . keeping a strange kind of single file. Unspeaking . . . as if they had forgotten the sound of human speech. Bodies lax in a weariness too great for comprehension.

Plod. Plod. Plod. Nothing on their faces. Nothing in their eyes. No joy. No relief. Nothing but the dumb, vacant eyes. *Thump, thump, thump* . . . heavily studded boots pounding upon the cobblestoned roadway.

THEY thumped toward lines of houses set close together. Each the same size, the same design, dirty and black. Each as shabby, as cheerless as its fellow. The lines of houses, set in long rows, followed the contour of the earth, running up the short, sharp hills and down. No bit of green grass about them, nothing to relieve the drabness. Smoke curling from short chimneys. Smell of hot grease oozing out of doorways and hanging heavily upon the still air. Now and then the squall of a child.

Home! For the ghouls who were vomited over the pit of hell. Home! After a day of blackness. Of groupings and grubbings in the stench and darkness underground. Home! With the full agony of endless toil tearing at the stomach . . . and with the brain drunk with over-labor. Home! But no voice called out to the ghouls. No glad cry of welcome. No rompings of pleased children. Nothing but the blackened, coffin-like "company houses," and the retching smell of boiling grease.

Within the houses, three rooms and the kitchen. The "parlor" which was never used. The bedroom of the father and mother. And the bedroom of the children . . . no matter how many there might be. A flickering oil lamp burning on a table, the jagged sawtoothed flame giving little light but much heat. The table covered over with a red and white oilcloth . . . begrimed with the same stuff which masked the windows . . . which filled the lungs . . . which gritted against the teeth with each mouthful of greasy food. Clothing, stiffly brocaded with the blackness from underground,

smelling of sweat, hanging obscenely in open closets. Hushed, frightened-looking children, fearing to speak, to move, awaiting the male ghoul who had emerged from the pit.

The ghouls stepped out of line, one by one, and entered the bleak, cheerless piles of unpainted clapboards which served as houses. Heavy studded boots sounded upon the bare board floors. The creaking of benches or chairs. Panting grunts . . . sounding hardly human. Noise of knives scraping against plates. Smell of heavy grease growing more pronounced.

Then, after thirty minutes, perhaps, the light within the house was extinguished. The ghouls were sleeping . . . to be ready for the dawn . . . and a new descent into the pit.

Sometimes they did not sleep. Sometimes it seemed that pig-like brains went mad and an individual ghoul would wander away uncertainly to the gin mill at the end of town and drink in quick gulps a quart or more of rot-gut to be had for a price. After which the drinker reeled homeward . . . and men and women and children avoided him . . . and the smaller and more fragile ghouls who shared the house with him fled in terror.

Then came the sound of smashing glass and furniture . . . of terrible cursings and bellowings . . . the screams of a woman . . . a scream of torture and a death cry in one.

Sometimes the sharp bark of a pistol shot, or a sobbing grunt as a knife blade slithered through flesh. The ghoul was making the only protest he knew how against such an existence. But even he did not understand that it was a protest! To him it was merely "getting drunk."

But usually there was a stillness after the lights were out. A stillness shot through with the vague poundings and thumpings which came from the bowels of the earth . . . where other ghouls labored "on night turn" for the privilege of sleeping through-out the day.

Silence, and darkness.

And over all hung the darker and heavier shadow of fear. Horrible, ever-present, gripping fear. Ground into the souls of these ghouls who went down into the maws of hell, lowered like condemned criminals, inside of a cell-like metal cage attached to

cables, which were in turn fastened to the drum of a panting donkey engine. Fear lurked in their eyes. Fear rose up and clutched them by the throat each time a louder roar sounded from the depths of the pits. Fear which sent women screaming madly into the streets dragging half-naked, tousled headed children after them, when a certain bell rang or a siren blew. Fear which caused them to sit for hours and days at the mouth of the pit . . . staring with unseeing eyes . . . waiting . . . for life . . . when death would have been much kinder.

Such was the life of the ghouls. Such was the only life Stanley Kublik had ever known.

FELLOW ghouls—especially his own family—called Stanley Kublik "queer." For one thing, he could read. That was astounding. He could write. That was miraculous, for in all of the company houses there was hardly a man whose hand could grasp such a small thing as a pencil, much less control its movement over a sheet of paper. They sneered at him for having "ideas."

He spent his time hanging over books. Books he got from the "liberry" in town. Books which the smug librarian gave him grudgingly when she first noted his address among the company houses. Night after night, Stanley Kublik poured over the pages of his books.

He learned to read, by going to a town school teacher at night . . . an "Old Coot" the Carmel Board of Supervisors was thinking of "firing" because "he was too old to be good for anything" and because he wore black string ties "like them artist fellers" . . . and "gave himself airs not fittin' to a school teacher." But the "Old Coot" had looked at young Stanley Kublik's eyes on that evening when Stanley, nervous and apologetic, had first visited him. He listened to Stanley Kublik's voice as Stanley explained the reason for the visit.

"You see," the young Kublik had said half defiantly, as if afraid of being laughed at, "I'm aimin' to learn to read some. I'm gittin' big—and it's shameful not to be able to know what's in books an' such like. And besides that, I got— ideas, I guess you'd call 'em. I'm thinkin' that I'm not always goin' to dig coal out of the ground—never

seein' the sunlight—bein' like my pap—doin' like he done all his life. I got to do things better than that—I got to live."

SO the "Old Coot" with the string tie and the white hands forgot that the heavy odor of sweat clung to the boy's clothes. Forgot that his hands and face were black, in spite of applications of a scrubbing brush and soap. He remembered only the hungry, eager look in the boy's eyes. The breathlessness of his hope—the anxiousness of his desire.

When Stanley Kublik could read small words, he bought himself the books used in the first grade in Carmel's rather sketchy schools. He digested the first year's work in three months. He went through the second year's work in thirty days.

He learned more than reading and writing under the tutelage of the "Old Coot." He learned to "figger." He learned geography. He found the fascination of foreign countries. When he was twenty he had the equivalent of a high-school education. He had devoured a thousand books having to do with the world and its people.

One day, years before, the Old Coot had asked him: "Why all the rush to get education, Stan? You can't learn everything in a day. It takes patience. What do you intend doing with your learning after you have it?"

After a minute Stanley Kublik had answered gravely: "You never can tell. Maybe someday it will get me a job—up in the sunshine—up in the blue sky—where I can see it every day. I want to feel the warmth on my shoulders and face, and smell the wind that blows down out of the pine trees in the mountains. I got to hurry and get ready, so if anyone ever gives me a chance like that I won't be ashamed to take it."

And the Old Coot had stared at the boy's rapt face and had swallowed a hard lump in his throat.

The year after Stanley went underground the Board of Supervisors carried out its threat to "can the old man." There was nothing in life for him but the teaching of Stanley Kublik. He went at it passionately. As if he were a man in the face of death who must finish a task before closing his eyes. A strange bond grew up between the teacher and pupil . . . a strange partner-

ship. Underground, the youth pitted his strength and courage against unyielding nature, to wrest from it blackness, with which to pay for light. With the strength of his body he was providing a livelihood for the old man who was repaying him with the fruits of his brain.

When Stanley was twenty the Old Coot died. He died with a smile on his face. He looked up at the face of the boy who had become a man, and who was holding his hand . . . holding off the fear of death with his calm, steady eyes.

"I guess we've done a good job of you, Stan," he said softly. "You and I together. I guess you're almost ready to come up into the sunlight. I wish I could have lasted a little while longer . . . just to watch you with your feet on top of the earth . . . looking off toward those hills. I wanted to climb, Stan . . . climb and climb . . . get so close to the sky that I could touch the blue with my fingers. But somehow, I never made it. But you'll get there. I feel it inside me . . . ever since that first minute when you came up to my back door . . . wanting to learn to read.

"You'll go high . . . your wings will be spread out in the light of the sun . . . maybe you'll tell 'em that I tried . . . anyway . . . even if I didn't get any farther than Carmel."

The smile was over his mouth, as his eyes closed.

Stan Kublik stared down at him. There was a picture flashing through his mind. A little string of words were singing within his brain. "You'll go high . . . your wings will be spread out in the sun."

II

HE walked back to the rows of "company houses" with his head bowed on his shoulders, watching the earth at his feet. There was a stunned feeling in his brain—a sense of desolation, of aloneness he had never known before.

What would life be without the "Old Coot"—without his gentle voice, and his pride in the accomplishments of his protegee? He wondered how he would spend the evenings. What would he do for someone to talk with?

There were none among the ghouls he could go to for mental stimulus. Even now

they looked at him suspiciously and avoided him. In spite of the fact that he was born within the confines of a company house and had lived at the mouth of the pit all of his days, he was considered alien by his own kind. They suspected him of pretending to something forbidden to ghouls, of conspiring with himself to be better than his surroundings. Among the black-faced men, the slatternly women, and the squalling brats, he walked alone.

Even his own family suspected him—little more than tolerated his presence in return for the money he wrested from the blackness underground.

He lifted his head as he heard dull murmur of words coming from the center of the street. A breaking sea of hoarse voices.

In front of one of the houses a man was standing upon a big packing box. He was looking down at a crowd of miners standing before him. Looking down at them, dominating them, smirking at them.

The pit mouth seldom looked upon such a man. He wore a loudly checked suit. A pink shirt showed above the fancy vest. A red cravat, with a great knot, bulged out of the top of the vest, held a huge brilliant, a diamond perhaps, which glowed with a fierce iridescence. His face was fat . . . pudgy, pink-cheeked, as if flushed with good and easy living. His jowls bulged over the edges of his collar. He was holding a brown derby in his hand. His oiled hair was parted exactly in the middle and combed flatly on either side as if to hide the fact that he was growing bald. The back of his neck was a series of folds of flesh . . . like the neck of a pig.

His hands, soft and white, had never known the gripping of a pick or shovel. He had never rested on his back on sharp fragments of coal to hew at the hanging roof of a tomb stretching above his face. His brown shoes were resplendent with polish . . . polish on which the grime of the pit mouth had settled. There was a fat cigar between the fingers of his right hand. He seemed sure of himself—very sure, very cocky.

He waited a moment, until the hoarse voices below him were stilled. Then he spoke. A strange voice, high-pitched but heavily timbred. A voice which penetrated the chest and stomach and caused them to tremble nervously. A magnetic voice—a

voice foreign to his piggish appearance. His eyes glared down at them. They seemed to spit a green fire. They were alive, glowing, filled with a livid hatred.

Stanley Kublik stopped to listen.

HE edged in on the outside of the crowd about the man on the packing case.

"Sure," the man was saying in Polish—the Polish of the mines, "they use you for a bunch of fools. You labor, you sweat, you die! What for? Why, to help people kill one another—to murder your brothers across the seas—over there in the old country. They tell you that you must work hard, and they pay you in dirty, blood-soaked dollars. The blood of your friends.

"Already they are talking of putting the United States in the war. To send men over there—to fight against your own kind—and like dumb cattle you keep on working—helping them to murder your people. What have they ever done for you? What do they give you in return for this slavery?" His arm swept about the squalor surrounding the pit mouth.

"What have you—comrades of all the other workers of the world—to do with wars and murder and killings invented for the purposes of the capitalists, but fought by the workers—to make the capitalists fatter and richer, to pile up more bloody dollars for them—like the dollars they have taken from your sweat and your toil?

"They say to you: 'Nice John, or nice Alex, hurry now and mine us much coal, so that we can fire many boilers, to make many more bullets, to kill your comrades so that we can make much more money. And then when we want to make more money we will let you go and fight for us. You can leave your wives and children at home to starve. You can go and get killed—so that our wives and children can run about and play in their silks and their satins.' Then they throw you back a few dollars—like throwing slop to hogs in the gutter—and tell you to be content."

On the outskirts of the crowd, Stanley Kublik listened in silence. There was a fierce resentment within him. He had seen and listened to such men before. Each time they appeared, calamity walked with them to the pit mouth. Calamity which never touched the pink and white agitators—but

calamity which whirled over the people of Carmel.

"Listen!" went on the strident voice. "Stop all of this! Stop helping to murder brothers. Strike back at these rich dogs who own your bodies and souls—and the bodies and souls of your families. Show them that you are wise to them. Fight them with the same fire they use against your comrades overseas. They need coal to continue murder. Very well, do not let them have coal—without coal they can do nothing."

A leer appeared on his face. "We know, do we not, my comrades, that just a little trick would put a stop to any more coal coming out of these mines? We know that—and how to do it? Well, shall we continue knowing and do nothing?"

There was a sudden movement from the back of the crowd. Stanley Kublik was forcing his way to the front.

HIS eyes were narrow, slits and blue-white fire seemed to dart from between the half closed lids. There was a grayish pallor over his face. His mouth was drawn into a thin white line. His chest heaved, his hands were knotted into hard fists which dangled at his sides.

There was a murmur as his husky shoulders butted listeners to one side or another—then there was a sudden silence. He was standing below the packing case, looking up at the face of the speaker.

"You are a liar," he said in a low voice which trembled in its intensity. "You talk about workers and comrades. You!

"What do you know about work—with your white soft hands, and your fat face, and your nice diamond in your red tie. What do you know of the workers—what they think—what they do? You speak words which mean nothing. You give bad counsel.

"When men like you come here there is hell for days and months. Bellies of the children starving for food. Fire and flame, and bullets singing in the street. Bullets which do not take your life—for you are far away, at your table, smiling at the foolish people who have listened to you, and collecting your own blood money.

"Who pays you—who buys your diamonds and your fancy clothes? How do you keep your hands so white—how do you

live without working? What do you care for us—you with your grand words, your lying words? It is your kind who stir up trouble and shed blood. You do not fool me. I tell you to your face that you are a liar. Come down from there, you dog, or I will give you a taste of the fists of a real worker whose hands show that he has toiled—as you have never toiled!"

There was a growl of displeasure from the crowd. They did not like this interrupting of the speaker. One voice called: "Shut him up—he does not speak for us."

Stanley Kublik whirled on his heel and faced the crowd. "Dummies! Sheep! Children!" he spat at them. "Look at this thing who talks to you—look at him and forget the weeping of your children hungry for food. Try to forget two years ago—when the boilers were dead and when you went through the winter without fire and without clothes to warm your bodies—because you listened to another like this pig. Listen! Men are paid to labor. All men must work. It is the law of the world. If you are a miner, you are a miner—you work—you get paid if you work. If you do not work you starve.

"What do you care about these brothers who are in the old country? There are men here who ran away from that old country this fellow praises so highly. Ran away and came here to the United States as one would go to a heaven about which he can only dream. But, let one like this talk to you and you forget the horrors you fled to come here. What does this country have to do with the people of another country? You make your bread here—you raise your families here.

"Life is hard for you—but life is hard for many others. You are not alone. You cannot make it better by burning or shooting or stabbing or destroying. You are miners because you are miners. No one forced you to be miners—you have picked that work because your fathers were miners before you.

"You cannot have two allegiances. Either you are Americans or you are not. If you are not, you do not belong here—you belong in that place from which you ran like frightened cattle. You belong under the whips from which you fled.

"This man with his fine words! What does he seek to gain? What purpose does

he serve? Who is his master? Ask him those questions. He will tell you that he serves the workers of the world. Well, you are workers! Do you know him—have you hired him to speak for you? Does your money provide him with his polished shoes and his fat cigars and his pot belly? Does it?

"True, there have been rumors of war—but I have faith in the country in which I was born. If America says she must fight for something—then that something is right! And I tell you, my friends, that America will do more to right any wrongs the working man may have than all of the mealy-mouthed, pot-bellied, white-faced agitators in the world put together. America is the home of the people who work—America was built by such people. And men like this have no place within this country—tearing down what real workers have built up.

"You see what I think of this pasty-faced thing and his message? Look!"

One of Stanley Kublik's grimy hands reached upward and grabbed the speaker upon the box by the slack of the coat over his belly. Without effort he lifted his bulk to the ground. Then his arms moved—back and forth—shaking him until his neck was snapping and his eyes popping from his head. Shaking him slowly and methodically, while the white teeth behind the purple lips clicked like castanets. Shaking him until the fellow's knees sagged under him. Until his breath came in sobs.

Then, with a grimace of loathing, Stanley Kublik permitted the jelly-like carcass to drop into the coal dust at his feet. The proud black and white checked suit was begrimed with the stuff. The white face was streaked with the soot, made liquid by the slobber from his lips. The splendid pink shirt was like black denim.

And without a word Stanley Kublik shouldered his way out of the crowd and walked away toward the packing case house which served him as home.

WITH the morning—rather with the black dawn—when he took up his dinner pail, and made ready to go underground, there was a strange quiet about the mouth of the pit. A pregnant stillness seemed to hang over all. The puffings and panting of the narrow-gauged locomotives

pushing and hauling their trainloads of new coal, the softer puffing of the stationary engines within the sheds—all seemed to accentuate the sinister quiet.

He walked out into the half-darkness and toward the head of the shaft. The cage-car was in readiness to lower its human cargo into the bowels of the earth. Flickering lights showed here and there. Moving figures seemed to walk on tiptoe. There were only a score of men ready for the descent, rather than the hundred or more who crowded about the car every morning.

A voice spoke to him from out of the darkness. "Hello, Kublik. You gave that fellow a proper shaking up last night. The scum. I was ready to do it myself. You want to look out for that son of a gun, though. He's been bragging in the gin mill about what he intends doing to you—and 'your kind.'"

"Where's the shift this morning?" asked Kublik. He knew the answer. There was a vague sense of disaster stirring within him—an uneasiness he could not shake off.

"Oh, they're up there swilling rotgut that fellow is paying for and telling themselves what great, brave lads they are. They've decided they aren't going to work any longer. That the comrades from the old country will provide them with food for their families. The fools! Well, I'll work for mine—I'll be surer of getting it when pay day comes around."

There was a stirring by the pit mouth. A figure emerged from the gloom. A strident voice sounded. It was filled with a nasty menace. "One more warning, you fools," snarled the voice. "You get in line or get hurt. You lousy scabs! You dirty double-crossing traitors! Take the bread out of the mouths of your fellow workers? Well, you'll get in line or take it with the rest of the lousy skunks that hire you."

Another figure moved through the gloom. There was a gasping, muffled sound from the speaker as a hand was clapped over his mouth—a hand smeared with coal dirt. He was lifted off his feet by a brawny pair of arms, and for the second time, his gorgeous raiment knew contact with the filth of the street.

A laugh sounded, the laugh of one of the straw bosses. "Go home with your fairy tales. Come around here again and I do some hurting myself. You talk too much

mister—and I don't like the things you talk about. If you can talk those other fools into losing a day's pay, go ahead. We're not like them—we go to work. Now, you stay away from us—hear?"

The whistle of the donkey engine sounded. The skeleton remnant of the day shift crowded aboard the car. It moved downward with a breath-taking rush. The wet dampness of the interior of the mine filled their lungs—but this morning they went singing. Something unheard of—twenty men going underground singing—as if they found happiness in the going.

Over the edge of the hills surrounding the mouth of the pit the first pink tinge of the rising sun painted a blazing lace-work of breath-taking beauty along the rigid limbs of the skyline pines.

It was at nine o'clock that the first booming sound belched up from the mouth of the pit.

THERE was a sudden hush—as if the world listened. Then, a minute later, a second and louder blast. The shrill, agonized scream of a woman cut through the thick stillness. It was followed by another and another. And then by children's voices. And then by pounding feet running over the boarding of the sidewalks.

A black column of smoke billowed up from the interior of the shaft—the shaft down which the day shift had gone two hours before.

In the gin mill, surrounded by his "comrades," the speaker of the night before heard the dull boomings from underground. A fear seeped into his eyes. The fear that haunts the eyes of a murderer who fears retribution for his killings. Stolid men were about him—listening. Then came the first sound of a woman's scream.

"Aw, them guys had it coming—the lousy scabs," snarled the piggyish one. But he was suddenly alone. His "comrades" were lurching, staggering, running out of the door, down the street between the houses, making a way to the pit mouth.

After an instant of peering cautiously through the window, to be sure that the way was clear, the piggyish one crept out of the back door of the grog shop, and skulking about the edges of the buildings, made his escape from the company property.

III

STAN KUBLIK awoke. There was something soft pressing against him, something which seemed to bind his arms. There was a warmth on his face. A red curtain before his eyes. He drew a deep breath. It seemed impossible to summon sufficient strength to open his eyes.

His eyelids seemed to rip apart as he forced them open.

At first he was blind. The sun was shining in his eyes. His heart seemed to stop. Then a wave of joy swept over him. The sun! No . . . it could not be the sun—he would never see the sun again; he was in a delirium. The horrors of the black tomb were mocking him! His wings would never be spread out against the sun . . . he would never know the blue sky. . . .

A voice spoke to him—a soft, compassionate voice. "It's all right," the voice was saying. "You're safe. Can you swallow?"

His eyes looked upward. Again the paralysis of the unreal seemed to grip him. There was a face before his eyes. A very white, strained face—blue eyes looking down at him, sympathy and thanksgiving flooding their depths. His head was whirling. He closed his eyes and opened them slowly. No, it was not a dream—the face was still there.

He tried to sit erect. Something was holding him. His head was pillowed on something warm . . . living . . . soft. After a moment he discovered that he was being held within two white arms . . . his head resting on the shoulder of this white angel who looked down on him.

"Don't move," she begged in her soft voice. "You're safe. They got to you just in time—they found the barrier you had built to keep out the gas."

WAILINGS and screamings sounded over her voice. The wailings and screamings of Old John's wife and his fourteen children. They were clawing at the covering over a litter carried by four of the rescue squad.

There was another voice—a man's voice: "Come now, Helena—you've done everything. That chap will be all right. You're soiling your dress—really, you're ruining it. Let the first-aid squad have him—they'll know what to do with him."

Suddenly her eyes were flooded with tears. They fell on Stanley Kublik's face.

"The only one!" she sobbed. "The only one—out of all those men! The beasts—the murdering beasts who would kill in such a way! Who would strike at defenseless men—dynamite them as they worked underground—without giving them a chance! It's terrible!"

The man was hanging over him now—looking down at him. Speaking to him. "I say, Kublik," he was saying. "I want you to come into my office when you're feeling better. I've heard a great deal about that dressing down you gave that Communist speaker. I think we'll take you out of the workings and put you in the office."

But Stanley Kublik did not hear. He was staring up at the face of the white angel above him. Staring hungrily—as if fearing she might disappear if he took his eyes from her face. He was still staring when the litter men carried him to the company hospital. She walked beside the litter—holding onto his blackened paw.

Suddenly he discovered that he hated the man who had spoken to him. The man who was arguing with the white angel in an effort to take her away. The man who had called her "Helena." Had always hated him—with his white shirts and his white hands and his patronizing manner. He hated him because he was the son of the man who owned Carmel. Hated him because he could call this girl Helena—as if she belonged to him—as if she might be contaminated by the presence of such a thing as Stanley Kublik.

Helena! It was a beautiful name. It played in his brain—but he would never utter it aloud in her presence. Black-faced ghouls could not call white angels by their first names.

The blackness settled over his brain again.

IV

SHE came to see him on the afternoon of his second day in the company's hospital. She approached his cot seeming to float in the midst of a white cloud. He was not conscious of her garments—he only knew that she wore something white and that a halo seemed to hang over her head.

Her blue eyes looked down at him. Her

red mouth was directly above his face as she lowered her head to speak to him. Her voice was freighted with a deep sympathy.

He saw the face of Harry Coleman over her shoulder. Coleman, who was the son of the owner of the mine—the man who held Carmel in the palm of his hand. Coleman had an ill-concealed scowl upon his face. He seemed to resent her coming—her being within the confines of the company property.

Looking up at him, Stanley Kublik envied the man his good looks—his white skin. His eyes fell upon his own soot-grimed hands with the heavy callouses and the marks of toil. They were not like the white, carefully kept hands of Harry Coleman. Neither did he have the smooth face, nor the wavy hair of the heir to Carmel.

He envied him his easy manner about the white angel. At times his hand touched her arm, his cheek brushed against her hair, as he stood close to her, looking down upon Stanley Kublik upon his hospital cot. It seemed nothing unusual to Harry Coleman. Stanley wondered what he should do—how he'd feel if her white-gold hair brushed across his cheek—or his fingers touched her arm. He drew a great breath and smiled up at her.

"I'm so glad," she said, a smile flashing over her face. "I can see that you are much better . . . out of danger. They would not let me come yesterday—" She stopped suddenly as she saw his eyes darting to Coleman's face.

"I understand," answered Kublik. "It isn't exactly a nice place for you to come. You might spoil your clothes." He hated himself for the words. Hated himself for permitting the scowling face of Harry Coleman to disturb him.

She flushed quickly. For an instant a light of pain came into her eyes—then it was gone.

"I wanted to come," she told him. "They told me what a fight you must have put up for your friends and yourself. How you must have fought until you were senseless. How you had built that barrier against the gas. I tried to imagine what it was like—fighting for life down there in the darkness, knowing that there was no escape—unless men dug a way to you. Days and nights!"

She shuddered. "It was terrible. And

to think that you could be rescued—brought back to life—still unafraid, and still sane, after the thought that you would never again see the light of day—feel the sun, see faces.”

Coleman's voice cut through the stillness. “Come on, now, Helena,” he was saying. “That's enough for the day. You'll get yourself worked up to the point of kissing him. He doesn't need sympathy. He wouldn't understand it. All he needs is a night's sleep. He'll be back on the job before the end of the week.”

He felt her moving away from him. There was a fierce protest in his brain. He opened his eyes—to see her face once more.

“I'll go now,” she was telling him. “I didn't want to disturb you—you do need rest and quiet.” She seemed reluctant to move away from the bedside. Coleman's hand was on her arm, urging her away.

If he could only tell her that he would be well in an instant if she would touch his cheek again, that the only rest and quiet he needed was her presence. But his throat was contracted. She turned and was walking away, leaving with him a last fond smile.

HE heard Coleman's voice speaking to her, admonishing her. “You really shouldn't come into this place,” he was saying. “You can't tell what you might pick up. These people don't live as we do. And besides, don't fool yourself in thinking they appreciate your sympathy. They hate you—they laugh at you. There isn't an ounce of appreciation in a thousand of these bunks who work underground. They don't know what it means.

“You take that Kublik fellow in there. He's laughing at you now. Laughing because you have the silly idea that you can do something for him. You saw the way he looked at you—as if you were a woman of his own kind. You see, when women go out of their way to be nice to a fellow like him, it's a sign that the woman isn't—well, you understand, don't you? I don't have to embarrass you by saying the truth outright.”

Kublik's voice, coming to him from across the room, interrupted him. It was not much of a voice. Just a rough, hoarse, whispering sound. He turned and walked back to the cot. He looked down at Stan

Kublik's face. He saw flaming eyes and tense mouth.

“Well?” he demanded. “You called me back. What do you want?”

“I just wanted to tell you what a liar you are,” said Kublik. “I want you to know that I think you are a yellow dog, with the honor of a sewer rat. You understand—you're just a lousy liar.”

Coleman's face was blazing red. “If you weren't down there on your back I'd smash your ugly face,” he told Kublik.

“I can get up,” smiled Stan, making an effort to lift himself off the pillows. “I wouldn't need any more strength than I have to smack down a liar—I never knew one who had guts enough to fight.”

He paused suddenly and confusion came over his face. She had returned.

“What's the matter?” she demanded of Coleman. “What are you saying to him? Why are you glaring at each other?”

“Oh, it's nothing,” assured Coleman with a nasty laugh. “I'm merely getting a foretaste of the well-known gratitude. I told you that you couldn't expect such a thing from him, didn't I?”

They left the ward—leaving Stan Kublik squirming and trembling with rage.

That night, staring up into the darkness, he knew that he was through with Carmel.

HE could never work again for a man who bore the name of Coleman. He could never go back underground. Not that he was afraid—but he would never again go out of the sunshine, never into the darkness. Over and over the words ran through his brain. . . . “Your wings will be spread against the sun. . . .”

He was in awe of those words. Singing in his head, they sounded like some grim prophecy. What could they mean? What wings? The Old Coot had forgotten that he was born a breaker boy and had grown into a human mole who burrowed far below the surface of earth. That he knew nothing else—except what the Old Coot had taught him.

But the world was wide, and the wind which swept over the pines topping the hills which walled in Carmel from the rest of creation must come from somewhere. He would see the far places and the high places—where the sun was always shining

and the blue sky was not stained with black soot.

He sensed an air of tension about the hospital. Even the doctors seemed to speak with a brittle, nervous voice. There had been dull, distant, shouting voices the night before, voices which seemed to leap from wrought-up nerves. It was his fifth day in the hospital. His strength was coming back. He could breathe without the torturing coals of fire burning his lungs.

She came to visit him that afternoon. He noticed that there was an air of excitement about her. That her eyes were bright, her voice a trifle unsteady. She was carrying a sheaf of newspapers.

"I brought you these," she told him. "I knew you'd like to read all about it. The doctor told me that you were definitely out of danger, and almost as well as ever. He said the excitement of reading about it would not upset you." She placed the papers upon his bed.

"About what?" he asked, for something to say. Nothing printed in black ink could be as important as having her there—with-out Coleman. He saw that her eyes moved from his face to the newspapers. He glanced at the headlines. A black smear of type formed sodden words, the largest type he had ever read.

It took an instant for the words to translate themselves within his brain. Suddenly he was sitting erect in bed, the top paper clutched between his two hands. The headline was screaming at him now.

CONGRESS DECLARES WAR ON GERMANY!

There it was. Spread across the entire page. He remembered what the piggish man had said during his speech—the night before the explosion. The United States was going to declare war. And it was done. The paper was telling him so.

He looked up at her face. Her cheeks were white. But her eyes were very bright.

"I'm getting in it," she told him. "I'm going. I told father this morning. They are recruiting an ambulance unit for immediate overseas service—women drivers. They've accepted me. I'm ordered away for training. Isn't it wonderful—to be able to do something! Women can have a part—not like other times, sitting at home, wait-

ing—but going and doing, working shoulder to shoulder with the men. . . ."

"You going?" he said stupidly. "You—why, you can't—"

"Oh, yes, I can," she laughed. "I'll be there before any of the boys get across—except perhaps the Regular Army.

"But it's war—men get killed—and hurt. Blood and death—you couldn't be around things like that!"

"I will be," she said quietly. "Who sees the most of the blood and the pain! Women! The fighters haven't time to think of such things. A man goes down, he stays where he falls—his comrades go on. You see? They see it or feel it for only an instant.

"That is where the women step in—as they have always stepped in. There is a place for me—on the front seat of an ambulance."

"You're going soon?" he said. His voice was a dry croak. His eyes probed deeply into the blue depths of her own.

"I came to say good-bye," she said quietly. "I'm leaving for camp tonight. I guess I won't see you again. I hope you'll be all right—and that you'll be as strong as ever. I'll think of you a lot. I'll remember how brave you were—and that they said you fought until you could fight no more. I can't seem to get that picture out of my mind—you, down there, cut off from everything living, with death creeping up on you—fighting on and not being afraid."

HIS eyes were filled with a silent agony. She looked away for an instant. Then she faced him again, her jaw set, her eyes flooded with a sudden wetness. She lowered her head, her face was coming close to him. Her eyes, her lips—and then she had kissed him. The softness of her lips burned his mouth. The perfume of her hair seemed to cause his brain to whirl drunkenly.

"Good-bye—Stanley," she said softly. "Good luck."

Stanley! She had called him by his name. A fierce something leaped up within him. His hands clenched into hard knots. The blood in his temples was hammering madly. He struggled to control his voice.

"Good-bye," he said. He was fighting with himself to utter her name. To call

her Helena as she had called him Stanley, but he could not force the word from his throat. He could only stare at her and feel the warmth of her lips upon his mouth.

"Good-bye," he repeated dully. "Good-bye."

As she walked out of the ward he knew that all of the happiness and beauty in the whole world had gone with her—and that he was alone.

It was an hour before he could focus his attention upon the papers she had left him. Her face came between his eyes and the type. The black letters danced, leaped madly. The first paragraph he read caused him to catch his breath sharply and reread. What was this? Words came singing into his brain as he read. The Old Coot's words. The strange prophesy: "Your wings will be spread against the sun. . . ."

The printed message burned itself upon his consciousness.

The Secretary of War has announced that immediate action will be taken to build up the Air Service Section of the Signal Corps. The significant part this arm of the service has played in the last year of the war has excited the interest of the entire world.

The Secretary of War has addressed an appeal to all young Americans who desire to serve in this branch of the service to submit their names to the nearest recruiting officer. The requirements are very strict: The equivalent of a two-year college education. Perfect health and physical fitness. No candidate to be more than twenty-five years of age. Added tests will be given candidates who possess these requirements, to ascertain their fitness to become air pilots.

It was stated that all successful candidates will be sent to Kelly Field, Texas, for training, and that graduates of the training school would be transferred to active service overseas as rapidly as qualified.

Serve America in the Air!

The lines of the type grew dim before his eyes. Serve America in the air! Up in that limitless stretch of blue sky—borne aloft on fragile wings with the unbroken rays of the sun upon face and head. . . .?

"Your wings will be spread against the sun. . . ."

He was suddenly trembling. Pictures flashed through his feverish brain. Vision of Stanley Kublik rising into the heavens, the wind whipping against his cheek, the glory of flight flooding his soul. Stanley Kublik, who had lived in darkness and in squalor all of his days, daring to this. . . .

That night he left the hospital. For the last time in his life he stumbled away to that packing case house which had served him as home during the days of his darkness. He donned his best clothes. His head was spinning. He was weaker than he had thought. He said nothing to anyone.

Later that night he descended from an interurban trolley at the county seat, thirty miles from Carmel. He carried no suitcase. He made no inquiries. He walked directly to the Post Office. There were brightly colored signs standing before the door. A soldier in a blue uniform paced back and forth before the signs, grave-faced.

Stanley Kublik spoke to the soldier.

Together they walked up the narrow steps leading to the second floor of the Post Office—toward a scarred and unpainted door bearing the words *Recruiting Officer*.

V

EDDIE MILLS pulled the flaps of his black helmet down about his chin and fumbled for the buckle. There was a three-day black stubble upon his chin and cheeks, and his uniform was creased with a thousand wrinkles, suggesting that he had slept without taking off his clothes throughout many preceding nights.

His hands shook a little as he tried to force the limber chin strap through the opening in the buckle. His uncombed black hair straggled out from under the helmet. His eyes were strained and the eyeballs overshot with a red network of distended blood vessels.

"Guy can't help but look at that square-head," he said in a cracked voice. "You might think he was going out to a May party or something the way he struts up to that crate of his. Cripes! Cripes! I wonder if he really feels that way inside—all pepped up the way he looks all calm and kind of peaceful?"

At his side Tommy Buell was buttoning the flaps of his flying coat about his throat against the cold of the heights to come. There was black grease splashed over the front of his whipcord riding breeches. A triangular gash in his helmet, which permitted his sandy hair to show through, suggesting a wound from a whirling, jagged-edged splinter. A splinter, which through

some miracle had not cut through the skull under the helmet.

His face was purple with the chill of the early morning—purple spread over a thick pallor. His eyes were a trifle too bright, whispering of a raging fever burning within his frail body. The flesh about his nose was pinched and anemic. There was a rasping sound from his chest each time he breathed.

"Queer guy, Kublik," he agreed. "Can't quite figure him. Almost make you believe that the world has done him a great favor—just in letting him fly. Goes about it as if it was something sacred. Has a certain note in his voice when he's talking about flying . . . kind of gives you a crinkly feeling at the back of the neck. He looks at that ship of his—well, like a priest going up to the altar."

Mills cut in with a croaking laugh. "May look like a priest on the ground, but I'll bet a couple of Jerries figure him for something else. Look at his face—great big blue eyes and that funny reddish-tinged hair. Serious as the devil. Looks about as dangerous as a baby. Wouldn't take him for a large dose of flying poison, would you? The Heinies call him the 'Crimson Comet.' You ever been assigned to his flight?"

Buell shook his head. "No, I'm satisfied with B. Guys in B live longer."

"I was with Kublik once, for three days—just before B was wiped out and right after Kublik took A over. I got moved back to B to steady a bunch of kids they sent up as replacements. I still think that getting out of A was the biggest break I'll get in this war. No guy can stand the kind of flying Kublik takes his gang through—not and live."

"He stands it," grinned Buell.

"Well, he ain't human," snorted Mills. "Listen, I was with him the day he pulled the hat trick on these three Hals. Nobody in his right mind is going to play with three of those babies at the same time. But do the Hals scare Mr. Stanley Kublik? And the answer comes back—No!"

"Cold-blooded—get me? Planned it before he moved the stick. Looked up at 'em—saw 'em flying above him. Figured out how to knock 'em all down—and then goes climbing up—by himself, mind you—and puts his Spad right in the middle of those

Jerries. Right where they can rake him with a cross fire—and waits for them to try for the kill."

HIS eyes darted across the field to where Stan Kublik was sitting in his crate listening to an idling motor.

"He's got death or something written all over his face," whispered Buell. "Something a guy can't place. Makes you feel he's like a guy who is in heaven for just a minute, knowing that he doesn't belong there—and sooner or later he'll go back."

"Not the kind of a guy you'd call superstitious," said Mills grimly. "Funny, all of us seem to have some little quirk. You, for instance—with that cork out of a Golliwog perfume bottle that dame in the Bal Tabarin gave you. You'd go nuts if you lost that crazy thing."

"Hey!" objected Buell.

"I know, I know. I've got one of my own, and no dame gave it to me—I took it away from her. But Stan Kublik is different. You'd hardly figure him for a guy who carries a lucky charm around with him. But if you'll take it from Sergeant Hawley . . . Kublik has one . . . and what a laugh. It's a girl's picture he cut out of some rotogravure section back in the States. Some girl! Dressed like a society dame—swell looker. No name on it. Just the picture. Can you imagine Kublik with a dame's picture? Pasted up above his instrument board, and protected by a glass set over it. Hawley says that every time he's ready to take off, the last thing he does is look at that picture for about a full minute—like a guy saying a prayer.

"One day Hawley asked him who this was—was it his sister? And Kublik gives him a funny look. 'No,' says Kublik. 'It's not my sister, Mike—she's just a beautiful dream. I call her my White Angel. As long as she flies with me, I'm safe. As long as I can keep her picture there in front of me, I'll come back.'"

"Well?" growled Buell. "Can't a guy have a dame's picture in his crate without getting panned for it?"

"You don't get me," argued his flying partner. "I'm not talking about the dame's picture. I'm talking about Kublik. Now, can you figure a guy like him to call a picture his White Angel—a guy who goes out and knocks down a couple of e.a. every

morning before breakfast and never bats an eye? A guy that seems as hard as nails about life and death—about everything except flying and this picture? What does a girl's picture—cut out of some newspaper—mean to him?"

"Search me," offered Buell. "Only I'd hate to be the guy to get too personal about such a thing with Stan. He's like a tiger cat—quiet and nice to look at, but always crouching, ready to spring."

They started for the line of ships, walking shoulder to shoulder. "You hear that we're getting a new C.O. to take Boswell's place? A guy coming up from behind—never been with a front line unit before?"

"Yeah, I heard about it," said Mills. "The kind of a sap you'd expect us to draw. The sixth got a bird who had been a ribbon clerk before the fuss. How do they get in—and how do they live to get up here?"

"Ain't it bad enough without listening to some keewee telling us how to win the war?"

There was a shrill whistle from somewhere in the middle of the line of ships. The two pilots broke into a trot. They climbed into the cockpit of twin Spads, standing side by side at the end of the line. There was a roar of motors, ships veering away from the line, heading down field, gathering speed, raising clouds of dust and grass. Gray shapes lifted, one after the other, to merge with the gray-blueness of the sky and go banking off toward the north.

FIVE miles north of the field from which they had flown, the twelve ships divided into two units. Six—A Flight—flying steadily behind Stan Kublik, turned toward the northwest. The remaining six, B Flight, under the leadership of Eddie Mills, bore off to the southward.

It seemed to Stanley Kublik that he would never lose the thrill of flying. How many hours in the air he had to his credit he did not know. But the thrill had first come to him that day when he had stepped off the train at Kelly—to become an initiate into the mysteries of flying. It had been intensified in that minute when he had first gone aloft with an instructor. The rise from earth—the steady progress upward until the earth was lost in a dim haze—and there was nothing in all existence except the

golden splendor of the sun and the depths of the all-enveloping blue.

The sun—as Stan Kublik had never dreamed it could be—with nothing to hide its face or to shade its light. No stacks throwing the murk of earth up to stain the blueness of the heavens. The sense of power. The power to rise and to rise—the Old Coot's prophecy being fulfilled: "Some day your wings will be spread out against the sun."

Sometimes he looked at the picture before him. None but he knew the name of the subject of that picture, none but he knew that sometimes, flying along, he whispered the name into the force of the slipstream. Whispered the name—*Helena*—as one might address a petition to a high altar. It was only when he probed into the heights that he dared utter the word. Then the wind, whipping in his face, ripped it from his lips and made it a part of the heavens about him.

How many times her face had been before his eyes? How many nights he had rested, sleepless, upon his cot—the memory of her lips on his mouth as she had said good-bye to him—and had gone? Nothing remained of her but the livid memory—that and the picture he had cut from the Sunday newspaper. The newspaper which had announced her departure for overseas. How many times he had imagined her whereabouts, her presence in the midst of the bloodsoaked aceldema of war . . . her soft hands and her soft voice. He wondered if she had ever kissed another man.

He looked up from her picture. His eyes lifted above the grim breeches of his twin Vickers, through the gun sight—toward the horizon. He passed a handkerchief over his goggles and looked a second time.

No, they were there—a series of black dots—like buzzing flies. Coming out of the north.

HE wagged his wings. Behind him A Flight closed up and continued to fly toward the series of queer black dots.

He looked down at the picture. A smile came over his lips. There was a warm glow in his eyes. "It's all right, Helena," he said softly. "Don't be afraid." The beat of the slipstream grew more powerful as he moved the throttle forward.

There was no indecision in his manner

as he flew to meet the bug-like dots which came flying over the north horizon. Stan Kublik knew only one way of meeting a problem—that was to attack it from the front. He never wasted time in preliminary maneuvers. He never sparred to have the wind at his back or the sun in the eyes of his enemies. He flew straight toward his objectives. When he was within range he cut in his guns.

Ahead of A Flight, the series of bugs resolved themselves into a flight of six Halberstadts painted a blue-black with wings of the same leaden hue. They had drawn close together, matching the formation tactics of Stan Kublik's group. They seemed reluctant to accept the gage of battle as thrown down by A Flight.

Suddenly they veered eastward, flying in echelon as if the Jerries' leader had decided against fighting. A mission perhaps—which demanded observation without fighting. It was not like a Jerry with six new Hals to evade combat.

They were passing over the front. Below them, as far as the eye might follow, stretched the bleak ugliness of No Man's Land, strewn with its coiled and twisted wire rusting under the rains of France.

Stan Kublik looked down upon those mites struggling ahead through the mud and horror of earth. Somehow they reminded him of the black-faced toilers who grubbed out an existence underground. Nothing of beauty about them. Nothing but the wretchedness and squalor of the sub-surface of the earth. Nothing of the cleanliness and glory of the heights. Nothing of the glory of moving a hand and feeling the body lifted toward the never-ending vastness above. Nothing but the semi-darkness of the burrows beneath the ground into which they crawled and crouched—when they were not moving forward toward the bayonets of an enemy they could not see. Death striking them—blind death—cutting them down. Like the death which came in the mines—creeping up—strangling and choking, or else ending life with the dull roar of an explosion.

THE Jerry flight had turned toward the north—back toward their own lines. No echelon now—nothing but a tight formation, showing rudders to the six Spads.

2—Wings—Winter

He nosed his own Spad downward to increase speed. Over his shoulder he saw that his six ships were keeping in place—following his every movement. He leaned far out over the side of his cockpit. There was a painted device upon the linen of the fuselage. The likeness of a sun, glowing in all of its splendor, high in the heavens, the earth merely a shadow below—and in the center of space, an eagle, its wings outspread, mounting toward the distant orb of light.

It was his way of carrying the Old Coot's message to the heights. "Some day your wings will be spread against the sun. . . ." The Sun and Eagle was a part of Stan Kublik's life. As he looked at it a strange, soft smile played about the corners of his mouth, a glow came into his eyes.

Concrete trenches below—running straight and true with the east and west as if put down along a carefully surveyed line. Trees below—wretched, blasted, jagged stumps with only a few green-clad branches remaining to them—trees through which men in gray-green made a cautious way, pausing now and then to look up at the spectacle of six Spads chasing six of their own ships back across the lines. Curling smoke from the stack of a narrow-gauge locomotive pulling a crazy train of cars made up of coaches and goods vans.

Twisting ribbons of a road. Ungainly centipedes moving at a snail's pace—battalions moving up to the Front. Now and then the faster progress of a unit of motorized artillery.

Wings bucked and jumped in the slipstream wake of the Hals ahead. Spads ploughed steadily ahead—overtaking them—flying six feet to the Hals' four. Pilots tense in seats, watching the back of Stan Kublik's head, watching his wing-tips for sudden signals. Pulling back the handles of the gun trips—feeding the first shell of those long belts into the breeches of the Vickers. Faces against the forward crash pad, eyes looking through the measure of life and death—the gun sight.

Five hundred yards ahead of A Flight, the Jerry leader suddenly decided to give battle. He swung about, throwing his ship into a steep vertical—heading back to face Stan Kublik, who flew at Point. After him the remaining Hals banked.

The earth was less than a thousand feet

below. Ominous puffs of black smoke suddenly opened against the white of space—opening with a flash of flame in the center of each smoke puff. Enemy A.A. endeavoring to aid the Hals.

BUT Stan Kublik knew the ways of Archie. He slipped rapidly to the left to meet the banking turn of the Jerry leader.

It was a sudden maneuver. The Spad roaring ahead yet sliding in the direction of the Jerry's turn. He saw the danger of Kublik's maneuver when it was too late. The Point Spad of the attacking flight was going to meet him—head to broadside—when his guns could not be brought to bear. He fell away in a deep slip to the right.

But at his side, Stan Kublik was driving in. The nose of his ship was like a rapier pointed for the long body of the Hal before him. Suddenly he reached upward with both hands and pulled the trips of both Vickers. The belt moved upward one notch. His right hand fell upon the top of the stick. He pushed the nose of the Spad down an inch to follow the slip of the Jerry leader.

His blue eyes were suddenly bleak and cold. Perhaps he was remembering that black stretch of hours behind a barrier against gas within the belly of the earth. Perhaps he was remembering the sound of Old John's voice as he screamed "Oh, God!" Old John looking into the face of death, begging for mercy—which he never received.

There was no softness in Stan's eyes now. The eagle painted on the side of the ship seemed to be tense with life, the sunlight striking the painted eyes, causing them to glow fiercely, the heavy talons seeming poised to strike.

He waited, even the heavens seemed to grow rigid, breathless, with the waiting for Stan Kublik to strike. His face, unmoving eyes close to the gun sight, was suddenly lean.

A black and white cross flashed before his eyes. He moved the rudder gently and centered the mark in the middle of the circle. The black and white cross was painted on the fuselage of the Halberstadt, directly over the cockpit of the pilot.

There was a sudden crackling and whining about his head. Behind him

the fabric of his Spad vibrated convulsively, mid the snapping sound of rending woodwork. He took his eyes away from the ship before him for a single instant. Long enough to see that a fast-flying Hal had broken through the Spad formation in a frantic attempt to save his flight leader.

The Hal was close on his tail. Rings of green-orange flame circled the muzzles of two Spandaus. The dull drumming of lead through the linen of Kublik's fuselage gave evidence of the deadly accuracy of those two guns.

There was a Spad nosing down, gathering speed, in an attempt to drive the Hal off Kublik's tail. In the fraction of a second his eyes had been away from the enemy before him he photographed the picture of the action close to his tail upon his brain. Then he was staring through his sights again—face to the front, seemingly unmoved by the death riding him down.

His thumb was tense upon the trips. The black and white cross was rising rapidly as the Jerry leader struggled to take his crate out of the range of Stan Kublik's guns. Deliberately, Kublik pulled his stick back and nosed up with the Jerry. He could see his face—his eyes behind the glass of his goggles. He was close—fifty feet perhaps—a sudden darting tongue of flame from the Vickers. A gaping black hole ripped through the fuselage of the Hal, exposing white woodwork and the figure of the enemy pilot half crouching in his seat.

His white face was turned toward the Spad's pilot. His two hands were grasping the stick—forcing it far back into his lap. The Hal went over the top of a loop, its wheels pointing for the sky. In the upside down position the flight leader's hands dropped away from the controls. His head swung back over the rear cockpit crash pad, bumping against the fabric of the camel back—and then as the ship went screaming around the arc, the head snapped forward, the chin bumping against the leather-clad breast.

Ailerons flapped wildly. The Hal veered right and left in obedience to an ungoverned rudder. Then it was spinning, gun full open, whirling about. . . .

There was a sudden hot pain eating at Stan Kublik's right side. A pain which sent waves of dizziness through his brain

and caused the horizon line to dance crazily. He did not turn his head. He brought the stick back into the pit of his stomach.

The nose of the Spad rose before him, the floor boards pressed hard against his feet. His belt snapped taut. The drumming of lead through the fabric of his Spad suddenly ceased. There was only the driving whine of his Hisso, the lessening pressure of the slipstream about his head—that and the gnawing agony in the flesh of his side.

At the top of the loop he looked below him. The fast flying Hal, betrayed by its own speed and the certainty of a kill, and the fury of a pilot who had watched his flight leader die, had darted below him, and had gone on, the pilot turning his head from side to side, searching for the Spad which had been in his sights but an instant before.

A second Spad was close behind the Hal's tail. There was still a hundred yards of space separating the two ships. Kublik's arm straightened. The stick went forward, throwing the Spad into a plunging dive, a mad descent, urged on by the racing motor. It dropped into that hundred yards of open air, cutting over the leading edge of the pursuing Spad's wings, caused its wings to rock with the violence of Kublik's speed.

A startled pilot kicked rudder and threw stick far over. But Stan Kublik had flashed by, his right arm lifted—an abrupt apology for his recklessness. Then he was squatting on the Hal's tail—closing up—eating up the distance—leveling carefully, bringing the guns to bear, the center section struts of the Hal bisecting the circle of his gun sight.

The cross in the circle. . . .

The pain in his side caused his eyes to blur. He shook his head impatiently. He could feel the sticky smear coursing over his flesh—the warm, wet stickiness oozing over his stomach, running down the leg of his breeches. There was a nausea in his throat—as if he had swallowed a tumblerful of warm blood. It was an agony to sit erect in the seat—to focus upon that Hal before him.

He saw the Jerry turn in his seat and look back over his elevators. At that second Stan Kublik cut in his guns.

He saw the linen fray and rip over the

Hal's camel back. He pulled the stick back a fraction of an inch, his thumb still upon the trigger, the Vickers still stuttering while waves of heat pressed against his cheek, acrid fumes forcing a way into his nostrils.

SUDDENLY the center section struts of the ship in front of him disappeared entirely. He stared, guns still pounding—but they were gone. There was emptiness between the top wing and the Hal's fuselage.

A buckling in the center of the top wing. A shaking, trembling buckling which caused the tightly stretched linen to crease and draw up into folds.

Then the top wing ballooned into a half circle, held against the weight of the blue-black ship for an instant—and then there were jagged stumps of wing beams showing through gashed fabric. The upper wing, blown upward, tugging madly against the restraint of the outer struts, tearing away from the fitting, kited off into space bearing a burden of coiling, lax wires.

The lower folded back against the fuselage, pounded madly for an eternity and then tore free to follow after the upper wing sections. The wingless fuselage fell like an arrow, dragged earthward by the weight of the motor in its nose.

A white face was turned in Stan Kublik's direction. He caught the glint of the sun upon the Jerry's goggles. He was waving his arms—shrieking, mouth wide open. After a hundred feet he ripped the belt from about his body, and standing erect in the middle of the falling arrow, hurled himself over the side—to go tumbling grotesquely through space, his arms and legs gyrating crazily, his falling body keeping pace with the diving fuselage.

For a moment Stan Kublik stared after him, his Spad diving downward in the track of the wreckage. Then he pulled the ship level and banked around to find the remainder of his flight. He was whispering strange words—mad words to anyone but Stan Kublik. He was whispering to the picture upon his cockpit.

"I have to do it, Angel," he whispered. "You see, they kill . . . they make everything dark . . . like that time in the mine. Sometimes I think it is bad. And perhaps it is. But then I remember that day . . . and I know that other men will die in the

darkness unless I do my best. . . ."

His head felt dead. The pain in his side was a coal of fire eating his flesh. His right arm was going dead—asleep. The fingers were too numb to cling to the stick. He flew with his left hand, climbed upward.

"We'll make it back all right," he was telling the picture. "You see they can't touch you. Things out of hell can't harm things from heaven. We'll make it in . . . if you'll stick with me . . . keep your hand on my arm. It doesn't hurt so badly . . . now. . . ."

The floor boards were slippery with blood.

His flight picked him up at three thousand feet. His pilots saw that Stan Kublik's rock-steady wings wavered slightly, as he pointed the way homeward. Far to the north three Hals merged with the horizon line. Far below, three tangled masses of wreckage, one burning, were smashed against German earth. Far above, spiteful bursts of flame splattered black smoke, broke out against the blue like great puffballs, filling space with whistling, deadly fragments of steel, aimed at the fragile gray things of linen and wood.

In his cockpit Stan Kublik forced his eyes to remain open. "We'll get in," he was whispering. "I'll get you in . . . just stand in front of me so I can see your face. It's getting dark . . . it's awfully hard to see. . . ."

His ship touched earth and taxied in across the field to One Hangar. A mechanic saw his head drop forward upon his chest at the instant Stan Kublik cut the switch. The mechanic uttered a hoarse cry of amazement and dashed forward.

The camel-back of Kublik's Spad was riddled. The cross bracing shattered in a dozen places. They lifted him out upon the ground. The blood, dammed up by the pressure of his flying coat, drained out upon the ground, running over the mechanic's muddy shoes.

"Ah-h! He's got it through the guts," the mechanic blurted out. "He's done for."

"Get an ambulance, you fool," ordered someone. "Get that ambulance over here. You going to let him bleed to death in front of you, while you blubber like that? What a bright guy!"

Someone pressed a wad of gauze beneath

his shirt and against the bleeding wound. Then the ambulance came jolting across the field. They lifted him onto one of the hard swinging litters.

"He's talking," announced the mechanic, a dry sob in his throat. "He's talking—I heard him whisper something."

Eddie Mills put his ear close to Kublik's mouth. "What say, Stan? Everything's O. K."

Kublik's eyes did not open. There was a ghastly smile about his mouth.

"Made it," he said, as if speaking to someone who was not present—someone far distant. "Made it—felt the wheels touch the ground . . . Helena. . . ."

"He's raving," reported Mills. "Get going. Evacuation for his—and no dressing stations. *Sabe?*"

The white-faced driver nodded and gave the ambulance the gun.

VI

THE surgeon who examined Stanley Kublik sniffed rather disdainfully.

"Not much," he told the litter bearers. "Take him in. Flesh and muscle wound—right side. Some loss of blood—probably weak and may need a transfusion."

He sent the keen needle of the syringe into the flesh of Stan's stomach and pressed the plunger. He passed to the next case coming off the ambulance then unloading. Flesh and muscle wounds were not much—to a man who examines smashed skulls, ghastly arm and leg stumps, gaping abdomens, or round holes drilled into chests out of which scarlet froth bubbles with each indrawn breath.

Within the receiving ward a nurse sterilized the wound in Kublik's side—ran a biting, stinging solution into the tunnel through the flesh, probed for the bullet—didn't find it. With fingers accustomed to high speed work, she packed the injury with medicated gauze, wound bandages about his body, took his temperature, made a record of his pulse and saw him safely upon a rolling litter, on his way to a ward.

It was night when Stan Kublik opened his eyes. A terror swept over him. Darkness—what did it mean? He half raised himself from the cot. The effort caused him a gasp of pain. His brain swirled with the weakness of his body. His head

dropped back on the pillow. Pillow? Where did a pillow come from? There were no pillows on his cot—and the softness beneath him—and the smells about him—and the groans.

He closed his eyes. A nightmare unrolled within his brain. A quick-moving mental picture. Two Hals—one before him, one behind him. The one behind him pumping lead—the stinging pain in his side—and the drip of blood onto the duckboards.

So that was it! That was how it came. The upsurging wall of darkness, the thickening of the tongue, the limpness of the arms and legs. Then motions and joltings in the darkness—and at the end a bed and a pillow, and the smells and voices in the darkness.

There was a pinpoint of light from a distance. He moved his eyes. He saw dark shadows upon the murky walls. The light came from a lantern. It was far away. There were shapes in the darkness—hundreds of them, drawn in a straight line like Spads ready for the take-off. Huddled things under the white blankets, drawn faces made hideous by the faint light rays. Blue lips drawn back over white teeth.

Footsteps came toward him. Softly padding steps. Someone in white, a white cap on her head, turning in at his bed, looking at a square of paper she took from a hook below his feet. Her eyes glanced up at him. She caught the gleam from his eyes and smiled. She moved closer to him and spoke.

"Feeling better?" she asked.

How long had it been since he had listened to a soft voice—a woman's voice? He wanted her to speak again—for the sheer pleasure of listening to the sound of her voice. The White Angel had said something once—while he had been on another cot: "Woman steps in when men no longer have time to bother with the hurt—that is the woman's job."

So this was one of the women who cared for the hurt, mothered them, spoke to them. But the panic was in the back of his brain—the grimly leering face and gleaming eyes. His lips were dry—burning with fever.

"Am I bad?" he croaked. "It didn't feel so bad. I'm not going. . . ."

"To die?" She smiled. Somehow her

smile relieved him, and put panic to flight.

"Hardly," she consoled him. "You haven't much of a wound—as wounds go—but you lost quite a lot of blood, and it has made you weak. Ten days, until the wound closes—if there is no infection—and it looks clean. Ten days building up your strength again—and you'll be as good as ever."

"That's good," he said with a sigh of relief. "I thought maybe I wouldn't be able to go back."

She looked down at him. There was a great compassion in her eyes. "Every man like you who comes in here says the same thing," she told him. "Is it so beautiful—life for you flyers—that you can't bear to go back to comfort and peace and good food? Can't bear to leave things to other and fresh men sent to take your place?"

"You don't understand," he answered in surprise. "You see we have to go back. They can get lots of doughboys—but somehow, we're different. There are only a few of us—and I guess it's the flying—the getting away from earth—the looking down on all that takes place below you. Feeling the wind blow, the wetness of the clouds on your face—the testing of your own right to live. Flying close together, six of you—above everything—the six against the world."

She shook her head and hung the chart back at the bottom of his bed.

"I guess I don't understand," she said dully. "Pain is pain, and human beings are human beings. They can stand only so much. But you—and your kind, as you call them. They swallow the pain, laugh at the hardness of life—laugh at death itself. Sometimes I wonder if you are not all crazy men. . . ."

"No one can understand," he told her quietly. "No one who has never flown. It's funny. If I knew I could live—and never fly again—I don't think it would mean much to me. I can't imagine living without ever being able to hold the controls. It wouldn't be living. I'd rather take my chances—and fly. I'd rather have the misery and mud and hunger of the hours on the ground. The minutes in the air would make up for that."

His face was haggard. She placed her hand across his mouth. "Don't talk any more," she told him, a note of authority

in her voice. "Dream your dreams if you wish—but if you are going back, you'll have to save your strength."

He smiled at her.

HE was quiet during the dark hours of the night. He was wondering what it would be like to have the White Angel walk up to his bedside as the nurse had approached him. The White Angel bending over him—her lips touching his cheeks. Her voice speaking to him.

He missed her picture. He tried to remember every word she had ever spoken to him. He tried to recall the sound of her voice as she had called him by his first name. He slept after a while. He dreamed of a leaden-hued Hal pursuing him through the skies. A Hal that struck him with whips and caused his body to sting and burn—but the White Angel flew above him, and touched him with her hand, and the pain went away.

The sun was shining. He closed his eyes and turned his face toward the sky stretching above him. He drew in deep breaths of the warm air. A new life seemed coursing through him. A new world seemed to have been created around him. That morning they had taken the bandages off his side. There was an indented place on his body, a puckered wound, as if a hot probe had been thrust into his flesh, but the wound itself had closed. There was only the scar remaining.

He was trying not to see the men about him—the men and half men.

Trying not to see that some were led about by nurses, and that some stumped an uncertain way on new crutches, folded trouser legs making a kind of bag over amputations. He fought with the fascination of watching a group of men who wore bandages about their eyes, and stood very still, as if fearing to walk, until a nurse took them by the hand and led them for exercise. Men who would never see the light again; who would go groping about in the darkness of living death, feeling for hands to guide them. He shuddered.

A droning of motors from the front driveway. Another ambulance train making its laborious way up to the door of the receiving ward. Creaking and rocking over the ruts. A thousand men might work on those ruts—and yet they remained. New

work for the blue-white knives. New burdens for still warm beds.

The first of them was already disgorging its cargo. The driver, a frail chap, lowered himself stiffly to the ground leaning against the side of his puddle-jumper as if for support. Body sagging in weariness. Face pale with fatigue.

Suddenly Stan Kublik was rigid. The weary driver had lifted off his overseas cap. He was holding it between his hands, shaking his head. A golden shower of silken hair tumbled down about his shoulders. Hair which glimmered in the sunlight. Hair, like the hair of the White Angel.

He half leaped out of his reclining chair. His eyes were fixed upon the driver's face. There was a look of astonishment upon his face—astonishment mixed with a wild hope. He lurched forward over the uneven ground, his eyes never leaving the white face of the driver.

He came to a dead halt as he faced her, his eyes still staring. His mouth was working, her name was bursting his chest with the desire to be spoken. But he could only stand there, dumb, trembling, rigid.

SHE looked at him for a long moment. A little shudder passed through her. Her hands went out to him and then dropped at her sides. There were other drivers about her now, looking at her, smiling—other girls, all dressed in mud-stained khaki. A sound broke from her, a dry sob which caused her shoulders to tremble.

"Stan!" she sobbed. "Stanley Kublik! You! Here—in a hospital!" Somehow she had stepped close to him. Her head was resting against his shoulder. Her face was wet with tears. He hesitated for an instant and then his arms closed about her. He wondered if he was not dreaming . . . another of those beautiful dreams which came to him in the hours of the night.

She was quiet after a moment, and looked up at his face. "I'm so glad to see you," she told him, wiping away the tears, and smiling at him. "It's been so long since I've seen anyone I knew—so terribly lonely. And the terror of it—day after day."

Her eyes went to the unloading ambulances. "I've been afraid—too. Every

time we've taken on a load of wounded I've watched for you—afraid I'd find you—like these other men. . . ."

"But—but—how did you know I was over here?" he asked. "You were gone before I was away from Kelly. . . ."

"Don't you read?" she counter-questioned. "Don't you know that the whole world knows you are over here? *The Stars and Stripes* has mentioned your name a dozen times within the last month. I read all about you when they gave you the cross. I knew you were somewhere in this theater of operation—flying. . . ."

"It's funny, isn't it?" he asked. "Me flying. . . ." Oh, that he should say such insane things to her. That he should stand there looking at her, at her face and eyes and hair—smiling, listening to his voice as if it were the voice of another man. His body ached to hold her in his arms. He wanted to blurt out his thoughts in all the hours he had whispered her name—to tell her that she was before his eyes every minute—that he carried her face as other men carried a fetish against danger. And all he could do was to stand and look at her . . . hunger for her.

Her hand slipped under his forearm, she led him away from the ambulance—toward the green grass behind the hospital. She threw herself wearily upon the ground. He saw that her face was lined with fatigue. That there were blue-shaded hollows under her eyes. That she was tired—tired.

"You shouldn't be doing it," he said.

"Doing what?" she asked.

"This." His arm swept about in a circle which embraced the hospital and the groaning misery and the ambulances. "You weren't meant for it—it's killing you."

"Do you think the same way about yourself?" she asked, watching his face. "Do you think you should give up your own job—because it's hard, because you get tired at times?"

"That's different," he defended. "I'm a man—I'm used to it. You aren't."

"None of us are used to things like this," she said somberly. "We all have to learn. After all, killing and being killed doesn't come to one naturally."

He was not thinking of what she was saying. He was thinking that she still was the White Angel. The White Angel sitting in the midst of a rioting hell. Touch-

ing men with her hands and making them well. She was the White Angel in spite of the torn and patched khaki of her uniform, the mud on her boots, the grime on her hands. She was exactly the same as that moment when she had touched his mouth with her lips. Her eyes were the same—and her face. The hunger for her rose up within him again.

It was then—in that moment—he discovered that he loved her.

IT was a strange sensation. He had never thought of that before. Always she had been something intangible, unattainable, something like a beautiful memory—or a singing line of music—or a marble figure which one may look at but never touch. Suddenly he knew that he wanted her—that there would be nothing left in life when she was lost to him again. He must see her—be close to her. The thought stabbed at his soul.

Somewhere a voice was bawling an order. "Take those things out of the driveway. Hey! Helena! Come on—they want the driveway. We're parking."

She struggled to her feet. "I've got to go for a little while," she told him. "There is another ambulance train coming in. We're going to stay here over night though. Can you talk to me a while tonight? I mean, are you well enough—will they let you? I forgot to ask you if you were badly hurt?"

"I'm not," he assured her eagerly. "I'm about washed up here—had a slug through a muscle in my right side—all healed. Will I come? Will I see you? Will I talk to you? Mention someone who might stop me!"

"It'll help a lot, Stan," she said. "I need to talk to someone—to you. After we're parked and have had chow, I'll be waiting for you, by the ambulances."

He watched her as she walked away. A strength seemed to seep into him. He felt that he might pull down the walls of the hospital with his two hands.

Then, suddenly, there was a sickness in the pit of his stomach. He was thinking of Carmel—of the days in the hospital, when she had visited him—and of Harry Coleman. The tone of his voice, the air of proprietorship. What was he to the White Angel? What should he be? He was of

her own class. What could Stanley Kublik, the black-faced ghoul, ever be to her?

He was afraid to answer the question.

VII

THEY were sitting very close together under the shadows of a big tree, which somehow had missed destruction in the typhoon of war which had swept over this place months before. Two hundred yards down the road twinkling lights marked the position of the parked ambulance train. Half a mile to the west, on the rise of the hill the lights of the hospital maintained a cold brilliancy. Here there were shadows—shadows and a full round moon which moved majestically through the long arc of the heavens.

A far-off droning sound filled the heavens and skulking black bulks passed slowly across the moon. Ponderous things, black-winged and sinister—witches riding a broomstick.

Suddenly there was a burst of pyrotechnics about them. Blinding pin-points of light burst in the silvery sky—A.A. batteries trying to turn the destroyers back. They sat without speaking, watching the play of death in the skies. It unfolded before them like some beautiful spectacle—a spectacle bringing to a close a fete day.

Then the stillness again reigned unbroken. Only the moon in the heights, and the gossamer play of the vagrant clouds.

An hour of silence. Sitting there. The warmth of her pressed against his shoulder. The silk of her hair blowing gently against his cheek. He hardly dared to breathe. A movement, a breath, might destroy the dream. He watched the soft white light of the moon touch her cheeks, transforming them into a pink-veined marble of exquisite beauty.

She spoke. "So you're going back?" she said softly. "Tomorrow I will climb on the front seat of my ambulance and head back for the lines—to load more misery, more horror. And you—you will go back to your field, to take your seat in that little cockpit, and fly again. To become the eagle chasing the hawk—a chase which has death for an ending."

A little tremor shook her. "Sometimes I wonder what it is all about. Sometimes I look at the strained and desperate faces of

those boys I carry in my puddle-jumper.

"I look at them and wonder. What would you be doing now, little boy, if this war had not torn you away from your home? What would you be thinking? What will you do when it is finished—and you have only memories such as this to begin a new life? They are merely here—suffering—going on. For them there is no beginning, no ending. Life is merely a crazy patchwork of days, the pounding of the guns, other boys falling on their faces in the mud, chattering machine guns probing for them, naked bayonets pointed for white flesh.

"What would you be doing, Stanley? Have you ever thought of it." Her hand touched him.

"I don't have to think," he told her bitterly. "I guess I know. I'd be back there in Carmel—going underground every morning, coming up with the darkness. Never seeing the sun—shivering with the dampness, choking with the kind of air a man breathes in a coal mine. I had dreams—once—dreams of getting to the surface, of staying there. Of being someone. But I guess a man born into that life can never change—he's born a ghoul, a shadow in a half world—and he never knows actual life. So I guess I'd still be getting in the cage at six in the morning, just when the sun is coming up—and being dropped down the back hole. . . ."

She shook her head, smiling.

"No, you wouldn't," she said, a strange note of pride in her voice. "No, you wouldn't. Didn't I hear Harry Coleman tell you that you had been marked for promotion—that first day when we came to see you in the company hospital? You had reached the surface right then. You would have stayed on the surface. You would have been a big man. Big because you understood your people—knew the hardships, the sorrows, the toil of their existences. Big because you had studied to lift yourself to a position in which you could have done much for them. I looked at your face that day—after that terrible time. I knew you were a man. I saw suffering on your face—even death—but there was no fear. I don't think you ever learned the meaning of fear, did you, Stanley?"

He nodded. "I've been afraid, lots of

times. Every time I went down in the mine I was afraid that I'd never get up again—that I'd never see the sun again. That fear lived with me day and night. I dreamed it, breathed it. You wouldn't understand that—you've always had the sun—the light."

Her fingers pressed against his arm. "Maybe I do understand, little boy," she said softly. "I guess all women understand things like that. All women are mothers at heart. They understand that children are afraid of the dark."

She heard him draw a deep breath.

"I had one thing, though—somehow it always came to me when things were blackest. Something the man who taught me all I knew once said to me. He was dying. The only friend I had in the world. The only person I could go to. The only beautiful thing in my whole life . . . until . . ."

HE stopped suddenly. "Well, until—I learned to fly. He knew how anxious I was to learn before his own life was wasted. The last words he ever said to me were: 'Some day your wings will be spread against the sun.' I never forgot that. It came true. They have been spread against the sun.

"You think it is hard for me to go back there? It isn't. I'll never get enough of the light, of the blue sky and the shining sun. You see, I've had it for only a little while—a few months. Other men have had it all their lives. I never think of the work, nor the struggle nor the fighting. I've had to fight all my life—for life—just as they are doing now. It's nothing new to me. I am different from the rest of the fellows. Everything they think of as hardship and danger—well, somehow, it's beautiful to me. They come out on the field each morning, ready to fly—and they are thinking that this may be the last day—that flight to them means the end of life.

"But not I.

"I think differently. Each day with me is another chance to spread those wings against the sun—the wings I searched for so long. The task may be hard—but the reward is greater than any I have ever known. To fly. . ."

There was a choking in his throat. He felt a tear drop upon his hand. He looked up at her face. She was weeping quietly.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't want you to cry—not in this hour. . . ."

"You don't understand," she answered. "You don't understand. I'm pitying myself."

"Pitying yourself!" he echoed. "Pitying yourself? You?"

"Yes, I," she said in a strange voice. "I will never know, or feel, such things as you have told me. I'm just thinking how small and how narrow and how drab life has been for me—while to you it has unfolded like a wonderful dream."

She was on her feet suddenly. He sprang up at her side.

"I'm going now," she said with a note of firmness in her voice. "I'll have to go. I'll have to think—about the things you've said. I can see you go back to your field now, without pitying you—because I know you would rather be there than anywhere else in the world. I'll have a new picture of you in my mind. Stan Kublik—with his wings—flying up to the sun, laughing as he goes, laughing in sheer ecstasy—just because he is flying. It's different from the picture I had before. I think I like it better. Good-bye, Stan!"

There was a catch in her voice. "You'll never know how much you helped me tonight. Not all of us can think the thoughts you think. Not all of us can love the things he is doing above everything on earth, to the exclusion of everything."

She looked up at his face. Her eyes were half closed. "But be careful, little boy. Don't throw away your life with a laugh of pleasure. It's needed—it's a valuable life. Lives like yours are very rare. Other people—like me—may need you—sometimes."

She made a sudden motion with her hands. He felt her palms against both of his cheeks. She was pulling his face downward. Then the pressure of her lips against his mouth. . . .

An instant only—as it had been in the hospital at Carmel. The softness of her cheek against his face. The coolness of her hands.

She stepped slowly away from him, her hands falling limply to her sides. "Good-bye, eagle who spreads his wings to the sun! Good-bye! Think of me sometimes."

She turned abruptly and was striding

away. The moonlight and the shadows of the tree playing about her seemed to wrap an invisible cloak about her. Then she faded into the darkness—was gone. A sound came back to him. He listened. It had sounded like a sob. Silence.

He walked back up the hill toward the hospital, his eyes watching the moon riding through the heavens. His mouth was still warm with her kiss. There seemed to be two Stan Kubliks. One walking by her side—the other making the weary climb toward the abode of pain.

HE left the hospital at daylight the next morning. He was going back to the outfit. Perhaps he might have another sight of her before he went. He looked eagerly toward the place where the ambulance train had been parked the night before. It was gone. Every drab khaki-covered vehicle was gone. There was only the burned spot on the grass where the camp kitchen had been.

Later he caught a ride on a lorry bound for the front. At dusk his feet touched the tarmac of the Thirty-third.

Buell saw him first. He came racing across the field, his face alight with pleasure.

"Stan!" he bawled at the top of his voice. "Stan! Himself—in the flesh—not a sliding photograph, and looking fit to knock off a cage of wildcats. Boy, boy! Have we missed you? Things haven't been the same. The gang has its tail down—we've had a lot of trouble. We've lost some of the boys." He turned his hand in the direction of One Hangar.

"Hey! You guys in there! Hey, Eddie! Mills! Come on out here and see what the S.O.S. just delivered to the field. Our little playmate—none other than Stan Kublik. . . ."

They ganged about him. Poured questions at him.

"What's it like? Have they got good-looking nurses?"

"Anything to drink?"

"Talk about a lucky break! Say, I'd trade a bump on the belly for a month like that any old day."

"What's the news? What's Foch doing?"

"Run across any of the old gang—back here in the hospital?"

The questions came to an abrupt finish.

Eddie Mills finished them his mouth grim.

"Say, you'll get a jolt out of this," he told Stan. "We have a new C.O. A major, no less. And he is the correct thing in majors. Came the day after they carried you out feet first. And he's been raising Ned around here ever since. What this half-wing knows about flying is a big break for the other side. He reigns in state in the orderly room, and so far as he is concerned the pilots in this outfit are only some of the hired hands. Wait till you get a load of this bird. Of course, we don't take him seriously. Who'd take a major seriously, anyhow?"

There was a series of groans and grunts from the men pressing about Kublik. "The world's champion horse collar," growled Buell. "If that guy rates a major of Air Service, then I know a lot of grease-balls who should be major-generals."

"Might as well get it over with," grinned Eddie Mills. "Come on in. We'll see if his Royal Highness will condescend to receive a mere flight leader—a guy by the name of Kublik." There was an outburst of wild whoops from the gang. They towed Stan Kublik toward the orderly room.

There was a big sign on the orderly room door: *Knock*. The door was closed. "Figurin' out how to win the war," snickered Mills. "He's sure clever that way." He beat upon the door with his knuckles.

A voice drifted out to them. "Come in." Mills thrust the door open.

"Flight Leader Kublik is back from blighty, Major," informed Mills. "We've brought him along—thought you might like to welcome him home."

"Oh, Kublik, eh?" answered the voice. "Sure, bring him in, I've been waiting to see him—for a long time."

There was something familiar about the voice. Something that sent chills along Stan Kublik's spine—like the hair bristling upon the back of an aroused dog. He stepped within the room. Eddie Mills was still playing master of ceremonies.

"Major Coleman," he said grandly, "permit me to present none other than Flight Leader, Captain Stanley Kublik."

Stanley Kublik was staring at the face behind the desk.

"Captain Kublik, may I present Major Harry Coleman," introduced Eddie Mills.

THERE was a sneer on the Major's face. "I've met the gentleman before," he told Mills. There was a nasty emphasis on the word *gentleman*.

"So you're back, eh?" he asked Kublik. "What's the matter—wouldn't they give you your discharge? Couldn't you make a scratch stick for a surgeon's certificate of disability? They must be getting tough back there—or wise.

"Well, Kublik, you'll find things a lot different around here. When I came the outfit was running things just about as they pleased. However, I'm running things now. I'm telling you that so that you can get the proper slant on some other things I'll have to tell you later. You went away from here a flight leader. There's another man in your place now—Buell, there, if you think you ought to have your job back again—prove it to me. Until you prove it you're just one of the pilots—taking orders the same as they do, flying the same assignments they fly.

"There's too much talk about little tin gods and four-flushing heroes in this man's war—and too little flying to back it up. This outfit is going to do more flying and a whole lot less talking. That goes for everybody."

Buell took a step forward. "Listen, Coleman," he said through his teeth. "You can't get away with that kind of stuff around here. Kublik is the leader of A Flight—and he's going to keep on leading it. As far as I'm concerned you can take your lousy job and put it where it'll do you the most good. The guys are a little fed up with your particular line—you're no bargain on any tarmac."

"You get out," snarled Coleman. "Get out through that door or I'll strip that so-called uniform off your back in five minutes. I've been aching to have some of you prima donnas appear before a general court for the past month—just to teach you proper respect for rank. I'd just as soon start with you as anyone. Get out, or submit to arrest for disrespect."

Buell stared at Kublik. "Get out, Old Timer," advised Kublik. "I don't want anyone to get in a jam on my account."

One by one they drifted out of the room until Kublik and Coleman were left alone. There was a triumphant sneer about Coleman's mouth.

"Brave lot, aren't they? he asked of Kublik. "Blow and wind. Use the fist on 'em and they back down like a lot of rats—like a lot of you squareheads around the mines.

"Well, I haven't anything more to say to you, Kublik. I suppose one has to encounter all sorts of people in fighting a war."

He laughed. There was a thick note of scorn in the laugh. "But just imagine—finding a 'blackface' who has risen to the sublime heights of a pilot? . . . and especially a gentleman. Close the door when you go out, will you?"

Somehow Kublik got out of the office without killing him. Somehow he turned in toward his own quarters tent and threw himself wearily on his cot. In that moment all of the joy and all of the beauty went out of flying. There was only the sneering of Coleman and the whiplash of sarcasm in his voice.

VIII

A WEEK passed. There was a growing tension upon the field of the Thirty-third. The feeling one experiences while walking about the crater of a steaming volcano. The air of close fellowship was gone.

Pilots went about with dark scowls upon foreboding faces. Greaseballs no longer sang and joked as they worked over the black Hissos, or over the patched linen of the Spads. No one ever went into the operations office.

Twice Major Coleman had entered the mess hall to take dinner with the pilots of the outfit, and to a man—with the exception of Stan Kublik—the pilots had left the table, dinners unfinished. Kublik had remained in his place, silent, never looking at Coleman.

For a week Kublik had been flying as a member of A Flight, under the leadership of Eddie Mills. A sense of shame had entered into Mills and into the rest of the men of the flight. Also, it seemed to take hold of every pilot in the squadron. Stan Kublik, with more victories to his credit than any two of them, humiliated, trampled upon, by a sneering, loud-talking know-nothing!

It ate at them, for the Thirty-third lived by the code which governed all flying men.

No personal jealousies. No personal grudges interfering with the welfare of the squadron. The best man for a leader, no matter what his rank. Stan Kublik was the best pilot among the men of the Thirty-third. Therefore he should be flight leader. More—he had been flight leader.

Coleman pretended that it made no difference to him that the men under him considered him a pariah. That they hated his guts. That they refused to breathe the same air with him. He pretended, but beneath the sneering, domineering surface, the knowledge cut deeply. To think that they should prefer a ground-hog to himself. That they should take issue with him over an order. It drove him to frenzies. The sneer grew more pronounced. His contempt for the opinions of the men of the squadron became more open.

He looked out the window of the operations office each morning, his eyes fixed on the person of Stan Kublik. Damn him! Trying to play the martyr's act by going out there as meek as a lamb and taking his place with A Flight. Keeping his mouth shut, suffering in silence. A hot surge of hate engulfed him each time he watched Kublik walk across the field. Kublik never looked at him, never spoke to him—treated him like dirt beneath his feet. Took orders in silence. Listening to words spoken in a tone of voice that would cause a white-livered coward to fight—listening in silence—merely watching him with those cold blue eyes of his. Damn him! Why didn't he fight back? Why didn't he make the break that would settle him for good?

No guts! That was the answer. None of his kind had any guts.

Coleman was drinking more than was good for him. For hours during the day and for hours in company with the guttering light of a candle he nursed a liquor bottle. He was getting unsteady on his feet. His speech had a fuzzy quality. His eyes were bloodshot. His hands shook. The more he drank the nastier he became.

The squadron was fed up. It was a dangerous mood. It was going Bolshevik rapidly. One thing kept it in some semblance of good morale. The flying of Stan Kublik. Twice Eddie Mills had forced Coleman to request confirmation of victories for Kublik. Twice the squadron had received acknowledgment of the victories.

In flight, the outfit was getting into the habit of dropping behind Stan Kublik—dropping behind until he flew at point, with Eddie Mills behind him. He protested at first. Eddie Mills argued for the squadron.

"Just because a guy like Coleman doesn't like you is no reason why this outfit should sell out. With you up there we have a fifty-fifty chance of getting back. Without you—well, you've seen the roster. Who went while you were in the hospital? You wouldn't quit us—just because a rat like Coleman tells you you can't fly point?"

"Listen, Stan, we don't know what this fuss is all about. We do know one thing—you belong to us. That louse is out. We're plenty sick of him. He'll make one more crack to you in front of this outfit and somebody is going to step out of line and knock him loose from his teeth."

"You can't do that," answered Kublik. "He'd like that—give him a chance to bury a fellow under a load of courts-martial. You'd smash his face and he'd smash you. It's not worth it—let it ride as it is. He doesn't bother me. I've never given him cause to hate me. I've only seen him once or twice in my life. You see, he is a gentleman—and I was only a mine rat. It must rub him the wrong way to have to accept me as an equal over here."

"Horse collar," growled Buell. "I know a gentleman when I see one. This guy is a third-grade louse. Well, as Eddie says, he's running his snoot into a mess he won't like. Anybody who thinks this outfit is going to stand for a song and dance such as he puts on has another think coming."

TO keep the peace for Coleman, Kublik rode at point for A Flight after that. There was another reason for his evading Coleman's orders. A Flight did need leadership. He had sense enough to know that his being at point might be the difference between life and death for the men who flew with the unit.

The third day after his return the flight encountered a group of Fokkers over the front.

Four of them—flying close together and keeping at a safe distance. Without hesitation, Stan Kublik led A Flight to the attack.

He spread his six ships out in a half-moon formation, with the ends attempting

to encircle the four enemy ships. The Jerry leader lost precious moments trying to solve the method of Kublik's attack. Then it was too late. Buell and Eddie Mills had drawn the sack about them.

They broke formation, each ship attempting to cut a way through the trap Kublik had set for them. Buell bagged one—the Jerry flew headlong into the flame of Buell's guns. The Fokker fell out of the center of the circle, spitting great gusts of flame from punctured tanks. Then Stan Kublik, diving from above, struck at the remaining three like a winged fury.

He seemed to be everywhere. He raked two enemy ships with separate bursts so rapidly that A Flight saw only the first burst hammer home through the dark fuselage of the first target. His feet on the rudder bar swung the Spad's nose back and forth as he dived—and with each swing, a short burst from his Vickers ripped through the ship outlined in his gun sights.

Behind him, Eddie Mills finished the destruction. There were two of the enemy going down when Mills came screaming along in Stan Kublik's wake. He riddled the third with stabbing, consecutive bursts at point-blank range.

Three hundred feet above, one of the pilots of the Flight looped his Spad in sheer frenzy at the sight. Looped it over and over and over. A Flight was a Flight again—four up, four down—and Stan Kublik doing the sharpshooting. A Flight was coming back into its own. The biggest day the squadron had had since Stan Kublik had been carried off the field with a slug in his guts.

There was no doubt as to the bestowal of credit. They were right in the middle of the lines . . . every observer in the sector, friend and enemy had seen that bit of action—and had reported it.

Back on the field there was an outburst of bubbling conversation.

"Did you see Stan smack that first guy?"

"Say, that was a swell stunt of Eddie's—following Stan up—getting what he missed."

They pounded Buell on the back.

Eddie Mills, as nominal leader of the flight, was forced to make the report to Coleman. He set his jaw before he opened the always closed door leading to the operations office.

"Reporting A Flight back, sir," he said. The *sir* almost stuck in his throat. He was looking down at Coleman as the squadron commander sat at his desk. There was a half-emptied bottle of cognac at his elbow. The room reeked with the odor of stale cigarette smoke and alcohol.

"I'm requesting confirmation of four victories. Two by Captain Kublik, one each by myself and Lieutenant Buell. I don't think there will be any question about them. They were knocked down in full sight of our lines."

"Well, well, so the fair-headed boy pet of the outfit is the big harp again, eh? I don't suppose we'll be able to live on the same field with him now." There was heavy sarcasm mixed with the thickness in Coleman's tone.

"I don't know what you mean by that 'we' stuff, Coleman," answered Mills. His face was dark with anger and his fists were clenched. "If you're speaking for us, you're wrong. It isn't the first time Stan Kublik has had victories confirmed—if you'll take the trouble of looking over the records of the squadron you're supposed to command."

"Lame ducks—lame ducks," sneered Coleman. "Picked out a couple of photographic crates, I suppose, and gave 'em the works."

"Four pursuit Fokkers," corrected Mills. "All he did was out-think them, outfly them—and knock them down." There was a heavy note of disgust evident in his own voice.

"You guys sure love your squarehead, don't you?" sneered Coleman. "He sure has got you where he wants you."

"Well, one thing, he does his flying in a Spad—not in a booze bottle," snapped Mills.

COLEMAN leaped to his feet, his face crimson. "You get out of here, you monkey," he screamed at Mills. "I ought to have you broken for that crack. Suppose you take a week on the ground until you learn how to speak to a superior. You hear me? I'll ask for confirmation for this outfit when I get damn good and ready—and when I think they're deserved, and not before."

"You're not scaring anyone, Coleman," answered Mills steadily. "You may be a

big guy to the home guards—with the oak leaves on your shoulders—but to this outfit you're only a false alarm. You take something from me—and take it straight! You'll get in more trouble than you ever knew could exist if you try to keep any credit away from the boys in this outfit—get that!"

He turned on his heel and walked out of the office, leaving Coleman bubbling with rage—choking in an attempt to find words.

In the days following, the Thirty-third's C.O. was like a madman. There was no secret of his drunkenness now. He flaunted it in the face of pilots and men. He went lurching about the field, his nasty voice giving impossible orders—the whiplash of his fury directed at Stan Kublik. Twice he ordered Kublik out on solo patrols in the middle of the day—after Kublik had returned to the field from the regular morning missions.

"Trying to get him bumped off," the whisper circulated among the pilots. "And Kublik stands for it. Why? Is he afraid of this guy?" They began to direct puzzled glances at Kublik. Why the meekness? Why did he stand for such treatment? What did Coleman have on him?

Stan Kublik might have given them the answer. He didn't. It was locked within his own breast. It only broke bounds in the black hours of the night—the hours during which he remained face down on his cot. His brain seething—the face of the White Angel before him.

She loved Coleman. He was the man she loved. It must be so—those days back in Carmel when she had been with him. True, twice she had kissed Stan Kublik—both times in farewell—but only because she pitied him—because she felt sorry for him. Pity! She pitied him because he was nothing more than a breaker boy allowed to associate with gentlemen because there was a war. Pity—because she thought he loved nothing but flying—when his heart ached for her.

Pity for Stan Kublik. Love for Harry Coleman. How could it be different? Coleman had known her first—Coleman acted as if he owned her.

Night after night. Nails grinding into clenched palms. Having her pity! How could he tell the rest of the gang he could not touch the man the White Angel loved?

That he could not bring her pain and unhappiness—no matter what kind of man Coleman might be? And the spots her lips had touched burned like fire, and the memory of the touch of her shoulder and hands, of the white gold hair blowing against his cheek, seared his brain. All those things belonged to Coleman. He had known them for two brief minutes—once because she pitied him—the second time because she was lonely and heart-sick.

So Stan Kublik, thinking of the happiness of the White Angel, went on, doggedly, taking the sneers of Harry Coleman. Humiliated before his companion pilots; humbled before greaseballs. There were times when he knew that he must strangle Coleman or go mad—but each time the blue eyes of the White Angel looked at him out of the darkness surrounding him—and each time the strength went out of his arm, the rage out of his heart.

Then came a morning.

KUBLIK had been back with the squadron ten days. The ships were on the line, ready to fly the dawn patrol. Stan Kublik sat in his cockpit warming the Hisso in the nose of his Spad. On each side of him sleepy-eyed pilots of A Flight were engaged in the same preliminaries.

Coleman lurched out of the door of the operations office and started an uncertain way across the tarmac toward Stan Kublik's crate. There was a sudden lessening of the din in front of the hangars. Pilots pulled throttles back to idling and watched first Coleman and then Stan Kublik. Coleman stepped up to the side of Kublik's cockpit. His eyes were glaring—swirling with hate. His head was level with the top of the cockpit.

"Listen, you!" he barked at Kublik. "I told you once that Mills was in command of this flight. You understood me, didn't you? Well, I meant what I said. I understand you've been sneaking behind my back and taking charge after the flight leaves the field. I might have expected that from you. Well, get this. When I say Mills flies point, that's what I mean, you double-crossing louse! Let me hear of you giving orders to this outfit once more and I'll jerk that monkey suit off your back and charge you with disobedience of orders so quick your head will swim. Un-

derstand? You may have been running things around this field before I came, but I'm running them now—in the air and on the ground."

Eddie Mills had jumped off of his cockpit and was walking rapidly toward Kublik's ship. His face was ugly with anger. After him strode Buell. The other pilots of both flights piled out on the ground and formed a circle about the crate.

COLEMAN'S voice had ceased suddenly. His eyes were staring. There was the look of apoplexy upon his face. The veins in his forehead were distended. His mouth hung open—as he had finished a word. He was looking at the space above Stan Kublik's instrument board. Looking with eyes filled with consternation at the sepia likeness of the White Angel.

"You!" he mumbled thickly in a choking voice. "You dirty dog. You dare to have her picture stuck up in your ship—like a greaseball with a dance-hall queen's mug pasted in the top of his foot locker. You insufferable louse! To think that you'd dare think of that girl—you—you groundhog! I'll kill you for this . . . so help me . . . I'll tear you apart!"

He was trembling violently. His eyes were staring from his head. "My fiancé!" he screamed, lashing himself into an uncontrollable rage. "The girl who is going to be my wife! You hear, my wife! And you touch her picture with your slimy hands and carry her in front of you."

He made a sudden motion with his hands. The glass over the picture snapped under his fingers. His nails ripped the picture from its place. Like a mad beast he tore it into small bits and flung them into Stan Kublik's face.

Slowly Kublik stepped over the side of his ship. There was cold death in his eyes—death which snapped and cracked with the flame darting from the muzzle of twin machine guns. His hands stretched out toward Coleman's throat. His face was a pasty white. The muscles of his jaw standing out in bold relief. Hoarse, croaking sounds were gurgling in his throat.

He staggered back a step, propelled by the force of a husky and determined shoulder.

He whirled—to face Eddie Mills. "You stay out of this, Kublik," snapped Mills.

"We've been aiming to do a little talking to Mr. Major Coleman all this week. We don't intend seeing you get framed for a scurvy trick like that."

He faced Coleman.

"You might as well get this now as any other time, Coleman," he said in a cold voice. His arm suddenly flashed back and jumped forward. There was the dull smacking sound of plunging knuckles bouncing from a jaw bone. Coleman was face down in the mud.

"Get up, you yellow belly," said Mills in the same cold, incisive tone. "Get up and tell me you're going to have me broken for this. Hear me? Get up and tell me how badly I'm going to be scared when they pinch me for taking a crack at a superior officer."

"You're a fine specimen to call attention to your superiority. You know what we think—what every pilot and greaseball on the field thinks about you? Well, I'll tell you. We think that you're a cringing, yellow-bellied mutt—a plain slinking mongrel with the guts and backbone of a jellyfish. We think you drink yourself stupid for fear that you're going to be asked to do some flying—get it? You haven't the guts to step into a crate and go out on your own."

"You've been here ten days. That's ten days too long. The boys hardly know what to make of you—they never saw a complete louse like you before. Go on—slink back to your kennel inside the operations office. Have me pinched—prefer charges—that's the kind of mucker you are. But you let the men in this outfit do their own flying after this—and no wise cracks. Furthermore—if I ever hear you making another crack to Stan Kublik here I'll take you apart to drain the yellow out of your mangy soul!"

Coleman was staggering to his feet. There was a slow trickle of blood from the corner of his mouth. "All of you are liars!" he snarled. "You call me yellow! I'll show you!" There was madness in his voice, madness in his eyes. "I'll show you!" he screamed. "All of you! I'll show you—and then I'm going to send you to a firing squad! You, Mills! You hear me? They'll shoot your guts full of lead for that punch on the jaw!"

He broke out of the circle and lunged

toward the ship next to Stan Kublik's.

"Yellow!" he shrieked. "Yellow! Why, you fools, I'll show you some flying—show you how to brag and strut!" He settled into the cockpit and opened the throttle with a vicious jerk of his arm. The blades of the propeller leaped to life. The knot of men who watched him scattered wildly.

He ruddered the Spad toward the take-off. It weaved about wildly as he gave it the gun.

Stan Kublik leaped forward, as if to interfere. "Get him, somebody," he begged. "He can't do that—we can't let him do that. He'll kill himself. . . ."

"Sure he will," snapped Eddie Mils "... and the rest of the world—particularly this outfit—will get a break. I hope he busts himself wide open."

They stood there motionless, fascinated by the lunging, wobbling take-off. The Spad bearing Coleman cleared the trees by a narrow margin, skidded dangerously as he put rudder to it without aileron control, and headed north.

Suddenly Stan Kublik leaped into action. He vaulted into his own cockpit and waved his hand. "Out of my way," he ordered. "Out of my way. I've got to get him—I can't let him die like that." He swung his own Spad around and sent it skimming down the field.

Eddie Mills moved next. He made a dive for his own cockpit. Then Buell, then the other men of the squadron. One by one, side by side, as fast as they could gun motors and swing ships around they went zooming off the field. No order—no objective but to see the end of the grim story. Gray Spads streaming through the sky—without formation—seemingly pursuing one another. And far ahead, two gray dots flying at top speed. The first, Major Coleman. The second, Stan Kublik.

IX

KUBLIK saw the Fokkers first. He knew Coleman had not sighted them. It was doubtful whether Coleman was in condition to see anything. The Spad he flew blundered along on its jerky course. Nosing up and down, corrected with a yank on the stick. One wing low and then the other, corrected by a kick on the rudder.

Crazy flying—Coleman's dazed brain doing little more than to keep it flying.

Possibly the Fokkers were finishing a high, offensive patrol. They were mere bugs against the white circus which floated high overhead. They flew in a steady formation, seven of them, an entire flight, and were headed north—until they made out Coleman's Spad. Then they went around in a steep banking turn—to give the leader time to be sure that the single Spad below him was not a decoy for a Spad squadron flying higher than his own altitude.

Not often does the chance come to knock off a single pursuit job—that is, for a flight to surprise one—to make sure of the kill before a gun is fired. The Jerry leader grinned to himself as he studied the antics of the ship below him. A student perhaps—a brave student trying his wings. He lifted his arm. His hand closed into a tight fist and swept it in an arc down and over the side of his ship: At the same instant he pushed the stick against the firewall. The Fokker went diving down closely followed by the entire formation.

Stan Kublik saw them as they nosed down in the death swoop. Coleman had not lifted his head—was not looking about him. It was death. He gave the Spad full gun, pressing the throttle against the forward post to coax every rev from the laboring motor. There was a network of sweat forming over his forehead, blurring his goggles. He had to get there—he had to save Coleman—save him for Helena. If she knew that Stan had stood by and watched Coleman killed —

He tried to shut out the picture of her face—of her eyes. He could not imagine suffering or heartache in those blue depths—such suffering as must follow if the man she loved were killed.

There wasn't much Stan Kublik could give her—beyond his life. Nothing that she needed, nothing that she wanted. What was a life if the losing of it could bring happiness to Helena? What was he? A black-faced ghoul—a squarehead, brought up in the packing-case company houses in Carmel. What could he hope to be—what had he expected? No one could rise above his station—the cards were stacked that way.

He smiled to himself—a strange smile. He'd carry the Old Coot's message to the

heights—write it in blazing glory against the heavens. One Spad battling seven Fokkers to save the life of the man the White Angel loved. He'd die—as the Old Coot had said—with his wings spread against the sun.

The whistle of the wind through the Spad's rigging rose to a cyclonic pitch. The motor roared as a leaping hurricane devastating the heavens and earth.

COMING down—those gray Fokkers with the white crosses on wings and tail. Closer and closer—the leader breaking away from his fellows, leading that wild dive toward the lone ship. That leader had no eyes for Stan Kublik in his Spad coming up with the rush of the wind—coming with screaming wires and drumming wings—coming crouched in his seat, his eyes cold and hard through the gun sights.

Jagged streaks of flame came from the leading Fokker. It was on top of Coleman's tail now, standing poised in the air, nose down, guns hammering and slashing. A sight of Coleman's face as he turned in his seat. A white face, with staring eyes, horror stamped upon it—frozen horror. Death blowing against his shoulder—hot death, spewed at him from the muzzles of hot Spandaus.

Coleman's Spad nosed over—diving to escape the merciless thing on his tail. Stan Kublik's face was wet with sweat—a terror growing up in his own heart—terror that he would be too late. Then the sky swarming with glistening wings—black wings—great white crosses.

The guns before his face broke into the staccato clattering. The shining bits of light leaped through the air in a shower. The tang of exploded powder bit his nose and throat. Dizzy turning and banking. Hurdling, side-slipping, skidding around a sky full of enemy ships—trying to keep on the leader's tail—trying to close up the gap before he could put Coleman down.

He smashed blindly at every obstacle, feeling the beat of the wind from enemy wings and props. A shower of splinters gashed his face—smashed the glass in one goggle, cut a channel in his forehead out of which the blood ran down over his cheeks, under his goggles, blinding him.

3—Wings—Winter

Thudding, rivet-hammer concussions. Slugs tore through his crate, smashing through linen and wood, cutting patterns in the wings. A thin mist of splintered wood from the right ailerons—and controls dragged against the stick.

Teeth set, driving ahead, the sight of Coleman's Spad, still flying, spurring him on. Clear track. The Jerry leader ahead of him. Coleman's crate under a whirlwind of flying steel. Burst after burst drilling through it. Wings wobbling, nose drifting about as if no hand held the controls.

Then it happened—quickly.

Curling black smoke burst from Coleman's tanks and a leaping inferno hid his head. His hands went up to shield his face—then came a shuddering explosion. A great smear of smoke blackened the sky, out of which rained bits of wreckage—hideous spar fragments, bits of burning fabric, the black bulk of the motor—plunging end over end.

HEAAT was on Kublik's face—the heat of the explosion. He was tearing through the space which an instant before had sustained Coleman's ship. Gone! Dead! Blasted out of existence—and the White Angel waiting for him. . . .

A sob forced in Stan Kublik's throat. Behind him a Jerry pilot, cursing at his inability to put a burst through a vital place, burned up his guns in the attempt. Snapping, crackling, singing steel whipping about Kublik's head. He heard nothing of it—his eyes were fixed upon the Jerry leader. The leader who had killed the man the White Angel loved.

Something smashed against the back of his neck. A rising wall of darkness blinded him. He shook his head savagely. Vision returned—and the Jerry was in the center of his gun sights. He jammed his thumb against the trips.

The eager Vickers bucked and jumped. A white Maltese cross was before Kublik's eyes. He continued to pump lead until the blackness blinded him again, and until it seemed that the back of his head was nothing more than a hollow in which the exposed brain throbbed and pulsed.

There was a burning ship below his right wing. Dimly he recognized it. The Jerry leader's Fokker—burning as Coleman had burned before he was blasted into

nothingness. Twisting and slithering, spinning—round and round. Kublik's brain was spinning in cadence with the Fokker.

Above, Eddie Mills, followed closely by Buell, leaped into the fray. They fell on the six remaining ships of the Fokker flight with the force of a trip-hammer. Behind them streamed the ships of the Thirty-third—all of them—straining to have a part in the dog-fight.

Spads where Fokkers had been—gray Spads with the red, white and blue circle on their wings. Driving the slate-colored Fokkers before them. Hemming them in—cutting them off from the north, grinding them down toward the brown earth which was within Allied lines.

Mills saw Stan Kublik's ship sinking loggish earthward. With a wild zoom he looped out of the fray, rolled out of the loop and went diving down to a place beside the battle-wrecked Spad. He flew to within fifty feet of its fuselage. He saw Stan Kublik's head nodding forward. His shoulders lax—his face smeared with blood. He cut the gun on his own crate.

"Snap out of it, Stan!" he screamed, the effort seeming to burst his throat. "Snap out of it—bring her down—easy, boy!"

Perhaps his voice carried to Kublik's ears, perhaps not. Both motors were turning over at idling speed, but the sighing of the wires never ceased. No matter what, Kublik's head lifted. He opened his eyes slowly, as if too weary to care. The ground was coming up. Mechanically he centered the stick, brought the wings up level, pulled the nose up gently, let the crate drift in.

There was a dump before him, piled high with white boxes and cases. The Spad hit the mass with a splintering impact. On the ground terrified men ran for cover. The Spad seemed swallowed amid the great mound of packing cases.

Three hundred yards away Eddie Mills pounced his Spad to a landing, cut the switch, tore his belt from around his waist, and leaped to the ground. He hit the road like a sprinter and headed back for the S. O. S. dump. He arrived as a crew of men were lifting Stan Kublik out of the wreckage. He was ghastly with blood. His face was very pale under the oil and grease. There was a deep gash low down on his head—below his helmet.

"Easy with him, damn you." There was

a catch in Mills' voice. "Get an ambulance! What do you stand there staring for?"

Until it came he sat with Stan Kublik's head pillowed in his lap, bathing the blood from his face, talking to him—but Kublik's eyes remained closed. After a while a little smile came about his mouth—and Eddie Mills turned his eyes away. There are lots of things men can't endure—even flying men.

X

HELENA MARTIN was weary. Her lax body rested against the side of her ambulance. It seemed that she would never be able to take another forward step. It seemed that she would never be able to wait until they gave her a fresh load of wounded and sent her back toward the rear.

Each time they loaded a wounded man on her ambulance she saw a face. It caused her to close her eyes—to clench her hands—to turn away.

They were ready to move. They were bringing out the wounded. North the guns were thundering, the night sky was lit with the fury of war.

There was a sound coming up the road—a sound like a machine gun firing. It came close—sweeping along at a terrific rate. She opened her eyes. A wild-looking, greasy man in the uniform of the Air Service leaped out of a sidecar and spoke to her.

"I'm looking for a girl," he said abruptly. "Back at the hospital they told me that her name was Helena Martin and that she was with this outfit of puddle-jumpers. Where can I find her?"

Something seemed to choke her. A wave of terror gripped her. She forced herself to be calm.

"I'm Helena Martin," she told him. "What—"

"Listen, I'm Eddie Mills of the Thirty-third Aero Squadron. My friend—Stan Kublik—was shot down yesterday. They've got him back at the evacuation hospital—right where he was two weeks ago. He got a smash in the head—trying to save the life of a rotten louse by the name of Harry Coleman.

"Well, Stan Kublik knows you, d'you see? He's been calling your name—over

and over. Maybe it would ease him off some if he could hear your voice, you get me? I'd tear France apart getting him anything he wanted. If you're the girl—the girl he calls his White Angel—why, then you're going to pile into this sidecar and make tracks back there with me—now. Get in!"

She stared at him. "Harry Coleman," she echoed. "He's dead?"

"Dead as hell, lady, and the Air Service gets a break. You coming, or do I have to carry you?"

"I'm coming," she said in a weak voice. "Why did he call me his White Angel?"

"Search me," answered Mills. "I'm not responsible for things like that—but he's going to get you if he wants you."

The sidecar snorted through the night. Behind them they left a driverless ambulance and a fuming section commander.

STAN KUBLIK'S face was very white—but the smile was still about his mouth. His eyes were closed. He was breathing slowly. Suddenly he whispered something. She put her ear close to his mouth.

"Helena!" he whispered. "Helena! I did my best—but they got him. If he could only have helped himself a little, I'd have brought him back to you."

Suddenly her lips touched his cheek. "Stan," she called softly. "It's all right, darling. I'm here—Helena Martin—I'm here to take care of you. I won't go away from you. Listen! Open your eyes, dear! I love you—can you hear me? I never loved anyone in the world but you."

He opened his eyes slowly. His face was turned toward the window. "Look," he whispered. "The sun—it's morning. It's been dark an awful long while—"

Then he saw her. At first realization of her presence did not come into his eyes. He stared at her. He moved his hand. It touched her own hand. Then there was anguish in his eyes.

"I tried," he said. "I did everything I could to bring him back—but they got him. He didn't have a chance. . . ."

She placed a finger over his lips. "It makes no difference, little boy," she whispered. "He lied to you—he hated you because he knew that I loved you—from the

first minute back there in Carmel when they brought you up from the mine. You've been in my heart—no one else—I'm here to help you get well."

"I'm well now," Stan told her. "I'll be going back to the outfit in a few days. But I'll go back differently than I've ever gone before. I thought I knew what the Old Coot meant when he said: 'Your wings will be spread against the sun.' I thought I knew when I first started to fly. But I didn't. I just found out this morning. I'm up there now—the sun on my face—and the wings standing out like white gold—because you're with me."

Her cheek brushed against his face. "I was always with you, dear," she told him. "Every minute—every hour—and I'll always be with you. I would have told you before—but it seemed you had room in your heart for only one thing—one love—the hours you spent in the air, your wings against the sun."

He smiled and touched her hand. "Back there—in those days when there was only darkness—when I never saw the sun, I wondered if I would ever stay above earth long enough to have the sun for one day—just for one day." His voice trembled a little. "Those hours before I saw you for the first time were the worst—but perhaps a man must know the darkness before he can understand what light means. I remember opening my eyes. Your face was above me—you were the sun that day. Since then you have always been the sun." He was silent for a moment.

"I used to dream of saying a word to you—a single word. It would rush up from my heart—and always I had to drive it back. I'd like to say it now—could I?" His eyes were looking up at her.

"Word—to me—from you?" The tears welled up in her eyes again.

"It's a word I've never spoken," he told her.

"Tell me," she urged. "You can tell me anything."

He was still for a long moment. Suddenly his lips moved and his eyes opened.

"Helena!" he said softly. "Helena!" She understood. She kissed him. In the background Eddie Mills grinned—with tears trickling into the corners of his mouth.

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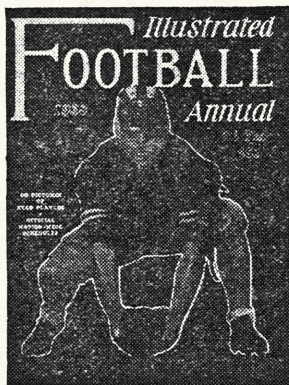
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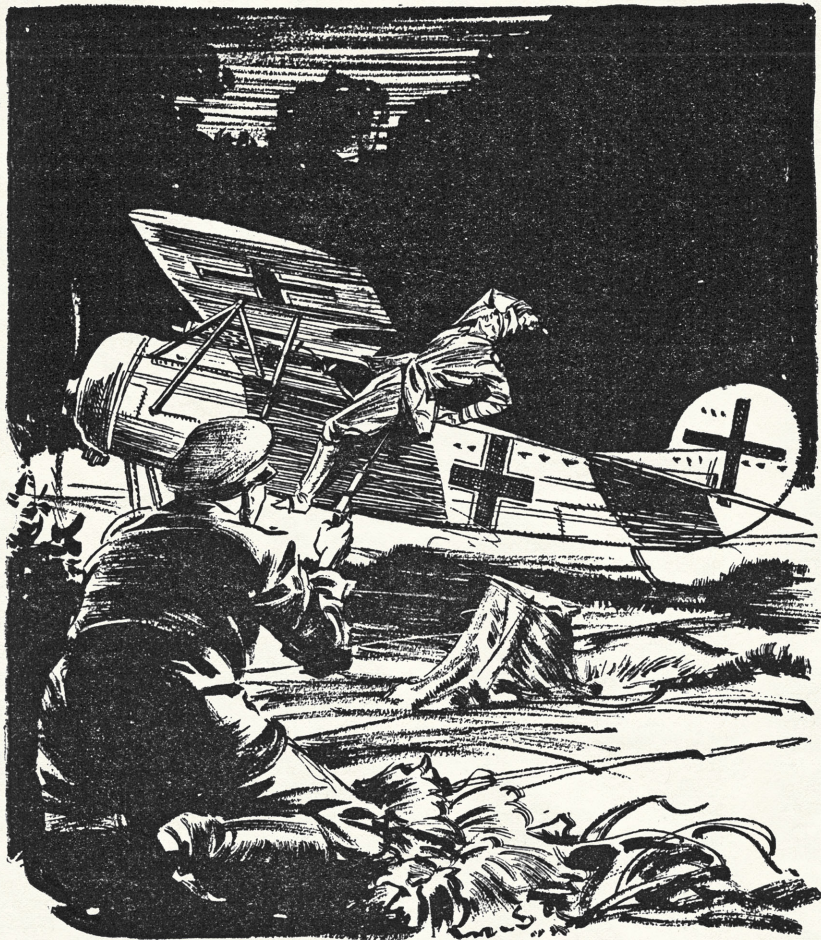
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S LANTING down through dusk rode death on the wings of tracer bullets. Its clammy fingers closed around three fledgling pilots, and ushered them into

the gloryland where ships never crack up; where guns are mercifully silent.

And the fingers of death called in destruction. Destruction painted the fuselage

of the doomed planes with scarlet flames that enveloped the doomed figures behind the controls. Only pitiful chunks of charred fragments reached the ground to mark the passing of these three untried pilots of the air.

But the fourth pilot of the flight, only a boy himself, looked with unfearing eyes at the grinning spectre of death; rattled the dice of destiny, and threw a perfect natural. Death passed him by, brushing him lightly with its wings. Out of the shrieking red of tracers he hurled his Spad, screaming down with all the power of its powerful Hisso.

He felt them slam into the fuselage, wings and tail assembly. He heard them ricochet snarlingly from the engine block as if angry at being cheated of their prey. He saw them gleam redly against the dun-colored clouds toward which he was racing the Spad.

One of the Fokkers roared ahead of the others thinking to head off the youthful pilot. Young muscles responded to the challenge. The brace wires groaned protestingly. Down swished tail and rudder. The humming dive changed into a hawklike swoop that carried the Spad straight up.

Across the lines of the ring sight slithered the belly of the Fokker. The belts of the twin Vickers jerked through the muzzles of the guns under firm pressure of the boy's fingers.

Scarlet flame bathed their muzzles—licking, darting flames that seared the intervening space and engulfed the under fuselage of the doomed Fokker. It trembled in mid-air like a vulture suddenly shorn of its wings, then in a puff of brownish smoke heeled over on its side and sagged downward out of control.

THE way was clear again. The youth fed his Hisso a huge dose of petrol. If he could reach the cloud bank, he might elude the overwhelming numbers on his tail.

Brrrrrr—ip!

The Spandaus were belching again, their tracers cutting a yellow flame along the tips of the Spad's wings. The boy's lean fingers barely touched the stick. The Spad viraged and dove. A seemingly careless half roll and once more it was streaking off on a tangent for the distant cloud bank.

Three Albatrosses, bunched above the Fokker, dropped a curtain of flame in front of it. The Spad nosed into it, quivered from nose to tail, and stalled in a swift climb.

No way out in that direction. Concentration of fire too great. Back the other way. Back under the Fokkers who were maneuvering around in a rapidly closing circle. The rat-a-tat tat of tracers beating against the wings caused the Spad to vibrate in every working part. Another second of pounding and it would rip apart.

A sudden Chandelle and the pilot felt the quivering impact of the tracers lessen. He circled, watching for a chance to pull free for the safety of the cloud bank. Have to be careful. Couldn't muff things and live to tell it. He must get back to the nest.

His eyes traveled up. The Fokkers were reaching for altitude. He knew what that meant. He wiped the eye pieces of his goggles on the sleeve of his flying coat, then leaned over the pit for a survey below. Still over enemy territory.

He jammed the throttle wide. The Hisso accepted the challenge with a deep roar. In another minute lightning would flash from the upper reaches as the Fokkers nosed down for the kill.

Dully the boy wondered what had become of the squadron commander, Major Tyndall. The major and eight others had left him above Exermont to meet and destroy three Gothas. The boy felt a spasm of pain for a moment. Someone had made a terrible mistake. The Gothas hadn't crossed the line where they were supposed to have crossed. Instead, they picked another crossing. And he, with three untried pilots, had blundered into them. Before he could finger a gun trip the escort had blown three inexperienced pilots into the Kingdom Come and left half of the escort to shoot down the one remaining ship of the luckless patrol.

Meanwhile the Gothas had continued on. The boy behind the controls chewed on his lips till they bled. He knew beyond a shadow of doubt that the information concerning the arrival of the Gothas was known to but five others, including himself. Had one of the five . . . was there a traitor in the squadron?

Captain Garth of G-2 had sent the message across the lines through Lieutenant

Perry, who had always worked with him. Now Perry was dead—dead less than an hour after returning to the drome, his body riddled with tracers.

All these thoughts hummed through the pain-wracked mind of the youthful pilot in a fractional part of a second. They were a sort of a backwash of half formed ideas. Actually he was thinking of the racing planes above him, and of the sheltering mists of the distant cloud that meant life to him.

"They'll start down in another second," he reasoned aloud. "One at a time so as not to get in each other's way."

Even as the words left his bleeding lips the first Fokker screamed down in a power dive, its guns flaming beyond the shimmer of its prop. Behind it raced the second and third. Timed almost to the second their Spandaus ripped in three slanting lines toward the Spad.

THE lone pilot saw the fabric jerk from one wing. He banked sharply. The motion sent the ship into the range of another stream of tracers. Before his eyes the cowling vanished, laying bare the engine block. A ricochet from the exposed engine struck the lad's shoulder like the blow from a club. But he gritted his teeth and clung to his course. Only a few seconds more.

Whrrrrr! The lead Fokker whipped past in a blur of red and yellow.

"One!" choked the boy, jamming the stick ahead.

The Spad nosed over, its tail careening in the air. From the twin mouths of the Vickers spewed a vomiting stream of tracers.

The Fokker lunged to one side, zoomed out of the scorching blast, then abruptly went into a tail spin as its pilot sagged in his straps.

"Next." A quick intake of breath.

The second Fokker roared down. The boy was watching. He saw the Spandaus gleam redly through the dusk. His feet thumped hard on right rudder. The Spad skidded barely in time to avoid the burst. For a moment it spun dizzily. A jerk on the controls. Nose up. Wings vibrating from the terrific rush. The enemy plane had passed the danger mark and was now far below.

Out of the corner of his eye the boy

marked the coming of the third ship as it churned violently upon him. Whirling on wing tip he cork-screwed out of its way. But the ugly stream of Spandau tracers followed him ripping along the forward edge of the upper wing.

A sudden yank on the stick. The nose tilted alarmingly, slowing the Spad's forward speed. But the maneuver took him out of range. Before the enemy could recover and change the angle of his guns the Spad was level with it and thundering straight into it. The Vickers coughed a staccato burst. The Fokker banked sharply away. Eyes glued to the ring sight the boy followed. But the other ace was not so easily caught. The nose of his ship twisted over in a jerky Immelmann that sent it far beyond the probing tracers.

The Albatrosses hovering above crowded down. One of them opened up with a burst of fire that seared the top of the pit. The youth cursed softly as he jockeyed his plane out of the fiery spray of metal.

A Fokker coming up from below turned its Spandau loose in a tormenting burst. The boy gritted his teeth and sideslipped out of danger. Only a few feet more. Already the Albatrosses were shut off from view.

Ping! A section of the feed pipe tore loose, drenching the pilot's feet with petrol. Disregarding the danger he refused to cut the switch. Into the cloud bank he winged with the two Fokkers pressing close behind.

Abruptly the Hisso began to cough and spit. Another soft curse. The feed line was broken. He reached down with his hand to determine the extent of breakage. The tubing was partly torn away from a coupling. As well as possible he bent the tubing back. It lessened the amount of escaping petrol, but did not shut it off entirely.

HE straightened in the pit and peered through the mists that enveloped him. Off to the left he thought he could hear the pulsing throb of enemy ships. A glance at the altimeter. He had four thousand feet to navigate in. Now, if the cloud bank would only hold out. . . .

His fingers tightened around the stick. He was staring at gray sky once more and the cloud bank was shifting off to his right. His feet pounded hard on the rudder. The

Spad wheeled around in a tight bank and plunged back into the security of the cloud bank, but not before the boy had obtained his bearings.

Swinging the Spad in a circle he held it there. Barring one of his enemies blundering into his path he might remain there until his supply of rapidly dwindling petrol was exhausted. It was worth risking however. Deftly he guided the Spad round and around in the heavy cloud bank, watching meanwhile the puddle of petrol slowly forming around his feet.

A loose wire, a jumping spark. But this young veteran put the thought from his mind and concentrated wholly on the task of guiding the plane in a circle. Minutes passed. Agonized minutes. Still he stuck to his controls. He knew that his enemies would be high above the cloud bank waiting for him to emerge. But in their circlings they would slowly work back toward their own bases. If he could only keep going till darkness fell.

Put, put, pist!

The Hiss coughed protestingly. He felt again the broken tubing with his fingers. The rank smell of gas floated up from the floor, and the backwash from the prop hurled it stingingly against his face. Locking his lips together, the boy clung to the controls.

Around and around circled the Spad, keeping always within the shielding walls of clouds. Gradually twilight slipped down from the heavens. When he could no longer see, the boy nosed the ship downward.

The sky was empty when he came out. Below him curved the landscape in a bleak expanse of wild desolation. He dropped downward barely able to distinguish landmarks. His eyes peered through the gloom and picked out a silvery stream beside a grove of trees.

He sighed with relief. Beyond lay the drome. The Hiss was limping painfully. The pilot nursed it along. The trees shot under the ship. Then a rolling plain. Abruptly the engine sighed desparingly and died.

Sounds floated upward—sounds of far-away cannonading. He cut the switch and pointed the nose of the Spad at an easy gliding angle. For long minutes he hung over the side of the pit trying to pick up a safe place to land.

LOWER and lower coasted the Spad. The ground leered up, black and ugly. And while the anxious pilot strained his eyes in the gloom a lighter patch of ground appeared off to the left. He banked sharply around losing considerable altitude. Now the lighter patch became plainer. He recognized it as a road. The road leading to the drome.

"Well, here goes," he muttered.

With a shuddering crash the Spad hit the road, rebounded and came down with its nose pointing up. It swished dangerously from side to side for a few minutes then slid quietly from the road to an empty field.

"Plain fool luck," sighed the youth, as he clambered to the ground. "I couldn't do it again in a hundred years."

He turned down the road leading to the drome reeking with petrol fumes. Upon arriving at the drome he didn't at once report to the squadron commander. Instead he hurried to quarters, changed into other clothes, reported the location of the plane to the chief mechanic, and returned once more to quarters.

Bill Danforth met him just as the boy reached the building. "Lo, Jerry," he grinned. "Where's the rest?"

Jerry's eyes hardened. And as they hardened, tiny wrinkles appeared on either side of them. Only eighteen was Jerry Ahern, but he had lived through ten weeks of bitter strife in the air. And those ten weeks had aged him like so many years. A kid in point of years, but he had the eyes of a grown man. He had seen much. More than a boy of his years should have seen. Determination and responsibility lay heavy on his heart.

Hardened aces had taken him under their wings. Keen-eyed pilots had taught him the tricks of Vickers and Brownings. And one lone wolf of the air had put him through grueling paces of ship control before he, himself, went west to join the ghost squadron of death.

Courage and love of combat came naturally through the warm Irish blood flowing through his veins. Respecting greatness in others he was a born hero worshiper. And his hero was Garth—he that belonged to that section of intelligence known as G-2. Garth had been betrayed.

"Wait, Bill," he told the older pilot. "I

don't want to talk until we're all together. Find Fechtman and Cravath. There's hell to pay for this afternoon's work."

"Eh?" rumbled Bill Danforth. "What do you mean, Jerry?"

Jerry countered with another question. "Did the C. O. get back?"

"Sure. Some time ago. False alarm. Not a Gotha in sight."

"I thought so. Listen, Bill. Someone sold us out. The Gothas got through. They trampled me and the three fledglings of my patrol out of the sky. I tried to stop them. Huh. What a mess. The fledglings went down in flames before I could even finger a gun trip."

"God!" breathed Danforth. "This is bad, kid."

"It's worse than that, Bill. Five of us, including Major Tyndall, knew what was coming off last night. Between the time we heard of the Gothas from Garth through Perry, things were switched. Why?"

"Search me," shrugged Danforth.

"I don't like the looks of things, Bill," frowned Ahern. "But someone of us five is directly or indirectly to blame."

"You mean," hinted Danforth.

"That there's a traitor and informer in our midst," finished Ahern. "Now see if you can locate the others and we'll all go over to operations office and lay the facts before the C. O."

II

MAJOR BUCK TYNDALL barely glanced up as the four pilots entered his office. Jerry Ahern handed him a type-written report of what had taken place late that afternoon. Tyndall read it from beginning to end and dropped it in a wire basket.

"Well?" he regarded the young pilot inquiringly.

"What's to be done about the death of those three kids," asked Jerry.

"Nothing," shrugged Tyndall. "What can we do?"

"Place the responsibility where it belongs."

"All right. Shoot!"

Ahern leaned across the squadron commander's desk.

"I'll stake my life, Major, on Captain Garth's reports. I have never known them

to go wrong before. Now, to get down to brass tacks. Only five of us were present when Perry brought in his report from Garth. You, yourself, suggested that we say nothing. Am I right?"

"Yes."

"Very well. What happens. You organize a flight to destroy the Gothas and send me and three inexperienced pilots on regular patrol. Strangely enough the enemy shift plans and come through me and my inexperienced pilots, leaving you and the pick of the squadron forty miles away."

"It was unfortunate that they should change their plans, Lieutenant," said Tyndall. "We're not to blame for that."

"Aren't we though. What made them change their plans. I'm telling you, Major Tyndall, that Garth's stuff has always been fool proof up to now."

"Come out flat, Ahern. What are you driving at?"

Jerry spat out the words sharply. "Someone in this squadron, or to narrow it down, someone of us five isn't playing the game."

"You mean that there's a spy among us?"

"Exactly."

"Rubbish, Lieutenant. Not with this bunch." He turned to the others. "You officers aren't tongue-tied. What do you think of Ahern's accusation?"

"I dunno," grunted Danforth. "He may be right."

Fechtman, blond and blue-eyed, shrugged his shoulders. "It would seem that Ahern is damned anxious to blame anybody but himself. Queer, also that he should escape while the rest of the patrol was shot down."

Cravath, newly arrived, and a morose officer, said nothing.

"What do you think, Lieutenant Cravath," asked Tyndall.

"Plenty," growled Cravath. "But most of all I think Ahern is all steamed up over nothing."

"Let it go at that," clicked Jerry, following a sudden hunch. "I'm sorry I blew up."

But Cravath and Fechtman didn't take kindly to the suggestion.

"See here, Ahern," said the blond-haired pilot. "You made an accusation against me that doesn't sit very well. You must have had proof or you wouldn't have done it. I demand to see it."

Jerry eyed him steadily for a moment.

"I didn't accuse you any more than I did the rest, including myself. I pointed out the fact that things went wrong."

"Fechtman asked for proof," put in Cravath. "I'm siding in with him. Let's have it."

"I'm withholding nothing," said Jerry, reddening. "I told you all just how the thing stands. Take it or leave it, just as you damn well please."

"No use creating hard feelings in the matter, Lieutenant," advised Tyndall. "In a way you're right, and in another way you're wrong. In any event I'm the one that will catch hell from headquarters."

HARDLY had he finished speaking when the buzzer sounded. Tyndall picked up the phone.

"Hello. Yes. Speaking." There followed a long silence on the squadron commander's part broken only by the crackling from the receiver. After a few moments the voice at the other end of the line stopped. Very quietly Tyndall replaced the receiver on its hook.

"Whew! That's the first time I've heard Blois mentioned in weeks. And coming from a General, it has an ominous sound. Return to headquarters, gentlemen. And forget about what's been said in this room."

But try as he might Jerry Ahern couldn't forget. He became aware from the moment he left the squadron commander's office a coldness in the attitude of his brother flyers. Fechtman was openly hostile and made no bones about his feelings.

Sullen and morose as ever, Jim Cravath kept his own counsel but he never spoke to Ahern unless it was a matter of duty.

Danforth sulked for the remainder of the night and the next day forgot all about it, becoming again the cheerful soul that he always was.

It wasn't until late the following afternoon that the summons reached Lieutenant Ahern to report to the squadron commander. He hurried at once to the operations office and paused before the major's desk.

Tyndall's eyes showed traces of worry as they studied the face of his youngest pilot. Of his gameness and loyalty he hadn't a doubt. Abruptly he shot the question.

"Have you ever met Garth?" His eyes studied the youngster intently.

Jerry Ahern felt his blood tingle. Was it possible that he would at last come into actual contact with the great one? Garth the mysterious; Garth, who had been more of a tradition than an actual reality; Garth, who remained obscure while others reaped a harvest of medals, and citations because he could call the deal of the enemy and come out right. And then, Jerry Ahern's heart sank.

"No," he answered, "I've never seen him."

Tyndall drummed the desk with his fingers. Mentally he was weighing the youngster against the older pilots. Ahern was young. He had imagination. And he possessed that rare combination so unusual in a youngster—common sense and guts. He again gazed into the boy's eyes, and there and then made up his mind.

"Big man," he explained. "Pink and white skin. Hair straight, iron gray and cut pompadour."

Ahern trembled with anxiety. "Well?"

The squadron commander noted the tenseness in the lad's face and knew that his judgment was confirmed. "Lieutenant Perry will have to be replaced. I'm picking you for the job. It's nasty work. There's no glory attached. Nothing but plain hell whether you succeed or not. Want the job?"

Did he want the job? Would he turn down the chance of working with Garth? Jerry Ahern fought for control of his voice.

"Yes, Major. I want the job."

"Very well. I'll have you relieved of all duties. We'll work together. You, I, and Garth. But your orders for the most part will come from him. Know where he is?"

"I know where I took Lieutenant Perry once or twice. Always the same place. A wild stretch of land between two hills north of Dun sur Meuse."

MAJOR TYNDALL nodded. "You will go there tonight at dusk, Lieutenant Ahern. Land at the place where you always left Perry. Shut off your engine and wait. And keep on waiting until you hear from Garth."

"I understand."

"Garth," continued the squadron com-

mander, "is our only source of information since the enemy discovered our wireless sending station at Metz. I rather think he's suspected now. At any rate, I'm placing the task squarely upon your shoulder, Ahern, of keeping contact with this man."

"I'll not let you down, Major."

"Good. Fly over alone in a single seater. From now on Garth will give you orders. We'll try and carry them out. That's all, Lieutenant. Report to me at once no matter what time you get back."

THE sun, invisible all day, had long since dropped behind the bleak horizon. And with its passing came night with a penetrating dampness that chilled to the bone.

"Plane's ready, Lieutenant," reported the chief mechanic.

"Thanks," murmured Jerry. "Fuel and ammo belts. . . ."

"To capacity, sir."

"Good." He glanced into the darkened sky, then climbed into the pit.

The Spad trembled into life. The Hisso coughed and spluttered, then settled down to a powerful hum. The boy adjusted his goggles and checked the instruments on the panel while he waited for the Hisso to warm. After a few moments he waved his hand to the mechanics. They kicked the chock blocks free from in front of the wheels.

The Spad bumped forward. Jerry nursed it across the field. And having gained sufficient speed, he pulled back on the stick and gave it the gun. Through the wings whistled a cold wind. The ship nosed up and into it with a faint rocking motion, then in a slow spiral roared high above the drome.

At less than a thousand he leveled off. The ground was now but one huge shadow with landmarks wiped out completely. Only by picking out those more dense than the rest, marking the woodland, could he plot his course northward into the enemy lines.

From Exermont he swung due west, passing north of Cierges to the forests at Dannevoux. Beyond lay triple markers, a trunk highway, a railroad and the Meuse River. Anyone of the three would lead him to Dun sur Meuse.

The trunk highway was invisible. Jerry

dropped lower and picked up the railroad tracks instead. A thunderous burst from alert Archies caused his spine to tingle. He winged to one side, mentally marking the spot as one to be avoided.

Due to the heavy fog hanging over the river, no combat ships came up to give battle. Jerry dropped the Spad lower and lower. After a time Dun sur Meuse passed beneath. Beyond it lay the desolate valley between high hills. He leaned over the pit trying to pierce the fog. The glint of water caught his eye. The river. Farther on he picked out a ghostly gray structure that he knew to be an old beet sugar mill. He banked sharply at the mill and followed the rounded curve of a hill.

"This is about the place," he reasoned. "Well, here's luck."

He cut the switch. The Hisso quieted. Down through the damp stillness winged the Spad like a ghostly shadow. Gripping the stick tightly, he leaned well over the edge of the pit to pick out a smooth piece of ground. Of a sudden it shot up toward him barely visible through the mists.

A quick yank on the stick. The wheels struck, rebounded, and the ship rolled roughly to a stop. Jerry Ahern sat in silence, listening. Water dripped from the top wing to the one beneath from condensed fog. He listened for other sounds and heard nothing.

SLOWLY he clambered to the ground. The valley was deserted. Worriedly he peered about him. Yes. This was the identical place he had taken Lieutenant Perry. But where was Garth?

Straining his ears to every possible sound, Jerry waited, standing close to the Spad. An hour passed. Two. Three. He was becoming restless now. What could have happened to Garth?

"Ah!" The voice came out of the darkness somewhere behind him.

The boy whirled in confusion.

"Don't make a move," warned the voice. "I've got you covered."

The beam of a powerful flash stabbed the blackness and struck the pilot squarely in the face.

"Ah!" repeated the voice again. "So you've come. A stranger this time. What became of the other pilot, Lieutenant Perry?"

"Killed," answered Jerry, blinking in the glare of the light. "Mind turning that thing some other way?"

"Not in the least. Who *might* you be?"

"Lieutenant Jerry Ahern. I've been sent out to take Perry's place."

"Hmrrrrrr. I can't be too careful, Lieutenant. And who were you looking for in this valley?"

"Garth of G-2."

"I'm Garth. But this is no place to talk. Follow me. I want to get a good look at you."

Jerry Ahern smiled. The moment had come. He was at last at the side of the legendary Garth. His heart pounded happily. In silence he followed the broad back of his guide.

They came, after a few minutes of walking to a mass of scrub pine growing to the side of a hill. Pulling the bushes to one side, Garth revealed a black hole. He entered with Jerry close behind. They traversed a narrow tunnel for some distance until it opened upon a sizable room hollowed out of the hill. After dropping a curtain over the entrance Garth lighted a candle.

"Sit down," he motioned, pointing to an upended box.

JERRY sat down as bidden. Under the sputtering glow of the candle flame he was able to study this Intelligence man he had heard so much about but had never seen. Huge, pink and white complexion, pompadour hair, just as Major Tyndall had described him. He was dressed in a peasant's smock, boots and wore a disreputable hat.

Filling a pipe, Garth sat down on another box and eyed Jerry rather steadily. "So you're Ahern?"

Jerry nodded. "Yes, Captain Garth."

"Never heard of you. You're nothing but a kid."

"I'm eighteen," put in Jerry, "and an ace in my own right. I didn't pick myself out for this job. Major Buck Tyndall sent me over."

"I'll trust Tyndall's judgment."

"Thanks, Captain. I'll do my best to serve you."

"Results alone count with me, Ahern. The honor and the glory belong to others."

Jerry pulled a sack of tobacco from his

pocket and built himself a cigarette. "Care for one?" he asked, extending the sack.

"No, thanks. The pipe does very well."

Jerry returned the sack to his pocket and waited for the other man to speak.

"From what I've gathered at various sources," began Garth. "Perry's tip wasn't highly successful." His eyes bored into Ahern's questioningly.

"I'll say not," responded the pilot. "Tyndall led a picked formation against the Gothas and drew a blank. I and three new pilots ran into them. The escort planes of Fokkers and Albatrosses shot down three of my patrol, but I managed to escape."

Again that sigh from Garth. "So you're the man, eh? Certain members of the Imperial air service were cussing you far into the night. I'm rather glad to meet such a pilot, Lieutenant. Excuse me if I've seemed a bit backward." He held out his hand. A queer smile hovered about his lips that Jerry was at a loss to understand. At the moment it seemed slightly sardonic and cruel.

He shook off the feeling and extended his hand. "Glad to know you, Captain Garth. What I did was nothing. It was what I didn't do that worries me."

"For instance?" encouraged Captain Garth.

"Nothing special. I just had a hunch. Someone in my own group. I've an idea he got word to the Gothas' drome before the big machines started out. At any rate, something happened, and we caught hell all around."

"I see, I see," murmured Garth, softly. "In this business, Lieutenant, a man never has any scruples. There's only one way to remove a menace." He leaned forward. "A bullet through the heart, or a knife. Either will do."

III

HARDENED as he was to war and bloodshed, Jerry Ahern nevertheless could not repress a shudder that came over him at the G-2 man's ready suggestion of cold-blooded murder. Was this the price he must pay to serve this relentless man? Were there no limits placed on the moral aspects of war?

"I can see that it's distasteful to you," observed Garth. "However, after you've

risked your neck as often as I have, you'll learn to take stern measures. But enough. Tell me. What activities are going on around your sector?"

"A regular and two new draft divisions are concentrating between Montfaucon and Varennes. Our squadron is keeping watch on their supply bases."

"Hmmm! Montfaucon and Varennes. Heard anything about this new gas—the one the Allies are reported to spray from planes?"

Ahern glanced sharply at the G-2 man. The question rather disconcerted him.

"No," he answered. "I haven't heard a thing. Maybe I can find out though."

"I wish you would. It's important to me. Quietly, you understand. It's like this, Ahern. I belong to that far-reaching organization known as the Wilhemstrasse. How and when my name went down on their books matters little. G-2 of the American Expeditionary Forces have me on their records also. I'm in a position of give and take, the balance of which I am throwing on the side of America, my own country."

Ahern's voice was barely audible.

"I understand, Captain."

"I might, for instance," continued Garth, "give certain parties of the Imperial Air Service the strength and disposition of troops and supplies that you as a part of your duties will furnish me knowledge of."

Jerry pulled the sack of tobacco from his pocket and leisurely rolled a second cigarette.

"Furthermore," continued the G-2 man, "I can offset any information I turn in by reporting through you what action is going to be taken concerning it. A roundabout way of working things but you get my meaning."

"Perfectly."

Garth pulled a memorandum book from his pocket.

"Officially you will be known as number seven. Remember the number—Seven."

A buzzer attached to a metal box on the wall began to vibrate. Garth rose to his feet and took down the receiver.

Jerry Ahern's eyes were openly admiring as he listened to the G-2 man's voice. Here was a force, a brain. Here was a lone wolf isolated in enemy country. He lighted another cigarette and waited. The conver-

sation was carried on in gutturals unfamiliar to his ears.

"Ja, Excellenz, Morgen."

He hung up the receiver and turned to the waiting pilot.

"The day is set. Tomorrow. I've passed on information concerning the location of the American divisions. Their first step will be to wipe out the nearest drome. Now, I'll light the candle at the other end and counteract what I have just disclosed."

From an inside pocket he drew out an aerial map.

"Hmmm! Hundred and Sixth. They're the nearest squadron. The voice I just talked to reported that they will be wiped out with bombs at three a. m. tomorrow morning. Flares lighting the exact location of the drome will be ignited one minute before the Gothas pass over. There will be four bombing planes and about twelve pursuit ships. And remember this, Lieutenant. They'll be over at three sharp."

Ahern glanced at his watch. "It's nearly ten. I think I'd better go. Anything else?"

Garth lumbered to his feet. "I think not. Big things are taking place. Things that will mean much to you and me. This little affair of tomorrow morning is nothing compared to what I have planned. Go now. And report back to me at the same time tomorrow night."

TOGETHER they re-entered the tunnel ending at the scrub pines. Arriving at the plane, Garth laid a heavy hand on the pilot's shoulder. "No matter what happens, Lieutenant, remember you're a free agent subject only to my orders. Watch your tongue. If anything goes wrong, do as I suggested. Cold steel or a bullet."

Jerry nodded. He was trying hard to adjust himself to this new game. "All right, Captain. . . ."

"Never Captain me, Lieutenant. I am Garth." He strode to the prop.

Ahern climbed in and adjusted the safety belt. Mechanically he called out:

"Contact!"

The Hiss rumbled, coughed and spun into life. Through the darkness the pilot could just make out the huge form of the G-2 man standing a little to one side. The tempest of the prop deepened. Wheels

jerked in the soft ground. Now the Spad was rolling forward. Faster and faster. With a clean jump it cleaved the night air and swerved around the hill.

A light breeze had sprung up and scattered the fog. Overhead a pale quarter moon played about the rim of a cloud. But the sky lanes were totally devoid of any form of craft. The boy's heart pounded excitedly every inch of the homeward flight. He felt now that he was in the midst of great things.

Forward through the murk winged the little Spad following the curves of the railroad, river and highway southward. Once a powerful beam from a searchlight stabbed the blackness within a few yards of the wings. But the Spad was not discovered.

Jerry drove by instinct, now turning westward across Landres-et-St. Georges and Sommerance, until through the eerie shadows of night he caught the first landmarks of the drome flattened against the earth. Slowly he circled it and dropped. And when his eyes made out the straightaway of the landing field he nosed down. Wheels bumped. The tail skid dug in and held. The little ship ground looped around and stopped close to the hangars.

Mechanics ran out and took it in charge. Jerry climbed to the ground and hurried at once to the operations office. Tyndall was waiting. He pushed a map aside at Ahern's entrance and looked up questioningly.

"I found him," announced the pilot.

"Good. What report?"

"Another raid. On our neighboring squadron this time. The Hundred and Sixth. Three in the morning. Four Gothas with at least a dozen escort planes."

"Anything else?"

"Nothing."

"Did Garth know about what happened yesterday?"

"Everything."

"I wish we were as well informed. Well, there's nothing more tonight, Lieutenant. Better get some sleep. I'll arrange a reception party for the raiders and warn the C. O. of the Hundred and Sixth what is to take place. With luck we ought to get every plane that comes over."

"If it's all the same to you, Major, include me in this little fracas. I've got a

grudge against those raiders. I'm not forgetting what they did to my fledglings yesterday."

"Suit yourself, although you're not called upon to do anything. Go to bed. I'll have the orderly call you ten minutes before we pull out. Ten planes ought to be enough with what the Hundred and Sixth furnish."

Jerry returned to quarters. A light burned dimly at the far end of the building. Danforth was writing and the only man apparently that was awake.

"Hell's going to start popping before morning," whispered Jerry.

Danforth looked up. His eyes asked the question.

AHERN explained in low tones so that his voice would not reach the ears of the other men. After he had finished they smoked in silence, then wrapping themselves in blankets they lay upon their bunks to await the appointed time.

A ghostly silence hung in the air around the hangars. Ten ships had been wheeled to the dead line. The pilots selected by the squadron commander began to gather. When they had all reported, Major Tyndall gave last-minute instructions.

"Watch for signals and keep as close to me as possible."

During assembly Jerry had kept his eyes open. Fechtman was present as was also Cravath. Danforth was being left behind. He stood close to the young pilot.

"I know I'm a rotten flyer compared with you and the others," he grinned. "When anything special comes along Buck Tyndall leaves me on the ground."

"Never mind, old man," consoled Jerry. "Your turn will come some day." He started toward his machine. "See you when we've blown these raiders out of the air. S'long."

A cracking roar shut off further talk. Into darkened skies they spiraled in a V-shaped wedge. The flying lights on the C. O.'s shop shone dimly ahead. Behind him swept the others, each aligning himself on the blurred shadow in front.

They reached their rendezvous flying close to eight thousand feet. In a great circle they winged. Occasionally a greenish flare showed from below marking the field of the Hundred and Sixth. Preparations were going forward there.

Ahern hunched his shoulders as he peered out into solitude. Nothing but a void and blackness. As he watched, two Very lights twinkled half a mile away—two bright blue sapphires that hung momentarily in the heavens then flashed into the surrounding blackness. The Hundred and Sixth was in the air.

Jerry examined the radium figures of his watch. Two fifty. Ten minutes more. He smiled grimly. Everything had passed off like clockwork. He'd have an encouraging report for Garth when next they met.

Garth. Who was this strange man anyway? An agent of the Wilhemstrasse. By what manner or means? And now he, Jerry Ahern, was an agent of Garth's. Number seven. A lucky number. His face clouded. Perry hadn't been lucky.

HIS thoughts turned to Fechtman and Cravath. No chance for bungling this time. Neither of them knew of the raid until they were called out for the before dawn flight. He had watched them nearly every minute from the time they had crawled sleepily from their bunks until they had climbed into the pits of their ships.

A second glance at his watch. Two fifty nine. One minute more to zero hour. Death hour for the raiders. Did he hear the pound of ships' motors? He strained his ears, but heard only the roaring blast from the Hisso.

Sixty seconds clicked away. No sign yet of the Gothas.

Jerry became uneasy. He twisted in the straps and tried to pierce the gloom to the north for the flash of exhausts. Only inky blackness.

Still the ships droned on into the night, winging in constant circles above the landing field of the Hundred and Sixth. The boy's eyes wavered northwestward toward his home field. A pale, pinkish light played about the heavens. His lips twitched. What caused that light? There was no artillery around that he knew of.

The glow vanished as the Spad circled. It came into his vision again a few minutes afterward. This time it was brightly red. Jerry felt depressed. He fought back ugly thoughts. No use worrying. Other and more important things faced him.

The hands on his watch registered three

fifteen when next he examined it. The fear that was upon his heart grew and intensified. He was thinking of the sudden switch in plans of the day before—or was it two days?

As the Spad winged in its third circle since the discovery of the glow in the sky, Jerry Ahern's horror-stricken eyes saw a pillar of flame climb into the heavens—an orange and red sheet of livid fire.

His throat constricted for a moment. He had a sense of impending disaster, yet he felt powerless. He was duty-bound to remain where he was, a mere spectator with no volition of his own except to stare with bulging eyes at a slow mounting horror.

Had his warning been in vain? Had the plans of the Imperial Air force again been changed at the last moment? His eyes searched the curtain of blackness for some sign of the raiders. But the serenity of night remained unbroken.

Abruptly a Very light stabbed the darkness. A red star parted the sable curtain of night followed by a green star. The signal to head back for the drome. The blue lights from the squadron commander's ship shot away to the west. The circle broke into an inverted V.

Minutes seemed eternities to the worried pilot. His ship seemed to be standing still. Yet each minute the flame-shot area became closer. The speed of the V-shaped wedge increased as it shot down from eight thousand to three. Slowly the red glow changed to licking, orange flames. No doubt about it now. There was a huge fire ahead. Nearer and nearer. The formation dropped down, swung in a slow arc, then veered into the quivering shadows caused by high-mounting flames.

And as Jerry Ahern looked upon the disaster that had overtaken his own field he felt suddenly sick at heart as though he had failed in his mission. Confirmation of what he had half suspected when he had first seen the red glow in the sky brought no relief. He had the feeling of a poker player whose straight flush had been beaten by a royal.

Insidious fears crowded into his heart and pushed upward into his throat. Wherein had he failed? Even as he slanted to the shadows of the field he wondered what Tyndall would say. What the others would say. But most of all he had a panicky fear

that Garth would have him removed as an incompetent. And to be lowered in the eyes of the great Garth would be the hardest blow of all.

"Oh, damn!" he choked.

IV

THE formation dropped to the field. Three ships promptly cracked up as their wheels dropped into deep, raw craters that pitted the tarmac—craters that were invisible. Jerry landed without mishap. Quickly he unfastened the straps and climbed down. Stiff with the coldness of high altitude he lurched unsteadily toward the nearest group of mechanics and flyers.

"What happened?" he croaked.

"Gothas!" A single word spoken by a dozen men.

Ahern blinked as the floodlights bathed the field. Clear and distinct came Major Tyndall's voice.

"Tear into it, everybody. Move the planes from hangars. Lively now."

Ahern labored along with the rest. There was no distinction now between officers and enlisted men. All was forgotten in a common cause of saving as much equipment as possible. The brilliant glow from burning hangars, aided by the floodlights caused the field to stand out boldly. That enemy ships might come over twice in one night never occurred to the squadron commander.

Only one man voiced the possibility. "It's folly, Major, to have all these lights on."

"Forget it," snapped Tyndall. "Lightning never strikes twice in the same place."

Two petrol filled bedons exploded throwing liquid fire into a ring of flame. Men staggered back pawing futilely at scorched faces. Downwind came the muffled roar of motors beating against the night air beyond the encircling flames.

Brrrrrrrip!

Pin points of fire streaked across the tarmac like jumping sparks. They swerved into a huddle of men laboring at a two seater.

Ahern leaped aside and the tracers thudded into the ground where he had stood only an instant before. He flung his eyes aloft. At that instant Two Rumplers cleaved the night sky, flying fast and low. For a single instant they were orange-hued monsters spitting malignantly. Then

they vanished into the outer darkness.

Eyes aglint, nostrils dilating, Jerry Ahern leaped toward his ship. Cold rage froze his heart. The thing was getting on his nerves now. He needed an outlet for his pent-up emotions.

"Stay where you are, Ahern," ordered Tyndall.

"But, Major," protested Jerry, "There's two Rumplers up there that . . ."

Brip, brip, brip! chattered the invisible Spandaus from somewhere overhead. Men screamed and fell kicking to the ground. A Spad standing alone suddenly took fire as probing tracers pierced its petrol tank.

"Spread out!" roared the squadron commander. "Is Captain Bellows present?"

"Right here, Major."

"Good. Take three pilots up and see what you can do. Ahern, you stay with me. Hurry!"

"Listen Major," insisted Jerry. Send me up. I can . . ."

"Shut up!"

THE sudden crackling of motors cut off further speech. Like avenging angels, or devils, four Spads clawed into the air. Before them, invisible except for the flame of their exhausts, scuttled the two Rumplers. The Spads enclosed them in a circle. Fingers inched toward gun trips. Cold turkey for the Spads.

Plop, plop, plop! Very lights shattered the darkness—flares of surprising whiteness that hung from parachutes of silken paper. Fully a dozen of them floated out of the upper stretches. Above the four Spads thundered a murderous staffel of Fokkers.

In the confusion the two decoy Rumplers scuttled free. The Spandaus unleashed their furious metal. Harsh, cruel riveting cracked the night air wide open.

The whole attack was over within less than three minutes. The pilots in the ill-fated Spads never knew what struck them. There was a quivering of death-locked muscles followed by four sullen thuds as the ships struck the field. And like an invisible wind, the victorious staffel howled away from the glare of burning hangars.

Glaring-eyed pilots surged around the squadron commander begging to ride the air. They wanted revenge.

Major Tyndall shook his head. "No,

men. Go over to where those Spads crashed. See if there is anything you can do."

During the remainder of the night Jerry Ahern worked along with the rest moving and hauling equipment. His heart was too heavy to assist with the wounded. His only relief was in physical action.

At dawn the last of the flames died down. B and C hangars were nothing but charred posts and studding covered with twisted sheets of blackened tin. The building used for petrol storage had vanished utterly.

Ahern's face was black with smoke as he lined up with the others for coffee. He felt tired, nervous. Morosely he wandered to quarters and sat upon his bunk. Fechtman and Cravath regarded him sullenly. Of Danforth there was no sign.

Jerry stood it as long as possible then wandered outside. From force of habit he examined the bulletin board. Except for routine instructions regarding the conduct of pilots and other personnel of the drome, the board was empty. He abandoned it and slouched to the road, lost in troubled musings.

HE struggled to blot the tragedy from his thoughts. His mind turned to Garth—big man, pink and white skin. Hair straight, iron gray, and cut pompadour. He heard once more the G-2 man's easy voice. "Results alone count with me, Ahern. The honor and the glory belong to others."

He reached a bend in the road unconscious of the direction he was taking. It occurred to him then that he had forgotten something. What? Something that Garth had asked him. Was it the disposition of troops? Ah! He had it. Garth had asked about a new gas—a gas that could be sprayed from low flying planes.

That would be easy. He had friends down the road. His steps quickened. Abreast a sprawling shack covered with corrugated iron he paused. A sickish odor assailed his lungs. He turned from the road, passed through a tangle of weeds, packing cases and metal containers, arriving finally at the shack's entrance.

"Chemical Service experimenting station," warned a voice behind a yellow-paper window.

"Open the door," shouted Jerry. "It's me. Ahern."

The door opened. Two men wearing jackets looked up from a littered table covered with glass bottles, retorts and test tubes. Their faces and clothing were smeared with the stain of chemicals.

"Oh, hello Ahern," greeted the younger of the two. "Come on in if you can find a place to plant your feet. What's doing in the air these days?"

"Grief," spat Jerry. "Nothing but hard luck. Can I smoke?"

"Not here you can't."

"Whew! It smells to high heaven in this dump. What are you fellows doing?"

"That," announced the second man, "is a secret."

"Oh." Jerry attempted a grin. "Come across. You fellows haven't a monopoly on secrets."

"We have on this one. It's a darb."

Jerry considered this. Perhaps it was the very thing he wanted to know. No harm in asking.

"There's a rumor that a new powerful gas has been invented to spray from planes. . . ."

"Rot!" broke in the first speaker. "It can't be done. We tried it out. And the planes had to fly so close to the ground to make it effective that they were shot down with rifles. It was a good idea, but it didn't work."

"But this stuff you're working on now," hinted Jerry.

"Nothing but an antidote for mustard gas. It's not exactly in our line but after seeing that last bunch of doughboys stagger down the road, blind and sick, it occurred to us that here was a chance to do something helpful rather than destructive."

"You fellows aren't so bad at that," sighed Jerry. "Well, I guess I'll be mooching along."

"If you ever run into any mustard gas, come in and let us dope you up."

"Not likely," shrugged Jerry. "S'long."

HIS spirits revived in the fresh air outside. At least he had something definite to report to Garth. He stood for a moment on the road again then turned and trudged back to the drome. Once more habit drew him to the bulletin board. It was still bare of orders. Idly he wandered about the field. He felt like a lost soul.

Six truckloads of lumber, tools and en-

gineers rattled across the field. Like a horde of ants they attacked the blackened hangars. Even as he watched, Jerry saw new ones rear themselves upward. An orderly approached and saluted.

"Major Tyndall wants you to report to him at once."

Jerry acknowledged the order and swung on his heel.

"Now," brusked Tyndall, some minutes later. "What's wrong?"

The boy looked the squadron commander squarely in the eyes. "I don't know, Major. I followed instructions exactly as Garth gave them to me."

"Humpf! Things look black, Lieutenant. Yet I can't believe that espionage exists in my squadron."

Jerry Ahern shrugged his shoulders and said nothing.

"See here, Lieutenant," went on the squadron commander. "Are you sure you got your information right from Garth?"

"Positive."

"And you told nobody at the drome?"

"Not a soul but yourself. I forgot—Danforth."

"Hm-mm! You told Danforth. Where?"

"In quarters. The others were asleep when I got in. Danforth was up writing a letter."

"Where were Fechtman and Cravath?"

"Asleep in their bunks." Then as if struck by a sudden thought. "But you don't suppose that Danforth . . ."

"Lieutenant Danforth," announced Tyndall in a low voice, "fell early this morning. He was among those that went up with Captain Bellows."

MAJOR TYNDALL stared thoughtfully into space as if trying to uncover a lead to the mystery. "A soldier is supposed to be like a machine, Ahern, and wholly without feelings in the discharge of his duties."

"Well?" questioned the boy.

"Danforth. He was here when we left for the field of the Hundred and Sixth."

"I know," nodded Jerry. "Yet, afterward he went up with Captain Bellows."

"That's all very true," frowned Tyndall.

"But in spite of his splendid sacrifice, he was here on the field. . . ."

Jerry winced. He had always considered Danforth a fine type of man. Nothing

wonderful as a pilot, but one that could be trusted to do his best under any and all conditions.

"If his things haven't been taken from quarters, Major, I'd like to satisfy myself once and for all. I can't believe anything underhanded of Bill Danforth."

"It's a sacrilege to touch anything belonging to men such as Danforth, but I've got to be sure of myself, Lieutenant. Go at once, Lieutenant, and report back the moment you've finished."

Jerry saluted and left the operations office. Minutes ticked by, worried, heavy minutes to the squadron commander upon whose shoulders all the past casualties rested. Now the broad shoulders were beginning to feel the tragic burdens placed upon them. Reports of recent disasters were being asked for by those higher up. The mounting list of dead and disabled called for explanation when there was none forthcoming.

The tired eyes of the squadron commander became wells of intense suffering. He alone must answer for each fresh disaster. His thoughts darkened. Nervously he tapped his desk and tried to think where it would all end.

Presently Lieutenant Ahern stood again before him, his boyish face older and more drawn. He laid a folded sheet of paper on his commanding officer's desk.

"Read it," he suggested. "Bill Danforth's unfinished letter to his wife—all that remained of his belongings at quarters."

Rather gravely, Major Tyndall unfolded the paper and stared intently at the words written thereon. For the most part it contained nothing more than a simple man's devotion to his wife—words too intimate for anyone except the woman for whom they were written.

But one paragraph stood out from the others like a beacon of light. Its quiet simplicity made the squadron commander feel small and mean as if he had entered another man's house unseen and saw things that were never meant for his eyes. Had he looked up at that moment, he might have seen Jerry Ahern's burning face. Instead he read on.

I don't know whether I ever mentioned Jerry Ahern. He's only a kid. Under twenty, but an ace among aces. In comparison I am a mud hen; he is an eagle, but with a heart as big as his

body. War hasn't spoiled or disillusioned him. He's fine, generous and a man's man in spite of his age. I admire him even as he admires and worships such misty great ones as Garth, Lufberry, Rickenbacker, Hall and the rest. I hope he comes through this mess without . . .

Here the letter ended. Mentally Major Tyndall finished the incompleated sentence.

Without crackup or going down in flames.

He raised his eyes suddenly. They were moistly bright. "I'm afraid we've got everybody wrong, Ahern."

Jerry nodded glumly. "I'm sure of it now."

"Better get a little sleep. At dusk you will go over the lines again. Garth should know the answer to the riddle. It's gotten beyond me."

"I'll know something when I come back," promised the boy.

"I'm sure you will. If I'm asleep when you return, have the orderly call me."

"Yes, sir."

With a smart salute Ahern left the presence of his superior. And his heart was heavy with foreboding. The malignant influences of a sinister horror hung over him like a dangling noose. Invisible, threatening and wholly unexplainable, it darkened his every thought. If tragedy continued to pile up, where would it all end?

The reassuring bulk of Garth floated before his eyes. There was something calm and peaceful in the G-2 man's heavy face. It reminded Jerry Ahern of the tolerant expression on the face of a bronze Buddha he had once seen. Carelessly he flung himself on his bunk.

"I must sleep," he forced upon his mind. "I must forget everything and sleep. Garth will know what to do. Garth knows everything."

Presently his breathing lengthened. The worried wrinkles smoothed on his forehead. Sleep gathered him to her bosom.

VI

DUSK dropped its mantle over a war-ringing countryside. The hours of killing and destroying partially ended at this time of the day. Like master chess players, Staff officers on both sides began to shunt weary divisions back and forth along that long, twisting line known as the front.

High-powered guns continued to belch

and roar. Their rumblings split the night air unceasingly as if the earth was turning over inside. But attacks slowed to a halt. Men licked their wounds, cursed, prayed and gambled. Outposts trudged wretchedly to their stations and peered out into the shadows.

Had they sharper eyes they might have seen a high flying Spad cruising along into the night ten thousand feet up. Jerry Ahern was pounding on to keep his rendezvous with Garth in a quiet valley north of Dun sur Meuse.

Round patches of clouds hung in the night sky. The moon was tricky. It would go into hiding for no reason at all. It was dangerous business riding at night. Thrills aplenty in the day time, but at night the land became a writhing mass of snaky shadows.

Jerry dropped his ship lower, picked up the shining ribbon of the Meuse and followed it north. He felt a quiver along his spine as some subtle feeling warned him that he was now over enemy territory. The pounding of the Hissos seemed terrific. How could the Archies below fail to hear him?

He strained his ears over the edge of the pit. A rushing torrent of wind drove against his face. There was no sound but that of the motor and the sigh of the wind. He nosed the Spad lower, picked up a familiar curve of a distant hill, took a long breath, then cut the switch.

Again he listened for the tell-tale throb of enemy motors, and heard nothing but swish of wind straining against the Spad's wings. The valley lay before him now, grim and mysterious. Banking sharply he cut his forward speed and began to drop. Another bank against the wind. He could see dark patches now of bushes and old shell holes. The ground rushed up to meet him. A slight pull on the stick. Wheels bumped, rose in the air, bumped again. Now the Spad stood quivering as if unwilling to remain on the ground.

Jerry climbed down. Idly he wondered if he could find the clump of scrub pine covering the entrance to Garth's retreat. The call of a night bird came sleepily through the air. The boy listened uneasily and moved into denser shadows.

Minutes dragged. No sign of Garth. From force of habit he rolled a cigarette

and thrust it unlighted between his lips. "Might as well go inside," he muttered.

AFTER some search he found the entrance to the tunnel. He pulled the bushes aside and crept into the cave. Lighting a candle he looked around. In one corner he found a pile of gray blankets. He sat down, lighted his cigarette and prepared to wait.

And without warning, Garth stood framed against the tunnel opening, bulking huge in the sputtering light of the candle. His eyes were heavy and infinitely sad.

"Don't say a word, Lieutenant," he began. "I've heard the whole story." He dropped to a sitting position on the box.

Wordlessly, Jerry offered his tobacco sack and papers. Garth shook his head. His voice when he spoke was not the voice of the Garth of yesterday. It was strangely soft and velvety.

"It's the same old story, Lieutenant. Orders switched at the last minute. Don't ask me for explanations. I have none to give."

"Do they suspect you. . . ."

"I don't know. During the past twenty-four hours I have lost two of my best operators, one and three. Just disappeared. Probably arrested and taken to Metz or Berlin for questioning. Maybe not that. German Intelligence has a sudden way of standing suspected persons against any convenient wall. . . ." Garth stopped abruptly. From far down the tunnel feet crunched on dirt.

He leaned forward until his face was close to Ahern's. "Someone's coming. Be on your guard. Take your cue from whatever I say. . . ."

The third man stood now at the tunnel entrance, a dark, oily faced officer dressed in a spotless gray uniform over which hung a cape of the same material. Ahern felt his scalp tingle. Like a cat he sprang erect primed for trouble.

Something like a snarl twitched from the other man's lips. In a flash the slender barrel of a Luger appeared from under the cape.

"Schwein!" snapped Garth, lunging between them. "Step back, number seven." Then to the officer: "It's all right, Kapitän Müller. Number seven has only recently been added to our organization. I'll vouch for him."

Kapitän Müller holstered his weapon, but did not remove his eyes from the American flyer. "*Ja wohl*, Herr Garth."

A jargon of gutturals passed between them. Garth was evidently making explanations to account for Ahern's presence. Müller seemed satisfied after a few moments, for he sat down on the box vacated by Garth and lighted a brown paper cigarette.

The G-2 man lighted his pipe slowly, "Have you any report, number seven, to make on this new gas covered in your last instructions?"

For a fraction of a second Jerry hesitated. He was undecided whether this officer Müller, was a member of Garth's Wilhelmstrasse organization or an operator connected with the American G-2. Then he remembered Garth's hissed warning. "Take your cue from me."

"The Fatherland has nothing to fear," began the boy, watching intently the expression on the G-2 man's face. And seeing it suddenly glow, he knew that Müller was of the Wilhelmstrasse.

"Through a connection with the Chemical Service," continued Jerry, sure that he was on the right track, "I found that the new gas has been tried out and found wanting. The planes carrying it were forced to fly so low that the pilots were destroyed by rifle fire from the ground. It has since been thrown out."

"Ah!" sighed Garth. "That is an interesting piece of news."

Müller grunted.

"Von Uhland will be pleased, eh Kapitän?"

THE German officer smiled coldly. "And this man, number seven, Herr Garth. He seems to be of the enemy. His loyalty. How can I be sure?"

"Results alone count with von Uhland. Have I not proved it within the last three days?"

"You have, Herr Garth, but the great test of your plans. . . ."

"That, too will follow in good time. A matter of hours now. By tomorrow, the squadron picked by von Uhland will be wiped out of existence. The last barrier leading into Montfaucon and Varennes will be down."

Jerry Ahern listened in pained bewilder-

ment. What Garth had just spoken seemed to apply to his own squadron. Once more he felt the malignant influence of a sinister horror hanging over him. Garth's words hit him squarely between the eyes. And now he was calmly plotting the destruction of Major Tyndall's already depleted squadron.

Then he recalled Garth's words about burning the candle at both ends. Small consolation in that since only his own squadron had suffered by these backhanded tactics. The thing wasn't right. One end of the candle was guttering, and that was the American end.

"The *coup de grâce*, as the French say, comes tomorrow," continued Garth. "Are you prepared, Kapitan?"

Müller grunted an affirmative.

"And do we have von Uhland's support?"

Again the grunt.

"Very well, Kapitan. Our plans stand as outlined by von Uhland, himself. I will instruct number seven in his part and send him back to his station on the other side of the lines."

Müller rose to his feet. He smiled bleakly on the American pilot and walked slowly to the tunnel entrance.

Garth followed and addressed him in German. Again their gutturals were a jargon to Ahern. Presently Müller flung the cape of his uniform over his shoulders and left the underground room.

Jerry pulled out his sack of tobacco and thoughtfully built a cigarette. His thoughts were a-jumble. He was seeing things from the wrong side of the fence, and they didn't look good for his squadron. First there was the matter of the bombing planes with their escort which destroyed the three fledglings. Then the raid on the Hundred and Sixth which never came off, but centered instead on his own squadron.

Tomorrow, according to Garth, they would pull the same stunt again. Garth had spoken about these things to Müller as if all had been part of a prearranged plan. To him, Jerry Ahern, he had explained them away as accidents, sudden switches of plans. When, then, was Garth telling the truth?

The G-2 man had returned to the box lately vacated by Müller. He leaned over

and cupped his forehead in the palms of his hands. A dark thought crossed Ahern's mind. Was Garth the fountain head of treachery?

JERRY inhaled deeply. The thought was too ugly. He couldn't imagine such a thing. Admiration for the big man crowded the black insinuation out of his mind. It came to Ahern as he sat there and waited for the other to speak, that Garth was in a peculiar position. If things went wrong, he alone was to blame. If they went right, his name would be kept from it. Others would reap the glory and honor.

"Garth," said Jerry.

"Yes, Lieutenant."

"I'm taking an awful lot for granted. Up to a couple of days ago, you were, physically, a stranger to me. I knew you only as a name, a name known only among the wise ones. To me you were an institution."

"Drivel, Lieutenant. I'm just an ordinary. . . ."

"Let me finish, Captain Garth. Upon your word I was willing to turn against my friends among the pilots of my squadron. I turned suspicion against them when your orders went against us. Two of them paid the price and have passed on. Aside from myself there is no one to take the blame of these disasters but Tyndall and one other man who has proved himself beyond a shadow of doubt. Bear this in mind when you plan this *coup de grâce*, as you call it."

"I know exactly how you feel, Lieutenant," answered Garth, "and that's why I'm sitting here like an ass, moping. I've got the whole thing sewed up so that you can't fail, yet I'm afraid you won't trust me."

"Shoot the works," suggested the boy. "It's not my purpose to question your judgment. I'll obey, of course, but don't make it too hard. I'll fight to the last ditch and give my life if necessary, but as for shouldering blame for the loss of other men's lives, that's what rankles."

"Want to quit?"

"Quit?" Jerry Ahern reddened. "Who said anything about quitting?"

"No one, Lieutenant. But as I said before, there's no honor or glory in this work. I have my orders. You have yours. Only

by co-operation can we succeed. There are great minds back of everything that goes on. I belong to G-2. But I'm not G-2. Bear that in mind."

"I'm ready to do whatever you say," announced the boy.

"Very well. Now listen carefully to what I have to say. Report to Major Tyndall that tomorrow will be quiet; that German air service will make no move other than routine patrol work."

"But you already said . . ."

"Never mind what I said to Kapitän Müller. The sector that your squadron covers will remain entirely inactive."

Jerry Ahern looked the other man squarely in the eye. "I have your word for that, Captain Garth."

"You have my word. You'd better go now. I expect other visitors soon whom it is just as well you never meet." He rose to his feet and entered the tunnel.

JERRY followed. There was nothing else he could do, but his mind was filled with dark forebodings. There was something going on that he didn't understand; something of which he was a part; something that he sensed spelled evil for his squadron.

"Ready?" asked Garth from a position near the prop.

"Ready," answered Jerry. "Contact."

The Hisso took hold at the first twist. Jerry fed it evenly till its steady song told him that it was warm enough to take to the air. Then, jamming the throttle down, sent it whirring down the slope of the valley and into the air.

Garth contemplated the fire from the exhaust till the plane could no longer be heard, then returned at once to the cave. He took the receiver from its hook and spoke a number into the mouthpiece. A few minutes waiting. Speaking in German.

"Everything is arranged, Excellenz. We strike at the hour arranged. Tomorrow. *Ja whol. Excellenz. Auf weidersehen.*"

VII

PARTLY undressed with his legs dangling over the edge of the cot, the squadron commander blinked upon the young pilot. "What is it, Lieutenant?"

"I talked with Garth," said Jerry, "and

he says that nothing will happen tomorrow." It was in the back of his mind to tell the major everything he had heard, but some inner voice protested against it.

"Hmmm! You might have let me sleep. All right, Lieutenant. Too bad you had your trip over the lines for nothing."

Jerry sauntered out onto the darkened field. "For nothing," he murmured. "I wonder if he's right." He removed his flying jacket and blouse and stretched out on his cot. For hours he stared upward into the darkness, trying to unravel the skein.

Was it Tyndall? No. The squadron commander was out. Everything had gone fine up to the death of Perry. He could rule Fechtman, Danforth and Cravath out. That left no one but himself and Tyndall. What the hell. There weren't any traitors at the drome. There weren't . . . there weren't . . . his mind trailed off sleepily.

Abruptly the earth was turning over, slowly, ponderously, with deep-throated rumblings of protest. It gathered in volume and sound like the far-off beat of drums. It swept from east to west, north to south, till the whole world throbbed.

Red lightnings pierced the sky. Incense poured upward from the steel maws of giant guns. Men who had but a moment previous shivered with cold pulled off their blouses. In another minute they had stripped to the waist. The clank of smoking cases striking against the trails of guns became a faint minor note to the swelling cacaphony welling heavenward.

Jerry Ahern twisted on his cot. It was cold. He sat up and pawed at his eyes. Through the yellow paper on the windows came a faint light. Dawn was at hand. He lighted a cigarette, walked to the doorway and peered out into the gray light of morning.

"A big drive," he muttered. "The dough-boys are going over. That'll mean trouble before this day is over. I wonder if Garth knew this? Those divisions around Varennes and Montfaucon. They've gone into action."

Breakfast was a silent meal, sandwiches and coffee, eaten beside planes. Pilots and observers alike scanned the cold skies waiting for orders. The tension heightened. Two straight rows of Spads stood one behind the other, ready to take to the air.

"Here comes the C. O.," reported someone.

Tyndall came across the field reading from a sheet of paper just brought in by a dispatch rider. A telephone jangled nearby. The squadron commander folded the paper and stuffed it in his pocket. A voice called him to the phone.

"Hello. Yes. Major Tyndall. . . . Where? Yes. Three planes at once. Vicinity of Septsarges, location 231.6 on new C maps. O.K. Confirmation requested. What? Very well."

The receiver clicked in place. Jerry Ahern stood close to his squadron commander. Tyndall's face was gravely questioning.

"What's up?" asked the boy.

"That was Garth."

"Garth? Impossible. He's over on the other side. . . ."

"His agent. Calls himself number three. Says infantry in trouble. Barrage falling behind first waves of infantry" He hurried outside. "Smith, Carrington and Young. Get out your maps. Locate section 231.6 on your C maps. Lively now. Ready?"

The three pilots gathered close.

"Code signals," clicked the major. "Same as usual. Carrington, you are to keep in touch with battery commanders. Smith, you will locate zone of fire. Young, you are to cover Smith. It hadn't ought to take you more than half an hour. Get away. Quick!"

HARDLY had the rumbling Spads got clear of the drome when the jangling telephone again broke in. Without waiting to be called Tyndall hurried into the hangar.

"Number three again," spoke a thick voice. "Have you sent out those planes, Major?"

"Yes, they just left."

"Have them recalled."

"Too late. They're out of sight."

"The location phoned was wrong. The co-ordinates would be changed to 261.1. Vicinity of woods at Danneveux."

"It's too late," fumed Tyndall. "That's not our sector anyway. Belongs to the 106th. Besides, we're short of planes."

"No excuses will be accepted. Verbal instructions are coming direct from G-2.

Written orders confirming verbal ones being forwarded to headquarters at once. Failure to act . . ."

"Wait!" demanded the squadron commander. "I'm short of planes but I'll send three more. The woods north of Danneveux, did you mean?"

"The same. Better double up on the planes, Major. It's important for the success of the drive."

"Very well."

Orders barked sharp and challengingly. In a swirl of smoke six planes rose and roared off to the northeast.

"Oh, God," complained Tyndall. "I've got only four pursuit ships left."

Jerry Ahern crowded close. "Whose orders, Major? I know it's none of my business, but I'm curious."

"Number three—agent of Garth's."

Jerry stood for a moment lost in thought. What was there about number three that seemed odd? He couldn't remember. Nervously he paced the tarmac trying hard to remember. The telephone jangled again, or was it still jangling? He saw Tyndall grab at the receiver. The squadron commander's face whitened as he listened to the voice at the far end of the wire. And when the voice ceased, Tyndall turned away crushed by an overpowering fear.

He stood for a moment outside the doors of the hangar, watching the pitiful remnant of his battered squadron. Abruptly he spoke.

"Attention, everybody!"

The pilots gathered around him. Taut expectancy held them rigid. They waited, each man alert, wide-eyed, and wondering.

"A French outpost north of Vouziers reports an immense armada of enemy planes sweeping toward Montfaucon from the northwest. It means that they'll come through us. Our duty is to stop them." He paused for a tense moment. "And we've got but four planes."

Jerry Ahern grinned.

"That's easy, Major. Phone the 97th and the 108th. We'll keep our four ships in reserve just in case. . . ."

"Ah!" sighed the squadron commander. To the telephone again. Impatiently he spun the crank. No answer. He spun it the second time. Still no answering buzz from the receiver. The dead silence of the wires was like a blow in the face.

"Line is dead," gritted the C. O., his face working strangely. "Good Lord, Ahern, you don't suppose . . . why, why . . . listen. Are you sure you got your orders straight?"

"What do you mean?" gasped the boy.

"I mean the orders from Garth. Don't you understand?" He mouthed a soft curse. "Can't you see, Ahern? Our troubles begin at the source. Garth's double-crossing us!"

Jerry's face whitened. All blood drained out of his head. And when he spoke his voice carried only as far as the grim-faced officer in front of him. "You're wrong, Major. Garth isn't that kind. I'd stake my life. . ."

"Think back, Lieutenant. Don't you see? It's a perfect set-up. Everything he has ordered us to do has turned out wrong. Our squadron is about wiped out. Those phone calls came from Garth. He drew the last of our ships from the drome. It was planned, deliberately. And now he's cut our wires."

"I don't believe it," defended the boy. "There's something big back of things that we don't know about. I'm throwing in with Garth, Major, because I still believe he is right." His face was savagely grim as he pulled on his goggles.

MAJOR BUCK TYNDALL cursed softly, feelingly and at great length. And when he had cleansed his system of the spleen that congested it, he turned and faced the last of his aces. His eyes sparkled dangerously as he spoke.

"There's a vast fleet of enemy planes coming this way, gentlemen. We've got four ships—four ships that will go down on our records as the last four of a sacrifice squadron."

He paused for a moment and flung his eyes upward. The mounting drone of unnumbered planes approaching thrummed the air. No mistaking that peculiar rise and fall in the tempo of enemy motors.

"Those of you that go up won't have a Chinaman's chance. But we've got to hold them up until scouts from other dromes are warned. I want four pilots—four volunteers for these sacrifice ships."

"I'll be the first," announced Jerry.

"Count me for the second," spoke Cravath.

Five other pilots crowded forward. Tyndall selected two and led them aside. "I won't appoint a leader," he told them. "It's every man for himself. Fight according to your individual style. The honor of the squadron is at stake. To your planes, gentlemen, and good luck."

The awkward silence that followed was broken by a thundering roar. Across the field tore the four dauntless Spads. In another moment they had flung their proud wings into a blast of smooth rushing wind that bore them into a menace-choked sky trail of disaster.

VIII

AS if by common consent, the three other pilots followed Jerry Ahern. If the boy was aware of it, he gave no sign. He simply gunned the Hisso and climbed for altitude.

At five thousand he spotted the formation. At close to six he thumbed the Vickers for a warming-up burst. There was no fear in his heart as he mechanically counted the ships racing toward him, only a numb questioning.

Garth had failed him. Garth had twice failed him. His faith in the G-2 man wavered. He searched the back places of his mind for the answer. What was it? Why had headquarters phoned the drome? Something clicked like a photographic shutter in the back of his mind. Headquarters hadn't called. The voice had been that of number three.

"God!" he breathed. "Garth said that number three had been gathered in. Taken to Metz or Berlin for questioning. Number three was out of the game. Had been out for a number of hours. Who, then, had put through those calls? A puzzler. Evidently the same man who had cut the wires after he had practically emptied the drome of ships."

In spite of himself, Jerry Ahern saw the black finger of suspicion pointing straight at the G-2 man. As the black specks of the vast fleet swept toward him and his three brother pilots, the boy realized the utter futility of the task before him.

His mind clicked again upon the G-2 man. Questions he had asked regarding the disposition of American divisions; the

use of the new gas. He, Jerry Ahern, had passed out this information with no thought other than helping the Intelligence man.

Like a ticking clock the words of Garth popped into his mind. "In this business . . . a man never has any scruples . . . only one way to remove a menace . . . a bullet through the heart, or a knife."

The boy writhed impotently behind the controls, and then all thoughts of Garth and possible treachery left his mind. Down through the morning air, darkening the rays of the sun, hummed a swarm of angry hornets upon the four American ships. Eight swift winged Fokkers. The main body of ships passed high over, intent on their mission into the American lines.

For a frantic moment it seemed that the outnumbered Spads would go down before they could break formation. But these pilots were all veteran aces.

AHERN banked sharply, noting as he did so that the others had spread out across the sky. Eyes front again—eyes that stared straight and unswerving at the trim Fokkers circling before the nose of his little Spad.

Swift appraisal. A victim picked out. Then, straight as an arrow winged the Spad at the nearest ship.

Brrrrrip, rip, rip.

The twin mouths of the Vickers belched a cataract of flame and steel. The Spandaus on the other ship flamed in return. A snarl of tracers whined within a foot of Jerry Ahern's helmeted head. But the Spad never faltered. It bore down on the Fokker like a hissing comet; ripped it from prop to tail in a punishing burst, and hedge-hopped over it. The Fokker trembled an instant, then bellied into the wind like a stricken gull.

The Spad trembled. Tracers hammered its wings. Ahern's jaws closed savagely. The stick jerked back until it touched the belt of his leather jacket. Into a tight loop hummed the Spad clear of the blast. It came out of the loop a hundred feet lower.

Jerry glanced around. Something crackled along the surface of an upper wing. The ship rocked crazily. He jammed hard on right rudder. The Spad sideslipped and fell away. Two Fokkers followed him down. Their streams of tra-

cers crossed within a yard of the glinting prop.

"Too damn' close!" muttered the boy.

He nosed into a vibrating lurch, threw left aileron and kicked left rudder. The maneuver freed him for a single second. Frantically he jammed the Hisso wide and climbed. A blur of red and black crossed his ring sight.

The Vickers coughed. The Fokker slewed away. Jerry thumped right rudder to follow. Something jarred against the cowl and ripped sideways into the wing.

"Damn them!" he gritted.

Across the Spad's nose flashed the red and black Fokker a second time. Jerry squeezed the gun trips relentlessly. Cherry red tracers melted into the enemy's cockpit. The Fokker clawed at the air despairingly as its motor died along with its pilot.

A sharp glance port and starboard. Long streamers of black smoke stretched toward the ground. Three ships were on their way to total cremation.

A Spandau burst slammed wickedly in front of him, barely missing the prop. A kick on the rudder. A second Fokker roared above him, pounding at his tail. Tracers screamed redly over the boy's helmeted head. A little lower. Jerry unconsciously ducked and hurled his ship into a vertical bank.

The ship above screamed past in a cloud of smoke. The Spad went into a swift Immelmann. A minute of peace to take stock of things. Only one other Spad in the air, and four Fokkers.

There was still a chance. . . . He laughed hysterically and climbed upward with all the power of the straining Hisso. A blur of red circled to meet him.

TWIN tongues of flame ripped from the Spad and seared the tops of the Fokker's wings. The Spandau blasted in return. Jerry felt his ship stagger. He whipped around. The other followed. In a vast circle they winged.

A stifled gasp. Into the belly of the Spad ripped a snarl of tracers. A second ship had crawled underneath. Jerry tried to jerk the Spad free from the punishing metal slamming through the bottom of his fuselage. A scrambling dive. Wings and struts groaned protestingly from the strain. Tracers slammed against the left wing,

causing the Spad to jump heavily.

The Fokker on the outer edge of the circle climbed like a soaring eagle. Abruptly it viraged and hummed downward. Jerry could feel the disturbed air from the tracers as they burned close to his face. The Spad groaned heavily and lurched to port.

The boy had an instant's vision of a snarling face behind jumping Spandaus. Sudden stinging pain. A wild tracer winged through the pit and struck the boy's arm. Coldly and determinedly he banked around. The pain nauseated him. His thoughts became a mad whirl. He must get out of this mess. He must get back to the squadron. The cards were stacked against him. He couldn't win.

Red and black wings barred his way. Sudden fury possessed him. He didn't try to look through the ring sight. He simply aimed his Spad at the nose of his enemy and leaned upon the gun trips of the hot Vickers. It was enough. The other ship trembled under the blast and sideslipped downward.

Another ship slipped into its place. Was there no end to them? It whipped crazily in front of him, vermilion jets of fire jerking from the mouths of its hungry Spandaus. Jerry felt the Spad quiver in the blast. It couldn't go on forever. He knew it couldn't. This plane would get him.

He banked to one side, but the other ship followed like a shadow. Spandau tracers clawed nearer and nearer. Mechanically the boy tried to get away from the murderous blast. The Spad faltered. Two cylinders went dead. Jerry nosed downward to help out his crippled engine.

Closer and closer crawled the insidious stream of death. Tac, tac, tac! The instrument panel splintered from end to end. Jetting streams of oil and petrol flooded the pit. The Spad sagged lower. A gust of uprushing wind sang through its wires. Over on one wing it toppled.

THE boy fought for control. A brace wire snapped. The left wing bulged crazily. A second Fokker joined the murderous one above. Their concentrated fire drove the boy downward. The stabilizer and part of the rudder disintegrated and flopped starkly in the upwind.

"It's curtains," muttered Jerry. "I'm licked."

The Spad was rocking badly now. At any moment it might tear itself to pieces. Jerry looked over the edge of the cowl. The ground was soaring up to meet him. Was this the end? A Spad whipped between him and his tormenting enemies. Cravath's. The Fokkers abandoned Ahern, knowing he would crash anyway, and pounded after the last of the fighting Spads.

Hope burned anew in Jerry Ahern's breast. His brother pilot had given him a chance to reach the ground alive.

"Thanks, Cravath," he murmured, huskily.

The ground was still some distance away. If he could lengthen the gliding angle he might land without a crash. The Hisso exploded spasmodically, then ceased utterly.

Over on one wing banked the little ship. The angle was dangerous. In a half circle of recovery it lurched. Slowly its tail straightened and its nose came up.

"Take it easy," muttered the boy. "Oh, God. I'm going to be sick."

He fought against wrenching nausea. The rumble of guns came to his ears. The front lines. He tried to distinguish one side from the other, but a pall of dirty smoke covered everything.

Down, down, down quivered the Spad.

"If it will hold together for another minute." His eyes bulged as he watched the straining wing. It held. A blur of wheat stubble showed ahead. With a prayer on his lips he hauled back on the stick. The wings set themselves against the blast, groaned and protested, but held. Into the wheat stubble plowed the wheels. Jerry crawled to the lower wing. A sudden shock threw him free. He landed on his side just as the petrol tank exploded.

Agonizing pain seared his wounded arm. But he lived. Crouching low, he hurried to get as far from the flaming ship as possible. He wasn't sure whether he was on enemy soil or not.

He reached the shelter of a hedge and concealed himself. A moment later a shadow passed over the ground. One of the Fokkers roared by, saw the flaming ship, and as promptly left.

The thunder of guns seemed a long way off. Jerry relaxed in his place of

concealment. The high shriek of a locomotive whistle aroused him. Must be somewhere near a railroad. He marked the direction carefully and relaxed once more. The wound in his arm throbbed feverishly.

From nearby came the shud, shud of marching feet. Again he peered from his place of concealment. He jerked his goggles free and rubbed his eyes. He saw no bodies, nothing but the heads and shoulders of marching men in coal scuttle helmets. And slanting from their shoulders, the ugly glint of bayonets.

Sunken road, and reinforcements going up. He was right in having been careful. He had come down in Hunland.

IX

FRIENDLY darkness released him from the sheltering hedge. His throat and lips were parched. Cautiously he moved in the direction from which the train whistle had come.

For long moments he stood on the railroad embankment wondering where he was. Then he remembered. This was the railroad that paralleled the Meuse river. To the south lay Verdun. To the north, Sedan. In between would be Dun sur Meuse. And north of Dun sur Meuse was the valley where he'd find Garth.

Then, as if his mind was already made up, he struck off through the murk, northward.

He reached, hours afterward, a broad highway filled with gray-clad troops milling rearward. As he crawled close to the road his extended hand struck the body of a dead man. Cursing softly, he backed away. Then, as if struck with a sudden idea, he returned to the body for helmet, rifle and tunic.

In the darkness he removed his own things and substituted those of the German infantryman. Hanging the rifle over his shoulder, he marched boldly onto the road.

FINGERS gripped tightly around the German Mauser, he crept stealthily toward the scrub bushes concealing the tunnel entrance. The sound of voices came to his ears. He flattened himself against the ground. The voices raised. They came nearer. The inquisitive beam from an

electric torch played over the ground.

Jerry's eyes narrowed. Outlined against the sky he saw two figures. There was no mistaking that of Garth. With him was a figure in a cape.

"That'll be Müller," thought the boy.

They came closer and paused beside the scrub bushes. Their deep gutturals grated on the boy's nerves. He fingered the rifle uneasily. He had an insane desire to shoot them down where they stood. Then Garth laughed. Jerry writhed in torture. Garth was laughing at the terror and destruction caused by von Uhland's vast fleet of planes. Let him laugh. It would soon be his turn. He'd laugh when he saw their bodies twisting and squirming under the thud of leaden bullets.

The bushes moved aside. The two figures disappeared. Jerry crept close. Give them a chance to reach the cave and light a candle. He waited with a pounding heart. And when he could stand the suspense no longer he pulled the bushes aside and on hands and knees crawled forward.

Müller had removed his cape and was sitting on the empty box. Garth stood near the phone.

"Up with your hands!" rasped a voice.

"*Lieber Gott!*" choked Müller. "*Was meinen sie?*"

Garth said nothing. His hands went up along with Müller's. The intense silence that followed was broken by the boy.

"Got anything to say, Garth, before I plug you?"

Garth eyed the nondescript figure in the airman's lace boots and German infantry baggy coat and helmet. For a dazed moment he was unable to place the boy. Then his face twitched. Jerry took that twitching for guilt. His eyes hardened.

Abruptly Müller jerked out his Luger and leaped to the far shadows of the cave. His rush overturned the table holding the candle.

Boom! The Mauser roared like a blast of dynamite in the cave.

Crack! Crack! Crack! The Luger flamed hotly. The barrel of the Mauser shifted to the spot where the points of flame blasted. It roared again and again.

JERRY collapsed to the floor, a crimson stream running into his eyes. The world swam before him. Groggily he

swung the rifle to catch the initial flash if Garth fired. From the darkness came a groan, then silence.

Jerry's head began to whirl. He strained his ears against the ghostly silence. He mustn't let Garth get away. His fingers trembled wretchedly around the rifle. Now his body seemed to float. He was moving into space. Weariness left him. Up, up, up through the gloom of the cave, into the night air. Before him burned a single star. Rain spattered against his fevered face and parched lips.

As if from a great distance came the voice of the G-2 man. "You shouldn't have come, Ahern. You might have spoiled everything."

Jerry blinked through the gloom. The candle had been relighted and now twinkled through the cave very much like the star he had seen but a moment ago. Garth was bending over him holding a small canteen of water.

The boy wrenched himself free. "You, you tricked me, Garth."

Garth smiled heavily. "Yes, son. I tricked you."

"Damn you for a traitor. . . ."

"Easy, son." The big G-2 man held the struggling pilot rigid. "I tricked you all right. It was part of the game. But it's over now. I'm through."

"But I'm not," retorted the boy. "You'll pay, damn you."

"Be still," commanded the G-2 man. "How did you get here?"

"Walked. And I'm going back by the same route."

"No you're not. There's an Albatross two-seater down to the valley waiting to take me before a high tribunal at Metz."

"For citations and an Iron Cross, eh?" sneered the boy.

"No." Garth shook his head. "The firing squad. They think I don't know it, but another operator tipped me off. The debacle was complete."

"The debacle?" questioned Jerry, not quite understanding.

Garth nodded. "Haven't you heard?"

"No. I went up with the last four planes of our squadron. I was shot down."

Garth's smile was full of understanding. "Oh, I see now. You thought that I . . . oh, well, no matter what you thought. You were more than half right."

Jerry gritted his teeth. The wound in his head throbbed unmercifully. He said nothing since there seemed nothing to say.

"I told you, Ahern, that I was burning the candle at both ends, playing one side against the other. I also told you that while I belonged to G-2 I was not G-2."

"Then you mean," struggled Jerry, "that you deliberately destroyed my squadron. . . ."

"Exactly. It was a master stroke of Allied strategy. Your squadron lost in all about twelve men and fourteen ships. I lured nine away, but they later returned unharmed. But in the end . . ."

Dumbly the boy listened as the big man's voice droned on.

"But in the end we trapped the whole fleet, sixty pursuit planes and ten Gothas. We got them just north of Montfaucon. The English on the west, French on the east and our own ships closed in from the north, cutting off all retreat. They never had a chance to escape."

Jerry Ahern swallowed heavily.

"And all the time headquarters knew what was going on?"

"They planned the whole thing. It meant a sacrifice, of course. How could it be otherwise? But the end justifies the means. I'm sorry, Lieutent, if you lost your friends. I'm doubly sorry if I've destroyed your faith in me. Oh, I could see hero worship shining in your eyes. You looked upon me as a god. But I'm not. I'm just a tired, middle-aged man that's afraid of his own shadow."

"Afraid," scoffed the boy, admiringly. "Garth, if I had your guts to stay on this side of the lines and do the work you've been doing, I'd call myself a man."

"It was hard at times," shrugged Garth, "especially when I knew your squadron was suffering heavily, but I had to do it. No other way out for me."

He rose to his feet and glanced about the room. Müller lay where he had fallen, quiet and unmoving. "My work is finished here, Lieutenant. Shall we go down the valley and take possession of the Albatross? Captain Müller was to have flown me to Metz, but I'd a damn' sight rather go over to your squadron. It'll be a shame to disappoint the chief of the Imperial Air Service and his firing squad, but it just can't be helped."

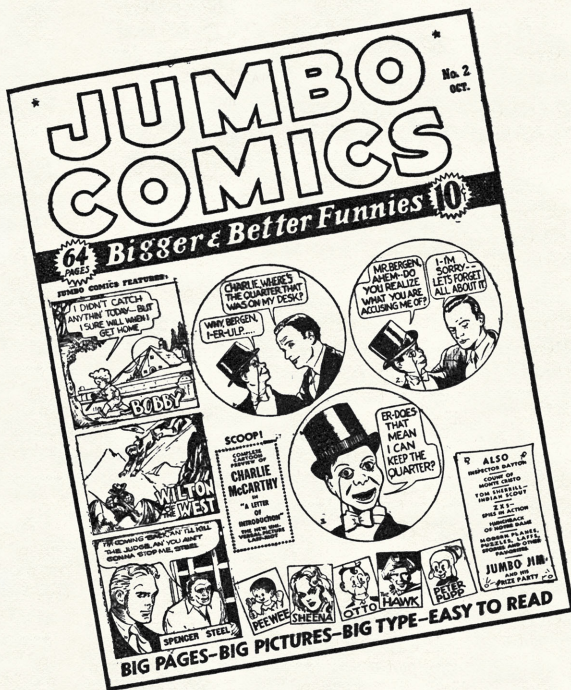
A smile of supreme content flowed over the boy's face. He struggled erect, un-mindful of the pain from his wounds. "Let's go, Captain."

Arm in arm they walked down the passage to the freedom of night. The black silhouette of the Albatross loomed starkly before them. Garth helped Jerry into the front seat.

"Feel equal to it?" he asked.

"Hell, yes," gritted Jerry. "Wind her up."

The silence of night was shattered as the powerful Mercedes roared into life. Garth climbed in. The Albatross rolled forward, bumped across the uneven ground, gathered momentum and with a muffled whine climbed into the sable blackness of night toward the far-away nest of the Sacrifice Squadron.



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HANGAR OF HATE

By TOM O'NEILL

IN the operations of the 89th pursuit squadron, Major John Lister sat and stared at a precisely drafted memorandum. He had seen many other similar memorandums during his months in command of combat birdmen. And always before he had hooked them a-file with a casual flip of his lean fingers.

But this one was different. This was a transfer memorandum advising him of a replacement coming in. Not that there was anything unusual in the fact itself. He had promptly reported the vacancy when Lockheed had been carted to the hospital after cracking an arm as the result of side-slip-

ping into a crash landing on the new drome back of Menil-la-Tour.

A replacement for Lockheed; that was the purport of the memorandum. Another new pilot to be whipped into line. Another young hellion to be flung against the black-crossed ships that barged out of the eastern skies. That was all the tersely printed and typed form should have indicated amidst the labyrinthine files of the A. E. F.

But it was something more than that to Major Lister. The instant he scanned it his eyes had widened to admit harried shadows. His lips had pressed slowly into a pained line that drooped oddly at the cor-

ners of his mouth. He felt suddenly tired, spent, almost beaten. For this particular replacement was indicated as Lieutenant Clinton Lister.

To be sure, there might be other Clinton Listers about somewhere. But the major was sure that only one could have made the long journey from Kelly Field to Issoudun and on up to Menil-la-Tour. And that one a tow-headed youth of twenty; his son.

"Clint—up here!" muttered the major, as though seeking credulity in the sound of his own voice.

The memorandum fluttered to the desk-top. His fists clenched to press their

knotted knuckles against his throbbing temples. His face twisted into a mask of sheer agony.

Not that he hadn't known of his son's enlistment in the air service. Not that he was ignorant of his portentous transfer from the sandy Texas tarmacs to that finishing school for air killers at Issoudun. But that his final assignment had been to the 89th; that a father should daily face the dread of sending his own son into the flaming hell of sky combat!

"God help me!" muttered the major fervently.

A moment more and his face grew calm,



his tense body relaxed. The thing was done and there was nothing he could do to change it. Perhaps, too, it were better so. Out of the vast experience which he had gleaned since his fledgling days he might be able to pass on a word or two that would help. And maybe the fates would prove kind; kinder than they had to many a keen-eyed youth who had dreamed of adventure and glory in the flame-racked arenas above the lines.

THE revving of freshly fueled motors brought him to his feet. It was a call to arms. Instantly he flung open the door and strode toward his waiting ship, head erect, his face as impassively cold as ever. As he clambered in over the controls, he jerked down his goggles and turned to glance at the eleven ships drawn up on the line behind him.

Wearily and haggard, grumbling and cursing, the pilots were straggling forward to take their places in their cockpits. They had already been out twice since dawn. And they were going out again. Furthermore, they would continue their ceaseless patrols until dark shrouded the vast activity sweeping northward toward the front.

The major's gray eyes flashed purposefully. He knew what was planned and he had no intention of falling down on his end of the work. Let his men mutter about their curtailed liberties. Let them call him "Hardpan" Lister while they growled about his stiffnecked discipline. He alone would be held responsible if through the 89th's laxity enemy observers spotted this greatest of all mass movements since America's entry into the war.

With a sweep of an arm he signaled for the chocks to be withdrawn. His tense fingers dragged at the throttle and the slim Spad lunged forward into a racing takeoff. A moment more and it boomed skyward like a flushed grouse.

Following immediately, the three combat flights of the squadron swung into formation as they climbed steadily for their drive toward the lines. As the terrain to the northward hove into view the hard-driven pilots shook their heads wearily, disgustedly. They cursed mechanically, monotonously.

Cooler heads might have denied the jus-

tice of their resentment. But these men were dazed with the need of rest, half-deafened by the continuous bellowing of high-speed motors and with limbs cramped and aching from long confinement in tiny cockpits.

Thus when fields and woods spread sombre and silent beneath them, when this great expanse of steel-racked earth fringing the front appeared no more active than a deserted graveyard, what reason could there be for this furiously driven air patrol? That was the question which these harassed pilots clung to, as though aware that some violent emotion were necessary to keep them from nodding over their sticks.

But had they known the cool reason of this man whom they reviled as Hardpan Lister, they must have guessed the truth. Peering overside and down they must have glimpsed something of the gigantic machine which was creeping stealthily toward the front—a front which extended from Pont-A-Mousson to St. Mihiel and thence northward to the bulwarks of Etain and the environs of Verdun.

Holding his roaring Spad straight over its course, Major Lister missed nothing of this mighty maneuver. Along the railroad line which twisted and turned through Domèvre and Bernécourt to end in a tangle of wreckage northeast of Flirey, ponderous 14-inch batteries were entrained and rolling forward. Monstrous 16-inch naval guns were also rigged for transport over this same line, and over those lines between Nancy and Pont-A-Mousson and between Commercy and Apremont.

And along those rain-swept roads which dove-tailed into the Bouconville-Flirey highway the three veteran shock divisions of the American fourth corps were gradually working into position. Every byway, either of boggy muck or shell-shattered macadam, was choked with the on-streaming lines of horse and tractor-drawn artillery, the sputtering quads of the ammunition trains and the creaking fourgons of supplies. And within the wooded depths of the Forêt de la Reine were being crowded thousands upon thousands of men—veterans of Cantigny and the Marne, crouched with battle-packs upon the lips of a steel-gutted inferno.

VISIONING this brazen maneuver, the major's lips crinkled into the tense grimace of a man who had tapped his last ounce of reserve energy that he might carry on. He, too, was on the verge of exhaustion mentally and physically. He knew that Soissons and Montdidier. Men who it was the canker of weariness that sped the hateful glances of his pilots. But he could do nothing but order them again and again into the air.

If a single enemy observer were permitted to spot the growing ferment within the American lines, Pershing's dream of conquest might end in a fiery cataclysm sounding the doom of a nation's finest warring youth. If the 89th or any of the winging allied squadrons failed to uphold their aerial blockade, the tale of that week in September, 1918, might be written in the blood of sacrificed legions.

With these thoughts stiffening the fibre of his mind, the major peered through the blue of his whirling prop to descry the jumbled ruins of Rambucourt. Gradually he threw on right rudder to bank his ship over the long slope sinking toward the litter of débris marked on the map as Seicheprey. He was practically over the lines now, and his eyes probed the skies through narrowed lids.

His body tensed, a savage growl rattling in his throat. Dead out of the north and half obscured by the low-hanging clouds, dark shapes were winging toward him. Instantly he wagged the wings of his Spad and jerked wide the throttle to stand his plane into a series of steep-climbing spirals.

At the same moment a Vickers gun loosed three staccato blasts. The sound came from behind him and to the right. He turned his head to see one of his following Spads lunging in close. He recognized it immediately as that of Kelsey, the leader of A flight. Simultaneously he observed that Kelsey was signaling wildly with his arm, pointing eastward.

As the major turned his gaze in the direction indicated, he gasped. He saw less than a mile distant a cluster of planes which but a moment before must have dropped through the screening clouds. They were four Fokker tripes—and a single Spad.

It was futile to hope that the lone Spad

might win through unscathed. True, it was close to its own lines, but the Fokkers were dropping upon it like lunging hawks. Even as he watched he heard the shrill chorus of the high-tempoed Spandaus. And such odds as four to one were far too great. That was why Kelsey had signaled, begging permission to lend assistance.

There was a brief moment of indecision. But as his gaze whipped back to the steadily winging enemy flight above him, his jaw set determinedly. There was no time now for the rescue of this luckless flier. One of those black ships scudding along within those trailing tendrils of low-hanging clouds was a Rumpler two-seater. Accompanied by its combat escort it was barging directly toward the American back areas.

The major's fingers whipped to the stick-triggers, loosing a single sharp blast from his Vickers. He pointed aloft toward the Hun observation detail as the echo of his denying signal died in the motor-racked skies. His arm jerked with the imperative order to launch the attack upon the Rumpler.

Orders were orders, and his men obeyed instantly. But he knew that they cursed him bitterly, condemning him as a callous henchman for a system which reckoned with flesh and blood in the cold type of its various reports.

GLANCING back, he witnessed a stirring act. The pilot of that harassed Spad, realizing that the aid in sight was to be denied him, abruptly hurled his ship into a reckless *renversement*. With his Vickers snarling his utter contempt for the doom which he faced, he drove straight into the midst of the plunging Fokkers.

His mad maneuver was undreamed of. In the tick of a second he had come over and about. The storm of lead pouring from his guns caught one of the Fokkers full in the flank. It leaped crazily. Then in a shocking blur of flame and smoke it vanished in a shower of tumbling débris.

But the other three enemy planes closed in savagely, the leaden hail from their guns converging upon their lone opponent. They had no idea of waiting until the odds in their favor were further reduced. They planned a speedy kill with their concentrated attack.

Yet the pilot of this single Spad, flying now on the very rim of death, maneuvered his ship like a fiend. It rolled and twisted, leaping and plunging through the enveloping patchwork of the livid tracers. He was fighting, too, for time; endeavoring to claw his way closer to the dozen ships of the 89th.

The enemy pilots divined this plan, however. And they saw the need of their presence amidst the observation detail. Thus they swirled up and over to dive as one. They loosed a veritable devil's tattoo upon the harassed Spad. Bits of fabric, splinters of wood, spattered in all directions. Screaming lead slammed this way and that past the tiny cockpit.

All hope vanished. With the edge of his own territory in sight the beleaguered pilot thrust forward on the stick to hurl his plane into a bellowing dive for the earth, a race against inevitable death.

Major Lister witnessed this last-minute attempt to escape. His face became a grim mask with the thought that under different circumstances he might have saved this man. A choking oath slipped through his lips as he saw a section of the plunging Spad's tail-assembly slashed away; as he saw the tiny ship turn over, right itself, then vault erratically on toward the ground—and doom.

Before he should witness the all-destroying crash, he tore his eyes away. Resolutely he peered up through the blur of his prop to determine his avenue of attack upon the Rumpler. But in the same instant a harrowing question broke into his mind.

Supposing his own son, who soon would reach the lines, were to be caught in a similar predicament. What would he do then? Would he be able to act so readily upon the orders of staff with his own flesh and blood in jeopardy? Would he be able to think of that man-made machine forming against the front when this son he loved was in danger of death in a flaming, lead-seared plane? Would he then continue to live up to the name of Hardpan Lister?

There was no time to mull over this gruelling question, however. His guns were lined with the black snout of one of the diving escort Fokkers. His fingers closed over the triggers as his hand inched the

stick back for the filling of his sights. His Spad fairly tore over the last few yards of its climb to attack.

With the rasping snarl of his Vickers all other thoughts vanished from his mind. He was again the fighting leader of the indomitable 89th. He saw his tracer rake the fuselage of the Fokker from prop to skid as the two planes flashed past each other. Certain that he had scored vitally, aware that his following planes were streaming on behind him, he held to his upward course.

His planes would have to cleave through those escort Fokkers, scattering them to gain an advantageous position for the rush upon the Rumpler. But the opening chorus of the guns had sounded an alarm. The visible enemy escort had numbered only six planes. Yet in the space of an instant an equal number had broken like plummets through the veiling clouds.

IT was to be a battle in earnest, now. The opposing flights were evenly matched. And the heavy-winged Rumpler was holding to its course with the observer in the rear cockpit spraying the surrounding skies with his swiveled weapon.

Furthermore, it was close to its objective. Scarcely a kilometer before it lay the Bouconville-Flirey highway. Less than three kilometers separated it from the borders of the Foret de la Reine.

What if it were permitted to fly on above these positions with the observer's camera minutely clicking its fatal record; with the observer himself grinning down through powerful binoculars upon the formidable massing of men and guns?

It was this grim threat which spurred Lister to the height of fury. Flying through a veritable fog of tracers, with the din of Spandau and Vickers clattering high above the roar of motors, he made his second kill with his plane wing-down in a tumbling cartwheel.

There were other kills, too. He was dimly conscious of a Spad and a Fokker swirling down in flames; of another of the black-crossed ships fluttering earthward with a buckled wing. In battle now, he knew that his men were loosing their pent-up rage upon the enemy, fighting with a reckless savagery.

Swirling down among the Rumplers, he

glimpsed the three Fokker tripes barging into the fray; the three Fokker tripes which had downed the lone Spad. But his attention was riveted upon this threatening observation plane. That must be shattered first from the skies. With this point of menace eliminated the fight could run its natural course.

A Fokker ruddered directly across his path, its Spandaus spitting their livid hate. But instead of dodging away, Lister maneuvered to meet it, cutting in his own guns, roaring straight for the whirling prop with a stream of lead drumming weirdly upon his motor cowling.

The threat was too much for the Fokker's pilot. He hauled his ship into an abrupt zoom. And it was a fatal zoom. For the Vickers lead tore through the gut of the fuselage, slamming up through the cockpit in a clawing burst.

The path was open to the Rumpler, then. But the rear-pitted observer was alert. His swiveled weapon arched over to present a flickering crimson jet which reached the Spad with its gray-streaming tracers. The lethal gale crept in along a wing, stretching toward the cockpit.

Lister was forced to zoom out of trajectory. Up and over he looped with a Fokker slamming at his tail as the Spad lifted. Diving again, he sprayed one of the Fokker tripes.

But he had no care for the effect of that targeting. Through the clearing skies effected through swift kills he glimpsed again an open path to the Rumpler. And again he dived to meet the battering fire from the observer's gun.

This time, however, he clung tenaciously to his attack. With lead spattering the cockpit coaming in splinters against his goggles, he grimly centered his guns. Crouching low with the tail of the Rumpler full in his sights, he gripped the triggers and eased back on the stick.

The flashing gray death from the twin Vickers struck true to its mark. In a sweeping flood the battering lead washed forward to fling the observer limp against his belt. On forward drilled the pelting fire cutting through the pilot's cockpit and out across the blunt nose.

The objective was won, then. The Rumpler nosed over to fall off into a quickening spin, its roaring motor drawing it

faster and faster to oblivion. And the Fokkers, their pilots quailing before the mad fury of the 89th's attack and on their own with the destruction of the Rumpler, drew away to flee back into the east.

LISTER let them go. There could be no point in pursuit. Signaling for his ships to re-form behind him, he saw that the encounter had cost him four planes. And in all probability the four pilots that guided them were also lost forever. He knew, too, that all this would be added by his men to the score they held against him.

He spurned the ghost of regret that rose in his mind. He was doing nothing that was not justified, even imperative. He had his orders and he was in a position to know that they had been issued with good reason. What better reason could there be than that which prevented the enemy from learning of preparations for the greatest drive since the arrival of American troops in France?

With the loss of these four men the lives of hundreds, perhaps thousands, were to be saved. If that Rumpler had ever penetrated to within the American lines, entire regiments might be annihilated, whole divisions disrupted through a single concentrated barrage from the enemy lines little more than eight kilometers away.

And the loss of four men had prevented this disaster. Five, if one wished to consider the pilot of the lone Spad which the Fokker tripes had cut down.

With the thought of this lone flyer who had been caught in the mesh of such tremendous odds, the burning question leaped again into his mind: what if his own son had been caught in such a cruel trap? Should he have turned coolly to duty, then? The query clamored through his brain, mocking, jeering, insistent.

He tried doggedly to dislodge it. His eyes blazed as his face turned gray. He saw the faces of his men before him, their lips moving to that same question. He saw the faces of those men who had died that day; their lips, too, framing that hateful query.

A groan of helplessness sounded in his throat. His hands closed over the stick until the knuckles glowed white. Harried shadows again crept into his eyes.

"Hardpan Lister!" he muttered to himself.

Abruptly he laughed, discordantly, mirthlessly. His face became instantly hard, utterly impassive. For a long moment he stared across the nose of the Spad.

And in that moment he made his decision. He was called Hardpan Lister because he carried out orders regardless of adverse conditions. In the past he had not spared himself nor any man of his command. He did not intend to begin now—even with his own son.

For the time being he knew peace again during the return flight to the drome back of Menil-la-Tour.

II

DEEPENING twilight had paced this return of the 89th. It was almost dark when the planes swooped down upon the drome. The exhausted pilots half fell from their cockpits to straggle off across the stable ground. Another tortuous day had spent itself. There would be time for rest now—blessed rest.

There was little grumbling now, little speech of any kind. These men who had flown and fought almost continually since the crack of dawn were weary beyond words. Too, the thought of those four men who never again would report on the line, was sobering, saddening. And none could quite forget that unknown pilot who might have been saved by the dispatch of a single rescue flight.

Mess? There would be no mess that night. In steadied silence the pilots laved their parched throats with steaming coffee and stumbled away to their quarters. Some fell fully clad upon their bunks, asleep in the instant. Others gathered for a while in silent groups. They sat huddled together dazedly, seeking that comfort of comradeship which needs no words.

But there were three of the 89th's pilots who met in purposeful convention. They were Kelsey, Dorn and Edwards, the squadron's flight leaders. Kelsey had summoned the other two to his cubicle, his lean face grimly determined.

"Fellows," he said without preamble, "it's time we had a talk with the major." His voice sounded hoarse and strained. He watched the faces of the men before him, seeking their reaction to his words. When

they made no attempt to speak, he continued.

"We've got to have rest," he barked. "Rest, do you hear me? Another day like today and we'll be crashing ships on the take-off. If we manage to get into the air we'll be cold meat for the lousiest Hun rookie that ever flipped a stick. Furthermore, we're liable to have trouble right here on the drome—nasty trouble."

Hitching forward in his chair, he fixed his comrades with a burning gaze.

"Do you realize that the four men that pulled out of that Rumpler fight alive with us today are damn near bolsheviki?" he rasped. "Did you get a good look at them when they staggered into the kitchen tonight? Did you see how they shook from head to foot? Did you see their eyes? They're damn near mad, fellows—animal mad."

KELSEY whipped out one lean hand in an emphatic gesture.

"Those four men are liable to break at any moment," he declared grimly. "And when they do—they'll get Lister. They'll smash him, fellows. They hate him now worse than they do any Hun. They could see him dead and celebrate the occasion."

Dorn looked up with his lips twisting into an ugly snarl.

"Well, it's Lister's funeral, isn't it? Let them get him—finish him," he croaked. "Maybe I'll even lend a hand."

Kelsey reached out and gripped Dorn's arm.

"Listen, Dorn," he said. "And you, too, Edwards. This is no time for us to be spreading a streak. I'll admit I'm as all in as any one of you. And I'll admit that there's times when I hate him as I've never hated any other man. I've cursed him until I've been blue in the face. And when he let those four Huns ride that poor devil into the ground today, it was all I could do to keep him out of my sights." He rubbed a hand across his eyes as though seeking to erase that moment's recollection. He sat back in his chair, relaxed, thinking.

"I can't quite figure the thing out," he resumed presently. "It looks sometimes as if Lister's hunting some medals or a post with staff. But if that was the case he'd be a fool to risk his neck by riding out with us every time we go over. One thing

we're certain of: he's not yellow. If anything he's got more guts than the lot of us. He's a fighting hell-cat from way back. No other man would ever have taken that Rumppler from the topside the way he did today."

Edwards waved a hand listlessly, his head drooping.

"What's the use of all this talk?" he cut in. "We all know Lister's tough. An' a battling fool. Why, hell! He isn't even human." His chin dropped back upon his chest "Hardpan Lister!" he muttered. He laughed gratingly.

"He's human, all right," retorted Kelsey; but in a tone which meant no defense for the major. "More than that, he knows what he's doing. Any fool that ever saw him in the air would know he has every move figured out before he makes it. He has a reason for acting on HQ's orders without making a kick for relief. Of course, there's going to be some sort of activity along this front; listen to the racket down on the road—beaucoup stuff moving up. But I've been on other fronts without getting rode like we are on this one. Yes, Lister has a reason. But what is it?" He ceased speaking to sit with bowed head, pondering his question.

Edwards looked up again, an ironic grimace scrawled across his face. His half-veiled eyes reflected a mocking light.

"Why don't you ask him?" he growled with biting sarcasm.

Kelsey's lips slowly drew into a hard, thin line. He spoke softly, measuring his words.

"I'm going to," he said. "I'm going over, now. And you're both coming with me. We'll have a showdown—tonight. We're entitled to it"

He rose immediately to his feet and stood gazing down upon his companions. They sat impassive for a moment. Then without a word they relinquished their chairs and stood beside him.

"Let's go," he said simply. "We'll have it out."

THE three flight leaders entered the squadron office to find the major sitting alone before his desk, apparently studying a map. His eyes seemed to flash the slightest hint of surprise at the sight of his visitors, his face hardening almost im-

perceptibly as he nodded to them coolly.

"Yes?" he said, the single word assuming an interrogatory inflection as the three lined up in front of him.

With the apprehensive glances of Edwards and Dorn sweeping over him, Kelsey experienced a momentary flickering of his courage. The major was difficult to talk to under ordinary circumstances. His hard gaze seemed doubly disconcerting now.

Kelsey squared his jaw resolutely. He hoped that his voice would sound natural; that the major would not prove too difficult.

"Major Lister," he began. "We'd like the opportunity of talking to you as man to man."

"What about?" asked the major. His voice sounded flat; too coolly even.

For some unknown reason the crisp tone irritated Kelsey. Although he fought against it, the color rose in his face. When he replied his words achieved a tense, rasping pitch.

"About these incessant patrols, Major," he said. "About this dawn to dark flying without a moment's rest; without a decent breathing spell, or time to think, to eat. Without time to do anything but fly and fight—and fly again."

Despite his best efforts to the contrary, he found himself leaning tensely forward across the desk. He knew that his eyes were blazing, his expression menacing. But what little self-control he had been able to maintain during the day was fast vanishing.

"We want to know why you've been driving the men of this outfit to suicide," he demanded recklessly, his voice rising. "More than four hours a day in the air is enough to craze any man. You know that—everybody knows it. We've been up twice that length of time. And for how many days? God knows! What—"

"Shut up, Kelsey!" The words snapped from the major's lips with the crack of a bullet. His face appeared suddenly like a grim gargoyle of etched granite. He was every inch a commander now, and every inch a man. As to the latter, although he was scarcely of medium height, he had the brawn of an iron-worker, the tight-jawed face and flashing eyes of a fighting terrier.

The sharp rebuke halted Kelsey as though he had been struck between the

eyes. It served to steady him, to aid him with the remmarshaling of his faculties. The major's gaze seemed to bore back into his brain, forcing him to think rationally.

"Are you in the habit of questioning orders?" asked the major, still in that same cold and even tone.

Kelsey licked at his parched lips.

"I think we have a perfect right," he rejoined ponderously, "to ask the reason for these orders which are driving every man in this squadron either to insanity or certain death."

His face had grown calm now; his eyes as cold and direct as the major's.

Major Lister stood for a moment in frigid silence. Then, reaching for the map that lay on his desk, he turned it about for the inspection of his visitors. He picked up a pencil which he employed as a pointer.

"Our drome at Menil-la-Tour," he began abruptly and without the slightest change in demeanor, "is situated about eight kilometers behind the line and about halfway between that section of the line which extends from Pont-A-Mousson to St. Mihiel, running east and west. From St. Mihiel the line extends due north to the outskirts of Etain. You can see, then, that the enemy is holding a giant triangle driven deep into allied territory.

"Plans which have of necessity been held as secretly as possible have been made to wipe out this salient in one terrific drive. Those plans have been drawn by General Pershing for an all-American action. Troops of other allied armies will participate only as reserves. In success or failure, the American army must alone be responsible."

THE major paused for a moment to let his words sink in. Then sweeping his pencil in an arc, he said:

"All around us the troops which will strike from this side of the salient are moving into position. The movement started three nights ago. And although it is now scarcely dark, if you listen you must know that the roads about us are teeming with that advance. Hundreds upon thousands of men, thousands of guns, millions of shells, tons of supplies—all are being secreted along the roads and in the woods and fields of this sector."

Again the major paused, tossing his pen-

cil to the desk, hooking his thumbs in the pockets of his tunic. His deeply set eyes glowed like live coals.

"This drive," he said, "will be launched the day after tomorrow morning. Mont Sec and the tip of the salient which have defied the allied armies for four years, will be flanked and pinched off by American troops."

Abruptly he leaned forward across the desk, his face deadly pale with the intensity of his thoughts.

"Do I have to tell you now," he rasped, "why we must maintain a continual patrol from daylight to dark? Or do you realize what it would mean if an enemy observer were to spot the preparations now under way?"

Any man who glimpsed the major at that moment should have known that he, too, was nearing the breaking point. As weary as he was, Kelsey sensed it, and stood silently trying to analyze it. Dorn also conceived something of the true situation.

But Edwards reacted differently. He may have been too far gone in exhaustion. Or he may have been too prejudiced; too predisposed to take issue regardless of whether right prevailed. At any rate he had no intention of being content with the major's explanation.

Suddenly crouching forward, he thrust his face close to the major's and laughed. At least, the articulation was suggestive of laughter; a mad, mocking, mirthless clatter of sound. It ripped out like the burst from a machine gun, ending as abruptly as it had begun.

Words came, then, in a rushing tumble, hoarse and loud. Kelsey and Dorn were nonplussed.

"Are we the only squadron on the front?" snarled Edwards. "Have all the rest of the crates in the A. E. F. been junked? Are we the only pilots staff knows of that are fit to feed to the Huns? Do you think you're going to keep us aloft tomorrow until we get shot down like Burns and Oakley and Deal and Hendrick got theirs today? And that lone pilot that was in a jam this afternoon! You abandoned him when we might have saved him. Do you think you can get away with that sort of stuff forever?"

As this mad tirade rushed through

Edwards' lips his voice gradually rose until it achieved a roaring shriek. His face took on an apoplectic tinge, the veins bulging upon his temples, his eyes becoming suffused with a monomaniacal glare. But through it all Lister never winced nor moved. The only change that could be remarked was a gradual tensing of his lithe body. He waited until the last syllable barged through Edwards' lips. Then he spoke.

"Are you through?" he asked.

He did not wait for a reply. Like a flash of light his right fist crashed to the pilot's jaw. The stricken man was hurled back against the wall of the office where his body slumped grotesquely, his knees buckling, his eyes glazing.

The major was upon him in a bound, gripping the breast of his tunic before he could fall, jerking open the door with his free hand. A heave of his shoulders and the whipped recalcitrant was flung bodily out upon the tarmac.

FOR a long moment the major stood staring out into the darkness. Then closing the door, deliberately, almost slowly, he turned and walked back to his desk. He halted to gaze unseeingly at the map lying beneath his relaxing hands, the muscles of his jaws whipping in and out as he fought to regain self-mastery.

Kelsey and Dorn! The violent scene left them in the grip of conflicting emotions which sent a riot of incoherency reeling through their brains. They were in reality paralyzed, incapable for the moment of deciding upon word or movement.

And it was during this static interval that a new factor appeared.

There was the sound of footsteps beyond the door, a hand on the knob. The major's eyes whipped a-level. Kelsey and Dorn started nervously.

Was it Edwards slamming back under the impulse for revenge? Was the office to be the scene of further violence? Was this to be a night of strife which might end in the swift disintegration of the squadron?

The three waiting men watched tensely as the door swung inward. As they glimpsed the strange visitor that stepped across the threshold they gasped with surprise, not unmixed with relief.

Their first fears dissipated, Kelsey and Dorn stared curiously. But it was a vastly different expression that writhed over the face of Major Lister. He went deathly pale in an instant. His eyes flicked wide to permit a second's portrayal of revulsion, almost of horror.

The man who had entered was clad in the uniform of a lieutenant in the air service; a uniform torn, rumpled and mud-stained. He seemed none too steady upon his feet and there were shadows in his eyes which told too well of some harrowing experience recently undergone. Blood had caked on one side of his face where the skin had been scraped away over an area as large as a silver dollar. There was a bulging bruise over one temple.

He stood for a moment with his helmet dangling from his left hand. Then with a swift stiffening of his body, he saluted. His tense lips moved.

"Lieutenant Clinton Lister," he announced, "reporting for duty."

Lister! Clinton Lister!

The breath of Kelsey and Dorn was sucked inward with an audible hiss. Their eyes flashed upon the major. They knew, then, instantly, beyond all possibility of doubt. It made no difference that they had been unaware of the transfer memorandum hooked upon the file. Perceptions were quickened where death paced the skies in the gap of a split-second.

These two men—the commander of the 89th and this ragged newcomer—were father and son.

The full import of this strange meeting was not lost upon the two flight leaders. Cruel though the thought might be, they knew immediately that here was the supreme test for this man they had known as Hardpan Lister. It was a supreme test because they were intuitively certain that this battered lieutenant—this newcomer to the ranks of the 89th—had piloted the lone Spad which left upon its own had been ridden into the ground by four Fokker tripes that very same afternoon.

Nor was anything of this last divination lost upon the major. He, too, guessed the reason for the tardy arrival of this replacement; this son whom he had awaited half eagerly, half fearfully. And that racking question which he had known in

flight—what if his own son were so entrapped—rose again to torture him.

A THROBBING ache welled upward in his breast, reaching for his throat. The dizzy wave of emotion that gripped him threatened to blaze forth in his eyes, to burst through his tightly clenched teeth—a single word, some intelligible form of utterance.

But he read the thoughts which had leaped instantly into the minds of Kelsey and Dorn. He saw their watchful eyes upon him, wary against the moment of his weakening. He knew that they were waiting for the collapse of Hardpan Lister. And with all the will at his command he fought to conceal any sign of this shock that had been dealt him.

All this conflict of thought and impression transpired in the breath of a moment. And during that moment the major also recalled the resolution he had made during his return to the drome. The determination that in this furnace of war his own son must be treated no differently than any other man who fought and flew in the ranks of the 89th.

He prepared to adhere to that resolve, now. His square jaw lifted. He spoke slowly, coolly, his cold gaze significantly surveying the torn and muddled uniform.

"Have you anything else to report, Lieutenant?" he asked.

The lieutenant's lips twitched miserably. Bewilderment, hurt, then complete comprehension were mirrored in his eyes. He withstood the blow with visible effort. When he spoke, his voice was hoarse, strained.

"I have to report, sir," he replied, "the loss of my plane."

"Details, please?" snapped the major relentlessly.

The lieutenant told his story. Haltingly at first he told of the impulse that had caused him to veer over the front when he had found it so short a distance from his destination. With a flair for the dramatic he described the sudden attack of the four Fokker tripes. A searing note of bitterness crept into his voice when he mentioned a squadron, which in a position to aid him, turned deliberately away into another quarter of the sky.

The major winced visibly under this por-

tion of the recital, the muscles of his hard face straining into whitened streaks.

A ring of returning confidence, almost of hope, was sounded as the lieutenant told of his single victory against such formidable odds. Then he explained that discretion had caused him to make a run for safety, adding that with his ship all but battered to pieces it had settled to a crash landing, flinging him clear behind the trenches near Seicheprey.

At the end, Kelsey and Dorn felt that they wanted to wring this youngster's hand. They wanted to assure him that he had won a place in the nest of the 89th. They glanced quizzically at the major, wondering if he would relent.

And the major? It would have been unnatural not to have felt pride—thankfulness that this stalwart youngster was alive after the seeming inevitability of death. True. But such emotions could scarcely be credited to Hardpan Lister. They could not be revealed before the wary gaze of Kelsey and Dorn. There was an easier way, if he were determined to stick to his resolution. Cruel, perhaps. But easier in the end.

The major's face remained an impenetrable mask. His attitude was utterly impersonal. When he spoke it was after the crisp manner of a squadron commander.

"You have exceeded your orders, Lieutenant," he said accusatively. "By doing so you have lost your ship. Luck alone has prevented a further loss in time and personnel necessitating the transfer of another replacement. You may go to your quarters. Report here the first thing in the morning."

Dismissal! And as quickly, as brutally as that. No sign of recognition. No word of welcome. No hint of mitigation for offense by even the slightest reference to the downed Fokker tripe. Nothing but dismissal, cold, final.

KELSEY and Dorn stared incredulously. They saw this newly disillusioned youth fresh from the harrowing baptism of first-fire tremble in his tracks. They saw the ghastly look of soul agony that scrawled across his face as he turned away. How his sturdy shoulders sagged as he lurched through the door to vanish in the night's gloom! How like the measured beat of a

dirge his footsteps sounded amidst the faintly echoing clank and clatter of the gathering inferno!

They scarcely heard the major's voice when it sounded again. But somehow they managed dimly to comprehend their own dismissal:

"You may go, now. You will get orders for the dawn flight here in the morning."

That was all. A minute later they were out in the open, stumbling dazedly toward their quarters. But midway in their journey they halted. Facing each other on the edge of the dark drome, their thoughts for a time defied expression.

Dorn was the first to speak, his voice sounding hoarse, awesome.

"Good God, Kelsey!" he exclaimed.

Kelsey shook his head wearily.

"He's *not* human, Dorn," he muttered unsteadily. "He's not human."

III

THE ensuing dawn broke gray and foreboding. A fine mist, driven by fitful gusts of wind, swished at intervals across the drome. The wearied pilots, flushed from their bunks by the door-pounding orderlies, climbed numbly into their clothes. The cold and damp of that mid-September morning seemed to seep into the very marrow of their bones. Even the great mugs of scalding coffee, greedily consumed, seemed of little avail.

Kelsey, Dorn and Edwards stood together after the habit of many such mornings. The latter was dour and silent under the memory of the night before. His face was grim, his eyes exuding a cold, calculating glitter.

Kelsey eyed him warily, his lips pursing thoughtfully. He turned to look for Lieutenant Lister, sighting him as he was starting for the open. He reached the newcomer to lay a comradely hand upon his shoulder.

"Just a minute, Lister," he said. "We'll all go over together." Turning to Dorn and Edwards, he summoned them with a jerk of his head. "What say, fellows?" he said. "All set? Let's go."

The four flyers started together toward the squadron office. They walked in silence, each occupied with his own thoughts.

Kelsey had visited young Lister the night

before; had found him crouched on the edge of his bunk with his head in his hands.

"Don't take it too hard, old kid," he had said, dropping down beside him. "The old man isn't quite himself these days. We've been having a hard pull of it up here. All of us are hard hit. But he's not so bad when you get to understand him."

What a brazen lie! He thought of it afterwards lying on his bunk staring wide-eyed into the dark. What sort of man was this major who could see his own son walk literally from the grave and never seek to touch his hand—or utter a single word of welcome and comfort?

Kelsey's eyes closed with a jumble of bitter curses gurgling through his lips. He reviled his commander as a soulless fiend whose only urge was to fight and slay; as one who looked upon men—upon his own flesh and blood—merely as so many pawns to be risked at his will in this ghastly game of war.

And those curses now ran afresh through his mind as he made for the squadron office through the half light of dawn. For he had no way of knowing that the major had sat half through the night staring blankly at the door through which the drooping figure of his son had stumbled. He could not vision the great tears which had coursed silently down over that stern-jawed face. He had not heard the labored breathing of this man who for so long had forgotten the relief of sobbing. Nor did he know anything of that soul-racking plea which in an agonized cry, had been sped toward the war-torn heavens:

"Clint! Clint! God help me, now!"

No. Kelsey knew only the grim-visaged commander who sat before his desk ready to deliver the orders for the day; who rose with a cool and niggardly nod as his flyers stepped through the door.

There was no time lost, no words wasted.

"All ships are to be made ready at once," said the major crisply. "Squadron formation aloft. Area of patrol between Flirey and Bouconville. Liaison will be maintained when practicable with such other squadrons as may appear to the right and left. Enemy ships will be attacked on sight and none will be permitted to cross the lines. Flight leaders will relay these orders to—"

INTERRUPTION came with the discordant ringing of the telephone. The major snatched up the receiver, barked his acknowledgment and bent over the instrument. For fully two minutes he listened in silence to a hoarse dissertation which sent his lips twisting into a wry grimace. In the end he thrust the telephone aside and turned almost fiercely upon the tensely waiting flyers.

"Special reconnaissance orders," he barked. "Staff reports conflicting rumors regarding the withdrawal of the enemy from its advance zones in this area. We have been ordered to investigate with Mont Sec as our point of observation."

Mont Sec! The three flight leaders started at the mention of this veritable fortified mountain. Thousands of men had died upon its steep flanks. Birdmen gave it a wide berth.

But the major was continuing:

"This observation will be made by a single plane with the full squadron for combat escort. Approach will be made under cover of clouds until the position has been reached. The observation plane will then dive for visibility, setting a course directly across the position at the lowest possible altitude."

Kelsey glanced at Dorn to see the same look of incredulity which he knew must be stamped upon his own features. This plan, if that gigantic network of batteries were still in existence, was suicidal, murderous. Proof there would be, if those guns were still manned. But it must be obtained at the certain cost of the observer's life.

The eyes of the flight leaders suddenly leaped to the major's face. Each had simultaneously realized why the major had explained the plan with such close adherence to detail. It meant that the man to be selected for this hazardous mission was there in the office at the moment.

A profound silence settled over the room. Then scarcely audible, a mocking chuckle broke from the lips of Edwards. His lips twisted into a defiant sneer; his burning eyes met the level gaze of the commander.

Kelsey and Dorn breathed heavily. So that was the situation! Edwards was to pay for his moment of insubordination—to pay high. It was to be he who would dive from the ranks of the squadron to

skim the crest of that grisly monolith.

In that moment of suspense Kelsey and Dorn could not help feeling a tinge of contempt for the major. Of course, someone would have to take the assignment. But in the present instance it somehow looked as though retaliation were being made against a helpless victim. It was like kicking a man who was down.

Major Lister, however, read an entirely different interpretation of Edwards' leering gaze. And scanning the faces of Kelsey and Dorn, he knew that he was being judged. But he read their thoughts incorrectly. He believed that they were waiting again to raise the finger of scorn at the ghost of Hardpan Lister. And he remembered his vow—his resolution to play no favorites. He knew, too, that he would have to prove that resolution to these hard-eyed flyers who had grown to hate him in the line of duty.

The three flight leaders of the 89th were quite unprepared for what happened then. As the major's gaze broke from the leering face of Edwards they were momentarily puzzled. Then they saw that cool glance swinging across the room, glancing toward a far corner near the door.

The breath stopped in their throats, then. They had forgotten the presence of a possible alternate. Young Lister stood there, stiffly erect, his eyes like those of a hunted deer, his face frozen.

"Good God, no!" breathed Kelsey. "Not him!"

But the voice of the major resounded inexorably through the room.

"Lieutenant Lister," he said, "will make the observation. Captain Kelsey will see that the auxiliary plane is made ready immediately for that purpose. That will be all, men."

THE die was cast. There could be no appeal. And even if the possibility of protest had been conceived, it must have been forestalled by the expression which grew upon the face of the youthful lieutenant. For in the moment of hearing that veritable death sentence read upon him by his own father, he became fully a man, hardened, cynical, laconic. He was the first to turn and pass through the door.

It was less than a quarter of an hour later that the 89th took to the air. It was

already quite light, but the sky was canopied with glowering grey clouds at barely 3,000 feet. Conditions were ideal for the work at hand. And they were also ideal for the steadily winging Hun ships which had been trying daily to crash the sky-barrier above the American lines.

Yes, there was every promise that it would be a busy day for the 89th. Even without this grim special observation assignment to open the activities. But it was to be the last of these madly driven patrols out of the Menil-la-Tour drome. For at one o'clock the next morning thousands of guns of all calibres would loose their salvos in the mightiest barrage of the war. And four hours later the khaki lines would begin their advance behind rolling drum-fire to storm the coveted salient.

But there was little thought of this vast plan in the minds of these birdmen whose ships were V-ed out behind the auxiliary Bristol that clung to the tail of the major's Spad. Among the few surviving pilots in this war-worn squadron word had passed quickly of this last dawning action on the part of their mad commander.

Where they had feared him before as the most hateful of men, they now feared him as a monster. With their over-fatigued minds on the verge of delirium, the violence of their early indignation was giving way to the sobriety of cunning.

Even the hard-headed and steel-nerved Kelsey of A Flight was succumbing to this subtle poison. After his first encounter with the major the night before he had been willing to concede the necessity of sacrificing every man and every plane to keep the Hun in his own confines. He had even been willing to condone the swift violence with which the distraught Edwards had been silenced.

But that was before he had seen a tow-headed youth with haunted eyes walk up-right from the rim of hell to meet with a father's uncalled-for and brutal callousness. He had wondered, then.

He had said that he was not human. But he had not abandoned hope entirely.

There could be little hope now, however. He had his own eyes and ears to bear witness to his judgment. The major's own son ordered coolly to his death; his own flesh and blood bartered across the counter

of Mars to fulfil a wish that staff had uttered.

Let reason assert that some man of the 89th had to receive this dread assignment; that war is a leveler of all mankind and that one is as fit to die as another. Granted. But that the final cup should be passed to one who had barely toed the threshold of conflict seemed somehow unfitting. There were others whose allotted years could be thrice accounted in as many days. Men long experienced in the pitfalls of battle both below and aloft. Men who in the foreknowledge of impending dangers might somehow contrive to ride through the maelstrom.

Those were the thoughts that raged through the mind of Kelsey as his ship barged on with the others toward that grim rendezvous to the north. And they were kindred thoughts to those of his comrades. These men had become an outlaw breed of the sky ranges, pacing a leader they were no longer sure was fit to lead.

It was his knowledge of these things, too, that made the cross of the major doubly hard to bear. And perhaps his mind also conjured images more distorted than true. His brain and body were likewise unutterably weary. Yet he did not fail to perceive the hatred in which he was persistently held; the hatred which he had hoped to dispell through that proof of impartiality which now must cost him so dearly.

GAUNT and hollow-eyed, he now sat over the controls a broken effigy of the man he had been. Without conscious volition he held his Spad into a steady climb over its race toward the front. His fingers clung limply around the metal of the stick.

He was utterly without hope. From time to time his lips moved to a hoarse and broken muttering.

"I—I had to send Clint. They were watching me—all three of them. They were waiting for me to make the slightest break. Edwards! When he laughed—I could have killed him. He was challenging me, daring me. I had to do it. They're beasts—beasts, these men. And Clint—pays."

A wisp of the lowering clouds flung its damp fingers across his face. The clammy touch sent his head jerking aside. His glance fell upon the tortured earth along

the Beaumont slopes. Great, shell-ruptured pits; twisted wire, rotting wood and crumbled stone. Wreckage everywhere. Death.

His gaze lifted to sweep the war-pillaged valley winding into the Rupt de Mad. And as though hypnotically drawn, it traversed the farther slopes, lifting again and again, haltingly, fearfully until—

There! There it was. Mont Sec! A flame-blackened Goliath of earth and stone. It was silent, now; but waiting. A crouching octopus ready to hurl its steel-tipped tentacles upon unwary victims. Its flanks already were littered with the ghastly refuse of its gormandizing—the whitening skeletons of myriad men. And there was to be still another.

Swirling clouds closed softly around the major's Spad. In these dim corridors of the skies he glanced warily about. His haunted eyes turned back over his shoulder. The Bristol was there. And at the controls—Clint.

His foot flexed over the right rudder. His fingers tightened upon the stick. The clouds were dense—very dense. If he could get Clint to follow! Why not? A lancing Chandelle, a bank, full-throttled zoom.

There could be a dozen plausible explanations. Pilots were known to have become fogged in these swirling cloud-banks. He himself could take the responsibility. No one could doubt him. His record in the past—

But there was an opposing cross-current to these thoughts. There was a roaring voice dinning in his ears. It was the voice of the prop purring against the flaps of his helmet, mocking, insistent.

"Hard—pan Lis—ter! Hard—pan Lis—ter!"

The major started. Hardpan Lister? That was he. His tense body relaxed, his shoulders sagging.

He couldn't do it. He couldn't turn back; even to save—Clint. He was committed, condemned. Those damning words uttered so short a time before were beyond recall.

FOR a minute he sat motionless, dazed. It was as though the agony of this flight had numbed him in body and brain. Calm came, then. And although he was not conscious of it, it was the calm of Hardpan Lister,

His eyes whipped to the tachometer, to the watch upon his wrist. It was time! It was time for the ordeal.

The stick moved in his hands to a wing-wagging signal. It moved forward and the nose of the Spad swung down. The throttle was retarded. Like a groping ghost the plane slid through the billowy screen, the Bristol following behind, the squadron in line.

The great scarp of the earth spread magically into view. It was ominously still. Woods and fields and battered towns, without a sign of movement. And the sky? Deserted.

The major's head thrust over the wall of the cockpit. For an instant he stared downward. Then his grim lips writhed into a frightful snarl. It was there, below and behind him. He had overshot the mark. He had flown beyond it.

But it was there. And it seemed more monstrous than ever, now. How it dwarfed the surrounding hills! How it loomed above the adjacent plains! And what menace did it hide within its gargantuan bowels?

But it was time! This sluggish circling of the 89th would be seen. Alarms would be snapping through to every enemy center in the vicinity. The stroke must be swift. Each ticking second augmented the certainty of destruction.

The signal! He must give it. Clint was waiting. The squadron was watching. Men with bitter curses on their lips. Hate-filled men waiting for him to break, to falter.

His grip tightened over the stick. The muscles of his arms and shoulders bulged. But his hands were frozen, his will congealed. He couldn't do it. He couldn't possibly do it.

But what was that! The roar of a swiftly gunned motor, throttle jerked wide! A single defiant burst from synchronized Vickers! It had broken from behind him. His head jerked around, an agony of apprehension in his eyes. A hoarse cry of recrimination burst through his writhing lips. It was the Bristol, nose down in a bellying dive.

How swiftly it plunged! And its line of flight? Straight for the denuded cap of that bristling knoll. Down, down it plunged, dropping like a plummet. Its

fate would be known in the space of seconds, a very few seconds.

The major stared with bulging eyes at the swooping Bristol. His hands were still frozen over the controls, the circling Spad seeking its own airway.

Regret! Remorse! It was too late now. The dart was spent, with Clint—his son—riding the war-head. He imagined the maw of that mad-made volcano yawned wider and wider. He visioned its hidden fangs, the hungry guns of close-packed batteries. "God save him! he prayed. "Save him!"

HOPE. Maybe it was true that the enemy was withdrawing from the tip of the salient. Maybe this mountain fortification had already been abandoned. Archie usually cut in long before this. Possibly these fears—

His hands almost tore to stick from its pinions. He hurled his body hard against the wall of the cockpit, his eyes bulging with stark horror.

So quickly it had come! In one instant the Bristol was diving cleanly through the brightening dawn. Its nose was just beginning to lift for that racing glide across the top of the crater. Another instant and it should have swooped again into the clear, standing back aloft in a volleying zoom.

But doom flashed skyward in a pylon of flame. Licking jets of pale crimson and orange. Then a vast black dome of savagely swirling smoke, the poisonous breath from spitting guns. A single, monstrous salvo from the crest of Mont Sec.

"Clint!" cried the major. "Clint!"

His voice rose shrill above the snoring drone of the circling ships: above the tympanic rumble of the echoing explosion.

He stared down through the heaving black shroud while his plane vaulted and yawned with the battering concussion.

But he searched in vain. No winging shape broke clear. No moving thing was discerned through the rifting smoke. Nor could reason credit the possibility of escape from that all-enveloping cataclysm.

He had hoped; that was all. Once he thought he had glimpsed a streaking blur far down against the dun colored earth. Eagerness had thrust his body half out of the cockpit. But in the end he had clawed at the lenses of his goggles as though to rid them of maddened vision.

Gradually he sank back over the controls, his body limp, his head bowed. Racking sobs tore at his lungs.

"Gone," he croaked. "Gone."

One hand thrust against the cockpit coaming to support his drooping body. There was no hope, now.

IV

IT is in times of stress such as this that the fibre of man lies bare. If a strain of weakness is predominant all energy of mind and body must inevitably disintegrate. If strength is inherent, the spirit will revolt and a berserk reaction will stamp out the danger of moral cowardice. And Hardpan Lister was strong.

Circumstances, too, were to be shaped in his favor. For during that dreadful moment when he slumped weakly over the controls, fighting the nausea of horror and grief, a looming shadow crept upon the cockpit.

His subconscious mind flashed a warning. And although it was a warning fashioned from long experience in the war-torn skies, it all but failed of its purpose. But abetted by the quick-tongued stammer of synchronized guns, it flushed the shadows from his haunted eyes.

They were hard eyes in an instant, alight and flaming. Like a flash he kicked at the rudder and thrust upon the stick. The Spad reeled recklessly on a dragging wing-tip. And none too soon. A slick stream of cupro-nickel splashed through the wings within a foot of the fuselage. A black-bellied ship screamed past him like a meteor.

It was then that he became aware of the nightmare of sound that had broken behind him. He knew that Hun birdmen had crept southward through the clouds to drop their net upon his circling squadron. Yet he did not turn immediately to take an estimate of this threat. His eyes were following the black ship whose guns he had evaded. They were fixed upon the sable-crossed insignia which stood for that ruthless force that had robbed him of his son.

His lips split wide to loose a roar of hate. His fingers whipped to the throttle and jerked it wide. The re-centered stick shot forward to line the Spad for a bullet-like dive: a hurtling charge for the now

looping Fokker which but a moment before had plunged so close.

It had already begun to nose aloft. But Lister's eyes were doubly gifted. No doubts rose now as to the angle of convergence. He sought no aid from the cross-lined sights. Speed and lift were indubitably determined; as surely as though taped upon a white-lined print.

His ship became a demoniacal thing tonguing a fury apart from bellowing motor and shrieking stays. Lunging against his belt he rose half erect in the cockpit, his square jaw set against the surge of the slipstream. His lean fingers feathered the trips of his triggers as those of a violinist attuned to harmonics.

A PRESENTIMENT of doom must have reached the Hun pilot. He half turned in the cockpit, twisting his head full around over his shoulder. His mouth fell agape with grisly terror. And he never turned back.

The twin Vickers belched their steel-tubed lightning. And the Spad roared so close that the spitting flame seemed to sear its target. Its silver wings vaulted but a split second after the storming lead had slashed the Fokker into a broken winged shambles.

Over and about went the Spad in a swirling Immelmann. Straight into the ruck of the battle it flashed. Its nose fell flush with the belly of a Fokker, banking steeply against a zooming Spad. The twin Vickers cut in again to a slamming burst. Flaming wreckage spattered the sky.

Flame and smoke! The vision of a mightier inferno rose again. It was mirrored in the blazing eyes of this mad commander of the 89th. That inferno through which his son had dived to oblivion.

He would create another that would hail from the skies. His would be a blood-vengeance to sate all the pagan gods of conflict. He would kill and kill until no single Maltese cross was left aloft.

"Kill!"

He muttered the word through his clenched teeth. He spat it forth again and again as his fingers clawed at the trips of his guns. His Vickers-flung lead spattered to all quarters of the sky as he hurled his ship through the screaming fray.

A dozen enemy ships were a-wing. They

outnumbered his force almost two-to-one.

But his heart exulted. Just so much additional grist for his guns. And his guns glowed hot, their swift fangs deadly over long range and short.

Most of these enemy pilots were veterans. But they saw a winging terror in this mad commander. And they saw this same spirit flash to one after another of his battling flyers.

Chill fears flicked at their spines. Dread clutched at their hearts. They had met American birdmen before, but never any like these. Their ships split the sky like flame-tipped specters on the rim of a hurricane. And the fire from their guns was incessant, deadly.

A deluge of wreckage was streaming earthward. Black ships tumbling with buckled wings. Black ships aflame. Black ships spinning while death jammed the controls.

There were brave men numbered among these enemy birdmen. But the bravest quailed before this frightful carnage. In the end there were four survivors who hurled their ships from the path of the massacre, seeking to escape, to flee.

Hardpan Lister was among them like a falcon among pigeons. His battling zealots were charging at his flanks. The chorus from the Vickers was loosed in one last terrible storm of flame and lead. The lethal gale washed over the black-crossed ships to batter them from the skies.

THE grim lips of Hardpan Lister cracked wide again. This time to voice a wild paen of victory, a shrilling cry of vengeance wrought. He lunged back with the stick to lift his Spad into a roaring loop. Once again his sleek ship lanced up and over in its aerial dance of ecstasy.

It leveled to vault and roll, to jig and spin. There broke again in the sky the crack-crack-cracking of his Vickers, as though they rallied against the lack of further victims.

But in the end the swift Spad leveled off toward the south with wagging wings. The major's hand lifted high above his head to flash forward and down. The battle-worn 89th was going home, no single ship missing although a dozen of the enemy craft had been battered to earth.

Yes, the 89th was headed back for the

drome at Menil-la-Tour. The ships were a-level and winging smoothly. No menace paced them along the air-lanes. The skies were clean from horizon to zenith.

Yet these pilots became susceptible to an insidious malady. With the stimulus of combat gone, their long-tortured nerves drew taut in an agonizing reflex. Lips twitched, teeth chattered, hands trembled as they clutched at the sticks. Their futile cursing sounded to the rush and stammer of stretorous breathing.

They had been for ages aloft. Again and again they had glimpsed the horrors of death from the skies; had sped it themselves until their very souls revolted. And in retrospect, now, they saw their commander as a veritable killing fiend.

With the breath of the Spandaus hot in their faces they had fought back grimly. In the welter of conflict they had known the lone law of self-preservation. Unconsciously they had rallied with the murderous onslaughts of the major's Spad. A fiendish fury had possessed them as their gaunt commander thrust his livid guns at will through the enemy ranks.

They did not reason that they had loosed a rage already conjured. With the first stream of fire they forgot the grim tragedy to which they had been witnesses. The exigency of the attack supplanted the hatred that had flamed against this man who had sacrificed his own son.

But now their eyes could not help but center upon him. He was leading them back; back to make ready for another of his bloody forays. He was herding them in for fuel and ammunition.

Their fevered minds saw him as more monstrous than ever. Staring at the bulge of his body above the cockpit's rim, they pictured him as a malevolent demon stirring the contents of his cauldron of death. They visioned the face of a leering gargoye, chuckling, gloating, planning new outrages. And the back-drop to their minds was ever the belching holocaust that had burst over the Bristol from the crest of Mont Sec.

THESE thoughts were rampant as the squadron settled to the surface of the drome. After their planes had stopped rolling minutes ticked by before they dragged their bodies to the ground. And

then as though by some prearranged plan they milled together.

They moved dazedly. Their faces were pale and drawn. But their eyes were ablaze with a mounting fanaticism. And their lips were cruel, savage. Horror and fatigue had stripped them of their veneer of culture. They had reverted to stand again in the twilight of barbarianism.

As Kelsey barged in amongst them, Edwards lifted both hands high above his head in a frantic gesture. His body shook with a surging wave of emotion.

"Have you got enough?" he cried in a ghastly croaking voice. Have you seen your fill of this stinking vulture we're tied to. Do you realize now what a beast we've been following? Or are you a bunch of gutless, yellow curs swinging your necks to the slaughter?"

The jumble of words almost choked in his bulging throat. He seemed to have no care that they might reach the ears of the man he reviled, stumbling now toward the squadron office.

"You know what you've been through," he rasped. "And you know what you can expect. You saw him watch his own son dive to his death this morning. And you saw what he did afterward—to those Fokkers."

The sound of his voice, more than his words, stirred his listeners. Their eyes gradually narrowed to flaming chinks in their dead white faces. Animal-like snarls rose in their throats.

"He's a fiend!" Edwards finally screamed. "He's not human—he's a fiend. It'll be either him or us. And I swear to God I'll kill him! I'll kill him!"

As this last awful declaration rushed through his lips, he whipped around. In a half crouch he glared at the squat walls of the squadron office, as though trying to peer through the weathered partitions that hid the object of his hatred. Then in the next moment he was pressing forward the others crowding with him.

The spirit of the mob possessed these men. The madness of fagged bodies and tattered nerves was wedging into their brains. They were carried along by the impetus of a homicidal rage.

This tragic sequence was exactly what Kelsey had predicted must happen. It was only the night before that he had argued

in the hope of preventing it. But since then he had seen a clean-eyed youngster sink to his death through a treacherous well of fire. And he had flown and fought through the terrible annihilation of an enemy squadron.

Thus no longer capable of steadied thought, he also succumbed to the contagion of the mob. The voice of that cool monitor in the back of his brain had grown helplessly weak. He was dimly aware of its feeble stirring. But the snarls of these maddened flyers dinned even louder in his ears.

There was a moment's pause at the door of the office. Strangely enough, a harsh voice was audible through the thinly boarded walls. The voice of Hardpan Lister.

HABIT is strong. And the voice had long been one of command, of restraint. Despite the dynamic force that impelled them, they halted in a tense knot. Their bodies trembled anew with the damping of their wills.

And then during that pulsating moment of hesitation, that ringing voice sounded louder, clearer. Each word became distinctly intelligible, lancing into their rage-fogged brains. Moreover, that voice was not harsh and domineering now, but pleading, broken.

"Clint! Clint!" they heard. "I had to do it. They forced me. They were watching me, sneering at me, waiting for me to break. You saw them the night you came. I didn't dare take your hand, boy. I didn't dare talk to you as father to son. God knows I wanted to. I could hardly hold myself back. But they were watching me. And I thought I could square things later—in the morning."

During an interval of silence, then, those men who waited beyond the door gazed wonderingly at one another.

"But they were there again, Clint," continued the throbbing voice. "They followed you in this morning watching me, hounding me. And when those orders came through from staff—You heard Edwards laugh. You saw Kelsey and Dorn. I went mad, Clint. Raving mad. And I turned—to you." There was a choking sound. Then:

These men, Clint—They have cursed me

because I have kept them aloft while thousands of lives have hung in the balance.

They have called me Hardpan Lister. Yet I never spared myself, Clint. And I didn't spare—you."

The heads of the listening men were bowed, now.

There was a window close to the door. The listening flyers unconsciously had shifted before it. Through the unobscured glass they saw their commander slumped before his desk, his chin upon his chest. His face bore that strange calm of a strong man beset with grief. Tears were coursing over his bronzed cheeks.

V

KELSEY tried to speak, to urge the stricken flyers away. But the words clogged in his throat. He motioned them back with his hands. They fell away dazedly, turning to straggle slowly off across the tarmac.

They were suddenly ashamed. And they were hurt as any decent men must have been hurt. They were ashamed with the thought of how greatly they had misjudged this man whom they denounced as Hardpan Lister. They were hurt with the knowledge that he believed his flyers had sought to humble him through the cost of his son's life.

"Good God almighty!" croaked Dorn, after the straggling group of pilots had halted uncertainly beyond earshot of the office.

Edwards looked up slowly, his lips trembling.

"He—he thinks I laughed," he said almost in a whisper, "to make him choose his—son." He gulped audibly, gripping his lower lip between his clenched teeth.

Kelsey laid a comforting hand on Edwards' shoulder. He lifted his other hand in a placating gesture to the others.

"It's tough, fellows," he said, "on all of us. We've had the wrong slant on things up here. The major, too. We haven't understood one another at all. We've been farthest from it. But we at least understand now. And it's up to us to do what we can."

Edwards nodded silently, still dazed.

Dorn turned slowly to Kelsey.

"What," he asked, "can we do?"

Kelsey waited for a moment before answering. Then he said:

"We'll have to wait and see, Dorn. The old man's about finished, I'm afraid. We'll have to—well—watch him on the steep turns. We can't say anything. But maybe in time he'll see the—change."

The others nodded their silent agreement. They understood perfectly.

The ground crew was busily at work refueling the ships and replenishing the ammunition racks. It would not be long before everything would be in readiness for the squadron again to take to the air. And these men were ready to fly now until exhaustion or death robbed them of their will over stick and rudder.

Each man stood near his ship when the major stepped through the office door. And as he strode toward his own plane, all tried not to have their willingness appear too obvious.

But he seemed scarcely aware of their presence as he marched along over the tarmac. He looked neither to the right nor left. And in all probability his gaze was turned inward, searching his soul for some surcease from the grief that tortured him.

He never once looked back, as was his habit, after settling over the controls. He seemed impatient to get aloft, barely waiting for the Spad's motor to settle to smoothly barking combustion before he waved the chocks away.

UNDER full gun he raced his ship down the runway and blasted it skyward in a roaring zoom. But he leveled off at only 1,000 feet, seeming to skim the green roof of the *Foret de la Reine* as he led the way back toward the lines.

Kelsey maintained a position close to the tail of that leading Spad. His gaze was anxious as it settled from time to time upon the sagging shoulders of the 89th's commander. A vague uneasiness assailed him.

After a time he tried to dispel it by diverting his attention to the activities aground. He had little success, though, despite the fact that at an altitude of 1,000 feet he could observe perfectly the workings of this mightiest of all maneuvers in the war.

In the woods beneath him he glimpsed

something of the assembling of the combat sections of the First Division. Farther to the right he knew that the Forty-second and the Eighty-ninth must likewise be swinging into line for this proposed steam-roller attack of the Fourth Corps.

As far distant as he could see into the back areas, the roads were choked with lines of artillery, ammunition and supply trains and files of troops. In cleared glades convenient to camouflage he descried the fat backs of partially inflated sausage balloons which on the following day would be swung aloft and towed into position as the attack progressed.

Engrossing details, these. But they could not disperse the lurking fear that probed at his mind—an unreasoning fear for the sorrowing major who rode his Spad at the point of the squadron.

They were winging close to the lines, now. And still there was no attempt to grab for greater altitude. Almost directly beneath them lay the road out of Mandres, with an occasional shell churning the mud of "Dead Man's Curve." Ahead and to the left lay the ruins of Beaumont. Three days before a battalion of the 26th Infantry had sought billets there, conveniently close to the lines they would enter. But a rain of shell-fire had flushed them back into the Raulecourt Woods.

With these indications staff must be addle-pated to hope that the enemy might be withdrawing from the salient. In all probability underground information had been obtained of the planned attack. More than likely reinforcements were being wedged into place to shatter this dream of Pershing's into a nightmare shambles.

Kelsey cast these thoughts from his mind to bend his anxious gaze again on the major. The ships of the 89th were within two kilometers of the lines, now, and still skimming along far too close to the earth. If the Hun birdmen should plunge from the skies with such an advantage there would be hell to pay and a fine broth for the devil.

The sight of flares streaking aloft from Xivray to St. Baussant sent a quick thrill up Kelsey's spine. Even if he had been slow in realizing the major's purpose, the Huns in the trenches had divined the plan. They were calling for Archie, for every means of repelling attack from the air.

Yes, the major was bent on an observation and strafing expedition of the most dangerous character. This knowledge had no more than registered with Kelsey before the skies were rent by the shocking explosions of spouting shrapnel shells. They lanced obliquely up from the earth to slam in around the ships of the 89th.

KELSEY'S lips twisted into a snarl of fear. At greater altitudes he should not have been so greatly troubled. But here Lister was leading his men almost into the muzzles of the guns. It was as near to being point-blank fire as he had ever encountered.

And then instead of zooming for safety, twisting and rolling through the angrily blooming black mushrooms, he was swooping lower and lower. In a matter of seconds he would be down upon the narrow trenches.

Light dawned upon Kelsey as his teeth clenched painfully, as a coughing burst sent his Spad tumbling crazily. The major was utterly beyond fear. In fact, he was deliberately courting danger, daring death, inviting it.

To uphold his reputation as Hardpan Lister he had forfeited his son. He believed that he had been forced into that extremity by the men who now flew in his wake. And he was determined to show them another phase of Hardpan Lister which they should never forget—while they still lived.

His Spad suddenly stood on its nose and shot earthward. And in one respect Kelsey and his comrades were glad to follow. This mad dive rapidly placed them below the mean angle of fire from the anti-aircraft batteries. The cloud of shrapnel bursts soon hovered above them, then ceased to grow in the steel-torn sky.

But immediately there sounded the ripping clatter of machine-gun fire from the ground. The air became filled with the snapping and whining of pelting slugs. This brazen raid was met with a veritable hailstorm of lead from the stammering Maxims.

The major's Spad never deviated a hair. Five hundred feet above the break of the trenches his Vickers spat forth their flaming death. Down and forward they streaked, raking the earthen crevasse with devastating effect.

Kelsey followed grimly, the rest of the ships streaming along behind him. And like Kelsey, everyone of those trailing pilots knew the reason for this macabre attack. They knew that the major was bent upon exhibiting those qualities with which his men in their earlier madness had credited him.

Crouched behind the butts of his snarling guns, the war madness gradually supplanted his fears. If the major could lead, he and the rest of the squadron could follow. Death, eventually, was the foreseen gleanings of battle. Let it come when it was due.

The slashing fire from the streaking Spads hosed the trench for 500 yards. Groups of the demoralized enemy were battered dead upon the soggy duck-boards. Pot-bellied Maxims were stripped from their tripods. Elephant iron shelters were drilled to sieves by the leading ships.

And fear-stricken troops were madly scattered beneath the guns of those that followed.

Only when his ship had plunged so low that the wheels seemed to rip at the top of the firing-ledges, did the major still his chattering Vickers. And then he stood aloft in a wing-torturing Chandelle that placed him in position for another of those screaming dives to strafe.

And the planes in his wake followed like puppets.

Down came the 89th again over a farther section of the trench. Once more the Vickers loosed their shrill cacaphony of hatred. In an incessant flood the down-pouring lead washed on through the enemy position. Panic broke beneath them. They left a reeking shambles of destruction in their wake.

Again the major's Spad nosed upward. But this time to adopt an undulating motion. Up and down, up and down its nose swung like a crazy pendulum. And at every earthward dip of the prop the Vickers crashed to slamming bursts.

Kelsey glimpsed and duplicated this new maneuver through the red haze of battle that had gripped him. He was dimly aware that savagely torn rents were appearing in the wing-surfaces of his plane. One burst of lead had ripped through the gut of the fuselage to claw at the side of his jacket.

IT was a hellish thing, this strafe. And the major had planned it because life no longer seemed of value; as a grand gesture to those men who had damned him. He was not aware of the new understanding that had dawned upon his men. He did not realize that to save him from danger they were all too willing to charge the grim reaper.

The irony of the thing sent a rush of bitter curses through Kelsey's lips. How long must this madness continue? And what would be the final toll? Already one of the 89th's ships lay in flaming wreckage along the lip of that battered trench.

How many more must bow to the Maxims in sacrifice to this senseless internal feud? When would he turn to some freshly planned devilry? How could he be forced to abandon this mad strafing?

The answer to this last question came from the skies. It came with the growling crescendo of plunging Fokkers; the high-pitched clatter of blazing Spandaus. This plunging vengeance was upon them almost without warning.

A choking cry gurgled through Kelsey's lips. Where now was the 89th with the belts of the Vickers almost spent? What possible hope of escape so close to the ground?

His eyes leaped instinctively to the major for guidance. It was the impulse of habit, and not of hope. There seemed no possible avenue of escape. The ships overhead must literally peck the Spads to pieces.

But Hardpan Lister was a past-master of strategy. He was ever ready to grasp the one advantage which all others might overlook. And he was an uncanny judge of an opponent's impending error.

Thus he marked the over-confidence of those diving Fokkers in a single glance. And in the same instant he saw a way out of the trap. He acted immediately.

His hand jerked high above his head, then flashed down in a curving sweep to the left. Simultaneously his Spad stood into a dizzy left bank that all but rolled its gear against a jutting copse of tall trees, a straggling grove from the Bois de Garantua.

Kelsey acted instantly upon this signal. Every ship in the squadron, close a-file from the line of their strafing, followed with full-gunned speed. In the merest in-

stant they had swirled with bellies flat against the wall of trees.

The Fokkers diving from the north were clearing those leafy crests. They had thought to catch the Spads dead in the open over the trenches. In their cocksure eagerness they had planned to batter these silver-winged ships to earth with one sustained chorus from their waiting Spandaus, each set of guns ready for its target.

Too late these grim Hun birdmen glimpsed that racing bank beneath them. Too deep in their dives they could not pull up to hover aloft for their rising quarry. But as originally planned they clipped the tips of the trees to flash down against the trench-burrowed earth.

They had to zoom then, to loop and Immelmann with the fear of fatal error upon them. And the dread that gripped them was real. For the Spads had zoomed and leveled before them. They were charging en masse with their death-spewing Vickers blazing.

The breath that had choked back in Kelsey's throat now whistled through his teeth. Here was a chance, an even break. His jaws whipped tight as his hands gripped the triggers. Even with their depleted ammunition they might yet win through. And if worst came to worst they were close to the lines.

THE sight of the mad commander of the 89th well out in the lead steadied his nerves. The major was again half standing over his guns, as he had that morning over the crest of Mont Sec. And he seemed possessed with that same berserk ferocity which had led to the annihilation of that complete Hun squadron.

Kelsey jerked his eyes away as a Fokker loomed in his path. He cut in his guns for a raking burst which chance had afforded him. There had been little time for conscious aim. But as he glanced back he saw the black-winged ship begin to stagger. As he banked around into the thick of the fray, he saw it faltering into crippled flight from the field.

A whirling dog-fight enveloped him, then. During a hectic interval tracers were flashing from all quarters of the sky. Three separate times he saw splinters fly from the wing sections of his ship. And twice as often he knew that his Vickers had sped

damage amidst the doggedly battling planes of the enemy.

Opponents began to pair off, then. He saw the maze of the fight spreading out. He glanced around to select his own choice of battle.

An ominous clatter burst from the rear of his cockpit. His ship staggered as though clipped by a battering ram. He kicked at the rudder with a gagging horror clawing at his throat.

One of the Hun killers was riding his tail. As his ship leaped frantically out of the path of the Spandau's fire, he glanced over his shoulder and saw it. It was so close that its hot breath seemed to be searing his back.

Again those frightful guns cut in. Rudder again with hot lead slashing close to the fuselage. He essayed to zoom and bank only to see a section of his instrument board splinter up before his goggles. He threw the nose of the Spad down then for greater speed in his twisting, cavorting attempt to win clear. But the ship behind him centered with every maneuver.

A frenzied sob broke through his lips. So this was the end! He had feared it superficially at times in the past. But he had never actually thought to get it. He had grown used to these dangers; too certain of survival. But his hour at last had been posted.

As another long, raking blast ripped through one wing, he groaned aloud. The price of folly, this; the major's folly. That insane strafing of the trench had brought it on. That relentless destruction of the Hun squadron over Mont Sec that day.

Mont Sec! It was there before him. He was almost atop its grisly slopes. This fiend behind him was driving him farther and farther behind the lines, cutting him out for a lone kill and a lonely grave. Well, there was another such grave somewhere in the vicinity. A grave with a shattered Bristol to mark it—and the major's son as its tenant.

KELSEY stiffened agonizedly in the cockpit. The chill damp of oozing perspiration broke against the visor of his helmet. His lips writhed into a tense grimace. Let the beast behind him fire—and to kill. He was ready. He was tired, ex-

hausted, sick of it all. Let his aim be true, the stroke swift.

There it was! The clatter of the guns. But why didn't they strike? His body writhed with the torture of suspense. His tense nerves tautened until he almost screamed with the retching agony. With a broken cry he whipped around in the cockpit.

His eyes bulged wide. Even as he watched, that tailing black ship burst asunder in a splash of flame, a spreading smudge of black smoke. He glimpsed the pilot tumbling earthward through the litter of destruction.

He grasped at the shreds of his waning reason. The unlooked for had happened. There was another ship roaring along behind him; and it was a Spad. He blinked his burning eyes and stared hard. The pilot was Edwards. Edwards had saved him from certain death. His last moment had been close. But he was safe, now.

As his aching body relaxed he waved his gesture of thanks. His gaze roved out over the skies to see that the battle was drawing to an end. Some squadron from the right of the area had flown to the 89th's aid. The Hun ships were breaking, fleeing back into the north.

Slumping back over the controls, he looked to his own position. He was perilously close to the looming slopes of Mont Sec, but well down against the earth. He saw, in fact, that his ship was almost raking the tops of a shell-shattered grove of trees bordering on the deeper woods in that vicinity.

As he hauled the stick toward him and prepared to rudder back to rejoin his comrades, he looked down over the side of the cockpit. Only for Edwards' timely rescue he might now be lying down there among those battered limbs and twisted roots, the wreckage of his ship sinking amidst the tangled undergrowth.

Abruptly he started. His eyes narrowed to incredulous slits. An expression of sheer wonder spread over his bronzed face. Reason told him that his sight was tricking him; that the thing he believed he saw was impossible.

He was not afforded an overlong scrutiny as his plane slid by. And he did not dare rudder back to circle lower. Enemy observers were certainly watching his plane

as they had watched the defeat of their own ships but a few moments before.

He had retarded the throttle, but now he jerked it wide. His plane roared up and around to stand back across the lines, to rejoin those surviving ships of the mad 89th. And during that winging journey Kelsey's face portrayed a mixture of wonder, incredulity and awe.

If the vision he had glimpsed in those battered woods were actually real—

"Good Cripes!" he exclaimed.

He shook his head bewilderedly. Words were utterly inadequate.

VI

THE 89th was a mere battered remnant of a squadron when it settled again to earth on the Menil-la-Tour drome. There were only four ships that swooped down behind the major's Spad. It was Dorn who had crashed during the strafing of the trench. Two others had fallen before the avenging Fokkers.

Major Lister climbed stiffly to the ground to stand for a moment scrutinizing these surviving ships. He saw their condition. Wing-surfaces hanging in tatters, struts gouged and splintered, guys broken and frayed. They would have to be thoroughly overhauled before they could again be trusted to flight.

Kelsey was close at hand when the major turned to address them.

"Captain Kelsey," he said, "these ships are through for the day. But I want the work of reconditioning to begin at once. They're to be thoroughly overhauled and must be proved serviceable by flight test before midnight tonight."

Kelsey chuckled grimly when the major had turned away to repair to the office. Damn right those ships would be reconditioned immediately. At least, he'd make sure that his was. And furthermore, he'd see that it was in flying condition not only before midnight, but before dusk. He had a job in mind that could not be put off until dark.

Forthwith he hunted up the sergeant in charge of repairs and fixed him with a beady gaze.

"Listen here, you red-nosed bandit," he said in a manner which the sergeant understood. "I want that crate of mine ready

to hold plenty of air-way by four o'clock this afternoon. By four o'clock—do you get me? And the rest of those ships well before midnight."

"Yes, sir," replied the sergeant with a broad grin.

"Well, you heard me," said Kelsey with mock truculence. "And if you fail me there'll be no fifty francs to buy cognac the next time you head for Toul. That's a promise."

"It'll be ready, sir—and at four," declared the sergeant.

Kelsey grunted, grinned and walked away. He had perfect confidence in the sergeant and there were certain other preparations he had to make against the designated hour. He said nothing of his plan to anyone.

PROMPTLY at four o'clock his ship was ready and waiting. He inspected it carefully from prop to skid, slipped the sergeant the promised fifty francs and retired to his cubicle. He reappeared a few minutes later with his leather flying jacket carelessly bundled under one arm.

He glanced first at his wrist-watch and then at the sky as he strolled along across the tarmac. The sky was still heavily clouded, conveying the constant threat of rain. With the sun veiled, dusk would come early. Darkness ought to be on its way shortly after five o'clock.

All of which was pertinent to Kelsey's plan. And he did not intend to take off a minute too early, nor a minute too late. Where he was going it was not considered healthy to stall for time. If he were late he might never get anywhere at all.

Considerable time can be consumed in the thorough inspection of a plane. There are many vital parts to be felt over and adjusted. Kelsey pretended to work diligently as the hands of his watch moved slowly around the dial. When the hour of five arrived, he was ready.

To all general appearances he was merely taking his ship aloft for a test hop. After climbing into the cockpit he unwrapped his jacket from around the compact package it had concealed, and placed the latter carefully between his feet. Then, with the motor volleying smoothly, he waved away the chocks and gave it the gun.

After a fair run, he slid his ship grace-

fully into the air. In order to give his flight every appearance of an ordinary test, he circled slowly upward over the drome. And instead of leveling off at a decent altitude, he continued to circle upward and upward until the gray clouds enveloped him at about 3,000 feet.

Well into the clouds he nosed, keeping a wary eye on his directions. And when sure that he was perfectly hidden from the ground, he selected a northward course and gradually advanced the throttle.

He was finally racing through the swirling mist at full speed. Minute after minute slowly ticked by; and with every minute a kilometer of distance dropped behind him.

During the seventh minute of his flight, he eased the stick forward. The nose of the Spad dropped and presently the clouds beneath him began to lighten. A moment more and he was able to discern the earth through the rifting lower mists.

He nodded his head with a grimace of satisfaction. The lines were almost directly beneath him and with one quick glance he was able to take his bearings for future use. He observed, too, that the dusk was settling quickly.

Once more he hauled the nose of the Spad aloft. With the throttle slightly retarded he picked a course a trifle west of north and went winging on through the clouds. At the same time he burrowed deeper than before into the billowy screen careful to erect every safeguard against the dangers that threatened.

HIS eyes were now almost constantly on his watch, the radium dial beginning to shed its glow through the gathering gloom. Four more minutes finally ticked by and with face grim and eyes watchful he again eased the stick forward. At the same time he reduced the throttle until the plane was gliding along almost noiselessly.

Through the lower stratas of the clouds he made the desired observation. Mont Sec and the broken borders of the Bois de Gargantua. He fixed the pattern distinctly in his mind and nosed back again into the clouds.

For another five minutes he drifted along in his softly purring ship, fighting his impatience as the dusk thickened. He knew that the slightest misstep in his plans might

lead to the forfeiture of his own life—and perhaps that of another. He held himself in check, watching, listening, waiting.

With the darkness gathering about him a thousand fears crept into his mind. This was an eerie portion of the sky, inhabited by the ghosts of men who had but lately died. And it was a distinctly inhospitable place for an allied ship. If a single glimpse of his plane were seen from below; if human ears were to hear the throbbing purring of his throttled motor, doom might envelop him with the quick flash of sable wings.

There was one thought that keyed his spirit, that made him impervious to these lurking fears: This plan he had conceived, and which he was determined to see through to the ultimate end. If it were to be death, he should at least have tried.

At last he knew that the darkness was tempered to his liking. Again he guided the Spad stealthily downward through the mists and out into the blackening void with the earth for its floor. Circling blindly before, he feared for a moment that he might be unable to take his bearings.

But his eyes soon became accustomed to the deep shadows. The scrap of the earth, at first appearing in a flat tone, took on mottled hues of gray and black. He was soon able to distinguish the varying features of the terrain.

His lips set grimly. His hands tightened over the stick to crowd it slowly forward. He reached up and cut the motor entirely, and the gliding Spad dropped toward the earth like a great, gray ghost.

Down it slid with the wind whispering sibilantly over the lazying prop, whining eerily past guys and stays. It was nerve-racking work, this business of stealing virtually into the lap of the enemy.

With his head thrust over the cockpit coaming, Kelsey stared tensely into the shadows below. From time to time his eyes shot a quick glance aloft and roved from side to side. He had no intentions of being caught flat-footed.

His plane was slipping downward out of the north. The formidable bulk of Mont Sec, black and silent, gradually rose on his right, looming higher and higher.

At the same time the shadowed roof of the forest pressed upward beneath him.

He was watching steadfastly for the

break of the trees at its farthest rim: for a straggling grove that had been battered and broken by shell fire—one time, no doubt, the screen of some long-plundered battery.

THEN he saw it. Every muscle in his body went tense. If only he were sure that his eyes had not tricked him when his plane had gone winging above that spot earlier in the day. He strained his gaze downward, but he could see nothing. He was still too high.

Calling on every ounce of nerve he possessed, he pushed the nose of the Spad down to quicken its gliding speed. He would have to bank around and swing back closer to the ground. Stick and rudder, now—with the constant danger of stalling, of being forced to throw on his motor.

There! What was that? Had his eyes deceived him, or had there actually been a tiny flash from the ground? He guided the Spad with hands that ached from their tense clutching of the stick. He scarcely breathed.

He started abruptly. He had seen it again. There could be no mistake. It had been a flash of light, the merest glimmer. But he was sure of it nevertheless. And he was certain that he knew its meaning.

One hand darted between his feet to swing the package to the seat beside him, to lift it to the rail of the cockpit. Tensely he watched. The light flickered again. A shadow moved. He was sure he glimpsed a white pattern sprawled against the ground—the pattern which he had glimpsed but a few short hours before.

A second or two more he waited—until his ship was directly over the spot he was watching. Then with a quick thrust of his hand he knocked the package from the rail. He saw it go hurtling down into the underbrush less than three hundred feet below.

His mission was completed then. There was nothing else he could do that night. But the following day— He wondered if he were acting the part of an idiot; or if ensuing events would prove true the queer belief upon which he had acted.

He shook off these conflicting thoughts as his fingers reached out for the switch. His heart almost stopped beating as he snapped it closed. Would the motor catch

again? Or was he destined to crash there above those twisted trees? In that ticking instant of suspense he cursed himself bitterly for not having told Edwards—someone—of the weird hope he had known.

But the motor caught. The resulting explosions split the silence with a terrifying growl. Kelsey felt his nerves leap taut as that deep diapason throbbed against his ears. He knew how plainly it must sound from below.

With a crackling oath he jerked the throttle full-out. His one chance now was a bold rush for the clouds and a swift flight back to the drome. The Hisso burst into pealing thunder and the slim ship stood into a steep racing climb for the southing clouds.

How slowly the altimeter seemed to register! The Spad swung upward, 1,000 feet, 2,000 feet. It was climbing at the steepest possible angle compatible with speed. Yet how slowly the needle trembled in its dialing of altitude.

KELSEY'S lips whipped into a fight-snarl. Lights had blinked suddenly from the crest of Mont Sec. Other lights had flashed along the Richecourt road. His plane had been heard; was to be traced.

He gasped. A slim, silver finger stabbed up into the sky. Another! And another. They stood like ghostly columns thrust against the clouds. Archie searchlight!

He visioned the crews whirling the amplifying cones, taking directions. The lights came creeping toward him, slowly, steadily. In his frenzied desire for greater speed he slammed his clenched fist against the cockpit coaming. The irony of the thing—if they got him now!

A gagging oath clattered from his throat. One hand whipped up over the lenses of his goggles. He was being blinded. A dazzling well of white light had enveloped him. He kicked at the rudder, twisting this way and that. But the lights followed relentlessly.

A coughing roar sounded ahead of him. He glimpsed a ruddy flash, a spreading black bolt. Another. The arches were opening up. Those two shells had been "overs." There was the raucous sound of the "shorts" almost instantly. They'd range him, now. They'd get him.

"God!" he groaned. "God!"

The hellish glare of bursting shrapnel flamed around him. His Spad leaped and vaulted crazily. He clung to the stick, staring aloft through a reeling aerial sea. The din in his ears achieved the proportions of a thousand slamming doors.

He became dizzy, almost nauseated. He felt that any moment must prove his last. His exhausted body, his tortured nerves could stand no more. A great, strangled sob welled into his throat. And then—

A sudden plunge into cooling mists. The gentle blurring of those blinding lights. The realization that he had reached the clouds. Hope reborn.

A last salvo from the Archies crashed around him. A minute longer he held the Spad straight up into the clouds. Then left stick and rudder—hard over.

The roaring ship turned like a wild thing, wing down in a vertical bank. An instant and it leveled again to speed eastward. The hungrily searching lights were lost. The crashing shells burst aimlessly against the heavens.

He had won through again. A right turn, and then the race back to the drome. After that a long night of waiting. The day to follow? Its events were subject to the will of the gods.

VII

WHEN the ship skid-hooked onto the tarmac and trundled to a stop, Kelsey glanced at his watch. He had been aloft a little more than twenty minutes. He smiled grimly. He was supposed to have gone aloft for a test flight. Well, so he had; on an exceedingly rigorous test flight.

Chuckling sardonically, he clambered out of the cockpit. He needed food and plenty of hot coffee. He strolled over toward the mess-hall to get it and met Edwards filling the same need.

"Your ship O.K.?" asked Edwards.

"Never better," replied Kelsey, drawing up a chair as grub was laid out for him.

For a moment or two they ate in silence. Edwards finished to light a cigarette.

"I just came in myself," he said. "Where in hell were you?"

Kelsey drank deeply of the steaming coffee. He grinned boldly.

"I took a spin in the clouds," he said. "Thought I'd get cooled off."

Edwards snorted.

"You'll get cooled off on a marble slab some one of these days," he said with good-natured sarcasm.

"Well, I hope you'll be around to roll me off of it," retorted Kelsey. "Thanks, incidentally, for booting that Fokker off my tail this afternoon. The beggar had been in a hole."

"Forget it," rejoined Edwards. He stared meditatively at his cigarette. "I wish," he said, "that I could have done the same for the major. Maybe I'd have gotten a chance to talk to him—to tell him—well, hell, Kelsey—I hate to have him think we're a lot of rogues."

Kelsey thought a moment before he spoke. Then he said:

"Just take it easy, old man, and everything will turn out all right. I've got a hunch we're all going to be damn good friends—the major included."

Something in Kelsey's manner drew a sharp, questioning look from Edwards. But before he could speak, Kelsey pushed back his chair and got to his feet.

"You'd better hit the hay for a while," he suggested. "That's where I'm headed for right now. See you later."

With a casual wave of his hand he passed out into the night. He looked up the sergeant in charge of repairs and told him to report the moment all ships were ready for flight. Thereafter he sought his bunk and turned in as he was.

He was woefully tired, but for several minutes he lay thinking of that journey he had made through the dusk-shadowed clouds. It had been a big gamble. He had been sure of nothing. But if he won it would prove well worth the risks he had taken.

He seemed scarcely to have closed his eyes before he was awakened by the pressure of a hand on his shoulder. He opened his eyes to see the sergeant bending above him.

"Those other two ships are O.K., Captain," said the sergeant.

Kelsey expressed his thanks and swung his feet to the floor as the sergeant went out. He doused his face with cold water and rubbed it briskly with a coarse towel. Then stepping through the door he made

for the squadron office. It was a quarter past midnight.

HE entered to find the major standing meditatively before his desk. It seemed to Kelsey that an overlong interval passed before he looked up. When he did so he presented a face drawn and haggard. The deeply set gray eyes had lost their intense gleam. The usually stern mouth was oddly altered, softened.

Kelsey felt strangely ill at ease. He had never seen this battling commander of the 89th look so. He felt that he should far rather have faced him in anger.

"Yes?" said the major. His voice sounded detached, uninterested. He had the air of one to whom all things had happened; to whom nothing worth while was left.

"I've come to report that all planes have been tested and found serviceable, Major," said Kelsey.

"All planes serviceable," repeated the major. He seemed to ponder the words, his heavy brows knitting querulously.

Kelsey bit at his lower lip.

"Yes, sir," he prompted.

The major's hands strayed aimlessly along the edge of the desk. There was another overlong interval of silence. Then:

"All right, Captain," he said. He nodded his head ponderously. "All right. Just tell the men to stand by."

A dull ache settled around Kelsey's heart. He knew what had wrought this terrible change in the major. And he wished that he might bring himself to speak a word of comfort. But he could not. He dared not.

Still he hesitated, until that oddly softened voice sounded again:

"That's all, Captain. That's all," Kelsey repeated.

Kelsey didn't dare trust himself to a reply. He turned quickly and went out, closing the door softly behind him. Standing alone on the shadowed border of the drome, he rubbed one hand roughly across his face.

"It's awful!" he muttered to himself. "Awful! If I could only tell him. But I don't dare. Something might happen. And then he'd go through hell—twice over."

He walked on toward his quarters,

dropping down upon the doorsill to sit with his chin in his hands.

For a minute, perhaps, he sat immobile. Then his head lifted, his body stiffening. Two clapping peals of thunder had broken the night's silence. And before the echoes were fairly vibrating there burst over the earth a reverberating roar like that of a mighty cataract.

It was a cataract—a cataract of steel loosed from the muzzles of thousands of guns. Guns of all calibers, standing in places with hub crowding hub. Everything from quick-spitting 75s' to the giant 16-inch rifles of the railroad sections. All joining in a mighty barrage to rim the front with a flaming aurora.

Edwards came trotting up to squat beside Kelsey.

"There it goes," he said. "Listen to it!" His voice sounded as though he spoke half to himself.

Kelsey nodded grimly.

"It must be hell up there," he said.

His fists clenched tightly under his chin. He was visioning the pounding horror of that gigantic barrage. Earth and stone, streets and buildings, woods and fields—all caught in this ghastly mill whose grist was death and destruction. He visioned it rolling inexorably on behind the enemy lines. And he wondered if it would wreak havoc anew in the battered grove along the Bois de Gargantua; if it would destroy all hope of the plan he held for the morrow.

With that girdle of flame along the northern horizon; with the whole earth trembling as though it must be shaken asunder, there was no thought of sleep. Kelsey and Edwards; the major—every man on the 89th drome waited through the long hours of the night. They were eager for the dawn, anxious, at times fearful.

THE minutes ticked by slowly. But finally the fateful hour arrived. Five o'clock! The thunder of the barrage diminished. It assumed a new tone, sullen, grumbling; that of the rolling barrage behind which the khaki lines would be pressing forward across the enemy lines.

Kelsey and Edwards hauled themselves to their feet. They were stiff and chilled. Their faces were grim, their eyes hard. They knew what was happening.

Out in front of them the Fourth

Corps, comprising the First, Forty-second and Eighty-ninth divisions, was sweeping northward, bayonets glinting through the lifting mists of dawn. Away to the northwest, in the vicinity of Les Eparges, the Fifth Corps with the veteran Twenty-sixth division in the lead, was fashioning the other claw of Pershing's pincers. If all went well these two crushing forces would meet at Gigneulles and Hattonchatel, the giant enemy triangle flanked and sheared away.

Kelsey and Edwards were pondering this vast attack when the major appeared and made for his ship. He issued no orders, for none was necessary. The four surviving pilots of the 89th responded instantly. In less than five minutes all were in the air, their ships winging away into the north.

Upon nearing the front, Kelsey's eyes widened with amazement. Planes dotted the sky in all directions. He recalled a rumor he had heard that over 1,400 ships would cover the drive from the air. It was perfectly creditable, now. He was watching the greatest aerial armada he had ever seen. It was stupendous, awe-inspiring.

His gaze swept down to the earth. He shook his head grimly. Where the lines had been the ground was ripped and torn in the most horrible fashion. Such towns as Xixray, Richécourt, Lahayville and St. Baissant—all of which had presented a few buildings still intact the day before—had practically been leveled to the ground.

He glanced over toward Mont Sec. There was no need for powerful glasses to see what had happened there. The streets and structures that had once capped its dome had been blown away, leveled to ruins, battered to dust. Gigantic craters pitted its slopes, attesting the terrific powers of destruction vested in the enormous shells that had rained down upon them.

The woods beyond it was not so vastly changed. Only the rolling barrage of the advance had fallen there. It was slamming now at its farther borders, creeping toward Heudicourt, Nonsard and Pannes.

Nevertheless, Kelsey wished that he might guide his plane low over a certain grove near those woods. He was fearful lest he should fail in the end with this

greatest of all tasks he had ever attempted. But the major was still in command. And he was following orders, guiding the remnant of his squadron to safeguard from the air those swiftly advancing lines of infantry.

Enemy birdmen, however, did not happen to fly before the guns of the 89th. Combat operations were observed in distant quarters of the sky. And after three hours of profitless flight, the major signaled for the return to the drome.

Once again aground, idly waiting for ships to be refueled, Kelsey sought an excuse to get away by himself. With the great drive well under way and with the line already having swept over that point which he had visited the night before, the suspense was becoming unbearable. But though he racked his brain, he could think of no plausible plan.

AN orderly trotted up, saluting jerkily.

"Major Lister wants to see you," he said. "It's urgent."

Kelsey turned and made for the office. What the deuce was in the air now? Was the major planning a final show for the four men who had managed to survive the last few hectic days?

The major met him at the door. Something of his old time crispness had returned.

"Come in, Kelsey," he said jerkily. "Come in."

Kelsey strode on into the office.

"Yes, sir?" he said.

"Listen here, Kelsey," said the major, his eyes beginning to flash. "Staff just called. There's hell to pay. This drive's moving so fast that everything's up in the air. Communication with the lines hasn't been maintained. There's no way of checking on things—on a rumor that just came in." The major leaned forward tensely, his voice dropping to a rasping snarl.

"There's a rumor," he said, "that 30,000 Germans, supposedly bottled up through the flanking of Mont Sec, are being entrained for an attempt to crash through to Chambley." As he ceased speaking his breath fairly hissed through his clenched teeth. Then he rasped:

"Do you realize what that may mean. There'll be hell to pay. Supposing it is true. Supposing they decided to try a rear

counter action. My God, man, it'll be terrible with the lines in the conditions they're in now." He stepped forward and tapped a lean index finger on Kelsey's chest.

"I want you, Kelsey," he said, "to take off immediately and find out if there is any truth to that rumor. Be quick. And if there is get back here as quickly as you can fly. Get started, *now*," he barked.

Kelsey flung out of the office with his brain in a whirl. Thirty thousand Germans preparing to entrain out of Mont Sec! Two complete enemy divisions planning to crash the lines that had hemmed them in! It was ridiculous. It was mad.

Yet reason told him that it was possible. He had seen for himself how the on-racing lines had been disrupted, artillery bogged down far in the rear. And that flanking of Mont Sec had not been accompanied by an assault and search of the position. The circling waves of troops had pushed on toward farther objectives.

In a flash he visioned this crowded troop train, this steel juggernaut packed with entire enemy regiments, careening northward through the broken American lines. He turned pale with the scene his imagination conjured. An oath ripped through his lips.

He had almost reached his waiting ship when he halted abruptly. He turned to race toward the ordnance building, a weird plan rapidly forming in his mind. He slammed through the door and searched around in the semi-gloom of the unlighted shack. He found what he wanted, a small wooden case which he cradled in his arms and carried to the ship. He was back again in a minute for a small oblong contrivance which he also stowed away in the cockpit along with a coil of light wire.

One of the ground crew spun the prop and jerked away the chocks. The Spad rolled forward, gathered speed and lunged skyward. A minute later and it was racing over that northward course which it had taken the night before under such vastly different circumstances.

CROUCHING over the controls, jockeying the throttle for every ounce of power the Hisso possessed, he spat out a blistering oath.

"Race back and report." He laughed sardonically. "If there was any trouble, tell staff! A hell of a lot of good that

would do with a mob of the enemy already entrained."

He glanced down at the cumbersome articles he had jammed into the cockpit. He had a plan of his own. If there was any truth in this mad rumor he'd take a crack at this flying train himself. Staff could keep right on warming its bomb-proof chairs. That was about all it was good for anyway.

Yes, he had a plan. It would call for the labors of two men. And if everything went well there would be two men. Kelsey nodded his head grimly. He refused to give way to the doubts that plagued him.

The winging Spad roared on into the north. It held scarcely a thousand feet of altitude. And although it sped along under full gun, Kelsey cursed impatiently as the earth rolled serenely beneath him.

Mont Sec! He was approaching it again. He seemed somehow to be fatefully identified with that ominous mountain. The thing was getting on his nerves.

It stood somber and still, now. The dull thunder of the advancing attack echoed back to him from a distance. Yet as he thought of the rumor he was supposed to probe, a growing horror stalked through his mind.

He was lancing swiftly upon his objective. He gave it a wide berth, swinging closer upon it after he had beaten around to its northern slopes. That was where the single steel track could be seen, twisting slightly eastward over its course to Chambley.

This line of track; he glimpsed it now. He saw its terminal at the foot of the shell-battered knoll it connected with. His glance ran out along the glittering trail. He saw nothing.

Slowly he nodded his head with a sort of I-told-you-so expression. His lip curled disdainfully. Another latrine rumor knocked into a cocked hat.

"Judas Priest!"

The exclamation had been uttered in awed tones. But even greater eloquence lay in the expression of amazement that spread over Kelsey's face. He was staring down through a group of trees and a cleverly erected screen of camouflage covering a sizable section of the track.

Instantly he veered away. He had seen enough and he did not wish to foster undue alarm. Enemy troops! A waiting

train! They were there, all right. They were there and making ready for that mad dash to safety.

He hurled the Spad around in a dizzy bank and thrust forward on the stick for a roaring dive. He was driving directly for that battered grove of trees above which he had glided the night before. It was conveniently close; dangerously so.

But there was no time to quibble, now. It was time to act. Every fleeting second was precious. He thought again of the absurdity of racing back to report his observation to staff. Before staff could get its cumbersome machine in motion the whole thing would be over with.

THERE was the grove, just as he had seen it the day before. His lips parted to loose a shrill cry of triumph. That pattern he had glimpsed against the ground. There it was; a white panel laid out in the shape of an L. A man stood beside it gazing aloft, wildly waving an arm.

Kelsey waved back and glanced around for a place to land. He found it.

There was a tiny clearing close by. With a little care he would be able to stall right into it. And he would have to use care. The cargo he carried might act most violently in the midst of a crash landing.

Grimly he concentrated upon setting his plane to earth. Down it glided with throttle cut. A tense moment as its wings flashed close to the butts of trees. And then the thrust of the gear against the ground.

He had made it. And he was about to realize something far greater. He leaped from the cockpit and essayed a stumbling race across the hummocky ground. And with every bound he drew closer to a strange figure of a man who stood awaiting him—a man clad in the tattered rags of a uniform proclaiming him an American flyer.

"God, Lister," exclaimed Kelsey, "I thought I'd never find you."

Lieutenant Clinton Lister closed a shaking hand over Kelsey's arm.

"I thought you'd never get here," he replied. "It's been hell—plain hell. But that note you dropped me with the grub helped a lot. I think I understand, now. And I know he will. Dad's hard sometimes. But he's fair."

Kelsey lifted a hand for silence.

"There's just one thing more," he said. "And I need your help. I'm banking on it."

"Anything," agreed Lister.

Kelsey lost no time in explaining the savage scheme which was even then in operation so close to where they stood. With quick, snapping sentences he drove the facts into Lister's wearied brain. In the end he gripped Lister's arm and almost towed him toward his waiting Spad.

"Come on," he said. "We'll have to move fast—and carefully."

Reaching the waiting plane Kelsey threw one leg over the wall of the cockpit and reached down into the interior. He drew out the coil of wire and the oblong contrivance with a plunger attachment protruding from one end—a contact detonator. He handed them to Lister.

"I'll be right with you," he said.

A moment later he dropped carefully back to the ground with the compact case tucked under his arm. Lister read the legend stamped upon it in red ink: "Danger. Dynamite."

They stumbled away then, hurrying as fast as they dared over the uneven ground. A moment later they regained the cover of the trees. For perhaps ten minutes they trudged along in silence. The woods they traversed swung farther and farther to the west, Kelsey clinging to its borders.

Finally he halted and lifted a rigid index finger.

"There," he said. "Do you see it?"

Lister peered forward through the leafy screen. He spied two slender ribs of shining steel; the railroad track. And at the point which Kelsey indicated he saw that they extended out over a sort of trestled culvert bridging a swampy creek. He nodded silently.

KELSEY knelt down and unraveled the binding end of the wire with nervous fingers. He jerked out a knife and stripped away the insulation, paring it clean. Another moment and the connection was made.

There was a feverish light in his eyes as he struggled erect. An ominous parting sound was beating into his ears. He knew what it was; the pulse of a waiting locomotive with a full head of steam under pressure.

"This plunger!" he snapped at Lister as he tucked the small case again under his arm and snatched up the coil of wire. "Push it down the instant you get my signal. Don't hesitate. And don't worry about me. Just do as I tell you."

A moment later he was off, almost running toward that elevated section of the track. Time was short. He had been aware of that with his first glimpse of the hidden train, of that milling mass of men in gray-green garb.

With his lungs burning from the exertion of his labors, his left hand blistered by the wire which he had strung out behind him, he reached the trestle. It was about a hundred feet long, supported by stone pillars.

Walking over the last few yards through clinging mire, crouching below a screen of tall swamp-grass, he reached the central column. A single glance showed that it was ideal for the purpose to which it was to be used.

Kelsey's lips were grim as he lifted the short, thick sticks of dynamite from the case and arranged them at the base of the pillar. Perspiration poured over his face as he went about the tedious work of capping and connecting them. His breath came and went in sharp gasps through his parched lips.

He was in the midst of the last connection when he heard a tremendous belching sound far up the tracks. A savage growl sounded in his throat. His lips writhed back over his clenched teeth. As his gaze probed far up the rails he shook violently. The long, heavy train was already in motion. It was gathering speed to roar down upon him.

The line to the plunger! Where was it? One hand reached up to rip the collar of his shirt free from his tortured throat. His gaze darted this way and that in a frenzied search.

The train! The beat of its driving pistons was growing louder and louder, faster and faster. It was coming now, careening down upon him at full speed. He could distinctly see the black snout of the locomotive. He visioned the trailing cars jammed with enemy troops.

That line! That plunger line! He stumbled back over the trail he had made coming in, searching for the wire he had

strung. It had sunk in the black ooze. He had lost it. He was to fail.

"No!" The exclamation burst from his throat in a choking gasp. He hurled his body forward and snatched at a segment of the wire which lay over a rotting stump.

He whirled and floundered back to the trestle, the damp wire swishing through his fingers. He almost pitched headlong as he regained the base of the pillar.

A tremendous roaring sound was surging against his ears. He dared not look up. He feared that a single glimpse of the steel monster charging down the track would completely unnerve him.

In frenzied haste, but cautioning himself over and over again to keep cool, he made the final connection to the plunger. A second longer he waited to make sure that he had made no error. Then he leaped away from the trestle and ran reeling and stumbling for the screening trees.

HE had almost reached them when he turned to look back. A sudden calm enveloped him; a wave of deadly purpose. Making a cool estimation of time and distance he plunged on for another hundred yards.

He was almost three hundred yards from that mined trestle, now, but he could see it plainly. With every effort at control he raised his right hand high above his head. He saw Lister's answering signal.

A minute more—an age. With a convulsive jerk he whipped his hand down. There was a ticking instant of maddening suspense, an instant during which a thundering locomotive stormed out upon the trestle with a troop-jammed train careening along behind it.

Then a pulsating roar—a leaping black geyser of death shot with swirling flame. Earth and stone, steel and wood, barging high into the skies.

The shocking concussion hurled Kelsey to his hands and knees. But he was up in an instant and running blindly to where Lister still knelt above the spent detonator.

"Come on," he shouted. "The ship!"

He almost jerked Lister to his feet. Together they went stumbling off through the trees, shaking their heads as though to rid their eyes of the ghastly scene they had just witnessed.

But when they stood beside the waiting

Spad their shaking nerves steadied. Moving toward them through fields and woods they saw wave after wave of men in khaki, bayonets flashing, a newly shining sun glinting upon the crowns of their steel helmets. The alarm had been spread and reserves were coming up.

Kelsey's hand fell on Lister's shoulder. "It was hell, kid," he said. "But we had to do it. It's war."

Lister nodded soberly. He opened his mouth to reply. But instead he lifted his face to stare into the sky. Two trim Spads were wheeling overhead. And as the men on the ground watched, they nosed downward and came slipping into the tiny glade, stalling prettily to the ground.

Lister stood for an instant with a look of wonder slowly spreading over his face. Then he turned and ran toward the newly arrived Spads.

Major Lister leaped from one of the cockpits and ran forward to meet him. Kelsey came panting up as they halted to

face one another with their hands locked tensely. He halted abruptly, strangely disconcerted at the sight of the emotion which played across the faces of this oddly reunited pair—father and son.

He heard the major's voice:

"I know all about it, son. Edwards told me. I've been a fool—worse. But I've got you back. And that's all that matters—now."

"And I know, too, dad," said young Lister. Captain Kelsey—he—"

But Kelsey was not listening. He had turned to grasp the outstretched hand of the grinning Edwards, gripping it in silence. Then shaking his head in bewilderment, his lips moved.

"Hardpan Lister!" he muttered. The words were uttered almost in a tone of reverence.

And meanwhile the ruck of the battle surged on toward Hattonchatel and the conclusion of that great American offensive in the St. Mihiel.



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FLAMING COFFINS

By ANDREW A. CAFFREY

"Burned by Seidl!"—an old, bitter story to those battered air-knights. For the Heinie fought with war-banned, blazing tracers! But at last came the day when the Yanks trailed the hate-scorched skies win their own fatal flame!

A Complete War-Air Novel

THIS is the account of what the Yank air bunch, on the Front, used to call "that twenty-four hours."

Well, those twenty-four hours were

pretty hot. Yep, some of the twenty-four were so hot that they seared themselves, for all time, on men's brains and in men's hearts. And that's some hot, for men at

war are pretty hard to faze. They take all that comes with a stiff upper lip and a grin; and they watch all that goes—west—with the same poker face. And the Air Service gang wore the stiff upper lip and the fixin's till it became a mask. Tell you what, it wasn't easy, this thing of being hard-boiled.

But it was easy enough for Major Kingsley to be hard-boiled on the afternoon when these twenty-four hours opened. Also, every last man—enlisted and commissioned—of the major's command was hard-boiled. What is more, they were hot under the collar, and that's where the heat in this story begins. They were "regulating" all this heat with a terrible outpouring of choicest Yank cussing, and the choicest of Yank cussing is always very choice.

They had something to cuss about; and even the "Y" help stopped selling stuff long enough to join in. Even the visiting chaplain came darned near forgetting his cloth.

You see, the outfit was suffering too many losses. Now, losses are all right, and always to be expected. But this was all wrong, this—each loss was going down in flames. Burning, burning, burning! And never giving the boys half a show. No dam' justice!—for this Yank outfit had been square with the Hun.

MAJOR KINGSLEY was commanding this observation group, the All-States squadron. The group, flying artillery observation for the greater part, was trying to win a war with American-made DeHavillands. That, of course, was out of the question. But the brave Yanks didn't know it at the time. Why, it's a fact, some of those poor guys actually thought that they were riding A-1 flying equipment. And even with their flightmates burning down to right and to left, before and behind them, these martyrs to what the late Ring Lardner might laughingly have called "American ingenuity" went right along taking orders, making missions and dying in what Yank Air Force called "flaming coffins." They called them that, not laughingly.

Flaming coffins! Good Lord!—two boys, any two happy young Yanks, going down with eighty-six gallons of hi-test gas-

oline burning right between them! At the pilot's back; and right in the rear-seat man's lap—that was where the God-forsaken boneheads had placed the fuel tank.

Anyway, the enemy flight-leader whose gang was sending these brave Yanks down in the red should have been sportsman enough to play square. Naw, he didn't; not for a minute. We'll show you, for that was the first and last cause for all the heat.

CAPTAIN SEIDL, the Austrian, was in command of the enemy pursuit squadron whose checkered Fokkers were fattening their scores at the expense of this American "cold meat." And they said Seidl was game! Game—hell!

Taking orders, you say? Seidl just doing what he was told to do? That doesn't go! A game man, a sportsman, Seidl if he was either of these, would have stepped over the side at about 20,000 feet and ended the disgrace that comes of taking such orders. No, Captain Seidl was doing his work with his whole heart in the bloody, hellish undertaking. Seidl was fattening his own score. He was an ace six times over. He held his whole flight back, time and time again, just to swoop down on the cold meat and burn a Yank ship for himself.

He knew that, once swooped upon, this Yank cold meat *would* burn. Yes, burn! Not a chance of it just going out of control, with dead men in the pits, and spinning into the ground. No such merciful end for the All-States brave. No, they must burn. Burn every time, and this Captain Seidl, the "game" Austrian pilot, and all that—Aw, hell, that guy was lower than the corporal in the Signal Corps that the regular-army bunch used to sing about down at San Antonio.

And Major Kingsley, and all the men of the major's command, knew that Seidl was low. They hated Seidl with a hatred that was justified. And they knew that so long as Seidl was on that Front, just so long must the men of this command burn. And burnings, more than anything else, undermine the morale of a flying unit. You can't beat the Visit in Red.

Sideslip? Go ahead and sideslip, and you'll come out, maybe. Yes, come out of it alive, but with legs and arms burned

to the bones. Far better, many times better, had you taken the call and jumped. Fire in the air is nothing short of hell. It's all that your Sunday-school teacher said hell was—plus. Hell by Seidl.

"Get me Seidl, or one of Seidl's men, with the goods on him," Kingsley often said, "and I'll wrap his machine-gun belts of incendiary bullets around his neck and drop him, from 20,000 feet, right back into his home field. And he won't have a parachute, either!"

Incendiary bullets! There's the cause for the heat.

The outfit knew, and beyond question, that Seidl's unit was loading its machine guns, solid, with incendiaries and tracers.

And they knew what Seidl knew: that this is against all international law. Also, Seidl and his crew knew that there was just one wage for this sin. The wage is a quick trip to the wall, and a firing squad. The bird caught, thus equipped, was as good as dead. The skunk!

HOWEVER, up to date, not one of Seidl's men had been brought down on the Yank side of No Man's Land. That is, none of which there was anything left. Major Kingsley, himself, had brought down Seidl's sub-leader, and this with a DeHaviland two-place job too. Kingsley, as mad as a wet hen, had dived that pursuit flight and picked this Hun off in the dive. The enemy ship, true enough, had burned; but it burned upon striking ground with its motor still running full-on and plenty hot. There was, of course, no way of telling how the Fokker's guns were loaded. Nothing but the steel parts of the gun were left, for that matter. The pile was behind Esnes.

Then, on another occasion, one of Major Kingsley's best men—flying the old flaming coffin *a la chasse*, met and tangled with two others of Seidl's "sportsmen." That lone Yank, gliding to the home field with a red-hot Liberty motor, and alone, went out of his way to engage these two well-equipped enemies. These Fokkers were back almost to Verdun, and this at a time when Verdun was really "behind the front." Somehow or other, the Yank dived the two before they knew what was happening. That opening burst failed to

score. Knowing his onions, flaming and garden variety, the D.H. pilot in question just shoved his nose a little straighter down and kept going. The two Fokker pilots, snapping out of the surprise at one and the same time, also shoved their noses down, and in the general direction of the American who was going away from there as fast as a D.H. dive would allow, which wasn't quite fast enough.

No, a D.H. isn't a diving ship. Sure it will dive, but the fuselage will finish the dive alone, after it has hung all four wings on the nearest cloud.

Well, anyway, this Yank, Lieutenant Salisbury was his name, decided that he wasn't going to be able to outdistance the boy friends from the Fatherland. Salisbury didn't give up to this idea till more than a few slugs began to pass through his D. H. He also noticed at this time that all those slugs were smoking their way across the sky. The linen holes, through which the slugs had passed still smoked as Salisbury took stock. So it followed, when the world behind Salisbury seemed to be overloaded with trip-hammers, Salisbury did the unethical thing and zoomed without a thought of what might happen. It isn't likely that the Yank cared much what might happen. Just about everything was happening to him as it was.

Up he pulled, out of its hellish dive. The roaring, yelling, abused D.H. stood on its hind legs and pawed for the zenith. Strangest of all, it made the zoom, out of that dive, without stripping all its surfaces. Also, that zoom *was* vertical.

THE two Fokkers were close on his tail, too close. However, they too, zoomed. And—ye gods of quick American justice—the two collided! Salisbury, hanging head down at the top of his zoom, which had flopped over into a *chandelle*, told how he looked with much genuine surprise and found both pursuers locked together, and falling in a flat spin, out of control. He says that he cheered. When, you'll agree, the guy should have said something in the line of well-intended and rapid prayers. Be that as it may, they were beyond prayers—or curses.

The double wreckage piled up after burning most of the way down. Again, the evidence was destroyed.

II

ALL morning it had been raining. By noon there was some promise of a clearing. At twelve-thirty, Major Kingsley, flying with an enlisted man in the rear seat, flew a few turns of the field and decided that a photographic flight might make a go of a mission. He landed, and told his operations officer to "turn 'em loose." Right away, the field began to show signs of life.

Clouds were still low. Any mission that went out now would have to do its work without altitude, and without coverage by ships from the co-operating pursuit group. But artillery had been yelling for observations; and artillery, working out there in the mud, never could understand why Air Service felt privileged to wait for perfect weather. Well, the All-States gang never knew why perfect weather was necessary, either. And when the All-States mob got a chance to operate without pursuit coverage, well the All-States took that chance. Hell, who said that they had to be chaperoned by that big-headed gang of *chasse* hoppers!

Burnings take out ships on a unit. When the All-States flight was ready to hop off at one o'clock, only seven D.H.'s were available for the mission. But they'd worked before with less ships, and when they worked *they worked!*

Bring on the job!

Major Kingsley glanced at his wrist-watch when the leader, Captain Male, gave his bus the gun and got under way. The seven DeHavilands were climbing off in formation. Lieutenants Wagner, Wright and Ott were on the right echelon to Captain Male's rear. Lieutenants Force, Lally and Singer strung back to his left. The major, standing at the deadline, again noted the opening of what was going to be one hellish twenty-four hours. Then he went slowly to his field-quarters. He kicked stones thoughtfully, as he went. He should!

With little or no altitude to be won, the flight of seven weren't called upon to lose any time in getting what couldn't be had. So they went away from that home drome with a suddenness that made the watcher on the ground think that they had just hopped to safe perches in the first clump of trees to the east. And the seven

knew that they were up against one tough mission.

When the clouds take you like that, well you're not going to have a soft shift of the thing, and you're not going to grab many fancy tin-types of enemy terrain. You're going to have all you can do to hold your place in formation, and in the sky. Seven Air Service crews were now wondering how the artillery would like this set-up of work.

THE six ships behind Captain Male were flying as loose a formation as was advisable. And it wasn't advisable to fly very close that noon. It wasn't that the sky was the worst on record. No, every man in the flight, pilots and observers, had known worse; but morale was low. Seidl, and the followers of Seidl, were still to be considered. What a feast this would be for that gang of hell-hounds! Seven Yank D.H.'s flying a low patrol. Seven ships without a single covering pursuit job. Seven-times-two men to be burned down. The clouds to hide the approach.

It took fourteen stout Yank hearts to face that mission. But these were stout.

Ten minutes on the wing, and they were crossing into Hun territory. The ten minutes had hardly passed before the first enemy anti-aircraft battery picked them up. Machine-gun set-ups, flanking that Archie battery, tore particular hell out of more than one set of wings; and Ott's observer collected the first wound. He pounded Ott on the back, held up a bloody right mitt, and yelled:

"Winged by hell! No good to you now, soldier!"

Ott yelled: "I'll put a Jew curse on 'em for that, guy!"

When they swept across the river at Dun Sur Meuse the outfit had won a little more sky. They were after observations back toward Jametz and Stenay, and Male pushed ahead on the circled course that would bring home the pictures of what they were after. The areas and concentrations to be observed weren't packing the sort of society that would allow close-ups without making a big noise about the thing. There was more Archie to the square mile than you could imagine. Singer, when the flight was hardly twenty minutes on its way, was picked off the left tip of the wild-

goose wedge for a direct hit. He, his observer and the D.H., just simply went to pieces in the air. There was nothing to show for that equipment but a nasty black puff of smoke and a shower of something falling into the trees.

The flight located gun position after gun position; and, rapidly raising their elevation, those gunners located these Yank airmen. The going was hot. It was too hot, and Male, after Jametz had been photographed, went higher. The clouds took them for the time being. Where they had gone into that cloud bank the Hun ground crews whaled away after them. The concussion of H-E's shook those bloody clouds. Almost shook those six D.H.'s from the partial, murky sanctuary of the tossing, protecting black. But they carried on, stuck to their formation in some unknown way, and held to the course which was to bring them out of the clouds at Stenay, back on the snaking Meuse. There to pick up what they might, and turn for home.

But somewhere in that cloud-bank toll had been taken again, and when Captain Male flew into the clear once more, and took a hasty check, he had but four ships behind him. Lieutenant Wagner was the one missing; Wagner who had been flying so close on his right flank.

That's close! Taking them right off your rudder, as you might say. But, anyway, Wright had edged in and was flying there where Wagner had been. Up over Wright's tail was Ott. So everything was as war should be: One had been taken, and another was in his place. War is that way, and you have no kick coming—just so long as another fills the gap. Yep, war's hell, but it's also systematic. You bet.

Stenay now. . . . Stenay waiting for them. . . . Stenay all set to give them one hot reception; ready to give them that reception long before they stand on the threshold of its leaden hospitality. It was a hot welcome. A curtain fire of concentrated Archie walled up before them.

Archie!

The stuff that never got an airman—till it got him right! Nobody was afraid of Archie. Nobody but the poor birds who had to barge right through it. And these five knew that they must not be afraid. Gosh, what would the artillery think if these five allowed themselves to be turned

back now? Mustn't think of any such damfool thing. Go in. Get those pictures. Come out again, and give Archie the hoss laugh. Moreover, make artillery happy.

THEY did go in. But before they were half way across the small town that is Stenay, Captain Male knew that he had a dead man in his rear pit. His ring wing-tip was also missing; and the gasoline was dripping from his reserve tank, just overhead. That dripping hi-test gas was falling on his hot exhaust stacks.

The captain tried not to notice the flow of gas. He edged over in his seat to keep it from splashing back on him. He tossed off his goggles to keep it from clouding them. Gas, gas, gas! Great stuff in its place, but hell turned loose when it is turned loose on hot stacks. And Liberty stacks had a way of getting white-hot. But Male was there to lead men, not to think of Male. These others came before him, and he had always thought of them first, and he would now.

Past Stenay now, the five ships swept beyond the last of the anti-aircraft batteries. Even the heavies that had raised their elevation no longer banged away at them, and the ten Yanks were on the point of taking a new lease on life, when—

Captain Male knew that something wasn't just as it should be. The going had no right to grow so smooth all of a sudden like this. No, those ground forces weren't calling off their dogs of war without good cause. In a flash Male knew that the alerte had gone all over this territory. He knew that Hun pursuit would be on the wing by now. And he knew all this at the same instant that a shadow crossed his upper wings. And the ship casting that shadow dived at him head on. Its burst of lead failed to score, fatally, on the Yank leader; and the ship passed aft. Another shadow, and another ship came down. With the flash of the second craft that passed, Male made out the checkered surfaces of Seidl's group Fokkers. The five Yanks were right back in fast company again. And lots of that company, too.

Captain Male, with a world of crazy clouds half hiding his visibility, slammed full gun to his ship, zoomed, lay her over in an Immelmann, and shot back over his milling men. Wright's No. 7 was still there.

Ott's No. 3 was close to Wright. Male could also locate another big craft off to the north. So far so good; and maybe there was hope of doing something yet. But where was Lally in No. 2?

Male was picking an oncoming Fokker for himself when that checkered ship, so picked, picked a Yank that was closer than Male. The Yank leader saw the D.H. go into flame. At the last second he caught the number—2—and he knew that young Ed Lally had joined the hosts *burned by Seidl*. And it was Seidl in person. From his rudder a leader's white steamer whipped back. Seidl zoomed; and Male did, too.

III

CAPTAIN MALE now had three ships besides his own badly winged craft left in the melee. With Stenay in the black boxes, what few black boxes were now in commission, there was only one purpose pressing upon the captain's shattered unit. That purpose and aim was the home drome, for as many as might be fortunate to make the distance. But with Seidl's countless, milling checkerboards all around them, Male left like a small boy who had been sent out on a man's job. His few ships could not handle this job, that was sure.

Wright's No. 7 was still managing to cling, through all this combat, close on its leader's right flank. Lieutenant Force had also managed to fly back into his old position on Male's left; and Force's rear-seat man was standing-off just about everything he could reach with his red-hot, bouncing machine guns doing a land-office business. This rear-seat man was "Get-'em" Fay, one of the first Yank observers to reach acedom. Get-'em Fay, as Force was later to make known officially, had bagged three in this fight up to the time when Male had signaled them to quit Stenay and cut for home. And Get-'em Fay was still in the fight. Still doing business.

Ott, with that wounded observer of his still trying to man two guns, had climbed above and behind Force and Wright. Ott's rear-seat man was depending entirely upon bluff. He, half laying across his guns, swung right and left, whirled 'em high and dipped 'em low, and, to an extent,

made that bluff good. Now and then he was getting in a burst that told; and five minutes west of Stenay, when Dun Sur Meuse had been almost regained, this man made a score. One of Seidl's braves, a bird whose smoky slugs had been cutting Ott's craft through and through, went away out of control. And Ott, seeing that, took time out to give his half-man one big cheer.

The area down below Dun Sur Meuse, through Forges Wood and on over "The Dead Man," was just about anybody's territory today. Any groundling living in there was doing so on borrowed time and, for the most part, deep in shell holes. Both Yank and enemy artillery were sweeping the hill country with a concentrated, withering fire. And Archie—never too bright—banged away at everything on wings, and regardless of whether the craft banged away at was friend or foe. Archie's only motto was—knock 'em all down, and sort 'em out later.

Over Forges Wood, Force and Wright, to turn back an attack that was being made upon Male, from underneath, both went into a dive and lay their guns on the same Fokker. That Fokker, about to burn its hot, fiery stream through Male's underside, decided at the last second that two diving D.H.'s, was just one too many under the circumstances. But the Hun did not decide soon enough; and the two Yanks hung it on the ambitious enemy for keeps.

There wasn't a whole lot of sky between the falling Fokker and the green meadows along the Forges River south of the Woods. Taking the longest chance in aviation, nevertheless, the enemy pilot, with only a few hundred feet left, kicked his craft into the first turn of a spin. That was desperate. It was also an old stunt. Force and Wright, still diving with the spinning ship, saw that faking pilot actually remove his hands from the controls—flying with feet on the bar, and knees on the stick—and try to make his bluff good.

The two Yanks drilled lead into that bird all the way; and when his ship hit bottom in the shallow Forges, the enemy pilot—game guy that he was—was no longer faking. No, that bird was dead, and dead all over. And again, one of Captain Seidl's checkered Fokkers was

down; and once again the evidence was in a place where it would be hard to reach. But Male made a note of the landing spot; and, perhaps, he made a wish.

The flight had now put upward of a hundred air miles behind them on this mission. What with backlapping, and fighting, nearly two hours of their four-hour gasoline supply was gone. Few flights had ever suffered heavier. Few flights of seven ships had ever before been weeded down to four in such short order.

And no flight had ever tried to fight on, so badly crippled as were these ships now.

But now, with The Dead Man and Forges Wood put behind them, the Hun pursuit ships dropped the chase and, at a signal from Captain Seidl, they turned back along the Meuse. Flying as low as ever, with a new blanket of clouds facing them in the west, the four Yank ships crowded onward toward the home drome.

AT the home field, Captain Male circled the landing space and signaled the other three to drop in for their landings. One by one, Wright, Ott and Force made their set-down and rolled up to the deadline to be greeted by Major Kingsley and the whole command.

Then, with his flight back at the drome, Captain Male gunned his D.H. for a turnaround and cut back into the east toward the lines. The command, wordless for the greater part, watched his craft grow small and fall from view, lost in the treetops where hell was doing business along the same old lines, and as usual.

"What," Major Kingsley asked, "is the cause for that?"

The hard-faced, hard-hit men of the mission had no answer for the major's question.

They were at a loss to understand Male's strange action. Though, no doubt, given time to think, they might have made a good guess.

"Four ships," Major Kingsley now remarked.

"Same old story, boys? . . . Meet up with Seidl again?"

"He burned what the Archie missed, sir," was all Ott told the C. O.; and the others said nothing. There was nothing more to say.

"How about your observations, did you make them?" the major asked.

"Every one of them, sir," Lieutenant Ott reported. "Got them, sir, and we paid for every damned one, too."

A heavy pall was upon that field as the mechanics, cussing as only Yank enlisted men can cuss, trundled three D.H.'s back to the hangars.

"Handle them there buses with care," a watching M.S.E. warned his men, "or they'll fall to pieces before you get them back under cover. . . . An' all you guys fall to an' put them ships back in commission. . . . D'y' hear me? . . . No liberty parties till all three are ready to do it again, and that means if you have to work all night. Now get the rag outa ya hip pocket, an' prod!"

An M.S.E. could always talk to the gang in that manner, 'cause an M.S.E. was lucky to be wearing all that rank without having to know a dam' thing. What, were they?—you bet M.S.E.'s were a lot worse than second-loots. Ask any Air Service enlisted stiff.

However, the M.S.E. was the power out in the hangars; and soon those three badly shot DeHavilands were back "in work." Men did this and did that—still cussing—and the three near-wrecks began to show promise of usefulness ahead.

The ships would be ready to do it, by morning, or this gang would know the reason why. This gang was all het-up. They were tired of having Seidl's hellers burn their equipment into the ground.

They were fed-up on having all their hard work washed out in such quick order. The buck private who had the very important job of sweeping out the hangars—brave guy!—spoke in the spirit of '76, and '18, when he said:

"Fellers, I'll grab me one of these dam' D.H.'s, and I'll go up and burn that so-and-so of a Hun such-and-such into the this-and-that ground. So I will, by hell! And I'll take an' chase every last son of a bad-and-worse clear back to Berlin, and when I get through, these—"

"Yeh?" the private who put that slick high-shine on Major Kingsley's best boots put in, "you an' who else, greaseball? You just shove that muck-stick a little faster, y' loud son, or I'll tell the M.S.E. that you're laying down on y' high-class job.

You'll fly one of these D.H.'s! You'll—"

"Hey, dogrobber!" the private who swept those big hangars yelled. "I'll take and shag your hip-bones t'hell and gone back to your place under the Old Man's bunk if—"

At this point, Major Kingsley, still studying his wristwatch, came in through a back flap of the canvas hangar; and the two high-paid men quit their wrangling. But anyway, the guy who pushed the broom had the right idea: Everybody must work with the one big idea—get Seidl.

IV

AT five that evening, Major Kingsley was still pacing the deadline, and watching the eastern sky. With four hours gone, Captain Male, if he was still on the wing, would have a little more time left. Kingsley wasn't the sort of a man to break out in a sweat every time one of his ships flew a long patrol, but he did have some fear lest Male might have returned to the Front and taken on more than he could handle. Captain Male was that type of man, too. Making him a captain, and placing him in flight command, had never slowed the bird up one bit. He was no more cautious now than he had been as a cadet. Male, at that, had been just about the wildest cadet to ever smash flying rules—and laugh right out loud at the smashing.

Kingsley, still watching that watch, saw five-fifteen come and go. He kicked a few more stones in his pacing, and, swinging on his heels, headed for his small office. No use waiting for the captain, he figured, for the captain wasn't coming. The outfit, Kingsley concluded, lost four ships out of seven on the mission. And that report—four out of seven—will sure hit Air Service Headquarters where Headquarters doesn't like to be hit. Tough on Headquarters.

On the threshold of his office, Major Kingsley stopped and turned. He stretched both ears, and stared into the east once more. A few seconds later he caught sight of a low-flying, smoke-waving craft that was bearing down on the field. It was a D.H., all right, and it must be Male. It was Male. A few minutes later, the captain had rolled to a stop afront the hangars. And now, not only a wing-tip

was missing from Male's ship, but two struts had been shattered and the propeller was whistling—splintered. Male had been through the wringer again. And in a hundred ways his equipment yelled of the fact.

Squadron mates lifted Male's dead observer from the rear pit.

"I took Harry"—Male was speaking of that observer—"back as far as the Forges with me because I knew he'd want to hop along. Yes, I know that Harry was beyond caring. When he was hit there was no doubt as to how bad."

Walking to the small field headquarters, Captain Male went into details as he talked and walked with the C. O.

"We've got what we've been working for, sir," he explained. "One of Seidl's men was forced down on the south bank of the Forges. The ship, with a dead man in the pit, is wing-deep in the stream.

"But the guns, and the cartridge belts will be intact. All that area, north of The Dead Man and up beyond Forges Wood, is under heavy shelling. I went back to make sure of the layout, and to satisfy myself that nobody was trying to reach that Fokker. So far, so good.

"Nobody was within several kilometers of the spot, and, with a little luck, and a lot of hard work, we might expect to get in there and bring out those cartridge belts.

"Then, maybe, the rest of the A.E.F. will believe that this mob operates entirely with incendiaries."

"You mean, go in tonight?" the major asked. "That the idea?"

"As soon as it's dark, sir, I'll be ready to shove off."

"But how, Captain, in the name of reason, can you get in there? How can you go where nothing but shells are now going?" Major Kingsley wanted to know.

HE asked the last group of questions as though he considered the whole thing out of reason. Surely, Captain Male was talking through his hat, or helmet. Well, maybe he was, but when Male undertook to explain his mad plan, the good major was knocked for a long row of slow loops, then some!

"Sir!" Male went on to explain, "when I was a kid back in California, we used to swim at a place where the Southern

Pacific R.R. crossed Grass Lake. That S.P. trestlework was a mile long and all of fifteen feet above the lake. Well, we kids used to climb aboard the freights up at Big Snake Junction. Then we'd stay with the freights till they reached the trestle, and rolling at forty miles per hour, we'd make our dive. Those of us who got good at the thing are now in this war. I'm not swinging any lead, sir, when I stand up on both hind legs and say that I was just about as good as they came. There's my plan."

"I don't see it," the major said. "Where's your plan? Are we to run a freight along the Forges, Captain?"

"Yes," Male smiled. "A danged fast D.H. freight, sir."

"And you'll drop off a flying D.H. into the Forges?" the incredulous C. O. exclaimed. "Is that your mad plan? You're crazy."

"It can be done, sir," Captain Male insisted.

"Too desperate, Captain. Too damned mad, mister," the C. O. said. "How would you ever get back?"

"Ah," Captain Male went on to explain, "there's where the cockeyed plot begins to solidify, sir. My return will necessitate a quick landing by one of my brother pilots. There's a good landing spot in the Forges bottom-land not more than a few hundred yards west of the mired-down Fokker. It has a good east-and-west approach; and this evening there's a fairly stiff wind out of the west across that neck of the woods."

"Well, look-a here," the major suggested, "if a ship can land in there, and if it must make a landing to get you out, why not let him land with you and do the job all at once?"

"That question is reasonable enough, sir," Captain Male agreed; "but a landing ship, if it has been picked up by the searchlights at all, would draw all the enemy fire in that area if it were to shoot a landing there. But if a ship just drops low across that bit of bottom, nobody will guess that a high and fancy diver has done his stuff and flopped from the landing gear."

Major Kingsley tapped his desk with the butt-end of a ruler. Then, for a long time, he tried to make that ruler stand on end; and off toward the Front,

hardly a dozen kilometers away, heavies were shaking the world, and that old ruler wouldn't stand on end. The C. O. gave up trying, tossed the ruler aside, and went to drawing strange squares, circles and triangles on his blotter. In other and fewer words, the man in command was trying to concentrate, trying to come to a conclusion, trying to decide whether or not he would allow this mad captain to go out and commit suicide.

Finally, the major had the required number of squares, circles and triangles drawn. He tossed the pencil aside, studied that much-used wristwatch, discovered that it was already seven-fifteen, and said:

"I'm not detailing you on this mission, Captain, but if you wish, you may go. Now, how about your co-worker? Who's the pilot for this job? How about me?"

"You'd do, sir," Captain Male agreed, "but I'm going to ask for Sergeant Vanetti. The sergeant and I work very well together."

"But," the C. O. said, "a sergeant has no flying status on the Front, Captain. As for him flying over the lines, well it just isn't being done. That is, it isn't the usual thing. But then again, this mission isn't the usual thing is it? Why Vanetti, Captain?"

"Sergeant Vanetti," Captain Male told the commanding officer, "is the best hand with a D.H. in the A.E.F., sir, and—"

"And," the major took up, with a half-smile, "that's dam' hard on the commissioned personnel, on we officers and gentlemen who are supposed to do all the high-falutin' birding over here, eh?"

"No, not exactly that, sir," Captain Male laughed, "but it's the truth, Sergeant Vanetti has something that the rest of us can't match. It isn't our fault, it's just his gift. The sergeant and I have done a lot of aviating together, sir. That was back at Romorantin, before we came up here on the Front. Vanetti has a feel-off-ship that few men ever get. He can stall and stagger a DeHaviland's flight lower than any man in the game. I'll swear, sir, I've been with Vanetti when he'd slow down and fly formation with the French students near Chateauroux. And those students were flying Caudrons. With any kind of a wind this evening, Vanetti will

be able to kill off speed till his ship will be mushing ahead at far less than fifty miles per hour. I have no dread of dropping from a plane that is in the sergeant's hands."

"Well, Captain," Major Kingsley said, "just between friends, as you and I know, orders are only made to be broken. You go get yourself something to eat now. Line up the night's work. Get the sergeant's point of view. Then both of you come back here before you get set to shove off. I want to make you pass inspection. M'gosh, if you men are going to be grabbed by the enemy, I want to make sure that you're entirely presentable. . . . And, by the way, Captain—better fix the sergeant up with an officer's uniform and some sort of credentials. If you two are taken, we don't want him to face the rough going that an enlisted man in a German pen must expect. That's the least we might do for a man who can fly better than any of his superiors, eh?"

"Don't be too hard on me, sir," Male laughed. "But I will see to it that the sergeant is fixed up."

V

IN the officers' mess, over a hastily bolted meal, Captain Male explained the lay of the land to Sergeant Vanetti. A military map covered the table between them, the captain slopped a bit of coffee into the river as he pointed out the spot on the Forges for which they were headed. The sergeant was all eyes and ears, and all hopped-up for the mission ahead. It was easy to satisfy Vanetti, on airwork.

"Now," the captain said to his sergeant, "I told the Old Man that you could kill off a DeHaviland's speed down to fifty per, or less. I was right, wasn't I, Sergeant?"

"Yeah," Vanetti told Male, "we can stall this job down to forty or less. You'll make the drop all right, and I'll promise to pick you up. I'll either pick you up or fix things so's nobody will ever pick either of us up again. . . . Now you say this strip of bottom is a good two-way landing, eh? I'll be there with bells on as soon as you knock that Fokker loose from her belts."

"You'll do, Sergeant," Captain Male

laughed. "Let's go and tell the commanding officer that we want this night off for a sidetrip to the east."

A D.H.'s motor was turning over on the line, out in the gathering dusk. Inside the major's quarters, the major, Captain Male and Sergeant Vanetti were once more covering the job ahead. Few of the command knew that two men were about to tackle the impossible; and the two men were not out to advertise the fact. There'd be time enough for cheering later on, if they got away with the thing.

"This mission," the major said, trying to make a pen stick upright in the hard wood of the desk's top, "is tremendous, men. So far, you have acted entirely on your own free will. Right now, if you choose, and nobody will ever know the difference, you can again exercise that same free will, and I will order that ship taken back to its hangar. I'm going outside now. I want to take a walk. In about five minutes there'll be a liberty truck running into town. It's all right with me if you two men take that truck. You need a little time off. On the other hand, if, in a few minutes, I hear a Liberty motor yelling in the night—well. I'll be waiting up till that ship comes back. If it's a trip to town—have a good time, and everything. But if it's the other thing—time everything good, and God be with you."

Major Kingsley shook hands with each man, lit a smoke for himself, stopped trying to make his desk implements do things, and went out into the dusk. Off on the deadline, the Liberty was still ticking over. High over head, through the shifting clouds, a full moon was floating in a high French sky. It was one *bon* night.

"What did the big boy mean—hop a bus to town," the sergeant wanted to know, "is this mission of ours washed out?"

"Not so's you'd notice it, sergeant," Captain Male said. "The major merely meant that we could quit if we wished."

"Hell, Captain!" Vanetti objected in a half wail. "Why should we quit, eh? We ain't started yet, even. Let's go."

Major Kingsley was strolling down the road half a mile from camp when a Liberty motor wailed loudly in the night. The major half turned and listened. The wail fell—wheel-chocks were

being pulled—then roared louder again—the ship was taxiing down the runway—and now the noise of the distant D.H. filled the night, and the craft was making its take-off.

Major Kingsley strolled back toward the camp, watching a dark object rise and cross the moon. He glanced at that wrist-watch of his; the hour was exactly nine o'clock.

"Nine," Major Kingsley said to himself. "Good Lord, it seems like a year and a day since I sent out that last mission for Seidl to burn down. Three out of seven! And some of my best men too. Nine o'clock. I'll know something before midnight. If I don't know then, or by one, or shortly after, then there'll be no knowing; and Male will be among those 'sent out by Kingsley.' Incendiary bullets! International law! Bah! Hell! I'll take the law into my own hands, wrap a brace of incendiary bandoleers around one of Seidl's men's neck and drop him back into Germany. By hell! I'd do that in a minute.

"If I lose Male and the sergeant tonight, I'll quit. I'll hand in my resignation and take a reduction. Headquarters won't fight fire with fire. They won't allow me to fight incendiary with incendiary. And God knows I'm done sending fighting men out there to die without a fighting man's chance.

"'Bring us the evidence, Kingsley,' they yell, and laugh. 'Old Man Kingsley must be growing old. Thinking queer things, the old boy is. Thinks that the Hun is using incendiary bullets against his men. Strange that the Hun isn't doing that against other units. Poor Kingsley! Poor fellow thinks the enemy would take a chance on being caught loaded that way. Yes, Major Kingsley, bless his fighting soul, must be slowing up.'"

Walking back down the road, the major chewed all that over in his mind. Time and time again, the staff gang at Headquarters had seen fit to kid him. The major had always taken it in good grace; but, way down inside, the thing rankled. It was killing, that's all.

So Kingsley went back to his small office. He got the co-operating pursuit group commander on the telephone. They exchanged a little friendly kidding, then

Kingsley asked: "How many pursuit ships can you put in the air by ten tomorrow?"

"Let's see," the pursuit commander answered, and turned to his "in commission" chart. "Hello, Kingsley—I can cover you with at least a dozen. How will that be?"

"That's fine," Major Kingsley answered. "Just a second—how are you fixed for incendiaries?"

"Got plenty," the pursuit C. O. answered. "That is, Kingsley, we have enough for balloon work, but none for ordinary patrol."

"That's fine," Major Kingsley answered. "But you make sure that you have enough incendiary ammunition to load all guns solid. If I call you back and ask for this morning patrol, I'll want all guns loaded that way. And if I do call, I'll also have proof enough to satisfy you that the guns, for this trip over, should be loaded that way. Good night, Seewell."

With that bit of business off his hands, Major Kingsley worked for half an hour till he had headquarters of another pursuit group. Colonel Windham was in command here. Kingsley got a promise of ten more Spads. He asked for this coverage for 11:30. And, to Colonel Windham, he explained.

"I want full pursuit protection for four hours. Your Spads can't make that long a patrol. Seewell's men will take care of us for the first half of our mission. You see, Colonel, we're going out looking for somebody, and we're going to stay in the air till that party is located, or till a gasoline shortage sends us down. If that happens, we'll refuel and make a second try. And so on and so forth till we make our point. Maybe it will be a long game. Well, we've waited a long time. I think that the end is close at hand. . . . Don't forget what I suggested about incendiary ammunition, sir."

As he hung up, Kingsley knew that he caught a slight twitter from Colonel Windham's end of the line. Kingsley didn't mind now.

VI

BACK over that ear-splitting, man-mad-denying air trail Captain Male was making his rough way. For the first half of the journey, the captain was doing the piloting from the rear seat of the DeHavi-

land. Sergeant Vanetti, enjoying the large-sized evening, was merely a happy voyager in the front pit. Now and then, the captain reached ahead, tapped the sergeant on the back, and pointed out some earthly marker of special interest. The guns of both armies were warming up for the Argonne push which was about to start. Towns were burning, and sending their smoke into the east. Wheat fields were on fire, and showing thin red lines of sweeping flame. Searchlights circled the sky. A thousand guns belched along that thirty miles of American front; and these two looked down on every bit of it. That was one night, and one sight, well worth the price.

Their Liberty motor was singing sweetly to them; and the newly commissioned D.H. which they were using, handled like a pursuit job. Knocking off the miles, zigzagging all the way, the mad captain and his nerveless non-com, were sitting on top the burning world.

They were crossing the lines and Captain Male had all his attention on Forges, not far ahead now, when his sergeant began to yell, kick and shake the controls, and act like a lunatic. He was pointing ahead, and down. Male turned his attention to the non-com and yelled, throttling his power for a few seconds.

"What's eating you, Sergeant?"

"Look," Vanetti barked. "A ship. Almost under us. A two-motored job. She's a bomber. . . . See it?"

Male located the black craft flying westward almost directly under them now. And Male went into deep thought. This craft, he had no doubt, was an enemy ship a-bombing bent. But the mission in the hands of these Yanks was so important that it superseded all side-trips no matter how attractive they might be. Captain Male was about to use this line of logical argument on his rasher self when said rasher self spoke right up and said, to the non-com.

"Well, what are you going to do about it? The ship is yours! You're on that front gun! Take it away!"

THE big enemy ship was now passing directly below. The Yank ship had about four thousand elevation. Sergeant Vanetti poked that DeHaviland's nose al-

most straight down, stood on his rudder bar, screwed his old onion into the headrest, and brought the target into his ring-sight. And they went down. Down was right, and right now. Full gun, almost, and that old Liberty barking louder than the ground batteries. Also, the Liberty was dragging long lashes of exhaust fires from its stacks; and a fire-belching ship can't come down through the night, and cross a big moon, without drawing some attention to the fact that it is there, and in business. Also, that diving ship was sure to draw fire. The Hun gunner had swung a brace of spitting guns skyward, and DeHaviland-ward, before the excited sergeant knew what was about to come off. But the sergeant was more or less premature with his own smother of lead; and when he pulled out of the dive—missing the larger ship by scant feet—the rear-seat Hun gunner was laying across his gunnel, dead.

Well, at this point the wild enlisted stiff almost pulled a lethal boner. In coming out of his dive, Sergeant Vanetti zoomed, and in zooming, he exposed his whole broadside to the bomber's front gunner. The Hun gunner, all set in a front *nacelle*, lay his two guns right on the D.H. However, Male had that front-*nacelle* Hun equaled, two for two, and the Yank captain's brace of guns spoke first. Not only did Captain Male's burst get the gunner, but the man at the controls slumped in his belt. Quickly, however, the auxiliary pilot unstrapped his mate and slid in behind the Dep-wheel. In a flash, that second pilot had the big ship back on an even keel.

By then the sergeant had recovered from his redressing zoom, and the shadowy enemy had drifted ahead. Down came Vanetti for a second try. His gun rattled to the king's taste; and his A-1 gunnery—the gunnery of an old enlisted man—was telling. Perhaps that Hun pilot got it right off the reel. Maybe he was playing safe.

Anyway, in that dark sky, there was little that the Yanks could see and be sure of. But from the time Vanetti opened with his diving burst, the Hun bomber had started his dive; and the big ship never came back under full control. Captain Male and his sergeant followed down till they saw a clump of trees gather the big

bird in, and a two-way Yank cheer, unheard to the world, went up into the night. For a few seconds the sergeant fought to regain his former course; and in the end called upon the captain to find the direction of their objective once more. Captain Male, with a great grin on his face, took over the controls and put his nose on the line that should lead to Forges, and the wrecked Fokker. And the night was red again; and heavy guns shook the world; and even the air around them waved, bumped and pulsed. But two *soldats Americain* were full of pep.

THE Dead Man forest was soon under them. Short miles and brief minutes now stood between them and the place where the Forges half hid a Fokker. Captain Male shook his controls and humped his line-of-flight. Sergeant Vanetti took over the ship. The captain next leaned far over the sergeant's right shoulder, and talked into his ear, pointing. He was pointing down to where silver traced the earth.

"There's your river down there, ace," the captain kidded. "That thin, winding thread is one wet river, the Forges. See it?"

The sergeant yelled back, "I see the bloody silver thing. Pretty, ain't it? And wet, you say? Doesn't look big enough to be very wet. . . . But you'll find out all about that."

"And there's the bottom land where you'll pick me up," Male pointed out. "Get it? . . . That's good field, Sergeant. . . . See that smoke down there? . . . We've got a good stiff blow from the west. . . . Go down across that field a few times and look her over. We've got the time, and we best make sure. . . . Look her over good. . . . Remember, I'm counting, heavily, on you, Sergeant."

Sergeant Vanetti cut his gun, dropped his nose, and went down for a look at the river and the field in which he was to land. Three times, at less than a hundred foot elevation, he crossed and recrossed the layout, then he turned again to the captain and called, "I'm all set. Climb over the side anytime. I'll put you right in the cockpit of that ship. Why get all wet?"

Sergeant Vanetti had by now dropped downwind once more. He was circling, very low, in a tight *verage*, and waiting for the captain to go overside and down

to the landing gear from which he would drop. Captain Male was climbing out of his flying gear, also free of his heavy field boots, and getting set for the big moment. Finally, the captain was ready. Out of his seat, and up over the sergeant's shoulders he was scrambling on his way to the right lower wing. Astride the back of Sergeant Vanetti's neck, Captain Male stopped for a final bit of instruction. Vanetti throttled low.

"When you put me in the river, Sergeant," he ordered, "you go down to the east, and pick up a bit of altitude for yourself. Play safe. Things look quietest down that way, toward the French sector. Then as soon as I get the belts and make my way to shore, I'll have to take a chance and cup a few lighted matches to show that I'm all set for your landing. And as for you, when you see my signal, retard your spark for a second and give me a flash of flame from your exhaust stacks. Maybe we'll light up the whole sky like a house on fire, but it can't be helped. If I have any kind of luck this shouldn't take more than ten minutes. Be good now. And let me see how slow you can stall this bus."

Wham! Wham! Wham! And more wham-whamming coming up!

NO sooner had Male stopped talking, and slipped to the lower wing, than the whole sky seemed overloaded with exploded H-E. shells, flaming onions, and a few rockets thrown in for good luck. Vanetti's hot exhaust stacks, circling there over one spot, had sure served to bring down the wrath of the Hun on their plans.

Wham! W-h-h-i-s-s-s! And more stuff passed too close; and the D.H. tossed and settled as the sergeant brought her back on a straight, lowering westward course. Captain Male, shells or no shells, Hun or no Hun, had gone from the right lower, and was now out of Vanetti's sight. A second later and the sergeant heard a dull, heavy pounding under his floor boards, and he knew that the captain was safe on the landing-gear spreader-board. Male was in place.

Again, the sky lit up with more fireworks. And the throttled, gliding, fish-tailing craft was making bad weather of the approach along the river.

The sergeant, flying with that fine-fingered handling of his, hung far out to the left of his windshield and tried to locate that spot in the Forges that was a wrecked Fokker. Luck was with him. Far to the west a sky shell lit up the black, floated slowly down, and showed Vanetti what he wanted to see. The sergeant sideslipped and lost more altitude. At the same time he throttled till he dare throttle no lower. His headway fell off. There was little or no control on his rudder and elevators; and his nose was too high for sensible handling.

But—hell!—this wasn't the time or place for sensible handling. Sensible handling was for majors and high-rankers who like to live, and have nothing of importance to do while they are living so carefully. A man in the sergeant's place had to take a chance. He had to kill off every possible bit of speed. He had to stall that bus till it staggered. Also, he had to be in control when the time to redress and shoot along the surface should arrive.

Down through the dark, Vanetti watched for the up-coming ground. And it was up-coming! The whole crate shook and shimmied in that slip. You'd guess that the tail-service would buckle with all that vibration and leave any time now. Dust and dirt sifted straight up from the floorboards and filled the sergeant's eyes; and when the cockpit's debris is vacuumed out like that, well you know that a slip is being staged. Vanetti stayed right with it.

VII

CAPTAIN MALE, with his long fingers hooked into the axle channel of the landing gear's spreader bar, trailed back from that under carriage like a shirt on a line. The propeller blast, thrown downward by the ship's nose-high sideslip, whipped back and cut his face with bullet-like slugs of dripping oil and overflow water. But Male held everything, studied the approach to the near-by water, and spotted his destination not far ahead. Every quiver and shake in that slipping box of a D.H. came down through Male's outstretched arms, and the wonder was that he wasn't shaken loose long before the Forges came up to meet him.

The captain knew that the second had

arrived, when Vanetti kicked his ship out of the slip, dropped its nose, ever so little, to redress, then went along the stream, fishtailing to the west.

Captain Male dangled almost vertical now. There was little speed attending the ship's staggering headway, and the throttled motor purred lowly. So slowly was the propeller turning that the craft was no longer holding its own in flight. Settling, settling, settling, Male watched the water come up till he expected to feel its wetness upon his feet. Just ahead, easily seen now, was the half submerged German Fokker. High overhead, still coming to Male's fine-drawn senses, roared the concussion and bark of shells. A strange, dim light fell upon all of the world that he could still see, in a queer passing way, and an endless period of time seemed to stretch out before the voice of his sergeant came down to him:

"There she is, Captain. Drop!" Sergeant Vanetti yelled.

Captain Male heard the hellish roar which came into the world just above his head. He knew that the sergeant was hitting the Liberty with full throttle; and that the great bus was taking the gun in a wild zoom.

Male realized that he was coming back to the surface, and swimming. In a flash then, everything came home to the captain. He quit swimming, began to tread water, and listen. His eyes were rapidly accustoming themselves to the light and to his new surroundings. Both banks of the Forges seemed to be deserted; and the Fokker was a thing apart in this battling world. Male, dog-paddling in order that the surface water might not be rippled too much, made his way toward the wreck. A few minutes, and he was there.

The cockpit was pretty well under water. The dead pilot was still in his safety belt; and his right hand was tight on a wide open throttle.

Captain Male, working as quietly as possible, took that dead bird out of his safety belt, eased him over the gunnel of the pit, and shipped him down stream. Good to have him out of the way! Next, head down, the captain labored under water till he located the fasteners on the cartridge belt housings. It was a battle to open those containers. But in the end, he had what

he had come for: Two half-used rolls of machine-gun bullets.

Still working half under water, Male opened his shirt and secured those drummed rolls inside. Then he buttoned up the shirt, cinched up on his belt, and made for the shore-side clearing. He swam slowly. The added weight of his cargo made under-water swimming easier, and for the greater part of his trip, he tried to stay under. All the time, he studied the shore which he was approaching. Nothing moved there. It was almost too good to be true. Strange that no enemy patrols had tumbled to what that circling plane was about to try. Well—the captain told himself, all the way to shore—we're not out of the woods yet, and it isn't too late for a lot of hell. Maybe they're waiting for me in the high grass. Perhaps they have a nice surprise for me, all set.

MALE'S feet found bottom. It was a slippery, gooey bottom. Wading out, he came to the steep bank. It was also slippery. He must take this thing easy. No noise. No slipping now. Wonder what time it is? Then Male kicked Male for one dam' fool! His eyes fell upon the luminous dial of his wrist-watch. Under water, he ducked that bright dial. He pulled it off, and slipped it into his sock. But he had spotted the time. It was eleven-twenty. Captain Male's stout Yank heart just about failed him. The thing had taken more time than he had planned. Eleven-twenty meant that more than half of their gas supply was exhausted. It also meant that there was no more time to be lost. But if Vanetti got his signal right away, and shot his landing pronto, then all would be well. They'd have plenty of time.

Male tried half a dozen places before he found a root-entangled stretch of river-bank which made his climb possible. Slowly, even then, he had all he could do to gain the field above. Once more he dropped belly down, rested up a bit, and took a good long look.

Male's heart missed a flock of beats when he took that good long look. And the stoutest heart on record, under the same conditions, would have registered a few flutters. On the high upslope of the field, off toward Forges Wood, half a dozen black figures were moving. And this patrol

wasn't making any pretense at hiding in the grass. They were feeling at home, and acting as though this was just their usual mid-night stroll.

Male studied that group; and the silhouette told him that the boys belonged to the Fatherland. No question about that. But there was plenty of doubt as to what they were trying to do, or as to whether they were trying to do anything at all. As near as the Yank captain could make out, the group was moving away from him. He took heart. Then lost heart, for those dizzy squareheads stopped moving altogether, and all together.

MALE knew that he hadn't been seen. That wasn't the reason for the patrol's hesitation. Evidently, these troopers had either reached the westerly limit of their patrol, or they were waiting for something or somebody. A few of them had dropped to the ground. The few who still stood showed Male where the others were, and gave him a marker. But all this wasn't going to help Male at all, no how!

Male remembered the time. He took his eyes from the enemy group and studied the eastern sky. His practiced eye picked up the D.H. The sergeant was circling at an altitude that the captain placed as three thousand feet. And now and again, the Archie raked the sky in an effort to find and bring him down. Male, turning his gaze back to the group on the up-slope, could see that they, too, were watching the circling plane. Now and then, one of the group, more interested than his fellows, pointed to the American ship.

Captain Male was in a tough hole. How could he chance a fire signal with this group so close at hand? And how long was this squareheaded gang going to hang around? Well, the thing had to be done. If the sergeant came down, and these birds opened fire, Male would touch off some of the rank growth at his feet. Then, in the light of the burning stuff, he could give Vanetti the wave to pull up and make a run for it alone. That was the thing to do! It was the only thing left. Time was running out, and gas was running out.

Male fished out the tin container in which pilots always carried their matches. With his back to the group on the grade, he crouched low in the grass and got set to

cup his signal. Then Male took one last look to make sure that he was going to hide that lighted match, and—Ye gods! what a break!—two of the troopers on the upslope were bending low over a half hidden match, lighting smokes. Then those sitting came to their feet and the whole group went into a huddle around the two who had dared to ignite fags.

WAITING up there at 3,000 feet, Sergeant Vanetti had seen that small, glaring fire for just a brief second. He knew that his mate was ready. He cut his gun, came out of his circling, and began to bring that field up to him. He fought all the way to prevent the singing of struts and wires. He held that big-winged craft flat in its glide, and lost altitude. Male, tumbling quickly to what had happened, waited in mid-field. With matches still in hand, he was all ready to touch one off at the last second and show Vanetti where he was waiting.

In the minutes that dragged by, the captain lived a life. Rapid-running Time had stopped, and his pounding heart seemed loud enough to warn the clubby Huns who were making such a jolly affair of their mission. But—sure as hell!—they'd hear the D.H.

The D.H. was fluttering through the eastern tree-tops, and Vanetti was about to redress with power and set down. When that 450 h.p. motor should snap into action. Male knew that the jig would be up. And *snap* that motor must, and soon. Well, anyway, they were going to make a run for it; and Male was going to flash one match, and right here and now.

He struck, and—what hell was this turned loose! No, that wasn't Vanetti's propeller making all that noise. Male half turned and stared up-hill to the group, and the Huns were now pointing to where all that noise was crossing, mighty low, just beyond them. A hell-whooping whizbang was crossing the sky, and the thing had made a Liberty's landing noise sound like nothing. Male knew that this was his night for horseshoes. What luck!

Vanetti put his wheels on the ground not forty yards from the waiting captain. The captain was swarming aboard before the ship's tailskid had time to kick the ground. Vanetti hit her with the gun, the

wheels bounced off the ground, and half a dozen infantry pieces barked on the upslope. And two Yanks put on a regulation Air Service salute, which in polite society is called the thumbing of the nose.

And they were soon long-gone from there.

VIII

FROM office to hangars, from hangars to office, Major Kingsley had paced through those long, dragging hours. Midnight had arrived. The Liberty trucks, carrying flying officers and the outfit gold-bricks, had long since returned from town. Out in the hangars, whipped through the work by their slave-driving M. S. E., the grease-monkeys had commissioned ten D.H.'s that, shortly after midnight, would be all set for the morning's work.

Ten ships. The C. O. was well satisfied with that "in commission" report. Ten ships would make a fair-sized swarm in the morning, if they had cause to use those ships as the C. O. had planned. And if Captain Male and the sergeant got back. Major Kingsley had a hunch that they weren't coming back. Of course a hunch was only a hunch, but things had been breaking so rough, of late, that the tougher the hunch the more sure it was to pan out true. Hunch, hell! Kingsley, back in his office, tried to put all his attention on a French cigarette lighter that wouldn't light. And the dam' fancy gadget had cost the major just exactly 200 fr. in Tours.

One o'clock.

After that, through what seemed like an age, the major went outside and paced the deadline. Off to the east, and northeast, the sky was buffed in softest ruddy glow. Now and then high explosives blinked brighter in that buff, and Kingsley knew that aircraft was abroad over the lines. But was his single craft still abroad, and in the game? That, and that alone, was all the major cared about now. He'd be doubly damned, and eternally sorry, if he had allowed these men to sacrifice themselves in the proving of his, Kingsley's, own personal ideas. Oh, yes, war is war, but nothing—as the major now saw the thing—justified such singular, individual martyrdom.

Come out of it! Come out of it, Kings-

ley! What are you doing, running around out here tearing your shirt and acting like a nice old woman! Since when has an army man fallen to a place where he must worry about the personal safety of any two men? Snap into it! These, after all, are just run-of-mine soldiers. They're no better than the outa-luck infantrymen out there in the mud. Why, no matter how bad these airmen get it, they never get it half as rough as the mudhen who takes a rifle butt on the chin, or a bayonet in the belly. Get back to your quarters, turn in, and be a soldier. Pound your ear, man. By hell, you *are* getting old. Sob stuff, this.

WHEN Major Kingsley reached the threshold of his sleeping quarters and turned for a last study of the eastern sky, a straggling group of mechanics came from the direction of the tree-hidden hangars. The M. S. E., in passing, saluted his commanding officer, and said:

"They're all set to do it, sir. Ten of 'em. She's been one hell of a night's work, sir." The rest of the enlisted men had moved, dragged down the line, toward their own quarters. "Them's good macs, sir," the M. S. E. continued, indicating the good macs with a hitch of his right thumb. "One of these days, sir, I'd like to get 'em two-day passes to town. They're beginning to cloud up on me. Fed-up, what I mean. Maybe next week, sir, if it rains."

"This week, if it rains," the major promised. "Tomorrow, if things go well today, Sergeant. And Sergeant, when you shove those ships out on the line in the morning, make sure that they are right. Have them that way, Sergeant, if it's the last thing you ever do."

"You know me, sir," the M. S. E. made answer, and departed.

The C. O. did know his M. S. E.; and he smiled a bit as he watched the swagger one's back go down the line.

It was just one twenty-five when Major Kingsley reached back, fumbled absently for the doorknob that would let him in, and turned from long-lost hope that had held him through these endless hours. Then Kingsley froze in his tracks. Life came back with a rush, and, like a madman, the major went tearing out on that flying field.

The hum of a Liberty was coming out of the east; and the faintest blur of a plane was already in view. There was a G-I can of wool waste at the front corner of the nearest hangar. Kingsley ran to mid-field with the greasy mess of debris, dumped it in a pile, and chucked a match into the litter. A fire burned merrily. The incoming ship skirted down to the east of the field, brought its nose around, and—The motor died. The major froze again. His heart just about went out of business then, and it was a strong, regulation, A-1 heart too. The ship was in its glide. It came on, and down. It whis-s-s-h-e-d through the trees to the east. It hit the ground, made a series of bucking-bronc bounces—*à le cheval*—and rolled to a stop with its dead stick, one tip down, in the fire. And the long mission was at an end.

"Whew!" Captain Male exploded, and wrung the sweat from his brow. He stood in the rear pit and saluted his superior officer.

"Whew!—is right!" Sergeant Vanetti agreed. "Two whews for me."

"That fire, sir," Male said, "was the only thing that saved our necks. For the life of me, and you'll hardly believe it, I couldn't distinguish this field from the clump of fir over here to the west. I was going to over-shoot my landing sure. Thanks for the illumination."

The guard had arrived, a-runnin' and the fire had been quickly kicked out. The captain and his sergeant were sliding to the ground. Captain Male, presently, was making an elaborate report, and saying: "Sir, we have had a big evening. What we went after we got."

"A wetting, Captain?" the C. O. kidded. "You sure look it."

"That was incidental, sir," Captain Male laughed. "And there were a few accidental happenings. But the intentional thing was Sergeant Vanetti's bagging of one twin-motored enemy bomber."

"Do tell"; the C. O. exclaimed. "By Godfrey, Sergeant, that is quite a distinction."

"Quite a lok of luck, too, sir," the sergeant told his C. O.

The major reached out and turned the sergeant around. The non-com was, of course, wearing the lieutenant's outfit that Male had procured for him. As though

noticing the outfit for the first time, the Old Man remarked:

"The Sergeant seems to fit these clothes just about right, eh, Captain?"

"Sir," Captain Male answered, "I never knew anybody who could fill them better. I'm going to recommend Sergeant Vanetti for a commission, sir."

"And I'll indorse your recommendation, Captain," the major promised. "Let's go to my quarters. I'll have the guard call M. S. E. Moody. Moody is quite a ballistic expert. We'll have him inspect these German cartridges, Captain."

IX

WITH the other three men watching, M. S. E. Moody went to work on those cartridge belts at two a.m. By three o'clock he had ripped open every last one of them. All were incendiary bullets.

The hard-faced major heaved a sigh of bitter relief.

"That," he said, "proves our contention, Captain. Now we'll get action. Again, I shake hands with you and the sergeant; and bid you good-night. In the morning, Sergeant Vanetti—contrary to all Air Service orders—will fly a ship in our group. . . . That will be all for now. Get some sleep. For my own part, I must do a little telephoning. There's a few of my colleagues who must get out of bed and listen to what we have uncovered. It will do them a world of good. They've been so doubtful, and wise. Kingsley—they have said—you talk like a madman. Incendiaries. Tush! Tush!"

Major Kingsley got a call through to that other major, Seewell. A guard had rooted Major Seewell out of his cot and the major, with little or no ceremony, yelled—"What t' hell's the big idea, Kingsley? Y'd think there was a fire! Won't this war keep till morning? Where do you get this stuff, rootin' a man out in his dam' shirttail? Why, I could have you cashiered for less than this."

"Hello, hello," Major Kingsley called back. "This brother Seewell speaking? This is Major Kingsley, the pyromaniac who has been talking about incendiary bullets for so long. Listen, Seewell. You recall that I asked you for some ships to cover a patrol in the a.m.? And you'll recall that

I asked you to load your machine guns with hot stuff? Well, brother Seewell, one of my men, two of my men, Captain Male and a Sergeant Vanetti, went into the bad lands a few hours ago and brought back the cartridge belts from one of Seidl's group Fokkers. My Major, those belts were as we expected, all loaded solid with incendiaries. What do you think of that, Seewell?"

"That's not so good, Kingsley," Major Seewell answered. "I'll get my armorers out of the hay right now and get them busy reloading our belts. You'll get those twelve ships, Kingsley, and they'll be as you ask, solid with tracer and incendiary. What time will you be taking the air?"

"We'll be ready to shove off at ten. You can get your flight to altitude before that. We'll work under you up toward the lines. When your patrol time runs out, Colonel Windham's group will take over and cover us. Thanks, Major. Sweet dreams for the rest of the night. Let's see you get 'em. So-long now."

"Go to hell!" the wire snapped; and it seemed to sound very much like Major Seewell's voice. At least, Kingsley thought so.

BY three-forty-five that morning, Major Kingsley had reached Colonel Windham's adjutant. The adjutant, Captain Cutting, was just a standard army adjutant. That is, he had a bad stomach, and the attending long face. Kingsley felt no misgivings about getting an adjutant out of his blankets, for an adjutant never does sleep. No, he spends all his nights lying awake trying to think up mean things to do during the coming day. Or days. For a war is never too long for an adjutant. And the ways of an adjutant are dam' strange.

But Captain Cutting knew enough to say "Yes, sir" to a major of Kingsley's standing; and he promised to dig up the squadron armorers right now and get them busy on the guns. Yes, he'd make a report to the colonel and extend Major Kingsley's compliments first thing in the morning. Yes, the colonel had mentioned the promised pursuit escort. Ten Spads would be ready to cover the All-States group at eleven o'clock. And the captain hoped that Major Kingsley was feeling well, and all

that. For adjutants are very solicitous for the happiness and welfare of others—others higher up. And the adjutant, unlike Major Seewell, did not cuss—out loud—as he hung up.

For a little longer, in the cool gloom of coming morning, the fine-drawn commanding officer of the All-States group sat at his desk with a wan, satisfied smile on his gray face, and tried hard to make an eraser bounce over the ink-stand. Then, finding the thing to be almost impossible, the major gave up, lit a cigarette, buttoned up his English greatcoat, and went down to the cook-house to see what could be done about getting a jolt of hot coffee for the inner man.

The cook on shift looked up from where he was sleeping behind the hot range, and said, "Morning, Major. . . . Say, wasn't that a hell of a mission that Vanetti flew last night? Why t' hell, Major, don't they let more of the enlisted stiff's pole these planes? Y'll never win no war with the bunch of dudes they're sending up here now."

"That's right," the C.O. agreed. "How's the coffee?"

X

DAYLIGHT came with a clear sky. This was the sort of limitless, white ceiling in which a pursuit group could "hide" to the best advantage. Against that pale canopy gossamery Spad wings might cruise, and swoop, before the unsuspecting Hun had time to search the danger out. On the other hand, against that same high ceiling, any number of enemy craft might "hide" right out in the open. Not a cloud had crossed the sky since morning's mists had blown away. And the All-States group, every officer and man, was on the job with his whole heart in the work that this day should see accomplished.

At nine-thirty, up over the trees half a dozen kilometers to the south, the twelve Spads of Seewell's group climbed. They were operating in two flights of six ships each. Twelve propellers took the glare of the sun's slanting rays and heliographed the news of their cooperation to the watching Kingsley. Those twelve beautiful French birds, Yank manned, went out for altitude, and soon put lots of that fine stuff

under them. Back into the West they circled, and far in the rear of the Yank lines. Finally, the white-blue of that morning sky had blotted the flight of twelve from view. Of course, ground observers who knew just where to look could still follow them; and Major Kingsley had half a dozen men assigned to that watch.

AT nine-forty-five Major Kingsley's group went into a huddle at the dead-line for final instructions. The commanding officer was going to lead this "cold meat" flight in person. Captain Male, acting as sub-leader, would bring up the rear in high defense. The major's instructions were few. He told the men that they needed no instructions. They, he said, knew what this was all about. Yes, these men would remember what this was all about just so long as memory was given them, and just as long as they could still recall empty chairs at mess, and empty bunks at night. Squadron mates, gone west.

"Seidl's group has never failed, as yet," Major Kingsley said. "On a morning like this they'll be on hand in numbers. We'll put our defense in the covering escort. We'll be cold meat, and try to act like cold meat. It is not our intentions to tackle any enemy ship, other than those of the Seidl group, loaded as we are with incendiaries.

"However, balloons, if we chance upon them, are our meat. And if any stray enemy patrols tangle with us, well, God help them and the devil take 'em. That, I think, is about all I have to say. We'll do our best to make a Roman holiday of this. Try to stay with the formation. Climb aboard your ships now. We'll be hitting it on the tail, and getting under way."

Mechanics pulled ten Liberty propellers through. Ten motors "took it," and the noise of warming up filled the drome. Ten pilots studied the instruments on ten panels; and ten rear-seat men looked to their guns, made final adjustments and turned their backs to the whipstream blast. An anxious ground crew watched and waited the signal that would pull the chocks and send the flight on its way. Major Kingsley gave the signal to his macs, out came the wheel chocks, and he was taxiing down-field.

One by one, stringing out in single file, the nine following ships went afieled. Ten o'clock, sharp, found them in perfect formation, a single wedge of ten ships, and going east.

This D.H. formation of the All-States' outfit wasn't out for much altitude. Four or five thousand feet was all that they had when the lines were crossed. Archie picked them up right off the reel; and they just ignored old Archie, and carried on. Up across the Yank sector, over the Argonne, they went. Deeper and deeper into enemy territory, the dangerous low course took the flight. High up in the sun, for those who know where to look, twelve Spads flew along with them. The coverage was complete.

Sergeant Vanetti was at the major's right flank. Behind the sergeant was Lieutenant Wright. Then came Ott. Above and behind Ott rode Lieutenant Force. On his left echelon the major had three what you might call "new men." They were new to the All-States. Cole, Welsh and Higgenbottom were their names. One old hand, bringing up the tip of the left side was Lieutenant Bill See. Bill See was just back from a few weeks spent in the hospital. He was all ripe for more fight; and when Bill See went into action, there was a fight. Bill would sooner fight than eat, and, friend or foe, he didn't care which.

The gang always said that Bill wasn't shot down by the enemy—when he was sent to the hospital—but that he had picked on one of his own fellow Yanks in a dull moment, during a dull patrol. Bill said no such a dam' lie, and added that it was his rearseat man who shot him down because the propeller blast blew out that rearseat man's last match when he was trying to light a cig. "Me—nobody could ever shoot me down from the front," Bill See always claimed. Anyway, Bill was flying the very important left tip of the wedge.

But 'way up above, in high defense, Captain Male was flying the most important position of all, not excepting the leader's claim for tactical usefulness.

And, in spite of the few snatches of sleep that he had managed to grab, Male was pretty dog-gone tired. Three hard missions inside twenty-four hours is enough to wear out any man.

WHEN ten-thirty came the flight was pretty well into Hun country. There was plenty of aerial activities all around them; and Major Kingsley was beginning to face a big problem. That problem was to avoid these other flights. Now and then enemy ships had seemed to start toward these low-flying D.H.'s, and just as often the major had changed the course a little and discouraged such intimacies.

At one point, just as they were approaching the English sector to the north, a blundering enemy two-place ship had popped up from nowhere and, before anybody realized what was happening, the Hun ship was flying right along with the Yank group. You wouldn't believe that such a thing could happen in a clear sky, but it did. Also, it had happened before, many times.

Well, of a surprised sudden, that Hun pilot looked across that brief chasm of possible death and saw what he was moving with. The whole Yank flight saw that Hun pilot sit bolt upright, yell to his dopey gunner, and shove his ship's nose straight down. And the entire Yank unit wanted to get out, sit by the road and have a good laugh.

It is likely that, to this day, the pair of Huns in that ship can't figure how come they didn't get knocked off. How could a skyful of enemies miss them?

Only once in that first hour of patrol did Major Kingsley allow anything to interfere with the well-planned cold-meat scheme. They were well back toward Sedan by then, and the major knew that it was high time to make a turnabout and cut back across the rough American sector to the south and east. But down between Tannay and Thelonne a single-handed Spad was bestowing particular hell on a balloon position.

There were two German balloons in the air, and a third one was cradled in reserve on the ground. The lone Allied flyer—either French or Yank, most likely—was putting on a show well worth watching. So the major circled, and the whole group, following, watched. That lone Spad, however, wasn't playing with anything soft. This balloon camp must have been plenty important, judging by the amount of anti-aircraft and machine-gun units that were on hand to fight off the attacker. But the

attacking party, this solo offensive, was a willing guy. He stayed with it longer than a wiser man would have. And, after nearly twenty minutes of circling and watching, the All-States men saw the brave Spad knocked down in flames.

Flames!

That was enough for these onlookers. Major Kingsley afterward said that he could feel the whole flight tighten up behind him. Kingsley received this telepathic wave, signaled his men into attack formation, and started down. From their five-thousand-foot perch the hog-wild All-Staters howled down to four and three and two and, just under that, at about eighteen hundred feet, to where the two enemy bags swung lazily on their cables. The ground defense rattled and banged away. The winch men, now on the job, did their damndest, but that wasn't enough. And the ten DeHavilands strafed across that tough position, and zoomed. Twenty men, now in the climb, looked back to where three bags were burning. The job was very good.

XI

IT was eleven-fifteen, or shortly thereafter, when the flight of ten cut across and picked up the Meuse near Mouzon. Mouzon was thirty-five miles behind the enemy lines. Everything between this town and the lines was constantly on the alert. The flight was back at five thousand, and fifteen thousand feet higher, almost invisible to the unpracticed eye, rode the Spads. Positions west of Mouzon whaled away at the passing Yanks, Archie puffs filled the air all around them. On the hills behind Inor, more anti-aircraft batteries opened up.

Then, before Stenay was put behind the flight, Lieutenant Cole dropped off Kingsley's left flank, waved once to the gang, and went down into the river with a ship that had been hit once too often. Cole and his observer could be seen swimming ashore. Nine ships went along the Meuse.

Over toward Montmedy, beyond the Chiers River, a dogfight had fallen to three thousand feet. They had watched this milling mess of ships come down and down, during the last fifteen minutes. Now, coming to place where they could identify the

types of craft in the mêlée, Major Kingsley decided that a detour was in order, and justified. Two of those dogfighting ships were Spads. Four were Fokkers of a group not to be recognized from the distance at which Major Kingsley now flew.

THE Major signaled for a turn. Down the nine ships dived as one. The eight or ten miles were clocked off in quick order. Before they could come into the fight, however, one of the two Spads had gone by the boards for all time. With all four wings shot off, the fuselage had fallen like a shooting star. The thing was sickening. That could happen to anyone, or all, of the diving watchers.

They saw the last surviving Spad go out of that dogfight in a real hard dive. For a brief few seconds, perhaps too busy with their own joy to watch the sky above, three of those four Hun pilots zoomed and circled with joy. Only one of the four continued to follow the diving Spad. But that Germanic joy was short-lived. Kingsley's incendiaries came down like a ton of assorted brick—and every bit as red. Nine guns were spitting fire. Sky-tracing fire!

Three Fokkers were burning in the air at one and the same time. The other, hearing all that noise behind him, looked back, cut away from his quarry, and went high-tailing back along the Chiers. Kingsley was half satisfied to see that one pilot get away. He could carry back the message that three incendiary-felled ships was sure to carry for all enemy birdmen. It was a lesson well-placed, and timely. You bet!

Coming back into formation, and pushing their laboring D.H.'s hard for altitude, the Yanks looked down and back to where three piles were all burning. Hot stuff, that. Fire! Great stuff this, too. This thing of getting their first big chance to wipe, out fire with fire. Three-in-one lesson also had a great mental boost for the Yanks. They were getting somewhere. Yep, when a ship was hit with that sort of medicine, it was hit. No damn' kidding. Well, shouldn't the All-Staters know? Hadn't they lost plenty of their own in the same way? Bring on that such-and-such of a Seidl!

Fill the sky with those bloody black

crosses, and watch the All-States hellions knock 'em loose from the wing linen.

ELEVEN THIRTY was close at hand now. Off to the west, coming over at fully twenty thousand feet, was a pair of small flying wedges. Kingsley, perhaps, was the first to pick them up. Each flight had five ships. These were Colonel Windham's men. The relief was going to be on hand. Two hours of the upper escort's time was now down; and soon they must cut away and make for home. Things were working out fine, but where was that Seidl? Of all days, why wouldn't he make a showing when he was wanted most? Unreasonable Hun! Dam' ape!

Major Kingsley was thinking along those lines when he saw a streamer of fire fall, like a meteor, only a short distance to the right of his group. Ship afire! Fokker afire! A checkered bit of wing-tip still unburned. One of Seidl's group! The moment of life was at hand; and something must be happening far overhead.

Major Kingsley turned his head to look back and up. Male was giving him the wave. Sergeant Vanetti was even hanging out of his cockpit and yelling. The whole flight was pointing up. The major was now looking up. And at about fifteen thousand feet that Spad escort was engaging a skyload of checkered Fokkers. The trap had worked!

Seidl, without question, had started to "jump" the D.H.'s, and, in turn, or out of turn, he'd been properly jumped by Seewell's group. Kingsley's men were now pushing those big DeHaviland boxes for every last rev of power and every foot of climb. This was their party, and they were going to attack even if it was from the bottom up.

As they climbed, and looked ahead, two more of the checkered ships were on their way down, and both in the red. Three of Seidl's men gone, and each of the three had gone out as though "burned by Seidl" in person. But now, when Kingsley's altimeter shows nine thousand, and the fight is close at hand, one of the Spads whistles groundward. It is in flames. And a Yank makes the big choice and drops over the side. For a long time that Yank seems to fall right with his ship. Then he goes ahead and quits that waving streamer of

red. And the D.H. men go up and up. Hard men now! Ripe! All set!

The DeHaviland pilots, making as close a guess as was possible, estimated Captain Seidl's present strength as upward of twenty Fokkers. Of course, the wild mêlée gave nothing but a very limited estimate; but the "game" enemy had never yet made an attack unless he had his opponents greatly outnumbered. What a tough break this was for Seidl. To dive these nine more or less cumbersome DeHavilands and, the next second, awake to the fact that he had a dozen flashing Spads on his neck. Worst of all, these Spads were in the burning business. Seidl must have known the pangs of a living hell when he realized that his own method of fighting had turned into a deadly boomerang. Others could burn. Others could throw sportsmanship to the dogs. And these others could "jump" Seidl with overpowering, deadly numbers just as predatorially as Herr Captain and his vultures.

THE world in which these nine D.H.'s now climbed was a dizzy place to be. Everything was distorted. Full gun, and sticks back, noses high, and the horizon gone from their view, the eighteen men seemed to be lying on their backs and waiting for all that action to drop right on them. Back over his shoulder, making sure of the safety of his climbing position. Major Kingsley, time and again during the few minutes of ascent, looked aft to find his whole brood in place with propellers pawing for the ceiling. Captain Male was now highest man in the group, and—Kingsley came darned near losing his sub-leader right there.

Two Fokkers were coming down on Male. Three Spads were shagging the pair of enemy ships. The Spandaus were sending tracers into Captain Male's wings when the following Spads, with their faster dive, did the trick. The first, and closest Fokker to Male, burst into flame. Wild with agony, no doubt, that burning Hun pilot came out of his dive, then zoomed. His zoom crashed the burning mess hard into the second Fokker. Together they began to fall. And, as they passed off to the east of the D.H. group, Major Kingsley saw Force flatten out for a brief few seconds; and Get-'em Fay, with both good hot guns

on the job, made sure that the double Fokker mess would burn all the way down. Captain Male was still on high; and the dogfight above, wasn't so far above now. Far down the sky, two ships, one Spad and the other a Seidl pilot, had broken away from the main fight. After a minute of milling, another checkered ship was in the red; and the Yank was also going down with a dead motor. Ten men now in the Seewell flight.

Ten Spads that were going round and round with hellish and telling persistency. Ten pilots, with twenty rattling guns. And the major found himself musing, it sure beat business the way hell kept up!

At twelve thousand feet, and it was darned close to noon, the dogfight came right down to meet the Kingsley men. In a flash, it seemed, Herr Seidl and all his followers decided that the cold meat—now getting pretty well warmed up—was the thing that they were after. So, cutting away from the Spad scourge, all those checkered Fokkers dropped, Spandaus streaming, onto the nine wide-winged climbers. But, try as they might, Herr Seidl's boy friends could not shake that Spad unit. And the whole mess were going round and round at twelve thousand, and falling lower. It was anybody's fight for the time being.

The swarming battle had now drifted off toward Haraumont and the Meuse. Out of the fray, Kingsley could now see one of his ships—Wright in old No. 7—going down toward Damvillers. Wright was still in control of his ship. But down into Hauraumont, a Fokker was dropping. It was dropping red, too. A flash, and a splash of fire, and another German ship was done; and Kingsley saw his No. 14, with Sergeant Vanetti on the controls, pull up after that score. The major was glad that he had broken a few Air Service rules. *Bon pilote*, the sergeant!

XII

WITH that Hun off his hands, Vanetti zoomed to regain all the altitude he could win. No. 14 waited on the top of that zoom, and Vanetti redressed, looked over his nose, and—Captain Male was in bad there. Male's gunner was dead, and hanging clear of the rear pit by his observer's belt. Male, when the sergeant first

spotted him, had his ship nearly square, flat on its back. The oil-burning Liberty had the craft in a swirling eddy of smoke; and Vanetti figured that his friend was in flames.

Male had three of Seidl's men on his tail at that exact second. And still on his back, Male managed to pick off a passing Fokker that wasn't bothering him at all. Another burning heap went down to the Meuse; with its Hun pilot going over the side.

Sergeant Vanetti, laying his howling D.H. over into a right *verage*, cut a circle around those three attacking Fokkers. The sergeant's gun accounted for one. The sergeant's rear-seat man, a fine handler of guns named Winton, got a second ship off the captain's left flank and the third checkered craft flew a tight wing-over turn and went away from there. Captain Male kicked his ship back to an even keel, and came up for altitude. His dead observer still hung overside. And Vanetti, climbing with the captain, scanned the sky for more victims. Minutes of climb, and the *mêlée* was regained.

One by one now, with twelve o'clock dangerously near, the Spads of Seewell's group were cutting away from the fight. But coming down from the same direction that the department were taking, the ten ships of Colonel Windham's promise were making their way into the party.

At twelve, the last of the old escort was either picking safe landings on the wrong side of the lines, or else limping, with half-starved, throttled motors, to the right side of the Front.

With the new Spad escort—from the Lord knows where!—six English S. E. 5's came crashing in. And then things *did* happen!

Ten fresh Spads. Six seemingly fresh S. E. 5's. And eight of the D.H.'s still in the game. Of Seidl's group—some were to say later—there were still more than fifteen in the game. What kind of a swarm—you'd find yourself wondering—could that "game" guy have had when he first jumped the cold-meat DeHavilands? Well, there's no way of telling. But he must have had a veritable army on wings.

Another whirl of that hellish *mêlée* and Kingsley, and all his men, get an eyeful of something that stops their hearts. Lieu-

tenant Higgenbottom, one of those new men on the left echelon of the original formation, is being pressed by two Fokkers. That chase takes the three ships down the sky. It's at a time when the rest of the mob are working into new positions, and all see what happens. Higgenbottom knows that he can't get out from under.

Half a dozen of his mates have started for him, but they can't close the gap in time. So, with one chance in a million for success, Higgenbottom decides to pull up and try an Immelmann turn. He does pull up. The D.H. shoves its nose straight up. The following Fokkers do, too.

At the top of the zoom, Higgenbottom's Liberty cuts, clouds up with black smoke—dies. The Yank is vertical. He tries to kick in rudder and flop back for a dive. There's no control on any of his surfaces. The big ship hangs, during seconds, on its propeller. Then it drops that heavy, Liberty-motored nose for a whipstall. It whips off the entire tail service. And Higgenbottom, with Lieutenant Ratti in the rear pit, go west.

THE fight was on again. Two more of Seidl's men went down. Kingsley, in the clear for a few seconds, glanced at his watch. It was twelve-thirty.

Major Kingsley heard something too close behind him. Instinctively, he *piqued* his craft and looked back. He was under the guns of a ship from the struts of which white streamers were fluttering. Those Spandaus were blinking as Major Kingsley turned. Already, the major's gunner was slumped, out of sight, behind his guns. The major had no rear defense now. Herr Captain Seidl had this bit of high-ranking cold meat for sure. Not so sure! Something came from somewhere and crashed in between Kingsley's rudder and Seidl's guns. Major Kingsley caught sight of a No. 14, and again he thanked God for enlisted pilots. Seidl crashed, head-on, into Vanetti's left wings.

At the same moment, Vanetti's rear man let Herr Captain Seidl have it at that close range. Herr captain fell away in flames. Vanetti's ship, with those shattered left wings, went out of the fight.

The sergeant was holding some kind of control, and with lots of gliding speed and full right rudder, he kept the craft out of

a spin. Then, fighting the checkered Huns ahead of them, all those Spads, S. E. 5's and the six remaining D.H.'s, led by Kingsley, started down after Sergeant Vanetti. The Fokkers, also diving, never reached the non-com.

Sergeant Vanetti had his ship headed for a piece of good bottom land near the Forges River. If he could reach that bit of smooth bottom land, he could hope to make a landing. If he could do it in the dark, well he should be able to pull it off again in broad daylight, even with a crippled ship. He was headed for the exact spot that had seen him last night.

Before he could reach that bottom land, however, the ground batteries opened up on him once more. Then, after the close following gang had seen him fight the craft out of one near-spin, they saw Vanetti's gunner clamber out of his rear pit and make his perilous way to the tip of their right lower wing. That change of wing-load helped the sergeant.

Next, cool as they make 'em, Vanetti went east of the bottom land, flew a flat turn, headed back into the wind, and lammed in for his landing. The milling hosts overhead covered that landing; and in this last *mêlée*, the rest of Seidl's men, only five ships, took it on the run. Back along the Meuse, like bats out of hell, they went a-hi-tailing. Three of the checkered Fokkers had gone down in this last rush; and two of the three had gone down in flames. Enough fires had been set for one day, Mars knew!

While the others circled, and strafed the ground positions, Captain Male dropped downwind, turned back, came in for a landing, and dropped his crate within fifty feet of where Vanetti and the gunner were all set for a pick-up. All hell was turned loose anew when Male with a man on each lower wing, hit that old box with full gun and got under way again. But all hell turned loose might just as well have been tied up.

Male and his double load made the grade.

Behind Major Kingsley, and with the pursuit escort still covering them, five DeHavilands started for home. At one-fifteen those five ships set down on the All-States drome, the pursuit ships dipped and zoomed in salute, and went their own way.

Major Kingsley slid down from his cockpit, shook hands with the commanding general of that area, and said: "Sir, we have just ended twenty-four busy hours."

"You look the part, Major," the commanding general agreed. "Your M. S. E., here has been talking with me. After talking with him, I'd suggest a day off for this command, if you think it feasible."

"I'll turn them loose, sir," Kingsley said. "There is nothing left to fly. These six ships as you can see, are junk."

XIII

IT was several days after this big twenty-four-hour period, before the All-States group came back from town. They came back from many, many different towns. And, if the truth must come out, it was away down in Bordeaux that the M.P.'s came down on Captain Male and Sergeant Vanetti, turned 'em around, and sent the brave pair home. All Male told Major Kingsley was: "The patrol of two got lost, sir."

"I knew something like that happened, Captain," Kingsley said. "But I've been pretty busy for the last few days with outfit reorganization. Hell, man, we're not even keeping records. But, before night, I expect a ferry of ten new ships, up from Romorantin. We'll be getting back in the air anytime now. By the way, Headquarters tells me to keep Sergeant Vanetti on flying status. Not a bad idea, eh? We can use him, don't you think so?"

"That guy's bad, sir," Male laughed. "He wanted to fly over into Spain. Said he bet he could throw any bull in that country. He was practicing on M.P.'s all along our line of march. What fun, sir!"

WHEN the war ended the All-States group was still under Major Kingsley. Captain Male was on hand too. Lieutenants Ott, Welsh and Get-'em Fay were there at the end. Bill See died during the last week of the Argonne. He wasn't *got-ten from the front*—Archie got him. Sergeant Vanetti lived to go to town and whoop it up on the 11th of November too. They tell that he was the wildest whoopee man in La Belle France. He should be. He was the only enlisted stiff to do combat.

Then there came a time when Head-

quarters began to pass out medals, and hang commissions on everybody in sight. You could buy a drink with a medal almost any place, but a post-war commission was worth a whole lot less than nothing at all. About ten cents a million was the value of such commissions. Not worth bothering with. Not worth walking into the orderly room to refuse. No good, no how.

Along toward the holiday season, Christmas and New Years, the major sent an orderly to dig up Sergeant Vanetti. The sergeant was all cut up over quitting this game just when his luck was running good, and he asked the orderly if the Old Man didn't know the war was over.

The orderly was the sort of bird who always had the inside dope on everything. He must have been cockeyed from peeking through keyholes, and thin walls had his ears all splinters. But he was a good orderly as headquarters orderlies go. He looked wise and said to the sergeant: "Get wise, guy. You have something coming up. Step on it!"

"What have I got coming up?" Vanetti asked. "Are they putting out some of those two-week passes for Alix-In-The-Bath, eh?"

"Wise up, guy," the orderly insisted. "Come on. The Old Man is waiting. . . . Come on, never mind combing your teeth."

A few minutes later, Sergeant Vanetti, fully military now, made his report at headquarters. The C.O. looked up from his work, and said: "Morning Sergeant. . . . How're things going these quiet days? Getting much—flying, and stuff like that? How's the war after the war treating you?"

"I'm holding my own, sir," Vanetti told the C.O. "And that's all any young soldier can hope to do."

Major Kingsley took a blank form from his desk drawer. He passed it to the non-com. "I want you to fill out this application for a commission, Sergeant," he said. "Write it out right now; and I'll see that it goes down the line tonight. Here, sit down."

Vanetti stood back, as though afraid of touching that poisoned paper. "Not me, sir," he finally said. "None of those second-loot, restricting commissions for this baby. Not by a hell of a way!"

"Why, Sergeant," the C. O. exclaimed with surprise, "I really supposed that you'd

want it. You've earned it. What's the matter with a commission?"

"I take a commission, sir," Sergeant Vanetti said, "and my whole mob will give me the go-by. I went through the whole war as a greaseball, and I'll finish the thing as one. Thanks just the same, sir."

"But the honor and dignity of the thing, Sergeant," the C. O. reminded his non-com. "Think of yourself going home as an officer."

"You honored me," Vanetti said, "when you sent me over the front, sir. To me, sir, air isn't a thing of uniforms and regulations. I love air, sir. And if I don't get anything else in life, I've at least had two missions out where men were men. That's all I ever wanted out of this war, sir, and I'm proud that I got it. As for rank and honor, I'm on an even footing with the French non-coms that made air what it is."

And, after that last shot, Major Kingsley was left high and dry without an opener, and he knew as much. Also, he thought a hell of a lot more of Sergeant Vanetti as that non-com walked out of the office.

A MONTH later, when the squadron was up on the Rhine with the Army of Occupation, Major Kingsley again sent an orderly out to find Sergeant Vanetti. Vanetti was busy with bunk-fatigue when found.

"Now wise up, guy," the orderly again warned Vanetti. "You have something coming up."

"Listen, bo," Vanetti said to that orderly, "if the Old Man tries to hang a Y.M.C.A. commission on me this time I'll Scotch-hobble you for not telling me beforehand, see?"

"Come on, come on," the orderly insisted. "You've got something coming to you. Make it fast, guy. The Old Man's in a hurry."

When Sergeant Vanetti made his report, as ordered, the major held up a restraining hand and warned: "Now don't yell *no* to what I have to say. Understand, Sergeant?"

"Yes, sir," the non-com laughed. "All set, sir. Shoot."

"First thing in the morning, Sergeant, a group of six men roll out of this tarmac bound for Paris. You are one of them."

"I draw me a pass at last, do I?" Vanetti asked, with real heart-felt enthusiasm. "How long is it good for, sir?"

"We're not issuing any passes," the major said.

The sergeant's face fell. Where was that dam' orderly? The sergeant wanted to kill!

"You," the major continued, "are going to go down to Paris to stand in line and be kissed by a whiskery French high-ranker."

"What," Vanetti asked, "do I draw down a 'quad guerre'?"

"You do," the C. O. said; "and with palms, and everything."

"You going, sir?"

Major Kingsley nodded. "And why, I don't know," he added.

"Who else, sir?"

"Captain Male, Lieutenants Ott and Force. Posthumously, for decorations too, we'll have Lieutenants Lally, Singer, Wagner, Cole and Higgenbottom along. Now will you go too?"

"Yes," the sergeant agreed. "I've seen some pretty regular birds with the 'quad guerre' on their chests. I'll be proud to have one. But, sir, I don't mind saying that I wouldn't go along if Lally, Singer, Wagner, Cole and Higgenbottom weren't due to stand there with us. I'll be on hand, sir."

"At ten o'clock, Sergeant," Major Kingsley said; and then he worked for the longest time trying to make an eraser balance on the top of a pencil.

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THE FIVE-A-DAY ACE

By CARL B. OGILVIE

**The amazing story of one of America's
Ace of Aces—the man who downed five
enemy Fokkers in single combat!**



Sergeant-pilot David E. Putnam

UP from the ground he flashed in his brilliant red Spad. A crimson streak in a terrific open-throttle zoom. A crimson streak winging aloft, challenging picked pilots of the Imperial German Air Force. Into the very center of a ten-Fokker formation the pilot of the crimson Spad climbed. His Vickers crossed fire with chortling Spandaus.

Three more vultures, with black Maltese Crosses on their wings, hovering above, eager for the death of the Yankee pilot.

Thirteen against one!

One lone American that dared to challenge an overwhelming number of enemy pilots. Dared to fight against staggering odds without an advantage except one—his astonishing Yankee daring. That was "Dave" Putnam, American Ace of Aces, that September day back in '18.

Banking, swirling, thrusting, in the hub of a maddening hell of roaring Mercedes and barking machine guns, his twin guns suddenly flamed. Flamed until they overheated—jammed. That was Dave Putnam that day and every day that he flew. He was reckless, audacious, cold-bloodedly fearless. One of the most capable American pilots that ever flew under the Tricolor of France and the Stars and Stripes.

To everybody he was Dave. This tall, stalwart, handsome young man from Newton, Mass., who left classrooms at Harvard

to become one of the most famous and popular American pilots on the Western Front. His good nature, eagerness to help others, his skill and fame as a fighting pilot made him a favorite of two nations. Dave it was.

Many of his friends regarded him as "Hard Luck Dave." He ran into plenty of hard luck. Tough breaks hounded him. But he kept smiling, kept flying, fighting, killing. It's astonishing how many times the ominous, unlucky number 13 played a prominent part in his brilliant and regretfully short career. (Watch for the unlucky 13 as it crops up.)

Yet Dave laughed at his hard luck, laughed at danger, laughed at the Huns that set traps for him, laughed at death. David Putnam had pluck, courage and aggressiveness. An indomitable will to overcome obstacles, the character qualities of the adventurous soul.

He possessed brains and brawn. He utterly ignored the dangers of personal injury. Above all, Putnam displayed an intense devotion to country and duty which only heroes of the highest order possess.

A DIRECT descendant of that illustrious patriot, General Israel Putnam, the Revolutionary War hero, Dave was a fervent patriot. Inspired by his inherited love of country, he had but one

ambition, one dream, one all-consuming desire—to get to the war zone at the earliest possible moment.

Putnam proved his determination to see service. As soon as America entered the war he attempted to enlist. The United States Aviation Corps rejected him for military service, due to some minor physical disability. He repeatedly attempted to enlist. Finally, in desperation, he shipped aboard a cattle boat, worked his way to France in the spring of 1917.

Once in France he immediately applied for service. Inspired by the heartrending dispatches of "Bloody April," when the German Air Force was bathing the battle skies with the blood of Allied pilots, Putnam sought out the French Aviation Service and was sent to Avord to learn to fly the slow Bleriot's.

AT Avord he astonished his instructors by keeping a Penguin grasshopper plane (a Bleriot with its wings clipped and powered with a three-cylinder Anzani motor) in a direct straight line the first time he took the controls.

Putnam was elated. He said, with boyish enthusiasm: "Wait until I get to the Front. I'll fly just as straight at the Huns."

He kept that promise.

In every class Putnam quickly displayed his natural aptitude at flying. He was breveted a pilot and sent to Pau, the great French Military Aeronautic School, for final training.

So anxious was David Putnam to win his military pilot's license that he often was the first at the hangars in the morning and the last to leave at night. He hung around all day. Whenever he saw a plane idle he would get into the cockpit, take off. He performed the routine acrobatics with an ease and daring that was breath-taking. The way he executed tight spirals in the tricky eighteen-meter Nieuports left instructors limp.

This young American, they feared, would be killed before he even reached the Front. Such daring!

When he was reprimanded for stunting low over the hangars, Putnam took it good-naturedly.

"It's a good pilot's job to be daring." A strange, faraway look came into his eyes as he spoke a prophecy that came true. "I

intend to be a good pilot—the best Yankee birdman at the Front."

DAVE PUTNAM won his corporal's stripe; arrived at the Front on a disarmingly cold December day—the 13th. He had put in twenty-six weeks (twice thirteen) at training fields. He was a Lafayette Flying Corps man and was to see service with the French Squadrons of 156, 38 and 94, flying Nieuports, Morane monoplanes and Spads.

Putnam was at the Front a month when he fought and won his first battle. This tall American, with the build of an athlete, appeared like a giant alongside his French comrades of slight stature. Fighting his way out of the novice class made him instantly popular.

During his second encounter with a Boche pilot, Putnam had an extraordinary experience which he didn't soon forget. He engaged in a grueling duel with an Albatross. The pilots were about as equally matched as their Nieuport and Albatross. Neither could gain the advantage. Machine-gun lead rent the sky, but no serious damage was done. The Yankee maneuvered into a position to dive on his foe. A sharp, sudden tight spiral. A control wire loosened under the strain. And Putnam's Nieuport went over on its back. All of his extra ammunition fell out of the plane. Putnam fought with the uncertain controls of his plane, redressed his ship. Only one cartridge remained in his machine gun. With careful aim he fired his last shot. The German plane went down.

Dave was possessed with a contagious enthusiasm. But of his own unusual accomplishments he was inordinately modest and reserved. When praised by his superior officer for his uncanny flying skill and his remarkable one-shot victory, Putnam answered:

"That was luck. You won't believe it, but I was scared stiff. My hand shook so I could hardly press the trips. Scared? You bet! Scared I'd miss that Hun cootie."

A week later, February 5, 1918, Putnam fought his first foursome. Four A. E. G.s—fighting reconnaissance ships—shot his plane to ribbons. His Nieuport had the advantage of speed, but each two-seater biplane had two men, each busy with machine guns. Losing flying speed, his motor miss-

ing, struts and bracing wires shot away, Putnam just managed to dive under his enemies. As he did so he lifted the nose of his Nieuport, sent a stream of leaden death into the blind spot of the nearest plane overhead.

The German ship crashed.

Putnam barely managed to glide across the lines and make a dead-stick landing. He had come through safely without a wound, although the cowlings about him was gnawed with bullet holes. He turned his hard luck into a military triumph. For this victory, he was awarded the *Medaille Militaire*, and promoted in rank to sergeant-pilot.

Of his battle Dave said: "It was the toughest go I ever had. And a mighty narrow escape, too. The scrap lasted thirty-five minutes. Eight men behind uncomfortably accurate Spandaus. Boy, how they did shoot up my barge! First the observers in the rear pits would blaze away at me; then the pilots would swing their ships around and let me have more lead. I don't think they missed a single part of my ship. How I got away without a scratch is just another one of those inexplicable things of the war."

When it was pointed out to him that for a pilot to wage a battle against four two-seaters for thirty-five minutes and live to tell about it was conclusive evidence of extraordinary skill and masterful flying tactics—both defense and offense—he smiled and murmured:

"Maybe Lady Luck smiled on me those thirty-five minutes."

Putnam displayed his daring adventurous nature by a fondness for attacking, single-handed, large flights of enemy planes. The next day he tackled one of Germany's prize flying circuses.

He attacked in true Yankee style. Fighting the first and nearest, and all the others that wanted to mix in. The zest with which he fought, the skilful handling of his plane in sudden, tricky maneuvers, the accuracy of his gunnery, brought him out of the fight without a wound and with two of the six *jadgstaffel* pilots swirling to earth dead, or out of control.

It was then Putnam had his plane painted a brilliant red, copying Baron von Richthofen's daring in making his plane easily seen and recognizable.

IN March he repeated his two-a-day victory. Thus in thirteen weeks he had reached the class of Ace. But hard luck was to keep the coveted title away from him for a while.

He fought most of his battles so far back in Hunland that official vouchers were impossible. During this month he attacked three Albatross triplanes. He brought down one, put the other two to flight. The following day he attacked two two-seaters, sending one down to crash in flames. A little later he fought a duel over a German airdrome. The Black Cross pilot fell to his own flying field, a bullet in his heart. None of these victories was ever officially recognized.

March 14—the day he appeared over the front-line trenches in a Morane monoplane for the first time—Putnam ran into a German patrol of eighteen planes. Although overwhelmed by numbers, Putnam had one slight advantage. His Parasol was a marvel of maneuverability. He made a sudden dive. And before the gigantic enemy squadron realized what was happening, the tiny French hornet had left the sting of death upon their leader. Seventeen furious Boches took up the chase to avenge their leader's death. But with cunning and skill Putnam evaded them in one of the fastest little ships the French ever had at the Front.

Hard fighting, brilliant successes, victory after victory. He became a star pilot at the Morane controls. His Parasol was a terror to German pilots. Yet the French War Ministry allowed him only four officially confirmed victories.

But Dave grinned as he gazed at his bronze war medal. "I've got the French trinket—and I'll get more Huns. I'm going to be an Ace. It's in the bag—if my guns keep working."

Putnam knew he could and would make good. Something of the spirit of General Israel Putnam compelled him to go into battle, to fight until he won, never to withdraw as long as a German plane remained within striking range.

If the French were slow to get confirmations of his many victories, they quickly recognized his bravery. By the time five victories were finally officially recognized and he was an Ace, he had been three times mentioned in the orders of the

day. He was presented with the *Croix de Guerre* with three palms. The citation reads:

By his skill and daring and contempt for danger he has proved himself a pilot of the very first rank. Recently in attacking a patrol of nine enemy machines he downed one. And the next day while on escort duty he boldly attacked a patrol of eight enemy planes and downed two. Thus winning his 5th and 6th victories. Three times he has been mentioned in dispatches.

Although he had shot down twice his official number of planes, Putnam had only five vouchers before the American squadrons at the Front had been equipped with machine guns.

The Cigognes Squadron recognized Dave Putnam as a great ace. He was invited to join the famous Escadrille N. 3, the Storks, where France's greatest aces were gathered in one remarkably efficient *chasse* squadron. The tall, good-natured New England lad soon proved that the Cigognes' judgment of him was well warranted. With them he won aedom, palms for his *Croix de Guerre* and official credit for nine victories.

It was during his tour of duty with the Cigognes that Putnam accomplished one of the most brilliant achievements and outstanding victories of any American pilot. In one day he shot down five enemy planes. In one day, to be exact, in five furious death-dealing minutes he won five victories. The hard luck that pursued him seemed to vanish. Five minutes of bloody fighting and he became a heralded Ace of Aces, victor of five Huns!

JUNE 5, 1918. A German sea of field-gray uniforms surging down the Marne.

One of the greatest battles of the World War was in progress. The second Battle of the Marne. France, rushing her every available resource forward to halt the enemy's alarming advance. Von Hindenburg, determined to crash through the *poilus'* defense regardless of the cost of manpower. Hordes of German planes sweeping the skies above the battlefield to keep French and Allied planes from making observations.

Putnam knew that he could pick a hot scrap any place above the battle zone. He went aloft deliberately for that purpose, to give battle in the dreary sky wastes. His

squadron had been equipped with France's latest fighting ship, the Spad. Winging over the winding Marne River, he headed directly back over Hunland. In the neighborhood of Fere-en-Tardinois his alert eyes riveted on a formidable formation of ten Fokkers.

Ten of them! This would be a battle royal exactly to the liking of this lone fighter. Ten against one! This dog-fight would be as easy as routine patrol duty. Hadn't he fought eighteen Boches single-handed, without a scratch?

By tactful maneuvering Putnam surprised the mighty formation by sending his red Spad diving into their midst. The formation broke up. The American found himself in the center of a mad, racing, milling mob of planes. Spandau lead drilled at him from every angle. They didn't intend that this lone pilot flying the French *cocarde* should live to return to his lines. He wasn't to be permitted to give valuable information of advancing troops, of mobilized artillery.

Through the hail of lead Putnam soared. His crimson plane, like a smear of blood in the sky, droned into a one-sided duel of death, destruction, flames. Into the hail of lead he roared, his guns silent. Not until he was in such a position that a collision seemed inevitable did his guns speak. The German plane in front of him veered off, dropped like a plummet.

One down!

Then Putnam became a wholesale killer. Followed a five-minute period of mounting death that staggered the Boches.

Two down!

Putnam fought and killed. A man inspired to rid the skies of the German scourge. Banking, zigzagging, zooming, diving, he bewildered the enemy pilots.

Another Maltese Cross went tumbling down. A long plume of smoke behind it.

Putnam's red plane seemed to be here, there, everywhere at one and the same moment. No matter how desperately they maneuvered to line him in their sights, his lead found them first.

Number four rolled over on its back. The pilot's safety belt broke under the strain. He dropped to earth, followed by his cavorting plane.

With frantic desperation a Fokker came at the American head-on. This lone pilot

must die. The German owed it to the Fatherland. Kill the Yank, or be killed. Spandaus raked the forward part of the swirling red Spad.

Putnam crouched behind his instrument board. Held his ship straight on its course. Went head-on for the challenging German. At a combined speed of 250 m.p.h. they tore savagely at one another. In another instant there would be a head-on collision.

The Boche's nerve failed him. He veered off sharply. He was afraid of this lone killer, afraid to die.

Quick as a flash Putnam banked, went down in a mighty power dive, in hot pursuit of the withdrawing duelist. He redressed his ship. The Hun's head wavered in his ring sights. A burst of two shots. Putnam's ammunition was exhausted.

The Fokker pilot slumped over his controls. Blood seeped through his leather helmet. The American had made his last two bullets count.

Five down in as many minutes!

WITH his ammunition gone and no way of protecting himself except by skilfully maneuvering, Putnam fainted at the nearest Fokker. He was relieved to see the five remaining pilots turn and hi-tail it for their drome. He pursued them for a distance, then triumphantly winged his way back to his comrades-in-arms, the Cigognes.

Dave Putnam was the first and only American pilot to ring up a five-plane victory in one day. However, five days after his death Frank Luke shot down three balloons and two planes within ten minutes.

Putnam's tremendous and glorious achievement put him in the foremost rank of American pilots. He was regarded as a promising successor to Baylies and Lufbery. His astonishing success swept France, England and America by storm. He was a hero of heroes. This Yankee lad of twenty became in five minutes as famous as his illustrious rebel forefather. Blood will tell, and there was patriotism and daring surging through the veins of Dave Putnam.

But as famous as he was, his traditional hard luck pursued relentlessly. This greatest victory to be won by an American had been achieved so far back in Hunland that

only three of the five victories were officially confirmed.

"That's all right," said Putnam, without any sign of disappointment. "Everyone knows that to meet ten Hun pilots you must fly halfway to Berlin. They don't come over our lines these days."

But this denied credit rankled. He planned and dreamed of duplicating his five-a-day as Rene Fonck did. And it seems quite possible that this secret ambition was to be the cause of his death.

That was Putnam's last battle for France. The American Air Force was in France. The Ninety-fourth Squadron was at the Front. So was the Ninety-fifth. America needed tried-and-true pilots for squadron leaders. Putnam, a strong lover of his country, joined the American Aviation Corps. In June, after thirteen months of military service with the French, he was commissioned a first lieutenant and sent to the One Hundred and Thirty-ninth Pursuit Squadron. Note the numerals. The first two form 13; add all three and you get 13 again. Truly the hoodoo number pursued this fearless pursuit pilot.

He had nine official victories at that time.

The first dispatch from the American Army in France mentioning Putnam told of his victory near Regnieville, north of Toul, over a German biplane in a night combat.

The most renowned of American Aces was Putnam, yet he was one of "his gang." He was as good an instructor as he was a pilot and fighter. He inspired his men to great achievement. Corrected their faults, was quick to give warm praise. The squadron developed seven aces, in addition to Putnam, with a total of forty-one enemy planes to their credit. In each one of these victories there was something of the spirit of Dave Putnam, leader, instructor and friend.

For his brilliant service, General Pershing presented him with the Distinguished Service Cross and recommended him for the Congressional Medal of Honor. But hard luck still followed him. He never received America's highest cross of honor.

For thirteen weeks Dave Putnam was the world-famous pilot of Squadron One Hundred and Thirty-nine. Then came that tragic day, Friday, September 13.

Putnam and Lieutenant Robertson of Fort Smith, Arkansas, were doing a two-

man patrol at low altitude over the American trenches north of St. Mihiel. Three enemy planes swooped down on Robertson, who gave battle and later returned to the drome. But Dave Putnam never came back.

Looking up, he saw a swarm of Fokkers overhead ready to dive and crush him and Robertson. Putnam did not know that those thirteen Fokkers above had been sent out with orders, "Kill Putnam."

From a very low altitude—only three hundred feet above the Front line trenches—Dave Putnam nosed his crimson Spad upward.

Ten Fokkers, fresh from victories over two observation planes, came down in one maddening dive to snuff out his life, end his brilliant career. Three more hung above, waited. Putnam rose bravely, fearlessly to meet them.

It was his last challenge to the Imperial German Air Force.

He could have gotten away easily. But running before the enemy was a disgrace far more to be feared than death to him. He didn't even wait for them to come down to him. He didn't jockey for position. He zoomed up to face the tremendous odds of 13 to 1. Zoomed into their midst, fighting like a madman. Probably hopeful of duplicating his spectacular five victories in one gigantic furious dogfight.

A German plane toppled out of the sky. A flaming comet made by the lone American's machine guns. Then the eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth Fokkers came roaring down from above. Death hovered in

the muzzles of the Spandaus of that thirteenth machine. Leaden death.

Putnam saw them coming. His guns spat yellow fire. He got the first of the three; sent him down, to burn to a crisp. That was Putnam's thirteenth victory. Then hard luck struck Putnam a final ruthless, cruel blow. His machine guns jammed.

The pilot of the thirteenth German plane saw an easy kill. He pressed his trips. A long burst. Death rode on that burst of lead that drilled into Putnam's heart.

The red Spad shuddered, floundered in the backwash of enemy planes. Its familiar sure hand no longer guided it. The ship glided drunkenly to earth near Limey behind the American lines.

Putnam's attack had been a spectacular display of courage of the highest order. A spectacular climax to a spectacular lad who had just turned twenty-one. Putnam, who fought and flew with such remarkable skill that he had never once been touched by enemy bullets, was dead. On his wrinkled tunic, moist with his life's blood, reposed the medal ribbons attesting to his valuable service under two flags. The Distinguished Service Cross, *Legion d'Honneur*, *Croix de Guerre* with six palms (one for each time he was cited by the French Army), and the *Medaille Militaire*.

Officially accredited with thirteen victories. Multiply that number by two—yes, three—and you will come closer to the correct number of enemy pilots he shot down.

Perhaps David Putnam was America's "hard-luck" pilot, but he was a truly great Ace.

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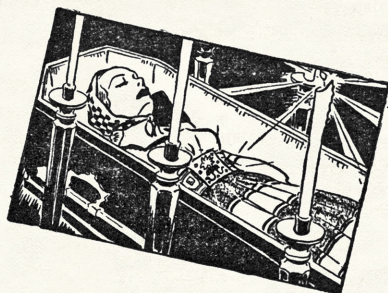
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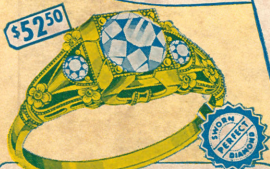
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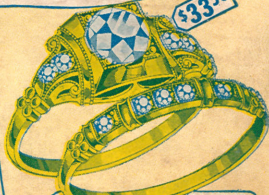
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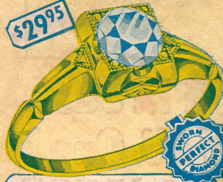
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