

FIGHTING ACES OF WAR SKIES

WINGS

NOV.

20c

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OUTLAW ACES

To fly was their religion
To die was their destiny

A complete War-Air-Novel

Published by
Boylan

By **DEREK WEST**



51

MILES ON A GALLON OF GAS WINS ECONOMY CONTEST

49 MILES Takes 2nd Place

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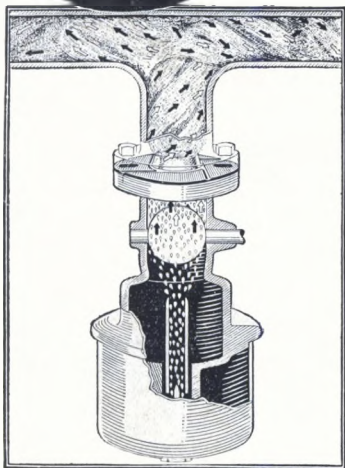
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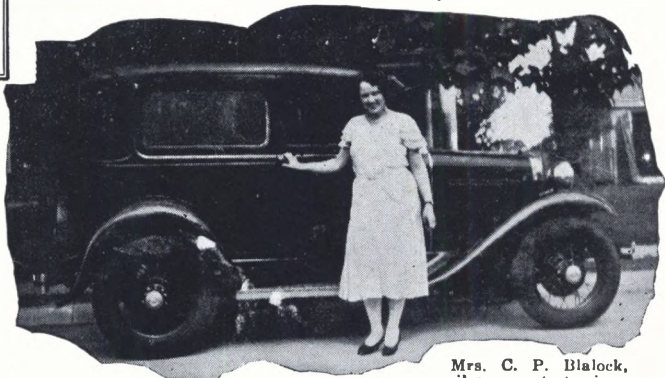


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**NOVEMBER
1932**

20c Per Copy

**VOL. V
NO. 11**

WINGS

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

THE COVER

A Strange Duel

The cover on this month's *Wings* shows an air fight between a German Fokker D7 and an American balloon observer whose bag has just been destroyed by the Jerry. Mr. Belarski got his inspiration for this picture from the exploits of Lieutenant Neibling, an American attached to a French balloon company in the Argonne. When the Fokker pilot attacked Neibling as he floated to earth the American drew his Colt and shot the Fokker down.

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You can't keep a good man down—And they couldn't keep the three flying gyrines out of the battle skies.

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Cover design and story heads by RUDOLPH BELARSKI

This magazine is
a member of the

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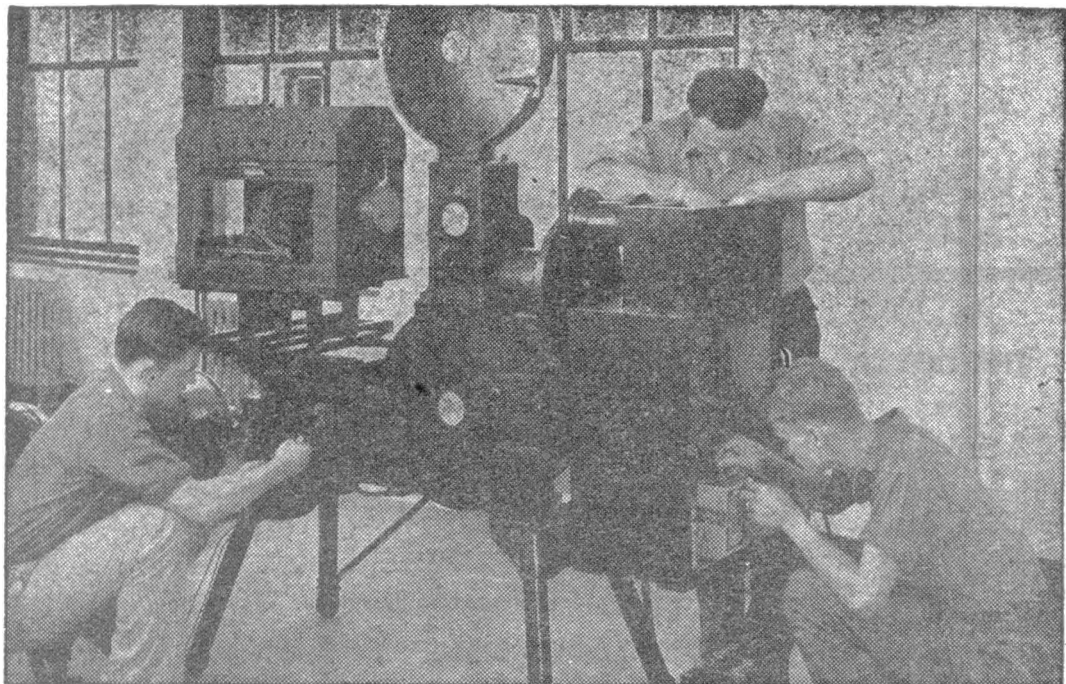
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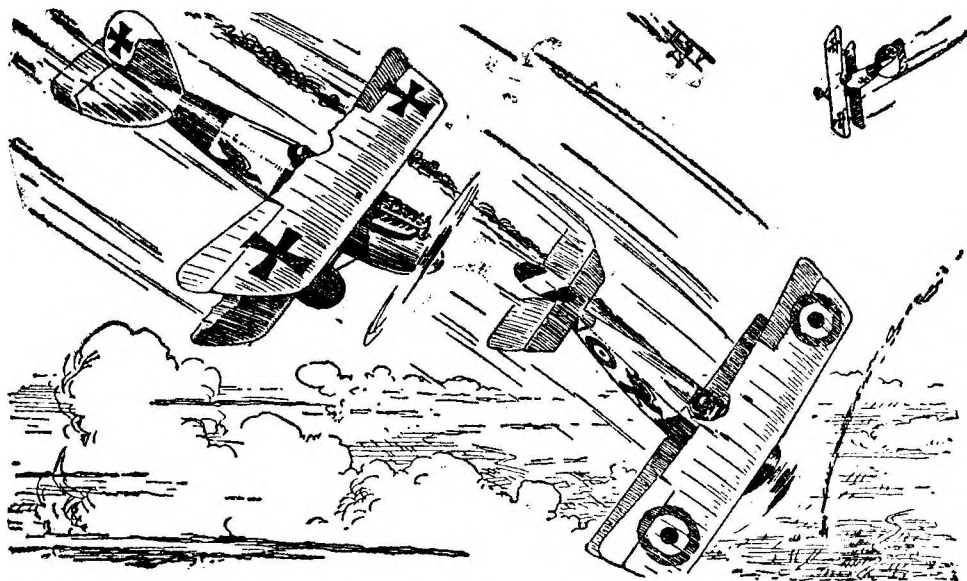
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Outlaw Aces



By Derek West

Author of "Hawks of Hades," etc.

To fly was their religion, to die their destiny, and they sent their enemies down in flames . . . A burning ship was incense to the God of War . . . And to spare an enemy was to wear the traitor brand.

A Complete War Air Novel

HIGH above Ypres, the German Albatross echelon lanced out of the stringy cloud. Clear sky stretched above, forward and below. But Olaf Kruger, third in the line of six, had eyes only for the leading ship.

At the head of the line, Sigmund Borck, *der Badische grauer Bar*, the Grizzly Bear of Baden, turned his head, and the following five saw the wide grin between square goggles and massive fur collar. They looked down, those five, and saw what had evoked the grin.

Four thousand feet below, on a steady course, two Allied artillery planes glinted in the sun. *Englisch*. Fair prey.

With a flick of a gauntleted hand, Borck signaled to Erkner, second in line, to hold the patrol aloft. With an-

other wave he summoned Olaf Kruger. "Follow me!"

Fingers tense on the control stick, Olaf Kruger, *der Falke von Schleswig*, the Falcon of Schleswig, matched the dive of the Baden Bear. One quick glance forward, as he began his plunge, showed him the malignant envy on Erkner's face. Then he was hurtling down, storm wind shrieking about Albatross struts and wires, on Borck's quarter. Heading for the slow-moving British two-seaters below.

Screaming seconds ate up the four thousand feet between Albatross patrol and Allied gun-spotting planes. Borck the Bear and Kruger the Falcon whistled down, each eager for one sudden surprise burst.

Borck, twenty yards ahead, was first in range. His tracer snaked over a striped tricolored tail and into the fuselage of the nearer two-seater. Then he was past his target, shooting down, leveling and banking in one quick twist for the next move in sky combat.

The second two-seater cheated Kruger of a free shot. Somehow the pilot took warning, dropped his craft in a lightning slip, and banked about to give his observer a crack at the Albatross.

But Kruger was thinking faster than that. As the logy old two-seater sideslipped, the Falcon threw his nimble scout into a half roll that merged in a trice into a dive. And Kruger's Spandau poured a steady burst into the two-seater's vitals.

Then he was whipping past the Englishman's wingtips. Whipping past, and banking to survey the battle.

Two Allied planes were going down. Two Albatrosses were circling warily, watching.

KRUGER'S victim was diving fast. Suddenly a puff of smoke showed at the two-seater's nose and unraveled in the slipstream to reveal a fang of flame. The Allied craft quickly dropped a wing and sideslipped on. Kruger, peering down, saw that the tongue of flame was gone. The pilot had slipped out the fire.

"A fighter, there," Kruger breathed in admiration for the British pilot. He watched to see if the clumsy craft would come out of the slide. . . . No. Too late.

The still smoking plane made a gallant effort to right itself and fly level. But the right wing was low. As the craft shot over a ragged hillside that wing struck a treetop. The plane whirled in a right-angle turn and struck.

Circling, Kruger saw two figures jump away from the wreck. Then the crumpled wings flew high in the air as a flash of fire blotted out the body of the two-seater. The fuel tank had burst, exploded.

The two figures were still afoot. In

their own Lines. Edging out of sight now in the underbrush.

Kruger scanned the sky. There was Borck, circling to the west, watching the other two-seater descend like a dying bird. It was lurching now to the left, now to the right, as if caught by opposing currents. It grew smaller to the eye. And in a flash it halted in its lurchings, righted itself, shot ahead.

Borck snapped out of his circle and flew beside Kruger. He gestured to the safely departing two-seater with a rueful grin and a hand-wave that the men of *Staffel* Fifty knew full well. A full sweep of the straight arm through half a circle, from east to west. It was the Baden Bear's way of saying, by way of consolation to a comrade: "Another day, another story." Now he invoked his carefree philosophy to reconcile himself to the loss of a bird that had seemed to be safe in his bag.

The two Albatrosses climbed, Borck leading the way. Half a mile above, the other four planes of the Fiftieth's patrol were waiting. Circling. As Borck neared their level, Erkner dropped and fell in behind him. Kruger took his place behind Erkner, and looking back saw that Rheinhold, Mockel and Weisenhorn were following in precise line.

Borck wheeled and set a straight course for the drome of *Staffel* Fifty. The patrol was over.

A fair morning's work, thought Kruger as he relaxed in his cockpit. Two *Englisch* artillery directing planes chased off their post, one destroyed. In flames. . . .

Kruger said it aloud. Flames!—that was the way his flying mates liked it.

But Erkner wouldn't congratulate him for the victory. Not with the scoreboard showing twelve victories for Kruger, and only nine for *Leutnant* Adolf Erkner, the Fox. No, Erkner would snarl in animosity and grumble that *die Englisch flieger*s had escaped to fly again.

Feuer! That was the idol of Number Fifty. A *staffel* of fire-worshippers, no less. From *Hauptmann* Gottlieb von

Achtermann, the commander, down to little Mockel. On their own authority they used a large ratio of incendiary slugs. The *feueraubetung*, the fire-worship, held them all in its grip. All but Olaf Kruger, the Falcon of Schleswig.

NOT Olaf Kruger, the Hunting-Hawk of the North. He could fly and swoop in the death dive, yes. But let it be a clean, quick kill. Like the kill of a fighting falcon, not like the pecking of a vulture. His lip curled in scorn.

He thought, "What ails them? Where did they catch this *feuerblick*, this fiery look?" From Richthofen, perhaps. The swaggering baron made it plain, often enough, that to burn the opponent meant to make more sure of the official score. What a poser, that stiff-necked *Junker*, thought Kruger, as he remembered the baron's cool indifference to the Schleswig farm boy who had been presented to him last summer. Even then he was strutting because he had passed the great Boelcke's mark.

Kruger scowled and spat over the side. *Pfui!* for the whole batch of fire-makers. He, Olaf Kruger the Falcon of Schleswig, was as good as any. *Ja*. And better. He remembered a quaint boast of the little red haired Riley, his schoolmate in St. Louis, Missouri, America. "I hit the first time, and there ain't no second time." A champion in bare knuckles, Riley. . . . And what a *flieger* that Riley would have made! But America was neutral.

Ahead, Borck slanted down and circled. The drome was in sight. Erkner followed, and Kruger methodically touched his stick. He looked to the west, and saw the spires of Lille, what few were still standing after two years of war.

Borck went down, Erkner circling to await his turn. Then Erkner slanted down to a landing. And Olaf Kruger followed. His Albatross touched wheels to turf and rolled to a stop.

CHAPTER II

The Falcon's Nest

SCURRYING men erupted from the huts and hangars on the drome that filled to its full width the little valley west of Baisieux where the Fiftieth Albatrosses made their war nest. One by one the six scout planes taxied up to the hangars and pilots leaped to the ground.

Borck's great bulk swayed down from cockpit to stirrup and to the hard stubborn turf. Feet planted wide, hands on hips, he grinned at his five pilots as they drew near.

"Olaf!" he cried. "Another one for you!"

Kruger nodded. At his elbow Erkner spoke up.

"In flames," he remarked with satisfaction. "However—the two Englishmen escaped."

But Borck laughed deep in his throat. "*Ach*, Adolf! What would you? The plane did not escape. Not"—he grimaced—"as mine did, a curse on the *lausig* luck! A score for the Falcon!"

"*Ja!*" Rheinhold smiled affectionately at Kruger. "To make a total of twelve, eh, Olaf?"

"And look you!" Little Mockel broke in excitedly. "Twelve!—you see what that means?"

The other five looked wonderingly at the chubby diminutive Mockel. Strangely, it was the calm Weissenhorn who had not yet spoken, who first realized Mockel's meaning.

"You mean, Hermann," he said with half a sneer, "the Hohenzollern *Hausorden*."

Rheinhold's face lit up. "*Ach, ja!* The decoration for twelve victories!" He turned to Kruger. "So, Olaf! It will go well with your Iron Crosses, eh?"

Olaf Kruger shrugged. "You count the chickens before they're hatched. Perhaps there will be no confirmation."

Borck scoffed. "Of course it will be confirmed. Didn't you drop the Englishmen into the very lap of the observing force? So let us trickle a few drops of wine into these throats so dry from the beat of the breeze!" He clapped Kruger on the back with a great paw and led the way to the *staffel* cardroom.

The six trailed across the thicker turf outside the low hut, tonguing their lips in anticipation. They barged through the door and dropped heavily into the great chairs that surrounded the long table. In the doorway appeared five orderlies. One stepped to Borck's side. He started to take Borck's coat.

The Baden Bear waved him aside. "Your man is not yet back, Olaf?"

"Not yet," Kruger replied.

"Then take the flying suit of the *Herr Leutnant* Kruger," Borck directed his orderly. "Mine later. It is the Falcon's day. Eh, *kamerads*?"

Erkner, Weissenhorn, Rheinhold and Mockel were tearing off their heavy flying clothes. They looked up at Borck's call.

"*Ja wohl!*" cried Rheinhold. "The wine is from my pocket!"

"No, it is mine!" Mockel dissented.

BORCK silenced them with a wave of a huge hand. "This is for me," he declared. "Did I not miss my shot, so that the English made off, skipping over the hills like a frightened rabbit? Ho! *Feldweibel!* Wine!"

The orderlies fell back, burdened with flying kit, and a grinning noncommissioned officer bore a laden tray to the table. Borck seized the heavy bottle and poured its contents into the six glasses.

"To the Falcon!" he cried, raising his glass. "*Hoch!*"

"*Hoch!*" the four chimed in, and drank.

Olaf Kruger leaned back in his great chair, its high back adorned by the deft hands of Otto, his orderly, with the design of a falcon in flight. He smiled from one to the other of his comrades. This was pleasant, to sit with soldier

brothers. After the fight, to sit and take one's ease in fellowship.

Twelve! And the *Hausorden*, perhaps. It would be good to show the new decoration to *Unkel* Jakob and *Tante* Anna when next he went on leave to Gorlag in Schleswig.

He was aroused from his musings by the sweep of the opening door. In the fading light of the day stood the *staffel* commander.

The six at the table sprang to their feet.

"*Guten tag, Herren.*" The *staffel* leader advanced with a smile, nodding to their murmured "Good day, *Herr Kommandant.*" He turned first to Borck, and then to Kruger. "Good hunting today."

Borck shifted uneasily. "Nothing to my credit, *Herr Kommandant.*"

"Yours got away, eh, Borck?" The *kommandant* dismissed the failure with an airy wave. "Better luck for you, Kruger. The Bavarian artillery reports the destruction of the English plane, and what's more, the sharp observers mention particularly the Falcon Albatross. The device you fly becomes famous, eh?"

Borck's eye lighted. "*Ach*, they saw that, eh? They know the Falcon, eh? So! And they'll know it better, *nicht wahr*, Olaf? And so'll the English!"

"*Ja wohl!*" Erkner thrust in. "Olaf surges forward. For me, I could wish that it had been I who scored today—"

The *staffel* commander nodded. "To make you an ace. *Ja*. I understand. Soon, perhaps, Erkner. Patience!"

"Patience!" Erkner scowled, but quickly his brow cleared. "For Olaf, *Herr Kommandant*, you'll ask for the *Hausorden*?"

The eyebrows of *Hauptmann* Gottlieb von Achtermann went up as, standing tall and straight in the low-ceilinged room, he rocked back and forth on the balls of his feet. "*Hausorden*?" he repeated. "For—*ach*, but so! Twelve, then, Kruger?"

"Twelve, *Herr Kommandant*," Kruger assented.

Von Achtermann nodded. "We shall see. So, good day, gentlemen." He turned and strode to the door.

Borck relapsed into his chair, but immediately heaved his broad shoulders up again. He patted his waistline. "The Bear grows hungry," he declared. "Soon we shall eat. Let us prepare, eh? And after the dinner, a game of cards?"

BUT it was another game that the six played when after dinner the six gathered again in the cardroom. And the *Hauptmann* Gottlieb von Achtermann, leader of the *staffel*, was the dealer.

He sat at one end of the long table and stared them all into silence. Then he laid a map upon the table.

"We have a new problem," he said. "A new enemy. On the map you will see a cross in red. Note it well." He handed the map to Borck, who sat at his right.

The Bear of the Black Forest studied the chart briefly, then with a grunt passed it on to Erkner. And Weissenhorn, Rheinhold and Mockel had a look before the map came to Kruger.

It was a map of the sector, Kruger saw. Their own drome was marked with a circle, standing to the east of Lille. Here were the trench lines, west of Lille, and still farther west, near Molinghem, the red cross had been imposed upon the white surface.

Kruger handed the map to Mockel, and from Mockel it went to Rheinhold and then to von Achtermann. The *staffel* leader folded it carefully and placed it in his leather map case.

"That position," he said, "is the location of a new French squadron of Nieuport scouts. A tough squadron, led evidently by a tough hard fighter who can use his head. The Thirty-fourth Rumplers have been all but wiped out."

"No!" Borck was incredulous. "The Thirty-fourth! Not Thoma's crowd?"

"The same." Von Achtermann frowned. "Thoma himself is in hospital, badly wounded. Half his ships are gone. Finished."

Rheinhold was drumming on the table. "We are to single out this Nieuport squadron?" he asked.

"Not that, quite." Von Achtermann shook his head slowly. "The regular patrols must be flown. But if occasion permits, then—do what you can to this Nieuport lot."

"The number, *Herr Kommandant*?" Kruger asked. "The number of the squadron?"

"*Ach, ja*, the number. The number is One Hundred and Sixty. The Nieuports bear the usual French marking, the circles, blue center, then white, then red. Also—but this is not clear—it seems that each pilot has an individual device. There is no report on them, because Thoma had not recovered sufficiently to describe them and"—his brow darkened—"there was no other survivor of the combat this morning."

Borck growled. "It was this morning, then?"

"*Ja*. Above La Basse. Thoma was flying bombs for a raid on the English dumps north of Bethune when the Nieuports sneaked up. It was a short fight, but from what they tell me it was a small corner of hell while it lasted. Two Nieuports went down, whether destroyed or not no one seems to know. As for the Rumplers—"

The six leaned forward.

Von Achtermann's clenched fist smote the table with a crack. "Eight Rumplers! Eight! Gone to hell in fire and smoke!"

"Eight!" Borck breathed. Little Mockel's mouth hung open, and his eyes were staring from their sockets. Kruger felt a strange thrill. Eight Rumplers gone! Eight of Thoma's Rumplers! What men were these Nieuport pilots?

WEISSENHORN'S voice, cool, precise, broke the tense silence. "This Nieuport squadron is west of Lille, *Herr Hauptmann*? And carries the French markings? That seems odd—a French squadron behind the British lines."

"Ja." Von Achtermann's lean face broke into furrows as he stroked his chin. "It is something of a mystery. Something queer." He sighed. "But there! Knock one down, one of you, this side of the lines, and perhaps we shall have an explanation of more than one point of mystery."

"We'll try for them, *Herr Kommandant*." Erkner leaned forward eagerly, his eyes glowing under his shaggy brows. Perhaps, thought Kruger, he's counting on a Nieuport to make his rating of ace.

Borck broke in. "No change in our patrol course?" he asked.

"None." Von Achtermann picked up his map case and rose. "I leave it to you, Borck." He nodded to them all as they rose, and strode from the room.

"Nieuports," muttered Borck thoughtfully, staring at the door through which the *staffel* leader had passed. "Well, we know how to handle Nieuports. Let them beware of the Fiftieth Albatross!"

"Ho!" echoed the little Mockel. He had recovered his usual urbanity. "Nieuports, beware! Here comes *der grosse Fiftieth!*"

Rheinhold grinned. "Take care, Mockel, *mein freund*, lest they gobble you alive."

"Let them gobble," retorted Hermann Mockel. "Alive or dead, I'll give them a bellyache."

"Hear the little one!" roared Borck. "Yet he has the right idea. We fight Nieuports from now on. And Valhalla waits for those who fall! And now, who has a bottle?"

"I have that!" Kruger pushed back his chair and rose. With a sweep of his arm he included the five in his invitation. "Enough for all—while it lasts."

Weissenhorn smiled sourly. "You'll excuse me, Olaf." He touched his tunic above the belt line. "You are so near to the elect, you who are soon to wear the *Hausorden*, that I'm afraid I couldn't be at ease as your guest tonight. And so there'll be more for the others." He moved toward the door.

Rheinhold glanced up sharply at the

tall, thin *flieger*. And Borck broke out, a lowering look on his candid face. "You are none too courteous, *mein freund* Weissenhorn!"

Weissenhorn raised his eyebrows. "But surely our Olaf will excuse me. I meant no offense. In truth I have letters to write."

Kruger nodded. Borck's face cleared. He slapped little Mockel on the shoulder. "There goes one who'd rather write than drink! Ho! *Das ist ein tüchtiger Mann! Ja!* There is a man for you! Come! Let's go! Olaf has liquor!"

Erkner rose with alacrity. "Ja. There is only one thing I would rather take from Olaf, and that's his chance at the next English flying ship."

"You would take both if you could, Adolf," grinned Rheinhold as he rose and fell in behind Kruger, Borck and Mockel. Erkner grinned a good-humored confession as the five made their way into the night toward Kruger's quarters.

THE sky was clear, starlit, with no moon. A vagrant breeze shifted down the valley from the tree-clad ridge on the west. Borck eyed the sky above that ridge.

"They do not raid us," he remarked. "How many nights of sound sleep have we had? Ah well, so much the better. Give me the broad day for my fighting."

"And for me, the same," agreed Kruger. "And the broad day for my dying, when that day comes."

Borck guffawed. "Who talks of dying?" he chaffed. "But if that's your wish— You hear, *kamcrads?* The broadday for Olaf's Last Landing!"

"To be sure, it must be arranged," agreed Rheinhold, grinning. Erkner chuckled. Mockel snorted. "Maybe none of us will be here when it's Olaf's turn," he threw at them.

Kruger's hut, which he shared with Rheinhold, loomed ahead. He opened the door, fumbled in the dark for a bottle that served as candlestick, and set a lighted match to the stub of tallow stuck in the bottle mouth. The interior of the

room was revealed in the yellow glow, and Borck surged forward to drop upon the couch at the far wall. Rheinhold, Erkner and Mockel took the chairs, and Kruger rummaged under his own couch near the door. He pulled up a squat bottle. The table yielded glasses.

"A peaceful spot, this." Rheinhold was reverting to Borck's thanksgiving for surcease from raids. Now he reached out a hand for the glass that Kruger proffered. "I have a feeling, all the same, that it won't last."

"What do you mean?" Erkner inquired, taking his glass.

"Night flying." Rheinhold squinted at his glass as he slowly twirled it in his hand. "The British tried it almost as soon as we did, in 'Fourteen. Gave it up because they lost too many planes. But it's easier to light dromes for landing than it was in the old days."

"True," Borck agreed. "These British—they've done much more damage lately." He scowled. "The Zeppelin sheds in Belgium. And now they're pushing in toward Kiel. I wonder—"

The door burst open. In the open doorway stood a squat, short figure, almost shapeless in the heavy sheepskin coat.

"Otto!" cried Kruger.

It was, in fact, Kruger's orderly. Back from leave. Bursting in upon a group of officers without so much as a knock. And with a face filled with portent, eyes shadowed with pain. The five officers stared. Then Kruger spoke.

"Well, Otto?" His voice was sharp with reproof.

Otto spread his hands limply. "*Un-
glück, Herr Leutnant.*"

"Bad fortune?" repeated Kruger wonderingly. He stared in perplexity at Otto, noting that his four companions were alert. Then a hideous thought struck Kruger. "Otto! You don't mean—"

Otto bowed his head. "*Ja, Herr Leutnant. The Herr Kruger and his frau.*" He shot a frightened look at his officer, then added slowly, "they are—dead."

"Dead!" Kruger cried. "Not dead!"

Otto nodded.

Borck cleared his throat, and rose. "*Olaf, mein freund,*" he said in a voice oddly low, "we leave you to hear your news. Then perhaps you will tell us later."

"*Ja, Sigmund,*" Kruger responded absently. He nodded to the Baden ace, nodded goodnight to Erkner and Mockel and to Rheinhold who left with the other three.

Otto had stepped aside to permit the flying officers to pass out into the night. Now he silently closed the door and stood waiting.

Kruger roused, and heaved a deep sigh. "Well, Otto? Tell me."

CHAPTER III

Night Raid

SLUMPING onto his cot, Olaf Kruger raised a haggard face to his orderly. Otto stood irresolute, evidently at a loss to begin his tale.

"Take off the coat, Otto," Kruger directed. "And sit down."

Otto looked dubious. "But, *Herr Leut—*"

Kruger silenced him with a gesture. "It does not matter. We are alone. So sit, and do not fret. To be sure, my ways will spoil you for service with a *junker* officer—"

"*Ach, Herr Leutnant!*" Otto turned a face filled with pain to his officer. "Never will I serve any but Your Graciousness!"

Kruger smiled. "I should hate to part with you, Otto. Even in these last few days that you have been on your leave, I have missed you sorely. We Danes must stick together, eh? Even if we do serve the Kaiser." He leaned forward. "And now, Otto?"

Otto sat down. He gestured with opened hand. "It was the English, *Herr Leutnant.*"

"The English? At Gorlag?" Kruger

knit his brows. "You don't mean—English planes, raiding?"

"Ja." Otto hunched forward on the seat of the chair. "It was by night."

"By night!" That explained it. Gorlag in Schleswig was not so near the North Sea, not near enough for a British raid when the coast defenses were alert. But by night. . . . Kruger remembered with bitterness Rheinhold's prediction of a few minutes before. Night flying. Raids. Well, it had come true.

Kruger passed a hand before his eyes. "And *Unkel Jakob*—and *Tante Anna*—"

"Bombs killed both." Otto twisted his hands together as he sat.

"Bombs. . . . Intended for the *Zepelin* sheds." Kruger's comment was a statement rather than a question. But Otto answered it.

"Ja, *Herr Leutnant*." He clenched and unclenched his hands, staring at them unseeingly the while. "The *Herr* Kruger lived so near."

Olaf Kruger nodded. Well he knew. The pleasant plain, dotted with well-kept farms, was the scene of his childhood. Denmark's capital, Copenhagen, was his birthplace, and there he had lived before his father Anselm Larssen's death when he was three years old. His mother Enid, left in straitened circumstances, had gone to America, alone. It was safer, she had thought, to accept the offer of her old friends the Krugers to take care of the boy, and she had yielded when they begged her to let them give the boy Olaf their own name, Kruger.

They had no children.

And so Olaf Larssen left the teeming city of Copenhagen for the flat, quiet plain of Schleswig. He left behind him too the name of Larssen, and became Olaf Kruger of Gorlag in Schleswig. As Olaf Kruger he attended school at Gorlag, once a Danish town but for long years a part of Germany. The few words that he had known of the Danish tongue he soon forgot, and he studied in the German language, and passed through the lower school.

WHEN better days came for his mother in far-off America. Her millinery shop in St. Louis, Missouri, which young Olaf had painstakingly located in his geography book on the bank of a river called by the strange and fascinating name of Mississippi, had prospered. And she had sent for her son.

To St. Louis on the incredible river the fair-haired Olaf had journeyed by train and great liner and again by train. And in St. Louis his mother had wept over him and had made her plans. He attended school, first the highest grade in the grammar school, months after his mother had taught him with great effort how to speak the American language. It was in his first class that he had met the red haired Riley who served him as guide through the streets of the American city and along the old waterfront.

Then high school. And here he became popular among certain of his fellows, for he could help them in their struggles with the German language studies, and he was an athlete.

It was during his second year at high school that Uncle Christian came home. Tanned and toughened by ocean winds in Tropics and along the reaches of the Pacific Ocean, he told great tales of life aboard the windjammers. Olaf and Uncle Christian became great friends.

Olaf studied hard after Uncle Christian left. And on his second trip home, his uncle found Olaf growing from a lank, gangling youth into a tall sturdy figure of a man. Uncle Christian had gone into the matter of Olaf's future, and for long hours uncle and nephew had spoken of this trade and that.

Two weeks after Uncle Chris had left for the second time, Olaf's mother fell ill. At first she jested, insisted that he continue his school attendance, and was content to leave her shop in the hands of assistants. But as the weeks passed, she grew thoughtful. Olaf quit his school, nor did she protest.

No word had come from Uncle Chris. So she wrote two letters, one to her brother Christian and one to Jakob and

Anna Kruger in Schleswig. Two weeks passed, and a reply came from Gorlag. But two more weeks passed with no word from Christian Larssen. Then she gave the letter from the Krugers into Olaf's hands.

"Read it, Olaf, my son," she said.

Olaf read, and trembled. It was the simple but sincere promise of Jakob and Anna Kruger to care for Olaf if the mother could no longer do so.

There were two dark weeks for Olaf. And then a week when his heart seemed dead and his mind numb. And after his mother had been laid away in the grassy cemetery in western St. Louis, he miserably went about the task of packing his belongings and taking the money proffered by the lawyer. Again a long journey by train, more travel on a liner, a train again, and he was back in old Schleswig. In Gorlag.

But not to stay. Jakob and Anna Kruger welcomed him warmly, to be sure. But they had great plans for him. He was to go—could Olaf guess? No, of course not!—to Berlin! He was to attend the great Konigstadt school, and there learn to be a fine engineer.

AND so it came about. Olaf—no longer Olaf Larssen, but Olaf Kruger again, as in the days before he went to America—fared forth to Berlin and classes in the great barracks-like building of the Konigstadt High School. Four years of classes, with long and short vacations on the welcoming farmstead outside Gorlag.

Then he was called for military service, and passed summer days with veterans and conscripts like himself at maneuvers, with the bands playing and the clatter of cavalry hooves and the rumble of artillery brightening the days.

And suddenly, the war.

It bewildered Olaf Kruger. He sat at the hearth in the Kruger home, listening while Jakob Kruger, his hair whiter now, stolidly packed tobacco into the great bowl of his meerschaum pipe and spoke of the enemies of the Fatherland.

Tante Anna was silent, only her side-long, worried glances at Olaf betraying her interest.

It was decided that Olaf should offer his services and seek a commission as an officer. But in what branch of the army? A classmate of the Konigstadt school provided the answer in a letter to Olaf. The Imperial German Air Corps was accepting applicants for training, and Olaf's classmate knew an officer with influence.

But for months, for little short of a year, Olaf saw nothing of the Front. Aviation schools were crowded. And it was late in 1915 when he first glimpsed the smoke clouds on the horizon that marked the battle Front.

He forged ahead. First, a period with an *Aviatik staffel* at work on reconnaissance. Then more training, on the Fokker monoplanes. Then the Front again. And finally, *Staffel Funfzig, Albatross*.

Only once had Olaf been able to visit Gorlag on leave from his military service. He remembered the shock he had experienced to see, rising on the plain like giant mushrooms, great shapeless masses of framework and canvas that shadowed the very fields of Jakob Kruger. Jakob, when he had welcomed Olaf, had pointed them out with pride. He was delighted.

"Sheds for the great ships of the *Graf Zeppelin*, Olaf my boy," he had said. "Great things will come."

Great things. . . .

OTTO JORGENS, Kruger's orderly, sat with shoulders drooping, sadly watching his officer. Occasionally his gaze would rove about the interior of the hut. He was gazing fixedly at a pile of rubbish that he had thus noticed when Kruger, thrusting aside his memories stirred by Otto's tale, glanced across.

He smiled, his gaze following that of Otto, and nodded. "One goes on, eh, Otto? One turns to the task before one. No time for mourning. And yet—I could strike a blow for *Unkel* Jakob and

Tante Anna." His tone was even, but his eyes were bright.

"*Die Englisch?*" Otto inquired quietly.

"Eh?" Olaf Kruger looked blank. "The English?—*ach, ja*, the raiders. I had not thought. . . ."

Long after Otto had left, Kruger sat staring sightlessly at the guttering candle. And as his thoughts ran on, he started. For he had just now been thinking of those two English flyers as he saw them run from their burning plane. And he wondered why, with *Unkel Jakob* and *Tante Anna* lying dead of English bombs, he could still be more glad than sorry that they had escaped the flames.

CHAPTER IV

The Other Falcon

DAWN crept over the ridge to the west and touched the slumberous hangars and huts of *Staffel* Fifty. And forth from the great tents crept gaunt birds of prey, the Albatrosses of the *Hauptmann* von Achtermann.

Olaf Kruger roused at Otto's knock, and sat up sleepily as the stolid plump little orderly stepped into the room and set down a pitcher of water from which the steam rose invitingly in the chill air.

"It will be a good day," Otto offered.

Kruger nodded. "Clear, eh, Otto? Then we fly. And—*ach!*" He remembered the conclave of the night before. The *staffel* would fly for Nieuports today, on that he would wager. French Nieuports west of Lille.

He stumbled into breeches and boots, splashed hot water and cold into the basin on the stand, and rubbed the sleep from his eyes. The *staffel* would hunt Nieuports. . . . And at Gorlag, *Unkel Jakob*. . .

He finished dressing and strode out onto the field. As he made his way to the dining hall, Borck appeared and fell in beside him.

"Olaf," he said hesitantly, "We know

—Otto told us—about your uncle and aunt. We—you know—er." He clapped Kruger gently on the shoulder. "Well—you know."

"Thanks, Sigmund."

That was all. But Kruger was grateful for the sympathy of the *staffel*. They suffered with him. Well, let them see that he would always fight the *staffel's* battles.

He passed through the dining hall door behind Borck. Inside were Rheinhold, Erkner and Mockel, who called out greetings. A moment later Weissenhorn came in.

"Today we fly west, eh, Sigmund?" Kruger asked, with a wink at Rheinhold. Erkner and Rheinhold watched Borck slyly.

"*Ja*," replied Borck emphatically, unaware of the byplay. "Straight west."

"I thought," Weissenhorn remarked, carefully casual, "we were to fly the usual patrol."

Borck stared. "But today—" He stopped suddenly, all at once conscious of their amused glances. Then he laughed hugely. "Of course, the usual patrol." He winked.

"Do you suppose," ventured Mockel, expressing the thought of all, "these Nieuports make an early flight?"

Borck shook his head. "We'll fly to where they should be," he said. "If they're there, so much the worse for them."

THEY made their way to the planes, drawn up before the hangars. *Feldwebel* Pfannschmidt greeted Olaf Kruger with a quick smart salute and a gesture toward the plane.

"In fine shape, *Herr Leutnant*," he said cheerily.

Kruger laughed. "Good! We'll see what we can do today." He placed his toe in the stirrup and vaulted into the cockpit. A touch on the throttle woke the idling engine to a roar. Looking back, he saw Sigmund Borck eying him. He waved quickly. Borck grinned, slapped his throttle forward, and sent

the Albatross skimming over the turf. Half way down the field, and he was off the ground, climbing in a reckless zoom. Olaf followed.

At two thousand feet the echelon formed, Borck in the lead. Behind and above was Erkner, and behind Erkner and above, Kruger took his place.

For minutes, while they were in sight of the drome, they flew north. Then Borck turned his head, looked back and down to make sure the drome was obscured from their view, and with a wide grin at his pilots wheeled and lay his course straight west. The *staffel* would call upon the Nieuports.

Olaf Kruger tightened his belt, settled himself, and cast an idle glance below. Hills and ravines rolled past, then fields, a road. Then a river. The familiar stretch of La Marque, a stream that rolled on to swell, farther north, the Lys. Then, on the right, the spires and smoke of Lille.

Motors barking and roaring, the Albatross echelon sped past Lille without a turning from the course. More towns appeared below, and vanished in the rush of the flight. And now the Front was not so far away.

Kruger began a careful study of the sky ahead, and as his gaze roved from left to right he saw that Borck too was watching. The sky was clear, with a faint haze gathered about the morning sun behind the patrol. On the ground, low-lying mist still lay in sheltered spots that the sun had not yet touched. It was a morning for reverie—unless the Nieuports appeared.

Borck suddenly waggled his wings. Kruger shot a glance south, even as he obeyed the signal that Erkner was already following. Nothing there. And now the Bear of Baden was leading them north. Nor did any sign of hostile wings appear there.

Olaf Kruger looked to the west, and understood the move. The trenches were in sight, and Borck was for patrolling up and down the Front, leaving it to the Nieuports to come over if they were

in the sky. A cautious way of fighting, but based on a rule that the great Boelcke himself had laid down: "Why fight on the enemy's side, where the chances are less for a safe landing?"

The echelon bored into the northern sky, pilots alert. For here was the domain of the trouble-making Nieuports.

And here were the Nieuports themselves.

BORCK was first to sight them. He dipped his plane's blunt nose for a short dive and with the increased speed slammed into a climb. The five behind him followed.

Not that there was urgent need for maneuver. Those five specks to the northwest were five miles away. But every foot of altitude would help the Albatrosses to complete a surprise attack. It would not be needed, perhaps with six against only five. But Borck wanted to be sure of these Nieuports.

Motors straining, wires humming in the climb, the six rangy Albatrosses gripped foot after foot of altitude. And with every second of flight the five specks in the northwest grew larger. Now Borck was wheeling to the east, to get into the sun, on the Frenchmen's blind side.

But it was too late. The Nieuports were wheeling too, and climbing, their trim, compact lines and *cocardes* showing clear as they turned from their southeastward course. It would be an even fight, save for the odds of six to five.

Borck stopped climbing. With the opposing flights on a level, he dropped the nose of his scout and smashed straight at the wedge of Nieuports.

The French planes scattered, broadening their V. Then the two flights came together with a crescendo of twelve roaring motors and twelve spitting machine guns.

Borck tried a burst, Kruger saw, at the leading Nieuport. Then he was up and over. Erkner had no time even to trip his trigger release before he zoomed

and avoided collision by a few feet with the second Nieuport. Kruger himself let go a short burst at the ship that had dived to dodge Erkner, and then he too was past the Nieuport line.

Borck was swirling up in a tight climbing circle, Erkner following. And Olaf Kruger joined the climb. As he circled, he saw that Rheinhold and Mockel had driven through. But Weissenhorn was going down in a spin with a Nieuport on his tail.

There was no time for Kruger to see more. A drab shape with a patch of color on a wing was lunging at him from below, and he kicked over in a quick slip, skidding across the attacker's wings and banking for a shot at the Nieuport.

He missed that shot. A second drab shape cut in on his quarter, and tracer snaked past his head, grazing his top wing. He whipped over in an Immelmann and shook off the new danger for a moment. A glance above, and he saw he was safe in that direction. But that glance told him, too, that Rheinhold was pulling out of the dogfight, frantically working at his gun.

That made it even, for the moment. Kruger zoomed and looked down for a target, and found two. He half-rolled and came down on a Nieuport tail. His hand was ready to turn loose a long burst, but a whistling past his ear forced him into a quick bank.

THE sky was a maze of leaping, darting ships. What madmen these Nieuport pilots were! Could they not fight sanely, then? Man for man, not jumping from one target to another! Olaf Kruger cut around in a short climbing circle and then dived for the fringe of the fight. Let it spread out, and a man might get in an uninterrupted shot.

His strategy worked. Out of the mêlée a Nieuport shot in pursuit of him. He grunted with satisfaction, watched it narrowly, and made ready to flip up and over when it drew near.

It came on, to within range. And from the Nieuport's nose a stream of tracer

reached out to tap the Albatross on the tail. Kruger flipped, up and over, and was for a flash in line with the Nieuport's cockpit. His hand was on the trigger, finger tensed, when he saw that which caused his finger, the sure shooting finger that had rolled up twelve victories on the Front, to fall lax and limp on the trigger ring.

On the fuselage of that Nieuport, just by the cockpit, was emblazoned a falcon in full flight. The exact counterpart of the falcon on his own Albatross.

Like a swallow drugged with bird lime, Olaf Kruger wheeled drunkenly for seconds on end, flying only by instinct. The sight that had stayed his ready finger now filled his brain, clamoring for explanation. Was it a trick of imagination? No. When had the Schleswig Falcon's nerves ever sagged? Then, there it was, a Falcon of Schleswig—on a French Nieuport.

A flashing shape caught his eye. He turned. On his right, Borck was slanting past him, shaking his fist and pointing down. Kruger followed.

Two thousand feet below, little Mockel was going down, weaving from side to side. And to the east, where Kruger had last seen Weissenhorn spinning, a Nieuport was rising like a shark with appetite unappeased, nor was there a sign of Weissenhorn.

The odds were now with the Nieuports—but no! Rheinhold was back in the fight. That made it even. Yet Borck was leading a retreat.

Olaf Kruger knew why. Little Mockel would be easy prey for that rising Nieuport. Then, to the rescue of Mockel. And let the affair with the Nieuports stand over.

Slapping his stick hard over, Kruger followed Borck. Then with a dive, he caught up with him and flew on his quarter. Borck looked back. Olaf Kruger flashed him a grin, and signaled with Borck's own famous gesture. The full sweep of the arm, from east to west. "Another day, another story!"

But this time Borck did not respond.

CHAPTER V

Hollow Victory

FOUR Albatrosses screamed down on the trail of little Mockel.

The climbing Nieuport saw them coming, and abandoned whatever thought he had entertained of jumping the crippled Albatross. He sheered off, and watched the five overtake their comrade.

And now Mockel was pulling level. Olaf Kruger could see the diminutive pilot industriously nursing the throttle of his sick motor, and gradually the blots of smoke from the exhaust came in a steadier fashion. Borck flew alongside, and Mockel gave him a reassuring wave. He slipped into his regular place in the echelon.

And Borck led the way back toward the drome.

That was ominous. Kruger reflected. Borck seldom laid a course for home when there was fuel in the tanks. Had the big Baden ace a special reason for the return? He could think of none.

But something was wrong.

He felt cold, chilled, as he remembered the glare which Borck had cast his way rather than the cheerful wave that washed out all recriminations after a combat. His mood of depression increased as the echelon winged eastward with no broad grin from Borck in the leading ship.

There was nothing of swagger, only a slashing drive, in Borck's downward slant for the landing. He climbed stiffly from the cockpit and with a lowering look watched the four pilots approach. Then with only a glance at the now cheerful Mockel, he fixed a baleful glance on Olaf Kruger.

Suddenly his brow cleared. "Ho, my good Olaf! There for a minute I was thinking you had gone to sleep in that little passing of the time of day. But I am sorry to have lost my head. When does a falcon sleep, *hein?*" And with a great laugh he clapped Olaf on the shoul-

der. "Come, let's hear what has happened to the good Weissenhorn."

Mention of Weissenhorn swept the smiles off the faces of all. Soberly they plodded toward the cardroom, leaving it for Borck to beard von Achtermann in the *staffel* headquarters, report the encounter, and ask for telephoned news of the missing pilot.

Olaf Kruger sank gratefully into his great chair. His mood of depression, engendered by Borck's rebuff in the air, was gone. And with the burden lifted from his mind, he suddenly felt weak. He sighed, and looked about lazily.

Erkner, sitting two chairs away, was eying him curiously. Kruger shifted uneasily. "No luck today, Adolf," he commented lamely.

"No," agreed Erkner slowly. "I hadn't even a good shot at any one of them. But—I thought at one moment that you'd get one. Did your gun refuse?"

"No," Kruger admitted. "I—didn't get a clear shot."

Erkner made as if to speak. But at that moment Borck swung into the room.

"Weissenhorn's all right," he announced. "He pulled out of the spin and landed on Thoma's field. Cracked his undercarriage. He'll get in tonight with the old flytrap all fixed."

"*Ach, gut!*" Rheinhold ejaculated. And Mockel nodded brightly.

BORCK spread his legs. "Another patrol in two hours," he said. "Likewise to the west." He teetered on his toes, grunted, and strode out of the room.

"Again, the Nieuports," muttered Erkner. Rheinhold yawned, rose lazily and made for the door. Mockel and Erkner followed.

Olaf Kruger leaned back, resting his head against the falcon-emblazoned panel on the chairback. From outside he could hear Rheinhold's shout, and the clink of metal against metal. Some of his comrades were whiling away an hour at quoits. But for a reason he could not define, he felt no urge to join them. He

was grateful for these moments of solitude, grateful for a chance to think.

He thought of Gorlag, and the good Jakob and Anna Kruger, dead by bombs, and the ache filled his heart again. He felt alone in the world, and suddenly he realized that these merry jesters of the *staffel* could never fill the place of the two who were gone.

These merry jokers. . . . His eye roved to the great chair at the head of the table, its chairback panel bearing the black eagles of Prussia, *Hauptmann* von Achtermann's insignia. Beside it on the right was the Bear of Baden, and the Gray Fox that was Erkner's sign. On the other side of the table, Rheinhold's bright Flamingo, Weissenhorn's Owl, and little Mockel's Gull. Hallowed chairs, these. Only one man might dare lay a hand on one of these chairs, and he the man who flew its insignia in the air. It was the *staffel's* way.

Out of the sickness in his heart he felt all at once a contempt for the swagger of his mates. Now, at Gorlag, there was a chair where *Unkel* Jakob always sat, but it bore no glittering picture. There was *Tante* Anna's plain chair, and the leather armchair reserved for Olaf Kruger. In Olaf's eyes the display before him seemed for the first time unfamiliar.

Stirring uneasily, he let his eyes travel over the wall. Above the fireplace were Weissenhorn's crossed sabers. Beside them, a shattered propeller. A jagged patch of airplane fabric which showed a faded British number, and under it the *cocarde* from another British plane. Stretched from ceiling to floor was a spiderweb in wire—the flying wires of a Morane Parasol. And fastened by cord and screws to the wall surface, the "hump" of a Sopwith Camel.

Trophies of the chase. Relics of combat. Bits of Fokker monoplanes, Caudron biplanes, Nieuports—

Nieuports. . . . Kruger's thoughts jerked back to the present. A Nieuport this morning, under his own guns, was flying a Falcon of Schleswig. Alert

now, he tried to read the puzzle of that falcon in the Nieuport flock. How had it come about? A Dane in the French service, no doubt. Well, that was possible. Were there not even Americans flying with the French, in that volunteer *escadrille* of which other pilots had spoken?

Then another thought struck Kruger. What if his *staffel* mates should sight that other Falcon—might they come to regard it in its true light, as a true Falcon of Schleswig? And might they then reflect that Olaf Kruger was after all no German but a Dane?

Another question followed upon the heels of the first. Had Borck seen the insignia on that Nieuport? If so, would that account for his hostility after the combat, during the flight home?

Kruger shrugged. He was imagining things, that was it. Let him get into the air and clear his head of such wild thoughts! Patrol in two hours—no, sooner than that. Perhaps he'd get one of the coveted Nieuports, and make good for his lapse of this morning. A Nieuport, and a score of thirteen. Surely then the *Hausordnung*. . . .

The patrol winged straight west under Borck's urge, and made the tour of the Lille front. But no Nieuports appeared.

CHAPTER VI

A Falcon Falls

FIVE pilots sat under a spreading leafy tree on the fringe of the flying field, watching the dusk turn purple. Weissenhorn had returned, but the hasty repairs to his undercarriage on Thoma's drome had failed to satisfy his exacting taste, and he was supervising the work now furthered on his Owl. Other lights than those that guided Weissenhorn's crew glowed in the cavernous hangars across the field, as mechanics kept motors warm against the raids that never came.

Rheinhold took the pipe from his

mouth, knocked the cold ash out against his bootheel, and shook his head. "They are good men, those Frenchmen we met this morning," he said thoughtfully.

"Ach!" Borck snorted. "Are we not good?"

Mockel grinned, and Erkner nodded assent. He opened his mouth to speak, and suddenly stiffened. Mouth hanging open, he held up a warning hand. His four comrades sat like statues.

On the soft twilight breeze came a humming, that rose to a low drone.

Borck sprang to his feet, and with a bound made for the hangars. His roar came back to the four who sprang to follow him. Men appeared at the mouths of the hangars, roused by that roar of the Bear of Baden.

"Out with them! Make haste!" The giant Signund was already half across the field. Behind him sprinted Kruger and Rheinhold, Erkner close, and little Mockel a bad last. At the hangar mouths the Albatrosses poked noses out, like dogs scenting a fox, in response to Borck's call.

And now the drone was growing to a roar in the sky. Over the ridge to the west, dark shapes appeared. And they were not night-flying swallows.

Von Achtermann came running from his headquarters retreat. "Ho, Borck! *Was ist?*"

Borck thrust one foot into his stirrup, slapped a huge hand onto the cockpit rim, and with the other pointed skyward. Then he was settling into his seat and fingering his throttle.

A dozen yards away, Olaf Kruger matched his moves. The Falcon Albatross crawled from the hangar a dozen yards behind Borck's craft, and the two ships turned together for the run down the field into the wind.

And thus they escaped the whirlwind of destruction that flayed the field of the Fiftieth Albatrosses as those dark shapes came hurtling down from the western ridge. Roaring motors deafened von Achtermann as he turned from the hangar mouth and ran to the bomb-

proof dugout behind it. Erkner stood dismayed, heedless of the raining bombs from the night raiders, as he saw the left wings of his plane fold together with the sudden collapse of a strut. Mockel took one look at the shell-torn field, shrugged, and thrust his hands into his pockets as he turned to join von Achtermann. He was never too good at night take-off, and with the field a morass of hills and exploding valleys. . . .

BUT down at the far end of the field, Borck and Kruger were clearing the treetops. Up, up zoomed the straining little Albatrosses. Then Borck cut back in a screaming bank and Olaf Kruger was at his heels.

The Bear of Baden and the Falcon of Schleswig. Giving battle. And the onrushing night raiders gave way before their mad rush. Dark shapes zoomed over the Albatross wings, and Borck and Kruger turned again.

But this time they wheeled far out, to watch for the enemy's exhaust flares. The sky was dull with the failing of the day, and no moon showed. This was no place to fly with only hope for a guide. And Borck had wheeled to the right, but Kruger had turned to the left.

Olaf Kruger strained his eyes as he turned his craft toward the hangars of *Staffel* Fifty. He saw nothing—at first. Then a great spout of flame appeared below, lighting the field and hangar openings, and on the heels of the flame came a deafening roar. A second flame and its trailing roar. But now Kruger had spotted the streaking raiders.

He wheeled away, farther from the field, and turned his tail to the new bursts of flame and detonations, to catch a raider as it came out of its up-field flight. He watched for the flitting of the dark shape against the scarcely less dark sky.

But when it showed, his heart sank. It was five hundred yards away, and climbing, unswervingly, toward the west. At its side appeared another. A

third, then a fourth showed. And then, farther to the left, a fifth.

Olaf Kruger, the hot blood of battle leaping in his pulse, slammed his throttle to the notch as he pointed his Albatross toward the west. And as he flew he stared speculatively at the spark that dipped and wavered alone, far to the left of its four companion sparks.

He looked to both sides then, and behind him. The raiders were all in front of him, homeward bound, of that he was sure, but he expected to see Borck joining him in pursuit. Yes, there he was flying low, far to the right, chasing the four.

Well, let him go. This straggler on the left is a better chance. Good luck, Borck, thought Kruger, and then gave himself up to the chase.

He gained. He gained with a rush. For the raider, knowing less of the ridge ahead, was climbing more steeply than was necessary. And the spark ahead became a bright glow in Olaf Kruger's eyes. Then it was a living spout of flame, and beside it Kruger could see the outline of the raider's fuselage.

The retreating pilot increased his climb, and the splash of flame from the exhaust stack grew brighter. And thus Kruger saw a strangely familiar picture on the illumined fuselage.

It was the Falcon of Schleswig.

Kruger's fingers trembled on the control stick. Here was his chance! Honor for the *staffel*, honor for Olaf Kruger, and the answer to the puzzle of that Falcon.

He lifted the Albatross in a short zoom, and as he did so the moon raised its rim over the horizon at its back. The pale gleam bathed the outlines and surfaces of the plane now only fifty yards ahead, and showed the French *cocarde* and familiar lines of a Nieuport.

Then Kruger struck.

FROM the right and below, his Span-dau tracer snaked over an invisible trail straight to the Nieuport's snout. Tracer—and the *staffel's* pet incendiary

slugs. A long burst, passing the time of three heartbeats, set the gun before him to trembling in the death rattle. And the Nieuport nosed swiftly down.

They had passed the ridge. And now the gentle slope of the barren ground lay softly illumined under the rising moon. At this silvered surface the Nieuport was diving. Olaf, staring keenly, felt a twitching at his heart as he saw a yellow fang of fire licking about the cockpit. Those incendiaries!

He followed down, warily. The French plane, afire though it was, slanted down in a steady glide. It leveled off, gracefully slanted down again, and struck with a bounce. The flame wavered, and flickered oddly.

Kruger followed the Nieuport's landing, picking the same spot to touch wheels. The Albatross bumped over the rough ground and stopped fifty feet from the flame-licked Nieuport. He reached for his Luger in its cockpit flap, peered ahead, and warily went forward.

There was no head showing above the rim of the Nieuport's pit. Nor could Kruger see the pilot beside the ship. He halted. Yes, there was something, lying beside the fuselage, half under it. He began to move forward slowly, but broke into a run as a flare of fire filled the cockpit and gave warning of an explosion of the fuel tank.

The face of the prone Frenchman lay in shadow, but the body was limp, and Kruger knew that this *flieger* was unconscious if not dead. He seized the pilot—a tall man, this—about the waist and turned with a swaying run to put a safe distance between himself and the burning plane. Twenty yards he made before he heard the *boom!* and felt a rush of air push him to his knees, and he fell flat upon the body of the Frenchman.

His burden had fallen face down. With an effort Kruger turned the pilot on his back. The goggled face was motionless, and Olaf Kruger saw the reason as the moonlight showed a widening red stain low on the left breast.

The man was dead. An incendiary slug had made a ghastly hole.

Kruger unfastened the chin strap of the helmet and with a quick twist swept goggles and helmet from the fallen flyer's head. As he moved, the glare from the burning Nieuport fell full upon the ground and all about, and Kruger saw clear-limbed in its ruddy light an unforgotten face.

It was a face tanned to a leathern hue in tropic suns. A lean jaw and a jutting nose like Olaf Kruger's own. It was the face of his uncle, Christian Larssen.

How long he knelt, staring at that well-remembered face, Olaf Kruger never knew. He was roused by the drumming roar of a motor overhead, and looked up slowly to see an Albatross come slipping down to the slope lit by moon and blazing plane.

Borck.

KRUGER, after that one look aloft, turned away. He scarcely heard Borck's gliding and bouncing approach, and the barking of motor that announced his landing and halt. Then Borck's voice carried over the fifty feet of slope.

"Ho, Olaf!" The Bear's roar cut like a knife into Kruger's dulled musings. "You got one, eh?"

There was no answer. Borck strode forward, drew up beside Kruger, and looked down. "So! The *flieger's* dead."

Kruger stood grim and silent as a stone statue. Borck bent down, stared at the strong lean face of the dead pilot. "Not a French type," he muttered in surprise. "Strange . . . I've seen that nose and chin, somewhere. . . ." He shrugged. "Nothing to do here. The plane is burned, eh? This one can wait for daylight, when von Achtermann will send for him."

Suddenly Kruger growled in his throat like an enraged animal and pushed Borck roughly away from the still form on the ground. "Get out of

here!" he snarled. "Keep your paws off him. You and the rest of them—with your dirty incendiary slugs. Fire fiends! Get out!"

Borck gazed in amazement, started to speak, then turned and slowly made his way back to his plane.

CHAPTER VII

Old Nick

VON ACHTERMANN exuded good humor as he sprawled in his chair behind his desk, blinking whenever his eyes met the patch of light thrown upon the floor by the early morning sun streaming through the opened window. He nodded brightly to Olaf Kruger.

"So you've scored your thirteenth, Kruger. And I have, already, assurance that you are to receive the *Hausorden*. Splendid, eh?" He twisted his lean face in a smile.

Kruger, standing listlessly before him, said nothing. Only his eyes, under heavy lids, burned with an odd light to show that he had heard.

"You take it calmly?" Von Achtermann was nonplussed. He nodded. "That is a soldierly attitude. *Ja*. But it is a great honor."

He blinked, and smiled bleakly again. "And one of the Nieuports! The *Herr Oberst* von Geissler is delighted."

Olaf's face twitched as if in pain. But the *staffel* leader did not observe it. "It will give you joy to know that the Colonel will arrive this afternoon and will bestow the *Hausorden* with his own hands. What a day for you, Kruger! Eh? And now, that is all."

Kruger saluted frozenly and left the room. As he turned into the anteroom, Borck entered from the field. He opened his mouth to say something, but Kruger walked unseeingly past. Borck scowled and went in to von Achtermann.

"Yes, Borck?" Von Achtermann looked up at the patrol leader's entry.

"The men have brought in the body of the Frenchman," Borck reported. "Rheinhold, who went out with them, could find no parts of the plane worth saving. All markings burned."

"And the body?"

"At the *staffel* hospital, *Herr Kommandant*."

Von Achtermann picked up cap and gloves. "Let us go there." He led the way out of the headquarters building and down the field. A noncommissioned officer opened the door. Two other enlisted men were staring at the covered figure on a planked trestle.

Von Achtermann eyed the two in surprise. "*Was ist?*" he demanded sharply. "Are you then hypnotized by this corpse?"

The nearer of the two ducked his head deprecatingly. "*Herr Kommandant*, it is only that—"

"Ja, ja. What is it?"

The *feldwebel* pointed. "The face, *Herr Kommandant*—it is the face of—the Falcon."

"The Falcon? The Lieutenant Kruger? Are you mad? Lieutenant Kruger is alive." The enlisted man held his ground, and the *staffel* leader bit his lip. He was about to speak when the meaning of the soldier's statement struck him. "*Ach!*—a resemblance." He strode forward and swept the covering from the face of the dead pilot. He looked long and steadily, then replaced the covering, motioned to Borck to follow, and left the building.

Outside, he turned to Borck. "You saw?"

"The resemblance? Ja. Strange."

Von Achtermann nodded. "Coincidence."

BORCK looked away. Then he turned back, and looked the *staffel* commander full in the eye. "Perhaps not."

"Eh?"

"Last night, *Herr Kommandant*," Borck said slowly, "Kruger behaved strangely. He knelt for a long while

beside this body. I came up and he turned on me savagely."

"So?"

"Yesterday morning he had an opportunity to shoot down a Nieuport, and—did not."

"You are certain?"

"Certain."

Von Achtermann squinted. He thought it over. Then he said, half to himself, "Von Geissler must know of this." He nodded to Borck. "You will say nothing to any one. But"—he shook a finger under Borck's nose—"you will watch Kruger on patrol." A gleam came into his eyes. Then he added: "You had better say to Erkner, Rheinhold and Weissenhorn that Kruger is to be watched lest he grow slack. Not a word of this other thing."

The flight leader nodded.

"One other thing," Borck said. "Kruger does not like incendiary bullets. It would seem that he does not like to hurt the enemy—"

"Humph! He will use the ammunition we all use, and inflict all the damage possible on the enemy—or explain. There is no room in the German army for—friends of the enemy. You understand?"

"Yes, sir."

ALL the other pilots were gathered about the ships when Olaf Kruger crossed the field for the morning patrol. He saw Borck giving orders, it seemed, to the other four. But when he joined them, Borck greeted him shortly, and said nothing about plans for the flight.

Rheinhold, with an anxious note in his voice, it seemed to Kruger, said, "Nervous about meeting Old Nick, Olaf?"

"Eh? Old Nick?"

Little Mockel grinned faintly. "You haven't seen him. The *Herr Oberst* von Geissler, Chief of the Secret Intelligence."

"Oh."

"He is to bestow the *Hausorden*," Erkner reminded Kruger.

Olaf Kruger nodded. "He could keep it," he said bluntly.

Erkner gasped. Little Mockel turned a dull red. And all five stared at Kruger.

Weissenhorn said sharply, "What's got into you, Kruger?"

Olaf Kruger shrugged.

"The Falcon is turning into a timid sparrow," Borck jeered.

Kruger's head jerked up. He stared at the Baden Bear. Then, "A falcon is always a falcon," he declared.

Borck glowered. Rheinhold broke in, "But the *Hausordnung*—"

"Let it go," said Olaf, "to those who delight in fire." He sneered at the five. "You who are *feuerwahnsinnig*, take it. I am not fire-maddened. I have burned men down, but I burn no more." He turned his back to them and strode to his ship. Thus he missed the significant look that passed from Borck to the other four.

Borck walked to his ship, giving the cue to Erkner, Mockel, Rheinhold and Weissenhorn. And each cast a lowering look at Olaf Kruger as he sat stiffly upright in his cockpit, staring out upon the field, waiting for the order to fly.

The Albatross of the Baden Bear taxied away from the hangar, turned and shot down the field. Olaf Kruger followed, climbing indifferently. A thousand feet up, the exhilaration of flight seized upon him, and he lifted his head, seeking Borck. Then he stared.

The echelon had already formed. And there behind Borck was Erkner as always—but flying close behind Erkner was Rheinhold. Mockel and Weissenhorn followed in close order. There was no gap left for Olaf Kruger.

He flew aimlessly alongside Weissenhorn, wondering if Borck had given new orders for the flight. He waved to Weissenhorn, seeking a signal that would guide him to a place in the formation. But Weissenhorn seemed unaware of his presence in the sky.

For a moment he thought of trailing behind Weissenhorn. Yet he hesitated,

knowing it would be a breach of discipline. And then a chance came.

Borck, heading west, changed course forty degrees. Rheinhold lagged on the turn, and Kruger cut in ahead of him, and slipped into his old place behind Erkner. What the devil!—they might not like his company, but they'd have trouble shaking him loose!

On the next turn Erkner dived suddenly and Rheinhold cut across Kruger's bows, almost causing a collision. Kruger pulled up and once more he was out of the formation.

On, toward the Front. But not to reach it this time.

For over the lines came Nieuports. Five in a flying wedge. Heading for the Albatross echelon, and hitting it up. Riding high, too high to be trapped by a diving attack from out of the sun. And toward them Borck led his flying staircase.

The well-known Albatross formation with Kruger, the Falcon, shunted out of formation, buzzing aimlessly on the edge of the flight.

SIX Albatrosses. Five Nieuports. So quickly was the battle joined, and such was Kruger's momentary confusion resulting from unfamiliarity with his position on the fringe of the flight, that in a moment five black-crossed scouts had chosen each an adversary, and Kruger was out of the fight, a spectator and no more.

Fretfully he wheeled on the fringe of the dogfight, that soon began to spread over the sky. There was Borck, slamming into the *kurvenkampf* with a hot fast Nieuport for a partner. Rheinhold was thrusting up at the belly of another, that slipped away as Kruger watched.

And diving away to the south was a Nieuport with an Albatross on its tail. Kruger wheeled for a better look. That Nieuport—yes, that Nieuport was lamed. And on its tail was Erkner. Adolf Erkner, with a score of nine, hot after a flamer and rank of ace.

Kruger slid his stick forward and slid down the sky to close the gap and watch the play. Yes, Erkner was firing—playing for the Nieuport's nose. He wanted a flamer. . . .

A sudden twist of the Nieuport brought it around into the sun, and Kruger had a glimpse of the pilot. A goggled head topped with flaming red hair. Olaf Kruger thought of the little Riley, and with no knowledge of his action slammed his stick forward and went down.

The Nieuport was leveling off out of its dive, and Erkner matched its move. Thus as down came Kruger in his screaming plunge, he cut between the pursuer and pursued. And there he stayed.

Looking forward, riding the Nieuport's tail, he saw the startled Nieuport pilot counting two Albatrosses where only one had been before. He watched the Frenchman's puzzlement when no tracer flew through the fifty yards of space. Then he cast a glance back at Erkner.

That fire-worshiper, astonished by Kruger's dive, now realized its purpose. He shook a fist over the cockpit coaming, and veered and swooped in a try to pass Kruger and reach his prey. But Olaf Kruger, with a laugh, touched his stick, and Erkner was blocked again.

He looked ahead, and saw the Nieuport flying easier. So much the better, the Frenchman was safe. Let him go. Kruger whipped about, made to charge at Erkner, saw Adolf swerve, and laughed aloud. They'd chase him out of line, would they? They'd call him sparrow, eh? Well, at least he gave his enemies a chance to touch ground when they were helpless to fight!

He climbed. Above, Nieuports and Albatrosses were still playing Ring around Rosy. A drawn battle. And suddenly the Nieuports dived out of it. Fuel getting low, that meant.

Borck tried to pursue, but the Nieuports had caught the Albatross men off guard. They had a good start toward

their Lines. So Borck led off north to complete the patrol.

FLYING once more behind Mockel, with Weissenhorn behind and above, Kruger sobered as he realized what he had done. Once again—the second time, this—he had spared a Nieuport of the breed that von Geissler of the Intelligence wanted so hard to get. It would mean, this last trick, nothing less than a trial.

And since it was so evident he had interfered to send the Nieuport flyer on his homeward way . . . Kruger paled. Much could be made of this by that cold-eyed Old Nick.

Olaf Kruger set his teeth. He'd play it out. Let them try to stretch his neck on a treason charge. He had a splendid record. He was to receive the Kaiser's own award.

The four ships before him rose and fell in undulating motion. But there was no thrill in the sight for Olaf Kruger. Gone was the joy of winging with the Albatrosses of von Achtermann. He knew now that his heart was not with the fire-makers.

Borck led off to the east for the drome. One by one the Albatrosses touched and rolled and turned toward the hangars.

As Kruger climbed down from his cockpit, he saw Borck and Erkner striding away in the direction of von Achtermann's headquarters. They were talking rapidly. Kruger's lip curled.

But a diversion drove from his mind the memory of the patrol.

Striding from a staff automobile that had evidently just driven up to the field came a short slender officer with bushy white eyebrows and a bristling white mustache. This, thought Kruger, must be Old Nick.

It was. *Herr Oberst* Nikolaus von Geissler, Chief of Secret Intelligence of the military area, had arrived. At his side strode von Achtermann.

"So Old Nick is here," thought Kruger. And he remembered: "This is

the day when I am to receive the *Hausorden*." The thought brought no elation, only a dull pain. But an afterthought struck him—there must be a banquet.

It was the custom. The recipient of the *Hausorden* must play host to his fellow officers. This was his duty.

Wine, then. Wine, laughter, song. While Uncle Chris lay under the covering in that little building down the field. . . .

In the *staffel* headquarters building, the *Herr Oberst* von Geissler sat sphinx-like beside von Achtermann's desk as the *staffel* commander talked. Occasionally he nodded thoughtfully. When the *staffel* leader finished, he summed up.

"So!" His bright cold eyes sought von Achtermann's. "Surely a coward, possibly a spy. He stands strangely in your *staffel*, von Achtermann."

The lean face of the younger officer flushed. "I could bear to see him stand before a firing squad, *Herr Oberst*."

Von Geissler shook his head. "His behavior is strange. He insults the All-Highest with his scorning of the *Hausorden*. Just this morning he saved an enemy from the guns of a brother officer. But he has a record in the air, and I could not order his arrest without hearing from Berlin. Possibly even from the Emperor. I cannot even withhold the decoration."

"But the *Hausorden*—" von Achtermann's hands rose in the air—"to a man who has besmirched it!"

The Chief of the Secret Intelligence smiled mirthlessly. "I have had a word," he said, "with your good men Borck and Erkner. They seem to believe that something may be done."

CHAPTER VIII

The Party

FLOWING tapers in great seven-branched candlesticks lit the faces of the eight men who stood stiffly about

the long table in the cardroom. The candlelight struck the wine bottles on the table, and set them to gleaming red as blood.

Von Achtermann was in his place at the head of the table. At his left stood Rheinhold, Weissenhorn and Mockel. At his right, Borck, Erkner and Kruger. And at the guest's place, opposite the *staffel* commander, the *Herr Oberst* von Geissler reached out to his left and pinned upon Olaf Kruger's tunic the decoration of the *Hohenzollern Hausorden*.

Kruger looked down at it. And as he looked, the glittering wreath seemed to fade out of view, and in its place appeared a face, strong, sun-hardened, a fighter's face. The face of his uncle Christian Larssen, Falcon of Schleswig.

With a stifled cry he seized the decoration in trembling fingers, plucked it from his tunic to the sound of rending cloth, and hurled it down upon the table. "Damn the *Hausorden*!" he barked. "And damn Hohenzollern!"

In the dead silence that followed he heard the tinkle of the metal as the bauble, rolling on the table top, came to a stand against a bottle of wine.

It was little Mockel who broke the silence. Eyes glowing with a feverish glare, he shook a finger at Olaf. "Traitor!" he cried.

"What does it—" began Rheinhold.

Erkner laughed harshly. He shot a glance at Kruger that was filled with hatred. "What does it mean, you ask, Rheinhold? It means that the famous fighting Falcon has grown tired of the war, and takes the quick way to an easier life—or an easier death."

Rheinhold eyed Kruger coldly. "He invites the firing squad?"

"It's a comfortable death," Erkner explained with a sneer. "More to the Falcon's liking than fire at five thousand feet!"

Weissenhorn, pale, turned to Borck. "Sigmund—"

"Ja!" The single word signified the Baden Bear's complete agreement with

Erkner. Borck looked Olaf Kruger up and down, his dark eyes afire, his brow a thundercloud. "Pfui! Let him go for a lousy coward—and a traitor!"

Let him go for a lousy coward. . . . The words echoed in Kruger's brain. He was dimly conscious of a movement on his right, and as he turned, he saw von Geissler moving away from the table to join von Achtermann on a settee against the wall. They chatted idly as they strolled.

Then Erkner savagely gave Olaf a shove away from the table. "It is not fitting that a cowardly traitor should stand or sit with fighting men! Move back, you!"

Kruger seemed to rouse at the physical contact. He stiffened, pivoted on the balls of his feet, and swung his fist for Erkner's face. But a pair of great arms gripped his elbows from behind, and Sigmund Borck's jeering voice rang in his ear. "Ho, back to the wall, skulker!" And Borck with a heave tossed the tall Dane over the floor and against the wall. Kruger's head struck with a crack, and he slumped unconscious to the floor.

DIMLY, through a red haze, Kruger saw them seated about the table. He heard the murmur of voices and the sound of boisterous laughter. Slowly, painfully, he raised himself to a sitting posture.

Now he could see them clearly. His head ached dully, and he sank his teeth into his under lip while the blood beat at his temples. But he could see.

Borck was opening a bottle. Kruger's wine. The wine that he had offered to comrades. Kruger watched the bubbling red liquid flow from the bottle's mouth into the waiting glasses, and it seemed that in that same fashion his own life blood was draining from his heart.

Comrades! He had called them comrades. For months he had known them as brothers. And now he sat alone.

"To the next score for the Fiftieth!"

Erkner's harsh laugh rang out across the room.

"*Hoch!*" They drank to that. Then Rheinhold asked, "Which is your preference, Sigmund, English or French?"

To which Borck replied in a great voice, "Either will do. But for true enjoyment, give me a Schleswig traitor under my guns!"

They roared at that, Erkner and Rheinhold and Mockel, while Weissenhorn looked across the room with a baleful glance for Olaf Kruger. Then Weissenhorn's attention was caught by the empty chair beside Erkner.

"Ho, *fliegers!* Here is something which we must wipe clean of filth!" He gestured with a disdainful frown at Kruger's chair with the falcon panel.

Mockel and Erkner caught at the notion eagerly. "*Ja!* Let us clean it!" cried Mockel. And Erkner added, mockingly, "With the great purifier—fire!"

"*Ja!*" Borck roared in approval. "Let the falcon have a taste of fire!"

Erkner caught up one of the great seven-branched candlesticks and carried it to Kruger's chair. The seven flames ate at the inflammable paint as Erkner held it close and steady against the falcon panel. A cut of smoke arose, and then the panel blazed.

"Ho!" cried Borck. "The falcon goes down in flames!"

Tense against the wall, under lip half bitten through, Olaf Kruger watched with staring eyes as the flames devoured the heraldic art.

He had forgotten von Geissler and von Achtermann. Now as he saw them rising and moving toward the door, he wondered. Why had they chosen such punishment? He thought he knew. It was so that the *staffel* might wear him down with shame and drive him to a death that could not annoy von Geissler or von Achtermann.

At the door the two turned, facing the five pilots who had risen as they passed. Von Geissler spoke. "We leave you, gentlemen," he shot an oblique glance at

Olaf Kruger, crouched on the floor, and then turned his bright cold smile on the five at the table, "we leave you to your—feast."

The five bowed. The two passed through the door, and the six pilots of the *staffel* were alone.

OLAF KRUGER slowly drew his legs under him and swayed to his feet. The meaning of von Geissler's parting words was clear. He had washed his hands of the situation—the matter was now given over to the pilots of *staffel* Fifty.

And the pilots knew. Theirs was the privilege of determining Olaf Kruger's fate, and the moment of his death. Borck drew back from the table, and eyed Kruger.

But Kruger was unaware of it. He was watching the diminishing flame that had eaten his falcon from the chair-back. In a sudden curiosity he lurched forward to see what damage the fire had worked. The flame died as he half-whirled the chair about.

Then he, too, was whirled in a half-circle as Borck's arms fastened upon him from behind. He was pinned against Borck's great chest, facing the others, with Borck's arms under his elbows.

Then Erkner swaggered up.

"Kruger!" His voice was blurred with the wine he had drunk, but his eyes burned with a fierce and steady light. "You do not like fire as we do, eh?"

Kruger stared him in the eye, but said no word.

"He does not like fire!" cried Erkner, turning and gesturing with his cigarette to the other four. "Then perhaps a better acquaintance with it would change his feelings!" And he laid the lighted end of the cigarette against Olaf's cheek.

The maddening pain of it fired all the stored fury in Kruger's brain. With a furious twist he shook Borck off. Erkner fell back a pace, but Kruger made no move toward him. Instead he stood

irresolute for a moment, then he stood straight, smoothed his rumpled tunic, and said sharply, "Listen, all of you. You want sport. I will tell you a few things—then I will entertain you."

He pointed to Weissenhorn's crossed sabres over the fireplace.

"Fighters!" he jeered. "Nay! Torturers! Fire-workers, *Feuerwahnsinnig* lunatics, all of you!" His steady finger indicated the gleaming sabres. "Who will make a real fight with the Falcon of Schleswig?"

None of them moved. Kruger laughed. "When it comes to making fire," he said slowly, with a grin that moved the fiery spot on his cheek where Erkner's cigarette had rested, "you stand supreme. But you are no company for the Falcon of Schleswig!" He pointed to the broken propeller hung upon the wall. "You, Borck! Who was it snapped you up out of No Man's Land when your ship was gone, and the barrage was eating forward to make mincemeat of you?" He tapped his own chest with his thumb.

Then he whirled on Erkner. "Adolf Erkner!" He pointed to the jagged piece of fabric that bore a British number. "What of the Martinsyde that would have put you down—whose hand took it off your tail?"

"And you, Rheinhold, gaze at that British *cocarde*! What happened to the Sopwith two-seater that carried it? It fell—under the guns of the Falcon!"

His arm fell and came up again to single out Weissenhorn. "What of the spiderweb?" He flung his hand to point out the design in flying wires that had supported a Morane Parasol. "And the Camel's hump! Eh, Mockel, do you remember?" He breathed hard. "The Falcon's work, fire-worshippers! The Falcon's fights!"

The five stood silent and alert, watchful.

"And now," Kruger barked, "who stands against the Falcon? It will be rare sport for you all to watch. Take down the sabres. Who dares to raise

the sword against Olaf Kruger?"

Five pairs of eyes glanced at the twin blades over the mantel-piece. Then Brock growled, "Since when has a coward and traitor deserved a fair fight?" Erkner, Rheinhold and Mockel murmured agreement.

But Weissenhorn stepped forward, and shook his head at the four. "Kruger deserves to die like a man, like a soldier," he said slowly. "He has won the right many times." And he nodded to the wall where the trophies and relics hung.

"Ho, Weissenhorn!" Kruger's eyes glowed. "Come, then! A fair fight, to the death!" He stood forward from the fireplace.

Borck stepped forward as though to lift the crossed sabres from their place over the mantel. Suddenly his great arm swung around and his fist crashed against Kruger's ear. Kruger staggered and sat down on the floor.

"No, Weissenhorn," Borck growled. "He does not get that chance so easily. He has forfeited the right to settle it like a gentleman."

Weissenhorn bowed and started for the door. "Then," he said, "if you gentlemen will excuse me I shall leave. I would have fought him gladly—and tried to kill him. But I shall not stay and see a man who was once a member of the proud *Staffel* Fifty kicked about like a pickpocket." He clicked his heels and was gone.

CHAPTER IX

The Caged Falcon

HALF an hour later Borck stuck his head out of the cardroom door and bellowed to the sentry on duty, "Come in here!"

The enlisted man entered the room and looked around inquiringly. His glance finally came to rest on the figure of Olaf Kruger, slumped in his burned chair. His eyes stared and livid welts

showed on his face. His tunic was open at the throat and there were burned patches in it, as though someone had held a candle to it, so that it would smolder and the pungent smoke would fill the wearer's nostrils.

"Sentry," Borck said, "have you ever wished to slap an officer's face?"

The guard stiffened and looked around in alarm. Could these flying officers be that drunk?"

"Have you?" Borck thundered.

The very thought of it made the stout soldier tremble. "No, sir!" he gulped.

"This man *was* an officer," Borck went on. "Go on, slap his face."

The guard stood as if turned to stone. He shook his head in wonder. He could not have lifted his hand to slap Kruger's face if his life depended upon it. His eyes bulged and his knees shook at the mere crazy suggestion.

"Bah!" Borck spat. "He is an officer no more. But if you don't want to enjoy yourself, take him away. Take him to the solitary confinement cell."

Through the anteroom, out onto the familiar field, Kruger walked as if in a dream. Was this he, the Falcon of Schleswig, paraded past these gaping soldiers who had taken his orders for long weeks? As he strode along, head high, rage smoldered in his breast, smoldered, and flickered and flamed.

The corporal of the guard took the lead once the field was reached. He turned down the fringe of the field, stopping at a long, low building that never in the memory of Olaf Kruger had ever housed a human being. He opened a door fitted with a heavy outside padlock and an iron bar that stretched the width of the door.

A cage for the Falcon.

The room was none too inviting. But there was a straw pallet in one corner that showed an attempt to provide a measure of comfort for the unexpected prisoner. Four narrow slits in the front wall let in some light. Kruger looked around as the door closed and he heard the bolt shot, and scowled at the sight

of rat holes in the floor boards by the wall.

The day passed slowly. At midday a guard appeared with a tray of dishes, and Kruger ate with little relish. At dusk the guard again brought food. Then the four narrow slits in the front wall slowly darkened. Rustlings sounded at the rear wall, and Kruger looked about for a weapon with which to combat the rats. He found a slab of wood in a corner, and with it in his hand awaited the arrival of the rats. If he could give them a scare, perhaps they'd leave his night free for sleep.

The rustlings increased. But Kruger had forgotten them. What was his next move? He hadn't expected immediate arrest. Why, what had driven them? Erkner's fury, of course, and Borck's anger. When he had saved that Frenchman from Erkner's guns. That was what did it. The decoration had been a mockery.

And so, the arrest. Kruger growled. His fingers touched his burned face.

The rustlings came again. Irritably Kruger moved silently to the rear wall whence they came. Then he stared. A short board in the flooring was shaking as if it were about to fall away. Large rats they grow in this valley, thought Kruger, and he poised his club to smite the rat's head as it appeared.

But the head was the head of Otto, his orderly.

CHAPTER X

A Falcon Flies

IN the dim and fading light Otto's face showed pale. His eyes blinked. "*Herr Leutnant!*" he breathed. "Come quickly!" He withdrew his head, and his hand appeared, pulling at the longer board beside the hole. It gave way, six feet of it, with a loud creak. The way was clear.

Kruger put down his club. Thrusting his feet through the opening, he

stretched his legs away, outward toward the ground beyond the hut. He felt Otto's hands tugging at his ankles. And in a moment he was clear, and rising to his feet in the gloom beside the hut.

"You'll fly, Lieutenant?" Otto was plucking at his sleeve.

Kruger grinned without mirth. "*Ja*, Otto. And let them try to stop me, once I hold my little Albatross in this good hand."

"All is ready." Otto cocked his head to one side, listening. "The men at the hangars have a bottle. Schnapps from the *Herr Leutnant's* locker. With the *Herr Leutnant's* leave," he added diffidently.

Kruger laughed silently. "And welcome!" he chuckled. "Then go, Otto. You must not be seen."

"*Nein*, not yet." Otto shook his head. "There is the propeller to start, then I will disappear. It will be quick—the engine is still heated."

"So." Kruger nodded. "Well, then. In five minutes I'll be flying. And after that"—he glanced questioningly at Otto—"who knows—?"

"*Ja*." Otto added vigorously, "If they should fly to stop you—"

Kruger's eyes burned hard and bright. His fingers touched the burned spot on his face. "I'll shoot them down."

"Good." Otto nodded again. "In flames?"

"In flames?" Kruger started. "Ah, well, perhaps. They live by fire, let them die by it. If they must die tonight. But this I know, they shall not lead me to the noose."

He moved slowly to the corner of the hut. The field was wrapped in gloom. Down the side of the field, lights burned dimly in the hangars. It was time to make the dash.

Moving slowly behind huts and hangars, with Otto a silent shadow behind him, Kruger came to the hangar where his Falcon plane was housed. It was empty, as Otto had promised. But it could not be empty for long. The me-

chanics would be back, in minutes.

He strode over to his plane. Yes, the engine was warm.

"See, Otto! The plane is pointed to the field. You pull the propeller through, and I run her out, fast. That is when you make your way from the hangar—when any eyes turned this way will be watching me run down the field." Kruger climbed into the cockpit. "Now!"

Otto laid hands upon the propeller. A quick pull through, and the motor barked, roared, and filled the night with racket. Like a hurtling hawk the little plane shot from the hangar and out upon the field. Then, under Kruger's hand, it turned its nose down the field, took on speed, lifted wheels off the ground, lifted, and was flying over the treetops at the edge of the field.

Kruger looked back. Buildings were dim in the meager lights, but before the hangar mouths he could see men running. He grinned a tight grin, and laid a straight course northeast. To Holland. Up!

An hour's flying would do it, he knew. He eased the motor and heard it settle to a rhythmic beat. But as its roar lessened another sound came to him. Faint, but clear.

Pursuit was a-wing.

He looked back. Only one ship on Fiftieth's field need he fear, only one faster than his own. That was Adolf Erkner's. If it was in the air, it meant a fight.

ERKNER flew with rage in his heart for Kruger the Falcon. Flew under the goad of rage, and the lash of the rasped order from von Achtermann: "Shoot him down!"

His plane was gaining. Slowly. Already he was ahead of Borck, who had taken off a full minute before. He pushed it to its limit.

Half an hour off the little drome in the valley, Kruger saw him come. And made ready to meet him. The night was dark, the moon was not yet up. But

in the higher levels of the sky was light enough for battle.

Erkner closed in with a rush. Kruger banked away, Immelmanned, then climbed in a turn that gave him a view of the pursuer. It must be Erkner, though the plane was a dim shape and only a black bump showed above the fuselage outline. A black bump that was a pilot's head. Erkner's, no doubt.

Erkner bored up, then from below, trying for a shot in the belly of the Falcon's ship. Kruger banked and cut in upon Erkner's tail. It was a full fair shot, and Kruger, with his eye on the dull glistening arc of the other's propeller, flicked out a quick burst.

But at that moment Erkner leveled off. Was it a miss, or— No! Kruger snarled like a she-tiger.

Erkner was going down. In flames! He had wanted a flamer. And there it was. A thin tongue of flame in the night. They had made him use incendiaries. Erkner had mocked—and burned him.

And then Kruger jerked his stick as a swarm of bees came buzzing past his head. A new threat was behind him. He looped and came down with trigger finger ready, and fired as a dark shape crossed his vision. The dark shape dropped away.

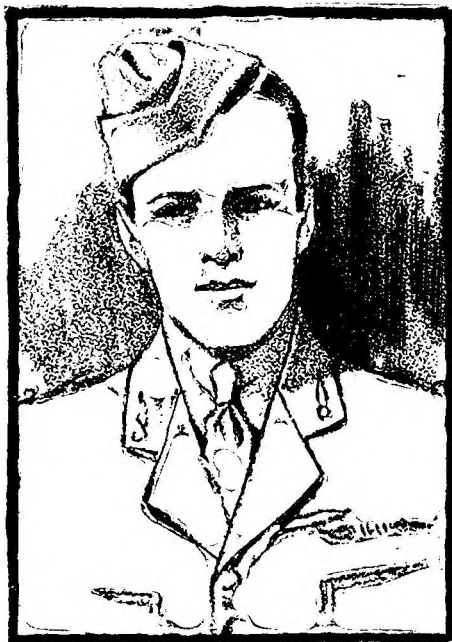
Kruger circled, watching. And suddenly the thin tongue of fire trailing from Erkner's ship became a great torch. In its light he saw the other dark shape that had gone down—a shape illumined, and in the cockpit of the plane the helmeted head of Borck.

The Bear of Baden was hit. Somewhere one of Kruger's bullets had found a mark. But as the flame lit the sky Borck raised his head. An arm lifted slowly, in a gesture that was a benediction and a challenge. It was the old signal, the full sweep of the arm from east to west. Another day, another story.

Kruger nodded. Another day, Borck. But now, there was a little matter of the coast of Holland.

THE END

They Flew to Glory



BRITISH
Major James B. McCudden
58 Confirmed



GERMAN
Captain Oswald Boelke
38 Confirmed

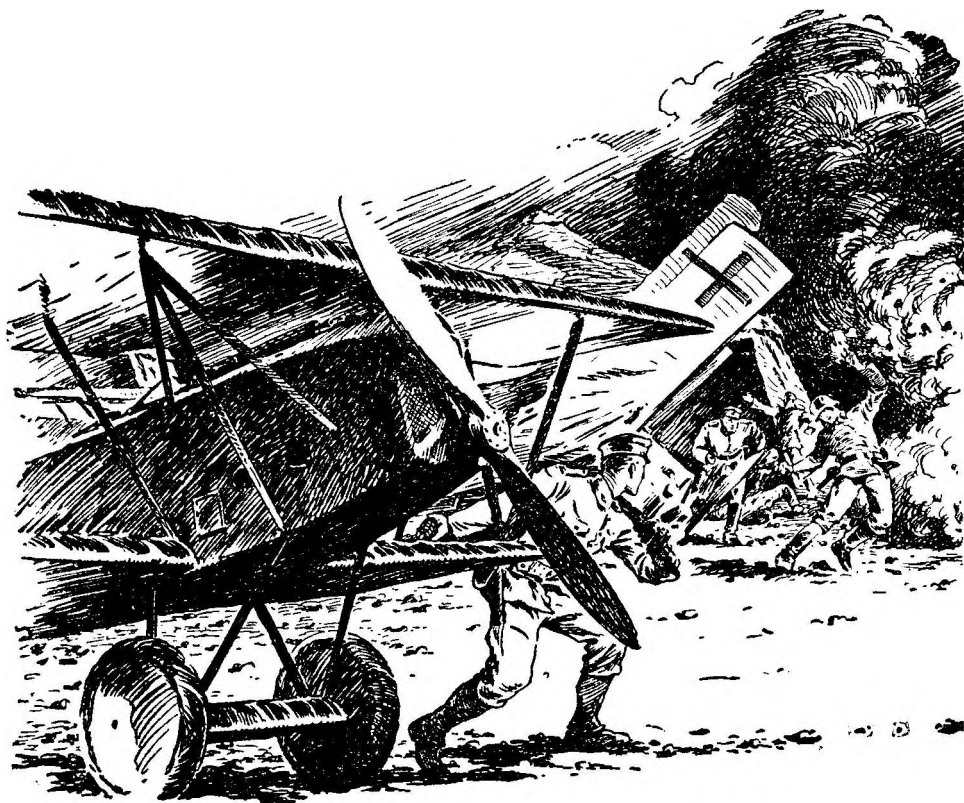


AMERICAN
Lieutenant Frank Luke
18 Confirmed



FRENCH
Captain Georges Guynemér
53 Confirmed

The Gallows Birds



By Joel Rogers

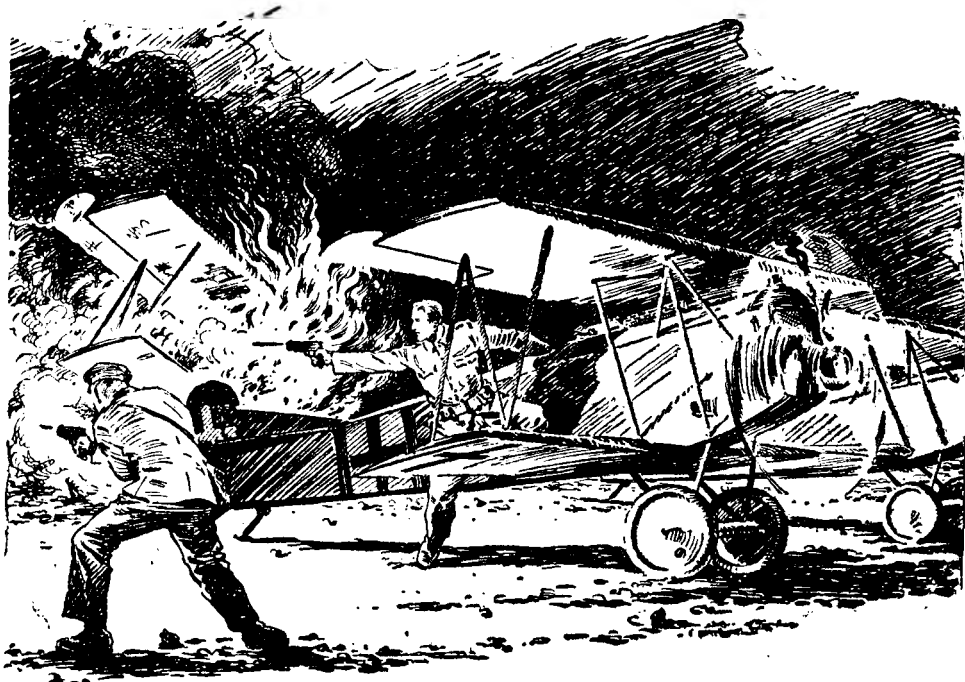
Author of "Kings of the Camels," "The Ace from Missouri," etc.

The Unholy Three were A. W. O. L. birds in a kiwi outfit and they wanted to hit the air above the battle lines and tangle feathers with the Red Baron . . . And they fought three armies on the way.

THERE were three rather tired and red-eyed gentlemen in Marine Corps forest-green, wearing the gleaming wings of American naval aviators on their unbuttoned tunics, with their split-ess caps shoved wearily on the back of their heads and their shirt col-

lars opened on their sweating necks, who went stumbling and slogging down the deserted side road from Paris toward Compeigne in the dust beneath the hot July afternoon sun.

The name of the tall thin flying man with the knobby knees and the little but-



ton nose was Slim. The name of the broad thick flying man with the freckled face and the gold teeth and the bow legs who was carrying a bottle under his arm was Finnegan. The name of the small brown-skinned flying man with pomaded black hair smelling of violet toilet water and lilies-of-the-valley was the Conch, meaning that he was a native of Key West, Florida. They were all three second lieutenants of the Marine Corps, attached to the 83rd American Observation Squadron at Compeigne for training, pending the formation of a Marine squadron, and at present they

A Complete War Air Novel

were returning to their field from an A. W. O. L. party in Paris by the hoof route, having failed to connect with any transportation in Paris, and having wandered off now onto the deserted side road where their prospects of picking up any ride were growing nil, if not niller.

"Not even a donkey cart in sight," said Finnegan.

"Eighteen miles more," said Slim.

"*Madre de Dios!*" said the Conch.

They came to a crossroads where a little square milestone said: "47 k. a Paris, 33 k. a Compeigne." A muddy stream purred through a culvert beneath the road, at the bottom of a gully, just beyond. They paused with staggering knees, leaning against each other to keep from collapsing. Finnegan passed the bottle around. They tilted it in turn, swallowing without enthusiasm.

"Some hair of the dog," said Finnegan.

"Blah," said Slim, taking a deep swallow. "Never again."

"It was the third or fourth bottle of cognac we had at that joint called the Dead Cow that kayoed us," said Finnegan. "Somebody put something in it."

He snorted.

"It was that perfume you poured in that triple sec back in the dressing room at the Folies," said Slim. "I never could stand the taste of atar of roses. Or else it was all the tobacco ashes you dumped into the champagne."

"It was everything," said the Conch with a hiccup.

WITH one accord they slid and sprawled down the gully slope to the edge of the muddy little brook that crossed beneath the road. They took off their boots and socks, unbuttoned their breeches from their calves and rolled them up, and laved their bunions and blisters in the cool water. Slim soaked his handkerchief, and wrapped it around his yellow curls and high intelligent forehead. Sitting by the edge of the water, with their feet dabbling in the stream, morosely they watched the specks of planes that came flying far down the road toward them, low in the heat-hazed sky.

"It's the Prune," said Slim. "It's Old Prune-juice himself. He's sent out the whole blanked army gang looking for us."

The Prune, otherwise Prune-juice, otherwise several other less mentionable names referring to what a diet of prunes is apt to do a man, was Major Israel

Putnam Pruyn, U. S. A., pronounced Prine, commanding officer of the 83rd Observation Squadron at Compeigne.

"It looks like both the Salmsons, and all the A. R.s in the deck," agreed Finnegan gloomily. "Not to speak of all the haywire Bleriot's that have been lying out on the dump heap getting ripe in the weather since God knows when. It's the first time the outfit ever got more than three ships moving and in the air at one time."

"It's the brig for us when we get back," predicted Slim.

"Well, it was worth it," said the Conch, hiccuping.

The sound of the approaching planes had increased steadily and rather swiftly from a rumble to a drone to a deep long-drawn roar, as they came on straight over the road, with fast thundering engines. They were approaching the culvert, beside which the three sad gyrines sat with feet dabbling in the purling water, at two miles a minute. They were coming like a bunch of comets and a load of buckshot out of a gun. *Hur-r-rrrrr!* Riding the telegraph wires down the line, with stubby wings eating the whirlwind of their propeller blasts, with black gun mouths mounted on their bows, they came hell for leather in a wild goose flight. There seemed to be twelve or thirteen of them, making the sky boom, looking all black for the instant in the glaring summer sunlight as they came howling low down the road from the north.

"Them ain't our own old bunch of hencoops and rattletaps," said Finnegan scientifically. "They're trick Frog fighting crates. One-seaters."

"Nieuports, maybe?" said Slim.

"Maybe even some of these new greased-lightning ships they call Spads," said Finnegan.

The onward hurtling squadron was extremely near. In fact, it was within a couple of hundred yards of the road-bridged little brook, coming like a flight of yelling shrapnel, and due to pass over the three tired interested men sitting by

the brookside in approximately two and eight-tenths seconds more.

"They sure are com—" said Slim.

Abruptly and without pause the leader of the howling flight shoved his nose down as he came on, and dived with full gun roaring straight at the trio of tired gyrines sitting on the ground. It could be seen then that his wings were not black, but a dark and brilliant red. *Hickety-hick-hick!* his machine-gun stuttered.

"Hey, you dang fool!" howled Finnegan.

Muddy drops splashed up in the brook like a streak of hail. Stones zinged and bounced on the bank. A bunch of daisy heads and grass blades went snipping away between Slim and the Conch. With an earth-drumming bellow the crimson ship flashed over and past on its way in half a second, while the flock of its fast red-hot sisters that followed on its tail dipped and dived headlong like a bucket-full of thunderbolts in imitation of it as they came roaring over, with guns streaking.

Hickety-hick-hickety-hickety.

DIRT and water spouted up. Stones were leaping. Daisies were kicking off their pants and flying in a shower. Cursing and yelling, Finnegan went flying for the shelter of the culvert in a record-breaking broad jump from the squatting position, seeing the tall elongated form of Slim and the short agitated form of the Conch diving for shelter ahead of him. Knee deep in the muddy swirling water, they stood with bent heads beneath the mossy old stone arch, while the thundering howls of that hurricane squadron went traveling overhead and away, ripping down lead into the ground alongside and onto the road above, drumming and echoing on the culvert's walls.

"Frogs!" said Slim, blasphemously.

"Sons of lice," commented Finnegan.

"I'd li' to be about ninety Boches right nov D-7 Fokkers," said Slim. "I'd like to be von Riegelmann's circus,

sitting on those funny Frogs' tails."

"Yes," said Finnegan. "Think they're cute."

The swift reiterated roars of the thunderbolting combat ships had gone zipping over one by one. Their roar faded away down the road into silence. The three irritated marines thrust their necks out, and emerged into the sunlight, climbing forth from the water. The swift fighting squadron had gone on south down the lonely road. They were only specks of dust now in the horizon haze. Finnegan smoothed down his bristled red hair and spat.

"They might have hit us," he said.

"Maybe they thought we were Fritzes, wearing green uniforms," said Slim.

"Say, those dim-wits don't know the Civil War's over yet," said Finnegan. "They don't know nothing. Frogs. They're almost as dumb as spigs."

"Says you," said the Conch belligerently.

"Well, maybe not. But almost," said Finnegan.

The three of them sat down indignantly again on the brook bank and resumed the soaking of their blisters. Finnegan passed around the bottle once more.

"Kill it," he said.

"Bottoms up, the navy way," said the Conch.

Down the road from the south behind them there was the rumble of an approaching vehicle. Slim's pale upstanding ears twitched. He looked at the two others. The Conch's sad Spanish eyes were full of an arising hope. Without a word the three of them grabbed up their boots. They clawed and scrambled up the steep gully slope to the roadside as the motor car came on. They started yelling and waving their arms violently.

It was a French army camion, camouflaged green, gray and white. It braked to a stop beside them. It was piled high, they saw, with a load of crated fuselages, wings, and engines—three brand new and slick jet-black combat ships hot from the factory, going up to some combat

unit at the Front. The little wrinkled brown-faced driver of the camion stared down at them like a monkey, pulling an ear lobe that was dripping blood. The big blond French sergeant in horizon-blue sitting beside the driver stroked his long yellow drooping mustaches inquiringly.

"Compeigne!" said Slim. "Allee samee want to get there quicky-wick. Drink heap much hoochum in Paree. No can find ridee. Too long walkee. How mooch wampum you him wantee give us lift, let us go by-by Compeigne mit you?"

THE blond French sergeant took off his helmet to cool his brains. Meditatively he rubbed his thumb over a bright shiny new dent in the headpiece. The little brown monkey-faced driver sitting beside him held his bleeding ear. The driver had a rip across the shoulder of his dungarees, as if a bullet had cut the cloth. There were silver bright punctures in the rumbling hood of the camion, too. The blond sergeant wiped his forehead with his palm, surveying the trio of dusty red-eyed barefooted men in forest-green who stood on the road. Plainly they were not French, he decided.

"*Anglais?*" he said. "*Est-ce que c'est peutetre la route a Groupe de Combat Arienne Anglais Quatre-vingt-et-troisieme, Messieurs les Aviateurs?*"

"No spikka da Frog," said Finnegan. "Wanta da lift."

"Hablas Espanol?" suggested the Conch. "Speak Cuban Spanish."

"Weety-durd flying s-squadron, which way him?" said the French sergeant.

"Huh?" said the Conch.

"What?" said Slim.

"Weety-durd flying s-squadron, where is which?" said the sergeant, replacing his helmet. "Maybe ze road she is a leetle mistaken, so?"

"Eighty-third squadron!" said Slim. "Oh, boy, is that where you're headed for?"

"That is her," said the sergeant with

delight. "You know him—Is it not?"

"Brother, let us take you by the hand and lead you to it," said Slim. "The 83rd is us."

"And they say a red-haired man has no luck," said Finnegan.

The three of them threw their boots aboard, and clambered up onto the camion with prayers and groans of exhausted delight, falling down amidst the crated wings in the last stages of collapse. The camion got under way again, rumbling and bouncing up the road.

"Eighteen sweet long miles," said Finnegan. "Hold her in neutral and give her the gun. Rev her up to fifteen-fifty and don't fire till you see the whites of their eyes, Gridley. You'll know when you're getting home if you have a nose for Prune-juice, and because there'll be about fifty-seven different brands of cock-eyed doughboy M. P.s out scouting the cabarets and boudoirs in the neighborhood for us. Don't wake us up till we get there. And not even then, if you can help it."

"Pardon?" said the sergeant.

"Thirty-three kilometers to go," said Slim, holding up his fingers. "Turn right—*richt, droit*—about five kilometers along from here. That will bring you straight to the Eighty-third that you're looking for, this side of Compeigne."

"So soon?" said the sergeant with delight. "Me, I have onderstan' she is all day I mus' go yet, up beyond Armentieres before the Front, where ze beeg guns boom and ze dirty Boche cirques go *pliquet-pliquet-pliquet* up and down ze road wiz ze mitrailleuses all ze time. But Compeigne, she is not so far."

"You're tooting sweet, sarge, as you Frogs say," declared Slim. "Not so far as the Front, by plenty. Any outfit that old Prune-juice commands is going to be a good long eighty miles from the sound of big guns and the Boche circuses."

"I will be back in Paris before ze night, *alors*," said the sergeant contentedly. "It is more zan I 'ad 'oped. Me, let me say frankly, *messieurs*, I do not

like to be so long on ze road. I do not enjoy ze Boche *cirques*. Zat *cirque* of M'sieu' ze Baronne Riegelmann zat come over, she give me what you call him a pain in ze pantaloons. Ze sooner I come back home, ze plaiser I like it."

He gave an apprehensive glance over his shoulder at the rear horizon, pulling his mustaches.

"Von Riegelmann?" said Finnegan. "Is the big tough Red Baron flying around here, sarge?"

"*Mais oui*," said the sergeant. "Did you not see ze terrible baronne wiz all his red Fokker *avions* come roaring straight down ze road *pliquet-pliquet*? Me, I jump under de camion when I see him coming. All ze same, I have got a souvenir from him. *Plique!* he goes on my hat."

HE removed his helmet again and surveyed the bright new dent in it with pride. "I show zat to my switt-heart tonight," he said. "Me, Jean Jules Marie Sacretonnerre, sergeant of ze transportation, I 'ave met ze *Baronne Rouge*. She will not call me a truck-driver again."

The three marines looked at one another. Silently the Conch fanned his face with his hand.

"Holy Moses, von Riegelmann!" said Finnegan.

"We thought they were Frogs, just being funny," explained Slim. "Great golly, were those Fokkers?"

"If I'd known it was him, I'd have thrown the bottle at him," said Finnegan belligerently. "What the hell—is a Finnegan going to have to dive into a sewer to get away from a gang of dirty Dutchmen? Tell the driver to turn around, sarge! Let's go back and find him."

However, that was just pure oratory. Like Slim and the Conch, he felt a coldness at the back of his neck at the name of the famous German circus captain.

The little monkey-faced French chauffeur held his wheel straight ahead, on down the dusty rutted road. Understanding no English, he did not take part

in the conversation. His crimson earlobe dripped down on his bullet-creased shoulder. He, too, had had his souvenir from von Riegelmann.

The three foot-sore gyrines nestled in somnolent comfort amidst the cases and crates. They drew on their socks and boots, and lit cigarets, bursting into the melodious strains of "Working on the Railroad."

"What have you got here—new Salmsons for us, Sarge?" said Slim presently, peering at the glossy black wing in the crate beside him.

"*Avions fabriceés par la Societé Pour les Affaires Deperdussin*," said the benign blond sergeant. "Ze Spads, one calls zem. *Especé nouvelle d'avions de combat*—new type fighting ships."

"Spads!" whooped Slim, untangling his long limbs and sitting up with a jerk. "Read that and weep, boys. After all the lousy *Avions Renault* and other condemned garbage they've been passing off on us. I'll say we're coming up in the world. Brand new Spads for the Eighty-third!"

"When we ride home with a load of these, Old Prune-juice'll forget we've ever been A. W. O. L.," grinned Finnegan. "He'll fall on our necks and slobber us with kisses. Boy, I'll bet he doesn't even know they're coming."

"We'll take the credit of having got them for the outfit then," said Slim. "I'll invent a little *marraine* whose husband is the Minister for the Distribution of Spads for Hungry and Cheese-ridden Rear Line Squadrons, and who got 'em for us just because of my winning personality."

"I can just feel myself feathering the stick of one of these babies now," said Finnegan. "After hauling around these cock-eyed waterlogged wing-warped tail-heavy sons of scows of A. R.s of the vintage of '13. Boy, what a feeling that will be! One-seaters. Say, and can they walk! I've heard they can climb ten thousand in nine minutes. And tumble them! Boy, all you need to do is breathe on your stick, and you've done

a loop. A brand-new Spad for big boy Finnegan. Watch out, Boche circuses, here I come."

"Say it with flowers!" said Slim. "Ape, when I wrap my fist around the stick of one of these, I ain't never going to stop looping till I hit the moon."

"What's the use of you guys getting all heated up?" said the Conch gloomily. "It don't make any difference if we got Spads. The Prune-juicer's going to save them for his army pets. No poor hard-working gyrines ain't ever going to be given a chance to get one good crack at them."

"I'd like to see him try to stop us," said Finnegan.

"Just wait till we get them set up," said Slim.

THEY were singing "Sweet Adeline" an hour later when the camion went rolling up to the sentry post and through the gates of the 83rd Observation field outside of Compeigne. The ride had much refreshed them. In the joyous excitement of discovering that the squadron was to be equipped with the priceless and unexpected new French combat ships, they had forgotten their hang-over headaches and their blisters. They had even forgotten temporarily that they were reporting back A. W. O. L.

"Drop us at the flight office, and take these babies on down to the main hangar and unload 'em," Slim told the sergeant. "I'll sign the ticket for you right now. Boy, we're going to have these babies set up and moving before evening chow."

Though they had forgotten their state of criminality and disgrace for the moment, Major Israel P. Pruyn, U. S. A., alias the Prune, alias Just a Great Big Fruit, had by no means forgotten. As a West Pointer, Major Pruyn had no use for amateur volunteer officers of any sort, though he had to put up with them to a certain extent in this war. As an army man he had most particularly a native and righteous and wholesome and healthy antagonism, aversion, and sense of indignant dislike toward all marines

of all descriptions, horse, sea, or air, boiled, fried, pickled, or stewed in their own juice. A marine, in other words, to Major Pruyn's honest and upright eye was the same as the tail end of a scorpion or the thing that birds drop. He would prefer not to have to pick up one of them even with tongs, and it was the great grief and bitterness of his life that these three specimens of so-called sea-soldiers should have been grafted on his squadron and allowed to eat at the same mess with him.

He was a big man, six feet big, with a pouter pigeon breast, a long glass jaw, a bristly red mustache, a bald head, and a voice like the bull of Bashan. He stood on squadron headquarters steps with a red glitter in his eyes and his jaw muscles locked with rage as the camion rolled up to a halt in front of him and the three seedy marine flyers clambered down from it, straightening their wrinkled forest-green tunics and gulping down the last vestiges of their hiccups. The major opened his mouth.

"Sir," said Finnegan, saluting, "it was this way—"

"I suppose," said the major, breathing slowly and passionately through his nose, "that three beautiful female German spies drugged you and kidnaped you outside of the station gates again, like the last time you were A. W. O. L. in Paris?"

"No, sir," said Slim, "the fact is—"

"Or that an uncle of yours who's an admiral on the double dashed blank naval mission staff in Paris got the apoplexy suddenly, and you were called down to nurse him without having time to apply to me for leave, like the time before when you three prize beauties went A. W. O. L. on me?"

"Not exactly, sir, but—"

"Devil-dogs!" said Major Pruyn.

"Major Prune, sir—" said the Conch.

Major Pruyn glared, chewing his teeth with a harsh grating noise, as if he were chewing glass or something else unpleasant.

"The fighting marines!" he said.

Only he didn't say it, he belched it. His face was growing purple with bottled fury.

"Where's my C. O.'s car that you three gyrene horse-thieves stole last night?" he bellowed. "Don't lie to me! By Godfrey, we sent out a call for it, and found it had been wrecked in a ditch ten miles outside of Paris."

"The steering gear was loose, sir," said Slim. "It kind of hit a tree."

"We couldn't help it, sir," said Finnegan. "It was purely an accident."

I FOLLOWED the track of you three gallows-birds till I lost sight of it," roared Pruyn. "I got the report of how three American marine officers had staged a riot in the Dead Cow cabaret and beaten up the gendarmes that were called in. I got a report of how they'd invaded the stage of the Folies Bergere from a box and tried to do a dance of veils on it. I got the report of how these same three were last seen galloping down the Champs Elysees in an open barouche which they had taken away from three French generals along with the generals' girls, singing 'Mado-moiselle from Armentieres' and bombarding the gendarmes that were pursuing them with empty bottles about three a.m. this morning."

"It must have been three other fellows, sir," said Finnegan. "Surely you wouldn't accuse us—"

"That's all!" roared Major Pruyn with a purple glare. "Thank God the army's not responsible for you, is all I say. I only wish that the dad-blamed keel-hauled navy that dumped you blanked horse marines onto me would sink in its own bilge-water, if that's the proper nautical expression. I never wanted you infernal hermaphrodite half-sailors, half-chimpanzees in my command, but until I'm relieved of you you're going to conform to the same discipline as if you were army officers and gentlemen. Confinement to the station for ninety days, and grounded for the same period without flying pay! And

your regular pay checks will be held up till you've made good the cost of that Cadillac, if it takes till next year's Christmas. What's more, if you try to sneak A. W. O. L. again, the sentries will have orders to shoot you in the pants."

"Ninety days," the Conch moaned.

"No dough," said Finnegan hoarsely.

Slim, the sea-lawyer, licked his lips, with a hurt and sorrowful look on his long bony button-nosed face.

"Sir," he said in patient wounded tones, "you do us a grave injustice. It is true that we left the station last night informally. It is true that we borrowed your Cadillac. It is true that we broke into the dispensary and hooked a couple of bottles of whiskey to warm us up before we left. Or have you accused us of that, sir? If not, then I am sorry that I mentioned it.

"It's true, or at least it may be true, since I can't recall anything to the contrary and you probably wouldn't accept my denial if I made it, that we did have some minor altercations here and there last night with the Paris police, though anyone knows that they are very irascible and bad-tempered and hard to get along with. Far be it from us to attempt to deny anything or to excuse ourselves if we had done anything wrong. But, sir, let me assure you that in all that we did we were only acting for the best interests of yourself, sir, and of this outfit, sir, and of the war as a whole, sir."

The major surveyed him grimly.

"This war," the major said, "is not a hole."

"It was this way, sir," said Slim. "It was, uh, this way. . . . Let me explain. You see, it was all just because of the cock-eyed rattle-traps and tail-spinning hencoops and moth-eaten aerial mud-scows that the outfit here has been inflicted with up to date, sir. Hearing suddenly that the Frog air ministry was passing out brand-new ships to whoever applied for them, first come first served, we resolved on the spur of the moment

to grab a share of them for the Eighty-third, or die in the attempt. We wanted to surprise you, sir. We had no least idea when we borrowed your car and breezed away from the station yesterday that we wouldn't be back in time for taps. If we had realized all the horrors in store for us, sir, we would never have gone. Unfortunately we underestimated the diabolic cunning of the German secret service, sir. Their spies, of course, learned our intention almost before we knew it ourselves."

Slim took a deep breath and went on. "They realized that if the famous Major Pruyn's fearless and efficient Eighty-third, sir, should be equipped with new and first-class fighting crates, the war would be practically over for everybody concerned. From the moment we lit out from the field here they were on our trail, under orders to get rid of us by any means. They followed us with relentless persistence. We could not shake them. They shot our tires off and made us run into a tree outside of Paris, which was what happened to the Cadillac. I know I said it was the steering wheel, sir, but I wasn't thinking."

THE elongated gyrene continued in a sad and earnest voice, leaning toward Major Pruyn and breathing fondly down the major's neck as he warmed to his story, "from that moment on it was a succession of nightmare horrors. We reached Paris after running across fields for miles and miles. There one of their agents, disguised as a taxi chauffeur, picked us up and transported us to this low dive called the Dead Cow, where they succeeded in pouring drugged liquor down us in spite of our desperate struggles. We managed to make a temporary escape, but they pursued us from bar to bar. Two or three times again they succeeded in poisoning our liquor. One of them, disguised as a red-headed member of the Folies pony ballet, managed to get away with my purse sometime between midnight and five a.m., though fortunately it only con-

tained seven francs and a few sous since I had stuck the rest of my money in my boots and didn't take them off.

"Another German agent disguised as a gendarme blew a police whistle when I threw him out the window somewhere, and a lot of them came swarming and tried to drag us off in a black wagon to a secret dungeon, where undoubtedly they would have tortured and murdered us if they had been able to persuade us to go. However, by the use of superhuman courage and resourcefulness we finally outwitted them all and escaped from them by crawling down a sewer into the catacombs."

Slim was going strong now. "After a night of pursuit and terror we succeeded in reaching the French air ministry this morning, sir, where I used my personal influence to the limit to secure a preliminary consignment of the trick new Frog buses for the outfit here. We loaded the consignment on board a camion at once and brought them back with us, guarding them in the constant peril of our lives against incessant and furious aerial attacks made on us by all of Baron von Riegelmann's Red Circus."

"And I can show you the dent in the sergeant's tin hat to prove it, sir, if there's anything about my story that you doubt. What's more, we brought the Spads."

Major Pruyn had been following the tall earnest gyrene's voluble and slightly incoherent story with a rocky face, expressing neither credulity nor fondness. He had heard the story of the German spies before. They were always drugging the trio of unfortunate marines and compelling them to go A. W. O. L. in Paris. The major stood with his face growing harder and more purple with wrath. At the last word, however, his face twitched with a look of some alarm.

"Spads?" he said weakly. "Do you really mean you brought back some Spads for us to fly?"

With an anxious cloud in his eyes he stared down toward the main hangar, in front of which the French camion

crew had just finished unloading, with the help of the hangar grease-monkeys, their cargo of fuselages and wing crates, of landing gears, props, machine-guns, and Hiss motors, and all the other necessary accoutrements of fighting Spads. As Slim had hoped, the news of the arrival of the sweet little French chasse ships had immediately driven out of Old Prune-face's mind all his accumulated righteous wrath, great and boiling as it had been. The expression which glistened on the major's face was not joy, however. It was alarm. He licked his lips. Nervously he rubbed one of his palms over his well-padded stern, a gesture expressing agitation.

"Spads?" he repeated in a shrill slightly hysterical voice. "Well, what in blazes did they want to send us Spads for? We never asked for them. Great holy Moses, aren't there plenty of other outfits who rate them more, and who've been fighting to get them? I wonder if they're planning to make us over into a pursuit squadron and send us up to the Front?"

CHAPTER II

Fighting Ships

THE idea of being equipped with combat single-seaters, and probably having himself to fly them occasionally, was distinctly distasteful to the stalwart major, to put it mildly. He was a conscientious dutiful officer, but he was not particularly air-minded. Certainly he was no eagle. He was built large and solid, with a sensitive liver and a tender stomach. Even his regular monthly pay-hop, once or twice around the field in a slow loggy A. R. at a height of five hundred feet with a good pilot at the stick, always gave him dizzy spells for a week after he had taken it.

He enjoyed the prestige of commanding a flying squadron, to be sure. It was more distinguished than the Q. M. corps, and safer than the infantry if a man had

sense enough to stay out of the air too frequently. But so far as he personally was concerned, he would have been just as happy if the air had never been invented. He would have enjoyed living in a vacuum. The Eighty-third as equipped had satisfied him up to now, with its pair of old battle-condemned Salmsons, its four Ancient Rattletraps, otherwise *Avions Renault*, and its half dozen Bleriot pusher planes of the vintage of early '15. For every hour in the air that this collection of garbage managed to tick off, they had to spend anywhere from three days to three weeks on the ground in the rigging and machine shops, so that there was never too much unwholesome aerial activity going on around the Eighty-third. The opportunity that was now being presented to Major Pruyn of flying dizzy single-seater combat ships in loops and barrel-rolls henceforward was something that he regarded the same as an opportunity to let himself be shot out of a cannon. He did not warm to it.

"Great Godfrey!" he croaked. "And you three prize thieving duty-jumping hermaphrodite half-witted sons of salamanders—I mean you three enthusiastic young devil-dogs—are responsible for having gotten these ships for us?"

"We thought you'd sure be tickled pink, sir," said Slim happily. "We wanted to surprise you."

But Major Pruyn wasn't tickled pink. If he was tickled any color, it was blue. He tried to force a pale dreadfully happy look upon his face, but it was little use.

"Fine," he said. "Perfectly splendid. Now we have something that can really fly. We can really get in this war now. The only problem is whether our flying personnel is quite up to Spads at the present moment. Training Jennies are the fastest thing they've ever flown up to now, and these Spads are going to be somewhat different, I'm afraid. Great Godfrey! They say they land at sixty miles an hour. Imagine whizzing down a field at that rate of speed! Sixty—why we haven't got a Bleriot that can

make that in the air. And there isn't any way of giving men instruction in these infernal single-seaters. You've just got to take them up and learn to fly them, or break your neck. Still, we mayn't be able to get them set up anyway," he added hopefully.

"We'll set them up, sir," the three gyrines volunteered in an eager chorus. "Right now. In half an hour. Give us a break for once," said Finnegan.

"What I don't know about Spads hasn't been written in no books, suh," said the Conch.

"I helped old man Spad invent 'em," said Slim.

"You three crash-artists fly Spads?" echoed Major Pruyn with an outraged glare. "Why, you never flew a Bleriot yet without buckling its landing gear or bouncing it on its club when you came down. You never took an A. R. off and brought it all home with you. You couldn't zoom a Cadillac down a straight road without barrel-rolling a ditch with it and slamming it into a tree. You hoof-handed sea-going dodos couldn't fly velocipedes. Spads! Holy Godfrey of Bouillon!"

HE wiped his bald head in agitation, glaring at the crated ships that had been unloaded in front of the hangars and at the French camion which was now rumbling away out the gates, and finally back again at the trio of crumpled, unkempt mismated red-eyed devil-dogs confronting him.

"All right!" he said explosively. "Go ahead and take charge of them. The infernal Frogs have wished them onto us, and somebody's got to fly them. I haven't got any J. M. aviators I care to send to glory in these pint-size sky-rockets without better than thirty hours training-ship solo behind them. The ships are yours from now on. You can have the first crack at them. As many cracks as you or they can stand."

"Happy days!" they yelled.

Slim flung himself down off the steps in a backward somersault and finished

with a cartwheel. Finnegan grabbed the Conch around the middle and did a capering dance of joy on the grass. From the height of the flight office Major Pruyn surveyed their wild jubilation with a sour eye, fists on hips. There was a good chance, he thought, that he would be rid of both Spads and gyrines in very short order. He couldn't squeeze out any tears over the prospect.

"Boys," babbled the Conch, "we're on our way!"

"Off to that big Hun sky," yelled Slim, "as soon as we can mote!"

"We'll be eating krauts up on the Front in a couple more hours," whooped Finnegan. "Fokkers, watch for our dust!"

"Fokkers." Major Pruyn was impelled to add at that, laughing hoarsely and heavily. "You three dim-witted morons wouldn't know a Fokker silhouette from the silhouette of a trimotored Handley-Page if it came straight at you out of a clear sky and hit you in the face. You wouldn't know the difference between a taube and your grandmother's square piano. God help the Allied air forces if you ever did get up in a fighting sky, is all I say. You'd probably go blazing into the Lafayette Escadrille or Captain McDuff's Black Death Camels thinking they were the Red Circus. It'd be a miracle if you didn't start shooting up each other. And if a man-sized Fokker ever did get sight of you, well, happy days! He'd take you apart in the air in seven seconds, and ride home with your scalps hanging to his wheels."

They didn't wait to hear any more of old Prune-juice's harsh contemptuous sneers. They had started pell-mell for the hangars. With Slim's long kangaroo legs leaping and the Conch's short legs flashing and Finnegan's bowed calves galloping, they raced neck and neck down the field to where the three black Spads has been unloaded and stood awaiting assembly.

"Get out the crowbars and bust them wing-crates open, you grease-monkeys!" howled Finnegan. "Slap the babies to-

gether and heave their engines in! We're going to be aces in forty minutes! We're off for that big kraut sky!"

The job of setting up the fancy French *chasse* ships was to prove, however, somewhat more complicated and prolonged than they had counted on, even with the willing though inexperienced help of the whole doughboy mechanic gang, plus such of the squadron mess-cooks as could spare the time to wander down from the cook-shack during the afternoon at intervals to give a little free advice. The specification charts which were attached to the engine and wing crates of the black *chasse* ships were fortunately printed in English as well as French, but even so the diagrams and instructions made highly technical reading, they were to find, for three half-baked rule-of-thumb shavetail gyrene mechanics who had never before even taken up a turnbuckle slack with their own fair hands, and whose knowledge of the theory of airplane rigging extended only to a hazy ability to distinguish the difference between a tail-skid and a rudder-bar after examining the two together in a clear light.

"THE first thing," said Slim briskly, "is for us to divide up everything that's been unloaded here into three kind of even piles, so that all of the ships will have about the same number of wings and jiggers each, more or less."

"And the next thing," said Finnegan, wiping his scarlet sweating face, "is to figure out some place or other to stick or tack on all these here bolts, nuts, turnbuckles, struts, screws, cotterpins, and funny wires. My glory, I never had no idea there was so many fool useless idiotic doodads on an airplane before. I'll bet there's no sense to most of them, either. Still, we can't afford to leave nothing out."

"Sure," said the Conch, "they put in lots of these things just to make it hard."

They puzzled and they argued, they heaved and grunted and perspired. Wings and fuselages collapsed on them.

The Conch got tangled in a nest of control wire, and it was ten minutes before they could unravel him. Slim dropped one end of a Hisso engine on his toes and screamed. Finnegan spent an hour, without any appreciable success, in trying to file down an inch-and-a-half forged steel main-wing bolt to make it fit into a half-inch flipper hinge. The long hot sweating afternoon passed, retreat was sounded, and mess was sounded. Major Pruyn stalked out once or twice, and watched their progress for a few moments with hoarse jeering laughter rumbling in his throat, and scratched the seat of his breeches contemptuously as he departed. The sun sank. The twilight shadows grew.

With the passing hours the hangar gang had drifted away to mess or other duties. Still the gyrene shavetails cursed and perspired and toiled on. Up to seven o'clock, at which hour Slim was called away to take over the temporary junior O. D. duty, they had succeeded in bolting the upper wings of one ship on in place of its lower, in tentatively fitting its skid-fins onto its tail, in connecting up its rudder controls out through its aileron sheaves, and otherwise trying out a dozen unique and fearful rigging experiments such as neither God nor man had ever thought of before, and all of which ended in collapse.

However, they were buoyed up with a boundless if mistaken confidence in their ability as U. S. marines to do anything from building a railroad to nursing Siamese triplets if given a book of instructions and a set of tools, and they were slowly learning, so they could look forward to the hope that the second and third set-up jobs wouldn't take a tenth so long, once they had got the hang of the first.

"To hell with that," said Slim, when he was called off. "We've forgot the struts. I figure that's what's kind of been making her always collapse and keep falling to pieces on us. Try putting them in next time, guys. If you get them all set up before I'm relieved of

duty, you two chicken-thieving buzzards won't steal a hop on me, will you?"

"Don't worry, ace," said Finnegan with a gold-toothed grin. "We'll be wanting you along with us, and plenty, when we go zooming off up there where von Riegelmann and the rest of them high-card Fokker outfits are smoking. We'll wait for you, buddy."

"Do you think there's any danger, I mean any chance, of us running into old Riegelmann's circus again when we get up there?" queried the Conch, swallowing nervously. "Not that he's any better than we are, I ain't saying, boys. Still, there was something about the way the old Red Kraut and his gang come whizzing and smoking down the road this afternoon that kind of impressed me. Yes, suh, it kind of impressed me."

"I wonder was he laying for these here Spads?" said Finnegan. "Do you suppose he's heard about 'em yet?"

"Don't worry," said Slim. "The old Huns know all about these babies. And I'll bet they're worried sick about 'em."

"**W**ELL, the old Red Circus had better not try any funny business on me again," said Finnegan belligerently. "Still, I'd just as lief practice my first hop on a couple of squadrons of Rumplers or some other of these Fritz outfits that ain't quite so poisonous. We can kind of get warmed up by degrees, learning how to fly and fight these Spad honeys, till maybe after a couple of days we'll be so red hot we can take on old Riegelmann and polish him off."

"I'm not asking for any fancy Fokker circuses, either," agreed the Conch heartily. "Not right away. All I'm wanting is the tail of any old kind of a common onery Hun bus to bring back and stick up old Prune-juice's nose and let him smell it."

"Boy, wouldn't he go nuts if we got even one Jerry?"

"He'd go raving."

"He'd never believe it unless he saw it," said Slim gloomily. "Me and you guys might be the greatest aces that ever

was, we might burn up hunnerds and hunnerds of kraut ships, we might be Bishop and Captain McDuff and Lufbery all rolled into one, and still the Old Fruit would never believe it if we come and told him. Yuh know, sometimes I kind of half way think he never believes nothing I tell him."

"He's not so dumb as he looks," said the Conch. "Nobody could be."

As Slim paced up and down on duty near Post Number 1, the main station gates, in the pale silvery descending twilight, he kept one yarning red-rimmed eye fastened on the tiny figures of his two confreres toiling in front of the hangars down at the far end of the field.

Finnegan and the Conch had got the first Spad set up finally, soon after he had been hauled off, and the second had gone up much more rapidly. He was glad and grateful to see that they had resisted the temptation to hop without him. They were assembling the third ship now, with increased confidence and speed. His temporary duty was nearly over, and there was still an hour or more of visibility left in the long smooth summer twilight. He ought to be able to get a brief crack at flying one of those sweet swift terrible little fighting ships before darkness fell.

His fingers itched to have the joystick of one in the air, to zoom straight up with it into the tallest sky where the shadows that lay upon the earth had not yet come, and the sunset light was still lingering from a hundred miles away, with the scream of Hispano motor in his ears and a bucket of castor oil in his face, and throw her around up there in all the speedy whirlwind convolutions that he had ever read or dreamed about.

That was the kind of thing he had expected when he enlisted with the flying gyrines. He might know and care little about rigging, mechanics, or aerodynamics, about radio, gunnery, meteorology, silhouette-recognition cards, lift-drift ratio, burble points, whatever they were, and all the rest of that theoretical ground-school stuff, but he had one big

yen to fly. The twenty or thirty brief hours he had had in training Jennies back at the marine preliminary flight field in Miami, plus the six or seven hours he had managed to secure since coming to France in the ancient wing-warped stuntless garbage-scows with which the 83rd Squadron was blessed, had only tickled his appetite for something more. He paced up and down on post, with his knobbly knees jerking and his little button nose quivering with anticipatory delight.

"Oh, boy," he hummed to himself. "Just wait till I grab hold of one of those babies and ram her wide open. They sure are honeys. No wonder every outfit's been trying to wrangle some of them. Big important outfits like Guynemeyer's Storks and the old Lafayette that are still flying Nieuports. But here we're one of the first three or four gangs to have a crack at them. Just handed to us. Somebody at Frog headquarters sure must have heard that me and those two old buzzards are good.

"Or maybe they were just ashamed at the kind of tripe they've been dishing us. Did I ever say anything nasty about the Frogs? Well, I should hope not. I'll bet these honeys they've given us can fly rings around any old Fokkers. The kraut secret service is probably worried sick about 'em, too. Oh, boy, I'll bet they'd just about give their right eye to be able to get hold of one of 'em and take it apart to see what makes it tick."

HE paused abruptly, with a nervous thought. He had told the Prune so many wild stories of being poisoned or kidnaped by German spies to account for his A. W. O. L. jaunts in Paris, that he had almost come to believe the stories himself. He had grown spy-conscious. He was always having nightmares of nefarious German secret agents on his trail.

"Golly Moses," he muttered. "It sure is a responsibility."

"Sir?" said the doughboy corporal of the guard with an insolent leer, as the

tall red-eyed gyrene shavetail stood muttering hoarsely. "Did you say something, or was you just singing to yourself?"

"I just got to thinking," explained Slim, darting a wild nervous glance around him. "Keep your eyes skinned for any enemy spies trying to sneak into the station. Something tells me that we aren't going to be let fly these trick lulus without lots of troubles and difficulties. My luck never broke that way with me yet. It would be just too good to be true. There's bound to be some catch or other in it. I can smell it coming."

"Smell wot coming?"

"Trouble," said Slim dramatically. "Do you think that the krauts are going to learn that fighting marine birds like me and Finnegan and the Conch are going to be flying Spads against 'em, and take it laying down? No, sir. The old Boche spy gang will just about be running itself crazy all over the lot, I'll bet, trying to get hold of these honeys before we start carving up the sky with 'em. If any Huns' with false whiskers come around trying to sneak in the gates, don't you let them in on no account."

"Oh, sure," said the corporal. "They's always hundreds and hundreds of kraut spies trying to crash the gates on me all the time, ain't they?"

"You don't need to get sourkastic," said Slim. "Yuh gotta watch out, I say."

However, in spite of his premonition and the warning he had given, ten minutes or so later when the fast foreign touring car with its load of grim, determined fighting men appeared far down the level road, heading swiftly toward the 83rd's gates in a cloud of dust, he was so engrossed in watching the progress of Finnegan and the Conch that he didn't see it coming at all.

Nor see the stubby humpbacked black combat plane which, almost at the same instant, came winging like a pepper grain over the field two miles high, from the northwest, from the direction

of the fighting Front. It suddenly dived, and came spinning earthward down the high silver air spaces like a spider dropping down a twisted thread, straight towards the three shiny Spads that had been set up in front of the hangars. . . .

They were nearly finished.

Finnegan and the Conch were lining up the stagger of the last Spad with plummet lines dropped from the top wing, when that thunder-bolting pirate ship came hurtling down from the roof. They didn't see it, either.

"Seven and seven-eighths inches, okay," announced Finnegan with a happy yell, throwing his cap over the wing. "Toot feeny, as the Frogs say. "Go chase up Slim and tell him we're all set. Guy, we're off for sauerkraut land in a cloud of star dust!"

"We're going places and seeing things," the Conch jubilated. "And when the Fokkers see us coming, it's going to be an awful pain in their eyes."

"You said it, 'bo," said Finnegan.

CHAPTER III

Charge of the Scots

THE stubby little black combat plane had come shooting down from the roof meanwhile, straightening out from its swift pinwheel spin into a headlong stinging dive. The burble and spit of its throttled motor, the whistle of its tautened load-wires plunging at a hundred and eighty knots, struck on the hearing of the two rejoicing gyrines with some suddenness at about that moment. Finnegan's large sunburned ears twitched. He located the source of that whistling sound, and glanced up with squinted eyes. The Conch brushed back his long seal-black hair, also looking up at the pale crescent of the twilight moon in vague surprise.

"Well, well, somebody's coming," said Finnegan.

"Yeah," said the Conch. "Looks like it."

"Must be a Frog, huh?" said Finnegan.

"Yeah, must," said the Conch. "Looks kind of like a Salmson or maybe a Caproni night-bomber, maybe, don't it?"

"Naw," said Finnegan scientifically. "Don't be dumb. It's a one-seater. Can't you see they's only one guy in it? Nieuport, maybe. And can that buzzard fly!"

"I wonder what he's heading for?" said the Conch.

"It kind of looks to me—" said Finnegan.

"He'd better watch out," said the Conch. "Say—"

"Hey!" yelled Finnegan.

Whooom!

There she came, that black stub-winged humpbacked little screaming one-seater. Like a bat out of hell and a streak of lightning smoke. She had come down that last thousand feet in about three seconds. At a height of a hundred feet or less she had straightened out. With her gun muzzle gleaming in the ring of her flashing propeller swath, she came streaking across the roofs of barracks and mess-hall, bouncing her wheels like a ricocheting cannonball on the tar paper as she passed. And there was little doubt in the minds of the Conch and Finnegan any more as to what she was headed for. She was headed straight for them, without much argument or delay, at two hundred feet a second, which is a very rapid speed to watch.

"Hey, you can't do that!" yelled Finnegan.

She breezed across the field like the shadow of black lightning, and over them in a screaming streak, like a pouncing fishhawk that has overshot. Above the main hangar roof in half a second she heeled over quicker than a boomeranging comet, clipping the flopping end of the wind-sock on the pole, and coming back on her ear.

Whoom! She flipped over on her back in a half roll and shot down from

the edge of the cambered hangar roof with a scream of wires, rushing close above the heads of the two cowering cursing gyrines, with her blond square-headed pilot whizzing along upside down almost close enough to kiss them and showering them with a dirty look as he went by.

"He's nuts!" howled Finnegan.

"*Madre de Dios!* Stop him, Finnegan!" screamed the Conch.

"There the bug comes again!" howled Finnegan. "Throw something at him, you spig!"

Whoom! She had gone past, that damned humpbacked inverted streak, but she was coming back again. What she had done exactly, no mortal eye could have followed, least of all the bleared and wobbling eyes of the two gyrines, whose hair had risen on their heads and whose spines had turned to water. Shooting across the field on her back ten feet high, she had opened up her gun with a hurricane scream. The next thing Finnegan and the Conch could make out she had shot upward in an inverted half loop, with her motor yelling. Cutting her switch, she heeled over right side up at a hundred feet, and was headed back at them. She came straight for the opened hangar door and the three bright, shiny black Spads standing in front of it and the two profane and thoroughly agitated gyrines cowering behind the Spads' wings.

IT had been a beautiful piece of stunt flying to watch, for anyone in a bombproof grandstand seat and in the mood to appreciate it. But Finnegan and the Conch were not in the mood. They enjoyed nothing about it. Her flippers were lifting, her wheels were reaching for the ground in a fast landing, and her gun sights bore down on the marines from the circle of her dying club as she came rushing back. Her look was most unwelcome.

"Say, watch out where you-all point that gun, suh!" cried the Conch in scrambling alarm.

"Duck! He's a kraut!" yelled Finnegan.

"Santiago de Cristobal!" said the Conch.

They broke and ran for the shelter of the opened hangar doors as the black little murder ship came stalling toward them with a rush. They made the thirty yards in three seconds flat, plunging headlong into the big dark cool shadows, sprawling over oil-cans, water-buckets and other loose gear on the floor amidst the shadowy Bleriot and A. Rs. In an instant they paused and fell on their knees as if they had been shot. There was a bump and a rending report outside, followed immediately by the sound of loud guttural language of a sulphuric nature.

Gasping in the shadows, the two marines turned their faces. On hands and knees they crawled back to the edge of the hangar door and peered cautiously out.

The little black stranger ship had come to earth on two wheels in her headlong rush toward the Spads. She had been going with too much speed, however, for a perfect three-point, and had nosed over as she came to a stop. There she stood with her tail high and her broken club rooted in the ground close by the French *chasse* ships, and one of her wings had fallen over, snapping the end of its main spar. Out of her cockpit her pilot sprang, a short gnomelike figure in dirty dungarees, with a large blond unhelmeted head and goggles looped around his neck. Growling hoarse profanity, red-faced and wrathful and indignant, he paused to give the broken club of his ship a healthy kick, then rushed toward the nearest of the Spads with blazing blue eyes and a determined look.

"The nerve of the kraut son of a louse!" gasped Finnegan. "He's going to try to steal one."

"After the way we worked and wore our brains out on 'em!" said the Conch furiously. "Those ships is ours!"

"Come on, come on!" said Finnegan.

"Is a Finnegan going to slave in the sweat of his brow just to let a pint-sized Heinie come in and steal the gravy? Come on, and to hell with anyone that tries to take them crates from us!"

He grabbed up the nearest thing at hand from the hangar floor, which happened to be a large healthy pipe-wrench, while the Conch snatched up a canvas engine tarpaulin.

"Come on, you spig!" howled Finnegan. "It's a free fight! Hit him with a brick!"

With his red hair bristling and murder in his glaring green eyes he led the charge forth, bawling like a bull. Without weapons, but armed with the fury of honest indignation and the devil-dog courage of the U. S. marines (copyrighted), the two of them sprinted headlong at the short blond stranger pilot. That latter gentleman had one foot in the stirrup of the nearest Spad and was just on the point of springing aboard as if he owned it, when the wild, howling Irishman and the shrieking Conch bore down on him with galloping hooves from out the hangar door. He turned his square red wrathful face to them, and stepped down to ground vigorously and belligerently. He shook one hairy fist.

"Ye thaving Yanks!" he gibbered in a thick guttural voice, choked with rage. "Oi'll gie ye yer kail through the reek farr this ploy! Ye'll rue it sair—"

He didn't have time to express his feelings further. They were up to him then.

"Kill the kraut!" yelled Finnegan.

HIS five-pound pipe-wrench and the Conch's oil-stained engine tarpaulin descended on their uninvited guest's head at approximately one and the same instant. Unfortunately they tangled, so that the full force and vigor of Finnegan's wallop was caught and turned aside in the muffling canvas fabric. It was a scene of hurricane fury at once. The fight had just begun. Strangled

and blinded though he was beneath the thick hot folds of the dirty engine-cover, and no doubt somewhat addled by the blow which had carommed against his ear, the wrathful little blond air-demon was nevertheless a man as chockful of fight as a bucket of tarantulas.

He threshed and snorted like a bear, staggering around, kicking, clawing, tearing up the ground, heaving and blattling blue strangled words through the canvas hood, while the two marines, gripping his writhing torso where they could, clung and squeezed and wrestled and yelled.

"Grab him by the knees, Conch!" gasped Finnegan. "Wrap yourself around his ankles! Stop his kicking. Ouch! Sink your teeth into him!"

Smack!

"Sit on his face" panted the Conch.

By that time they had tripped their heaving, swearing, kicking captive. He fell on his back with a bump, and the two gyrines were on him like dogs on a badger. They rolled him over beam ends up with gasping speed. Snatching out a couple of loose short shrouds from the eyelets of the engine-cover, Finnegan got one of them around the thick hairy wrists of their tusseling prisoner in a double bowline and three marlin hitches, while the Conch whipped the other rope-length around his kicking ankles in a clove knot, becket bend, Turk's head and bo'sun's chair. That was enough to hold him for a while. Bruised, panting and exhausted, the gyrines lay prone across their muffled victim and howled for help to the swarms of grease monkeys, kiwis, guards, observers, mess cooks, store-room keepers, hospital orderlies, and other doughboy heroes of the 83rd who were streaming toward them across the field, led by the gallant Major Pruyn himself with snorting nostrils and bouncing buttocks.

"Krauts!" yelled Finnegan. "Bring a box or something to put him in!"

He was flushed with victory.

Meanwhile, however, the determined

guttural-voiced invaders had been swarming in by land as well as air, and with more success by the former route. Down at the entrance gates at the farther end of the station Slim, all unwarned of his own peril, had been watching with nervous alarm the swift descent of the black humpbacked ship which had suddenly appeared from the top of the blue, followed by its fancy crash landing near the Spads. As an unfortunate consequence of his absorption with the drama there, he had not been aware of the approach of the loaded touring car that came tearing toward the gates from miles away, with a crescendo cut-out roar.

The hostile car had come on, it had come roaring. The first thing Slim knew of it, it was throwing on its brakes with a squeal behind him, approaching the open gates.

"Is yon the field of the Eighty-tharrd Yankee Observation outfit?" a thick voice shouted at him.

He swung about in alarm. The juggernaut that was rolling up to him was a big red Sunbeam, packed to the scuppers with eight or nine men of assorted ages, sizes and ranks, from a red-faced giant about six feet six in the back seat, wearing streams of ribbons across his hogshead chest, to the car driver, who was about five feet two. All of them were wearing in one kind or another the khaki uniforms and insignia of the Royal Flying Corps, and superficially their appearance might be innocent enough, if they had only kept their mouths shut. But the thick, guttural voice which had bellowed from the car had never come from the land of roast beef and Bass' ale, Slim knew instantly. Nor were the looks of the eight or nine hard-faced, wrathful men who were packed in the red Sunbeam the amiable looks of friends, brothers in arms, and allies.

KRAUTS! A Hun spy strong-arm squad! The hair rose on the back of Slim's neck, and were his knees

knocking! All his nightmares had come true at last.

"Hoot, mon, don't gawk at me, ye goop!" the red-faced beribboned giant in the rear seat roared thickly, "Domn ye all for a pack of sair onprincipled pirating gillies! Where are those bluidy Spads of ours thot ye skailed the poor benighted French oot of with yer blosted Yankee tricks? Ye had better gie them o'er without muckle argument! Coom on, speak oop, mon, where are they?"

"Halt!" Slim shrilled in a cracking voice, reaching for his holster flap with a jerk. "You can't fool me, you pretzels! Halt where you are!"

But the red Sunbeam was still in slow motion, rolling toward him with braked momentum, and it did not halt. Instead the pint-sized driver, an unwholesome looking brute with a broken nose and large freckled ears, wearing the sleeve insignia of a sergeant-mechanic of the R. F. C., uttered a profane bellow and stepped on the gas with a number ten foot. With a roar the Sunbeam shot forward in high past Slim and through the gates, while the doughboy corporal of the guard turned a back somersault over his rifle out of the way and Slim clutched blindly at the red juggernaut as it passed.

"Halt!" he yelled.

His fingers had hooked hold of the car's folded top at the back as it shot by him. His gangling legs took three kangaroo leaps, and then he was jerked off his feet, and couldn't let go if he wanted to. Clinging with both hands, he lifted up his voice as the Sunbeam went roaring into the station past the flight office and barracks on its way to the hangars.

"Krauts!" he shouted. "Turn out the guard! Repel boarders! Reporting to Major Pruyn with a carload of Hun prisoners! Help me take care of them, somebody!"

The red-faced frog-voiced giant in the rear seat seized him by the shoulders with hands like steam-shovels and

dragged him in head first over the back of the car. Kicking frantically, he slid on his face down on the tonneau floor with great speed, between a lot of dirty boots and puttees. Somebody grabbed his legs. Somebody else put a foot on his neck firmly and with vigor. Or it might not have been a foot, it might have been a gunboat. The Sunbeam hit a bump which he felt through every bone in his skull. The next thing he knew the car had squealed to a stop abruptly.

"Hullo, Pruyn, is thot ye, mon?" shouted the giant above him. "Is this yer bluidy outfit, and no compliment to ye if it is!"

The foot which was on Slim's neck was removed. Spitting dirt and carpet lint, the tall gyrene wriggled his head clear. He lifted his somewhat flattened face, looking around him over the edges of the car door.

The Sunbeam had overtaken Major Pruyn en route at a gallop toward the hangars. The major paused at the hail and turned his large flustered face toward the crew in the car that had drawn up beside him. At sight of the red-faced beribboned giant in the rear seat, a look of recognition overspread his angry gaze.

"Why, my dear old chap! It's McGilibrochle, the Camel ace, isn't it?" he chirped.

"Ay, Captain Angus McGilliloch McGilibrochle it is, o' McDuff's Black Death outfit, Camels Eighty-tharrrd, from Armentieres," bellowed the giant. In a voice rich with thistle burrs he went on. "I see ye remember me. Ye have not forgotten the five-franc drink I boot for ye in Paris the last time we were oot on a binge there, Pruyn. Are ye the commander of this pirate gang, my brave laddie? And what is this blasted game of yours of trying to skail the Black Death out of our consignment of Spads that we had worked the wires and fought the bluidy French to get? Yer answer had better be short and sweet, my bonny laddie."

MAJOR PRUYN stepped onto the running board with a flushed face as the Sunbeam got under way again. He turned on Slim, on the tonneau floor, a look of indignation and consummate loathing.

"My dear old fellow," he told McGilibrochle fervently. "You don't mean to say those confounded ships were meant for you? Why, these infernal sea-going hermaphrodite devil-dogs told me they had secured them personally from the French air ministry for this outfit. I had no idea—I should have known—I can't apologize—"

"Ay," said McGilibrochle with wrath, "and do not try. A long sweating day ye have cost us, and ye will have to pay the price of the petrol we have had to use sae lavishly, or I will take it oot of yer own hide. We have been to Paris, to pick up these fancy French ships that had been promised us, only to find they had already been sent oot, with unexampled French celerity. But when we telephoned back to Wee Willie McDuff at Armentieres, we learned they had not come. Till looking here and yon all the bluidy day trying to trace those bonny ships, we foond the camion driver that had been sent up with them, and had come back with a recepit from the Eighty-third Amurrican Observation outfit in his breeks instead of the Eighty-third Royal Camel Scoots. Ay, and the same man told us how three thieving gillies had misdirected him wi' false words into unloading his ships at this blasted Yankee field of yers, Pruyn. Though I did not know ye were commander here, and would not have thought so ill of ye. It was a dirty Yankee trick. Ye can gie up those bonny ships to us without unnecessary argument, or suffer the consequences, which will be sair, monnie, will be sair, I promise ye on the word of the Black Death Scoots."

"I had no idea," Major Pruyn babbled with a flushed face. "I wouldn't for the world have put myself in the position of appearing to try to do Captain

McDuff out of any ships. There's no one who has a more overwhelming admiration for your peerless Black Death squadron and for the terrific fighting qualities of one and all of you, gentlemen. I beg you to believe it was a hideous error. I only had the inkling of a suspicion that something might be wrong when I saw a Camel coming down just now and recognized your Eighty-third R. F. C. cocarde on it. Of course you shall have those Spads without delay, Captain. And with my strongest apologies."

"Say!" croaked Slim wildly, struggling to climb to his feet. "If you think you're going to let this gang of Dutch-speaking Annie Lauries walk away with those Spads, you're all wet and you'd better change your pants. Those crates are ours! Finders keepers. If they didn't watch out for them, that's their hard luck. And who the hell set them up, anyway?"

Major Pruyn gave him a vicious glare.

"I only wish," the major said passionately and as distinctly as he was able, "that the regulations for the government of the U. S. army and the constitution of the United States gave me the power to shove you three bone-headed specimens of jellyfish and sea-serpents behind the bars of Leavenworth jail for the rest of your natural lives. I'd like to boil you in oil."

His meaning was clear, though in his fury his words tumbled over each other.

"I'm sick of your funny business," he said. "I mean, by Godfrey, this is just too much! Too much! All your blanked funny business."

"Them crates is ours!" said Slim wildly.

THE Sunbeam meanwhile had arrived at the hangars, beside the tip-tilted humpbacked Camel of the Black Death squadron and the three shiny black Spads and the two gyrines who were reposing more or less at ease on their muffled, hogtied and hooded vic-

tim, disturbed only by an occasional heave, grunt, and earthquake eruption in their unwilling bed.

"We got him alive!" gasped Finnegan. "Shall we skin and stuff him, or send him to the zoo?"

Captain Angus McGillibrochle of the Black Death debarked from the Sunbeam with speed, as did the seven or eight other irritated Scots air champions and Major Pruyn. They proceeded toward the trio on the ground like a charge of elephants.

"Weel?" said the red-faced giant, kneeling on the ground and rolling the captive over. "Is that ye, mon, Wee Willie, yer ownself, laddie mine?"

"Oom-woom," said the small muffled ace on the ground, out of the depths of his hood. "Oom, woom-woom."

Finnegan got up, and the Conch got up, glad to be relieved of their prisoner. Captain Angus McGillibrochle pulled out a large rusty jackknife and cut the cords from the captive Camel ace's wrists and ankles. Pulling the oil-stained engine-cover from his big square head and wrathful, swollen face, the little blond Scots ace on the ground also got up, with a leap of great rapidity.

"I'll gie them their kail through the reek and the breek farr this!" he said hoarsely.

"This man," McGillibrochle addressed the assembled Yanks and specifically Major Pruyn in a voice of great hoarse calm, though with purple veins swelling on his forehead, "happens to be Captain Wee Willie McDuff, V. C., my own commander of the Black Death Scoots, and a man wi'oot his bluidy equal in the air, not barring those Huns, Riegelmann and Richthofen, and only barring laddie Bishop himself. And this man," he addressed the wrathful McDuff, "is Majoor Pruyn, commander of this wingless kiwi flapdoodle Yankee observation outfit thot has tried to skail us oot of those bonny Spads of ours. Where shall I hit him, Willie, lad?"

"Richt here, mon," said the Black Death captain.

And he landed a swift and surprisingly hard fist with a hundred and seven pounds of smoked leather behind it into Major Pruyn's well-padded and sensitive midriff as he spoke. Old Prunejuice said "Wump!" and sat down.

"Ay, they're a stout gang of pirates, Angus, mon," said the little demon ace wrathfully, glaring at Finnegan and the Conch. "Paris telephoned me that they had the Spads, and I came flying on the wink to get them. Little did I ken they would treat an ally so uncivilly. But they are gillies that would sooner stick their finger in your eye than down a bottle of wusky. If they e'er come up by Armentieres, we'll gie the braw laddies their kail. Come on! Fuel up the bonny ships and ye'll fly them back wi' me, Angus and Mac. The rest of ye laddies go back by car. The Yankees can send this Camel of mine back by truck at their ain expense."

"You ain't going to take them Spads!" howled Finnegan, advancing with knotted fists.

"They're ours," said Slim.

"Sapadillo," swore the Conch.

They struggled forward with a rush, Slim's eyes popping out of his head with wrath, Finnegan's red hair bristling and gold teeth gleaming, and the Conch spitting like a cat. They had built so many dreams about those sweet little *chasse* ships. They had worked and fumed so patiently to get them beautifully lined up and ready to fly. Now to have the ships lifted from under their noses by a gang of immigrants who couldn't speak English was more than human flesh could bear. They were willing to die to keep those Spads. But unfortunately they were alone.

THE doughboy kiwis and grease-monkeys of the Eighty-third stood around and said nothing, and Major Pruyn sat on the ground and said nothing except "Wump." While against them there were nine or ten of the embattled Scots, who, besides being mostly large, healthy oatmeal-fed men with

whiskers in their ears, were all filled with righteous indignation and the famous battle spirit of the Black Death Scouts, not to speak of the distilled spirits of their native Hielands.

"Let go those crates, you Annie Lauries!" raved Slim.

"It's a free fight, boys!" howled Finnegan.

It didn't do the three gyrines any good to argue about it, and it didn't do them any good to try to rush. They were seized and held by half a dozen sinewy hands each, while six feet six and two hundred and forty pounds or more of red-faced Captain Angus McGillibrochle walked up to each one of them and kicked them scientifically on the shins with an educated soccer toe. *Wow! Wow! Wow!*

The Scots giant was no doubt motivated by a sense of justice, and possibly the chastisement he inflicted may have hurt him more than it did them, but if so he didn't show it. Tears sprouted in their eyes and the twilight was filled with stars. They hopped around with gasping profanity, filled with brief but excruciating pains, while the three little French ships that had been their pride and hope were quickly gassed and oiled, kicked over, and warmed up for flight.

"Coom up to Armentieres if we want to see these bonny ships again, ye thieving Yonks!" McGillibrochle roared as he swung his great bulk aboard one of the little one-seaters, shaking a steamshovel fist. "Coom up to Armentieres, and we'll shove some Vickers in yer breeks! It's only out o' respect to Wee Willie's being a God-fearing elder in the kirk that we don't make ye dance to lead richt noo!"

"You'll have only one lung, you bonny, if I ever meet you alone!" Slim raved.

Captain Wee Willie McDuff, the midget immortal of the air, had vaulted into a second of the burbling Spads, and another Mac into the third. The remaining stalwart Scots held the hopping,

shouting, furious gyrines back. The Spad throttles opened up with a song, the blocks were kicked away, and with a roar the three little black ships flashed forth across the field, wing to wing, hurling back a propeller blast filled with dust, dead grass blades and castor oil into the marines' shouting faces.

Gone!

Halfway across the field they rose upward in a sweet steep zoom wing to wing, and at three hundred feet rolled over like three plates. They came back upside down, passing over the heads of the throng on the field with silenced throttles.

"And what's more," the great voice of Angus McGillibrochle boomed down as he drifted over, "if Wee Willie or I e'er see ye laddies in the air, in Nieuport, Spad, Bleriot, Renault, or one of yer own blasted Yankee crates, we'll hop upon yer tails so hot and sair thot there'll be nothing left of ye except the pinfeathers."

"You're full of oatmeal and bagpipe wind!" howled Slim.

"Send us your address, you Annie!" screeched Finnegan. "We'll be up there to give you what Brian O'Boru gave the Black Douglas!"

"What was that, Finnegan?" said the Conch.

But Finnegan didn't quite know, and it didn't make any difference anyway. The three swift black little *chasse* ships had opened up their throttles again. They went away roaring, climbing on their backs. At a thousand feet again they rolled over like three plates, and went soaring away into the twilight sky like rockets, northwest for the battle-front.

"Oh, God, that's what we ought to be doing," said Slim, with hot boyish tears springing into his eyes as he watched them go. "They had plenty of their own damned Camels already, and it wouldn't have made any difference to them if we'd kept the little honeys. It's back to the mud-scows for us now. It isn't right!"

CHAPTER IV

Out of Luck

"WHAT the hell, bud," said Finnegan philosophically. "You wouldn't expect a Mac to unloose his hookers from anything worth good dough, would yuh, even if he didn't need it and had a million more like it. The only thing a Scottie would give you free is the smallpox, and he wouldn't give you that if he thought his wife could use it. There's no use bawling, leather-neck. They've got the crates, and we ain't. I'd just like to be able to sneak into those tough Macs' own chicken-roost some dark night, that's all. And would I clean it plenty. Say, I wouldn't leave them an oil-can."

"Me neither," said Slim vindictively.

"Well, anyhow, guys," said the Conch with a shrug and a brown grin, as the pepper-grain planes faded away into the dusk, "we can take the credit for having set the cock-eyed little buses up okay, which I kind of had my doubts of, between you and me. If they haven't fallen to pieces before they're out of sight, they're probably all right. I only wish now we'd sort of planted a Mills bomb with its pin out underneath each of their seats, though. Yes, suh, that sure would have zoomed them, if zooming's what they crave."

"It'd take more than a Mills bomb to rattle those hardboiled Annie's pants," said Slim. "I'll bet they eat 'em for breakfast, cut up and sprinkled with sugar. But I'll say this much for them, can they fly!"

"Boy, oh, boy," agreed Finnegan with reverence. "They may be only ignorant heathen Celts, and all that. But you said it, ace, can they fly!"

Major Pruyn was still sitting on the ground with both hands planted on his stomach, in a kind of Buddha-like contemplation. Several of the squadron kiwis and aerial truck-drivers had made motions of helping their peerless leader

to arise, but he shook them off dazedly. He sat there breathing deep and clutching his duodenum while the three Spads roared away into silence and faded out of sight, and while the rest of the hoarse-voiced wrathful profane Black Deathers piled back into the red Sunbeam and rolled away with jeers.

"You sea-serpents!" he croaked, rolling his sickish eyes on the three gyrines. "You—wump!—infernal devil-dogs!"

"It's coming now," murmured the Conch with resignation.

"It's going to be the brig this time," said Finnegan from the corner of his mouth.

"Let me explain, sir," said Slim, licking his lips.

"I only wish to holy Godfrey you three specimens of amphibian crocodiles were army men! I'd put you up before a general court that would tear the bars from your shoulders!" said the Prune-juice hoarsely. "Listen to me! Listen to what I'm saying! Are you paying attention? Very well then! Wump!"

"It was this way, sir—" said Slim.

Major Pruyn waved them to silence. He breathed heavily. He climbed to his feet and stood swaying, dusting the seat of his breeches with a limp spasmodic hand. By degrees he regained his equipoise and voice.

"You've wound up your careers with this outfit according to form," he said bitterly. "I might have expected something like this. But at least I'm through with you loafing hangar-looping A. W. O. L.-ing so-called devil-dogs from now on. Good and through. I've listened to your last alibi and watched you spin the tail off your last A. R. in the air. I've had to endure your last squawk for a chance to hop up to the Front and throw your fool carcasses against the Huns. I've had to scour Paris for you for the last time. I've had to restrain my impulse to brain you for the last time. And all that's something to fall on my knees for, even if I can't put you where you belong. You're out of my jurisdiction, and you can git."

"What do you mean, suh?" stammered the Conch.

"I MEAN your orders have just come through from Paris transferring you to the marine combat squadron that is being organized at Soissons," said the Prune in grim contentment. "And Soissons has phoned in requesting you to report at once. As if I would try to keep you two minutes beyond the time I had to. You're relieved of your duties with this outfit, such as they ever were, at once. And you can go to hell with my regards."

They stared at him and at each other in incredulous joy. After expecting to be ordered to the hoosegow instant, it was a turn of affairs too good to be believed.

"That must be Captain Buck Taylor's pursuit group that's been sent over at last, guys," breathed Finnegan in a hushed voice. "Boy, oh, boy! Read that and weep! We're going to be back in a fighting marine outfit with old Buck!"

"Don't anybody snore and wake me up," whispered the Conch. "It just can't be true!"

"That's on the level, major, no kidding?" stammered Slim with shining eyes. "You wouldn't try to fool a poor ignorant leatherneck, mister, would you?"

But they knew that Major Pruyn had not an ounce of humor, even of bitter sardonic practical-joking humor, in him. It was true. Their relief and jubilation burst forth suddenly in wild laughter, whoops and cheers. They danced, they capered, they slapped each other on the back hysterically and slammed their fists into each others' chests. They embraced each other and wept. They would have almost pulled the old Prune-juice himself into their dancing ring of joy, if he had looked inclined.

"We're going to fight the krauts with Buck, guys, the fightingest gyrine that ever chewed cut-plug!"

"McDuff and his horse-faced Annie

Lauries won't be in it when we get going!"

"We'll trim the pants off Riegelmann!"

"Good-bye Blerlots, good-bye old Renaults! Good-bye squads right and engine diagrams and ground school lectures by all the doughboy fathead kiwis!"

"Good-bye army!"

"When do we leave, please, suh?" prayed the Conch, when they had partially sobered down.

"Do we have to be deloused before we go?" begged Finnegan.

"What kind of combat ships are they flying at the Soissons field, do you happen to know, sir?" begged the elated Slim. "DII's or Frog one-seaters?"

"Combat ships!" echoed Major Pruyn gloatingly. "Why, you must have misunderstood me. There won't be any ships up there for you to fly for the next four months. It's all just being organized. I talked with your Captain Taylor when he telephoned, and he told me the field's nothing more than a cow pasture yet, and he hasn't a shred of equipment. The confounded navy won't have the ships to send him till God knows when. You'll be doing guard duty and digging latrines up there till Christmas. Flying! Picks and shovels are what you'll be flying, you web-footed paddleducks. And you'll wake up in the night and bawl for the time when you used to have Blerlots and A. R.'s to fly with this man's outfit."

All the revenge which he had ever passionately yearned for as recompense for the three wild marines' endless insubordination and trouble-making must have been felt by Major Pruyn now like a sweet balm on an itching wound, as he stood surveying with a twisted smirk their suddenly dejected faces. He was not an unkindly man. He never tied tin cans to dogs' tails, nor had he ever even in his playful boyhood poured kerosene over his dear old grandmother and set her afire. As West Pointers go, he was rather human and sympathetic. But

the iron had entered into his soul so far as the three reprehensible devil-dogs were concerned.

It wasn't his fault that flying made him sick, and he had felt bitterly their youthful unfeeling contempt of him and his courage. They hadn't been satisfied with the way he ran the Eighty-third. They had wanted to get back with a real marine outfit.

THEY had wanted to stunt and fight. All right, let them go. It was almost as good as sending them to Leavenworth, to look at their faces. Yes, Major Pruyn felt repaid. It was his hour to gloat, and he gloated.

"As to your question when you're to leave," he added grimly, "you'll leave just as soon as you can settle your accounts and get your gear together. The orders don't say anything about my supplying transportation, and I'll be damned if you'll get any. And just to make sure you don't, I'm giving orders to the O. D. to remove the timers of all motor vehicles on the station and sit on them, including the ambulance and the caterpillar tractor.

"You aren't going to steal any more rides in de luxe army Cadillacs. However, Soissons is only about twenty-five miles away, and that's no distance at all to walk it for prize Boy Scouts like you. You can shoulder your trunks, and if you start out before midnight you ought to be in Soissons some time before noon tomorrow.

"That's all!" he added. "Relieved of duty. I don't want to see you around after reveille, that's all. If I do, the sentries will have orders to put something hot into your pants. Get the hell out, and do it quick."

"We return the best wishes for your success, sir," said Slim politely.

"Right hand salute to the army," said Finnegan.

"Adios, Major Prune," said the Conch, with a rather sad look for the moment in his brown spaniel eyes. "We have really enjoyed you all's personality

immensely, suh. And if we have been a trouble to you, we didn't really mean it. After all, suh, whatever a man is, that's not his fault, is it?"

Which might be a true word for everybody.

"Perhaps I'll be able to think more pleasantly of you men after you're gone," said old Prune-juice a little stiffly. "Anyway, good luck. I'll write your Captain Taylor and request him to notify me in case the Huns get you, when and if you should be flying again. I'm sure we'd be glad to add your names in that case to the roster of the 83rd squadron's distinguished dead, and honor you with appropriate ceremonies."

"Don't cry," said Finnegan.

"My favorite flowers are raspberries," said Slim softly.

CHAPTER V

Transportation

NEAR midnight a few hours later, in the wing of officers' barracks which they occupied, aloof from the aerial truck-drivers, kiwis, photographers, meteorological wizards, and other doughboy heroes of the army squadron, three gyrines set about packing their gear expeditiously and in silence.

They had settled their accounts with the paymaster, rolled their educated sea-going dice in a final game with such army men as were still trusting and guileless enough to play with them, and picked up for farewell souvenirs various loose objects around the station which appealed to their collector's fancy. It only remained now to shoulder their trunks, check out with the O. D., and start the long trek by the hoof route to Soissons.

However, though they didn't say it, none of them had the least intention of taking the hoof route to Soissons, nor of going there right away, without paying a certain other visit.

"Let's see, have we forgotten any-

thing?" mused Slim. "A pair of souvenir army binoculars apiece from the instrument shop. The adjutant's English boots. That picture of the hot French baby in the silver frame that Kiwi Podgkins has been hiding under his pillow. Old Prune-juice's collection of kraut helmets and medals. The flight office chronometer and the mess hall silver ice bucket. Yes, I reckon we got about everything, boys."

"There's still three bottles of rye in the dispensary, it seems to me," said Finnegan reflectively.

"No, there ain't," said Slim, patting the bulging pockets of his overcoat. "There's only one. I kind of figured it might be a chilly night and we oughtn't to catch ammonia."

"It was mighty liberal of you to leave them one," said Finnegan. "I hope they appreciate it."

"Excuse me, guys," said the Conch. "I didn't know Slim had already been in there ahead of me. I reckon great minds just naturally run in the same channels. There ain't any, any more." His voice was sad.

He produced the third bottle of dispensary rye.

"I raided the galley," said Finnegan, unwrapping a lumpy package on his bed while the bottle was being uncorked. "There was a couple of roast pheasants old Prune-juice had brought over from Compeigne and put on ice for the two-star inspecting general that's coming tomorrow. If you guys don't mind eating them cold."

"Wasn't there no current jelly?" said Slim. "Well, that's a hell of a fine note to give us roast pheasant without no currant jelly. What does the Old Fruit think we are?"

"We ought to write him a letter," said the Conch, helping Finnegan sort out the other delicacies in the package. "Pickles, boy, and what the hell—anchovy sandwiches. Peach shortcake, ace. Try that on your tum-tum. Say, in some ways I'm going to hate to leave this roost. What's this, Finnegan, cigars?"

"Same brand as last time," said Finnegan.

"Yuh know," said the Conch, "you can say all you want to about the old sapadillo, but he does have good cigars."

"Down went McGinty," said Slim, lifting his glass.

"Down the hatch."

"Yea, leathernecks."

"**Y**OU know, the A. R. eleven-nine is standing out on the line all primed for a three a. m. photographic hop," remarked Slim dreamily and apropos of nothing, chewing a pheasant drumstick which he washed down with liberal gulps. "The best crate on the station, if that's saying very much. Gassed up and raring to go. The night gang ran her out."

"I saw her too, 'bo," said Finnegan.

"I kind of had a look at her myself," admitted the Conch.

They looked at each other with grinning half speculative glances above the rims of their glasses.

"Down went McGinty," said Slim.

"Anchors aweigh," said Finnegan.

"It's a long walk to Soissons," remarked the Conch.

"It'd be a shame to pile into the station there with nothing at all waiting for us to fly for the next four months, wouldn't it?" argued Finnegan. "How'd we even get our pay hops?"

"It sure would be tough," said Slim.

"Gosh, how my feet hurt," said Finnegan.

"Buck would expect something better from a bunch of three devil-dogs," said the Conch. "He sure needs ships plenty, from what the Old Fruit said."

"The moon just came up," said Slim. "And it's as clear as daylight in the air, I bet you."

"And besides," said Finnegan, "my feet hurt."

They had finished the Conch's bottle. They arose without more words, shouldering their locker trunks. They went out the door into the night, weaving a little, turning toward the hangars. Finnegan

had a corkscrew clenched between his gold teeth. Slim's overcoat pockets bulged.

They walked softly down along the edge of the field, keeping in the shadows out of the moon from old instinctive habit, watching around them with blurred but wary eyes. Somewhere in the darkness the O. D. and sergeant of the guard were making their rounds. Challenges from the various guard posts rang clear through the hushed chilly blowing night. Half way to the hangars the marines drew back into the shadows against the door of the low concrete gunnery hut. Placing their trunks down cautiously, they squatted behind them, pushing back against the door as the voices of the two army officers approached up the field.

"Whick-whup!" said the Conch.

"Strangle it!" breathed Finnegan.

The O. D. and the sergeant came on, talking with low voices, about twenty feet away, going up toward barracks and the gates.

"I want their trunks opened and searched when they report to check out, Ericksen," growled the O. D. as he passed by. "If they have a chance, they'll take the mess shack stove with 'em."

"Them gyrines ain't going to get away with nothing from this man's outfit," said the sergeant. "I got my eye on 'em."

"Where are they now?" said the O. D.

"Whick-whup!" erupted the Conch.

"What was that, Sergeant?" said the O. D. sharply.

The two army men paused to listen a moment in the moonlight. They looked around them with pale moon-shining eyes. The O. D. gritted his jiggling teeth. The sergeant twisted his neck to right and left, wiping his face with a large bandanna.

"Cricket, sir," said the sergeant.

"Whick - whup! Whick - whup!" chirped the Conch behind Finnegan's strangling hand, while the two army men went on.

The gunnery door wasn't secured. It inched open behind the crouching marines as they pressed back against it. They arose softly when the danger was past. With one accord they slid inside.

"We almost forgot to collect some of these here souvenirs," said Finnegan.

THEY helped themselves to army pistols and webbed gun belts from the racks, and strung the latter around them, hooking on two pistols each with filled gun clips, though the Conch took three. In the spaces left on their belts they hung pineapples till their hips sagged. Finnegan handled admiringly a sawed-off shotgun, a new kind of pleasant little face-blasting weapon that was just being introduced to the war by the soldiers of democracy.

"My kid brother sure would like this to play with," said Finnegan, loosening the top laces of one of his field-boots to stick the muzzle in.

"I promised to bring back some souvenirs for my kid cousins," explained Slim as he helped himself to another Mills bomb. "I got four of them."

"My grandmother wanted a gat," said the Conch.

"Three minds with but a single thought," said Finnegan.

Staggering only slightly more than before with their bulging waists, they went out cautiously, shouldering their trunks again at the door. There was a light in the main hangar as they approached it. They peered in at the edge of the door. The yawning sentry on the hangar post was standing inside at the back by the machine-benches, resting his chin on the guard-haft of his fixed bayonet. His eyes were fixed dreamily on the cantilever beams high overhead, filled with visions of lovely lightly clad coryphees of the Folies Bergere dancing toward him with enticing arms.

"Oh, jiz!" he yawned in rapture.

It would be a shame to disturb him. The three silent marines withdrew their heads cautiously, tiptoeing away, steering a course right oblique toward the

big old Renault photographic two-seater that stood out on the starting line, gray and ghostly in the lustrous shadows of the rising moon. They paused in the refuge of its wings, dumping their luggage on the ground, while Slim removed one of the bulges from his pockets and made use of the corkscrew.

"Down the ammunition-hoist, Finnegan," he invited.

"Try that on your keel-plates, spig," said Finnegan, wiping his mouth.

"Whick-whup!" said the Conch, passing the bottle back. "Murder it, Slim."

"God, did yuh see that moon jump, guys?" whispered Slim in alarm, as he threw the bottle away. "It jumped about three feet across the sky, so help me."

"Whick-whup!" said the Conch. "Which moon, Slim?"

"You're kuk-cockeyed, Slim," said Finnegan. "I can hear you stut-stutter."

"Odd man takes the stick," said Slim, producing three coins. "Other two'll have to sardine themselves into the rear cockpit. What you guys got? Heads, heads. Tails here. Well, she's a pretty cheesy hencoop, but she ought to get us there. Oh, but couldn't we use those Spads at Soissons!"

"Brother!" said Finnegan. "When old Buck Taylor saw us piquing in with 'em, would he do a war dance!"

"Come on," said the Conch briefly and directly, "let's get going. It's a hundred and ten knots by the map to those Black Death Kilties' drome at Armentieres, and the cockeyed dawn is coming in a couple more hours. They ain't going to be asleep forever."

"Armentieres," said Finnegan with a look of virtuous surprise. "Who the hell said anything about Armentieres? What do you want to go around looking at maps of where them Bad Breath Macs is roosting, spig? Somebody might get the idea listening to you that you was planning to rob their chicken-roost. You're all wet. In the first place, any guy that would even think of trying such a low down mean ornery trick is a sap. And in the second place, it's only

a hundred and three knots to Armentieres."

"Oh, you measured it on the map, too, did you, leatherneck?" said Slim.

"Hell, I brung the map," said Finnegan.

"Hell, I don't need any maps," said Slim. "I got the picture of it down in my bean. Yuh go up the railroad track from Armentieres. There's a crik beside the field that yuh couldn't miss in the moonlight, and some woods and a swamp north of it with a bunch of Canuck batteries. That's the picture. Am I right?"

"You'd have to land on the other side of the crik, I figure," said Finnegan.

"**A**ND it'd have to be dead stick from two miles up," added the Conch. "You couldn't even let them hear your wires humming, I figure, or they'd think it was a Hun raid and start the Archies powing."

"Say," said Finnegan, "whose cock-eyed idea was this in the first place? Let me tell you, any guy that's got a bug in his bean of piquing up there and robbing them hard-boiled Annies of their legally married Spads, and thinks he's going to get away with it, why, he's just a mug, that's all. In the first place, it wouldn't be honest. And in the second place, maybe it couldn't be did."

"You said it, Finnegan," agreed Slim.

"You sure said it," agreed the Conch.

"I'd hate to admit," said Finnegan, "that any guy smart enough to be a gyrene shavetail could have any such crazy idiotic boob idea like that."

"Same here," said Slim.

"Great minds run in the same channels," said the Conch.

"Having agreed on which," said Finnegan, with grim eyes laughing in the moonlight, "throw that there double-jointed chassis of yours behind the stick while we swing her over, Slim, and don't pretend to look so innocent to me, you low-down chicken-thief. I thought I was the only sap that was dumb enough to figure on trying it, but it looks like

I ain't. A hundred and three knots to hop, and we'll be flying Spads or angels' wings in ninety minutes more! Don't say I didn't warn you. Allez houp!"

"It's not as though they didn't invite us," said the Conch. "They asked us up particular."

The tall beanpole gyrene swung up into the Avion Renault's forward cockpit with limbs only slightly reeling, reaching for spark, switch, and throttle with numb but practiced hands as he sprawled down. Moons floated around him in the deep blue velvet sky. The night was chill, but he felt warm and relaxed and full of a million splendid godlike ideas, though he couldn't seem to think just what they were. He had had that idea of flying up to Armentieres to swipe those Spads back, if it could be done, from the moment he had first seen the A. R. on the field. He couldn't quite remember how Finnegan and the Conch had got the same idea, too. It struck him as funny. He began to laugh.

"Contact!" he said as he fell into his seat. "Swing her over, leatherneck!"

His voice, and the Conch's voice and Finnegan's voice, seemed still to be echoing and arguing in the still crisp night air. They had, he thought, been talking louder and louder at the last. Their voices had been the only sound. Now there had arisen suddenly other sounds—just when or how he couldn't seem to think. But he heard a rifle shot behind him. He heard a voice bawl "Corporal of the guard!" He laughed again. All that was remote and rather hazy to him, like everything else.

"Corporal of the guard, post Number 4! Corporal of the guard, post Number 4!" that wild voice was howling behind him. "Stop or I'll plug you! Get out of it!"

"Stop them! Drill them!" another voice screamed over the dark field.

There were howls and shouts coming from all directions, it seemed. The dreaming sentry on the hangar post had been aroused from his sweet seductive visions by their loud drunken voices at

last, and his yell as he ran out and saw them had aroused forty different brands of corporals, sergeants, and shavetail assistant officers of the guard. They came in boots and stocking feet. They came from guard house, barracks and gates. They came with Comanche yells.

The whole howling outfit.

"Stop them! Stop those blasted gy-rines! Plug them in the pants! Don't let them take that ship!" the well known voice of old Prune-juice bellowed above the fifty-seven brands of assorted other yells.

CHAPTER VI

On Their Way

A GAIN the rifle cracked. Before he heard the bang, even, Slim felt a wind whiz past his cheek, and slivers of wood and horsehair stuffing from the cockpit coaming hit him on the chin, and there was a smooth round hole suddenly in the isinglass wind-cowling in front of his blurred burning eyes. He didn't hear anything more. The A. R.'s engine spat on the instant as Finnegan snapped the club over, linked hand in hand with the Conch. Slim slammed the spark wide and it caught, and his right hand was shoving the gun open with a bellow that drowned all other sounds.

"Heave the gear aboard and pile in!" he screeched.

But there wasn't any leisure opportunity to stow anything away. They'd have to leave both their own gear and their assembled loot behind them. The old A. R.'s wheels had begun to roll, and Finnegan and the Conch had only time to dive beneath her wings as she forged at them. With fast augmenting speed she raced across the field, while Slim looked back with hazy eyes. The two other marines had seized her rear cockpit coaming as she went by them. The gold-toothed red-headed grinning Finnegan was up in the cockpit now, hauling the panting Conch in overside

with whoops and howls of enthusiastic profanity.

"Cast off moorings and full speed ahead!" he howled.

Slim had no notion of which way the wind was coming from, and in his present blithesome mood he didn't care. Across the field he hauled the skimming ship around on one wheel and a wing tip, and went racing back at the hangars with full gun on and warmed-up motor booming like thunder.

The big main hangar came toward him. The Renault rushed across moon-lit ground sprinkled with dodging, diving, and inaudibly profane shapes of rabid doughboy flyers and mechanics. The A. R.'s nose lifted up in a staggering cross-wind take off. A hundred feet high she skidded like a grand piano coasting across a glass floor, and for the moment there seemed nothing beneath her but big hollow empty air, and not too much of that.

She caught up flying speed as Slim lashed her nose down frantically and slammed her rudder over. She went roaring on her ear between the big main hangar and the rigging shop, scraping the wall of one and kissing the roof of the other with her wheels, and off into the wide empty moon-washed sky, heading straight north for Armentieres by the motionless light of the Pole star.

"And old McWhistlethrottle himself, the hippopotamus Annie, couldn't have done it any better, guy!" screeched Finnegan, pounding Slim on the back. "We'll show those hairy-eared macs how to fly Spads yet!"

Squeezed in the rear cockpit beside Finnegan, the little Conch said nothing. His long black hair flew back as flat as a board; large soft brown eyes were huge in his white face. He clutched the cockpit rim with whitened knuckles, softly hiccuping, while the great cold black whistling wind went rushing by and the old A. R. climbed for her ceiling.

For the next hour and more the smooth hundred-proof rye which the three marines had drunk to the tune of

two quarts gathered strength and authority in their anatomies. It had been no raw flash gin, to make a man suddenly boil up and then leave him sadder and soberer as it faded. It had a melowered delayed action. It took its time coming, but it came. It went beating through their hearts with warm fragrant throbs. It filled their veins and capillaries with a comfortable rosy glow.

THEIR brains swam in it and swished around. Slim still remembered that he was a marine, and could still partially recall his own name, and had not in the least forgotten that he had some important business to collect three priceless chasse ships from a squadron of thieving Scots who talked like bullfrogs and fought like badgers. But except for those isolated facts his mind was largely a bright and glorious blank, filled with rushing comets, suns, pinwheels, and the aurora borealis. He did not know whether he was flying a Bleriot or a Jenny. He was highly uncertain as to whether it was day or night. Nor did it seem important.

Only his elemental animal senses and the instinctive flying ability that was inherent in him remained with him now—the feel of the rudder, the feel of the stick, the feel of the wind on his face, the subconscious ceaseless attention to altimeter and compass, oil and gasoline gauges, Venturi tube and bubble indicator. Only one little bright subliminal spot in his brain remained alert and wary and cold sober—the censor, the soul, the elemental spark, that tiny sober rational spot in all men's minds which never forgets and never sleeps, which never gets drunk and never laughs, nor weeps nor loves nor feels any other emotion, and which never dies until life itself is dead. Only that little tiny bright spot of cold control remained sober in him, along with the instinct of his hands. But that was enough to save him and the ship from any disaster: for though he might be the world's greatest numbskull as a mechanic, as a rigger, engineer,

soldier, and all the rest of it, though he might never know the firing order or a LeRhône nor the recoil mechanism of a Darne, though he might never learn to distinguish the silhouette differences between a Pfalz and an Albatros at any distance greater than a hundred feet even in days to come when with Buck Taylor's 4th Marine Pursuit he should be piling up his twenty-odd victories on the Front, nor find out what in hell a burble point was till the day he died, still and in spite of all that there was no doubt that Slim Murchison of the Marines had to a high degree the instinct of a great flying man which can only be born in one, and never made.

Drunk, pie-eyed, boiled as an owl, fried on both sides and crocked to the top of his blond-thatched skull, filled with reeling visions of great blazing suns and northern lights and all the roseate ambrosial glory of his share of those two quarts of surging slow-fuse rye, nevertheless he held the stick of the old tail-heavy warped A. R. as steadily and soberly as a locomotive engineer for an hour and a good third more, feathering the bumps out of her, plowing her through patches of black night cloud, lifting her to her ceiling and above it. Lifting her up beneath the moon, where its pale white endless light cast a rainbow ring around the shadow of the old Renault flying on the clouds below him. Lifting her toward the stars. Lifting her and lifting her, a thousand feet in fifteen minutes, till she was thirty-two hundred meters high by her Frog altimeter, ten thousand five hundred feet high in U. S. talk. Than which only the angel Gabriel and an Archie slam of TNT beneath her tail could have lifted her a foot higher. But she was out of sound of the ground now. The sleeping Scots Camel squadron couldn't hear her drumming.

And all the time, planted clearly in that little bright spot at the back of his brain which no drunkenness could affect, there was the picture of the layout of McDuff's Black Death squadron, as he had read it from the big-scale con-

tour may. The brook and the railroad up from Armentieres, the swamps to the north where the Canuck guns lay hidden—he couldn't miss those kilties' chicken-roost in the moonlight if he tried.

"They invited us," he reiterated to himself with hazy insistence. "Ashked us up to party specially. Bunch of big warm-hearted hoshpitable old mac sons of guns, jush filled to the — gills with ol' Shcotch hoshpitality."

ONCE or twice in that thundering, steady climbing, dreamlike eighty minutes of high flight he turned his swimming head and looked back with a vague cheerful smile at his confreres squeezed in the observer cockpit. Finnegan had laid his red wind-whipped thatch on the back of the seat and was snoring, while an eighty-knot wind went rushing down his yawning esophegus and played tunes on his gold teeth.

But the little Conch remained wide awake, silent, tense, softly hiccuping, with great brown eyes in the pallor of his little pointed face, shivering and shivering. Shivering like a rabbit all the while. Oh, he was cold, the little fighting gyrene from the hot bright tropics, up there in the high thin rushing summer night, farther from the equator than the pole. His neck was scourged down on his shoulders. His teeth rattled spasmodically. He had thrust his hands inside the breast of his overcoat.

And perhaps he was more than cold, perhaps he was afraid, the little Conch. Perhaps he had a dark intuition already that the taking of those Spads would not be so easy as they had thought.

"Feeling woozy, fellah?" shouted Slim back at him. "Want to head over for Soissons and give it up?"

But the little Conch shook his head, trying to smile with rattling teeth.

"It's just the—whick-whick-whup—hiccups," he apologized.

"Buck up! You'll be wrapping your mitt around a Spad stick in twenty minutes more, guy," howled Slim joyfully.

"That'll shake the bubbles out of you."

Drunk, blotto, gloriously spifflicated and irresponsible, that was what he was. The idea occurred to him, however, that it was time to sober up. The moon had traveled perceptibly across the sky. With blurred eyes he looked at his luminous wrist watch. It was half past two o'clock. He had failed to note the time when they took off, but they had been up an hour and twenty minutes anyway, headed steadily northwest by north. It ought to be bringing them very near now to the famous Armentieres battle sector and the roost of McDuff's immortal Camel scouts.

A sense of excitement had begun to grow in him as he waited for the appearance of the goal below.

High moving night clouds, touched to silver on their scalloped fringes by the moon, drifted below for the time being, cutting off the ground. Slowly their weaving masses wallowed, rolled, and disintegrated. There was a rift that broke in them, widening into a great fissure in the floor of heaven through which the moon poured down. The lightless sleeping terrain below came into view deep at the bottom of the cloudy crack, washed with silver light and black shadows, touched with high lights on ponds and running streams. No light of any town, of course. A battery flashed and faded. Except for that, except for the eerie distorted moonlight, it was a world that was darkened. A world seeming dead as hell and the wastes of the Sahara, yet peopled with a million men under arms.

"The Front!" thought Slim with a curious chill. "The old cock-eyed battle front's not so far away."

And though it was the goal toward which all his dreams had yearned, awake or asleep, for months on end, his elation now that he was there above it or close above it was mixed with a cold spine-stiffening sense of fear. For the moment he felt immensely sober. As sober as eternity and the remote stars above him.

This was more than practice hopping and sky-larking. This was war. The Front.

"Annies, where are you roosting?" he muttered, staring down. "It's something hotter and worse than krauts is coming to bite you now. Sleep tight, you bonnines. You're going to wake up out of it with a jump when you hear the roar of those Spad babies taking off."

IT was the tiny crooked silver stream in the moonlight two miles below that first caught his wind-burned eyes. He eased his throttle a quarter shut, and banked around. In a moment, as the rolling cloud fissure widened, he saw the single line of railroad track an instant in the glinting of the moon, a single straight black line converging with the little river.

To one side there was the deceptively solid sheen of what must have been the swampland marked on the map, and the deep blackness of the shattered woods that hid the Canadian guns beyond.

They must be close.

His head was bent far overside in the cold rushing wind stream, watching below as the cloud crevasse closed its rolling lips again. He felt a touch on his shoulder. It was Finnegan who had been aroused from sleep by the tuning down of the motor and the circling bank. The red-eyed gyrene was likewise staring down with a squinting face and a shrewd nodding look.

"What do you think?" Slim cried to him.

"Sure," Finnegan howled back. "They've got their lousy Camel garages danged well hidden, the cheesy macs, but yuh can almost smell the castor oil and the burned gas if you take a sniff. Their tarmac's that black spot between the one-lung railroad and the crik according to the map. What do you say, Conch?"

"Which way is the—whick-whup—bathroom?" said the Conch.

"All out for Armentieres!" said Slim. "Here goes nothing in a garbage scow.

Cross your fingers, guys, and pray that the Annie's are all asleep."

"I'll rock them to sleep with the tough end of a gat, if they ain't," said Finnegan thickly. "His name was McWhistle—McWhistle—throttle. An extraordinarily large Colt with impressive feet. That was what most impressed me."

Slim had snapped the Renault's switch, nosing flatly over in a loose care-free spiral toward the cloud flooring that was closing up below. The roaring of the motor was no more. The high cold sky was filled with the windy and inaudible whispers of empty space, with singing ghostly murmurs that came from worlds a hundred million miles away. The Renault's dead club heaved over tiredly in the wind pressure. They went spiraling down into the cloud.

"Hold her in neutral," begged the Conch palely. "I've got the—whick-whup, whick-whup—hiccups."

"His name was McWhistlethrottle," said Finnegan darkly. "His name was McWhistlethrottle. I only wish I could remember what his name was."

"Will you excuse me, please, suhs?" said the Conch.

"I disliked the damned kraut from the start," said Finnegan. "It was a clash of temperamental antitheses. I hope that I am always a gentleman."

"Sober up, guys!" Slim said. "It's not going to be any joke."

They were planing through the cloud on flat and silent wings, with nothing, nothing, nothing around them or above them or below except the great vast vaporous billows of the night. They might have been right side up or upside down. They might have been motionless in a featherbed, except for the altimeter going down, and the bubble sliding softly back and forth, and the Venturi needle quivering at fifty knots. They had spiraled to five thousand feet before they went sliding down through the last cloud ravel and below into moonlight again, above the black and silver world.

Two or three star rockets rose upward in curving parabolas in the west. Over

there was the ocean somewhere, patrolled by unseen ships. Ahead, in the north, once more Slim saw the quick subdued flashes of long range batteries dotting the earth, warming and fading in their hidden nests like glowworms beneath leaves, hammering out their tons of death at targets twenty miles away.

"It's not going to be any joke," he told himself again, with the tiny sober spot like fire and ice in his brain. "Boy, remember if they catch you trying to pinch those crates, it's not going to be any joke. They're hardboiled macs, and they're tough as nails. But, by God, they invited us."

CHAPTER VII

Enemy Territory

THE Renault had overshot the carefully camouflaged and innocent appearing fighting tarmac by a mile or two. On whispering wings Slim banked around, without a wire whine that might arouse the fierce sky-scorpions from their sleep. It would have to be dead stick all the way, and a dead stick landing in the dark. He dare not open up the gun again. They would never get within a mile of the Spads or anything else on the Camel field if the wild Scots heard them roaring in the sky.

They might even be mistaken for raiding krauts and have their tail blown off by Canuck 3-inch shrapnel from the invisible batteries that were mapped lying in the adjacent woods.

This latter possibility was an added complication that had just occurred to Slim, and it left him cold. Very cold. He was prepared if need be for a fight with fists, feet, and any convenient missiles that could be picked up against the brawny Scots, once they had landed on the Camel drome, but he had no inclination for being blown into shredded wheat before he got there.

The batteries briefly glowing here and there signed off and did not resume

again, as the old French two-seater came spiraling flatly down through the black sky toward the looming ground. For the moment the moon went behind clouds again.

The world was just a bowl of big black cherries, not a star shell, not a star, not a gun flash, not a cigarette. In a few seconds more, when the big yellow orb at the roof swam into view again, the ground was much nearer, all of it silvered suddenly and slanting up with cockeyed speed, rivulet, railroad and woods, and the hidden combat tarmac in between—though even yet the camouflaged hangars and huts that fringed the field were invisible, so cleverly had they been concealed.

But the hangars were there somewhere, at the edge of the black woods. And they, and the woods, and the landing field itself, and the little brook on the other side, all came rushing up. Suddenly Slim forgot all the details he had memorized so carefully from the map, the contour lines, the location of swamps and woodlands. For with a final demoniac leap from three hundred feet below the ground seemed to hurtle up at him, and the moon went behind cloud again at that moment, and it was all blackness.

Dark as a coal hole.

He had the feel of thick shot-splintered trees rushing below him. He heard leaves swish on his sagging wheels. The altimeter registered minus altitude. He inched back on the stick and prayed in the name of all the powers he could think of, including the commandant of the United States marines.

The next instant the Renault seemed to have cleared the unseen woodlands, for her pancaking tires touched land with a soft and sudden bump, and she rolled. The tall breathless gyrene at the stick had no time to express his relief in a paean of thanksgiving nor even to let the hair sink flat on his head again. The Renault kept on rolling, while her nose bucked down and her tail rose up, and she somersaulted forward slowly and gracefully, dumping herself over

upside down like a wheelbarrow load of brick.

She had landed in the edge of the swampy land across the little brook from the combat field, and had turned clear over, with not the breaking of a spar nor a thud in the soft peaty ground. Slim hung upside down by his safety strap, reaching up to push the earth away from him, while his gun-belt load of army Colts and other weighty souvenirs slid down around his shoulder blades and neck, and a monkey-wrench from the Renault's cockpit went tobogganing down his face, followed by a bunch of oily cotton waste, a pair of mechanic's gloves, and other inconsequential objects. He managed to get his belt unhooked then, and dropped himself to the ground on his head somewhat suddenly.

FINNEGAN and the Conch, who had no safety belt attached, had been catapulted out with flying limbs onto the sod twenty feet away before they knew it. They arose and dug the mud out of their ears and came stumbling back through the night to the ship with voiceless but heartfelt profanity.

"Oh, God, don't tell me it's busted, guy," moaned Finnegan in an anguished whisper, as Slim sat up and felt his dizzy head. "Did you smash it?"

Slim straightened out his wrenched neck vertebrae and felt his skull for loose or broken bones.

"Pipe down," he breathed, moving his lips voicelessly. "The macs' field is just across the creek; past those trees. There may be a sentry post on this side. Don't bother about me. My neck's not busted. It just kind of got bent around when I slid out on my head. But I'm all right, old-timer, thanks."

"You," mouthed Finnegan. "Hell, I meant the bottle."

However, the last bottle of rye in Slim's overcoat pocket was still intact, he discovered on investigation, as were the assorted souvenir weapons which they had loaded their waists with, which was a larger wonder.

The Camel field, it seemed, must be just across the shallow creek, as Slim had surmised, beyond a fringe of gloomy funereal poplars that lifted their tall spires on the farther bank. There had been the sound of remote voices wafted through the still hushed night. No one had appeared so far, however, and there had been no sound of an alarm. So far they had been lucky. The braw and brawny kilties of McDuff's justly illustrious Black Death squadron didn't know that they were within a hundred miles. And perhaps mightn't have believed it if they had been told. Suddenly the roar of motors broke out beyond the poplars, swelling in a moment to a crescendo thunder and slowly dying away in a hoarse bubbling murmur.

"Listen to that!" breathed Slim. "The cockeyed macs are warming up for dawn patrol already. By God, it's not far away, either. Dawn'll be cracking about three o'clock."

"Come on!" said Finnegan.

"Are we here?" hiccuped the Conch. "How did we get here?"

"Snap into it, ace," breathed Slim. "Look alive. It's the Annies' roost, and the fun has just begun. We've got to be ready to hop those Spads on the jump, if we can reach 'em."

"I'm okay," muttered the Conch palely. "I just didn't know where I was for a minute, that was all."

"Can you hop all right, Conch?"

"You think I'm drunk. But I'll hop farther and faster than either of you hoptoads, and I'll hop first, I've got fifty cents that says it. Whick-whup. Watch me."

"He's not dud-drunk," said Finnegan. "He's no drunker than I am. He knows where he's at now, don't yuh, Conch?"

"Sure," said the Conch. "Scotland."

"Armentieres," said Slim.

"The little marine went over the top," said the little marine. "Hinky-dinky—"

"Pipe down!"

They went wading through the knee-deep water toward the sound of the

spurting engines, with crouched shoulders, stepping swiftly yet cautiously. They crawled up the farther bank on hands and knees, behind the screen of the tall gloomy poplars. None of them was sober yet, but they were all alert, with alcohol-quickenened hearts, realizing a little the dangers of the game they had undertaken. Breathing softly, with quick excited nerves and limbs that trembled with the tension of the moment, they paused in the undergrowth beneath the tall trees at the edge of the field to look things over. They lay belly-flat, peering forth.

WHITE moonlight lay in mottled patches on the famous combat drome in front of them, moving and changing as night clouds drifted high above. Vaguely they could make out the outlines of the camouflaged hangars at the end of the tarmac, eighty or a hundred yards away, against a background of thick woods. Here and there in the moonlight dark figures were moving, mingling with the night and reappearing.

A number of ships, not less than half a dozen, and possibly twice that many, had been rolled out from the hangars. Their motors burped and roared and droned away spasmodically. Some of them were obscurely visible at the edges of the moonlight to the three prone tense red-eyed marines—big black mosquito shapes standing with spinning clubs, or else just now being swung over by the dark figures of their crews. Others unseen in the black hangar shadows roared full throttle, with flashes of blue flame glimmering ghostily and briefly from their exhausts, and nothing else.

There was no light on the whole black field except those intermittent exhaust spurts, not a flashlight moving nor a cigaret burning. Shapes of men moving in unguessed numbers around the ships and hangars, motors spurting, that was all.

Tune up for dawn patrol.

"By God, they're all awake," breathed

Slim. "Every last mac son of them. There must be thirty different brands of oatmeal-stuffed Camel aces and hangar lice swarming around. And, boy, wouldn't they gang us if they caught us!"

"Which is McWhistlethrottle?" muttered Finnegan. "It's hard to tell the size and color of them, but I'll know him by his feet."

"Boy," said Slim, "they're an awful lot of them. It's going to be tough. Maybe if we come galloping toward them doing the highland fling or something like that they wouldn't recognize us till after we had started to grab those Spads and was taking off. But the more I think of how many of them there is, the tougher it looks to be."

"To hell with how many of the macs," said Finnegan with hushed belligerence. "Yuh can't stop to count all the snake eyes on the dice when you're rolling for a seven, guy. We've got to each one pick out a crate and make a dive for it, that's all. The old percentage is with us, anyhow, 'cause if we win we win, and they can't do no more than jug us if we miss. They can't hang a guy for trying."

"All the same, it's going to be tough."

"There ain't no argument to that, leatherneck. They're hard-boiled Annies."

"Which ones is our Spads?" whispered the Couch.

"How should I know?" said Finnegan. "Do I look like the kind of a cock-eyed bugologist that can pick you out the differences between eighty-seven species of female horseflies that look alike as two whiskers? If you ain't going to be satisfied except with a Spad and nothing but, you'd better ask the Annies to point one out for you. Grab any crate you can, is my motto. What the hell's the difference between a Spad and a Camel, anyhow, when you get down to it, can either of you guys tell me?"

"Search me," said Slim. "They're both one-seaters."

"That's my idea," said Finnegan. "And I reckon Buck would just as lief have us bring in either one, if we don't have time to pick and choose them Spads. They're all fighting crates, and that's all that's important."

"Pipe down," breathed Slim mutely.

The moon had gone behind clouds again. All was blackness. There was only the ragged sound of the motors across the invisible field. But lying flat with his ear to earth, Slim had felt an approaching tread shaking it. A sentry on patrol came walking by along the edge of the tarmac, a dark shadow moving through the profundity more like a bear than a man.

HIS rifle leather slapped as he shifted the carry of his weapon with a caloused palm. He was softly whistling a tune that Slim recognized as that of Maryland, my Maryland—though to him doubtless it had a different meaning. His whistling stopped. Somewhere near the three prone motionless unbreathing marines he paused with a muttered word, prodding the bushes and scrub at the edge of the field with his bayonet a moment before walking on.

"Foocy!" he muttered as he resumed his heavy march. "Insecten nur."

His stolid tread died away.

"Dios de los fabricantes de cigarros!" breathed the Conch, stretching his stiffened neck. "The muddy highlander tickled my ear with that harpoon."

"Son of a thistle!" mouthed Slim in silent rage.

"What was the Annie saying?" queried Finnegan blackly. "Did you get it, guys?"

"He said insects and manure, the lousy son of a mac," declared Slim with righteous indignation.

"That's what I thought he said. Why don't the dumb Celt learn to speak English? Insects and manure, are we. Well, by God, I'll paste that Presbyterian. Which way did he go?"

"Forget it, ace," said Slim. "He didn't mean nothing personal by it against

you and me. He didn't see us. It was just the Conch's hair tonic he kind of smelt. I figure."

"Well, he'll not manure me, anyhow."

"Save it, Finnegan," said Slim. "You'll need all you've got. It's going to be tough. Lend me that cockscrew again. Prime your pistons with that, guy, before we mote."

"Boy, that's what I needed," gagged Finnegan. "Oil up your tonsils, spig. Down to my thumb."

"Kill it, Slim," gagged the Conch.

"Give me the bottle when you've downed it, guy," Finnegan told Slim. "I always like a bottle. It's better than brass knucks, and aces up over a brick."

They were on their hands and knees again, crouching ready.

"Wait till the moon comes out again so we can see what we're heading for," whispered Slim tensely. "We'll just start walking casual and innocent like till some of these bagpipe-blowers begin hollering at us or try to stop us. Have a crate picked out that's turning over, and sprint for it then. If we get half way there before they spot us, we ought to make it maybe. No shooting and no rough stuff, guys. After all, the poor damned ignorant immigrants are allies, we can't get around it. Just put the slug on any of them that try to stop us kind of soft and easy like."

"I'll lean a gat so soft against McWhistlebottom's jawbone he'll think the angels kissed him if I see him," promised Finnegan. "Hell, no, no rough stuff, guys. If any of them take us for krauts and start to pull their heaters on us, holler out that we're Yanks in whatever lingo they speak. We don't want to have no murder and bloodshed on our hands. I don't mind using a busted bottle or the flat end of a gat between friends, but I draw the line on firearms even in fun. It always leads to trouble."

"That's agreed on," hiccupped the Conch.

"No rough stuff," repeated Finnegan, seizing the empty bottle by the neck.

Some of the turning motors were still

burping in the deep chill lightless night, some had been cut off while mechanics worked on them. The moonlight came flooding out in patches over the scene once more. Dark figures moved down by the hangars. The blackest hour. But the dawn wasn't far away.

The three gyrines arose in the shadows, the tall lean Slim, the broad and powerful Finnegan, the little Conch with thinly rattling teeth. They moved forward. Slim had thrown away his overcoat the better to make a sprint for it, while Finnegan had had none to begin with. Only the little Conch remained wrapped from calves to ears in his forest-green greatcoat, shivering and shivering. He was still cold to the marrow, the little fighting gyrene from the coral keys, and even that last powerful drink had not warmed him.

RED-EYED, with sagging hips, staggering only slightly, the three of them walked slowly and breathlessly forward, an incongruous trip, across the shadowy wheel-burned grass toward the blackness of the hangars and the ships, with as casual an air as they could muster and without appearance of alarm, though they felt plenty.

"Play it up," said Slim from the corner of his mouth, as they saw the shadowy shapes of the flying men and mechanics around the hangars begin to loom somewhat more definitely ahead of them. "Play it up!! Act like you belonged. Maybe there are some of them that are noticing us. Talk Scotch, you guys."

"How the hell?" muttered Finnegan.

"Hoot, mon, hoo wad ye like a boony drink o' fergus richt noo, laddie?" crated the tall gyrene loudly in his best Scots accent, with a tight expressionless face. "Aye, Bobbie Burns was one grond auld poet. Do ye ken the bagpipes skirling the tune O' The Campbells is Coming? Sair goot, laddies und lassies. Wee, wee, McTavish, mon spricht Deutsch. Oh, what the hell, I missed that one," he muttered in a hoarse

whisper. "That's Frog. I got mixed up. But never mind. Think of something. If you can't talk Scotch, just hiccup. Play up. Play oop. Wad that some power the giftie'd gie us to see oursel's as ithers see us. Hello, McTavish, 'tis a braw bricht nicht. Hoot, mon, 'tis auld St. Pathrick himself is the howly saint of auld Scotland. Mybonny lies over the ocean my bonny has only one lung. Scoots wot ha' wi' Wallace bled. Play oop, play oop, you cock-eyed leathernecks. Are you going to make me do it all alone?"

"Aye, McTavish, hoot mon, laddie, didye ever hear the story aboot the Scootchman from Edinboro and the other son of a mac from Glasgow?" began Finnegan desperately, in a loud hoarse voice. "The first one's name was Jock, and the other's name was Izzy Epstein, I mean McEpstein. Well, it seems Tam says to this other Annie one day as they was coming out of mass, 'Hey, Rastus, you all low-down no-account ol' black shoat, how come you all walking out in the cawnfield wif dat high yallah gal last night?' And Sambo says—what—in the name of—holy—who's them two buzzards coming, guys?"

"Erin go broke," prayed the Conch, stumbling in his overcoat, with sweat breaking out on his pale coffee-and-cream face. "Finnan haddie. Haig and Haig. Abercrombie and Fitch. Keep it up, Finnegan. Kip eet oop. McFinnegan. Whick-whup. Oh, God, I can't think of any more, lassies. Here commy sommy of the bonny macky you know whatties, and mine name iss not Yon Yonson if they aren't—"

"Hoot, mon! Hoot, mon! Hoot, mon!" said Slim with stiff pale lips. "'Tis a braw bricht sunny nicht, and a sair lang teem between Heeland heeballs, as the goovenor of Sooth Caro-neena said to the goovenor of Noorth Caroleena. Hoot, mon!"

They were no more than half way across the field toward the hangars at their calm forced steady gait. Suddenly two figures had appeared in a patch of

moonlight straight ahead, strolling from the hangars, and crossing the brief moonlight were approaching through the darkness the trio of marines. They were clad in flying suits, they had leather helmets on their heads—a pair of fierce Front-Line battle aces sauntering around while they waited for their ships to be reported ready and for the take-off signal of dawn patrol. Their features were like gray mush in the deep night, unrecognizable. But there could have been only one man in Wee Willie McDuff's immortal Black Death squadron. Camels 83rd, so huge and massive framed and heavy of foot as the larger of those two approaching sons of the mackerel sky, and there could have been only one so square and small.

"McWhistlethrottle!" mouthed Finnegan through his locked gold teeth. "The mac of all the macs himself."

He clenched his fists.

"Captain McDuff!" prayed the Conch. "*Santa Maria!*"

SLIM'S knees felt wobbly beneath him. He ceased to realize that he had feet. He had his eyes on one of the dark line of little combat ships in front of the hangars beyond the approaching pair of aces—a ship with its motor turning over, with its bog pointed down the field into the slow night wind, with its cockpit empty, and with only one dark figure of a mechanic up on its wing-walk tinkering with its poppet valves. So near, so near.

But still a long way to go, a long, long way, with every yard a mile, with all those shadowy Scotties around the hangars, and with the pair of demon Annie aces now coming onward and cutting off the way.

It was only by a heroic gesture of acting that the tall gyrene forced himself to continue walking steadily onward for one or two steps more without breaking into a flying panic-stricken sprint for the goal. His two confreres were as rattled as he was, too, he was subconsciously aware. He saw Finnegan's near hand

tighten large and hairy around the bottle neck.

The Conch stumbled again on the tails of his long overcoat, almost falling flat. Still they hadn't broken, none of them. They were keeping on, for a step or two, anyway. He only prayed that they might keep on past those two oncoming demon macs unrecognized in the darkness, and reach the cockpits of the ships before any fireworks started.

If they could only keep the game of being Scotsmen up ninety seconds more, all would be saved.

"Hoot, McTavish!" he addressed the bristling Finnegan and the stumbling Conch in a loud frantic voice, licking his lips. "'Tis richt bonny the blessed Spods and Commels look, ken ye nicht, mon? I oonly hoop 'tis von Riegelmann the dirty Hoon we have the devil's blessed luck to meet this marning, wurra, wurra, oh, me sowl, whin we git oop in the sky—skow, skay. Skee was whoot I mint to say. Play oop, play opp, you fish-brained leathernecks," he threw aside in a tight anguished whisper. "Act like you belonged. Just walk by like you owned the joint and don't give these thick-skulled Lauries a tumble. Oh, yuss," he rattled loudly, "as I wooze saying—play oop—play oop—"

His voice faded out in his throat with a last hoarse croak. It was no use. Even he realized it was no use. There was something wrong with him or with his Scotch. Maybe it wasn't the Scotch but the rye. Anyway, it hadn't clicked. The pair of oncoming squadron aces, the huge broad-shouldered Annie with the barrel chest and the gunboat feet, and the little square Annie with the big square head, had stopped in their tracks about nine feet away. About eight feet eight inches, more approximately. They had stopped sharply and emphatically, and in a manner betokening some alarm. The big McWhistleberry had laid one paw on the shoulder of the little Wee Willie, while the little Wee Willie was staring with eyes which seemed to shoot out of his head like rifle bullets and

leave his eye-sockets blank and empty with astonished fright. And Slim had no reason to misdoubt that it was himself and his two innocent fellow Scootch marines who were the object and cause and focal point of the two bold Mc-Camelhoppers' alarmed goggle looked through the hushed darkness.

"Oh, no, it hadn't worked.

"*Hauptmann?*" croaked the voice of the Wee Willie.

"Hoot mon yourself," croaked Slim.

"*Donner geräts yet! So! Voss hobben veer here?*" gasped the little one.

"*Etwas schlim, Hauptmann!*" snapped the big McGalumpus beside him.

The suddenly halted Annie's quick hoarse affrighted voices seemed ringing in a prolonged motionless silence, and Slim and Finnegan and the paralyzed Conch had the illusion of being without movement for a long timeless second, of being turned to salt, of being rooted to the ground, while they contemplated capture and court martial and long years in a Scottish hoosegow living on oatmeal gruel. They didn't know what their mistake had been, but they were quite certain the game was up, and instantly. They didn't pause to argue about it. The feeling they had of being rooted to the ground was all an illusion. Their bodies were functioning automatically before their brains took hold. Without being quite aware of it, they had all three continued onward in movement, and moving with sudden great rapidity forthright and instinctively, even before McDreadnaught's astounded voice had opened to reply to the wee sky mackerel's squawk.

"*Etwas schlim, Hauptmann!*" there the big astounded mac stood blating.

CHAPTER VIII

Marines Move In

HE never had time to unload what he had on his chest, and it must have been plenty from the size of him.

Moving like three catamounts in a cyclone, the three gyrines went forward full speed and all fur flying at their astonished squadron hosts.

"Halt! *Vare gates!*"

"Heaven's gates, you son of a mac!" snarled Finnegan.

"Eet was Slim, and et is Slim!" gasped Slim. "You guessed right the first time, Annie! Give it to the mackerels, apes! They're wise!"

With a quick blow Finnegan had cracked the rye bottle in his fist—bam! against one of the guns holstered on his thighs, and charged with the broken half held menacingly. Simultaneously Slim leaped, and the Conch, tripping forward in his tangled coat skirts, grabbed hold of an armful of enemy ankles and scooped them up like an armload of stove wood from the ground as he sprawled. Both Annie's went down practically simultaneously and at once. It was the heel of Finnegan's fist with the bottle neck clutched in it that slammed the giant McLocomotive on the jawbone, knocking his teeth down his gaping throat like a handful of loose pearls. It was Slim's own hard knobbly left fist that came hurtling through the midnight air like a record-breaking Olympic hammer-throw, pulling all the rest of the tall lean gyrine's body behind it, and beaned the big mac with a rabbit punch that rocked him to sleep on his feet at the same instant. The little mac was down a split second before with an iron elbow jab from Finnegan in passing that folded solar plexus in against his backbone, and his heels went flying over his head as the Conch tripped him up and batted his skull on the ground.

"Pick out your crates, leathernecks!" roared Finnegan. "It's a free fight now!"

"No rough stuff, guys!" howled Slim. "If you've got to lean the slug on them remember they're Christians and brother aces, and try not to bust their heads!"

They were up and running neck and neck.

"Yanks!" screeched Slim. "Give us

them Spads! Pile out of it, you Annie Lauries! There's a million more behind us! Wa-wa-wa-wa! The Piutes are coming! The little marine and a couple of spares has come to Armentieres!"

"You asked for us!" howled Finnegan. "Bring on your mademoiselles! Dive out of your pants, you kilties, and fade from them ships of ourn!"

"Give it to them in the gesoophigus!" yelled the Conch. "They asked for it!"

There was a dark bear shape of a man with a rifle who came rushing toward Slim, bringing the gun up to his shoulder with a hoarse unintelligible shout of fury from six feet away, as Slim went charging toward the ship he had chosen. The tall gyrene bent like a weasel. The shot roared over his spine.

"Cut it!" he gasped as he dived in. "Is that a pretty way to play, you cock-eyed son of a thistle?"

It was still a game he was playing, in his own exhilarated estimation. The excited grin was still firmly fixed on his face. But his eyes were hot with indignation and fighting wrath for the moment as he dived in at that huge dark shadow, beneath the quick clubbed gun that the cursing rifleman was swinging at him in a braining blow. He struck before the gun butt had fallen on him. A big army automatic, one that he had particularly picked out as a souvenir for his Aunt Jane, was in his fist, and he laid the flat end of it on the dark rifleman's jaw with a three-foot swing like a hammer hitting glass as he bore in.

"Get tough, will yuh, in a friendly game?" he gasped. "Don't try that on a Yank again, if you ever wake up out of it, baby!"

HE. was running headlong on for the line of dark fighting ships, with only a split second's delay. Somewhere near him he heard Finnegan's rich profane howls and the Conch's gasping breath, but he didn't have time to turn his eyes and see them. It was each man for himself now, to grab one of those

ships and get away if he could, before the macs could stop them.

"Last man to hop is a big fat monkey, guys!" he howled. "Wa-wa-wa-wa! The Yanks is coming, Annies! Dive off that wing, you oatmeal slinger! Spread your tail feathers and fade away! This crate of yours has got a ticket C. O. D. for Soissons! Scram!"

The industrious and absorbed dark figures of men around the line of little black fighting ships had been scrambling like a flock of cock-eyed bats during the last two or three seconds. In face of the wild howling gyrines suddenly coming at them through the moonlit shadows, they had displayed immediately a commendable energy and alacrity in making their presence scarce. They were leaping out of cockpits and off wings, they were scuttling beneath landing gears like large anxious rats, they were somersaulting over fuel-drums and hurdling other unseen obstructions in full flight on their way to the adjacent tall timber. Their speed in getting out of the way in all directions was all that could be asked for in the circumstances, and more, in fact, than Slim had expected from his recent brief but unforgotten experience with Wee Willie McDuff's tough fighting Scots. If he had had any time for thought at all in his headlong yelling excitement he might have been a little surprised at the fearless Black Deathers sudden and spontaneous evaporation.

The fact that they had been taken without warning could account, of course, for their impulsive panic. They hadn't had time to take a stance. They hadn't known how many hordes were coming at them in the darkness of the black pre-dawn, nor where they were coming from nor who they were, with the shouts of the three charging Yankee marines sounding like three hundred wild men from Borneo. Even the bravest fighters will wilt in those circumstances, if they have any brains at all. Luckily few or none of them appeared to have been carrying weapons, and there

had been only the one shot fired by the furious excited sentry point-blank at Slim so far.

"Scram, you Annie Lauries! Hop, you Scotch! Give us them Spads of ourn!"

That was Finnegan's wild voice. And they were scrambling, all right. They were hopping. In approximately four seconds from the time the gyrines had suddenly bowled over their first pair of victims in mid-field and started their howling rush, the majority of the shadowy flying men and mechanics at work on the ships on the line had skittered off in all directions. Like a bushful of bedbugs from a burning mattress. And those who hadn't already found some shelter or hiding place in the dark were endeavoring to do so with all the speed they could command. Some of them had taken time to snap off their engine switches as they dived out of the cockpits. One or two of them had snatched up wrenches, wheel-chocks, and other gear to hurl at the charging Yanks. But they were just rare bugs with big ideas. Most of them had not stood on any ceremony. They had went.

Slim's only worry now, as he rushed for the swift black humming little one-seater that he had marked as his own, was that the fleeing shadowy Annies might overdo their panic. They might be too hysterical with fright to understand that he and old big-winded blustering Finnegan and the harmless little Conch were Yanks and friendly allies, not krauts. He didn't want to scare the macs to death. After all, they were good and useful men. He just wanted ships for himself and his two buddies, Spads, Camels, V. E.'s, or what had they. He was bursting with laughter at their whole fool terror and the excitement of the game as he reached the side of the nearest ship in the line and sprang for its stirrup step.

"Fade, grease monkey!" he howled. "I'm a cockeyed Yank in a hurry, and I'm off for Soissons in this pint-sized ship of yours! What is she, Spad or Camel?"

THE little dark-haired, white-eyed mechanic up on the wing tried to reach in and snap off the switch in panic, but the laughing gyrene was springing up beside him in that instant. He gave one awful look at the big black gun in Slim's fist and at the marine's gold wings and hard, red, drunken eyes, and with a whistle of his breath he dived like a porpoise off the wing.

"We're off!" howled Slim as he sprang into the seat and reached his long legs toward the rudder bar. "Come on, Finnegan! Come on, you Conch!"

A shot banged from the hangars. Finnegan, with a gat in one hand and the broken bottle in the other, was charging toward a ship with turning club farther down the line. The little Conch, tangled in the skirts of his long absurd overcoat, was behind him. Finnegan ducked, with an inaudible shout, as the shot spurted. There were shadowy men running to intercept the two racing gyrines now, with rifles and flashing pistols.

"Cut it out, you blank dumb macs!" shrieked Slim. "We're Yanks, we're Yanks, not krauts! Button up that shooting, or you'll be sorry for it! We're Yanks, you bonny squareheads! Cut it out!"

Finnegan had reached the side of his ship and was swinging up. He had made it, it looked like. But the little Conch, throwing off his overcoat as he ran, was still sprinting down the line toward a third ship with turning club. The moonlight came out around his green-clad streaking figure then for an instant as clear as day, and though he was a hundred feet away Slim could see every line of drawn excitement on the little Conch's strained pale brown face, and his mouth opened with white teeth gasping, and the sparkle of his eyes as he ran.

"Go it, you barracuda!" Slim howled.

But there were four or five of the grim shadow men who had run in between him and the ship he was heading for. Sentries with bayonets glinting on their rifles and dungareed flying men

with pistols. Luckily they could identify the little marine's uniform and insignia now in the moonlight, the thought flashed to Slim. They could know he wasn't a kraut.

They had cut him off. He couldn't reach the ship. His long black hair flashed, the wings on his tunic sparkled, as he side-stepped with high pistoning knees, changing direction, trying to cut through them like a galloping ghost. But they were around him in all directions, and he tripped over his own ankles, falling flat. He was down. They were on him. They had got him. No, they hadn't. He had wriggled clear and got on his feet again. He had changed direction. He came racing back down the line of ships toward Slim, with his face wrenched and pale in the moonlight, one hand clutching his heart, and the pack of them behind him.

He stumbled, and Slim roared with laughter. The little Conch would be chewing finnan haddie for a month now in a Scotch hoose-gow, until Buck Taylor could get the diplomatic wires to working right and bail him out. It was too bad, but it was funny, all the same. The Conch had been afraid that something was going to happen to him. He had had a hunch. He had been shivering so. Still, he had boasted that he would be hopping before either of them, when he had taken that last drink. And it served him right.

"You'll be playing bagpipes and wearing kilties when we see you again, guy!" Slim howled with laughter. "Give my regards to all the macs, hoot, mon, Mc-Conch!"

ALL this had happened in a matter of split seconds—Slim's reaching his ship, and Finnegan swinging up onto his farther down the line with shots beginning to pop, and the Conch sprawling and falling, then up again and sprinting back through the moonlight. The shots were still popping. On the wing of his ship Finnegan lurched, holding to the cockpit rim with sagging shoulders. And

the little Conch came running back down the line in the moonlight, with his face white as coconut meat, every strained agonized line on it clear and distinct, huge terror in his great dark expressive eyes. Oh, Slim would long remember the look of the little Conch racing back in the moonlight, with the dark swarm behind him, and the hand clutching his heart, and the terror of his eyes, and the word he tried to shout, inaudible above the motor's hammering, as he staggered and sprawled again.

And all the time there had been the popping of those shots, ten or a dozen in split seconds. Suddenly Slim felt all the drunken hysterical laughter scorched out of him. There was something wrong. Why were those shots still banging? The damned squarehead Annies must have seen by now that they were U. S. marines. On the wing of the ship two ships removed down the line Finnegan was sagging like a man badly hurt, Slim was suddenly aware, and the tall gyrene saw then that Finnegan had twisted around with his gat out, and it was flashing. It was flashing, and Finnegan's shadowy face was twisted up in a wild desperate yell. And on the field the little Conch had fallen flat, with shots cracking from the rushing pack behind.

Down!

"The sons of macs!" screamed Slim. "They're potting the little guy, Finnegan! They're drilling him in the back! You can't do that, you—!"

But it had been done already, and the little Conch was down. They had shot him running, in the back, the dirty heathen. He was down, he was dying. And they were on him with racketing pistols and with bayonets like a rush of dogs. Driving it into him where he lay sprawled, the little marine. And now there was nothing left of him. Why, he'd been alive and drinking and talking foolish with Slim and Finnegan only five minutes ago back at the edge of the poplars overlooking the macs' field. They couldn't do that to him, just for trying to steal back a crate that they had stolen

from him. It wasn't real. It was a crazy dream.

"Conch!" screamed Slim.

The instrument board in front of him was shattered. He sprang to his feet on the seat. He felt a shot streak past his face. He saw Finnegan's thick body swaying drunkenly on the wing of the ship down the line, and the gun flashing in his left fist, and his right arm jerking. There was a great flash and blast in mid-field. Mills bomb! It had landed square among those rushing shadows on the field, and Finnegan's arm was swinging down at the end of a whip throw.

Yelling, Slim stood on his seat and snatched pineapples from his own weighted belt. The dirty murdering heathens had killed the little Conch. They had shot him in the back and bayoneted him. They had shot a U. S. marine and butchered him, knowing damned well who he was. That was all Slim knew or cared about. Time stood still for him. It was all a hellish nightmare. He didn't hear the shots hanging. He didn't feel the red hot scar that scorched his arm. There were shadowy shapes rushing at him from all directions, and they had killed the little Conch, and Finnegan had been hit. He stood on his seat shrieking, snatching pineapples from his belt and pulling out the pins, hurling them with his long whipping arms. Hurling them at the rushing shadows, slamming them into the dark hangar mouths behind his ship, at the hangar roofs, at the ships on the line.

Giving them hell.

"Take it, you damned Scotties!" he cursed and sobbed. "Blow their skulls off them, Finnegan! Spill their guts! Take it and swallow it, you sons of macs! Here's a little souvenir for Cousin Gertrude! Here's the one for Aunt Maude!"

RED hot flashes and roaring detonations shattered the night. A hangar roof was burning. Beyond a hangar doorway a gasoline drum had exploded, and in the bright furious glare stumbling

men and burning wings of ships were visible an instant. *Whamma!* There weren't going to be any souvenirs left to send back to his cousins and his aunts. Finnegan was throwing them, too. *Whamma!* Shattered ships on the line were blazing up. The dark figures that had been rushing through the darkness toward him and Finnegan had turned and were scattering, and on the upturn field in the moonlight where the sprawled and mangled form of the little Conch had fallen beneath their bayonets, there were six or seven other forms, equally motionless, lying in the smoke clouds now.

The last of the Mills bombs had gone slamming with drawn pin from the fury-crazed gyrene's long whip arm. He had out the pair of big black Colts, emptying them at the burning hangars and the blackness with shivering wrists. Hot shell cases erupted from the guns. The night silence roared and smoked, and time stood still.

"You murdering squarehead bonnies! Take it!" he raved.

It was time to go, and more than time. There were no more running shapes of men visible. But the rifles cracked from the black woods behind the hangars, from the darkness in between the shadowy buildings, from all the patches of the moonlight. They'd get the gas tank or his spinning club if he stayed here. His side felt warm and wet. There was a drip from his scalp down across his eyes, though when it had started he didn't know.

His gats were empty. He flung them away, sprawling down into his seat and reaching for the gun for life. There was a thunderous roar and rush that went past him. It was Finnegan in one of the prize black ships. The wild gyrene's head was rolling on his neck as he went streaking by. Down along the spotted moonlight his dark ship rushed, with tilted wings, careening, and into blackness. And Slim had slammed his own ship's throttle wide by then. She jumped her blocks with a hurricane scream. She

went away from the burning hangars and the shots cracking from the blackness, rocketing across the ground at eighty knots, with her instrument board smashed and a dozen holes plugged through her wings. And whether her tires were shot away beneath her or whether she even had wheels or not, Slim would never know.

Nor did he know when he left the ground. He saw the burning hangars behind him sink away, and he was alone, as he had never been alone before, in ten million miles of blank and starless sky, rocketing upward toward the cloudy roof. He had got his fighting ship for Buck Taylor's outfit, but it had been no joke, robbing the roost of those Scotties.

It had been tough.

No joke. His head was still ringing with that last ten seconds of red hell. Who would have believed it of the macs, that they would have killed the little Conch . . . ?

HIS drunkenness had left him, his brain had cleared, he was cold and shaken and worried of nameless consequences when, some fifty minutes later, he spotted the graying ground break through the high roof clouds, three miles beneath him, and recognized the peaceful slumbering field of the 83rd outside of Compeigne lying there below. He went on past, flying high above the pale pink sunset clouds, and Soissons, thirty knots away, was beneath him in twelve minutes. He dived for it, shooting down in that rocket ship through miles of layers of drifting high dawn cumulus.

An instant briefly, as he went plunging through the endless clouds, he saw a trio of black one-seaters swimming in wedge-shaped formation straight below him—the first and only thing on wings that he had seen since the dawn lightened in that high cold lonely sky. The three black ships came suddenly barging up into view out of the layers of mist at the two-mile level or thereabouts, not a hundred feet before his plunging bow.

WHETHER they were krauts or frogs or limeys he didn't know, but he had a curious feeling, as the three pilots in the climbing crates broke from the mist and stared up at him, that he had seen them before. One of them, in fact, a small man with a great square blond head that barely reached above his cockpit rim and pale eyes gleaming behind goggles, looked most extraordinarily like the distinguished Captain Wee Willie McDuff once more, while another of the suddenly arising trio had the big red face and elephantine massiveness of Captain Angus McGillichle of McDuff's Black Death. However, it was extremely unlikely that they were the same, since neither of them showed on their surprised and staring faces any contusions or lacerations, and it was impossible, moreover, that they should be here anyway. He didn't have time to make any close survey of them, for as he came diving with full gun roaring at them they all three rolled over with great speed and vanished into the dawn mist again, with an air of agitation and alarm, as if not liking his company.

He found the raw green marine field, with its empty canvas hangars and half-built framework shops, lying in the pearl gray dawn at the end of his three-mile plunge from the roof. A hundred feet high he leveled out, and went shooting across the tent ridges with opened motor. He rolled her neatly over on her ear and hooked around, coming back across the field with one wing-tip slicing the tops of the grass blades at a speed of a hundred and twenty knots, waving an arm more confidently than he felt to the bald-headed figure of Old Buck Taylor, the fightingest leatherneck that ever rated wings, who was standing out and smoking a placid pipe on the dewy sward. Streaking past, he rose upward in a howling zoom, and dipped, pulling her up over in a loop with a last grandstand swagger. Out of the loop he came sweeping down for earth with silenced engine, feeling a little dizzy and somewhat shaken. He would try her out in

rolls and Immelmans and things when he had had more practice and more sleep, and when his nerves felt steadier. For the time being he had had enough excitement, he was beginning to realize now, and the rich ripe courage of the rye had all left him, and he was worried about the consequences.

Captain Buck Taylor came strolling toward him as his wheels touched grass and he rolled to a stop. The bald-headed fighting leatherneck did not look surprised. He never looked surprised. Through a cloud of placidly wreathing tobacco smoke he grinned faintly at the tall blond young gyrene. He reached up and shook hands.

"Glad to see you, Slim," he said. "Finnegan couldn't make it. He crash-landed with a busted gas lead ten minutes ago at your old field, Pruyn's 83rd, outside of Compeigne. Lit there and ground-looped the wings off himself just as reveille was sounding and Pruyn was out on dawn inspection. Caused considerable excitement. Your old medico officer there had me on the phone as you came down. It looks pretty bad with him, the medico says. He's still unconscious."

"Shot?" said Slim with dry lips as he climbed stiffly down to earth.

"Finnegan?" said the bald leatherneck, "Oh, sure, he got a couple of scratches, I think the medico mentioned, like maybe an ear shot off and a puncture or two through his fat hide. But that's not nothing for a leatherneck. I'd never sweat about Finnegan. I was speaking about Major Pruyn, because the dad-swatted army may sue us for damages. It seems that when the poor guy saw Finnegan coming down on him he got so scared he got a stroke or something, and the medico's still working on him to snap him out of it."

The bald leatherneck shook his head regretfully. He pulled his pipe out of his mouth and tapped the stem on the wing of the ship that Slim had just climbed out of.

"And I," he added, "if I saw one of these — — things coming down at me

out of a clear sky, without having any warning, I think I'd have a stroke or rupture a couple of appendixes myself, or maybe give birth to kittens. Boy," he said reverently, "boy, you've sure got plenty of gall in your old gall-bladder is what I'm saying, and I don't mind saying it. The old Red Circus. Boy, oh, boy. And von Riegelmann's own private crate, at that."

SLIM looked, in the paling pearly light, somewhat intently at the wings of the ship that he had just brought down. He observed, upon scrutiny, that they were not black, but a dark and brilliant red. He also observed, as he let his round and slightly popping eyes rove over the details, that there were pattee crosses marked modestly in light gray on the red ship's wings and on her tail. He further observed, upon the Fokker's sides, in black block letters that were small but easy enough now to read without much difficulty, the name: *Hauptmann der Fr. K. von Riegelmann*.

"It was this way, Buck—" he began.

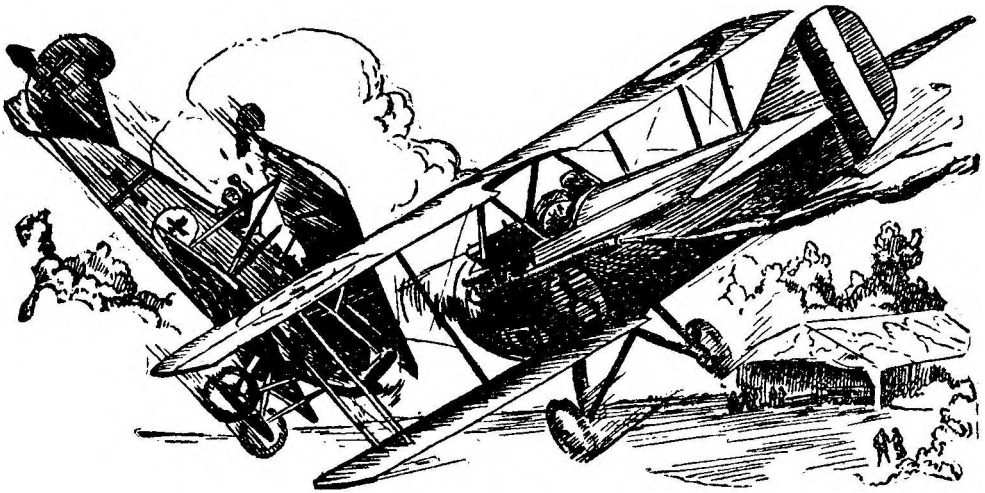
But for the life of him he couldn't think of any story to tell.

"Boy, oh, boy," said Buck Taylor. "Boy, oh, boy! Say, I'm expecting some Scotties to hop over any minute. Captain Willie McDuff of the Black Death Scouts and his adjutant Tarzan McGillibrochle. They're a couple of old fighting pals of mine from the China station, and I've made arrangements with them to lend us some of their Camel crates till we get ships of our own from home, when and if. They're a couple of guys you'll like, and I'm glad they're coming today. Boy, but I want them to see that crate of Riegelmann's! He's the one Hun that's ever got their goats, and he has always got it. I want you to tell them how you did it."

"Oh, it wasn't nothing," said Slim modestly.

But he thought that by the time Wee Willie McDuff and the big McWhatwas-his name came down, he would have a story to tell them.

Stars and Bars



By George Bruce

Author of "Guns Up!" "Horsemen of the Wind," etc.

An eagle with clipped wings, snatched from the sky and thrown in a steel cage—branded vulture. But he wanted to soar to the clouds once more to find the bird who had forged the chains of treachery.

A Complete War Air Novel

HIS fingers were talons clawing the thick steel bars, and his eyes, staring out, were reddened slits in a gaunt and ghastly mask. There was murder in Courtney Wayne's heart—slow and terrible death for the three of them—yet even now *her* name kept coming back to his lips and it was still joy to murmur it softly:

"Sonia. . ."

Let them box him in with massive steel and cold stone. Let them put the mark of a felon on him—brand him unfit to associate with fellow mortals. They could not take away the past. They could never take away the day he had taken her flying.

She was wanton and cruel and treacherous. She had used him and cast him aside. Yet he could not forget that day he had taken her flying.

It seemed a million years ago, but in

his mind each detail was bright and clear.

She had driven out to the field in her little red roadster and had permitted him to fit a suit of coveralls over her dress and to bind a leather helmet around her hair, and to cover her sparkling eyes with a pair of goggles. He remembered how close she had seemed to him. How vibrant with life. How warm her hand had been as he half-lifted her into the front cockpit. At last she was ready to understand the second greatest love of his life—flying. The first, of course, was herself.

The motor had roared, the plane had charged across the field and had vaulted into the air with a spirit of joyousness reflected in his own heart. Up and up, until the spires and broad avenues of Washington were beneath them. Until the winding Potomac was a silver rib-

bon stretching away in the far distance, until the broad waters of Chesapeake Bay reflected the bright sun. She had seemed very quiet as they climbed. Considering it was her first flight—she had assured him of that—she was wonderfully brave. She was watching the ground in a state of enthralled interest. Several times she thrust her tiny, foreign camera over the side of the ship and made pictures of interesting subjects upon the ground.

They had passed over the forts in the bay, over the flying field where an almost disinterested government was struggling to establish its first Army Air Field. Over the great government buildings, over the network of defense points which gave bar to an enemy seeking to invade the capital of the United States. She had watched with great interest, had made her photographs, and had remembered to turn in her seat several times to smile back at him.

He thought she had never been so lovely as upon that afternoon. Up in the blue of the limitless heavens, under a warm sun, with a motor purring in the nose of the ship, over green fields and green trees, white buildings and blue and silver water! It gave him the feeling of a super-man exhibiting the joys of paradise to one who had never dreamed that such things could exist upon a merely human earth.

He could see strands of blonde hair peeping out from under the leather helmet. He wanted to touch her with his finger-tips. He knew that he loved her more than anything in life. He had loved her before that afternoon, but now, having her in his own element—his own free air—she was part of him.

She was everything.

A wave of exultation passed over him. He knew that she would love him above everything after this day. He knew that he would be set apart from the legion which paid her homage, and that her heart would carry only his picture.

He had cut the gun and touched her upon the shoulder.

LIKE it?" he asked over the gentle wind sound.

"It is glorious," she told him, her eyes glowing. "I love it. I want to stay up here always—with you."

A joy so intense filled his heart that it was almost pain.

"I knew you'd like it," he told her. "I was saving today for you. Today the sky is blue—blue as your eyes—and the sun is as warm as your kisses. You can stay up here always with me—if you say the word."

She smiled back at him.

"You know I would say it if I could," she told him. There was a troubled light in her eyes. "Perhaps I will say it in spite of everything. After today you will be alone in my mind. You are a man—and then you have the heights at your finger-tips. No other man has ever offered me that. Perhaps I will decide that the heights are worth the depths one must pass through in order to win them."

The smile was gone from his face. He was remembering things. Unpleasant things. They were like dark visions of the night. He shook his head as if to clear away the visions. Then he smiled again.

"Do you want to go any special place?"

She nodded. "Take me along the bay, where the water is blue, and where I can watch the light in the waves. Take me along one side of the Bay, and back on the other. Fly across where it is wide. I want the joy of knowing that I can fly across the ocean—and that you can fly me."

He kicked rudder and turned the ship's nose to the south. They cruised along lazily. She watched over the side without turning her head. There was the big fort down there. On the ground one could see nothing beyond the walls; in the air, one saw everything. There were great twelve-inch rifles on their carriages. Languidly, he counted them. There were four in a battery and there were four batteries on one side only.

That was sixteen twelve-inch guns ready to hurl steel and death at an enemy. Men were down there, little more than strange bugs running around. Some marched as if at drill; others worked near the batteries.

There were buildings down there. They seemed so many gray doll houses. He saw that she was taking a picture of the fort. He smiled. It was against the law, but she was above all the laws. If she desired a picture she would have it.

Mile after mile along the shore line. Her camera was busy. She seemed to forget that she was flying. She was taking full advantage of her newest experience, making a photographic record of it. He could imagine her thrilling her girl friends with an account of the flight, and the pictures of it. The first Embassy girl in Washington to fly! It would cause a sensation.

They flew across the bay and back on the other side. Then, when it seemed that they had been aloft only a few minutes, the gauge told him that gasoline was low, and he had glided down for a landing upon his field. The rush downward had brought a flood of color to her cheeks. She had clutched the sides of the cockpit with a tight grip for the first three or four hundred feet of the glide, but then she turned and smiled at him and after that she was again at ease. There was a gentle bump as the wheels had touched the ground—and it was over.

His eyes were glowing as he thought of that minute. She had kissed him upon the cheek. A gentle caress of her soft lips, and then she had skipped away to her little red roadster and was gone.

GONE back to the life she hated. Many times she had told him that she hated her life. Her father was the gruff old Count Maryk of the Austrian Embassy. A slave to his duty, and to his country. A brilliant figure among the diplomats of the world. Ruling his daughter as he ruled his secretaries.

Choosing her companions shrewdly. He watched over her with the eyes of an ogre—and it was plain to everyone, including Courtney Wayne himself, that Courtney Wayne was not looked upon with favor by old Count Maryk.

Not that Courtney Wayne was not in every way a desirable young man; Maryk himself would have denied that. But young Wayne was not the type of companion the Austrian diplomat desired for his daughter. Young Wayne was not connected with the diplomatic service. Court's position in Washington society was assured by a long line of ancestors who had served the United States well, had always known wealth, and high position. Court was the first Wayne who had not graced a foreign Court for the United States of America. He was the first Wayne who had shunned the diplomatic service.

It was an enigma to Washington society. Here was young Wayne, who certainly would have gone as far as his father had gone in diplomatic circles had he been content to follow in his father's footsteps, coming to receptions and balls with the grime of oil and the earth of the flying field still noticeable on his strong fingers. Young Wayne who thought more of crazy flying machines and unreliable motors than he did of flashing decorations and the life of a diplomat.

Many fond mothers with marriageable daughters had sighed over Court Wayne and his strange bent. Court Wayne, who had the shoulders of a Greek athlete, the arms of a wrestler, the blond curling hair of some hero of ancient days perpetuated in marble, who danced with the grace of a dancing master, who fenced with rapier, broadsword and sabre with the finesse of a *maitre d'armes*, who rode like a Cossack, who played football like a demon, and yet spent his time grubbing in the grease and dirt of a frail contraption of linen and wood at great risk to his own life.

Many maidens had looked after

Court's blond head and blue eyes and broad shoulders, had considered his fighting jaw and his quiet smile, and had cared not whether he was to be diplomat or dog catcher if he would only pay them attention. They had looked and sighed in vain, until Sonia Maryk had come to Washington with the old Count, to grace her father's home, and to preside over the festivities that were always enlivening the Austrian Legation.

Straight from Vienna she had come. From Vienna, which boasts more beautiful women than any city of the world. From Vienna with her blonde beauty and her blue eyes and her warm lips and her musical laugh, and all Washington was at her feet in ten days, and the male youth of Washington were her devoted slaves.

Young Wayne had devoted every thinking moment to her since he was presented at the first of the balls the old Count had given.

Of course he was not favored by old Maryk. Hardly. Maryk preferred some one like Art Sheldon. Art was slated for Constantinople as First Secretary to the American Embassy. Some day he would be an Ambassador. Maryk much preferred Sheldon. Then there was Guy Morris, an army Captain at the age of twenty-three, and destined to follow in his father's pathway until he wore the stars of a General. Maryk liked Guy. Wayne liked him also. Much more than he liked Sheldon. Sheldon was inclined to be a cad, a stuck-up prig. Wayne disliked him, and Court Wayne was not diplomat enough to mask a violent dislike.

Sitting on his cot, staring through massive bars, he saw the picture.

preside over. He had arrived shortly after nine. The glow of that afternoon with Sonia was still in his heart. Everything seemed unreal. It still seemed unreal. He only knew that he had looked at her as she stood in the center of her friends, and that she had flashed him a radiant smile—and that she was very beautiful and that he loved her more than anything on earth or above it.

Sheldon had been there. He was even more impossible than ever. He seemed surly and in a bad temper. Court never knew that Sonia had refused to marry him not more than ten minutes before his coming. She had refused him with a finality that left no doubts in Sheldon's mind.

Court knew that he was crossing the floor to Sonia's side. Guy Morris, straight and tall in his blue dress uniform, was standing close to Sonia. He was watching her eyes. She was talking about the flight that afternoon. Half a dozen girls about her were listening raptly. She was saying that she had taken many pictures—pictures of everything

It was at that moment that Sheldon's surly voice had interrupted her.

"I suppose you know that it is against the law to take pictures of the fortifications?" he said with a nasty smile, and an emphasis on the final word.

The group about Sonia turned to look at him. At the least it was a positive breach of etiquette.

"I didn't think of it," smiled Sonia. "It was all so wonderful."

"No?" asked Sheldon, a sarcastic inflection in his voice. "Strange, I imagine such pictures would be worth quite a good deal—in certain quarters."

Her cheeks were crimson and her eyes shining strangely. There was a tense silence. Guy Morris' lips were white. Court Wayne stood with his hands clenched at his sides. Rumors of an European War with Germany and Austria against England, France and Italy had been growing of late. There was a snort of disgust from Court Wayne.

CHAPTER II

An Affair

THAT night after the flight there had been an affair at the Maryk's—another of the gay balls Sonia loved to

He took a step forward and faced Sheldon.

"You remember that I took the Countess Maryk on that flight," he told Sheldon, looking him directly in the eyes. "I am responsible for anything that may have occurred."

Sheldon's lip curled disdainfully; he shrugged his shoulders. "You could not be responsible for anything," he grated. "You are not responsible for yourself. You would not be the first to be turned by a blonde head and beautiful eyes. Many men have sold their own country for less."

It was then that young Wolfgang von Zant had stepped forward. His eyes were glittering with a strange light. A monocle was thrust into his right eye. There were sabre scars across the right side of his face—memories of days at Heidelberg. His father was the Military Attaché from the Imperial German Government to the United States. His hand was gripping the hilt of his dress sword. His close-cropped blond hair bristled upon his head. His light blue eyes snapped dangerously as he faced Sheldon and his voice was cold.

"YOU perhaps forget that you are in the presence of ladies and especially the Countess Sonia," he told Sheldon. "You are not only guilty of bad manners, but you are insulting, as well. I have the honor of being a friend of Count Maryk and I hope of the Countess Sonia. I have no hesitation whatever in branding you a cheap cad and a deliberate liar, when you insinuate that any photographs that may have been taken on this afternoon's flight were made for a sinister purpose."

He felt himself pushed roughly to one side. Court Wayne's hand was upon his shoulder. A voice was hissing in his ear.

"I'll handle this matter, von Zant," said the voice. "This quarrel seems to be with me. We'll keep it in the family."

He faced Sheldon. "Now spit it out," he challenged. "What's on your mind?"

Not one of the group noticed that the

old Count Maryk had joined the group. He was watching Sheldon's face. His eyes were bright with anger, and his hands were clenched at his sides.

Sheldon's face was white, but he assumed a sneering indifference. "I'm not going to be frightened into a retraction, never fear," he snarled. "I have reasons for making the statement I made. Good reasons."

Guy Morris spoke in his soft voice. "You had better make yourself clear and mighty quick," he said in a low tone. "Personally I don't like your manner nor your words. If you haven't sense enough to keep your mouth closed in public you shouldn't drink."

"Drink?" mocked Sheldon. "Drink? No use, Morris, you can't charge me with being drunk and smooth things over that way. I haven't had a drink all night, and I know what I'm doing. If you want me to be plain-spoken—plainer than I have been—I'll do that. I mean to say that our friend Wayne has permitted a nation supposedly friendly to this country to obtain photographs of our coast defenses—something that no nation has ever secured—and in utter stupidity, without knowing that he was being used for a purpose."

A sharp smack sounded over the room. Blood spurted from Sheldon's lips. He reeled back several paces. Wayne was standing before him. The imprint of his plunging knuckles marked Sheldon's face.

"You miserable lying dog," he spat at the man. "You yellow street mongrel. I'll have my stable boy horsewhip you over Washington."

Sheldon was making a futile attempt to mop the blood from his battered mouth. He only succeeded in smearing it half across his face.

There was a new voice in the affair—a cold, rapier-like voice. The group turned heads. Count Maryk was speaking.

"You will give satisfaction, of course?" he suggested coldly. "No man could hope to make a statement like that

in public, referring at once to the honor of my country and the honor of my daughter and hope to live."

Again young Wolfgang von Zant stepped forward. He flicked Sheldon across the face with his glove.

"I shall be honored to take the matter in my own hands, Graf," he said to Count Maryk. "I should have much pleasure in meeting a 'gentleman' like Mr. Sheldon."

Guy Morris stepped forward in turn. He was about to speak when Court Wayne thrust him aside. He swept the slight figure of von Zant out of his path with a single sweep of his arm.

"It will not be necessary for any one to act for Count Maryk, nor the Countess Sonia, nor for myself. I am fully capable of conducting my own affairs. It seems that I have struck the blow, which this fellow must either resent or accept as the lying coward I believe him to be. I have heard that he boasts of being a Southern gentleman. I think those gentlemen as a rule are familiar with the conduct of such affairs. I leave it to him to decide which it shall be."

The fury of hell burned in Sheldon's eyes. "I'll fight," he snarled. "The sooner the better. It's against the law of the land. It's against the law of common sense, but I seem to be overruled by the 'foreign method.'"

CHAPTER III

"... Ten Paces, Turn and Fire!"

EVENTS after that moved too quickly for Court Wayne to be sure what happened. He knew that Sheldon had walked away from the group. There was a silence. There was Sonia Maryk's face and the cold face of Wolfgang von Zant and the Count Maryk.

They were all talking to him. He was walking across a polished floor. Then there was a long, long room, also with a polished floor, and lighted by

shaded wall lights. The ceiling was in darkness. The shaded lights threw weird shadows over the floor.

He was standing at one end of the long room. Count Maryk was standing with him. Von Zant came striding toward them.

"It is all settled," he told the Count. "Captain Morris has been prevailed upon to act for Mr. Sheldon. He dislikes the task and objected on the grounds that it might tend to injure his career in the service. I gave him no alternative but to accept for his man. I stated that if my conditions were not met with you would go tomorrow to the Secretary of State and demand a formal apology in the name of the Government of the United States." He smiled until his white teeth flashed. "And so," he finished, "the affair is to be with pistols, here in the ballroom. I have the pistols."

He opened a box.

He placed two Luger service automatics upon a small table, and smiled at Courtney Wayne. "You are expert with the automatic pistol, are you not, Mr. Wayne?" he asked.

In a haze, Court nodded his head. The old Count nodded in a satisfied manner.

The door at the other end of the ballroom opened and Guy Morris stepped through. With him was Sheldon. A rather white-faced Sheldon but a Sheldon who still sneered at all present. They were standing together in the center of the ballroom. Von Zant was explaining the rules under which the meeting was to be conducted.

"You will stand back to back," he said stiffly. "At the command, 'March,' you will walk directly forward until you have taken five paces. You will then halt. The command will then be given—'Fire!' At this command you will both turn and fire. You understand? Back to back until the word is given to fire, and then you will turn, face each other, and shoot."

Both Sheldon and Wayne nodded shortly.

"Very well, gentlemen, take your places," ordered the old Count.

Wayne could feel the pressure of Sheldon's back against his own. It seemed that Sheldon's shoulders were trembling.

Von Zant had walked to the far end of the ballroom. He was almost lost in the shadows. Wayne could see him standing close to where he must stop when the five paces had been marched. It seemed a dream—something that could not actually happen. Yet there was the grip of the Luger in his hands and the pressure of Sheldon's back against his own.

A sudden voice shattered the stillness.

"March!" snapped the voice.

Mechanically Wayne stepped away. His brain was spinning madly. He knew that he could not kill Sheldon. He knew that every one connected with the affair would be in a mess if either himself or Sheldon were seriously injured. He was wondering if Sheldon was a good shot. He hoped he would miss. He was counting the paces subconsciously as he marched.

"One—two—three—four—"

THERE was a sudden shout as if of alarm from somewhere near him. It sounded like von Zant's voice. Then there was the sharp crack of a Luger pistol—a crack that seemed to shatter eardrums and echo and re-echo from the walls of the empty ballroom with ever-increasing force. Without thinking, Wayne whirled toward his opponent. He saw him swaying, crumpling, falling. He saw Guy Morris jumping forward, a look of horror upon his face. He saw Morris catch the tottering Sheldon and ease him down onto the polished floor. A red, sticky trickle was running from under the shoulders of Sheldon's black evening dress coat. It ran over the floor. It had stained the blue of Morris' dress uniform.

He stood there, staring stupidly at the fallen Sheldon and at the black pis-

tol in his own hand. Who had fired? Who had fired that shot? He knew that he had not fired. Sheldon had been hit.

It was at that moment that Guy Morris stood slowly erect. He was looking down at the white face of Art Sheldon. There was a queer glint in his eyes. It was at that moment also that Court Wayne, felt the pressure of a metallic something in the center of his spine. A voice spoke in his ear.

"Make a single move, or try to escape, and I shall shoot," said the cold voice.

He whirled about to face von Zant. The German had him covered with his automatic. There was a look of utter disgust upon von Zant's face.

"Sheldon is dead," announced Morris. "He was shot through the heart—and from behind—before the order was given to fire." His eyes swept over the person of Court Wayne accusingly.

"I did not shoot—I had my back turned," Wayne had heard himself whisper. "I heard the shot—I turned—he was falling."

"He lies," snapped the voice of von Zant. "I was standing ten feet from him. He turned and fired while Sheldon had his back turned. Much as I hated Sheldon for his actions tonight, I will not be silent in the face of murder."

White spots showed in Wayne's cheeks. "I didn't fire," he protested, looking from one to another of the group. "How could I fire? My pistol is still loaded. I never used it. Look at it for yourself."

Guy Morris stepped across the room and took the pistol from Wayne's hand. He snapped back the barrel of the automatic with a single motion of his hand. They stared. The chamber of the pistol was empty. There was no shell inside. Morris took the pistol from Sheldon's limp hand. He snapped the barrel back and a dull thud on the floor sounded as the loaded shell dropped from the pistol. Morris sniffed at the muzzle of the pistol Wayne had carried. It smelled of newly burned powder.

"You see?" asked von Zant coldly.

There was a look of unspeakable horror in Guy Morris' eyes as he looked at Court Wayne.

"You dirty murderer," he accused hoarsely. "To shoot a man in the back, when he was about to face you in a fair fight. To shoot a man down like a dog, like a coward, when you knew that you were a better shot than he was."

Court Wayne's eyes were glassy. His face was purple. His breathing seemed strangled.

"Guy!" he begged. "Believe me, Guy, I never fired that shot. I never lifted my pistol, I never turned to face Sheldon until after I heard that shout of warning, and the shot that followed."

His voice shook.

"I shouted," announced von Zant. "I shouted when I saw you turning with your pistol raised."

"Show me the shell from this gun," argued Court. "Show me the empty shell that must have been ejected from the pistol if I fired it."

Count Maryk pushed a small object forward on the floor with the toe of his boot. "There it is," he told them in a queer voice. "I heard it drop after the shot. It fell at my feet."

Guy Morris picked the thing up from the floor. He looked at it for a minute. Then he placed it in his pocket.

"Any more 'proof'?" he asked Wayne.

Wayne shook his head slowly. "I couldn't have done it," he was mumbling. "I was thinking—and then the shot—and Sheldon was on the floor—I didn't shoot."

COUNT MARYK was giving orders to his butler. The world seemed going about in dizzy circles. Like coming down in a power spin. There were blue uniforms and then his arms were grasped roughly and some time later he was sitting on an iron cot in a steel cage. A man with a shining star paced back and forth in the corridor outside.

The next remembrance was of a sea of faces and a man who sat on a raised platform wearing a black robe. There had been much talking. Men had mounted a chair placed close to a box in which sat other men, and had spoken for hours, and always three words appeared in those conversations—"Courtney Wayne—Arthur Sheldon—Murder—."

CHAPTER IV

The Black Robe

IT seemed that Sonia Maryk had been there and had addressed the men in the box. So had Wolfgang von Zant, so had Count Maryk, and Guy Morris. All of them told the same story—"Courtney Wayne—Arthur Sheldon—Murder—."

Then the man with the black robe was speaking to him. It seemed to be the first thing that Court Wayne could grasp clearly since the shot had crashed out in the ballroom and Art Sheldon had gone down, shot in the back. The man in the black robe was speaking in an icy voice. He was looking straight at Wayne. Suddenly Court realized that this man was a judge, and that he was being sentenced for the murder of Art Sheldon.

"I regret that I cannot impose the maximum penalty of the law upon you for this cold-blooded, cowardly murder. In my mind there can be no penalty great enough for one who would deliberately shoot a man in the back without giving him a chance to defend himself. An animal would not be guilty of such an action. Because there is no evidence of premeditation I cannot sentence you to death, but I do here sentence you to be imprisoned at hard labor for the remainder of your life, the Government of the United States to feed, clothe and provide necessary medical attention."

Then other arms grasped him and he

was hurried out of the courtroom. A quietness settled over his raging brain. It followed a glance at the superb beauty of Sonia Maryk, seated next to her father in the crowded room. A conviction was born in his mind. He knew that Sonia could not believe him guilty. She could not think that he had deliberately shot Sheldon in the back. If he could only hear her say the words—"I do not believe that you are guilty—I love you in spite of everything—" he could go wherever they were sending him with a light heart.

He knew that there was something strange about the entire affair. He could not believe that he had been insane and that he had shot Sheldon without knowing it. Yet, there was the evidence of all present. The empty pistol, the smell of freshly burned powder from its muzzle and the exploded cartridge upon the floor of the ballroom.

He sniffed eagerly. They were taking him out into the sunlight. It was the first time he had had opportunity to look at the sun in many days. He filled his lungs with a great breath. It seemed to give him a tremendous strength. There was a black wagon drawn up to the curb. They were going to put him in that wagon. He looked up and down the street. It was deserted, excepting for the crowd beginning to pour out of the courtroom. There was a guard on either side of him. Each of the guards was holding onto an arm. He had been an unusually docile prisoner. To his guards he had seemed a man who walked in his sleep. They were not as vigilant as they might have been.

He tensed his muscles. They were very near to the door of the prison van. He gave a sudden lunge forward and wrenched his arms free. He was clear. He had tumbled over his two guards. He was racing down the street. He dodged back and forth between the trees. He heard the crack of a pistol behind him. The sound spurred him to greater speed. He dashed into an alleyway and tumbled over half a dozen

fences. He lay still, under a back porch.

The sounds of organized pursuit swept by him. He breathed more freely. He was free for the moment. He had no idea where he was going or why. He only knew that he must hear the words from Sonia Maryk—"I believe you are innocent." He didn't care what happened after that. How many hours he remained beneath that porch he could not tell. He knew that he had gone to the courtroom in the morning. It was dark when he ventured out of his hiding place. He crept along, close to the fences, like a prowling animal of the night, skulking in the shadows. Twice he encountered police who were still searching. He heard newsboys shrieking the news that Courtney Wayne had been sentenced to life imprisonment for murder and had escaped leaving the court house.

HE kept within the shadows of the trees. Some instinct directed him toward the home of the Austrian Ambassador. He was not aware of his course until he found himself staring at the stone wall surrounding the house. He took a few paces backward, sprang forward in a tremendous leap and his clutching fingers caught the coping of the stone wall. It made no difference that the top was strewn with broken glass set in the masonry, or that his hands were cut and bleeding. He pulled himself up and dropped down upon the soft grass inside the wall.

There was an amber light burning in the library on the second floor of the house. It seemed that all the other rooms were in darkness. He flattened himself against the ground and crept forward, inches at a time, until he had crossed the open space between the wall and the house and his fingers encountered the trellis work supporting thick vines which climbed to the roof of the house.

There was scarcely a rustle as he drew himself upward. Hand over hand,

climbing like a monkey, he went up and up until his hands and feet found the wide balcony outside the window. He climbed over the iron rail and crouched close to the open French windows. Cautiously he peered inside. His heart was beating like a trip-hammer. The blood was pounding at his temples. Perhaps Sonia might be in there?

He heard voices. He was tense, listening. It was Sonia's voice. It sounded cold, impersonal. He glanced within. She was seated on a divan between her father and Wolfgang von Zant.

"It was too bad young Wayne had to be treated as we were forced to treat him," she was saying, as if discussing a new species of insect. "The look on his face, when the Judge sentenced him to life imprisonment, was terrible. I believe it was his first fully conscious moment throughout the trial."

Von Zant threw his cigarette into the fireplace. "Bah!" he snorted. "They are all fools, these Americans. What does a life or two mean to the Work? Sheldon knew and suspected too much. He had to be silenced. While he believed that he had a chance to win you he remained silent. If he had not been so bull-headed we could have used him after he had been sent to Constantinople—but he was a poor sportsman. He decided to air a little of his knowledge—and so—well, it was necessary to remove him."

On the balcony outside the window Court Wayne's nostrils dilated and his eyes became narrow slits of swirling hell fire. Sonia was speaking again. She had placed her head upon von Zant's shoulder and was caressing his neck with her lips. "None of them know that I am not to be had as a stake in the game, do they, Wolf? They think that I am to be won. They do not know that you have already won me and that I belong to you with all my heart and soul? It is hard to play a game, to play with other men when I love you so greatly."

He stroked her ash blonde hair.

"Every one has his or her duty," he was saying. "At present ours is a dangerous task. We are faced with war and we cannot tell what stand America will take. Therefore we must learn all we can of America before it is too late. We must use fools like Sheldon and Wayne to provide the information. The pictures you took of the coast defenses around this point, while you flew with him, are invaluable to us."

"He was a nice boy," she was musing. "Too bad to kill his soul."

He glanced down at her. The cold tone was back in his voice. "Perhaps you do love him?" he charged. "Perhaps he might have won a higher stake than your smile?"

She nestled closer to him. "No man can win me from you," she told him. "No man. I would die for you—if you wanted it. I am a soldier also—like you and like my father."

The old Count Maryk nodded his head in approval. He smiled at the young German.

"How did you manage to stage that affair between Sheldon and Wayne so neatly? I mean—you know what I mean—"

There was no hesitation in von Zant's manner. "You mean how did I make it appear that Wayne had shot Sheldon in the back?"

Count Maryk nodded.

"Simple," laughed von Zant. "When I gave them the pistols I gave Wayne an empty one and Sheldon a loaded one. I had fired a shot from that gun into the clothes hamper in the laundry room as I went to fetch them. Then I loaded my own pistol with ten shells instead of nine. I placed them back to back and gave them the order to march. Both of them were too excited to pay strict attention. They were both concentrated on that fifth pace and then the word to fire. I waited until Wayne had taken four paces. Then I shouted as if in warning. Wayne whirled about. I fired for the middle of Sheldon's back. He went down."

"Wayne was standing there with his pistol half raised. It looked as if he had fired the shot. I had my own pistol out, of course, but it was covering Wayne as if holding him from further attack. The empty shell upon the floor came from my pistol. You see, had they examined all the pistols in the room mine would have been found fully loaded, in spite of the fact that I had fired one shot. Putting the extra shell in the chamber of the pistol before slipping the clip in place gave me ten shots instead of nine. Simple?"

Count Maryk was lighting a cigar. He nodded. "Effective is a better word, I should say."

Sonia Maryk's voice sounded again. "I think I love you because you are so nerveless, so cruel, so uncaring," she told von Zant. "I believe you could see your own father bayoneted before your eyes and never move a muscle. I love you for it. You are like a striped tiger—ready to spring, ferocious, deadly—I am half afraid of you, but I love you—so much."

Von Zant was lighting another cigarette. He looked her fully in the eyes. "If it was a question of the duty of a soldier, and my father interfered in that duty, it would be as you have said," he told her. There was a note in his voice that caused her to shudder.

AND then the French windows were dashed back against the masonry of the house. The glasses shattered into a million fragments. A maniac with blazing eyes leaped into the library from off the balcony. A maniac who was drooling in an attempt to speak. Whose hands were clutched in talonlike shapes at his sides. He leaped forward like a panting animal.

"You dogs!" he shrieked. "You damn, rotten dogs!" He charged madly forward and closed with a white-faced von Zant. His hands were at his throat, and his fingers sank into the flesh. Von Zant's eyes started from their sockets even as he fought to free his throat.

They went down and rolled over and over on the floor. There was a shriek from Sonia. Lamps crashed to the floor. Heavy chairs crashed about in wild confusion. Wayne holding von Zant by the throat was lifting his head and crashing it against the smooth floor. Von Zant was no match for the powerful American in rough and tumble. He was going limp under Wayne's crushing fingers.

Below stairs a bell jangled madly and a group of excited servants rushed up the stairs. The butler, with the Count's chauffeur and footman were in the room first. They threw themselves upon the raging Wayne. They tore his fingers from von Zant's throat by main strength. The butler seized upon the base of a shattered lamp and taking careful aim smashed it upon Court Wayne's unprotected head. Wayne became inert. In a shaking voice the old Count telephoned for the police. They came and took Wayne from the house and back to a cell. That night a special guard watched over him. A guard that listened to the ravings of the prisoner.

"They're guilty, I tell you. They killed Sheldon and framed me. It's a plot. They murdered Art Sheldon." So he raved throughout the hours of the night. And they laughed at him for trying to frame a late alibi.

They took him to prison to serve his sentence on the next day and they took him in a strait-jacket.

He wore the strait-jacket for three months after he was inside the forty-ton gates of the Federal prison. He wore it until he understood that an Ambassador and the son of an Ambassador is above suspicion on a charge of murder, and that they believed him insane, and that he was being horribly punished for telling the truth. Then he subsided into a silent, aloof creature. He submitted to the discipline of the prison. He ate the food handed him. He did the work assigned him. He thought no thoughts. He saw nothing excepting that final scene in the library of

the Maryk home that fatal night.

One thing he knew. That was that he hated Sonia Maryk and Wolf von Zant above the power of mortal mind to restrain, and that it was dripping over his soul like some terrible poison.

CHAPTER V

Escape

ENDLESSLY he paced his cell. He had been behind steel bars and concrete walls for ages—years—how many—one? No matter, it seemed an eternity. The blue of the heavens came to him through a narrow skylight in the top of his cell. Six inches across and two feet long, that skylight measured. It limited his heaven to that small space, excepting when he was permitted to exercise with the other prisoners in the prison yard. Clouds floated by that slit in the masonry. He watched them—at times a bird fluttered by on the wing and he closed his eyes, thinking of those times when he had been as the birds and had breathed the free air of those same upper spaces.

And there was a war. Somewhere in that war was Wolfgang von Zant. Somewhere outside those walls was Sonia Maryk and as he thought of them his eyes blazed and his hands clenched and his teeth clicked with a sharp snap. He had heard about the war. Germany and Austria were in it against England, France and Italy. All the world was aflame. Newspapers came into the prison. He read avidly of the work of the airmen in the early battles and of the developments in airplanes. At times his hands itched for the feel of controls and ears ached for the old song of a roaring motor and the wind on wires.

The idea of escape did not take concrete form within his mind until a fellow prisoner passed him a newspaper one day in the exercise yard. He turned the pages idly, looking at the war pictures, until a boxed paragraph at the

top of a page caught his eyes. It was printed in black type. He read it with the flame in his eyes:

"GERMAN ACE GAINS FIFTEENTH VICTORY"

The famous German pilot, Wolfgang von Zant, was officially accredited yesterday with his fifteenth victory over Allied air craft. His latest conquest was over the person of Lt. Walter O'Donnell, an Englishman flying a Martinsyde Scout, and occurred over Luneville. After a short fight, von Zant sent the Englishman down inside the German lines."

It was then that Court Wayne knew that he must escape. The knowledge took such a sudden and urgent turn that it threw him into a fever of impatience. He felt that he must batter his way through the forty-ton gate, past the armed guards, past anything, only he must get out of prison. He must have air, he must have sky, he must have liberty. He lay awake all that night, his mind in a turmoil, a thousand plans flashing through his brain only to be discarded one after another as impossible. It was strange, all these days and nights within a prison. All this time, and the thought of escape as something far in the background. Something that might be done—some time.

THEY had ceased to watch him with the care they had first accorded him. During the first three months, when he had been classed as dangerous, a guard had been within sight every minute of the day and night. Since he had subsided into a part of the prison mechanism they had bestowed upon him the same care bestowed upon fellow prisoners and no more.

Daily life was a monotonous routine. Jangling keys in cell locks awakened convicts to a new day at six-thirty in the morning. Then they marched to the mess hall and had breakfast. After breakfast there was an interval of half an hour during which they smoked. Then the working prisoners were sent to tasks and the non-working prisoners returned to cells.

The prison was divided into a number of blocks. Each block contained 130

cells, usually two prisoners to a cell. At stated times each block marched out to the exercise yard for an hour in the open air and sunlight. Court's block was the third. They were called to exercise at 11 a. m. and 4 p. m. They were the last out in the morning and the last out at night.

Following block three's exercise periods the convicts marched to the mess hall for the evening meal. Then there was another half hour for smoke and talk, and then they were marched back to cells to be locked up for the night. Half an hour after they were locked up the final check for the day was taken to be sure that all prisoners were locked in cells and safe for the night.

It was not until the third day after the hot determination to escape was born in his mind that Court Wayne found his opportunity. It came as a bolt from the blue. A sudden idea! A flash of genius! The ash wagon was backing up to the ash door of the boiler house. The boiler house crew were spraying the red-hot ashes with a fire hose to deaden the glowing coals. A great cloud of steam arose from the pile. It drifted over the paved exercise yard. It blotted out half of the assembled convicts—and it gave Court Wayne his inspiration.

He leaped through the wet steam. It bit at his flesh, but he gave no heed to the pain. His eyes were fixed upon the dump bottom of the ash wagon. There was a pile of burlap bags outside the door of the bakery. It was ten yards from the bakery to the pile of ashes. He snatched up an armful of burlap as he crept along. He knew the ashes would be hot. He had watched them sizzling many times as the ash wagon drove out through the gates. He knew, that in between the main gates and the inner gate a guard always probed the contents of every wagon passing in and out with a sharp-pointed iron bar. The bar was rammed deep into the load and wiggled about so as to stick any living thing that might be concealed under the load.

The stokers from the boiler house were picking up shovels ready to throw the ashes on the wagon. Court Wayne plunged into the steam and vaulted over the far side of the wagon. He crouched on the dump bottom close behind the driver's seat. The first shovelful of ashes fell in the wagon. He could feel the heat close to his body. He covered himself over with the sacking.

He held his breath.

The ashes were coming in fast now. The floor was almost covered. Several shovelfuls had landed upon him. They were hot. The fire hose had not taken more than the glow from them. They still contained much heat. His face felt blistered and raw. He knew that he must scream aloud with the agony of the thing. He crushed his teeth into his lips and closed his eyes. It was becoming difficult to breathe with the ashes over his head.

He made a space in the burlap that would retain some air. The smoldering heat was all about him. It grew heavier as the load increased. It pressed him down. He was imprisoned within a casket of molten hell and it became more hot with each second. He felt himself going mad. There were live coals within his brain. His skin was dry to the cracking point. Great blisters sprang up on his hands.

God! Would the wagon never move? Would they never finish loading it? He heard muffled shouts from the outside. For an instant he believed that his hiding place had been discovered. Then the wagon moved. He could smell the burlap burning. The fumes choked him. He struggled against coughing. The smoke was in his eyes and burned terribly. He felt the wagon stop. He heard the teamster laugh as the guard probed the load with the pointed steel bar.

"You wouldn't have to worry about any of the boys who got away in my wagon," the teamster was saying. "They'd be cooked well done before we ever got to the dump."

A heavy, sharp something buried itself in Court Wayne's left side. He crammed his fist into his mouth to smother the scream of agony that had leaped from his throat. He felt himself slipping—things growing black. Then the wagon moved again and he heard the clang of the forty-ton gates as they closed behind them.

CHAPTER VI

A New Start

FOR an instant exultation caused him to forget the agony, to forget the scared flesh and smoldering cloth. He had at least half an hour. In five minutes the boys would be marching to mess. Then there would be the half hour recreation period. Then the lock up—then the final check for the day. He might be missed at mess. If so he had less than ten minutes. He certainly would be missed as the "screw" locked the cell doors of block three for the night. There would be no time lost for a futile check. The siren on the prison would blow and the world would know that a man hunt was on.

Fortunately for his plans the dump on which the prison ashes were thrown was not more than a quarter-mile from the prison. The wagon, making its slow progress, bumped over the stone-paved road. It seemed to Court that months were passing as he crouched beneath the load of ashes, and fought to maintain his sanity; fought to make himself remain under those ashes until the dump was reached. He felt a hard jolting and careening of the ash-cart. It seemed it had left the cobbled street and was bumping over uneven ground. It came to a jarring halt. He heard the driver whistling to himself. Then the bottom of the world fell out. Dust and ashes choked him. He felt himself falling. The mass above him moved. Something heavy passed over his right leg. It was lucky that a three-foot thickness of ashes

protected the leg. He heard the rumble of the cart.

Cautiously he dug a way upward through the ashes which covered him. He saw the sky. He breathed cool, sweet air. He glanced around, not knowing whether he would come face to face with other men working on the dump or not. He was again fortunate. The dump burners had gone home. He had come in with the last wagon-load of the afternoon. The ash-cart which had carried him was bumping its way toward the stables.

He shook himself free of the agonizing burden above him. Ashes and dust fell from him. His hands and face were burned and blistered. The burlap which had covered him was smoldering and had burned through in spots. His blue denim prison outfit was white with ground ashes. He stretched his cramped muscles and crawled toward the railroad tracks on his belly. He knew that trains passed frequently. He must get near the tracks. There was a crossing above him where the tracks crossed a concrete state highway.

Trains coming through slowed down for that crossing. It was a chance. If a train should happen by within the next ten minutes he had a chance. If not—well, he was not going back to the prison. Now that he was outside of the walls the full horror of imprisonment burst upon him. He was close beside the tracks. There was a section toolbox near the crossing. He crouched behind it. Far down the tracks he heard the whistle of an oncoming train. His heart pounded wildly. Escape? If it only passed slowly enough for him to swing aboard!

He could hear the exhaust from the locomotive. It seemed to be tearing along at a terrific speed. The train came around a curve below the prison. His heart sank. It was the Northern Express, the crack train on the Southern System. The drivers on the locomotive were rising and falling with fast, powerful strokes. It was slowing a

trifle. Again it whistled.

To Court Wayne it seemed that whistle said: "Don't try for me! Don't try for me!" He ground his teeth. He would try for her. He was going to swing onto her no matter what. He crouched, ready for a spring. The express was slowing, still it was moving at a fast rate. He started to run forward, to pick up all the speed he could before he leaped for a grip on the tender. He knew he must make the blind baggage, there was no chance of boarding the coaches.

THE locomotive thundered by. He turned his head. The tender—the end of the tender. He leaped inward, clutching for any hold. He caught the rear hand-rail on the tender. His one hand gripped and held hard. He was dragging along the ground. With sobbing breath he forced his free hand up until it grasped the rail. Then he pulled himself free of the ground by main strength and his foot found the iron step on the rear of the tender. The train was picking up speed again. The rails clicked underneath. They were shining and cruel looking. The heavy wheels roared on over the smooth track.

He swung himself to the rear of the tender and his feet found the couplings. There was a perilous moment when he swung forward in space for a handhold on the vestibule of the mail car. He made it. Gasping and white and weak, he made it. He sank down in a heap on the narrow vestibule partition and contorted his body so that he could not be easily seen from alongside the tracks.

Then over all the noise of the train, over all the pounding of steel wheels on steel rails, over the staccato exhaust of the powerful locomotive came a new sound that caused a prickly sensation to race up and down his spine, that caused him to draw breath sharply, that caused his eyes to grow blank with a sudden great fear and his hands to grow weak and trembling. A moaning siren, the call rising and falling like the bay of a

great bloodhound, was sounding from somewhere back there.

W'hoooo! W'hoooo! W'hoooo! it wailed. The sound seemed to penetrate the soul. The prison was broadcasting that a convict had escaped. It was sounding the alarm that would cause the surrounding farmers to saddle horses and take up shotguns and unleash bloodhounds. It was always that way. There was a hundred dollar reward paid in cash from the warden's office when an escaped convict was returned to the penitentiary by a civilian. The siren sounded seldom; when it did, all the civilians within sound mounted and joined the chase. It was great sport with the dogs, and a hundred dollars is a hundred dollars and a convict was just a convict.

The sound faded away as the express pounded on. Court Wayne listened with fear-filled eyes until he could no longer hear it wailing. Then he buried his head upon one arm and wept. Great sobs racked his body, his shoulders trembled, he cried without tears.

That night the Northern Express thundered through Washington, Baltimore, Wilmington and Philadelphia. He dropped off just as it entered the yards in Philadelphia. He could not risk arrest as a train rider. He knew the train would come to a halt in Broad Street Station and that there was no escape.

He was in bad shape. He could hardly stand upon his feet. He was ravenous. He was dying of thirst. He threw himself upon his face and drank from the water runway in the tracks where the important express trains took water on the fly. Then he caught another train going north and threw himself across the rods. His next stop was Boston.

He was in a half-delirium at Boston. He staggered off the tracks, and away from the yards. His cheeks were burning, his clothing stiff and cracking. His hands were blistered talons. He knew he had money somewhere about him. All prisoners had money, as much as they could get. It was against the laws of

the prison, but there were many ways of getting "cash in the mitt." Court Wayne's cash had been a little over three hundred dollars. He kept it sewed inside the waistband of his prison trousers.

He surveyed himself with bleary eyes. He did not think that he would be suspected because of his prison uniform. There was no mark to tell that it was a prison uniform. It was of blue denim, and it was dirty and stained and shapeless. It might have covered the form of a ditch digger. He decided to take a chance. He entered a hash house on a mean street near the yards and bought himself a steak and many cups of coffee.

Then he found a second-hand clothing store and bought riding trousers and khaki shirts, a peaked hat, puttees and army shoes. He bought a Mackinaw. He changed clothes in the store. He doctored his burns and cuts with a bottle of iodine belonging to the Jewish proprietor of the store. He looked fairly presentable when he had donned his purchases. He then visited a barber and endured the agony of having his raw face shaved.

That night he rode the "cushions" into Montreal. For the first time he experienced a sense of freedom. He could breathe freely. The haunting fear was subsiding. The wail of the siren was far distant.

CHAPTER VII

Flight!

THE Canadian Wing Commander to whom Court Wayne presented himself regarded the haggard-looking man before him curiously.

"Well?" he demanded.

"I want a chance to fly in France," stated Court.

"Sorry," explained the Wing Commander. "We're all filled up. We can't accept any more men for training."

"I don't need training. I'm a pilot with a good many air hours. I can fly

anything you have here on the field." He looked out of the office window onto the field. There were a score of Canuck Jennies, Curtiss JN4C's on the line. They did not seem so formidable. He was sure he could herd crates like those around with the best of the gang he had watched flying during the day before.

The Wing Commander studied his face. "What have you flown?" he asked.

"Everything from the early Wright pushers to Curtiss tractors," he stated. "I have a ship of my own, an OX5 Curtiss tractor. I've flown it plenty. I don't need flying instruction. I may need a few pointers on war work, but I'll get it quick and I want to get to France with the first bunch going over."

The Wing Commander smiled and rose from his chair. "Sounds too good to be true," he told Court. "I'll give you the chance. I'll send you up with an instructor. If he says you can fly the crate we'll give you a chance at what you want. If he says you can't fly, why I'll admire your nerve and say good-bye to you. Is that a go?"

Court nodded his head. "Show me the ship," he challenged.

They walked out onto the field and up to the line. The Wing Commander beckoned to a young fellow in the uniform of the Dominion of Canada. He was an alert, quick-moving chap. American, no doubt of it, but then, more than half the men in training on that field were Americans.

"This is Lieutenant Thompson," introduced the Wing Commander. "He'll give you a chance. I didn't get your name—?"

"I didn't tell you," answered Courtney Wayne. He paused for a moment. He knew he could not give his own name. He looked at the officer and then at the pilot. "It's Court," he told them, "William Court."

Thompson offered his hand. "Glad to see another boy from the States up here with us. What's the game?"

"Court says he can fly—that he is an

experienced pilot and needs no instruction in flying," stated the Wing Commander. "You are to take him up in a training crate, let him have the controls and let him demonstrate his experience. If he passes with your O. K. we're going to commission him and send him over with the first draft. If he can't fly, we're going to give him a drink and send him back to the States. Understand?"

Thompson smiled and nodded his head. "Righto," he told the Wing Commander. "And I hope he can fly—he looks like a good egg."

"**W**ILLIAM COURT" was climbing into the rear seat of the Canuck. He strapped himself in and moved the stick and the rudder. He looked back over the fuselage to assure himself that the controls were working properly. A mechanic stood in front of the bus, ready to spin the prop.

"Off choke," called Court.

"Off choke," answered the mechanic. He threw the prop through for several revolutions.

"Close the choke," called the mechanic.

"Choke closed," answered Court.

There was a pause. The Wing Commander watched him with an interested look. Thompson was watching also. There was a confident grin on his face. He nodded.

"Contact!" called the mechanic.

"Contact!" answered Court in a sharp voice.

The prop was pulled through the compression point. The motor coughed and then hit. It barked along at idling speed for a full minute, then Court moved the throttle ahead a trifle. The prop was a spinning disk of light at the nose of the ship. Little by little Court moved the throttle forward until the OX5 was clocking 1450 rpm's, and the slip stream was lifting the tail of the training ship off the ground. He pulled the throttle back slowly.

"She's O. K.," he announced to the

smiling Thompson. "She's revving up 1450."

"I don't have to take that bird up to tell he's a pilot," Thompson assured his Wing Commander.

The Wing Commander lit himself a cigarette. "I don't believe you do, but this flying is a funny game. Lot's of fellows fly a mean formation on the ground—"

Thompson pulled on his helmet and goggles and took his place in the front cockpit.

"Want to take her off the ground, or shall I?" he asked Court.

"Thanks," answered Court. "If you have enough confidence to ride that seat with me, I'll take a chance and take her off myself."

Thompson nodded his head and adjusted his belt. He nodded his head again and the blocks were pulled. Before his face the motor roared and the training ship moved forward. It ran ten feet and its tail left the ground. Ten feet more and it was in flying position. At the end of a hundred yards Court eased its wheels off the ground and they were flying. He held the nose down until they had maximum flying speed, then he pulled back gently on the stick and took the crate a thousand feet off the ground.

He flew around for five minutes getting the feel of the controls. He cruised easily under three-quarters throttle and banked to the left and right. At the end of five minutes he had another five hundred feet. He leveled off and put the Canuck through a tight figure eight. It answered beautifully. He nosed down sharply, pulled back on the stick, kicked right rudder and went over in a perfect wing-over.

His heart was pounding. His soul was singing. He was flying again. Flying a ship he knew as well as Instructor Thompson in the front seat. It was answering him. The months in prison had not robbed him of his mastery of the art of flying. He looked over the side. Steel bars and cold concrete walls

seemed lost in a great distance. They seemed no more than a bad dream of a restless night. He nosed down again.

HE watched the tachometer. When it read 1650 he pulled back on the stick with a steady hand. The nose of the Canuck reached for the blue dome of heaven. It seemed to balance there for a long instant, then it went over and over, until it was on its back. With an easy hand Court cut the gun. The training ship flew around in an almost perfect arc, and once more the ground and then the horizon came up over her nose. When he had the horizon line in front of him he eased the controls into neutral, and then went around in a 180 degree arc, holding the ship in that position without losing altitude.

He leveled off and pulled the stick back into his stomach. The motor was at idling speed. The altimeter read two thousand feet. The ship nosed up sharply. He kicked right rudder. It fell away into a dizzy right spin, whipping around in a tight circle, the tail going round and round with each revolution of the wings. He let it fall through four turns of the spin. Then he set rudder against the whirl, put the stick in the upper left-hand corner, and the Canuck came out of it, leveled off, nosed up and lost speed. He pulled all the way back on the stick and held the rudder in neutral. The ship nosed up in a powerless whipstall, hung there for a minute, then flopped forward, nose first. Coming out of the whipstall he gave it the gun for the first time in five minutes.

Thompson looked back from his cockpit. He shook hands with himself. Court cut the gun.

"Nice flying!" he called to Court. "Any time you want to go down it's O. K. with me. Just put her wheels down and call it a day and I'll give you your diploma."

Court nodded his head. They were a thousand feet over the field. It seemed as large as all Canada down there. He

could see the wheel tracks on the ground where other ships had taken off and landed. He tilted the nose down and cut the gun. A queer smile passed across his mouth. He reached forward for the instrument board and cut the switch. The idling propeller went to dead stick.

Thompson whirled around in his seat. There was a look of alarm on his face—until he saw Court's queer smile. Then he grinned appreciatively and turned back in his seat. Court spiraled down until he was at the end of the field, heading into the wind, and then he held the wheels off the ground and floated in, coming to a landing not more than a hundred yards from the hangars. The Canuck rolled forward twenty-five yards and stopped.

The Wing Commander was standing in front of the hangar as they climbed out of cockpits and walked away from the ship. He looked at Thompson curiously.

"Never had my hands on the controls for a single second during that hop," assured Thompson. "As far as I'm concerned Court here is fit for anything we have to do. He could give instruction tomorrow if you needed him."

The Wing Commander smiled at Court. "Well," he told him, "I'm a man of my word. I'll forward my recommendation to the Air Ministry tonight. I expect before the end of the week that you'll be a Canadian officer. Congratulations."

Court Wayne squeezed the hand offered him.

"Thanks," he said simply. "By the way, have any of the boys you know ever met that fellow Wolfgang von Zant?"

The Wing Commander gave him a look of amazement. "Von Zant?" he said in a queer voice. "Yes, several of the boys who have gone over from this field have met von Zant—but none of them ever lived to tell about the meeting. What makes you ask that?"

"Well, if it doesn't make any difference, I'd like to be sent up somewhere

over there where he hangs around a lot."

"You would?" asked Thompson in a hushed voice. "For the love of Pete, why?"

"I used to know him back in the States," answered Court with his queer smile. "Maybe I could meet him again sometime."

And so, Courtney Wayne, escaped convict, came to the Canadians as William Court. True to the Commandant's promise, at the end of the week he was commissioned a pursuit pilot C.A.F., and he exchanged his lumber jacket for a tunic with the crowns of George upon the lapels—and went overseas. With him went nineteen American youths who could not keep out of such a scrap even if America was not in it. They were in the majority. The battalions and batteries and escadrilles of the Canadian Expeditionary Forces were filled with such American youths.

CHAPTER VIII

Flaming Stars

THE Crown Prince was hurling his army against Verdun when Court Wayne arrived at Vitry with his squadron. There was no preliminary training in France for pilots before going up to the battle front in those hectic days. Canadians went across and up into the duty units at the front without actual war preparation. The English outfits had a chance to train across the narrow channel before being thrown into the conflict, but the Canucks had to take things as they were. The 11th Canadian Air Squadron, with a muster roll of twenty pilots, forty mechanics and forty assorted ground men landed at Vitry, within sound of the heavy guns blasting away at Verdun and prepared to give battle to the swarms of enemy air craft.

Night and day the dull rumblings of the heavies shook the ground. Night and day the roads leading back from

Verdun were choked with ambulances. Stories filtered back of heroic deeds on the part of individuals and regiments facing the gray-green host and the determination of von Kluck that Verdun must fall. Up there, somewhere, the Bruce and Wallace Highlanders had held against ten divisions of the enemy; had held until ninety per cent of the regiment were dead or wounded, and the Boche had learned to call them "The Ladies from Hell."

Up there the blue of the French and the khaki of the English were daring the might of Imperial Germany and holding that magnificent gray-green army in check. Assault after assault had been thrown against the forts at Verdun, and time after time the assaults had been thrown back, shattered and with the gentle slopes of the hills before the forts littered with the dead and dying.

Three hundred thousand dead and wounded had been lost to the Boche during the first three days against Verdun. The earth ran red with blood, the green of the short grass was dyed a rusty brown. Over this ground had stormed the host of the German army. The proud Prussian Guard had reeled back under the machine guns of the defenders. The mighty Brandenburg Guard was a shattered remnant of a once splendid corps. The Saxons and the Bavarians had in turn led the way against the forts, and all had crumpled into the earth and had added new stain to the fresh green of the grassy slopes.

Now the artillery was having its day. Von Kluck, despairing of carrying the forts by storm, was endeavoring to reduce them with big guns. Night and day the heavies fell upon the half-buried concrete fortifications. The slopes of Verdun were a shambles. The earth was a devastated place of horror and the fortifications battered masses of crumbled concrete and twisted steel. And yet the line held.

Up there a French general had said, "They shall not pass!" Later, after the

war, when a great arch was built to commemorate the defense of Verdun, the keystone of that arch was to bear those words, deeply graven into the imperishable stone. "They shall not pass!" And they did not.

The English and Canadian air units on the Verdun front regarded the 11th Canadian with a certain interest. Green, fresh from a land three thousand miles away from the storm center of the war, they were curious to learn how the "new chums" would behave under fire. They learned to pick out a young fellow named Tommy Thompson, who had been an instructor back in the Dominion and who had elected to come overseas when he might have remained in a soft berth for the duration of the war. Also they learned to pick out and speak of a young Yank with the 11th who said very little, who seemed a sombre sort of chap, who had no friends excepting Tommy Thompson, and who had a habit of breaking up conversations with the question, "Any of you fellows know Wolfgang von Zant?"

He seemed anxious to learn everything any one knew or had heard about the German ace. He would fix his stern eyes upon whoever had a new yarn to spin about the Boche flyer, and would listen until the tale was finished. After that he seemed lost in thought—unpleasant thought. Questions brought but one response: "I just happen to know him, that's all."

They watched him work, this Yank who knew von Zant. There was something uncanny about him. He had no nerves. He seemed to have no sense of fatigue. His face was scarred as if it had been burned recently. His hands were also scarred. His eyes were the blue of chilled steel, and his mouth was a thin white line which seldom smiled. Once or twice, when a bulletin had been posted recounting a new victory for von Zant, the Yank's mouth had twisted into a queer smile, the grin of a wolf, and his hands had clenched themselves until the muscles of his forearms stood

out in bold relief. But he had remained silent.

Then they had a look at his fighting. He was doing his third dawn patrol with Tommy Thompson. Somehow, without a word being spoken between them, Tommy and Court had teamed together. In his heart Court was glad Tommy had counted himself in for the trip across. It was just as natural that they should share the same billet and fly next in line as it was that they should be drawn together by a bond which neither of them could explain.

THEY hopped off the 11th's field with the gray of dawn still struggling with a rising sun. Twice before they had cruised that Front. From Vitry to Verdun they had flown, and never a burst with the enemy. It was no different than an early morning hop back in America, excepting for the brown earth between the lines, and the miles of winding roads on both sides of the front choked with lorries and marching troops. Then, there in the midst of the plain before Verdun the ugly three knolls held by the Allies and desired by the enemy, and just a little further north and east, the chief German artillery position Hill 101.

Queer concrete "toadstools"—the tops of the forts around Verdun. Zigzagging trench lines out into the sides of the hills before the forts, and protected with interlaced strands of barbed wire, and farther away on the German side of the other hills, straight and well prepared trench lines, reaching down into the shallow valley before the town.

Whir of propellers and drone of motors. The Canucks had been outfitted with Camels. Quick maneuvering but cranky crates. Loving to spin at moments when a life depended upon control. Climbing with the ease of rising wind, but treacherous every minute. Vickers guns with a penchant for jamming when an enemy flew up within the gun sights. Against the Albatross and Avatik and Pfalz and Halberstadt

they were poor crates, but they were the best to be had by the Canucks and so Court and Tommy were flying them.

Altimeters reading eight thousand feet. A haze above them, and sluggish ground mist below. Smoke oozing up from within clumps of trees where the Boche heavies were pecking away at hills before Verdun. It seemed to Court as he held the stick loosely in his hand that he had been born for such flying as this. Somehow he felt at home for the first time in his life. There was an affinity between himself and this air and this far off tang of exploding powder, and this raw muck in his nostrils and the whine of these wires, and the sight of Tommy Thompson flying along fifty yards off his right wing tip. His nerves were quiet. His eyes untroubled. All that had passed in his life previous to the coming of the 11th to Vitry was so far removed that it seemed to belong in a shadow life which had no personal connection with Court Wayne, or "William Court," as he was listed on the roster of the 11th.

One fear still remained. His eyes winced as the thought crossed his brain. The cold stone and iron bars of the prison and the days and nights of pacing a narrow cell only a six-inch strip of blue to tell that the eternal heavens still stretched above him and that days passed and nights shadowed the earth. Sometimes in the night he awoke from a dream of being carried back to that prison—and he awoke with a scream in his throat and a cold hand pressing against his heart and he knew that he would die rather than again know the confines of that cell and the living death of those days and nights.

His hand trembled upon the controls. He glanced at Tommy's crate and came erect in his seat. He saw that Tommy was wagging his wings, and then Tommy's Camel went around in a sharp bank. He swept the heavens with his eyes. Suddenly his hand was tense upon the stick. Over Hill 101 three empty ships were coming, flying

in a close V, headed for the Allied Lines between Verdun and Vitry, flying low and fast. He made them out, three Avatiks, up on a mission of some kind, perhaps to sweep the Lines clear of Allied ships.

He sat erect in his seat and pushed his throttle ahead. In front of him Thompson was bearing down on the three. Court smiled to himself. Tommy wasn't afraid of the devil himself. Imagine a person tackling three Avatiks with one crazy flying Camel. He pushed the nose down a trifle to gather speed and roared forward on Tommy's tail.

The oncoming formation accepted the gauge of battle willingly. Many times the leader of that flight had encountered Camels over the Lines. He knew them to be no match for his Avatiks.

The three cross-marked ships veered under rudder pressure and headed for the two Camels. They were spreading out on a straight line. They knew that five hundred thousand men in gray-green would be watching the outcome of this battle over the lines. Perhaps von Kluck himself would be watching.

They'd put on a good show.

They charged in under full throttle.

Tommy Thompson got in the first burst. He was flying head to head with the leader of the enemy group. He caught the Jerry in his sights at a distance of two hundred yards and he squeezed the trips of his guns. There was a single smudge of green and orange flame before him. Half a dozen tracers smoked a path through the air and disappeared into the wings of the Avatiks.

The Jerry swerved sharply in a slip and dropped below the Camel. The nose of the Avatiks went up at a steep angle and Spandaus answered Vickers. The burst from the Avatiks ripped its way through the middle of the fuselage, not five feet behind Tommy's seat, and Tommy went over in a vertical bank that carried him away to the right.

CHAPTER IX

Crimson Skies

THE Jerry leader found himself face to face with the second Camel. There was something about this second Camel that the Boche leader could not fathom. Usually Camels were a trifle nervous in the face of Avatiks, or any other Jerry ship for that matter. They seemed to feel that they were in a fight at a disadvantage. Usually they were easy conquests. However, this Camel acted as if it went into the fight with no question in the mind of the pilot as to the outcome. It was coming on, in a straight line, straight for the side of the Avatiks, and if there was a trace of nervousness in the hand of the pilot it was not noticeable in his handling of the ship.

The Boche did not know that sudden knowledge had burst upon the brain of Court Wayne. The Boche did not know that in his own mind Court Wayne had discovered that no living enemy pilot would ever be his match. He had suddenly discovered that he was a steel machine with a mission in life to batter down and to destroy as many of the enemy as cared to face him. His mission was to find von Zant and to settle with him. He knew that no man or men who had caused another man to suffer as he had suffered could ever hope to defeat him. He realized how another conqueror must have felt when he termed himself "The Scourge of God!" He could feel the butt of the whip in his hand. He was going to swing it over the backs of the enemy, and he was going to batter his way to von Zant if all Germany barred his path.

HIS cold blue eyes were fixed upon the cockpit of the Boche. He was flying straight for him contemptuous of collision. Let the Boche give ground if ground must be given. The wolf grin crossed his face. When the Boche

gave ground the Boche would die.

The Boche did give ground. He zoomed sharply and threw left aileron and, rudder to go over in a whip stall. Quick as a flash the Camel lunged up after him and caught the Avatik as it lay in the air tilted over at a sharp angle. The nose of the Camel bored into the side of the Avatik. The belts jumped dizzily. The guns spurted crimson and white. Tracers were cutting a white path through the middle of the stricken ship.

There was no elation in the heart of Court Wayne. Neither was there pity. He saw the Avatik slip away to the left, trembling like a thoroughbred who has felt the whip of a master. Its wings were weaving in a grotesque dance of death. The head of its pilot was lolling around in the cockpit. The controls were sloshing back and forward. The motor was still running under full gun. There was a black smudge pouring from the motor base.

Without so much as a look back, Court Wayne kicked his ship around and headed for the second of the enemy formation. Behind him the leader of the Boche flight plunged down toward the rusty green hills of Verdun, flame belching from his stricken crate, the Mercedes still running in spite of the swirling flame about it.

On the ground, half crazed men in khaki and blue screamed in triumph as the Boche fell. It had been many days since they had watched the spectacle of a Boche tumbling toward the earth. Usually they were forced to watch the defeat of ships marked with red, white and blue circles. The war in the air had a positive psychological effect upon the fighters on the ground.

A defeat of a friend plunged them into gloom and despair, and the defeat of an enemy roused them to heights of crazed joy.

Tommy was fighting with two of the enemy. One flew above him, waiting for an opportunity to nose down and to destroy the fighting Camel with a sin-

gie burst from its hungry Spandaus. The other hung onto his tail with a grinness that promised certain death.

Court Wayne closed with the ship on Tommy's tail. His hand was steady. He had drawn blood. He had watched an enemy go down before his guns to a flaming death. Yet he was calm. It seemed that these things had always been, and that he was doing something for which he had been trained all his life. He knew that he was going to come up on the tail of the Avatik pressing Tommy Thompson and that his guns would spit flame, and that while tracers would mark the passage of a stream of steel through the body of the Avatik, and that it would go down.

Which was exactly what occurred.

The Boche pilot turned his head as the first sweep of steel from Court's guns riddled his right wing. There was a surprised look upon his face. He died with that look in his eyes. A touch of toe to rudder. The nose of the Camel moving inch by inch to the left. The bucking jumping drums of his guns, the snarling spitting gun muzzles, and the white tracers and unseen steel snapped through the Avatik's cockpit and Tommy Thompson's tail was clear. Another of the enemy whirled down to crash upon the rusty green slopes before Verdun.

Thompson banked away to the left. Court went in upon the tail of the third Avatik. Perhaps the sight of the two others plunging to death unnerved the third Boche. Perhaps he tried too hard to escape the cold fury riding his tail. Perhaps some mental telepathy told him that the man behind him would not be beaten. He went down with Thompson, dodging and twisting to throw Court's Camel off his tail. It was a fatal maneuver.

The guns before Court's face opened again. He saw the tracers cutting into the Avatik's tail section. Then he saw something else. He saw Tommy pulling out of his dive and swinging up in a wild Chandelle. He saw that

Tommy's nose was in line with the Jerry's belly. Deliberately he pulled the nose of his own ship around and left the action. He knew that another burst from his guns would have shattered that Avatik, but he felt that this third enemy belonged to Tommy and so he let Tommy have him.

HE was not disappointed. Thompson tripped his Vickers, as his nose swept over the Boche's fuselage. The under surface of the enemy ship was outlined in his gun sights. He was too close to miss. His hands gripped the trips. The twin guns spat death. The floor boards beneath the feet of the Boche erupted a mass of splinters and vicious steel. The storm of death passed forward ripping the bottom out of the main gas tanks, splattering against the crank case. From a distance of half a mile Court Wayne saw the finish of the fight. He saw the Avatik flaming like the interior of a puddle furnace as the gasoline burned. He saw the fragile linen and wood blasted into a million fragments as the tank exploded. He saw the sky filled with falling blazing fragments.

Side by side Tommy Thompson and Court Wayne returned to the field of the 11th. They landed together. Neither spoke. As they entered the operation's office Tommy turned his head.

"Nice flying, Court," he said quietly.

"Thanks," asserted Court.

The 11th had not missed that fight. Neither had any of the outfits in back of Verdun. It was the first time in weeks that an allied pilot had gone out in the face of superior numbers and gained a victory without suffering the loss of a ship.

That afternoon the 11th was host to pilots from half a dozen outfits. They wanted to see the men who had knocked those three Avatiks down. They came and they saw. They left feeling that one of the two men was a bit "queer." To each of them Court Wayne had asked the same question.

"By the way, do you happen to know this von Zant?"

His tone of voice. The steel gray eyes, the fighting chin, the quiet voice gave them the shudders. He looked to them like a man who had been through hell and was only waiting to meet the chief devil.

One of them looked at Court and shook his head. "He's just a blooming exterminator," he remarked to a companion. "He's like a steel machine. A thing without nerves. Von Zant or no von Zant, I wouldn't like to meet him—alone—up there."

And so, throughout the Allied Air, Court Wayne became known as "The Exterminator." His list of victories grew with his fame. They talked of "The Exterminator" from Dieppe to Luneville. All the talk ended in the same manner. "Did you speak with him? Did he ask you about von Zant?"

THINGS did not progress so smoothly for the remainder of the 11th. Twenty strong they had plunged into the maelstrom of war in the air over Verdun. Sixteen of those twenty were Americans who were not too proud to fight. After three weeks of vicious dog fights there were eight of the original 11th's twenty pilots left, not counting Thompson and Court Wayne.

Perhaps the men of the R. F. C. and R. A. F. and the men who wore the horizon blues of France in the air discounted that phrase "too proud to fight" as they considered the deeds of these young Americans who were not too proud to fight. They watched them pit enthusiasm and ideals and courage against terrible odds, against the best the Boche had to offer. They watched them being carried away to hospitals, uncomplaining, silent, hiding the agony within. They watched them look down on the graves of brother "Yanks" who had died for a cause, and little by little the phrase "too proud to fight" was dropped from the banter of the Allied pilots.

From the 11th, Stevens was gone. The true Knight-Errant, going forth to battle with the guerdon of his lady swinging from the instrument board of his Camel. A lacy handkerchief, fragrant with an illusive perfume. They buried the handkerchief with him after they dug him out from under the wreckage of the ship. Jammed guns had killed him. There was a cross below Fort Douamont, over which Stevens had flown so many times. It was made of a broken prop.

There was Carl Brinkeroff. He was from the States, too, Milwaukee. They buried him within sight of one million of his countrymen. Carl fought because he believed the Junkers of Germany were riding the Fatherland to ruin. Carl had been an artist. He made pictures so beautiful they brought a choking sensation to the throat as one looked at them. He made his pictures in Berlin until he was called for the army. Carl was never meant for a soldier, but they tried to break him on the wheel of discipline and he had rebelled. There were dull red welts on his back like stripes.

Once a Prussian officer had ordered him beaten for insolence. The marks stayed with him. He came to America when his service was finished. He was never meant to be a soldier—he drew fragile looking, beautiful things in oils—but he took to the air when the war came, and he donned the khaki of Canada. He died without firing a shot in his own defense. An Albatross leaped down out of the blue upon him. Perhaps Carl had not seen it at all. Perhaps he was thinking of beautiful paintings? They would remember Carl. There was a square of canvas in the operation's office over which they had spread his paints and his wizardry. It was signed with his name.

Jimmy Burt, out of Detroit. Vibrant with the call of adventure. Nervous as a clock spring. Flying like an eccentric eagle. Daring to the point of suicide. Leaped down on a flight of three Pfalzes

from behind a cloud bank. Shot down one within ten seconds and then was trapped. They got him. He fell down on the slopes before Verdun—where so many skeleton air craft told of the war above the earth. He burned.

So it went. Man after man out, until it seemed that the living lived amidst a legion of ghosts, the spirits of the men who had gone—snapped suddenly out of existence without even a chance to say good-bye.

Battered and worn, dogged, tired to the point of desperation. The 11th was just a little part of that band of men who wrote in the sky in flaming letters the legend. "They shall not pass!"

Of course the outfits along the line knew the 11th. They knew it because there was a man with the 11th called "The Exterminator" and who always asked any new pilot he met: "Do you know von Zant?"

CHAPTER X

The Canucks Break Hill 101

THE 11th Squadron felt the rumblings of the battle of Verdun. There was a new offensive. There was a rumor that America was coming into the war! The German High Command declared that Verdun must fall. If Verdun fell after the sacrifices made to hold it the Allied morale would crumble. It would be possible for the German armies to march against Paris, striking from three points. As long as Verdun barred the way nothing but a direct attack was possible. No flanking movement could turn and drive into the far-flung Allied battle line.

So the Prussian Guard was rebuilt, and with it the Brandenburgers reformed and the Saxons and the Bavarians.

Fresh divisions faced the shattered town. Above them Fort Douamont bulked gray against the hillsides. Months of artillery fire had failed to

destroy it. It must be taken over a road paved with dead bodies and drowned in blood.

The moment for the supreme attack arrived. Mars, if he really is a god and looks down upon incited and inflamed human passions must have held high carnival on that afternoon. He saw the German divisions gathered within the shelter of a woods, a mile away from the defended slopes before Verdun. He saw wave upon wave of gray-green drawn up in that shelter. Regiment upon regiment, division upon division. A million and a half of human sacrifices ready to be pushed into the mouth of the God of War that Verdun might fall.

Mars heard the soul-shattering fire of the great guns. He saw white faces within Douamont. He saw crouching figures in skirts and in khaki and in blue crouching in the mud trenches on the sides of the slopes over which the gray-green wave must pass. He saw crazily galloping gun batteries swinging along the roads of France to take position in the face of the attack. He saw the great breaches of heavy guns within the forts yawning for the feeding of high explosive shells that would blast away through close packed flesh. And he smiled, for in the sight of the God Mars these things are pleasing.

The sun was high. Here and there a fleecy white cloud floated across the blue of a distant heaven. Except for the crashing of the guns the world was still holding its breath, awaiting the greatest military spectacle of all time. Then there was a movement in the woods. The watches of the observers marked the hour, eighteen minutes past two. The first wave of the German offensive launched itself.

A rocket broke high in the air over Verdun. A single rocket that stained the blue of heaven with a white splotch. Somewhere a gun boomed, and then the sides of the slopes before Verdun were red with flame. Hell shrieked its fury. The air was filled with the

scream, whistle, snap, crackle and boom of unseen death. In the valley below the hills a hurricane swept away the front ranks of the marching hosts. Like the sea breaking against the rocks, the foremost waves of the advancing infantry leaped high in the air, agitated by the sweep of steel through flesh. A great sea of gray-green.

A great breastwork leaped up before the attacking troops, a breastwork formed of the dead, and doggedly the shock troops pushed those dead aside and strode forward trampling them down into the grass, unhurried, silent, determined.

ON the tarmac of the 11th Squadron the Camels were waiting like race horses eager for the word. In racks under each lower wing were fastened three bombs. The 11th had never before carried bombs. It was to be a new experience. From the operation's office sounded the jangle of a telephone bell. An orderly answered it. He raced out on the field and up to Court Wayne.

"Get going," he shrieked. "You'll have a rendezvous with every ship within fifty miles. They're sending the whole of the Boche Army against Verdun. The orders are to machine gun the infantry on the ground and to drop bombs as fast as you can pull the wires."

The Camels were ready. Motors were warm. The pilots leaped into cockpits. Roar after roar as ship after ship careened down the field to a take off. In close formation they flew away from Vitry and toward the north and east where the thunder of the battle was most intense. On the way they picked up squadron after squadron of Allied ships of all classes and descriptions. Single-seaters, two-seaters, bombers, artillery buses, observation crates, everything that could fly and transport death rode the air that afternoon. The observers carried hand grenades, pistols, machine guns, tin can bombs, anything that would deal death.

Three hundred ships made up that

Armada. Three hundred ships flying together, leaping out of the sky like hungry wolves on a scent of fresh blood. They flew over the slopes behind Verdun and the terrific scene unfolded firing at point-blank range into the masses of gray-green. And still the gray-green host moved on. With steady tread, with magnificent discipline, pushing over the walls of dead that rose up before them, trampling upon the bodies of the fallen, firing no shot, making no sound, they came on like a mighty tidal wave riding over a sea wall.

Low over that mass flew the three hundred ships. Dark objects fell toward the earth and exploded with terrific force. Great gaps were torn in the enemy ranks each time a bomb fell upon steel helmets. Great gaps were filled up each time they were blasted in that solid mass. Fragments of human beings leaped up from the ground. Down lower, and still lower, and when the bombs were spent, Lewis and Vickers guns in the noses of the speeding ships cut the ranks to ribbons—and yet the gray-green host went forward.

Up the side of Douaumont, up toward that concrete dome which stood as the prize for which a million men were being sacrificed, and more and more supporting troops poured from the fringe of woods until it seemed that the entire world was made up of gray uniformed figures converging upon Fort Douaumont.

It is written in history that the ground ran red with blood in describing battles of the past. Perhaps those accounts have been exaggerated. Death dealing weapons were never perfected which could kill as rapidly as the machine guns and certainly no attack like that of the Crown Prince on Verdun was ever launched by any commander, but here on this afternoon the blood trickled down the slopes until the ground underfoot was a slippery morass and the ditches at the bases of the slopes were stagnant with the red fluid.

In spite of the thunder of the guns,

in spite of the death from the air, in spite of twelve hundred machine guns firing at a point-blank target, in spite of the rifles within Douamont, the enemy host advanced up the slopes. Line after line of trenches fell to them—fell at the glinting points of their bayonets. Machine gunners drew back steadily, reset red hot guns and continued to fire full in the faces of the inspired troops of the Imperial Army. In the van came the remnant of the Brandenburg Guard. Advancing steadily, storming the slope, within hand to hand distance of the fort.

Then the French abandoned the position. From the rear gates of the steel and concrete pile the French artillerymen beat a hasty retreat. They knew that within five minutes the position would be taken. The impregnable Douamont would have been stormed by human flesh, not reduced by hurtling steel. They withdrew to a safe distance. The advance trenches were all in the hands of the victorious Germans—and still they came on.

There was a great shout. The first sound that had issued from the throats of the storming troops. The Brandenburg Guard was inside Douamont. A roar from half a million throats sounded as the Tri-Color of France came tumbling down from the flagstaff before the fort. Twelve hundred of the Brandenburg Guard were inside Douamont. The remnant of a division that once boasted ten thousand seasoned veterans. Twelve hundred of them lived to shout aloud in triumph.

AND then, the mockery of war! A French lieutenant of artillery knelt beside a plunger battery a little removed from the rear of the fort. He was watching the Brandenburgers with a curious smile upon his face and a burning fire in his eyes. He saw them storm in through the gun ports. Other troops were pressing up the hill. The twelve hundred men were inside. All of them, all of the famous Brandenburg Guard—and then he drove the plunger

home on his battery and the next instant the concrete and steel of Douamont leaped high into the air! The earth rocked dizzily. Shrieks of fear from the throats of friend and foe. The sky vomited concrete fragments. A crimson flame shattered the blue of heaven.

When the smoke cleared nothing remained of Douamont but a cavity in the solid rock. All was gone. Concrete fortifications, the twelve hundred heroes of the Brandenburg Guard—all, and a frail lieutenant of artillery in a horizon blue uniform was rolling over and over on the ground, laughing with dry eyes, laughing hysterically, laughing fearfully, laughing crazily—mad, stark raving mad! One little man who had blown twelve hundred heroes to hell, who had laid waste the prize for which half a million men died. One little man with a movement of his hand. It is no wonder he was stark, raving mad.

Then the enemy wavered for the first time. The cry "Mines!" swept over the enemy lines. They faltered in the march forward. It was at that second that Court Wayne and all the 11th struck with the fury of devils. Down low they swooped. Props cutting into the very faces of the wavering troops. Machine guns searing them with terrible death. Piling new dead on top of the old. Diving down, banking around, always firing into that shambles.

The gray-green hosts broke. They retreated, slowly at first, and then madly. Pressure upon their rear lessened as the attack from the air drove the rear ranks into the shelter of the woods. They threw away packs, rifles, anything that would impede rapid retreat. They ran like frightened sheep—these men who had just set the world a lesson in discipline and bravery. And over them hovered the 11th.

Before Court Wayne's eyes Hill 101 loomed up as a tempting prize. There were guns on the top of that hill, and machine gunners and trenches. The brains of the Imperial Army were for the moment on the crest of that hill. He

waggled his wings to the 11th. The squadron gathered around him. He flew straight for the summit of the knoll. Over it he raked the trenches with his guns. He picked out clumps of artillery and flying low, dangerously low he dropped the first of his bombs. After him every ship in the 11th performed the same maneuver.

The ground was rent and torn. Guns were smashed into crazy shapes. Men were running madly for protection. The panic among the attacking troops spread to the top of Hill 101. They forgot that they held an almost impregnable position. They fell back from trench line to trench line under the deadly fire of the guns in the Camels and the impact of the bombs. Smoke and flame on top of Hill 101. Smoke and flame and death.

Some one within the Allied lines noticed the confusion on top of the hill and the attack of the 11th. Orders snapped along the line. Highland regiments in kilts, men who had long suffered in the face of German attack without being permitted to strike a blow of their own, leaped forward in a mad dash over a field strewn with enemy dead. On and on they came, kilts moving rhythmically with running knees. A Canadian regiment leaped forward. The Princess Pats! Many of them American. The Princess Pats, twice wiped out holding Verdun, twice re-built as a division, and then suffering seventy per cent casualties for the third time.

Still full of fight.

Men hungry to be at the throats of the Boche. They raced across the field screaming to pilots who could hear nothing but the drone of laboring motors. Screaming defiance, leaping over winnowed rows of the dead in gray-green. Up the slopes of Hill 101. Bayonets gleamed menace in the late afternoon sun. Highlander and Canuck, side by side. They bayoneted the few gunners who had remained. Then charged over trench line after trench line. They turned the undamaged guns

toward the north and threw Krupp shells after the retreating enemy.

Give it to 'em!

They laughed and shrieked and cursed—Hill 101 was won! The thorn in the side of the defence of Verdun was a thing of the past—it had been loosened by Court Wayne and the 11th Squadron, and had been plucked forever by the Princess Pats and the Bruce and Wallace "Ladies from Hell."

THE 11th looked down with weary eyes and cheered on the storming troops. Then they turned toward Vitry. They were sick with seeing the dead. They were sick of slaughter. They were like gods who knew the clean air of the heights and had been suddenly plunged down to the blood-soaked arena wherein human passions rioted.

That night, with the sinking of the sun, three hundred thousand dead lay upon the slopes before Verdun. Three hundred thousand men in gray-green who had gone forth to storm the heights inspired by supreme courage and had won, for the moment, only to have victory blasted from them forever by a frail lieutenant of artillery who cackled and laughed and rolled over and over upon the ground after he had pressed the plunger battery that had blown Douamont and the twelve hundred from off the earth.

Riddled wings. Riddled fuselages. Unnoticed in the heat of battle, dangerous when inspected. The 11th brought in shattered ships and nerve-jerking men. Men with white faces, men who had peered into the mouth of a flaming hell—and lived to tell of the horror of it.

A hellish nightmare.

Late that night Court Wayne spoke for the first time in hours. He spoke to Tommy Thompson who lay on a cot across from him.

"I sure thought von Zant would be in that mess today—but he wasn't."

In the darkness, Tommy stared at the place from which the voice had sounded and shook his head.

CHAPTER XI

Court Finds Von Zant

IT seemed to the Allies that America would never enter the war. She came in when France and England were beaten to their knees and when a victorious army under von Mackenson and von Kluck were in the fight, fresh from the terrific victories of the Balkans. Fresh from terrific smashes at Italy. There was no spark of resistance left to the Central Powers in the Balkans. The two field marshals had seen to that. Russia was slipping fast. There was a treaty about to be signed—the treaty with the Bolsheviks that would remove from the Allied strength ten million fighting men and the resources of a nation holding one-seventh of the land area of the world within her borders.

Eighteen miles from Paris, German guns thundered against the French capital.

The prize of the war, Paris, lay within easy grasp.

And then a stiff line of olive green uniformed men charged madly out of a woods before a town called Chateau-Thierry. A handful of men opposed to a great army. And so fierce was that assault and so hungry those shining bayonets that the advancing host recoiled upon itself in surprise. The Imperial Army had shot its bolt. Its men were weakened by hunger. No artillery opposed the advance of those victorious Marines. No great resistance greeted that American attack.

The Imperial Army permitted itself to be pushed back, much as an elephant moves at the command of its mahout. For the week Paris was saved. The French Government sitting in the south of France, where it had flown when the situation seemed hopeless, took heart and rallied the shattered French divisions. The English tightened belts, looked back, saw Anglo-Saxons holding

the line, and fought shoulder to shoulder with the men from the United States.

It was at that moment that the tide of war turned against the Central Powers.

FROM the 11th Squadron, R.F.C. two men were transferred to the American forces. They went because it was explained to them that the American Air Service needed seasoned American officers, and that they could be more valuable in an American uniform than in a Canadian uniform.

Court Wayne and Tommy Thompson were commissioned in the American Air. Court was made C. O. of the newly formed 60th Pursuit Squadron. Under him he had war-tried American pilots who had been transferred from English, French and Belgian Escadrilles. He found no joy in his new task. Rather, he found a dull fear. A fear that crept up upon him in the night, a fear that told him that the stone walls and iron bars were close to him, and that his days as a free man were few. He knew that sooner or later he would be recognized as Court Wayne, "murderer" and an escaped prisoner. When that recognition came—he shuddered. In some things he was not a steel machine.

He found von Zant the first time he took his new command on a cruise over the Lines. He had a new station at Senlis, near the Oise. He had traded his Camel for a Spad. He liked the Spad better; it was a better fighting weapon. He was leading the 60th along the Oise. They followed him on in a sort of awe. All of them had heard of the 11th and the man the Lines knew as "The Exterminator." They were proud to serve under him. It gave Court a laugh. He would not be much of an idol if they found he was an escaped convict. He was friendly with none of them excepting Tommy Thompson. That friendship never grew less.

They were headed north along the Oise when the enemy formation jumped

them. It was a queer looking outfit, one of those Jerry circuses which had lately been organized, each under a famous enemy ace. There were twenty or more ships in the flight. Court's mouth grew grim as he looked back at his own steady twelve, flying in exact formation. Odds meant little to him. He never thought of odds. He merely plunged ahead with his hammering tactics and fought until the other man went down. He had no hesitation in leading his twelve against the Boche's twenty. War was like that.

Raw savagery.

They met at nine thousand feet. They were Albatross tri-planes flying against them. The leader of the crazily painted group lost no time in sparring for an opening. He leaped in to the attack boldly. He flew straight at Court Wayne's Spad, then he twisted quickly to the side, slipped with a lightning motion, righted his ship and sank his fangs in Tommy Thompson's fuselage.

The 60th spread out on line. They were war wise. They knew that it would be every man for himself in an instant. It meant fighting anything that looked like an Albatross. Tommy whirled to face his attacker. Court was in the center of the Boche flight and his guns were cutting a path through the formation. They crowded about him. Spandaus spat at him at close range. He paid no attention. He smashed a burst through every ship that came within range of his guns, turned in a sharp bank and headed back through the formation. He saw that Tommy and the leader of the Boche flight were having it out in knock down and drag out fashion. He knew that the German was an exceptional pilot. He had to be to last that long against Thompson.

They were dropping down gradually until the two ships were slightly below the main dog fight. Ships careened through the air from every angle. There was a red shape before Court's eyes. He squeezed the gun trips. A wave of smoke burst from in front of him. He leaped over a stricken enemy and nosed

up sharply to throw another burst through the under fuselage of a new enemy. Out of the corner of his eye he watched the fight between Tommy and the Jerry leader.

The 60th was scoring heavily. Perhaps the Boche flyers believed that any American outfit would be easy pickings. Perhaps they believed that these men were green to the ways of air combat. They did not know that the men of the 60th were veterans of many air battles and had faced red Albatross times without number and were not frightened at this particular formation. Five of the twenty had fallen before the assault of the 60th, before the first Spad fell. Court saw it go out of the corner of his eye. He shook his head angrily and whipped his Spad around to face the man who had sent it down.

The flame was swirling in his eyes, matching the flame which swirled from the muzzles of his guns and from the vents of his exhaust manifold. He leaped down upon the triumphant Albatross with a savage suddenness. He saw that the pilot was watching his defeated foeman go down to a flaming death. The Vickers before Court jumped and chattered. There was no chance for a miss. The burst smashed home through the pilot's cockpit. He half lunged out of his belt, like one being executed leaps against the straps of the electric chair as the current is passed through his body, then he slumped forward, and the red Albatross fighting for its head, glided down out of the fight.

It was then that Court had a glimpse of the side of the Albatross that was fighting with Tommy Thompson. An electric shock passed through him. He shook off a Boche on his tail and crowded close to the mad circle formed by the two struggling ships. His eyes were wide and staring. He followed the Albatross of the leader of the Jerry flight without taking his eyes from it. He held his own ship at half throttle. He had discovered a legend and an insignia that caused his heart to pound

madly. He must have a closer look at that insignia.

Around it flashed a circle. His eyes were glued to the fuselage beneath the Boche pilot's cockpit. Then he laughed. Laughed like a madman, and with a sweep of his arm he pushed his throttle forward. At last! After a million years of hell he had found his man. There on the side of the cockpit was the head of a wolf etched in black and beneath it a single word—"von Zant." Wolfgang von Zant. Broadcasting his name to the high heavens. Imperious Prussian who did not fear to reveal his identity while in flight.

A THOUSAND scenes passed before Court Wayne's eyes. First that flight over the Potomac with Sonia Maryk. Then the duel in the ballroom of the Maryks' home. Then the shot that had killed Sheldon and the accusation of von Zant. The look in Guy Morris's eyes as he looked up at him from Art Sheldon's dead body. The trial. The scene within the library of Maryk's home when he had escaped for a brief moment and had climbed the balcony for a word of farewell. The voices of von Zant and of Sonia and of the old Count. Framed! Then the strait jacket and the prison. He shuddered. His face was deadly white.

He drove the Spad straight into the circle formed by Tommy's crate and von Zant's. There was a queer smile on his face. Von Zant was going to be surprised this day. There would be no turned backs and no empty pistols. His eyes were close to his gun sights. He saw Tommy waver and give ground so he waved to him and pointed upward. Tommy slipped out of the fight. Von Zant wheeled away sharply to study his new opponent.

Then the general mêlée from above descended to the level on which von Zant and Court Wayne was about to fight. One moment the sky about them was clear of ships, the next it was filled with a milling group of red and gray

ships. They flashed in front of Court's nose. They sailed around his wings. He tried to batter his way through to von Zant. He saw the Boche engaging another ship of the 60th. There was a brief encounter, and then von Zant darted in on the gray Spad's tail and it was all over.

Court, sobbing with rage, gripping his stick until white spots showed over his knuckles, dodged this way and that, but always another ship seemed to block him from von Zant. He went berserk. He ripped and tore at everything red that came near him. He smashed forward a little at a time. He was mumbling to himself like an insane person. He had eyes for nothing save that black wolf's head and the legend, "von Zant," on the cockpit of a red Albatross. Three of the enemy went down before him in that mad surge forward.

Then he was left alone, cursing to himself. Beating against the cowl in front of him in a frenzy of rage. Von Zant, seeing the fight going against him had wagged his wings, drawn his remaining ships together and had abruptly left the fight.

Court Wayne tilted the nose of his Spad down and gunned the motor to the limit. He had no thought except getting close to that leading ship of the fleeing enemy. He was flying after them at an awful pace. He forgot that he was alone, and that he was over enemy territory and that his ammunition was almost spent and that gas and oil was perilously low. He forgot everything save a sneering laugh and a pistol shot and the days and nights in prison.

Retribution!

A gray shape zoomed from below, close enough to give him a violent start. He glanced to the side. It was Tommy's crate. Tommy was waving his arm at him and motioning back to the Allied lines. Doggedly Court held his course after the enemy. Then, with great deliberation, Tommy cut over in front of him, passing so close that another foot would have meant collision. Again he

zoomed beside Court's Spad and waved his hand toward the rear.

Court shook his head savagely.

Tommy pointed toward Court's crate and then toward the ground. He meant to tell Court that if he persisted in following von Zant's outfit he was going to bring him down to save him from himself.

He took a position before the nose of Court's Spad. He dodged back and forth, slowing down by degrees. Slowly the rage oozed out of Court's heart. He swung about and headed back for Senlis. He landed a minute before Tommy. Tommy came running up to him. His face was a queer study.

"Gee, Court, you had me going there for a minute," he said in a shaky voice. "I thought maybe you had been bumped on the head by something and had gone goofy suddenly. I saw you taking out after that gang and I knew they would turn and tear you apart. I had to do something.

"Thanks," smiled Court grimly. "I was a little batty. You see the leader of the Boche outfit was my old friend von Zant. I was trying to say 'hello' to him and I couldn't make it. Too much interference. I was sure anxious to catch up with him. I guess I was acting like a fool."

Tommy threw one arm about his neck and led him into the operation's tent. "Why in hell don't you tell me what you have against that cluck?" he asked. "Maybe it would ease things up a little."

"Maybe I will—some day," answered Court soberly. "I'll have to tell some one."

CHAPTER XII

Special Duty

IT was at Moire that Court Wayne met Jane Sumner. An order had called him back to Headquarters for special duty. Tommy Thompson was running the outfit. Court had gone back grum-

bling. He was on the verge of absolute disobedience of orders. He had found von Zant. Von Zant was operating in the Senlis sector and Court wanted to stay in the Senlis sector.

At Moire he discovered for the first time that there were women in the war! Of course he had noticed many women, French and Belgian, scuttling around inside the ruined areas, prowling over past homes, like dogs without a master and reluctant to leave a place associated with the word home. At Moire he found that women went to war and obeyed orders much the same as men did and that there was at least one very beautiful woman in the war and her name was Jane Sumner.

Somehow Court found Jane was different from other girls he had known. There was something about her that caused him to wish that she was his sister. He could tell a girl like Jane Sumner all of the misery that was held within his heart. He felt that she would understand how he felt about von Zant and Sonia Maryk. He was introduced to her by a gray-haired Colonel.

"Captain Court," introduced the Colonel. "This is Jane Sumner. You will see a lot of her from time to time. At present she is paying us one of her little visits. You have no other duty but to stay near her and to carry out any orders she may give you without question. You understand?"

He smiled within himself. So at last he was under the command of a woman? What kind of commands could a woman give him? He looked at her. Her eyes were quiet and quite blue. Her face was a perfect oval, framed by a wealth of golden hair. Her mouth was a tender line. Her voice was a contralto that seemed to lull war battered nerves into a desire for rest and sleep.

"I am so glad to know you," she told him when they had left the Headquarters and were walking side by side down the streets of Moire. "I heard so much of you. I have heard that you are nothing more than a steel machine. A creature without nerves. They call you 'The

Exterminator.' I asked to have you brought back here for this special work. I felt that I needed some one like you—a man without nerves—for it will take a man without nerves to undertake the mission I have to perform."

He turned to look at her. "Missions for you?" he questioned. "I thought you were a nurse or the boss of an ambulance train or something like that," he told her.

She smiled up at him. "Not at all," she said softly with a glance up at his face. "I am a spy."

He came to an abrupt halt in the center of the street and stared down at her. "A what?" he gasped. "You?"

"A spy," she repeated. "In fact, I seem to be in very great demand at the present moment—by both sides." There was a far off look in her eyes.

He was silent as he walked beside her.

"**YOU** see," she went on. "My father was an army officer. I know all about such matters. I was educated in Germany. I speak German better than I speak English. That caused me to think. My plan has been accomplished before, but always by men. Now I will undertake a mission—a very important mission. I am going into the enemy Lines—alone—and you are going to take me. It will be simple so far as you are concerned. I will show you on the map. You will take me in a two-seater and land me inside the enemy Lines. We will make a rendezvous. At a certain time you will come back for me—pick me up, fly me back here. Understand?"

"It should not be terribly dangerous. I know all of the territory into which we shall fly better than I know any in the world. We shall land within the woods, on the hunting estate of a German Baron I once knew. I will wear peasant's clothing. I will disappear in the woods. You will come back when I tell you—and I shall have the information we want."

He merely looked at her.

"What do you think?" she asked in a low tone.

"One of two things," he told her. "Either you are the greatest fool I have ever met or else you are the greatest hero. That chance is so small that it is almost insanity to think of taking it."

"We need the information I must get," she reminded him. "I am no better than any of the men who offer themselves at the Front. After all, I am the daughter of a soldier."

So they got him a D. H. two-seater. A new job with a heavy motor. A rotten thing to handle, lumbering after the quick maneuvering Spads, and he took his orders from Jane Sumner. He found that he had been hungry for the companionship of a woman. He was able to talk. The hurt within him was eased just by having her near him. The third day after he met her for the first time she picked him up in a staff car and drove him out to the field. She had a trench coat over a peasant's costume.

"We are going this afternoon," she told him. "Better to go boldly by daylight than to try it at night when everything is quiet."

He had studied the maps until his eyes ached. He knew he could find the estate on which she desired to land. He helped her into the rear seat and then climbed into his own cockpit. They took off, heading north.

He skirted the Lines to the east, flying low, hoping to escape the notice of ground troops. He knew that he was near his objective. She tapped on the camel back to attract his attention and nodded her head. Abruptly he cut in across enemy territory. His eyes swept over the horizon awaiting the sight of an enemy crate. For the first time in his life he was nervous while in the air. He dreaded anything that might fly out of the north.

There was an open space below him after he had flown over a densely wooded tract for ten minutes. An abandoned chateau stood in the center of the open space. He spiraled down in a swift

glide. She was throwing off her trench coat as they came down. Everything below seemed deserted. Nothing stirred in the woods. Five miles to the north a road wound through the woods. The wheels of the heavy D. H. touched the ground. She sprang out before the crate stopped rolling.

"Good-bye," she called. "Get away immediately, and you know when to come back." Her hand touched his arm for a moment. He nodded his head slowly.

"I'll be here," he assured her. Then he swung around into the wind and was gone. When he looked down he saw her slipping in among the trees, headed for the road to the north. It was at that moment that he knew he loved her. Loved her as only a man who had known the hell he had passed through could love an angel from a distant heaven. There were new lines in his face.

FOR three days he paced the streets of Moire like an animal. Speaking to none, taking little nourishment, glancing nervously at his wrist watch every five minutes. Tossing restlessly on his cot. With the dawn of the fourth day he was again searching for the clearing in the forest.

She was there—waiting. He swooped down, picked her up, almost in a single motion, and gave the D. H. the gun. He fled the spot as if from an unknown terror.

Back in Moire they were having dinner together. She was wearing a dress of horizon blue that seemed to give a touch of softness and sadness to her eyes. He watched the pulses in her throat as she talked with him. She was trying to be carefree, gay. There was a husky note in her deep voice. He could see that she was nervous—that she had been under a terrific strain.

"You were frightened back there on that field today," she told him merrily. "I thought you were a creature without nerves who did not know the meaning of the word 'fear.'"

He nodded. "I am afraid," he admitted. "It was a new kind of fear. It seemed that I had to snatch you up from something that was grabbing for you. My heart was stopped dead until I had you in the cockpit and off the ground—then I knew nothing could touch you."

"Suppose they had chased me with an airplane?" she challenged.

"No airplane on earth could take you away from me in the air," he told her. There was a grim note in his voice.

"I believe you," she said softly. "I had never flown until I left the ground with you. It seemed so natural."

Somehow he found that his brown paw was covering her white hand and that his forehead was resting on her arm. She was caressing his head and speaking to him softly. "Why don't you tell me?" she asked. "Tell me—something is killing you."

"I can't take you any more," he told her in a broken voice. "If something should happen—" His voice broke hopelessly.

"You can take me," she told him, a mistiness in her eyes.

"You can do anything that I can do. It is not a question of what one desires to do, in this war, it is what one must do. To win, the heartaches of the many must be welded into a great determination to overcome every obstacle in the way. You have gone through too much to give way to your own emotions now. There are men and women on the other side who feel as we do and who make the sacrifice. We cannot be less brave."

"I am not going yellow," he assured her. "If it just meant my going out there and landing and scouting around why it wouldn't scare me at all—but it is the thought of you out there. Here I am, walking the streets of this damned town, day and night, with a tiger gnawing at my heart—thinking that perhaps they have you—it's hell."

"It won't last forever, Court," she comforted. "One of these days it will all be over."

He looked up at her hungrily. Then he dropped his head again. "It'll never be over for me," he said. "It can't be. Peace may come to all the armies and fighting men and nations, but peace to me will be a greater defeat than it will be to the losing side. That is—if I live to see the peace."

She patted his shoulder. "Why don't you tell me?" she asked with a tremor in her voice. "Don't you think I could understand. I know you, Court. I know what is in your soul. Why don't you give yourself peace by telling Jane about it?"

He shook his head miserably. "I couldn't," he whispered. "It'd be worse than having you go over there—and not come back."

THEY were working off a field near Moire. Headquarters decided that the take-offs and landings in which a girl figured were too public and too noticeable so close to the town. They found a secluded field five miles away from the town on the main highway and they built a canvas hangar for the D. H. two-seater. It was becoming a regular thing for Court to fly away from this field. In the early morning, in the middle of the afternoon, once in the dead of night, the motor in the D. H. had roared and he had carried Jane Sumner across the Lines.

They had never sighted an enemy ship. Every rendezvous had been kept to the minute. Jane was in high spirits. A few more trips and the big D. H. would have outlived its usefulness.

It seemed to Court that he had been doing this sort of thing all his life. Even the new squadron seemed years away. Life flows swiftly in war time. Life comes, death comes, love comes—and all of them leave a mark and go. He knew that Tommy was holding down the 60th Pursuit. Tales came into Headquarters covering Tommy's work. Court was proud of him.

Jane had been gone from Moire for four days following her last trip over

the Lines. He paced the streets like a caged beast. Away from her he felt nervous, alone. Life came to be a thing of living upon the side of an active volcano that might erupt at any moment. Life was bounded by the returns from across the Lines with Jane in the back seat.

Four trips had been made. Perhaps the fifth would be the last. His face was haggard and worn. His eyes were red rimmed with worry. It was a new kind of hell.

CHAPTER XI

Fluttering Wings

THEN an orderly found him in the streets, seated at a little iron table before the only estaminet left in Moire.

"There's a telephone call for you at Headquarters, sir," informed the orderly respectfully. "They're holding the wire."

Court leaped to his feet and trotted after the orderly. The telephone was on the desk of the Adjutant. He lifted the instrument feverishly. There was a woman's voice in his ear. He had never heard Jane's voice over the telephone.

"I can't say much now," said the voice. "I am in a terrible hurry. I wanted to talk to you. Be ready tomorrow morning at dawn. I will come to the field in a car. Understand?"

"I understand," he said in a dead voice. "Tomorrow morning at dawn."

"Good," said the voice in his ear, "and until then, Au Revoir." The instrument clicked. The line was dead. He replaced the phone by sense of touch.

The orderly was grinning at him. "Sure was careful," he told Court. "She wouldn't give your name. I knew who she meant though. She told me to get the pilot who flew the two-seater D. H. for Headquarters. I knew she meant you, so I chased after you."

"Thanks," said Court. He was think-

ing how different Jane's voice sounded over the telephone than when she talked to him in person. That afternoon he groomed the D. H. for the next morning. Fresh boxes of ammunition for the machine guns in front of his seat. Fresh impact bombs in the bomb racks under the wings. Jane's flying coat in her seat. He was proud of the D. H. It was getting so that he could handle it almost as well as a pursuit job. That night he did not sleep.

At five in the morning he made the trip to the field near Moire. The D. H. wheeled out on the line was ghastly in the semi-darkness. A mechanic was permitting the motor to turn over at idling speed. He donned his helmet and goggles, and pulled the collar of his flying coat up around his neck.

The exhaust of a motor car sounded along the road. It halted at the entrance to the field and switched off its lights. A lone figure dropped to the ground. His heart leaped. Jane was coming, dressed in her peasant's outfit. He hurried toward her. She seemed in a terrible hurry. Her head was covered with a peasant's kerchief and it concealed the most of her face.

"Hurry!" she whispered in a low tone. "There is no time to be lost. I must not be recognized."

HE nodded and held her coat for her. She slipped into it. He lifted her into the rear seat and vaulted into the front cockpit. He warmed the motor for an instant. The slipstream roared about his head. He turned to smile at her. He was ready. His goggles and helmet on. The slipstream was tugging at the kerchief about her head. She was fighting to hold it in place against the savage blast from the powerful motor. It slipped down off her head and away from her face. He gasped. For an instant his heart stopped beating. An icy hand touched his heart. She had replaced the kerchief almost immediately but not quickly enough to prevent a sight of her face. The woman

behind him was not Jane Sumner. It was Sonia Maryk.

For an instant a raging devil tore at his sanity. All of the hate and loathing his betrayal and imprisonment had engendered came to the surface in one mighty surge. He held himself with a grip of iron. She had not recognized him. His helmet and goggles—and then perhaps she had forgotten him utterly.

If this were Sonia Maryk, where was Jane? What had happened to Jane, here within friendly territory? Tales of a complete spy system had been whispered about Moire—but such tales were discounted by all of the officers not of the Intelligence Division. He was trembling. He knew in his heart that if Jane Sumner was harmed by Sonia Maryk, she would die! A grim smile played about the corners of his mouth. What a situation! What an awakening it would be for the girl in the back seat. The girl who had once made him believe that she loved him—and then forced him to hear her declare her love for Wolfgang von Zant.

He made his decision. The mechanics had pulled the blocks. A sweep of his arm and the gun was all the way forward. The heavy motor roared. The wheels moved. The ship lurched and gathered speed. It raced across the flat, firm sod and leaped up into the air. Court Wayne was thinking that this was the second time he had carried Sonia Maryk into his own element. Once along the Potomac—and she had taken pictures—had acted the part of a spy. Here she was again in the air with him—and the roles were the same. He was the pilot and she was still the spy—but she would take no pictures this time, nor deliver none.

His brain was in a turmoil. He did not know exactly what he was going to do with her. He wanted to make her feel the suffering she had caused him and the disgrace. He wanted her to know that she was riding with Court Wayne again—and that this was war. He glanced at his altimeter. They had

five thousand feet. He was not heading toward the secret field in the forest. He was heading a trifle west, toward Senlis.

Instinctively he was headed back toward the 60th's field. He wondered if she would call his attention to the straying from his course. Was she aware of the location of the secret field, or would she permit him to put her down inside the enemy Lines—trusting that he would fly to the same field without having to betray herself through not knowing the location of Jane's field.

He continued toward Senlis. The Lines were active in this sector. Even in the dawn guns were vomiting death across the Lines and machine guns stuttered and bucked.

He felt a rapping on the Camel back. He turned his head to the rear. She made a signal for him to cut the gun. He pulled the throttle back and the voice of the motor quieted to a whisper.

"Are you sure of your course?" she asked, muffling her face carefully with her kerchief. "Are you heading right?"

"Why?" he parried.

"There seems so much activity below there. Why don't you land me?"

He turned his head back into his own cockpit. He fumbled with his helmet and goggles. He took them off and placed them carefully in his lap. Then he faced her again, while the wires sighed in an easy glide.

"Perhaps you understand now why I don't intend to land you?" he said in a flat voice. His eyes were flaming in hate.

She looked at his face for a long minute. Then she screamed aloud. "Court!" She thrust her fist into her mouth to smother the cry.

"Yes, 'Court,'" he mocked. "The same Court who took you riding once before—along the Potomac—you understand?"

"I thought—" she began.

"You thought I was in prison—for life—eh? I was but they didn't keep me. I escaped. I came over here looking for your friend Wolf—the same

Wolf who shot a man in the back in cold blood and fastened the thing on me. Oh, I'm here alright and you're here with me. It isn't a dream."

"You can do nothing with me," she said proudly. "I am a woman."

"You have traded on that too long," he told her grimly. "Do you have any idea what it means to sit in a cell and know you have to stay there for the rest of your life for something you didn't do—because you thought you loved a 'woman' and dared to fight for her honor. Do you know what it means to wear a strait jacket for three months, night and day, and be treated as an insane man—because you were trying to tell the truth, and no one would believe you? Do you know what it means to look out on the sky through a strip of glass four inches wide and think that once you owned all of those heavens—and know that you never again will fly?"

Her face was white. She was watching his eyes. Her mouth was trembling. "Court! Court!" she cried. "I did love you! I did. I had to do as I did. My father—"

"Father!" he snapped brutally. "You did what you did because it was your nature. You loved von Zant all the time. I heard you say so. Do you know what I'm going to do?"

She shook her head.

"**I**'M going to kill you," he told her calmly. "Kill you in a way that is so hideous and so horrible that for ten minutes you will suffer what I have suffered—and at the same hands. What have you done with Jane Sumner?"

"The girl whose place I took?" she asked dully. "She's back there in the cellar of the estaminet. One of our people tied her up and gagged her night before last. She isn't hurt. She's just tied up."

He nodded grimly. "Thanks for the information," he told her. "It's lucky for you that she is not hurt. You are probably lying. Still you may be telling the truth. It's your last chance to

tell the truth, Sonia," he said in the same grim voice. "Perhaps you would not like to die with a lie on your lips—and you are going to die—understand—this is your last hour alive. What have you done with Jane?"

"I swear that I have told the truth," she answered. "She is in the wine cellar of the estaminet at Moire—unharméd."

He threw the throttle ahead. The motor roared. They were over Senlis at three thousand feet. She was staring at the back of his head with fear-drenched eyes. She tapped again on the camel back and he cut the gun a second time. Her voice was almost a whisper.

Barely audible.

"What are you going to do with me?" she asked.

The grim smile played about the corners of his mouth. "The most appropriate thing in the world," he answered. "Over here at Senlis, von Zant plays around a lot. He usually comes over at this time in the morning. We're going looking for him. When we meet him we're going to fight him, and you'll be here—in the fight—in your seat, and we'll see how much you can suffer in a few minutes for what I have suffered for a million years. I've been looking for von Zant for a long time. I didn't think the gods would be kind enough to bring us all together like this."

He turned again and gunned the motor. He cruised back and forth in front of Senlis.

CHAPTER XIV

The Balance Shifts

THE slipstream whipped the hair straight back on Court Wayne's helmetless head. He had not thought to pull his helmet back on after his speech with Sonia Maryk. There was hot blood racing through his veins. His eyes were sparkling. His hand was clenched about the throttle and the stick. His eyes were searching the north.

Searching for von Zant and the meeting he desired.

He almost believed that he would be lucky this morning. First, he was flying a D.H. two-seater. Von Zant loved D.H. two-seaters. The record of his victories was filled with them. Slow moving, slow turning crates, they were not a great match for his buzzing Albatross triplane. If von Zant was up that morning he would certainly pick out the D.H. for his own.

Von Zant was up. He was soaring around in the cloud banks around fourteen thousand feet. He had been up since before the dawn. It was a favorite trick of his. Up in the darkness, over the Allied Lines at a tremendous height. Hide behind the clouds and in the sun until some half-asleep pilot took off on a dawn patrol or an artillery mission, and then down upon his tail like the rabid wolf painted on the sides of his cockpit—and another victory.

Up there, behind the cloud bank, he saw the D.H. going over toward his own lines. It seemed to be a new D.H. The sun glinted from freshly doped surfaces. It was white and sparkling. He grinned mirthlessly, already he could see himself inditing another of those famous reports which began: "I have the honor to request confirmation of my—victory." He wondered which it would be. The forty-ninth or fiftieth. Even as he roared down from the heights under full throttle he was counting in his mind. Yes, it would be the fiftieth. The forty-ninth was that fool of a Canadian who had fought so doggedly with an antiquated B.E. artillery bus and had gone down with it. He remembered that he had written forty-ninth upon his report. This D.H. would be the fiftieth.

Fifty victories. Certainly that would mean an audience with the Kaiser himself. Von Richthofen had been given an audience upon the celebration of his fiftieth victory. A new D.H. going over on a mission, well it would not come back.

COURT WAYNE was not a sleepy pilot. He was wide awake and vibrant with excitement. He watched the flashing red meteor behind him as it dropped through space and flew on, straight ahead as if he had not seen it. He knew that he was at a disadvantage. The big D.H. against the agile Albatross, but he also knew that some day the law of averages brings retribution outside human understanding. He was carrying all the gun the motor would take. His nose was down for every ounce of speed the crate would fly. He needed that power in front of him when it came time to zoom. He glanced back in his seat. He saw that Sonia had discovered the plunging red wolf.

She looked at him with a question in her eyes. Her face was lined and her mouth was tense. In her eyes Court read the question: "Is it von Zant?"

He nodded his head as if to assure her that it was. She rested her head against the shock pad of the rear seat. He patted the belts of the Vickers into place. He knew that von Zant would dive down upon his tail, shooting as he came. He was going to surprise the wolf. He was going to loop that D.H. over so fast that von Zant would not escape. He knew that von Zant had never faced a looping D.H. Not yet! He was almost sure of what von Zant would do. He would sprinkle the staunch tail of the D.H. with a burst from his Spandaus. Then he would pull up quickly expecting to find the two seater floundering around wildly and would attempt to rip open the belly of the D.H. with a few wicked bursts.

He wondered what von Zant would think if he knew the rear seat of the ship he was attacking held the form of Sonia Maryk. He became more tense. The moment was at hand. He saw the orange and green flame from in front of von Zant's face. He felt the vibration of the rudder bar and stick as holes were drilled through the taut surfacing. He grinned back at Sonia, then he pulled hard back on the stick. Von Zant was

diving under him. The heavy D.H. whipped around in a short loop. Court's eyes were peering through his gun sights. He knew that he would find that red Albatross for just a second as he came out of the loop. He did. He found it zooming up, almost at a stalling angle, and with von Zant peering around foolishly for the belly of the D.H. that should have been there and wasn't and then the Vickers spattered destruction along the fuselage of the Albatross.

Court saw the Boche's vertical fin collapse. It went down like a circus tent. The Albatross veered to the right and left as von Zant struggled to hold it with the rudder. Loose wires were flapping about the empennage of the enemy ship.

Court felt his advantage. He was going to smear this von Zant. He was going to outfight him in a D.H. The vertical fin would cripple him altogether. It would make things even. He dared to cut the gun. He screamed back at the cowering Sonia. "Look! Look! It's your last chance." Then he poured the gun to the motor and darted down after the Albatross.

He seemed alarmed. He tilted the D.H.'s nose further down. It looked as if the red wolf was going to run out like a yellow dog just because he had shattered his vertical fin.

Court was mumbling to himself. "Oh, yes! The brave ace, eh? Running away from a D.H. just because things are evened up a little. Too yellow to fight, eh—well you'll fight. I've been waiting for this too long." He tore down after the Albatross. He was on top of it. A burst from the Vickers ripped through wings and forward fuselage.

The Albatross whirled. It pivoted around on its ailerons. For a moment they were head to head. The Spandaus flamed as Court slipped to one side to destroy von Zant's target. He heard the whine and snap and crackle of that burst through his own linen. Then he was veering in again with the same

terrible force. He was under the Albatross, he could not zoom in front of it, but he did turn it and force it upward again where the fight would have plenty of room. He saw the white face of von Zant looking over the side of his cockpit. He tripped his guns again. Chips and fabric flew from in back of von Zant's seat.

THE Albatross made a last try. It rolled over and over, as if scorning the consequence of the maneuver with a crippled vertical fin. It rolled too quickly for Court to escape. The burst shattered his instrument board. He felt a red hot iron sticking him in the chest. His mouth was flecked with bloody foam. He seemed to be passing out entirely. He gritted his teeth and held the nose of the D.H. steady. The Albatross was coming out of the roll. It was almost stationary in the air. It was a dead target within Court's gun sights.

The mirthless grin was back on his face. He couldn't let von Zant win again. He wouldn't. It was not justice. He squeezed the trips. Every nerve and muscle and thought was directing that burst. He saw white tracers cut in behind von Zant. He saw the tracers in the Boche's cockpit. He knew that von Zant was being ripped and torn with the burst.

There was a sudden explosion from the gas tanks of the Albatross. The first explosion was followed by a second and more terrific concussion. The fuselage and the wings separated and dissolved into shapeless junk flung far out in the air. The heavy motor crashed toward the earth. The fuselage with its single seat and black wolf's head painted on its side staggered and as if in astonishment at finding itself without motor or wings. It stood straight up on its nose, the empennage acting as the feathers act on an arrow, and darted for the far distant earth.

Court Wayne watched it go. His eyes were quiet now. His lips were trembling a little. He felt as if a great load had

been lifted from his chest. He forgot the tearing, searing pain in his chest and the blood soaking through his flying coat and the froth at his mouth. He was thinking of that night when he had faced Art Sheldon in the ballroom of the Maryk home. Suddenly it seemed to him that he was sane for the first time since that fatal night.

He remembered Sonia in the rear cockpit. He turned to look at her. The effort caused him to gasp in pain. He stared at her white face. Her head was lolling around limply. Her eyes were closed. Her golden blonde hair was streaming out behind her. There was a blood smear on her cheek.

Unsteadily he put the D.H. in a slip for the ground. He was going to make Moire. He was going to make the old field at Moire, close to Headquarters. He was going to deliver her into the hands of the Intelligence Service if she lived. He must get Jane out of the cellar of the estaminet. His eyes were covered with a mist. The ground seemed a crazy thing of brown and green. He held the nose of the D.H. up and it cost him greater effort with each moment. He could feel the trickle of warmth under his shirt. He knew that it was his life slipping away from him.

Then Moire was below him. He saw the buildings. The gaunt wooden Headquarters. The field looked too small. He squinted at it and dashed his fist against his forehead to clear his vision. He slipped down, leveled off, fish-tailed the big D.H. through sheer instinct. He felt the wheels touch the ground. He smiled. Even blind he could pull a three point. He rolled up toward the wooden headquarters. The ship stopped. He climbed out, forcing himself to stand erect.

He lifted Sonia Maryk out of the rear cockpit when he had unbuckled her belt. The lift caused an added torrent of warmth to pour down his chest inside his shirt. He was not thinking of that.

She was hurt and badly. One of von Zant's bursts had found the rear

seat. An ugly red smear was running from her shoulders. She opened her eyes. They were very blue and very tired looking.

"I'M sorry," she whispered with a sad smile. "I understand what you suffered. I am sorry for everything. Sorry for you, Court, I wish I could change it all—and be back there again—over the Potomac—without the camera. I'm sorry for Wolf—he did his duty as a soldier—without considering right or wrong. I'm sorry for myself—the last thing I loved went down—out there—you killed him. I understand what you mean by suffering. I never suffered until I saw that red shape plunge down at you—and saw your guns flaming at my heart—there in that red ship. I knew he would be beaten before the fight began—I knew you would not be beaten—and so I suffered." Her voice trailed away.

Tears were streaming from his eyes making white streaks through the red smears. "I'm sorry," he told her. "I'm sorry that I was mad enough to put you through such an ordeal. I was a little mad I think. The strait jacket and everything—those days and nights—that hell—and hating you like I did. I'm better now. My head is clearer. I'm sorry Sonia."

"I forgive you everything you did to me—I wish I could think the same of you."

"I forgive you," he told her eagerly. "It's all gone—all that hate—it went when that Albatross blew up."

They carried her away from the side of the ship on a litter.

HE watched her go. Then he pitched forward on his face, and the grass under him was stained a brassy red. They carried him into the same hospital on another litter. He was talking. He seemed perfectly normal in mind.

"Get Jane Sumner in the wine cellar of the estaminet," he told them. "You'll find her tied up and gagged. The girl I

brought in with me is a spy. She changed places with Miss Sumner and I carried her off the ground."

They found Jane Sumner bound and gagged in the dark depths of the wine cellar with the rats playing about her. She was half crazed from starvation and exposure.

It made little difference to Court Wayne, as he lay upon his cot, that a man in the next cot to him lifted himself upon one elbow and then called to an orderly.

"Bring me the officer in charge," the man in the next cot was saying.

They brought him the M.O.C. "That man is a murderer and escaped convict," charged the man in the next cot in a cold voice. He had the voice of a soldier. It was something like the voice of Wolf von Zant. "I know him well," he was saying. "He murdered an officer of the Diplomatic Corps. Arthur Sheldon. Shot him in the back like a dirty dog, and later he tried to kill three more people. He was sentenced to life in the penitentiary—and escaped two years ago. There is a reward for him. His name is Courtney Wayne."

Dully Wayne heard the accusing voice. He turned his head. He felt drowsy, weak. It was an effort to look at the man in the next cot. He met a pair of steel gray eyes boring into his own. The man in the next cot was Guy Morris.

Wayne nodded his head. "Hello Guy," he called weakly. "Glad to see you."

The man in the next cot who had an empty sleeve and an empty pajama leg turned his back.

CHAPTER XV

Forty Ton Gates Close Again

THEY brought Captain William Court, D.S.O., Croix de Guerre, V. C., D.F.C., and a few other abbreviations, alias Courtney Wayne, murderer

and escaped convict home on a litter. They carried him on board the transport at Bordeaux on a litter. It was a few days after the Armistice had been signed. He knew that he was still living. It made little difference. He knew that he was going back to the States—and back to prison. It did not hurt so much as the knowledge that Jane had not visited him in the hospital. He believed that he could depend upon Jane—but she had not believed in him. He knew the story. They had told her the old tale—Courtney Wayne, savage, coward, murderer—shot Art Sheldon in the back—escaped life term. He could think sanely of those things now.

They carried him down the gangplank in Charleston. They handled him rather gently he thought for an escaped murderer. They loaded him into a private ambulance that rolled along on noiseless wheels and without a jar. They drove him until it seemed they would never stop. Then they unloaded him again and carried the litter up a flight of granite steps. A knife of ice pierced his heart. He struggled to keep from crying out. He heard the creak of forty-ton gates swinging open. He felt the chill of the prison interior. They were carrying him along the hall—the cold stone lined hallway. He knew this hallway well. It led to the warden's office.

They carried him into the brilliantly lighted room. A man was bending over him. A man who touched his shoulder with a gentle hand. Court recognized him. The warden of the prison.

"I'm glad to see you back, Wayne," said the Warden.

A tear welled out of the corner of Court's eyes. He tried to smile. He tried to be game. He could only croak. "Thanks!" he said. "I'd be a liar if I said I was glad to be back."

Then he noticed that there were other people in the room. Several of them. They were looking at him curiously. He blinked rapidly. He stared. He saw

golden hair and blue eyes. He blinked again rapidly. Jane? Here? He groaned. He couldn't act like this they'd think him a nut, but he was looking at a face that was Jane's and at a smile that was Jane's and he was listening to a contralto voice that sounded like Jane's. The voice was reading from a paper with a huge red seal:

—and we do hereby unconditionally pardon the said Courtney Wayne, and order that the Warden of the said institution shall restore him to full liberty and rights upon receipt of this instrument, and that this unconditional pardon shall be in effect until such time as the Courts shall have reversed the sentence under which the said Courtney Wayne was imprisoned.

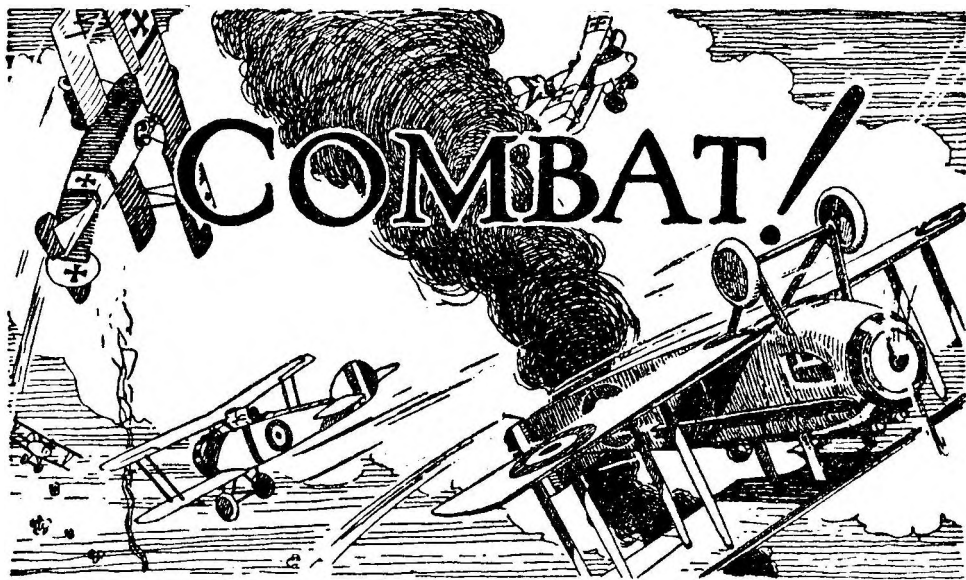
(Signed) WOODROW WILSON.

He stared at them. Jane was laughing hysterically. She came over to the side of the litter and kissed him gently upon the cheek.

"You thought I deserted you," she charged. "You thought I had run away. I did. I ran to Washington with a sworn statement signed by one Sonia Maryk, daughter of the one time Austrian Ambassador to the United States. She told the whole tale, Court. Told it in front of a group of officers. They took down her statement and she signed it. She said she was sorry. She wanted your suffering to end where her's began.

"I felt a little sorry for her. She told how von Zant had shot Sheldon in the back because Sheldon knew too much and was dangerous to them. Then she told how the crime was fixed on you. The President gave me an audience. I presented the affidavit and told him the story. He wrote the pardon—and you're going home—with me."

And so the litter was moved back to the comfortable ambulance. The Forty-Ton Gates swung open for the last passage of one Courtney Wayne, and on the front seat of the ambulance, two starry blue eyes looked out into the night and found the sun to be shining in golden splendor.



Strange, but true! COMBAT! brings you tales that have lain unsuspected under the terse and soldierly brevity of squadron reports written by shaking figures in the lull that followed battle storm.

When Boelcke Fled

By ROYAL SCOTT

SIX Nieuports beelined purposefully over the German trenches, heading north. Below, sulking in their hidden nests, lay the massed guns that for months had been tossing destruction at the Verdun forts.

Each of those six Nieuports bore the French *cocarde*, the blue, white and red circles, on each wing. And each plane bore too, on its fuselage, the starry flag of the United States of America.

For these Nieuports were flown by Americans of the Lafayette *Escadrille*, organized less than three months before. And this was a day when the six wished to fly the flag to battle. It was the Fourth of July, 1916.

Stringy clouds hung over the German support trenches. But at five thousand feet the air was clear. And the six sleek little planes bored into the north with the pilots hopeful of scaring up a fight.

They got their wish.

Twelve miles northwest of Verdun,

the leader of the Nieuports turned his head to stare long and earnestly toward the west, where lay Montfaucon and Varennes. Though the sky was clear of *Boche* planes at Verdun, perhaps at Varennes, where the French manned the trenches in great numbers, the enemy would try for photographs with which to inform their guns.

And there it was. A black-crossed plane flying steadily away from the lines, on a course almost parallel with that of the Nieuports. A two-seater, the patrol leader noted. A two-place Aviatik.

With a waggle of his wings the patrol leader led his flight of six on a tangent that should cut across the course of the *Boche* two-seater. He glanced back and saw them following, two on his left, two on his right, one high in the rear.

The patrol leader resolved to take on this job himself. He waved to the pilot nearest on his right, signifying that he should take the lead, and himself left

the formation with a quick zoom that set him above the level of the four following Nieuports.

The Aviatik was coming along, slightly below the Nieuport level, and apparently unaware of the threat in nearby sky. The patrol leader calculated the rate of flight of the *Boche* plane, nodded his head, and swerved slightly to the left again. Half a mile away, in a tightening formation, the other five Nieuports flew watchfully in his wake.

ALARM gripped the German pilot when the Nieuport, slanting down in an eager swoop, was less than a mile away. The Nieuport veteran saw the signs of the enemy's awareness of the threat.

The Aviatik's nose suddenly dipped. The black crosses on the top wings showed in clearer outline as the big biplane, dropping for an instant, seemed undecided which way to turn. Then the nose came up, the black-crossed two-seater banked away, toward the northwest, and showed its tail to the American pursuer.

Gritting his teeth, the American fondled his throttle in an effort to coax a little more power from his motor. That roaring unit responded, and the tail of the two-seater grew larger and larger in the Yank's vision. He pressed his trigger, and a warning burst of bullets and tracer yammered from the mouth of the Lewis gun mounted on the Nieuport's top wing.

But he was still two hundred yards beyond range. The space lessened slowly. And American pilot and German observer stared at one another across the intervening space, all the while they held ready fingers on triggers of their, as yet, useless guns.

It looked like a stern chase. The Nieuport had a slight advantage in speed, but the *Boche* was steadily moving deeper into its own sky, where help might materialize to drive off these madmen on wings.

Then at long range the American opened fire. Tracer zipped past the right wingtip of the big Aviatik. The burst had missed.

But the American's purpose was served. The Aviatik pilot swerved to the left, off his course, and the American cut in on it with a swoop. He paid for position as the German observer welcomed him with a long burst that the Yank could hear *fliff* through the Nieuport's fuselage. But he was in line to strike.

With a swift *virage* he lifted out of the German gunner's fire and circled for a diving attack. Below him he could see the Aviatik leveling off and turning back to her course. It meant that the enemy pilot would fight it out on the run, counting upon his gunner and his own fire to hold off the threat of the Nieuport.

Down came the Nieuport. The American was diving toward the right wingtip now, out of line of the pilot's fire and with the Aviatik's own wings partially blocking the German gunner's view of the swift-falling Nieuport. It was a clear shot for a quick burst.

That quick burst sped from the top-wing Lewis toward the pilot's cockpit. But it fell short of its mark. Tracer smoked past the spread wheels of the two-seater for a fraction of a second. Then the big plane was gone from the American's view as he passed it in his downward swoop.

Two hundred feet below, he leveled off and banked. To the north the Aviatik was roaring on its way, unharmed. He glanced back. The five Nieuports were following along a mile away. The American shrugged, and turned back to lead his patrol out of this none too healthful spot of German sky.

LESS than a mile from the aerial scene of the American's diving attack, the Aviatik, reassured, dropped its nose, circled and landed on its own aerodrome. As it rolled up to the hangars, a group of pilots gathered about it. They

had heard the firing and had witnessed the reluctant leave-taking of the Nieuport.

The Aviatik pilot jumped to the ground, shook his head, and stared about at the group. One face caught his attention. He stiffened to attention.

"*Herr Hauptmann!*" he cried. "The devil is loose at the Front!" He stopped for breath.

The officer whom he addressed frowned slightly as he stood unmoved, his glance roving intelligently from pilot to plane, and then to the observer, who had clambered down from his seat.

"*Der teufel?*"

"*Ja, Herr Hauptmann.*" The pilot pulled off his goggles and helmet and wiped his forehead with the back of an oil-streaked hand. "There are six Americans out there."

The steady-voiced, calm-eyed officer jerked. "Americans!"

The Aviatik pilot nodded eagerly. "I distinctly saw the flag on the machine!"

The officer stared thoughtfully at the pilot. Then "*Ach, ja.* They must be of that volunteer squadron in the French army."

"They are very bold." The pilot of the Aviatik spoke as with a grievance. With a gesture of irritation he gestured above his head. "They come far on our side of the Lines."

"But you gave them the slip." The officer nodded approvingly at the pilot and observer. "And now, you will stay for lunch."

"Thank you, *Herr Hauptmann.*" Pilot and observer bowed, and turned away as an obliging *jagflieger* fell in with them to guide them to barracks, where soap and water and a nip of cognac could be found.

THE other combat flyers edged nearer their captain. He saw their eager looks, and smiled. "I think," he said, "I must go to see for myself."

"But you have already flown twice today!" a pilot objected.

The captain nodded. "After all," he

said musingly, "they can't be so very dangerous."

"May one accompany you?" the pilot asked diffidently.

The captain shook his head. "Your plane could not keep up with my new *kampfeinsitzer.*" He called out a sharp order to a non-com standing alert nearby, and strode off toward his quarters for flying kit.

As he strode along, the German captain's thoughts were of the Americans who were flying over German lines. Could it be that more of the mad nephews of Uncle Sam were coming to the Front? But no. Headquarters had assured him that the squadron of volunteers was only one squadron, and a weak one, with few veteran pilots and few, very few, volunteers enrolling in Paris to fill the gaps in its ranks. So! Then let them feel the might of German arms, and there would be still fewer volunteers.

And, he thought, it was for him to teach them a lesson. The pilots on the field were good men. And all along the Front were other good men. Von Holck. Gontermann. That young von Richthofen, too, he seemed to have gotten over his clumsiness, and was now scoring victories for the Fatherland. . . . But this task was not for them. It was for him.

He was the commander of this field. He was the only German pilot with more than a dozen victories over the Allied airmen. He was the bright star of the German sky.

He was Boelcke!

SKIRTING the clouds that obscured their view of the near horizons, the six Nieuports winged away to the west. No black-crossed plane came into sight to fill the void left by the escape of the Aviatik. The patrol reached the westernmost point of its tour, and the leader signaled for a turn. The four following planes banked with him, and high above, the top protection man wheeled and followed along.

The leader was Gervais Raoul Lufbery, *sergent-pilote* of *Escadrille* Nieuport One-Twenty-Four, more popularly known as the *Escadrille Americain*. And no patrol ever had a better leader.

Lufbery turned over his life to the Allied cause on August 24, 1914, when he enlisted in the French Foreign Legion. One week later he procured his transfer to aviation. He went to the Front for the first time on October 7, 1915, after graduating from the French aviation schools, and served at the controls of a Voisin bomber until April, 1916. With the formation of the *Escadrille Americain* he trained on Nieuports, and joined his fellow Americans.

To them he was "Luf," the veteran. They flew with confidence when he led the patrols, for they knew that he would find enemy *avions* when they were in the sky.

High above those five grouped Nieuports, the top-protection man twisted in his cockpit as he watched the upper air. This was Cowdin.

Elliot Christopher Cowdin was a veteran, too. He had enlisted in French aviation in March of 1915. Like Lufbery, he first served with the Voisins. From then he went to a Nieuport *escadrille*, to a second, and then to a third before, with six other American pilots in the French service, he helped to organize the unit of Yank volunteers which was later to be the *Lafayette Escadrille*.

Caporal Cowdin was the first—and one of the few—of the American pilots to receive the *Medaille Militaire*. It came after he had fought a hard fight with a sizable German patrol and had shot down one of the enemy planes. Not many corporals could show the coveted *Medaille*.

But Cowdin wasn't thinking of that bit of ribbon on his chest as he flew above and at the rear of the American patrol. He was thinking, as the silvery ribbon that was the Meuse River slipped under his wing and he winged on the eastward tack, that if a *Boche* didn't

show up soon the day wouldn't be enlivened as a great holiday should.

He looked to his right. Far south was Verdun. Still farther south was the home field of the Yanks, at Bar-le-Duc. Cowdin sighed at the thought that the patrol which had started out in high hope might have to go back without a combat to report, other than the resultless one which Luf had had with the *Aviatik*.

Craning his neck, he studied the air behind him. Nothing there. He turned forward again, and noticed for the first time that he was lagging behind the others. With a quick shove on the throttle, he settled down to catch up. With the same movement, he shot a glance to his left—

Just in time!

DIVING out of the north came a sleek shiny Albatross. A hundred yards, and no more, separated Cowdin from the attacker when he caught his first glimpse of the *Boche*. And the Albatross pilot was firing.

Cowdin had time only to see that tracer was whipping through his tail as with an instinctive thrust he shoved his control stick forward. The Nieuport dipped its nose, picked up speed. And with all the speed that the quick dive had summoned, Cowdin zoomed into a cloud that lay above on his left.

With an eye on the cloud's borders he judged the moment when it would be safe to level off. Slowly he shoved the stick forward, and as the Nieuport faded into the mist he looked back.

The Albatross was banking. Had the pilot seen his sudden run into the cloud? If not, he might turn the tables. He'd slip out of the cloud and do a little diving of his own. But if the enemy pilot had seen, and was watching the cloud—

That Albatross looked fast.

Clammy mist closed in around him. Every second seemed like an hour, now that sight of the ground and the blue sky was shut off. Cowdin tried to time his journey through the cloud, but gave

it up. At the first break in the cloud, he'd try for the Albatross.

And here was the break. A chasm of clean air that had sliced the cloud in two. Cowdin took one swift glance upward and assured himself that the Boche had not climbed to cut him off from above. He looked down. There was the Albatross!

With a grin, Cowdin shoved his stick forward. The Nieuport started down. The Yank pointed at the black-crossed enemy and tripped his gun. At two hundred yards the burst missed by a few feet.

Then the Albatross was zooming. Suddenly its nose dipped. Some instinct warned Cowdin. He dived in turn, and quickly whipped up into a screaming virage. His guess was right. The enemy pilot's Immelmann netted him nothing, for Cowdin wasn't there to take the burst from the German's machine gun.

Cowdin was climbing. And in that moment when he saw the German's quick dodge and swift recovery, he had decided one thing. The Albatross was too fast for him to tackle in this German sky. He'd do well to rejoin the patrol—numbers would go far to make up for the disadvantage of being over enemy territory.

He climbed, on a beeline for the patrol. Then his luck ran out.

Suddenly, as if whisked away by a god's hand, the clouds vanished. One moment Cowdin was driving through thinning and thickening mist, the next he was in clear sky, unprotected.

Far ahead he spotted five specks above the horizon. And very near, on his tail, was the fleet Albatross.

It looked like a fight.

COWDIN knew his one chance. It was to rejoin his patrol. If he did not, there was no telling the chances of his going down inside enemy Lines, even if he succeeded in downing or evading this leech-like Albatross. He gauged the distance between him and his pursuer.

Three hundred yards. He was still

outside range, safe from German bullets for the moment. But the Albatross was fast. . . .

He clung doggedly to his course. How long would it take for Luf to discover that his top-protection man was missing?

He cast another glance backward, and his eyes widened. The Albatross *was* fast—it was in range. Cowdin dived, then leveled off, and looked back.

The Boche had withheld his fire, evidently disturbed from his aim at the moment when he was about to open up. Now he was on the trail again. Cowdin waited until the Albatross' nose seemed to steady, and suddenly went into another short dive.

Safe for another moment. But he was losing altitude with these tactics. Well, it was the only thing. Nothing for it but to dive away from this faster opponent, and then when he could dive no farther—

Cowdin shut that thought out of his mind. He looked ahead. Was it his imagination, or had those five specks grown larger? If they had, it meant that Luf had turned back. . . .

Three thousand feet of altitude. And he was losing five hundred every dive. And here was the Albatross again!

Cowdin dived. But this time he didn't level off. Desperately at the end of his five hundred feet of dive he zoomed with a rush that threatened to tear the fabric off the Nieuport's wings. And at the top of his zoom he whipped into a loop and came down in a vertical dive.

He caught the Boche napping. The Albatross pilot had thought to see the Nieuport dive and level off. He was unprepared for the sudden counter-attack.

Cowdin's burst whipped close to the shiny fuselage. Then the Boche, taking turn about, was on the run. Cowdin leveled off. He slid off on his left wing, then suddenly nosed up and opened fire.

Tracer snapped past Cowdin's head, and he fishtailed away. A second burst whistled close by, and Cowdin, turning, saw the Albatross nose slowly turning

toward him and steadying.

A stream of fire came through the hundred yards of space, and fabric streamed from the trailing edge of Cowdin's left wing.

It looked like the finish.

BUT a respite came to Cowdin. The Albatross still held its nose on the Nieuport, but the fire stopped. Cowdin, looking back, saw the German pilot fumbling in his cockpit. The Boche was fighting a machine-gun jam.

Cowdin, heaving a sigh of relief, turned his Nieuport onto its course, heading for the east — and almost rammed the foremost of his five comrades.

Luf and the boys were back to help him out.

Five Nieuports, strung out like thoroughbreds in the stretch, were streaking past Cowdin like storm gods. Cowdin grinned. He whipped his own Nieuport around in a tight bank, and followed.

Up ahead, it now appeared that it would be a two-plane fight. Luf was far ahead, and chasing the now retreating Albatross. The other four Nieuports

were content to watch. And Cowdin climbed to resume his top-protection post.

The fight was all Luf's. The Albatross was running. As a stream of tracer poured from Luf's gun, the Boche pilot slid away on his left wing as he had before. Leveling off, he won a few yards in the chase. Luf dived and fired again, and again the Boche slipped away. Gaining.

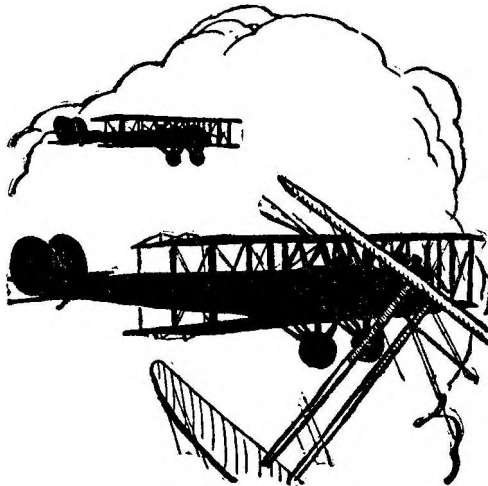
Luf saw the chase was futile. He leveled and climbed back to his patrol. With a wave of his hand he signaled the return to the field.

On the broad meadow near Bar-le-Duc the *sergent-pilote* stepped up to look at Cowdin's bus. Jagged holes showed in the wings and fuselage, and a strut nicked by a bullet was due for retirement.

"Fast pilot, that bird," said Luf to Cowdin.

At that same moment *Herr Hauptmann* Oswald Boelcke, sitting in his quarters, was writing in his diary:

... I decided to withdraw. Flew back to camp, little pleased, although untouched, while the Americans continued their flight along the Front.





LUCK of the skies! There was not a tarmac on either side of the Lines during the war that did not have an amazing collection of stories to tell about the pranks of the Goddess of Chance. No matter how hard-headed the individual, he could not ignore the great element of luck. Most of the best sky fighters believed themselves to be endowed with the favor of Lady Luck, and they would frankly admit that their number was up the day she turned her back.

On page 29 of this issue are portraits of four outstanding aces of the four great armies in the war. And, strangely enough, although none of them survived the war—not one met his fate at the hands of an enemy flyer in the battle clouds.

Major James McCudden, who started the war as a buck private machine gunner and worked his way to the rank of major and command of a squadron in the R.F.C., lost his life through a foolish error. Or maybe it was over confidence. He was taking off in a new Sopwith Pup and had less than a thousand feet of altitude when the motor sputtered.

Instead of landing straight ahead, as he had often drilled into his new pilots, he tried to turn and come back to the tarmac. The ship fell into a spin—and the great McCudden was killed.

Boelcke, who trained von Richthofen and was considered one of the greatest pursuit pilots of the war, crashed when a green pilot in his flight scraped wings with his and disabled his ship.

Georges Guynemer, idol of France and invincible in air combat, took off one evening at dusk—and no trace was ever found of him or his ship. It was one of the big mysteries of the war.

Frank Luke, the hell-diving balloon buster from Arizona, downed eighteen enemy aircraft in nine days of combat flying. No German pilot was to chalk up the flying cowboy on his score. Luke died on the ground, with a smoking Colt in his fist. A forced landing had brought him down behind the German Lines and he fought it out with his pistol rather than submit to capture.

McCudden, the Dandy. Boelcke the Strategist. Luke the Untamed—and Guynemer the tubercular, soft-spoken student. Master pilots and master

fighters all. And each went to his last landing when Lady Luck turned her back.

From the Tall Timber

DEAR EDITOR:

I am an English lad eighteen years old, and have been buying *Wings* ever since I came out to Canada from London in 1930.

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ARTHUR C. WOLFE,
Box 159,
Biggar, Sask., Canada.

Okay New Jersey

DEAR EDITOR:

I'm a constant reader of your magazine *Wings* and would like to say that I like the stories very much and can't wait every month until the new number is out. Whenever I have to recommend a magazine, *Wings* is No. 1 on my list.

A. F. KELLERMAN,
77 Franklin Avenue,
Maplewood, N. J.

Watch for the extra Bulletin Board in next month's WINGS.

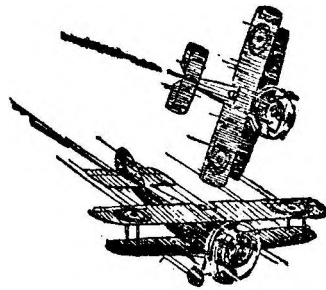
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DEAR EDITOR:

"Faithfully yours" is just a new reader of your wonderful magazine. I'm longing for the next number to reach my newsstand on the tenth.

Though I've been given to read but two copies of your book, it's just enough to tell it's a great one and the *best*. The stories contain sensation, thrill, drama, amazement, glamour and romance, the stuff that makes *Wings* a prize. If I should have a suggestion to make, it would be to have it printed every week.

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Action Stories leads with a straight right, a corking yarn of the dim-trail gentry, called "Rustlers' Syndicate." It's by Walt Coburn, and if you don't think this real cowboy-author knows the way of a red-blooded man with a light loop and a salty six-gun—well, you've got a raft of guesses still coming to you. Other sterling stories of the air, the sea, and the old West by such tophand writer-men as George Bruce, Harry F. Olmsted, Jay J. Kalez, and Albert Richard Wetjen.

Aces and *Wings* deliver the goods with the old one-two. *Wings* leads with a left jab to the head. It's Joel Rogers behind the fist, and the whistler he cracks over is "The Gallows Birds," a story of three U. S. gyrines on a hell-bender in the hot heavens all over the Western Front. Also stories by Derek West, George Bruce, and other *Wings* favorites. *Aces* comes over with a right cross to the chin, and it's Franklin H. Martin's "Zero

Patrol" that does the trick. Here's a writer who knows men and Maxims from A to Z, and his yarn of the big sky spy trap will rock you back on your heels.

Frontier Stories dishes it out old style and plenty potent. With "The Gun Wolf of Skeleton Canyon," Harry F. Olmsted sets a fast pace for seven rounds of stunning Western action. Walt Coburn and other men, first-string in the Western tradition, take you back to the days when you fought—or went down for the long count. It may be rough-and-tumble, but it's story-meat for the real red-blooded reader.

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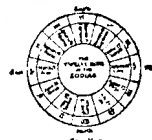
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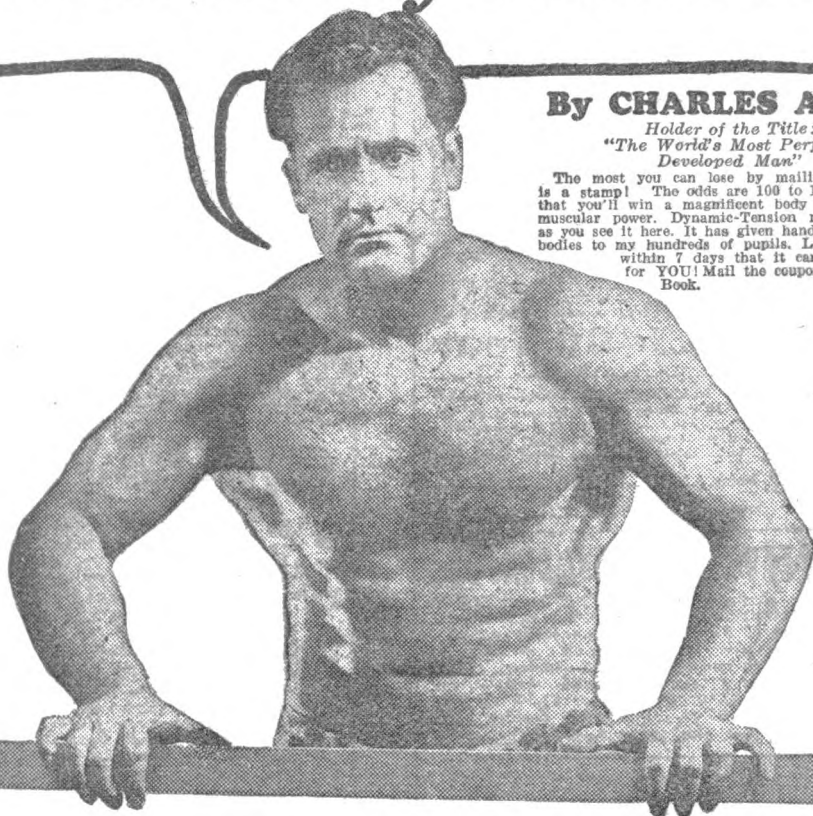
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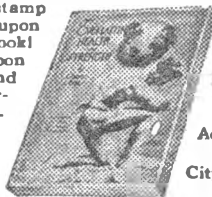
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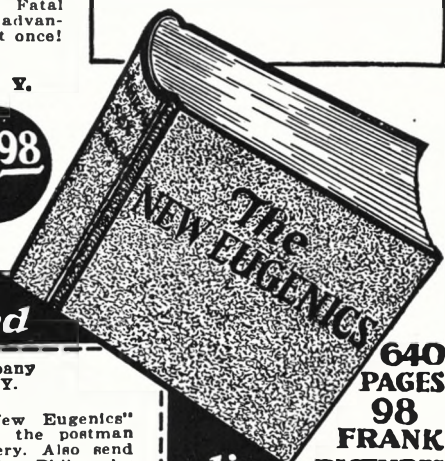
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