

Scourge of the Sky Hellions

A Stormy Lake Adventure by Bob Byrd

CHAPTER I "OLD ARABELLA"

THE day and Lieutenant Colonel Stormy Lake's spirits were both clouded. While Major Rud Riley lounged in a chair in Stormy's room, his face slightly suffused with the effects of the smoke-filled room, Stormy was flinging his long legs freely to right and left as he prowled up and down the room, taking occasional peeps out the window at the crude airdrome and seeing nothing that appealed to him.

The big blond Riley ran his fingers through tousled hair and cocked a keen and piercing eye at the lanky flyer. He knew that the somewhat glassy look in Lake's blue eyes was not the result of dissipation. Stormy was thinking. Experience had proven that time for thought plus the desire to indulge in that dangerous pastime usually meant trouble.

Few of the escapades which had made the court-martials of America's leading ace as famous as his victories over Boche airmen had been the result of impulsiveness, impulsive as the lean Westerner was. Rather they had been caused largely by allowing Lake two hours or more out of the day when he had nothing whatever to do.

"What's on your mind?" demanded the tranquil Texan.

"I need some action," responded the restless Lake, picking up a nest of three ash receivers and juggling them with absent-minded skill.

He scarcely looked at them, but his whiplike arms and long-fingered hands moved with effortless precision.

"That being the case," Rud told him, "why don't you go into town and use up some of your excess energy? It will give you something to do, and if you're idle another half hour, heaven knows what will happen to the Allies, to say nothing of the Thirty-first Squadron."

"Darned if I don't think I will," Stormy decided. "Lend me a few francs, will you? I'm busted."

This being Stormy's chronic condition, Rud had already had his hand halfway in his pocket to supply financial backing for the expedition.

Blouseless and hatless, but without any sign of perspiration from the humid heat of the day, Stormy started for the little village of Vidal, three kilometers away. Likewise, he walked instead of commandeering

transportation. That in itself showed that he was in a dangerous condition.

He hadn't navigated more than half the way to town when he started to think again. His eyes swept the ceiling of dark moist-looking clouds which blanketed the earth two thousand feet above him. They looked as though they were on the verge of spilling some rain. He'd come down from patrol two hours before and knew that above that layer there was about a thousand feet of fog-less space above which myriad cloud banks marched across the sky like a slow moving herd of aerial monsters.

"Something ought to be done with clouds like that," he soliloquized. "Gee, a man could drop in on the Kaiser without being seen by his valet!"

AT that second he stopped dead in his tracks. Then he got underway again, but now his long legs covered the ground like Man o' War in a hurry. His close-clipped black hair, parted exactly in the middle, waved upward to the sides of his head until there was the suggestion of horns. A beatific smile made one side of his face a little larger than the other and turned his hawklike profile into that of a sardonic Mephistopheles.

Turning back toward the field, he caught a ride on a truck. The driver, tickled to death at the opportunity of a chat with the craziest coot on the Western Front, got no satisfaction from his questions. Mr. Lake, as though enjoying a private joke, grinned and chuckled and thought.

The quiet of the Western Front was in the process of becoming imperiled.

He didn't even go back to Rud. His Spad was still on the line and the crew was just finishing the job of grooming it after its last patrol. The wizened, bow-legged sergeant turned to look at his approaching chief as though some sixth sense warned him of the approach of an electric storm. He waited suspiciously for the tall young man whose black hair seemed to throw off sparks.

The sergeant tugged at his walrus mustache.

"She all set?" demanded Stormy.

"Yes, sir."

"Plenty of ammunition?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then start her. I'll warm her myself," commanded Stormy.

Mr. Grigsby inquired diffidently: "May I ask what's up?"

"I don't know exactly, Sarge," chuckled Lake, "but I figure maybe a balloon is up. And listen, you buzzards, if Colonel 'Squads Right' Shafer or anybody else wants to know why a ship's in the air, the motor needed a test, understand?"

"What will be the matter with it, sir?" asked the grinning Grigsby.

"A light touch of—er—the flu." grinned Stormy.

He climbed quickly into the cockpit and a moment later the two hundred and twenty horsepower Hispano-Suiza was turning the geared-down propeller in the warm-up. Stormy posted a mechanic for the purpose of watching for an emissary from headquarters inquiring what he was doing. Said emissary, in the person of Lieutenant Charles Shaw, adjutant, came over the horizon promptly. Stormy nodded to the sergeant, and Grigsby pulled the wheel-blocks.

Before the portly and chronically worried adjutant got within fifty yards of the Spad, Stormy was taxiing the squat snub-nosed little single-seater out on the field. The motor temperature was only sixty degrees Centigrade and the oil pressure was still low, so he proceeded to do a little taxiing for the purpose of the warm-up.

Back on the line, Adjutant Shaw, who was capable of worrying about anything, or nothing at all, was telling Grigsby flatly: "I think he's a liar and that you birds are covering him up. Chase him, Sims, and tell him to get back here. There's nothing wrong with that motor!"

So Corporal Sims dutifully chased. Stormy, taxiing wildly about the field and watching the temperature gauge, allowed the corporal almost to catch him, and then sped blithely across the field at an angle. For a full minute, the perspiring corporal pursued him earnestly. Then with the thermometer at seventy-five degrees Centigrade, the Spad took off with a parting flick of its heavy tail.

Holding left rudder instead of right because the geared-down propeller turned anti-clockwise instead of clockwise, Stormy climbed it steeply. He had goggles on, but no helmet shielded his hair. The goggles above his jutting nose were like great eyes below the two curly black horns that crowned his head. He sent his solid little scout squarely into the opaque mist two thousand feet above the earth.

He estimated the effect of the breeze which came only periodically, and many trips over the Front had enabled him to figure almost the exact compass course which would carry him to the point he desired to reach. He knew the distance to a kilometer.

And so it was that four thousand feet above the earth he couldn't see, and just beneath the closely spaced mountain ranges of mist which marched across the upper air, he turned his Spad until the floating compass before him read four degrees north of east, looked at his wrist watch, and settled down in his cockpit to await the passing of exactly forty minutes. He skipped along just below the surface of the upper-level clouds prepared to pop into the mist at the first sign of a lurking Fokker.

That sector of the Front was suspiciously quiet. With the roar of his eight-cylinder Hispano drowning out any rumble from the guns below, no sign of another ship in the sky, and the floor of clouds below him screening the pitted ground, the war seemed very far away.

THIRTY-NINE minutes passed. Then he threw his Spad into a long shallow bank until finally it was pointed back westward. He shoved the stick all the way forward.

In a moment the squat little ship, built for diving, was flashing toward the cloud bank below. Its dive became almost vertical and the mist seemed to rise with the speed of light to meet it. It flashed into the dark gray clouds at close to three hundred miles an hour.

In an absolutely vertical dive the Spad burst in sight of the earth like a meteor falling from on high.

"There she is!"

A mile north and west of him he saw Old Arabella, his objective. The German captive observation balloon floated tranquilly just below the ceiling of clouds five miles behind the front-line trenches.

Stormy changed the direction of his dive until he was headed directly for it. With both hands he pulled back a little on the stick and slowly the angle of his dive became more shallow. The air speed meter read two hundred and eighty miles an hour and the wildly vibrating needle was going ever higher until finally it was jammed against the peg.

Down in the trenches, German soldiers were scudding around like ants in a crushed ant heap. Bullets poured from pistols and rifles and machine guns at the target that was darting across the trench-scarred ground, only a hundred feet high, and was out of sight again almost before they had seen it.

Old Arabella had been safe from attack by Allied planes—orders from headquarters. Camouflaged nests of anti-aircraft and machine guns were placed all around it, so set and pointed as to command the air for thousands of feet above the huge sausage. It was a trap for Allied planes. But Stormy Lake, hurling his ship along only a hundred feet above the ground, was an

enemy appearing at a time and in a place which no Heinie was prepared for.

A quarter of a mile from the captive balloon, the nose of his ship pointing directly at the great cable to which Arabella was attached, Stormy started to shoot. A hail of fire poured from his guns and zipped through and around the cable.

He dared not zoom for shots at the balloon itself—to gain altitude would be fatal. So long as he hugged the ground, the Germans couldn't see him until he was close to them and before they knew it he was gone on the other side.

The windlass crew was cranking frantically, dragging the balloon down. Lake fired until his guns were hot and smoking. At the last minute, when the time had come to change the course of his speeding ship to avoid running into the cable, he saw it part.

Like a great ball which had been bounced, the released balloon fairly shot upward. It disappeared in the mist while Stormy dodged his ship hither and yon across the trenches and barbed-wire barriers which his undercarriage almost touched.

“What wind there is, is from the east. She'll blow over the lines sure as anything!”

An aerial cowboy herding a German balloon across the lines!

He dared not zoom now—that would give the gunners below too good a shot.

Still close to the ground so that they couldn't see him for more than a second or two before he was directly over them, he flew a zigzag course that carried him steadily toward No Man's Land. The last trench had received a warning and five seconds before he reached it he realized that a wall of machine-gun fire was already raised against him. The higher he got the more vulnerable he would be.

He was a hundred feet high. Instantly he shoved the stick forward. Down flashed the Spad until it wasn't fifty feet above the ground. Still in the dive, he tightened his hand on the gun clamp. The bullets poured into the ground. Some of them might penetrate the trench.

Ten feet above the ground, twenty yards back of the trench that was spouting that forest of fire, he leveled off. The ship hurled itself across that perilous slit in the earth.

There came a split second when the Spad seemed shaken by a dozen heavy impacts on every strut and spar. A foot in front of his eyes the compass smashed to bits and three holes appeared like magic in the cockpit flooring. At least a dozen bullets had perforated his wings, and there were more in the fuselage behind him.

But not one touched him. In a mighty zoom, the ship cleaved upward. The cursing Germans pursued him with fire that they knew was abortive under the conditions. They could see his hand which he was waving at them as the Spad bored ever higher above No Man's Land.

CHAPTER II CHUTE FOR TWO

THE Spad's laboring motor was dragging America's leading ace upward through the wall of fog. The cloud layer was about six hundred feet thick, but the difficulties of keeping a ship on an even keel when there was no horizon to regulate its position were far from insuperable to the rangy pilot. The genius of a born flyer rarely is shown in moments of swift emergency—rather in landings and take-offs and fog flying.

The Spad roared out into the light, and two strange voyagers in a world of their own burst on his vision at once. One was the helpless balloon, drifting wearily westward. That he had expected.

The other was a Fokker, prowling around the sausage like an angry dragon.

Any Fokker was an unwelcome interloper in Lake's private war, but it took more than one ordinary Boche to turn him into a tight-lipped, drawn-faced chunk of dynamite. That particular Fokker was painted a brilliant red from prop hub to rudder, and on its sullenly gleaming sides the black-and-white figure of a death's-head grinned out at its enemies. It was one of the Red Devils.

Instantly Stormy shoved the stick forward to send the Spad into the fog. Had there been any doubt that one of Baron Friederich von Baer's aerial madmen was his opponent, it was proved to Lake before he had gained temporary refuge. For the reaction of the Fokker almost a thousand feet above him was as instantaneous as his own. The nose snapped down, and like a red eagle with folded wings the Fokker dropped toward its prospective prey.

That Fokker was a challenge to a private duel between a representative of Germany's most famous squadron, and Lieutenant Colonel Lake, of the Thirty-first Squadron—two individuals meeting to carry on the six month's long warfare which had been waged between Squads Right Shafer's flyers and Baron von Baer's crew of mad airmen.

Thoughts flashed and crackled through the flyer's mind. He knew that that pilot up there would be more than a master flyer. He might be a species of maniac, or perhaps a man already doomed to die of wounds or disease, and welcoming an opportunity to go down in

combat. No Red Devil seemed to give a hoot whether he lived or died.

There shot up out of Lake's subconscious mind one of the swift inspirations which came to him so frequently in the air.

The stick jerked back and to one side, the rudder jammed to the right and in a vertical bank he threw the Spad around until it was flying due east, back toward Germany. Up above the cloud the Red Devil would be prowling westward, waiting watchfully to pounce on the Spad.

"He'll figure I've beat it home!" Stormy told himself. "Being a von Baer man, he's chasing back over our lines waiting for me."

He gave himself ten seconds. Then he turned west again, flying perfectly in mist that screened his own wing tips from him. He dived a little to pick up some extra speed.

He jerked the stick back abruptly. The Spad answered buoyantly, and a second later it popped out of the fog. Five hundred yards away, and five hundred feet high, the crimson Fokker was headed West as well. And up underneath the clouds the balloon was drifting slowly in the same direction.

Lake leveled off, and sent the Spad scudding across the dark gray floor toward the Boche. Out of the corner of his eye he saw frantic figures, like puppets being pulled around wildly, signaling from the balloon's basket.

Then the Fokker pilot turned. Stormy was less than two hundred yards away from him, and had not gained an inch of altitude. As the featherlike German scout shot upward and over in a chandelle, Stormy was squinting along his guns. He started shooting as the Fokker became a broadside target. His tracers zipped fifty feet above it, and the Fokker's nose dropped to face him as Lake shoved the stick forward and reduced the angle of his zoom.

Lake blazed away at the radiator which was a shield for the Boche flyer, as Stormy's own motor was to him.

Then he shoved the stick all the way forward. Instantly the Spad answered. Bullets raked the fuselage behind him before he had dived underneath the oncoming Fokker. Instantly he raised the nose in a steep chandelle—a climbing turn.

Over his shoulder he watched the Fokker. No sooner had the Spad darted out of range of his guns than the German, still two hundred feet higher than the Spad, lifted his ship in a quick wing turn. Stormy was in position a split second ahead of the higher ship, and a lucky burst raked the red ship.

Stormy did not wait. That one burst—and he was gone. By the time the Boche had straightened for a shot Lake was diving squarely underneath him.

SAFE for a moment below his twisting enemy he brought the stick back smoothly. Now he was arching upward in the first half of a loop. The Red Devil was too wise to lose altitude. Instantly he had leveled off his ship, and once again was doing a climbing turn. As he completed it, facing the Spad which was now curving over on its back, the Fokker's nose lifted for a shot.

As Lake turned his ship on its horizontal axis with rudder and stick, he waited numbly for a hail of bullets. The Spad was dropping lazily to a level position. By the time the Fokker, now higher than the Spad again, had its nose down, Lake was dodging like a buzzing fly—only a hundred feet lower than his adversary.

So far the honors were his. He was still alive, and had gained four hundred feet of priceless altitude—then came his chance.

His response to an emergency was instantaneous and instinctive. And even more important than the mind and body which could react instantly was the automatic accuracy of his marksmanship.

A hundred feet above him the Fokker's nose dipped, swinging toward Lake. Simultaneously, Stormy used every remnant of flying speed in a zoom which carried the Spad above the course of the bullets which poured from the Boche's guns. A split second later, while the Fokker was still nosed down too sharply to hit its elusive target, Lake nosed over and for just an instant the Fokker, in its dive toward him, presented a target which the motor did not screen.

He saw his tracers pour into the motor, and rake the center section. An instant later the propeller disintegrated. Lake gave a shout of triumph. He steepened his dive, banking as he did so. He was three hundred feet lower than the German ship floating down helplessly above him. The pilot seemed to have escaped injury. He was handling his ship perfectly and Stormy was not sorry. Subconsciously he realized that in the battle, the ships had drifted westward and that below the clouds must be Allied territory.

He scanned the sky for the balloon and for a moment he could see no signs of it. He had had no time to keep an eye on it during the combat. His volatile spirits sagged as his searching eyes found nothing. Had they pulled the ripcord and descended?

Then he saw it. It was just a basket apparently suspended from a cloud fifteen hundred feet above him. The dun color of the balloon melted into the grayish mist.

“Well, it’s being blown west, anyway,” he thought.

For a second he hesitated. He had forgotten all about the red Fokker for the moment. That balloon was his pride and joy. If there was one thing on earth he wanted to do, it was to train his guns on its crew, force them to land, and deliver one German observation balloon, undamaged, to the Thirty-first Squadron.

He had throttled his overworked motor a little to give it a breathing spell. As he shoved the throttle all the way ahead for the climb up to the clouds, he glanced casually at the place where the Fokker had been. It wasn’t there and he looked quickly behind him. There it was, spiraling down with its motor dead, one hundred feet behind and above him. Keeping his Spad in the climb, he turned again and saw the Fokker diving on a course almost parallel with his and a little bit to his right. He throttled the Hispano again.

“Yonder Dutchman wants to say hello,” he thought. “Boy, that ship’s got more holes in it than a sieve!”

And it was true. The Fokker had been perforated from wing tip to wing tip and the cowling over the Mercedes looked as though it had been used for target practice. It was a limping wreck of a ship, and it seemed unbelievable that the rather small pilot had emerged unhurt.

The exultant Lake gave the Spad a little left rudder as the Fokker came closer. The speed of its dive was a bit greater than that of the throttled, still climbing Spad. Finally the German was almost even with him, his left wing tip scarcely ten feet behind and to the right of the Spad’s sturdy airfoils.

THE Red Devil raised his goggles and revealed the small, clean-cut face of a boy of twenty or twenty-one. That face was smiling a greeting, but even at that distance, Stormy got the impression that there was something funny about the stranger’s eyes.

Lake raised his hand in salute as he thought: “That boy’s going to have a tough landing underneath the clouds. And being a Red Devil, he won’t care for being a prisoner—”

Without any hint of warning, the Fokker steepened its dive and swung to the left. Lake reacted instantly. The Spad’s right wing snapped up, the nose down, as he tried to throw it out of the way. The left wing of the Fokker crashed into the Spad’s upflung wings, and the terrific din of tearing linen and splintering wood, and the rasping ring of steel struts on wires, was climaxed by a sudden increase in the Hispano’s roar.

The Boche had deliberately collided with him. The dazed Lake realized that his own propeller had shattered and he cut the gun automatically. The flyer

suddenly snapped out of the physical and mental shock.

The wings were two twisted masses of wreckage, and the two scouts, interlocked like two beasts in a combat to the death, were spinning loggily toward the ground.

“They’ve got me!” the taut flyer told himself.

This was final—last landing—

Then his head snapped back. The little German was climbing out into the tangled wreckage which held the ships together, and a parachute was strapped on his back.

The ships were spinning dizzily now and as they plunged into the cloud layer the little German was but five feet away from Lake. Clinging to a mass of twisted wire, he gestured like some spidery gnome in the dank gloom. Instantly the punch-drunk Stormy understood. He stood up, grasped the shattered center-section post, and climbed with great difficulty out on the crumpled wing.

“We’ll jump together, yes?” yelled the German, his delicate baby face smiling.

“O.K., Heinie,” roared Lake in amazement.

Grasping each other tightly with feet and arms, they hung for a second on the edge of the wing, the German holding on to the strut with his one free hand. The ships were spinning like drunken tops. Then they whirled out of the mist into daylight.

The German let go and they were falling toward the earth two thousand feet below. A second later, the parachute bellied out. Lake gave a sobbing gasp of relief.

Both the German’s arms were around him, and he and Stormy clung together like grim death as their bodies swung upward so far they were above the silken chute. Down they swung like some Gargantuan pendulum, up on the other side, and then down again in long arcs.

Colonel Stormy Lake saw that they were about eight miles back of the Allied lines and that there was desultory firing below them; that the two ships had hurtled past them on their last dive; that the smiling young German’s eyes were like those of an old woman looking up from the face of a little girl! And above all that the smiling Boche, who if he wanted to could send Stormy on a thousand foot drop to the ground, was dressed in the uniform of a first lieutenant of the United States Army Air Service.

CHAPTER III

“BABY FACE”

THERE could be no doubt about it. Underneath light coveralls of the type worn by the American

flyers, there showed the stiff olive-drab collar of an officer's tunic, and on it were pinned the crossed wings and propeller of the air service. Two bars on each shoulder bulged the coveralls.

"Who are you?" Lake exploded.

The German smiled. "I'm a spy," he said calmly.

Lake laughed. "Nothing like being frank about it," he said.

"That's the reason I saved your life," the German pilot said levelly. "Who might you be?"

"My name is Lake."

"Not Stormy Lake?"

"Yes."

"I had an idea I'd seen you before," commented the German in perfect English, which he pronounced a shade too carefully. "It was the night you fellows were captives for a minute or two on our airdrome—"

"I remember it well," grinned the surprised Stormy. "Well, the heck with that for a while. We're going to hit that ground darn hard, Heinie."

"That name is von Baer," his companion said stiffly.

"Any kin of Baron von Baer?"

"Nephew."

"What a family the von Baers must be," Lake said slowly.

He glanced down at the desolate earth. Yawning shell holes had turned it into a miniature Grand Canyon and through it zigzagged trails on which labor battalions were working desperately in an endeavor to make them into roads. It had been but two days since a big push had taken over that territory.

They were three hundred feet high.

"Now listen," Stormy said swiftly. "We're dropping about twenty-five to thirty feet a second. About ten feet above the ground, you drop me, see? I won't hurt myself and releasing me will break your speed a little bit."

"Why so careful of my safety?"

"My tender heart is my ruination," Lake said.

His tender heart had nothing to do with the suggestion. He was dependent upon the nephew of Germany's most famous ace.

Why, if he was bound on an expedition as a spy he should be flying one of the Red Devils' ships; why that ship should be a single-seater which must be left to its fate after the spy bailed out, and certain other matters had aroused considerable curiosity. The nearest laborers were a mile away from where they would land and young von Baer had nothing ahead of him but a firing squad. He might be depended upon to be somewhat less than docile if an emergency arose.

Fifty feet above the ground now, and Lake stiffened. They were sweeping across an apology for a

road and over the rim of a crater fifty feet square and almost twenty feet deep. Two or three skeletons lay unburied in it and its bottom was muddy.

"We get a break," he yelled. "Now!"

Obediently the German let go. As Stormy dropped the twenty feet he re-laxed every muscle. His feet jammed into the ooze, and his knees bent until his chin almost hit them in the shock of the landing. He fell forward, unhurt, but had not yet get to his feet when the German landed.

A vagrant puff of wind caught the parachute and dragged von Baer a few feet through the mud. Clawing at his shroud lines and trying to scramble to his feet, the German had just got control of the situation when Stormy hit him.

"No hard feelings," he grinned, when he had his prey pinned helplessly in the slime. "First off, let's see how many guns you have."

"With pleasure," smiled von Baer, his unchanged eyes probing Lake's, but his clean-cut face smiling.

Lake found one Luger. He stood up with the gun in his hand. "Men will be here pretty quick," he said, wiping some of the mud from his face, "so what you've got to say, say fast. You saved my life, I admit that—"

"I did it because I did not care to make a forced landing—or a jump—alone in a Red Devil ship with an American uniform on," von Baer told him mildly. "I thought that your gratitude might be great enough to protect me,"

"Protect a spy?" grinned Lake. "What would become of democracy?"

"You haven't a great deal of time," the German said slowly.

He climbed to his feet and took off his helmet. Blond hair like wavy corn silk crowned an oval face. He awaited the verdict.

"Right you are, old pal, old pal!" Stormy said thoughtfully. "All right. I'll take a chance for a minute or so, anyway. Get that blouse off quick. Nothing about your boots and breeches to condemn you is there?"

"No."

Von Baer threw his coveralls off his shoulders, and stripped off the blouse and tossed it to Lake. Stormy tried to put the blouse on, but it was too small for him. He dropped it in the ooze, stamped it into an unrecognizable mass, and finally covered it thinly with mud.

"All right," he said. "You're now a captured member of the Red Devils, Baron Friederich von Baer's nephew, and you're my prisoner. The only thing we leave out is the blouse, understand?"

"I do and thank you."

“Don’t mention it. Having you shot wouldn’t make me sleep any better. Now let’s get out of here and get to a telephone.”

VON BAER stared at him. The eyes looked like those of a sixty-year-old man who had suffered much and seen everything. It was uncanny to look at them against the background of a line-less face and pink and white skin and that wavy blond hair.

As they scrambled up the side of the crater, the German said with dry humor, “I’m going to stay close to you.”

“Hello, transportation approacheth.”

It was a motorcycle and side car and before any of the laborers who were converging upon the scene could reach them, the magic name of Stormy Lake had resulted in him and his captive being aboard the side car and on their way.

The mud-soaked flyer and prisoner were relayed from town to town and squadron to squadron. The members of the Fifty-third Squadron were scouring the sky for what was to be known before midnight, all along the Front, as “Lake’s Balloon,” and no one had seen fit to veto Lake’s determination to deliver his prisoner to the Thirty-first Squadron and nowhere else, preparatory to turning him over to G.H.Q. for questioning.

There had been no opportunity for private conversation between the pair until the commanding officer of the Twenty-eighth Squadron let them off at the cantina in Vidal with instructions to wait.

“Now listen here, von,” Lake said briskly, as they huddled at a table in one corner of the tiny room. “What’s the idea of your coming over in a single-seater and a Red Devil ship at that?”

“Simple,” smiled von Baer. “The wreck of the ship is found, eh? They wonder where the pilot is. They wonder who the pilot was. Unquestionably the wreck is burned and only remnants are left.”

“Well, what of it?”

“Then we put out news that my uncle, Baron Friederich von Baer, is missing and his ship also. His body wasn’t found in the wreck. The Allies will think that one of Germany’s most famous men is at large in their ranks, eh? Would that not create excitement?”

“Plenty,” nodded Lake. “We’d be looking at our own mugs for fear we had a false mustache on. We’d be tickled to death if the Baron was out of circulation and scared to death he was wandering around behind our lines. Great man, your uncle.”

“You seem to know him well.”

“Well, my being a prisoner of his and his being a prisoner of mine, and both of us escaping from each other, I’d say I did!” said Stormy. “But, von, old pal,

there are several things about your story that don’t hold water. Now for instance, it’s just getting dark now. Any time you jumped in your useful little parachute, you’d be seen by somebody.”

“But no,” smiled von Baer. “My ship had an extra gas tank. I would have been flying yet, my friend, if I hadn’t stopped to investigate that floating balloon.”

“Going to get three or four hundred miles behind the lines, huh?”

“Paris,” the delicate-looking German said emotionlessly.

Lake stared into the unwinking opaque eyes.

“And ten to one you were going to walk up into the Chamber of Deputies and kill the President of France and his whole cabinet, or blow up the Bank of France or something else!” he said slowly. “Von Baer, you saved my neck, but I’ll be darned if I’m not going to warn them to make you as harmless as though you were dead!”

“As you say,” the young fellow said.

“How is it we’ve never heard of you before?” Stormy inquired. “We know about Wolff and von Klug, and Schultz and—”

“In the squadron,” von Baer interrupted him in carefully formed syllables, “I’m not known as my uncle’s nephew. I’m known as Stark—”

“‘Baby Face’!”

It was like an explosion from Lake’s tight lips. Von Baer flushed. “Yes,” he said stiffly.

“Maybe you don’t like the name,” grinned Lake, “but there’s many a yarn told about its owner over on our side.”

The old-young von Baer nodded curtly.

There was many a tale which could have been told about him that had never penetrated the Allied lines, but Stormy Lake was not aware of that. Nor, for that matter, could he know that the man opposite him had not been the only passenger in the single-seated Fokker.

CHAPTER IV SPECIAL ORDER 767

EVEN had the cocky Lake known these things, and several other facts having a bearing on the complications which were already entangling him in their folds, he would not have been able to reflect on them then. For at that moment, a bulky officer, followed by three twittering French girls entered the tiny cantina.

Stormy took a quick look at the new arrivals and turned the back of his head to them. He grinned at the German.

"Tell me, von Baer, Stark, Baby Face, or whatever it is you're known as," he begged. "Isn't that officer a lieutenant colonel and hasn't he got a mole on the left side of his nose?"

"Yes, you know him?"

"Well, and unfavorably," declared Lake, "My, my, what's Tony Ross doing over here?"

"But listen," Stark said quickly.

It certainly was peculiar, Stormy thought, that Baby Face never seemed to wink. In fact one had to look at him twice to be sure that he had eyelids at all.

Fat old Mme. Golay had taken the colonel's order and was waddling to fill it. Lake's French was not good enough to make any sense out of the rapid-fire speech of the girls.

"Hearing anything worth while?"

"They are talking about you and the balloon and laughing," von Baer said unemotionally. "Also about you and me and the jump."

"Don't know who we are, eh?" chuckled Lake.

"Well, Ross will recognize me the minute he can take his eyes from the women long enough. He can smell me fifty miles away, and it always makes him sick!"

"He doesn't like you?"

"He'd lose this war, von old pal, to get even with me," Lake informed him serenely. "He's had me court-martialed three times in France and once in the States."

"Who is he? I haven't heard of him."

"Just what his job is, I disremember, but he's a big shot on the staff of General Mallory, chief of our air service in France."

"You have powerful enemies," Baby Face said thoughtfully. "What has he against you?"

"None of the brass hats like my style," Lake said carelessly. "But he hates me personally. It started back in the States. At the start of the war when flying was new, the girls fell for a pair of wings. We were hot stuff in my country. Ross was a major then, and I just snuck a luscious young lady right out from under that bulbous nose of his!"

He neglected to add that Major Anthony Ross had been deeply in love with the young lady. In fact, he didn't know it.

"Women always make trouble," stated von Baer.

"Well, you see," Stormy grinned, "I'd had a little *soiree* with the boy before that which didn't help any. He was a regular army infantry officer before he got in the air service and one afternoon, in the lobby of a San Antonio hotel, I'm just walking through and hear myself called by my C.O. He was over in the corner with about thirty or forty people, a lot of society folks, and 'Terrible Tony' was there. It seems that Ross had been shooting off his mouth about the fact that

anybody could fly—that there wasn't any trick to it—and that all that junk about cadets getting sick their first few trips and about acrobatics being so thrilling and dangerous and all that junk was the nuts. So, my C.O. made him a bet that he wouldn't find acrobatics so mild and easy, and he called me over to make a date to take Tony for a ride."

"I presume that it was a good one," Baby Face said.

"Quite a ride," agreed Lake. "About fifty cars full of San Antonio people came out to see it and all Kelly Field was waiting. There was quite a feud between the air service and all other branches of the army—is yet for that matter. They think we're a bunch of undisciplined, big-headed young punks that draw extra flying pay for no reason, don't do any work, and salute only ourselves because we're hot stuff. And the funny part of it is, von old pal, that they're sort of right!"

"What happened?"

"Oh, I went to about ten thousand feet and then I gave him everything I knew. I kept looking around at him and I caught him just right. I saw his face getting greener and greener and just before he popped his cakes, I flipped the bus over on its back and kept her there for a while. Von, you should have seen that mustache of his when we got down!"

Von Baer smiled and a sort of grumbling chuckle came from behind his clenched teeth.

"He could barely get out of the ship," Lake grinned. "He staggered over to his car and the chauffeur drove him out of the field. The last thing we saw of him he was leaning over the side of the car and snapping his cookies again!"

"Wait a minute. They're telling the old woman about the balloon," von Baer said, suddenly tense. "The colonel must be very mad at you—"

"But *mademoiselle*, that is Monsieur Lake at this other table," Mme. Golay was saying.

"What?" grunted Colonel Ross.

Stormy winked at von Bear. "Don't worry."

HE bowed to the colonel without speaking. The three women frankly stared at him. He inspected them with smiling boldness which wasn't offensive because he was smiling. That grin was disarming.

One of them, dressed in widow's weeds, was over thirty, but the others were much younger. One was a little too slender, and the other a little too plump, but they were not unattractive.

Colonel Ross bowed.

"Will you now introduce us?" the plump girl asked in broken English.

"If you wish," grunted Ross. His heavy voice rang through the room. "Please join us for a moment, Lake." It was an order, not a request.

“Come on, von,” chuckled Stormy, and the wide-eyed German followed him across the room. Lake basked pleasantly in the glow of the women’s frank admiration. Then he turned to the rigidly erect von Baer. “And this,” he said, “is my prisoner. *Herr Stark* of the Red Devils.”

The young German bent at the waist in a stiffly abrupt bow. Before the wide-eyed women could speak, Colonel Ross was barking like a Gatling gun. “You’re hanging around here with an important prisoner of war?”

“Well, sir,” Stormy told him serenely, “after a somewhat trying experience, and after a long trip, I saw no harm in stopping off for a little badly needed refreshment.”

Ross got to his feet. “Lake, as you are the sole custodian of a valuable prisoner, you should have delivered him to the proper authorities as quickly as was humanly possible! Is that your car outside?”

“Yes, sir,” Lake said serenely.

“Then you will proceed immediately to your airdrome with your prisoner!” the colonel rasped.

“Oh, but don’t be so severe,” begged the slender girl. “What harm can it do if they wait but a moment more?”

“Thanks,” grinned Lake.

“We’ve been interested to meet you—we hear so much—and some of your other flyers,” said the plump girl. “It is a shame—”

“That’s an idea,” interrupted Lake.

He didn’t even glance at the glowering colonel.

“Listen,” Stormy went on. “Why don’t you all drive over to the airdrome and have dinner? The boys would be tickled to death—”

“Splendid,” cooed the slender girl. “I should like *eet* so much—”

“Nonsense, we’ve got to push along. I must be back in Guliere by eight,” the colonel said flatly.

“We’ll see that the ladies get there safely,” beamed Lake.

“You won’t mind, Colonel?” said the plump girl. “It was so kind of you to carry us this far—”

“Of course not,” Lake said aloud in a highly off-handed manner. “That will be quite an experience for you, riding to the airdrome with a famous prisoner. Ever hear of Baby Face?”

“*Oui*,” said the slender one, her eyes flickering to the emotionless German.

“Well, that’s all set then, and we start right now as the colonel ordered. You don’t mind, do you?”

The elder woman who seemed to be largely in the hands of the young ones, looked at the colonel questioningly, but the two girls were on their feet.

“They’re a swell gang,” Stormy was telling them. “Oh, by the way,” he said evenly. “They may not be fully prepared for guests whom they want to honor, so I’ll get some supplies. I’m broke. How about lending me a hundred francs, Colonel? I’ll return it tomorrow.”

Ross’s heavy lips were compressed. He slowly put his hand in his pocket. He was completely at a loss.

“I’ll be seeing you tomorrow anyway.”

“Oh, yes?” Lake said blithely. “Thanks, Colonel.” He thrust the money into his pocket. “You’re going to be over this way again tomorrow?” he asked chattily.

“No, you’re going to be over my way,” Ross said with heavy significance.

“That’s news to me.”

“If you were ever on your own airdrome, where you belong, you’d receive your orders,” Ross told him.

Not until *Herr Baby Face*, von Baer, alias Stark, was safely delivered to the squadron, the unexpected, thrilled and highly welcome feminine guests enthroned in the recreation room, and Stormy telling his story to Colonel Squads Right Shafer, did the colonel’s words occur to him again.

“What do you suppose he meant by that?” Lake inquired.

“Come on over to the office—you’ve got to make out your report anyway—and you’ll find out. Special orders,” stated the lathlike Shafer.

IN headquarters they found Adjutant Charles Shaw working hard and worrying because forty-nine different varieties of unimportant reports, which would never be read anyway, were half an hour late. The rubicund young man fixed Lake with an accusing eye, and the tip of his nose raised higher in the air as he seemed to sneer as Lake entered.

“You’re darned lucky you’re getting out of this squadron,” he stated. “We’re so tickled that the colonel isn’t even going to court-martial you for beating it off in a ship without orders.”

Colonel Squads Right Shafer clamped his teeth down over a cigar.

“Some day, you’re going to punish yourself, Stormy,” he said, “and when it comes it’s going to make anything a C.O. could do look silly. You’re riding for a fall, boy. I hope you remember it—which you won’t in your new job.”

“What is that, sir?” Lake asked.

“Read it yourself,” commanded the C.O., “and you’ll know as much about it as I do.”

He handed Stormy a sheet of paper.

OFFICE OF THE CHIEF

*United States Army Air Service in France
August 17, 1918 Special Order Number 767*

1. *The following officers will proceed*

at once to Guliere, reporting not later than 3 P.M., August 18, 1918, to the Chief of the Air Service in France, Suite 4, General Headquarters, United States Army, for special detached duty.

Garry Lake, Lt. Col. A.S., U.S.A.

George Groody, 1st Lt., A.S., U.S.A.

John Evans, 1st Lt., A.S., U.S.A.

Ezekiel Benjamin, 2nd Lt., A.S., U.S.A.

2. By special arrangement with the Royal Air Force, Captain Archibald Bentham will also report at the same time, and commanding officers of the organizations to which the above-named men are attached are hereby instructed that the above-named officers are not to be assigned to any flying duty pending their departure, and that no excuse for their tardy arrival will be accepted.

By order of Brigadier General Mallory:

Donald R. Goodrich, Major, A.S., U.S.A. Adjutant

“Well, I’ll be darned,” Stormy said slowly.

He reread paragraph two aloud. “And the Royal Air Force is cooperating, and with Bentham at that.”

Captain Archibald Bentham was Britain’s leading ace with something like forty-two planes to his credit.

“And you the highest ranking man on the list,” sniffed Shaw. “In command!”

“Shut up, you pot-bellied kewpie!” commanded Lake without heat. “What do you suppose is on the general’s mind, Colonel?”

“God knows,” grunted Shafer. “Do those other three names mean anything to you?”

Lake read them again. George Groody—John Evans—

“Why, Groody and Evans are the guys who forced down that German dirigible near London and flew it back over Germany and bombed the ammunition depot!”

“And what about Second Lieutenant Ezekiel Benjamin?” inquired Shafer.

“The name’s familiar,” grinned Lake, “but I can’t place it immediately.”

“He’s the bird that was condemned to death by a general court for killing another officer, was finally let off—although you may not know this—because the doctors didn’t give him more than three months to live anyway on account of a wound. You needn’t spread this around, but I understand he’s back on flying duty because he’s a nut. Gave the Germans the devil one day on the Front and is in physical and mental shape to give them more now!”

“Sure,” Lake burst forth. “He’s the guy that no sooner got his commission than he walked straight out to find some kiwi officer who’s persecuted him while he was a cadet—beat him up—”

“And the kiwi eventually died,” interjected Shafer.

“He went out and knocked down four Germans the same day and came back to be arrested for murder,” Shaw finished. “A swell outfit, with the craziest coot of them all in command!”

CHAPTER V

DEAD MEN’S FLIGHT

AND so it happened that Lieutenant Colonel Stormy Lake, accompanied by von Baer, alias Stark, and two guards, was on his way to G.H.Q. the next morning in an official Dodge. The flyer had had quite a day and not a bad night. He half dozed for a while, and did not see von Baer thrust something into the pocket of his trench coat, which was flung over the foot locker.

The ride was mostly a silent one. The German, whom Stormy thought of now as Baby Face, had been by way of being a guest of the squadron the night before. With no more warmth than an electric light, he had accepted hospitality as a gentleman should. He was on his way to G.H.Q. for questioning.

They were within two miles of their destination when Stormy brought up the subject.

“Listen, von,” he said crisply. “I haven’t opened my yap. I’ve decided not to. If it hadn’t been for you, I wouldn’t be here to say anything, so I guess we’re even. The boys’ll notify your uncle—drop a note. If by any chance they get wise to the real truth about you, I expect you’ll protect me. In other words, I had no reason to think you a spy—you’d got rid of anything incriminating before I saw you.”

“I understand. But I can see no possible way they can find out anything.”

“You never can tell.”

They were talking in tones too low to reach the guards.

“As a matter of fact,” Stormy went on thoughtfully, “there were other things you could have done, you know.”

“Such as?”

“Such as taking off your fake uniform, leaving it in the ship, bailing out, and letting the ship fall. Anything in-criminating would have been burned. If you weren’t a Red Devil, and a von Baer to boot, I’d say you were nuts to ram me in the first place and to save my life in the second.”

“What was it you said last night?” inquired the German with a wintry little smile. “My tender heart is my ruination. I could not bear to see one so young die—”

“Well, what’s done is done. And here we are.”

They climbed out in front of the old chateau which was G.H.Q., and as the guards arranged themselves on

either side of the boyish German, Lake thrust out his hand.

"*Auf Wiedersehen*," he grinned. "The grub isn't bad, and maybe I'll be seeing you."

"*Auf Wiedersehen*," repeated von Baer. "Good luck with your enemy—Colonel Ross. Perhaps he does not hate you as much as you think—"

"Say, tell him a way to get my scalp, and he'll send you back to Germany in a private car," grinned Stormy.

The chauffeur parked the car and lit a cigarette. "All flyers," he thought to himself, "are crazy."

Which was about what the lanky, black-haired flyer was thinking as he passed from office to office on his way to General Mallory. Perhaps he had done wrongly in protecting von Baer. If he had, that was too bad, and he didn't regret it. Somehow, though, taken in conjunction with mysterious special duty under the very eye of Ross, he had a feeling that for once he had better watch his step.

He did not see Ross as he was passed from adjutant to adjutant on the way to the general's office. He had borrowed a hundred and fifty francs from Shaw before leaving, and had no fear of the colonel.

"Hello, Lake. How are you?" Mallory greeted him, and arose from his desk to thrust out his hand.

Stormy, who had gestured vaguely toward his head in the beginning of a salute, detoured his hand toward the general's.

"Good, thanks, General."

THE hawk-faced chief of the air service in France gazed up at his troublesome subordinate with a twinkle in his bold eyes.

"We're court-martialing you for negligence in not shooting down that balloon and for causing extra expense to the government in sending ships to round it up. When are you going to quit being a wild whisker in Uncle Sam's beard?"

"Well, my intentions were to bother the enemy, sir—"

"Your only intention was to have some fun," snapped the general caustically. "Well, Stormy, inasmuch as you're bound to go fooling around, we've decided that your fooling might as well have an objective."

"Yes, sir."

Mallory gestured toward a chair, and started striding up and down the shabbily rich room. Short, broad-shouldered, a graduate of West Point and a fanatic about flying since the days of Bleriot, he was reputed to know more about military aviation than any other man living. At forty-two he was the youngest brigadier general in the Allied armies, had earned his

rank. He was no one to be fooled with, not by Stormy Lake or anyone else.

"The others'll be dropping in before long," Mallory said. "I don't want to go over the ground too many times, but I'll tell you all about it, and you can pass it on to the others if I leave out anything. By the accident of rank, you'll be in command."

Stormy nodded. Mallory was taking this seriously, he reflected. The whirr of typewriters, the ringing of phone bells, the thud of hurrying feet on all sides' composed a symphony of humming activity.

The general's next sentence was unexpected.

"You know about the Red Devil Squadron the Boches have—more than anyone else, I presume."

"More facts than anybody else," Stormy corrected him.

"Exactly! Exactly!" barked the general. "They're famous all over the world. Tonight at a million dinner tables—Allied, German, neutral—they'll be discussed admiringly. Their name will be mentioned at least once by most of the millions of men we have under arms, and by every German. Do you see what I'm getting at?"

"Not exactly, sir—yet."

"That freak, grandstanding, theatrical outfit of crazy squareheads is a fine fighting tool for the Germans—grant that. But they're more than that. They're tough on the morale of the Allies, and a great stimulant to the morale of the Germans."

"I get you. The Boches forget a lot of things that aren't so good—"

"While the man in the trench chuckles proudly over the latest achievement of von Baer and his men!" Mallory finished for him. "What they did last night, for instance, will be discussed more than an important victory for us somewhere along the Front. They're like the home-town champion—and the home town is Germany in this case. The country's proud of them. They root for them. War or no war, every sportsman in the world has a private, guilty chuckle every time the famous Red Devils make monkeys of us."

"I believe you're right, sir."

"I know I'm right," corrected Mallory incisively. "Baron von Baer is an influence on the morale of every country in this war, and a sympathy getter for Germany in neutral countries. I hate to admit it, but you yourself, breaking every military, civil, and any other law there may be, a flying fool, have been and are in somewhat the same position as an individual that the Red Devils are as a squadron. If you try to take advantage of it, I'll break you to a private, but I'll bet that the President of the United States chuckled over his coffee at the thought of you, defying all orders,

cutting that balloon loose and presenting it, complete with crew, to your squadron.”

“I never thought of it that way,” Stormy grinned.

Mallory paused for a breath. “We agree that even our own men have a sneaky feeling that the Red Devils are more than a match for anything we can put out. The Thirty-first—and you personally—did two grand jobs; but they were just two minor setbacks in the wild career of Germany’s crazy squadron. Last night, for instance, the entire Red Devil outfit dropped twenty thousand feet out of the sky, and blew up the Marne ammunition depot. Half their men were killed—but what do they care? They’ve got a waiting list of thousands, and the red-blooded boy doesn’t live in Germany who doesn’t dream of breaking his neck in the suicide squadron.”

LAKE nodded. So von Baer had got the great ammunition dump, had he? It was probably the outstanding flying achievement of the war.

“We’re going to have an outfit like the Red Devils—we’re going to put a team in the field to contest for the all-around catch-as-catch-can championship of the aerial madhouse, and you’re chief lunatic!”

“Thanks.”

“That’s wrong, of course. We’re forming an outfit of aerial shock troops, made up of specially qualified flyers. The nucleus will be five men. Their duty will be to perform unusually hazardous and out-of-the-ordinary flying duty. Wherever action is thickest, there they’ll be. Special missions requiring a high degree of skill, initiative, daring, and downright flying genius will be assigned to them. The ships will be the finest specially strengthened and speeded-up crates we can furnish. You’ll be given a nickname—probably the ‘Blackbirds’—and the propaganda machine will publicize it in the news-papers of the world. And I hope you’ll make good on the publicity.”

Lake leaped to his feet.

“It would be one of the finest strokes of the war to wipe out the Red Devils.” snapped the general. “It would have effects a million times more important than the destruction of a hundred times that many ships and men of any other squadron. As Colonel Ross pointed out—”

“Has Colonel Ross got anything to do with this special flight?” Lake interrupted tensely.

“As my chief of staff he’ll be in immediate charge. While I’m away in Paris for the Inter-Allied Conference, he’ll supervise everything. You’ll have a certain amount of autonomy, be expected to show initiative, and to strike while the iron’s hot. But, your

regular orders will come direct from this office.” He stopped as the door opened.

“Lieutenant Groody and Lieutenant Evans reporting, sir,” announced the orderly.

“Send them in,” commanded the general, and a moment later the two dirigible pirates stalked into the room.

Stalk was exactly what they did. Lieutenant George Groody, in the lead, was an inch or two over six feet and he walked with a deliberate bent-kneed stride. In one hand he held a black cigar.

“Good morning, General,” he said. “Is the world fairly safe for democracy this morning?”

“It’s in terrible shape,” grinned the general. “Hello, Slim.”

The gentleman so addressed was six feet six inches tall, and as thin as a cafeteria sandwich. His long, humorously twisted nose crinkled when he grinned.

“Good morning, sir,” he said. “This is a very vulgar hour in the morning to get a man up.”

It was plain that the pair of flyers were on terms of the most friendly intimacy with the chief whom all the airmen idolized. He flew over the lines himself, on occasion, and flew well, and had never ordered a pilot to do a thing he would not have done himself.

“Meet Stormy Lake,” said the general. “This is Slim Evans and George Groody.”

Lake shook hands with the saturnine Groody and the human flagpole who was Evans, and breathed a sigh of relief. Here were a couple of onions who were after his own heart. The two insulted each other smilingly, conducted mutual inspections, and liked what they saw.

“Sit down and I’ll skip over what I have just been telling Lake here,” said the general.

CHAPTER VI

Ross’s REVENGE

BOTH flyers folded up in chairs, and Groody inserted his unlit cigar in one corner of his mouth. Long, narrow, sloping eyes gazed at the general below lowered lids as though the hawk-faced pilot was laughing sardonically at the whole business.

“That brings you up to date,” the general concluded. “Anything I’ve left out, Stormy here can tell you.”

Lake had been thinking of Colonel Anthony Ross and paying little attention to what Mallory had been saying. Sometimes, Stormy Lake kidded himself, but not where Tony Ross was concerned. His dealings with the colonel had rarely been as pleasant even on the surface, as the presence of the women had forced them to be the night before. In connection with that

girl back in San Antonio and the three court-martials, there had been private moments when Ross's positive hatred had glowed balefully from his eyes and crackled viciously from his lips.

"What he could do to me is a shame," Lake thought. "Could do, nothing—will do!"

"So," the general went on, "we've made some preparations. Five specially built Sopwiths with rotary motors, braced here and there to make them stronger and stream-lined to make them faster, painted black just for publicity purposes, are ready and waiting for you on the airdrome at Malais. Replacements will be ready within two or three days and the crew to take care of them is made up of crack mechanics.

You will have no real base. The most convenient airdrome for each job—French, English, or American—will be your base and you will fly from place to place as needed or convenient. Your crew will be flown along after you by ships of the squadron you are leaving. On these airdromes, you will be under the orders of the C.O. thereof, as far as discipline and all that goes, but your flying orders you will take only from G.H.Q."

"What death-defying stunt are we supposed to perform first, to get a reputation?" grinned Slim Evans.

"Tangle with the Red Devils," the general informed them genially "From what I know of you and the other fellows, Bentham and Benjamin, and from what I know of the ships you're going to fly, I don't think there's any limit to what you can do if you click as an organization. You can be—"

Again the door opened and Second Lieutenant Ezekiel Benjamin was announced. Every man in the room stiffened a bit and every eye sought the door. It was filled promptly by a pair of shoulders which the owner thereof almost had to turn sidewise to get through the opening.

Like an awkward bull, advancing suspiciously into strange territory, Benjamin walked forward. His short neck and large head were carried well forward as though he were prepared to leap at and butt his way through any obstacle by main force. A pair of turbulent, hard eyes darted from face to face. The jaw of a bulldog jutted forth truculently. A livid scar zigzagged across his forehead and another one ran from his left cheek bone across his angular jaw and into the flesh of his thick neck.

He planted himself in the center of the floor. He was wearing an enlisted man's uniform of issue khaki, with cheap leather puttees, and the ornaments of a second lieutenant added. Below the muddy puttees, he wore a huge pair of ordinary issue shoes. His hamlike hand raised in awkward salute.

"I'm Lieutenant Ezekiel Benjamin," he said.

General Mallory thrust out his hand. "Glad to know you, Benjamin," he said. "Meet the gang. Lake, here, will tell you what it's all about."

He performed the introductions and Benjamin grunted a suspicious acknowledgment of each.

"Captain Bentham won't arrive until ten o'clock tonight. Your duty doesn't begin until day after tomorrow morning, although you are to be at Malais before noon tomorrow, and Nancy isn't terribly far away," the general stated. "Why don't you all go over there and get acquainted and talk things over?"

"A pregnant suggestion," Stormy grinned promptly. "Say, General, I've got a hundred francs in my pocket that I owe Colonel Ross, but otherwise I'm broke until pay day. Any chance of making a touch for a hundred until pay day?"

"Sure. Keep what you've got. I'll pay Ross."

"Now that's an idea," stated Evans. "I've got fifteen francs myself. How are we going to enjoy our vacation if we're broke?"

"I happen to have plenty on me," Mallory told them. "Here's five hundred. Have a good time on me."

"There's something suspicious in this kind-heartedness," stated Groody. "Feeling sort of guilty because you know we're not going to be here long and that a little bust today is likely to be our last one?"

"Well," said the general blithely, "yes and no. How about you, Benjamin."

"I got money" stated Benjamin. "Okay. If you decide before five o'clock that you're going to run shy, call me up."

"Now I know there's something wrong!" stated Groody.

"Just fattening you up for the slaughter," grinned the general.

BUT when the flyers had filed out, his grin was obliterated. He sat down at his desk and stared for a moment at the wall. What he and Ross had been talking over for two days was suspiciously like sending so many bulls into the ring. He had never become accustomed to sending his young men to their deaths.

He would have been much more upset, and Messrs. Groody, Evans, and Lake much less exultant, and Ezekiel Benjamin far more belligerent and sullen right then, had the officers mentioned been flies on the wall of a little room up under the roof of the rambling old chateau. It was assigned to the Department of Military Intelligence, and Ober Lieutenant Franz Baby Face von Baer, alias Stark, was facing Colonel Anthony M. Ross across a bare little table while two guards remained out of earshot beyond the closed door.

"I don't know why this comic-opera stuff is necessary, and I don't even know why I consented to see you alone," Ross was saying harshly. "What have you got to say to me that you didn't want to say to the Intelligence officers?"

The young German stared blankly at the heavy face before him.

"I am interested in my freedom, have information to trade for my freedom, and prefer to make the proposition to you," he said carefully.

"Why?"

"Because I know that you have been acquainted with Lieutenant Colonel Lake for a long time, have more reason than anyone else to know how criminally insubordinate and dangerously impulsive he is, and because you are in a position to handle the whole matter efficiently."

Ross's eyes widened.

"Watch yourself, sir," he snapped harshly. "If you so much as hint that I would be willing to hurt our cause or help even one individual enemy for the sake of evening up a private feud, you will never get out of this door alive!"

"But no," smiled Baby Face. "One German flyer who has little if any information of value to the Allies, and could not be forced to give it if he had it, is of no particular value to you. Am I right?"

"Right."

"But information that one of your own officers is disloyal is of value, is it not?"

Ross leaned across the table. "Are you trying to tell me that Lieutenant Colonel Lake is a traitor?" he rasped.

"I'll say nothing unless I have your word that if my information is valuable enough, I will be exchanged immediately—dropped over the German lines in return for an American flying officer being returned to you. I guarantee the cooperation of Baron von Baer and the German government. Our end of the bargain will be lived up to. I'll leave the value of the information to you. If it seems of importance to you, I must have your word that what I have said to you about myself will be held in the strictest confidence while I remain a prisoner."

Colonel Ross thought back no farther than the night before in the cantina in Vidal. His face flushed dully. "You have my word on both counts," he said.

Von Baer leaned forward. "I flew over your lines and had a combat with Lake as a prospective spy in the uniform of an American flying officer," he said levelly.

"What?" snapped Ross.

"I will prove it in good time," von Baer went on. "To be sure, I saved Colonel Lake's life, by carrying

him down in my parachute. I offered him his life in return for his silence about the fact that I was in an American uniform, which of course was my death warrant. The blouse I wore, concealed by Lake himself, is hidden in a shell crater we landed in and can be located easily. But that is not all."

The colonel was breathing quickly, his face deeply flushed.

"I am prepared to sign a written statement, if I get my freedom for it, that Colonel Lake blackmailed me for the large sum of money—ten thousand francs, which I was carrying. He demanded it in return for concealing the fact that I was a spy; I'll swear that in the air, knowing that I was a spy, he had every opportunity to kill me and take my parachute and save his own life. Instead he guaranteed to help me escape if and when I was able to pay him twenty thousand francs which he was sure my uncle, Baron von Baer, would forward to me."

"If you ask me," Ross said slowly, "I think you're a liar!"

Baby Face smiled. Even the over-wrought Ross felt a touch of the same feeling that made the Red Devils stay a little aloof from the girl-faced German with the eyes of a killer, who, on three different occasions, had followed helpless and wounded Allied airmen on their last flutter to earth and used them for target practice.

"The hidden blouse in the crater where we landed will prove that I tell the truth," he said calmly.

ROSS leaped to his feet and walked up and down the floor like a caged beast.

"I believe that part of it," he said finally, "but the money I can't—"

"Leave the money out then," Baby Face said levelly, "although you will find ten thousand francs concealed in Lieutenant Colonel Lake's trench coat in the automobile outside."

"You could have planted them there," the tortured Ross said huskily.

"But I couldn't have planted the blouse in the crater without Lake's knowledge," smiled the German. "Surely you see what his protection of me means. Had I been captured as a spy, you would have had a perfect right to shoot me. In return for granting him his life, the average spy will and does give information of the utmost value. Every interest of the Allies demanded that Lieutenant Colonel Lake do his duty even had it actually been necessary for him to save his life through me, which it was not. Surely Colonel Ross, you must realize that it is to the interest of your country to use the information I have given you. If it is of personal satisfaction to you, who cares?"

Colonel Ross walked heavily toward the door. "I'll be back here in a few minutes," he said slowly, and with a word to the guards, he walked down narrow steps. He made his way directly to the Dodge.

In a cantina, not a hundred yards away, Stormy Lake was telling the story of what he called "the maverick balloon."

Ross, with a word of explanation to the chauffeur, took the trench coat, which was flung carelessly across the foot locker, and carried it into his office. In an envelope in the inside pocket was ten thousand francs. And Lake had been broke the evening before.

Up and down the small room, the lowering-browed colonel lumbered heavily. He hated Baby Face von Baer with all his soul, but he hated Stormy Lake more. He had scarcely admitted it to himself, but he had believed, and cherished the belief, that before a week of duty as C.O. of the Blackbirds Lake would be dead.

Back in San Antonio, the feud had started, and with the passing of time it had grown into a veritable cancer eating into the very soul of the brooding Ross. He hated Lake's slim youth, his world-wide fame, his reckless self-confidence—every quality and asset which the awkward bear of a colonel lacked.

What a revenge it would be—Lake dead—and disgraced in death. That girl back in San Antonio would rue the day she had ever chosen the impulsive flyer above him—

"I'll get the written confession about the money, but I'll never use it," he told himself. "If the blouse is there, I've got to do my duty—"

He almost looked into his own heart and admitted what he saw there then, but he turned away in time. And, as he walked into the chateau, he was persuaded that he was a conscientious officer performing an important duty without fear, favor, or prejudice.

CHAPTER VII

"THANK ME—AND DIE!"

LATE the next afternoon, roaring through a cloudless sky reddened by the rays of the setting sun, Lieutenant Colonel Stormy Lake led his Blackbirds into the spacious airdrome of the Ninth Pursuit Group. It was the airdrome nearest the front—less than thirty miles from it, in fact—and the Blackbirds had received orders only three hours before at Malais.

Consequently, the rangy young C.O., flying at the apex of the five-ship V, knew that action was imminent and for the first time in his hectic career as a combat pilot, a touch of apprehension chilled the tingles that rippled over him.

Three times in the past two days he had led them into the air in formation flights to become accustomed

to each other's flying. In addition, he had watched them individually as they felt out their ships in test flights. Each test hop had turned into an exhibition of aerial acrobatics which took the breath of thousands of pop-eyed soldiers on the ground.

The black ships, horribly beautiful as they swept through the air like five shining black projectiles, had given those master flyers a new lease on life. Their airmanship had seemed, to the expert Lake, absolutely perfect. At that exact moment, diving at one hundred and eighty miles in formation, it was as though the five planes were fastened to some framework.

Mindful of General Mallory's suggestion that showmanship be applied to the maneuvers of the Blackbirds, the flight was hurtling toward the airdrome in as tight a formation as the spectators on the ground had ever seen.

On the ground, Colonel Anthony Ross, standing by himself, watched with sullen admiration as the formation shot across the field. A hundred pilots looked on with critical approval, and hundreds of mechanics with outspoken admiration. There was a flair in the way the formation swung on its circle of the field, the inside leg of the V throttling down, the outside leg flying with full gun so that not even in the turn did their ships vary position.

There was a world of assurance in the way they ground-looped and slid their ships into the line as accurately as a pool shark sinking a ball into a pocket.

Their mechanics were awaiting them; musette bags over their shoulders, the Blackbirds gathered in a close knot, and cigarettes burning, started for headquarters, as a unit.

Before their acquaintances among the pilots of the Ninth could reach them, the burly figure of Colonel Ross, immaculately attired as usual, confronted them. Stormy's throat was a little dry and his stomach felt a little empty.

"Tony's right on the job—in person," he thought.

He didn't salute. It wasn't a deliberate refusal—he just didn't think of it. "Colonel Lake, will you come with me to headquarters? The rest of you can go to your quarters. Some of the boys will show you."

He turned and walked rapidly toward headquarters. Lake followed more leisurely, grinning greetings to occasional pilots he knew and responding to hard-boiled badinage about the five undertakers and their coffins.

He was fifty yards behind Ross, as the colonel mounted the steps of the frame building. Inside Ross awaited him at the door of an empty office. He gestured Stormy into the room and sat down behind the desk, his eyes avoiding Lake's. He picked up a sealed envelope and tossed it across the desk.

“Read it first,” he said.

For a moment Lake didn’t look up. When he did a bleak, thin-lipped smile deepened around his mouth. His face was a little pale and very hard.

“Well, Colonel,” he said coldly, “I guess I won’t be bothering you much longer.”

“What do you mean?”

“If I fly like a madman, and win three combats all alone, I’ll finally reach the place where I commit suicide,” he said. “Whose idea is this? Yours?”

“Yes.”

“I thought so. Well, I suppose I ought to get some satisfaction out of knowing that you had to enlist the German army to get me!”

“Watch what you say, sir!” Ross’s voice was shaking.

“Why?” snapped Lake with coldly grinning contempt. “I, who am about to die, insult you!”

ROSS, half crouched behind his desk, looked up at him like a black-maned lion about to spring.

“There’s one silver lining to the cloud,” Lake went on, his face pale and his tight lips bloodless. “Inasmuch as I’ve got nothing to lose, I can have the pleasure of telling you that you’re a yellow-bellied murderer without guts enough to come out in the open, and so shy of spiritual guts that you, a colonel, have got to hide behind a war to murder a man under you because he can outthink, outfly, outfight, and outflirt you the best day you ever lived!”

“If you’re through for a minute,” Ross said with a curious dignity which the maddened Lake had never felt in the man before, “I’ll point out a few things that you, who think you know everything, will be surprised to learn.”

Lake shrugged and lit a cigarette.

“Number one,” came Ross’s heavy bass, “for certain reasons—good and sufficient—the General Staff has ordered that your prisoner, von Baer, be flown over the lines tonight and dropped by parachute in German territory. An American pilot will be similarly returned behind our lines in exchange.”

“Good for Baby Face!” Lake said.

“To that end the Germans will expect that an Allied ship will fly over at midnight tonight and all German pilots will have been warned not to molest that ship. In fact, they have been told that it will be a black plane—”

“Oh, I see,” commented Stormy unpleasantly. “By a little ingenious double-crossing, you are making it certain that I will have the opportunity to be blown up!”

“Yes. You have an excellent chance of being considered for the ship which is carrying von Baer

over, and of reaching Laussenbach unmolested. It’s near the Red Devil’s airdrome. Why do you consider it a certainty that you will be blown up?”

“If I dropped this specially prepared bomb on the exact spot mentioned, I won’t be more than a couple of hundred feet above it when she blows up. If you used those wings you’re so proud of on your floosies, you might know a little bit about bombing from a pursuit ship!”

“All right, have it your way,” grated Ross, rising slowly to his feet. “And thank me for being kind enough to let you die a hero with your boots on, instead of against a wall, mowed down by the bullets of your own countrymen like the traitorous rat you are!”

The last six words were like so many blows that stunned Lake, sent him reeling. His jaw dropped, and there was nothing but anguished bewilderment in his eyes as he listened helplessly to the blazing indictment. Had there been any real doubt of Ross’s disbelief in the blackmail story, it had disappeared before Lake’s patent astonishment, but the colonel’s very self-contempt blazed him into an almost hysterical spasm of hatred.

“I’ve got the money, the blouse, and the confession—or accusation,” he concluded. “So thank me, Lake, for giving you a chance to die over the lines!”

Stormy was uncannily quiet. At last it had come—at last he had thrust his reckless head into a noose which had tightened around it. Vaguely he knew that he was internationally famous, and that the story of his trial and disgrace would circle the globe. Even were he acquitted of treason, there were enough damning facts to disgrace him forever.

White-faced he asked slowly: “I don’t deny giving that skunk a break. But do you, even, believe the money part of it?”

“I can’t go beyond the evidence.” It was like a sentence of death from Ross’s pale lips. He, too, seemed to be suffering—

“Okay. There isn’t a way in the world I can make that Boche rat tell the truth. I wouldn’t be surprised if you and he figured out this together. You’d better hope I get mine tonight, Ross—because if I live, I’ll live to get you and Baby Face where I want you, if I hang for it!”

He said that gently, and the blood slowly drained from his enemy’s face. Very deliberately, Stormy turned and walked slowly out of the office.

He lived the next few hours in a mental world of his own—alone in his quarters. It was ten o’clock when he talked to Slim Evans and George Groody. He had known them but two days, but they swore an oath

with eyes that burned balefully and lips that snarled their sincerity. Stormy Lake, lone wolf, regretted that it was his last night on earth, because he would have liked to know those men better.

IT was eleven-thirty when he started for the line—alone. He must fly over the lines a few minutes after von Baer was expected to go over. If there was a reception committee of German ships awaiting von Baer, they would be gone. Lake would fly a different course, but one not so far distant from von Baer's that he might not be mistaken for the German.

Meanwhile, forty miles away and ten thousand feet high, Baby Face von Baer had just completed the job of attaching his own parachute to the astonished person of Lieutenant George Adams, and throwing that protesting gentleman over the side of the two-seated ship. How could Adams have been expected to know that the British major from the Department of Intelligence in Paris who had interviewed Baby Face was really the German officer who had crossed the lines with Baby Face two days before, and that he had left a gun with Baby Face?

And there was no way of Stormy Lake's knowing that even then Baby Face was casting blank, covetous eyes on the airdrome of the Ninth Pursuit Group. It was the greatest concentration of aircraft in one place in all France, for one thing. It was only a twenty minutes' flight from where von Baer was, for another. And thirdly, he had overheard that it was the temporary headquarters of the mysterious Blackbirds.

CHAPTER VIII EAGLE'S PREY

TEN minutes later, Lake was sweeping around the airdrome in wide circles climbing for altitude before starting over the German lines. His sturdy black ship flew a bit heavily because of the three-hundred-pound load it was carrying—two hundred and fifty of it T.N.T. and other explosives, concealed in the specially prepared bombs, one of which hung under each wing.

He was four thousand feet high and nearly a mile north of the airdrome. He was constantly looking about him for signs of anything unusual in the air or on the ground.

And he found it. In a split second he had forgotten his mission and his fate and, leaning forward tensely, was watching a ship that was a mile north of him and four thousand feet higher than he. It was diving toward the airdrome out of the moonlit sky and unless his eyes deceived him, the ship was painted black.

"Baby Face as sure as anything!" And now that he had learned from hard experience the way in which the

young German's mind worked, he deduced the truth. "Got rid of his pilot and is out for some fun. He'll give the airdrome a bath of bullets that will just about knock everybody off—"

Baby Face had seen him. The angle, of the dive changed. It became steeper and the two-seater was banking as it dived to circle around and come down on Stormy's tail. Lake changed his course, headed for the airdrome, and in a screaming dive sent his over-laden scout on its way to warn the field. He wouldn't have a chance in an air combat with those bombs on his wings. They made the ship too heavy to maneuver properly, and a bullet which found its mark in either one of them would blow him and his ship to perdition. He must stay in the air, divert Baby Face's attention until ships could take off from the airdrome—and to do it they must know what was afoot.

Now he was half a mile from the airdrome and half a mile back of him, three thousand feet higher than he, Baby Face was thundering earthward in a terrific dive pointed squarely at Lake. Lake flew with his drawn face over his shoulder, watching for the red specks to start dancing in the muzzles of the two-seater's guns.

He was over the edge of the excited airdrome when those specks of flame started dancing a thousand feet behind him. Stormy himself was but a thousand feet high and his scout was traveling at close to two hundred miles an hour, its motor wide open and the sturdy Sopwith doing the best it could do. He flung it into a vertical bank and sent it streaking at right angles to Baby Face's course.

On the line he saw the still huddled Blackbirds leap into frantic activities. If only he could stay in the air long enough. Baby Face must chase him and knock him down before he started shooting up the field. So he sped eastward and up above him his Nemesis followed like the tail of a kite.

Lake dodged and twisted, zoomed, and dived for his life. Bullets penetrated the tip of his right wing—once when one panged from the motor before him, a bullet hole in his left wing almost made his heart stop as he thought how close it had come to the deadly explosive screened below.

He flew straight east, losing altitude every second. Baby Face was close upon him now, half a mile east of the field. Suddenly Stormy, barely six hundred feet above the ground, did a vertical bank.

Baby Face had been taken by surprise. Now Stormy was zipping underneath him back toward the field, and ahead of him he saw three ships roaring into view above the hangars which rimmed the field. Again he banked—northward this time, his ship answering loggily to the control of the stick and rudder. Now five hundred feet above him, Baby Face had turned too—

turned to meet the threat of three black ships which had now spread fan-wise, climbing desperately to knock him down.

For a second, Lake waited. Baby Face could get him now—

But Baby Face seemed to have forgotten him. The German had five hundred feet of altitude in his favor, but now still other ships were rising from the Ninth's airdrome. Not even Baby Face von Baer, alias Stark, felt inclined to battle those odds and so he turned eastward, diving to get extra speed, and ran for it.

Lake, white and shaking in the reaction from those horrible minutes as a helpless decoy duck, filled with explosive, flew due north. There was no sense of him and his bombs being anywhere near the scene of action.

"If they only could get him and not kill him."

He looked back of him, but could see nothing except little pin points of light where ships were flying a mile away. A cloud passed over the moon and the ships themselves were practically invisible.

There was a moment of wild exultation as he realized that he had saved the outfit and had come through unscathed himself.

"For what?" he asked himself bitterly and savagely threw his ship into a bank which turned it eastward; started it climbing on the midnight ride which he knew was to be his last.

HE couldn't know that back on the airdrome even Colonel Anthony M. Ross, with his own life at stake, had comprehended as well as the taut hundreds of flyers and mechanics, what Lake and his bombs had done. As the haggard flyer crossed the lines, fifteen thousand feet high, he would have been astounded could he have visualized the almost hysterical scene which was taking place on the line. The Blackbirds had not been born to be caged, and Colonel Anthony M. Ross was human after all.

There was Laussenbach—ten miles ahead and nearly four miles below him. Apparently a lonely, battle-scarred old castle—really, below the ground—below that tiny spot east of the castle which looked like a garage, a huge concentration of poison gas and explosives.

For almost an hour, forcing his overladen but overpowered ship ever higher, he had flown high above the shadowed earth toward his goal. Twenty miles away was the airdrome of the Red Devils. He thought of them as he hung in the sky for a moment—a hovering black eagle about to strike.

Then the eagle folded its wings and dropped toward its prey.

Faster and faster went the shining black ship—higher and higher screamed the song of the wires. Not by so much as an inch did he vary his course, and as he sighted along the cowlings ahead of him the growing black dot was squarely in front of his wide, unwinking eyes.

Two hundred miles an hour—two hundred and fifty. His hand eased back on the throttle, slowly to relieve the motor which was almost shaking itself from the ship. Struts danced in their sockets, the ship was quivering in every atom of its being.

What a way to go!

Ten thousand feet—five thousand. His hand on the throttle was that of a master musician on the strings of his instrument—now slowly throttling, now opening wide to clean the motor and avoid cooling it too fast. Not that it made any difference—

Three miles, three and a half, that supertorpedo with its nerveless pilot hurtled toward its target.

This, then, was Stormy Lake's ride into the great beyond. And because he knew that it was, and had cast the last die, he was suddenly glad. Everything was miraculously clear and unimportant.

A half mile above the ground, the nose of his ship pointed toward the small building which marked hidden stores of gas and powder, underground passages and laboratories, the human flame of the Western Front threw back his head and laughed.

THEN he was a motionless, hooded, bulging-eyed Nemesis, sighting along the cowlings through the propeller which was merely a circle of silver light. His left hand had left the throttle, and two loops, on the end of wires, were in his steady fingers.

He jerked them. A sleek, three-hundred-pound torpedo flashing toward the earth, gave birth suddenly to two little ones.

Instantly Lake banked. A split second later, holding his ship level, he was darting to the right at three hundred miles an hour. As the very earth seemed torn asunder, the Sopwith was zooming, as though that great mass of flame and pall of red-shot smoke had flung the Sopwith back to whence it came.

The universe was rent by shattering blasts. The Sopwith, a helpless leaf in the clutches of a tornado, was flung hundreds of yards through the air.

Its wheels actually touched the ground, and bounced, before Stormy got control of it again. His mad speed had carried him clear, and the specially constructed, sharp-tipped, metal-protected bombs had penetrated to their mark.

He looked back of him, and then flew like mad, westward toward the lines. That pall of poison smoke was rolling toward him. In its opaque depths fire

glowed sullenly. And beneath it a devil's tattoo of deep roaring explosions, the crackling rat-a-tat-tat of fired shells, the shattering boom of detonations which ripped the earth wide open turned a mile-square area into a maniac's dream of living hell.

He never saw or heard the four Blackbirds fighting the five Red Devils who had been waiting to meet Baby Face, and been pursuing Stormy for miles. They were high above the spreading smoke. He did see a thundering formation of Ninth Pursuit Group planes.

With sudden clouds which turned the night black, he made it back to the airdrome. In formation, battered and bullet-torn, the four black planes came back, too, four Red Devils to their credit and, along with the Ninth's pilots, a well-shot-up Red Devil airdrome had been left behind.

"Yes, sir," Mr. George Groody was explaining, "Terrible Tony got wise to himself when he saw you save our necks by dragging your bombs across Baby Face's trail. He started spouting orders like Old Faithful. Before he got through the whole army air service was on its way to protect you."

"Thank you, gentlemen," rotund, moustached, pudgy little Bentham said coldly. "I'll leave, if you'll pardon me. Good night."

Monocle in eye. like an overfed little broker, the supercilious Englishman left the smoke-filled room. Benjamin, glowering in a corner because he'd winged Baron von Baer and hadn't had a chance to kill him, growled: "He thinks he's too high-falootin' good for us."

"Let him think anything he likes!" stated the grimy Evans spaciously. "Did you see that glacier melt and drown three ships in two minutes? What a man!"

"Good evening, Blackbirds," they were greeted.

It was Ross, his clothes torn, his shoulder bare and bandaged, his face pale. But he was smiling. Dead silence greeted, and he went on: "Baby Face just died in the hospital, but I got the truth, Lake. You're cleared of the money thing, and the spy stuff has taken care of itself. You gentlemen probably don't want me around, so I'll say good night."

Two hours later, somewhat more high in spirits than usual, Lake brought up the subject.

"I never could figure why that girl meant so much, anyhow," he stated under cover of the noise made by twelve flyers who were standing around. "She had a husband anyway—"

"What?" grunted Ross.

"Sure; sergeant of artillery."

"And I spent all that hard-earned money on her."

"Well," grinned Stormy, "better luck next time."

A DOUBLE RESCUE

LIEUTENANT COLONEL STORMY LAKE was leading his five Blackbirds into the airdrome which was headquarters of the Fifth Observation Group. And it may be said that the arrival of those five black planes and their five peculiar pilots was an event on any air-drome. Stormy, however, would have been the last to realize that it was a particularly important event to two members of the Fifth Observation Group and one visitor.

Subconsciously the rangy brunette and his four partners in madness realized that they had come to be always interesting to other airmen, and that sometimes that interest was of an unpleasant nature. Nevertheless, the young commanding officer would have had to be a clairvoyant to come close to comprehending the depth of emotion which stirred three separate individuals who were watching the five coal-black Sopwiths.

One was Sergeant Grayson, who was in the air at the moment, another was Colonel Danville, and the third the colonel's adjutant.

Stormy's already jumpy condition would have been intensified had the slightest hint been given him of the fact that the organization which was the Western Front's overnight sensation was distinctly unwelcome in the airdrome below.

The snarling drone of their rotary motors had been reduced to half speed. Noses pointed toward the ground at an angle of forty-five degrees, the formation still so perfect that they were like five huge black geese painted on the screen of the darkening sky, they hurtled toward the earth in a tight spiral.

For once the wild young man in the lead ship did not thrill to the matchless skill of his Blackbirds. Almost automatically he had led them into that tight spiral, but the onlookers below meant nothing to him and the four hooded figures behind him meant nothing either. All he wanted was to get on the ground, get cleaned up, and get on into Nancy. For once in his stormy career he was just about at the end of his rope. So were the other four, and he knew it.

Some things had happened on the ground and in the air in the past few days which none but the five Blackbirds knew, and none but the five Blackbirds ever would know.

Well, it wouldn't be long now, the slim young commander thought as he glanced down at the ground. It would soon be dark and this was going to be the first night in more than a week when the five Blackbirds wouldn't be roaring through the darkness over the German lines.

He wondered why the single DeHaviland a hundred yards or so off to one side had suddenly turned and

was pointing toward them, and why its single pilot had been droning steadily round and round the airdrome since the time when the Blackbirds had come into sight. He didn't like that ship staying so close to them. So many half-trained youngsters were coming up to the Front these days that you never could tell what they'd do.

"Good grief!"

He was staring stupidly at the wreck of the altimeter ahead of him on the instrument board. The glass had shattered before his eyes and a bullet hole gaped in the cardboard gauge. Automatically he zoomed straight upward out of the way of Groody and Evans. As he did so, a second bullet cut a splinter from the center section strut ahead of him.

He and all the other Blackbirds were absolutely unarmed. Their flight had been a mere fifty-mile jaunt between two Allied airdromes far behind the lines, and they had carried no ammunition.

He came out of the zoom and looked back of him. The four Blackbirds had scattered to right and left and in the center, its guns spouting fire, was the DeHaviland bearing down on the dodging, twisting, unarmed Sopwith which was being flown by Groody.

Barely fifteen hundred feet above an American airdrome, an American DeHaviland was pouring a steady stream of lead at friendly ships. Down below the airdrome was a mass of frantically milling men. Flyers were running toward the long row of ships on the line. Enlisted men were like so many distracted ants and five black Sopwiths were twisting and turning and dodging as they attempted to climb out of range of the DeHaviland's guns.

Some German spy, prepared to commit suicide, had awaited his opportunity to knock down all the Blackbirds at once. Their forays on the Germans for the past month had been such that the suicidal plan would have appealed mightily to the imagination of some fatalistic patriot. Inevitably at least two Blackbirds must bite the dust. They could not all escape.

Lake's wide eyes, blue-black now, froze fascinatingly to the picture of three ships. One was Groody's, its right wings perforated with bullet holes, dodging and twisting frantically in an endeavor to escape the ton and a half D.H., which fired remorselessly at him. The third ship was Zeke Benjamin's and that Sopwith was not climbing out of danger. Rather, it was rushing toward the D.H. from the side, its motor wide open and the squat form of Benjamin leaning forward in the cockpit as though to help it along.

So quickly did it happen that the paralyzed Lake could scarcely realize it until after it had occurred. Just

as Groody zoomed frantically and the DeHaviland's nose followed its target upward in a more loggy zoom, Benjamin's Sopwith tore squarely into the tail of the D.H. The rending crash split through the roar of the Six motors and for a second the D.H. and the Sopwith tumbled and spun dizzily through the air. They whirled around like two dogs at each other's throat, in a sort of horrible pinwheel.

THEN they separated as though both had been flung out of the vortex of an aerial whirlpool. The D.H. was nothing but a pair of wings and two cockpits. The Sopwith's fuselage was unharmed, but its left wings had telescoped back. Its right wings were unhurt and it tumbled through the air like a fly with one wing plucked off.

The D.H. started on its last nose dive to the ground. Stormy glanced at it and then forgot it completely as his eyes clung to the Sopwith. Zeke had saved at least two lives by deliberately colliding with the D.H., and now Stormy had to sit helplessly and watch the man he had often believed to be insane, but had come to like, go down to his doom.

Its propeller shattered, its motor driven back a few inches into the fuselage, its left wings a crumpled mass of wreckage hiding Benjamin from Stormy's gaze, the Sopwith was slipping downward, its undamaged wings high in the air. Gradually the nose dropped and with the right wings still pointing toward the sky, the tragic trip earthward became half a dive and half a sideslip.

Stormy found himself diving—diving as though for his very life on the trail of his crippled comrade. Motor wide open, ship quivering from nose to tail, he overtook the damaged ship. Now he could see Benjamin, his head thrust forward up through the ripped linen and shattered wood which had piled over the cockpit.

A large object detached itself from the ship and fell like a stone toward the ground. It was the motor. The shock of the collision had ripped it loose from its bed. They were a thousand feet high when the DeHaviland hit the ground. And fifty feet in front of his eyes, in the motorless Sopwith, Stormy saw Benjamin fighting his way out of the cockpit toward the undamaged right wings.

The gyrations of the Sopwith had changed into an insane aerial dance result of the loss of the motor. Tail controls and right wings undamaged, the ship was at the mercy of the air stream against them. Its nose had gone sharply upward for the moment, and then the ship seemed to turn half on its back in an upside-down dive. He saw Benjamin reach down and do something in the cockpit. Evidently he had jammed the stick all

the way forward and caught it in some wreckage to hold it there. Now it was all the way on its back.

Stormy, flying automatically, was within twenty feet of it and the ground was six hundred feet below. Benjamin was hanging to a strut, a pendulum-like figure suspended underneath the right wings. It was then that Stormy, diving directly underneath the fluttering kite to which Benjamin was hanging, angled his ship to the right a little. Alert to dive out of its way at any second, Lake got directly beneath it.

He dipped so that his whirling propeller would escape Benjamin. He yelled frantically, but could not hear his shout himself. He never realized how or when he had adjusted the speed of his own ship almost exactly to that of the crippled Sopwith. He only knew that there he was twenty feet below Benjamin's feet, directly underneath that floating bit of wreckage the next move of which no one could foretell.

He eased a bit to one side and flung his right wings upward as he zoomed a trifle as though to collide with the ship above. He felt a dull jar on his right wing and saw Benjamin's feet crash through the frail linen and wood of the Sopwith's wing.

He shoved the stick forward and to the right. The aerial outlaw above suddenly dipped downward. He hunched in his cockpit as the undamaged wings of Benjamin's ship snapped down over his own upper wings. The fuselage of the other Sopwith projected out at a slight angle from his own, but for a second it was as though his ship were carrying the other. He could not even see Benjamin except for two feet projecting through the lower side of Stormy's upper wing.

Then he saw the ground directly below him. His propeller had not been touched by the other ship and automatically he had turned the motor full on. He jerked back on the stick just in time. The wheels hit the ground heavily and the grotesque mass, like some huge ant carrying a load of debris, bounced. It turned over as it rebounded, and an instant later the propeller shattered against the ground as the nose dug into the earth. The wreckage was catapulted off Stormy's ship, and both sections of the mass did their separate somersaults. Then something hit him on the head, and the world became a total loss to Lieutenant Colonel Lake.

CHAPTER X THE CHALLENGE

WHEN Lake opened his eyes to find that he had been hauled out of the wreck and was lying on the turf, the first sight that greeted him was the quartette of Blackbirds. Ezekiel Benjamin was crouched over him as though to protect him from the feet of the milling

mob of flyers and mechanics in the background. Towering above him were Slim Evans, Groody, and Bentham.

Stormy came to with a feeling of great peace as though his frayed nerves had been quieted.

"All O.K., Zeke?" he inquired as he sat up.

There was a dull throb in his head, but otherwise he felt great.

"Sure," grunted the square-faced, bulldog-jawed shavetail. "How are you?"

"Never better," said Lake getting to his feet.

"Where's Colonel Danville?" he asked crisply.

A tall, spare captain shoved his way forward.

"Colonel Danville is waiting for you in his office," he stated.

"Well, that's a heck of a place for him to be!" snapped Lake. "Who in the world was flying that D.H.?"

"Ssh," said the captain warningly, "this is no time to talk about that."

"Let's get to this dignified colonel," snapped Lake. "Who does he think he is, anyway? I suppose we'll have to kiss his foot and salaam."

"I am his adjutant," the captain stated with an accent that came straight from the Back Bay of Boston. "He sent me to represent him, and I would thank you to make no personal remarks about your superior officer."

"Nuts," Groody said.

They started for headquarters through the gathering darkness.

"It strikes me that there's less excitement around here over a bird suddenly trying to shoot down friendly planes than seems natural. If you don't think I'm curious, you're crazy!"

"After all," Bentham said, "it's all over now, you know. Rum go, but no use in getting excited, what?"

"Well, yes and no," Lake said. "We may only be saving our necks for the Germans to break, but I like to consider any time spent in friendly territory as a sort of vacation."

"I don't notice any signs of a fatted calf having been killed for us either," remarked the saturnine Groody.

"Well, why should there be?" inquired Slim. "The babies that run away with the headlines, my boy, are never popular."

"Righto," agreed Bentham. "This—er—showing off and all that rot, you know, is getting on my nerves. Makes us into a bunch of bloody bluffs, what?"

Groody nodded. They were walking between two hangars now and the lights of headquarters were just across the road.

“That’s what the chief wanted,” he remarked, “and that’s what he’s getting. And the doughboys and all love it.”

Stormy was losing the placidity which had been the result of the physical reaction to the strain of the last few minutes. And the more he thought of the C.O. sitting there in his office, the more rapidly his gorge arose. Respect for authority had never been one of his leading characteristics.

So he did not heed the captain’s gesture to wait for a moment in the outside office, but instead led his grimy, individualistically attired crew straight into the office of Colonel Danville.

Danville looked up from his writing. His lantern jaw was thrust forward.

Somewhat hard black eyes glinted with annoyance.

Captain Redfield threw himself stiffly erect.

“Lieutenant Colonel Lake and the officers of the Blackbirds to see you, sir,” he announced.

Colonel Danville continued to grasp his pen as though it were an anchor for his poise. He was extremely young, scarcely a year older than Stormy himself, and a couple of years younger than the hard-boiled Groody.

“Would you mind waiting outside for a moment, gentlemen?” he asked in brittle phrases. “I want to have a word with Captain Redfield.”

“As a matter of fact, we would mind,” Stormy announced.

Colonel Danville was still hunched over his desk. “Indeed,” he said unpleasantly, “but I fear you will have to wait a moment or two, Colonel.”

“The heck we will!” Lake exploded. “Do you realize that we’ve just been practically shot down by a ship and pilot off your airdrome? I’ll be darned if this is any time for writing to your girl, Colonel.”

The sight of this young West Pointer, erupted into high command by the accident of a regular army second lieutenantcy at the start of the war, acting in such a high and mighty manner, infuriated him.

Shocked silence fell over the office. Captain Redfield was gasping. The Blackbirds waited with untroubled calm.

Lake leaned across the desk, that cold grin on his face. This stuffed shirt was deliberately trying to put the Blackbirds over the jumps.

“I’m not being fresh, Colonel,” he stated contemptuously, “but, by gosh, we’re bound to know what was the cause of what just happened and to do something about it even if you and your outfit don’t!”

VERY slowly Danville got to his feet, his shiny black eyes never leaving Lake’s. He was beautifully

built, as slim and wide-shouldered as Lake himself, but his narrow face was hard.

“Any disciplinary action I may care to take as a result of your impertinence will be attended to in due course, Lake,” he said. “Rather than make a scene at present, I will tell you that the ship was flown by Sergeant Grayson, who had a spotless record of fifteen years in the United States regular army. A fit of temporary insanity must be responsible for what happened. In any event, it was an entirely unexpected and unpreventable but nevertheless regrettable thing.”

The small, thick-lipped mouth widened slightly in a compressed smile.

“I am sorry to disappoint the melodramatic Blackbirds,” he went on, “but there’s no enemy plot to uncover, no important spy has been destroyed either.”

Again there was brief silence as Stormy inspected Danville with amazed dislike. Here was a young squirt putting on more dog than General Pershing was entitled to on parade. It was the irrepressible Slim Evans who broke the silence.

“My, my,” he said gently.

Danville’s eyes flickered toward him, and a dull flush mounted to the sallow skin over his cheekbones.

“Now,” he said with icy politeness, “I trust that you will see fit to grant me a word with Captain Redfield.”

“Sure,” grinned Stormy. He had Danville’s number now, and the colonel did not add up to much. He wasn’t worth resenting.

“In fact,” Lake went on with that sunny grin, “you can talk for the rest of the night as far as we’re concerned. All we want to know is where our quarters are so we can wash up and get into Nancy.”

The slim, carefully poised colonel stared at him.

“You’re not planning to go into Nancy tonight, I hope,” he said carefully.

“We certainly are,” Lake grinned.

“Orders are that no flyer leaves the airdrome except to fly until conditions change,” Danville informed him. “I regret exceedingly that the same orders which apply to an ordinary officer apply to you.”

Lieutenant Ezekiel Benjamin gave vent to a quick grunt.

“I’m going,” he announced.

Lake took a step forward, and his smile was colder now.

“Say, Colonel,” he asked slowly, “what have you got against us, anyway?”

Danville gazed at him levelly.

“The insinuation in that question is insulting, sir,” he said.

“Oh, come on, Stormy; let’s beat it!” rasped Groody. “Do we get quarters or are we supposed to sleep in hangars or dog kennels?”

Danville's head came back and his eyes became two pools of rage.

The telephone on the desk shrilled. The taut Lake relaxed a little. Danville's hand moved toward the phone and then, as though recollecting himself, he jerked his head at the shocked Redfield. Obediently the adjutant picked it up.

"Headquarters, Fifth Observation Group, adjutant speaking," he said with wooden preciseness. "Yes, sir. He is right here, sir. Very good, sir." He straightened and motioned to Stormy. "Colonel Ross at G.H.Q., Colonel," he said.

"Darn," Stormy exploded as he moved toward the phone.

He picked it up savagely. "Hello, Tony; what's on your mind?"

It was the first time he had ever called General Mallory's chief of staff, Tony. He had done it for the benefit of the very military Danville and Redfield.

"Hello, yourself," came Colonel Anthony Ross's voice. "Well, you'd better get a lot of good sleep tonight, you fellows."

"Another one of your cute jobs, I suppose?" snapped Stormy. "What do we do now—get into the Kaiser's bedroom and listen to him talk in his sleep?"

"Far from it," came Ross's heavy voice cheerily, "but a little *billet-doux* was dropped behind the lines a few minutes ago and telephoned here. Get a pencil ready and take it down."

Something in Ross's voice made a tingle run over Lake.

"Give me a pencil somebody," he snapped. "Shoot," he barked into the phone.

Lake's pencil flew over the paper before him, and his lean face was a study in expressions. Danville, in spite of himself, was leaning forward as though fascinated.

"What do you think of that?" Ross crowed over the phone. "We've got their goats, boy; we've got their goats!"

"Now isn't that just dandy," Lake snapped back. "What a picnic! We can scarcely wait to have all that fun! Is that all, Tony?"

"That's all. Get a good night's sleep!" Colonel Ross hung up.

Stormy perched himself on the edge of the desk and looked down at what he had written. Gradually his face changed until his eyes seemed old and shadowed and the lines deeper around his mouth.

"What's the bad news?" barked Groody.

Lake shrugged. "Listen," he said, a bitter edge in his voice, and proceeded to read:

Lieutenant Colonel Garry Lake, The Blackbirds, Sir:

I have the honor to convey to you the esteem and respect of myself and my squadron and to invite you most earnestly to meet myself and four of my officers at fifteen thousand feet above Vernay at noon precisely on August 24, 1918. It will be a pleasure to meet you as gentlemen and sportsmen, and I have no doubt you will look forward to this friendly contest with as much anticipation as myself and my Red Devils.

VON BAER.

The Blackbirds looked at each other silently.

"And that, boys," Lake said slowly, "is Tony Ross's idea of a picnic!"

"We've smoked 'em out," grunted Benjamin.

"Listen," Groody said quickly, "that may be just a scheme to get us up there by ourselves for all the Red Devils to jump on us—"

"No," Slim interrupted, "the Baron isn't that kind, and you know it."

"Well, I'll tell you something!" Lake burst forth. "I'm not looking forward to any duel with von Baer or anybody else right now. Oh, I know we ought to be glad to have a chance to get rid of him. I suppose we ought to be glad to have a couple of us knocked off tomorrow for the honor of the Blackbirds, the general staff, and all the prizefighters working in shipyards, but by gosh we need a rest!"

"Don't be silly," Bentham said coolly. "What's scheduled for tomorrow is our reason for existence. Let's get it over with."

Lake stared at him. Then he relaxed wearily.

"You're right," he nodded. "We've got to get our replacement ships over from Malais in the morning and get them turned up, I suppose." He slid off the desk. "Come on, let's go!" he said wearily. "Where can we wash up, Colonel?"

"Captain Redfield will lead you to your quarters," Danville said slowly.

CHAPTER XI SUICIDE PACT

ONE hour and a half later, in direct defiance of Colonel Danville's orders, and likewise without his knowledge, the Blackbirds were ensconced in a cafe in Nancy surrounded by chattering French girls who could speak little if any English.

Among the subjects which came more and more to the fore in Stormy's mind was that of Colonel Danville and the aloof, almost hostile attitude of almost the entire personnel of the Fifth Observation Group. However, after the subject had been gone into somewhat exhaustively, the fiery Lake summed up the attitude of the Blackbirds as follows:

"There must be a reason, boys; but what of it? There will also be trouble when we get back there, but what's the difference?"

“And I’m sick of it!”

It was a grunted explosion from Zeke Benjamin.

“Sick of what?” Stormy asked quickly.

“I’ve got something to say to all of you,” Benjamin said doggedly. “You guys think I’m due to croak in another month or so. Well, I ain’t. I was. Some hemorrhage or somethin’ was supposed to explode in my bean or something. But it ain’t goin’ to. I can feel that. It’s gone away. No doctors told me that, but I know.”

“Isn’t that a disappointment?” Slim said airily, but as he said it he reached over and gripped Benjamin’s heavy shoulder. Benjamin shook off the friendly pressure.

“I’m tellin’ you guys that, and if any of you want to be a rat and squeal, to heck with you. I’d get you if I had to break my way out of all the jails in France.”

“Don’t be a fool!” Lake exploded.

“But listen,” Benjamin went on, “I’m gonna get knocked off sometime—so’s all the rest of you, and you know it unless you’re fools. I never had no fun in my life or ever done what I wanted to and, as long as I’m going to be knocked off anyway, I’ll be darned if I ain’t gonna do what I want to do for once in my life! I’m takin’ no orders and I’m gonna do what I please!”

Stormy did not answer for a moment.

“I don’t quite understand,” he said quietly.

“I mean this,” Benjamin said harshly. “I’m rough and tough, and I ain’t educated and I don’t wear nice clothes, and I don’t know nice people and I never did and I never will. I’ve had to fight all my life and take it on the chin day after day . . . took it on the chin worse in this man’s army than I ever did back in the States when I was a farm hand and a hobo and kicked around by everybody! Well, I got to be a flyer, see; and they couldn’t stop me. And I’m one of the Blackbirds, see; and they couldn’t stop me from bein’ that! They tried to kill me, but they couldn’t do that! Well, from now on Zeke Benjamin does what he wants to and when he goes down he’s gonna go down with flags flyin’ and with a lot of people wishin’ they could kiss his foot who’ve been spittin’ on him!”

Groody’s long eyes were like polished metal across his mahogany face. “I can understand that, Zeke,” he said, “but, after all, what more do you want than to be one of the Blackbirds? Man, you’re famous all over the world now and—”

“Yeah,” spat Benjamin. “As a murderer who’s doin’ some pretty good flyin’ because he’s gotta die anyway. And I’m still takin’ orders from every dressed up jumpin’ jack that’s got a first lieutenant’s bar on his shoulder, ain’t I? If I want to go out and get drunk, I gotta ask permission, don’t I? I don’t fight when I want to fight, do I? Somebody tells me when and how

to do it! Well, by gosh, when I risk my neck from now on, it’s goin’ to be for somethin’ that I think’s worthwhile and not because G.H.Q. tells me to!”

“What are you getting at?” Stormy said steadily. “Going to desert the army and do a little private fighting on your own hook or what?”

“Not exactly that,” Benjamin said slowly. “Suppose I find out where Hindenburg is, and I want to get him. By gosh I’m goin’ to get in my ship and fly off to get ‘im if I feel like it. Or if I feel like goin’ to Paris for a week, that’s where I’m goin’ and ask nobody nothin’—”

“Don’t be a jackass,” snapped Stormy. “We’ve got the best opportunity in this man’s army to do about what we please. You’re going to stick like the rest of us, and between the five of us we can come closer to being and doing what we want to be and do than any other way.”

“The heck I can!” rasped Benjamin. “Why don’t you tell the truth? I’m just a crazy bohunk that you guys don’t give a darn about and hate to be seen with because I’m funny lookin’ an’—”

“So that’s it!”

It was a yelp from Lake.

“Listen,” Stormy said steadily. “You crazy old coot, we think the world of you, and we’d go to hell and back for you as quick as you did for us this afternoon. And I’m going to tell you all something.”

HIS eyes shifted from the half-stony, half-bewildered gaze of Benjamin.

“Zeke’s had a tough row to hoe. So have I. I’ve been accused of being everything from a spy to a murderer in this man’s army. Not a one of us here, except Bentham, that hasn’t been court-martialed. Every once in a while when we get ordered to do something like this von Baer thing tomorrow, maybe we’ve all got the feeling that we’re so many eggs that have caused so much trouble that they want to get rid of us. If we’re going to risk our necks, we want to have some fun doing it—that’s natural. Furthermore, if we weren’t half crazy, we wouldn’t have been in the jams we’ve been in, and we wouldn’t be in this suicide squad. But I’m telling you this! If we stick together and don’t let any crazy ideas like Zeke’s here tear us apart or don’t let our dislike for Bentham’s snootiness work on us, we can get somewhere in this war and we can have some fun!

“In the last month we’ve flown all right together but there’ve been things on the ground that weren’t so hot. I stopped Zeke here from beating you up, Bentham, a week ago, and it isn’t so long since Groody was going to take Zeke in the back room somewhere and kick the tar out of him. Bentham, three

weeks ago, Groody and Slim and I got figuring you might double-cross us—there's been a lot of that stuff. Now if anybody's got anything on their mind, spill it. Zeke thinks we hate him. We think Bentham dislikes us. I figure every once in a while that all you babies resent me, the youngest and a lieutenant colonel by accident, being in command of this outfit."

Benjamin listened as though he couldn't believe it. One by one Groody and Evans and even Bentham forced themselves to say things to the obdurate Benjamin, protesting their regard for him, which at any other time or place would have greatly embarrassed them.

So it was that at midnight the pact was sealed. Then Stormy said:

"What would we do without us? We are half the joy of life."

CHAPTER XII THE TRAP

IT was eleven-thirty next morning when five black Sopwiths took off from Malais for their rendezvous, three miles above the earth. The field was lined with officers and men and the electric excitement which tingled up and down that sector of the Front seemed to center on the pursuit group airdrome.

The fact that the mysteriously hostile Colonel Danville had already forwarded charges against them and a recommendation for a general court-martial only made the prospective duel more piquant as far as the officers and men of the Ninth Pursuit Group were concerned. And to Stormy Lake, leading his flight off the ground in formation, those charges provided just the touch of bitter irony necessary to make him a self-controlled, deadly flyer.

General Mallory, who had used the Blackbirds for thirty long days as a sort of morale builder for millions of men, had not overlooked any facet of the private duel between the Blackbirds and the Red Devils. For months the hatchet-faced German ace and his suicide squadron's theatrical exploits had filled the hearts of all Germany with sporting pride. For the past month the exploits of the Blackbirds had done the same for the American armies and for the conversation around United States' breakfast tables.

So it wasn't strange that the chief of the air service in France had telephoned the news to every headquarters along the Front and that the German and Allied armies were like a monumental grandstand packed with spectators.

Higher and higher roared the Sopwiths until their altimeters read ten thousand feet. Stormy was far from unaware that scarcely a soldier in all the far-flung lines

of trenches but had bet most of his next month's pay on the outcome of the battle. He had heard that morning that at points where the enemy trenches were close together Germans and Allies had arranged group bets.

He forgot that the death of Baron von Baer would be a really important victory.

Von Baer was more than a master flyer with more than a hundred Allied ships to his credit. He was a jeering genius at harrying the Allies. How many hundred thousand rounds of ammunition the Red Devils had blown up—how many hundreds of thousands of men had been delayed arriving at the Front by the bombing of the Red Devils—how many battles had been affected by dozens of bright red ships sacrificing themselves to temporarily halt the progress of the enemy—only G.H.Q. knew.

Fifteen thousand feet and the Blackbirds straightened away for Vernay. Stormy's eyes ranged over his instrument board ceaselessly. No motor failure must mar the coming engagement.

Vernay lay twenty miles ahead of them. A solid blanket of cirrus clouds hid the sun at twenty thousand feet, but Stormy had no fear that Baron von Baer and the Germans were laying a trap for them. Once he had been the captive of von Baer and once von Baer had been his. He knew that the showy, self-dramatizing German would enact the role of a gentleman to the moment he died.

Lake's heart leaped as he picked five tiny specks flying in long endless circles fifteen miles ahead. He rocked his ship and pointed.

The Blackbirds scattered. Stormy throttled slightly and the others speeded up until Zeke and Bentham, on each end of a straight line formation, had reached position.

As they did so, the five Fokkers, now five miles away, scattered similarly until five Sopwiths spaced a quarter of a mile apart were flying in a straight line toward five Fokkers a similar distance apart.

Stormy's altimeter read fifteen thousand feet exactly. Not by so much as one hundred feet of precious extra altitude would the Blackbirds attempt to gain an artificial advantage.

The two lines jockeyed a little until each Sopwith was flying absolutely head-on toward a Fokker.

Now the coloring of the German ships could be seen—flaming red from nose to tail. On the radiator of the center Fokker there was painted the outline of a devil. That was Baron von Baer's taunting identification of himself.

On they rushed toward each other, the motors singing a song of defiance as the note of them seemed

to grow higher and shriller, while pilots made last adjustments to make them function more perfectly.

Stormy was in a state of suspended animation. Every faculty of his being was concentrated on that center Fokker manned by the ace of all the Germans. He would not be first to give way in that headlong dash toward each other. If he could make the proud baron do the first zoom or dive, the Allies would get in the first shot. And Stormy intended to make it the last shot for von Baer.

He jammed the nose of his ship down with the Red Devil barely two hundred yards away from him. He was utterly stunned, his eyes gazing in bewildered stupefaction at the swarm of ships that were erupting from the clouds like ants out of a damaged ant hill.

“Sunk!” he shouted.

Then he leaned forward, his ship diving until its wide open motor seemed to be shaking itself out of its bed. Up above him the Fokkers and Sopwiths were not battling—they were flying aimlessly. Those ships erupting in unending succession from the layer of clouds nearly a mile above the fifteen thousand foot level were not German planes!

He shook his head to clear it as he brought the stick back and the anguished roar of the motor died to its ordinary deep-toned roar. Those planes were DeHavilands—Allied ships!

He looked again to make sure. The leader was now so close that he could dimly make out the insignia on the side of the ship.

At least fifty DeHavilands of the Fifth Observation Group were bearing down upon them!

He was incapable of thought for the moment, flying aimlessly as he watched that swarm of planes surround the little melee of Fokkers and Sopwiths. He looked from ship to ship waiting and dreading the beginning of the fight. The DeHavilands, as though by a prearranged plan, surrounded the nine scouts like a swarm of flies around a piece of food. Not a shot had been fired.

THEN Stormy came back to himself. Gripped by such rage as he had rarely felt before, he shook his fist at Colonel Danville and his men.

“You double-crossing, yellow-bellied lice!”

Then something happened to him. He was ashamed of his country—ashamed of his chief—contemptuous of every motive behind that aerial ambush. He had been told that every air-drome along the Front had been warned of what was to take place, and he had believed it. Just as there was not a German ship visible in the sky, so it should have been the leading article in the unwritten code that no Allied ship should be present, or take part.

Fairly shaking with helpless rage, he turned the nose of his ship homeward as the Allied ships forced the helpless Germans to fly back toward the Allied lines.

“It’s a wonder they didn’t shoot ‘em down like so many pigeons—the crooks!” raved Lake.

For the moment he had no sympathy for the pilots of the Fifth Observation Group. He forgot that they had to take orders—forgot that the responsibility rested with some one official. The Red Devils had challenged like gentlemen and the Red Devils had acted as such. It was his own Allies who had been untrue to the code.

“And we’ll get the blame for it!”

He was a sort of madman by the time he was landing on the Fifth’s air-drome.

He flung himself out of his ship almost before it had stopped on the line. He cut the motor dead and let it backfire. Ordinarily he would have handled it like a mother caring for her child.

“The baron would have rather been shot down sneering at his lousy enemies,” he was thinking. “I wonder what they want to do with him—put him in a cage and ship him to America to show how great we are?”

He was walking up and down the line with nervous strides as the ships swarmed in. The five Red Devils were surrounded even on the ground by the lumbering DeHavilands. Stormy ran toward where the leading ship was taxiing. That would be Colonel Danville, he was sure.

Seven D.H.’s were coming in abreast toward the line. Behind them at wide intervals five Red Devils and all around them watchful bombers were spaced not more than fifty feet apart. The line was thronged with jabbering mechanics who watched the blazing Lake curiously.

The four Blackbirds had already taxied to the line far down the field and were now running toward their chief. Stormy strove to get hold of himself but could not. He watched the tall, spare form of Baron von Baer descend from his ship and the other German flyers get out and cluster around their chief.

Enlisted men and officers surrounded the Germans. He saw Colonel Danville get out of his ship like a conqueror, but he was too angry to notice that the flyers were far from exultant, and that they did not press close to their famous foemen.

Stormy tore his way through the crowd. He reached Colonel Danville, who was saying something to the hatchet-faced, stony-eyed German ace and spun him around by his shoulders.

“Before I apologize to Baron von Baer,” he shouted above the din of idling motors, “I want to say

something to you, Colonel, and you can tell the President and General Pershing for all of me. Whoever gave you orders to do what you did is a louse and a sneaking, double-crossing yellow snake! It's a disgrace to the United States and—"

"Jones—Green—arrest this man!"

It was a snarled command from the contorted lips of Colonel Danville.

"Don't put your hands on me!" raved Lake, "and what I said goes as it lays! Who ordered you to do this?"

"I ordered myself!" snapped Danville. "You're under arrest for—"

"Nuts," blazed Stormy. "So it's you who made your outfit go out and drag in these Germans!"

A deathlike hush had fallen over the crowd. Baron von Baer stood erect as a ramrod, his four battle-scarred Red Devils massed behind him. The tall, slim figure of Danville was shaking like a leaf. Then all at once the truth penetrated through the red haze of rage in the flaming Lake's mind.

It was not he—Stormy Lake and the four Blackbirds who stood alone—it was Danville. In their hearts the officers and men of the Fifth Observation Group felt the disgrace.

An icy calm took possession of Lake. "If nobody wanted to do this and it was your own idea, I reckon I've got more pity for you than anybody else I know," he said slowly.

Then he walked past the speechless Danville and up to von Baer. He didn't know that Groody and Evans and Benjamin and Bentham had walked behind him. Lake saluted. His eyes, blue-black, now blazed into the stony gray ones of the long-nosed, lean-faced German.

"Baron von Baer, you perhaps do not believe it, but your challenge was accepted by us in good faith. You are our enemy, and we would have shot you down if we could, but if it were in my power to put you and your men back in the air again, I would do it. It may be small consolation to you, but a great majority of the officers and men here and of my countrymen will damn the whole idea as sincerely as any German!"

The tall German, his long, straight nose giving his bony face the appearance of a ruthless eagle's, bowed from the waist, but he didn't speak. The suggestion of a smile, which to the sensitive Lake was more of a sneer, flickered across his tight lips.

Lake shrugged helplessly as the unyielding German looked at him with coldly amused contempt in his eyes.

"Come on, boys," Stormy said suddenly and without another word walked straight past Danville and through the silent crowd.

No sooner had they gotten out of earshot of the crowd than Benjamin stopped in his tracks. He took Stormy by the arm and turned him around.

"I ain't no gentleman," he said, "but I know one thing. I'm gonna see to it that the Heinies escape!"

"Are you crazy?" snapped Groody. "What do you think you're doing?"

"What do I care?" Benjamin said hotly. "What would we be thinkin' if a thing like that was done to us? It may be war, but a fair fight's a fair fight!"

Dead silence gripped the group. Benjamin glared at them from under his bushy brows.

"I thought we were all sticking together," he said savagely.

THE Blackbirds looked at each other fearfully. Bentham, a gentleman born; Groody and Evans, who loved to do unheard of things, for their own sake; Stormy Lake, with more than a touch of a sort of sublime madness inherent in his make-up.

No one spoke as Stormy started walking on. No one needed to speak. The only questions were—How and how soon?

It was Stormy who hatched the plan. It was amazingly simple. The four Germans were locked in a room on the top floor of one of the enlisted men's barracks, pending the arrival of a car from general headquarters. Outside in the hall two sentries paced up and down and on the ground beneath the window two others were on guard. Colonel Danville was not to be seen and officers and men were at lunch when Stormy, alone, strolled down the hall and said casually:

"I've got to talk to the Heinies for a minute—orders from General Mallorv."

Without question, the sentries let him in. Baron von Baer rose from his seat on the couch. The other four Germans got to their feet alertly.

"Your ships are on the line," Stormy said swiftly. "When I go out the door, rush it. The sentries will be unprepared. Take off your blouses and stroll out unconcernedly. You'll make it, I'm sure!"

Baron von Baer stared at him.

"Is this another plot?" he asked in his precise English. "An excuse to shoot us, perhaps?"

A red flame flared in Stormy's face.

"I don't blame you—but it isn't. Do you want to do it?"

Again Baron von Baer stared at him. The other Germans—two of them mere striplings, one older man whose face was half shot away, the fourth a hard-bitten fellow of middle age—waited in absorbed silence for a word from their chief.

"We will. Thank you," the Baron said, bowing.

Stormy outlined the simple plan. A moment later he walked casually out of the door. The sentries—one on either side of it—turned toward him. At that second, a concerted rush of the Germans knocked Stormy forward. He grasped at one guard as though to brace himself and pinned the man's arms as they fell on the floor. The other sentry had only half raised his rifle when the tunicless Germans got to him.

The thought of an attempted escape in broad daylight surrounded by hundreds of men had apparently never occurred to the soldiers. Not even a cry escaped them before they were safely gagged.

The Germans bound their hands and feet with lightninglike speed, using their own belts for the purpose. They bound the apparently struggling Lake, too, but so carelessly that it was obvious. The next second they were running down the hall as Stormy, watched by the writhing gagged soldiers, struggled to free himself from his bonds.

Mentally he cursed the fact that the Germans had not gagged him. Somewhere in the barracks he was sure there would be a few men who were on sick report or who had been on night duty. Although his role was that of innocent, he dared not yell for help.

He freed himself from his bonds with apparent difficulty and just as he heard a motor roar was bounding down the hall yelling at the top of his voice. Another Mercedes went into full cry. All of them were running as Stormy reached the barrack's door.

The crack of shots cut through the roar of the motor as the scattered mechanics who were at work in various hangars comprehended what was happening. Men streamed from the mess halls. Officers ran frantically for the line. But five red Fokkers were taking off!

Groody arraigned himself alongside Stormy as they ran for the line.

"I wouldn't have believed it!" Groody gasped breathlessly. "I scarcely believed it was the Germans myself. They strolled out so quiet and businesslike and from their breeches and boots I wouldn't have given a second look if I hadn't known. They had to knock out a couple of mechanics but that's all."

"Hope they didn't hurt them!" gasped Stormy.

Then their hearts leaped up in their throats, and they stopped stock still with a ghastly feeling in the pit of their stomachs.

Straight down the line of hangars barely a hundred feet high came the Fokkers. And every one of their guns was spitting a hail of death! Baron von Baer was repaying his debt to the men who had double-crossed him by double-crossing the Blackbirds.

From somewhere—Stormy never did know where—the other Blackbirds suddenly appeared. They

didn't seek for cover. It was as though they were too stunned to move at the thought of what they were responsible for. At least a dozen men had dropped under the rain of bullets from the Fokker's guns, and their cries cut through the roar of the now receding Fokkers.

"Let's get in the air!" Benjamin gulped, a sort of sob in his voice.

Stormy, his face white beneath the tan, stared at the Fokkers in fascinated horror. They didn't come back across the hangars again but had headed toward the lines.

"Good God, why are they doing that?" Lake whispered.

Groody jerked his thumb toward the west. A flight of Allied planes five thousand feet high were flying back toward their airport twenty miles farther from the lines. "Either that or they're scared about their gas supply," Groody said slowly.

"Let's get in the air," rasped Benjamin.

"We can't chase them," Slim Evans said dazedly.

"We'll be shot by Danville's men if we stay here!" Benjamin said savagely.

"Huh?" grunted Stormy.

He felt tragedy engulfing him from all sides.

"One of them sentries came busting out of the barracks yelling that you set the Heinies free," barked Benjamin. His face was red with sweat, his eyes those of a madman. "Danville hates you and us, anyway, Stormy. Let's get gone somewhere and have a chance to think this over!"

And lucky for them it was that they ran for the line, and lucky for them it was that in the frantic excitement which pervaded the field they were temporarily unnoticed. Motors were clattering into life up and down the line as the officers of the Fifth started out on their hopeless chase after the disappearing Fokkers and the mechanics unquestioningly started the Sopwith motors.

As they were taking off. Stormy looked behind him. Colonel Danville, followed by Captain Redfield, was running toward them. Behind him came one of the sentries.

"If they'd only gagged me!" Stormy groaned aloud as he shoved the throttle all the way ahead. "A baby would have known I was in on it because I didn't yell. And those dirty, double-crossing Boches—"

Inaudible curses fell steadily from his white lips as the Blackbirds took the air. They circled the field once and fifteen or twenty soldiers armed with rifles took abortive shots at them with Colonel Danville egging them on.

In that horrible moment, shot at by his own countrymen, something happened to Stormy Lake.

Two things he swore to do as he gazed down at the field with wide-shadowed eyes. One was to wipe out the Red Devils if the Lord let him live another twenty-four hours. And the other was to probe the mystery of Colonel Danville.

The unexplainable, murderous hatred which seemed to animate every action and word of the young commanding officer would color the report that would be made to G.H.Q. Not even General Mallory could save Stormy and the others from life-long disgrace. Perhaps summary execution as traitors would be their punishment.

CHAPTER XIII SATAN'S OUTLAWS

"IT'S my fault." It was Zeke Benjamin speaking. For once that human bulldog was tired.

He leaned against the side of his plane. Darkness was falling, and there was a chill in the air which foretold the coming of a rain. The Blackbirds had been in the air nearly four hours, with one landing in a stubble field to secure gas from the near-by town. Now that they had come to rest in a pasture lot less than thirty miles from the airdrome of the Fifth Observation Group, they could talk.

"Don't be an ass," the drawn Lake said mechanically. "It was all our faults, and I don't know that I'm exactly sorry. But I haven't changed my mind about one thing."

"What's that?" Slim Evans inquired, lighting a cigarette.

"That before we go across the lines tonight, I'm going to talk with Colonel Danville."

"Of course," Groody said slowly. "Why else do you suppose you're taking a chance sneaking in here? I had that in mind all the time."

Nothing had happened because the flyers had provided no opportunity for anything to happen to back up their convictions that they were hunted men. Nevertheless, Stormy was sure that they were all fugitives from their own forces.

"Well, my idea was that we'd get across the lines as soon as it was dark, instead of late. That's the reason I suggested that we sneak up as close as we could. But I'm going to get hold of Danville for an hour if it's the last thing I do on earth!"

"You're wrong there," Slim Evans told him. "I'm going to do that."

Stormy shook his head.

"That's my job," he said, "and I'm the guy that Danville seems to hate most of all—"

"I say, you're all wrong," Bentham cut in precisely. "I'm not an American officer and I have played no

prominent part in what has transpired, what? I'm feeling very fit, and I've got plenty of money in my pocket. You chaps get some gas somehow while I hire a car. If I don't rejoin you by ten o'clock, go ahead with your plans."

The stocky Englishman spoke with a curious finality. Stormy argued against it, but in his heart he knew Bentham was right. Bentham might enter the Fifth Airdrome and get away with it. And there was something about the icy Englishman which inspired absolute confidence.

Shortly after nine o'clock, with the air growing chillier every minute, but a high-riding moon floating on the horizon below gathering clouds, the faraway drone of a motor grew into the recognizable roar of a Liberty.

Slim Evans had gone to the little hamlet three miles away and secured gas for the planes. He had also thoughtfully obtained a few much-needed sandwiches. As the song of the Liberty reached their ears, the Blackbirds leaped to their ships and started the motors.

When Stormy became certain that there was one ship and no more in the air, he relaxed a little. He had been expecting that almost momentarily a dozen or more planes would sweep down upon them.

"I wouldn't be surprised if that were Bentham," Groody shouted.

Stormy nodded.

"I wouldn't, either," he said, "and if it is, I bet ten to one he's got Danville with him."

A moment later they were certain.

Straight as a homing pigeon the D.H. came to the field and started circling it. Both cockpits were occupied and as it made its final circle before landing Stormy thought he could recognize both Danville and Bentham.

Bentham was in the front cockpit and evidently flying. He dropped the heavy bomber over the fringe to the windward of the field and landed perfectly. The ship taxied up alongside the five Sopwiths and Bentham shut off the motor abruptly.

Danville didn't climb out until Bentham had descended from the the ship. Then the tall young colonel got out of the ship as though every move was an effort.

The four Blackbirds walked forward briskly, Stormy in the lead. His eyes were hard. He didn't look at Danville immediately, but gazed at the impassive Englishman.

"How did you do it, Archy?" he asked eagerly.

"Very simple," the Britisher said calmly. "As a matter of fact, the colonel and I have had quite a talk, eh, Colonel?"

Danville nodded wordlessly. His face was bloodless, the long, narrow jaw quivering a little.

"Very interesting, you know," Bentham said lighting a cigarette. "I had no trouble reaching the colonel's quarters unobserved. He didn't enjoy the prospect of talking with me, but before we got through chinning we rather got together."

"Well, Colonel," Lake said, "you and your outfit didn't seem to like us much. In fact, one of your outfit darn near killed a couple of us. Taking it by and large, you will pardon us for feeling that we'd like to know just why you set out to and finally did get us in bad. In fact, you'd better talk pretty logically and very quickly or I'm likely to break your neck!"

"I rather doubt if you could do that," Danville said slowly, "but if you tried it, I don't know that I'd resist."

"Well, let's all sit down," Bentham suggested smoothly, "and keep a grip on yourself, Stormy, old chap. The colonel's not a bad sort, but he's made some mistakes. I—"

"OH, let's not beat around the bush," Danville burst forth suddenly. "I've made mistakes that I won't forget to my dying day. Not that you fellows are perfect, or that you, Lake, are anything but an egotistical fool that needs discipline more than a wild horse needs breaking. But that doesn't excuse me!"

"Just a moment now, just a moment," Bentham cut in calmly. "Let me explain a few things to the boys. In the first place, I found out that just about everybody in the Allied armies thinks that Colonel Danville was not—er—so hot in springing that trap on our old friend, the baron. As a matter of fact, when I reached the colonel he was seriously thinking of committing suicide."

"Well, now, that's one thing I'm glad of," snapped Stormy. "If our boys had applauded that little exhibition of double-crossing, I swear I'd feel like joining the Germans!"

"Righto, righto," Bentham said. "In the second place, our position is not so jolly comfortable, in spite of the disapproval of the colonel's coup. A few Johnnies were shot, you know, and the release of Baron von Baer, taking it one way and another, is considered in high official circles quite too-too. In fact, M.P.'s and others all over France have been instructed to keep their eyes jolly well open for us and what will happen after they get us nobody can tell!"

"Well, never mind that," Groody said harshly. "After tonight's over, they'll be either kissing our feet or spades will be patting us in the face while they plant us underground. What we want to know is why a ship hopped on us on your airdrome, Colonel, and why we

couldn't go to Nancy that night, and why you were so pertinent as to want to court-martial us, and why you butted into our party at noon today, and why in general you've been one of the finest lice, as far as we're concerned, that ever came down the pike! What did we ever do to you?"

"Nothing," snapped Danville, "and I'm willing to get everything off my chest, as I did with Bentham. I was jealous of you. I'm a lame-brained, big-headed jackass. I envied everything about you, and wished I could be one of you. That's the reason why for the last few weeks I've been criticizing you and everything you did! It's the reason why I poisoned my men's minds against you as well as I could. All of them are jealous down underneath, of you fellows, and it wasn't hard to get them all thinking you were lousy flyers but good publicity hounds! When you came to the field today, they were sneering at your formation flying and your showing off! And I'm responsible."

"So that's it," Stormy said slowly.

"Yes, and I'll go farther," Colonel Danville rushed on. "You and Groody and Slim and Bentham here, in your separate ways, are what I'd like to be if I had the guts to be."

"You didn't send that ship in the air to shoot us down, did you?" Slim inquired.

"Twenty-four hours ago I'd have killed you for saying that," Danville shouted. "Of course, I didn't, but I'll confess this. That sergeant had been with me off and on for almost five years. He'd been in the trenches eight solid months when I heard where he was and had him transferred to my outfit, and I knew that this man's war had practically broken him down. He was just one step ahead of being a lunatic, and I can see now that his mind was giving way."

"For two solid weeks I've been pounding away on the subject of you fellows. I've said everything I could think of and some of it is true. Such as the fact that you're a bad influence on every last enlisted man and officer in the army because you don't obey orders. Three-quarters of them want to be Stormy Lake, snapping his fingers at discipline and honor and everything else. And, gentlemen, I'm frank to admit that in poor old Maitland's overwrought mind there must have been shaped the delusion that the greatest favor he could do for me and for the army in general was to get rid of you fellows!"

"I see," Stormy said. "I don't know that we can hold you responsible for one of your men suddenly going nuts, but—"

"War does such funny things, you know," Bentham interjected. "So many unpopular officers have been shot in the back while going over the top, what?"

There's nothing particularly extraordinary in a chap going berserk and taking a pot shot or two at us."

"Particularly when he's been fed for weeks on how undesirable you all were," Danville insisted doggedly. "Well, that's all there is, gentlemen."

"As a matter of fact," Stormy told him levelly, "you must have a lot of good in you, or you couldn't be talking like a man now. How in the name of heaven a fellow with any pretense of being a gentleman could have done what you did to von Baer this noon—"

"I guess I'm half crazy myself," Danville exploded. "I still don't know what made me do it."

"Be in every newspaper in the world, what?" Bentham suggested in his icy, confident manner.

The young colonel's body slumped. "I guess so," he admitted slowly.

"Ambition is the curse of most young men," Slim Evans informed the world in general. "Well, Colonel, you've certainly done a good job on us. Here we are without a friend in the world and—"

"Not deserving one," flashed Danville. "Who are you birds to release Baron von Baer and his men?"

"Be that as it may," Stormy informed him, "it still seems like a good idea. The fact that the baron turned out to be nothing but a small-time punk who did as dirty a trick to us as you did to him doesn't change the merits of the case. And we aim to repay that deadpan skunk this very night!"

"So Bentham said," Danville told him. "And believe it or not, I'm in a worse position than you are. Even if you were shot as traitors, you'd die with the admiration of millions of unthinking people. Don't you think I know that for the rest of my life, I'll be known as the officer who took unfair advantage of an honorable foeman? I who captured von Baer will not be shot against a wall, but I will be laughed at and despised for the rest of my life!"

"Well," Stormy said slowly, "you may be exaggerating a little bit, and now that Baron von Baer has proved himself as unprincipled as you were, maybe we won't have as much unofficial admiration as you think and maybe you'll have more."

"Which leads me to what I wanted to ask," Danville said. "You fellows are out to do or die as I understand it, to accomplish something that will result in the forgiveness of your sins, so to speak, or die in the attempt. I am asking you to let me join you. You won't be sorry. I have three German planes to my credit now, and I don't even expect or want to come back tonight. May I?"

There was absolute silence.

The young colonel was no longer the spick and span young square-shouldered dictatorial monarch of all he surveyed. He was a wreck—all his veneer swept

away to reveal his real depths. He stood there pleading mutely with eyes that Stormy could never forget.

"Sure," he said quickly, and his grin was the old grin.

"Thanks," mumbled Colonel Danville.

"Well, boys," grinned Stormy, "cheer up. As somebody has so well said, 'What do you want to do, live forever?' Let's be on our way. I believe we have a date with Baron Friederich von Baer!"

And Stormy was subconsciously aware that of them all, Colonel Danville was far from the least important cog in the Blackbird's machine that night. As he got in his ship and into the air, Stormy shrugged and grinned a bitterly mocking grin.

"If he wants publicity," he thought to himself, "he'll get it tonight, but I've got a hunch he'll never read it!"

He had a hunch that he himself would never read it, either.

CHAPTER XIV THE RED DEVILS

SHIVERING in the icy air at eighteen thousand feet, flying with the motor well throttled so that Colonel Danville's D.H. could keep pace, he was peering downward and to his right with eyes which he thought for the moment were deceiving him.

For, four thousand feet below him, diving at a shallow angle toward the airdrome of the Fifth Observation Group ten miles southward, were at least twenty airplanes, their exhausts a V of light which made them look like a formation of fireflies. He could not pick out their outlines with accuracy in the darkness, but instinctively he felt that they were Fokkers. If they were, he was sure they were the Red Devils.

The searchlights of an anti-aircraft battery below suddenly glowed into life. As they swept the sky picking up that formation, there suddenly leaped into being a huge V of bright red ships.

"Just like the baron," Stormy shouted exultantly. "He couldn't wait to pay his debt!"

Then for a moment as the eyes of the six Allied pilots remained frozen to the huge formation picked out by searchlights, Stormy's exultation died. Had they caught von Baer on his own airdrome, the Blackbirds would have been in the air and the Red Devils on the ground and the Allied planes would have had a fighting chance to wreak destruction on their enemies and still have some hope of escaping alive.

It would be many minutes before other Allied planes could arrive, and for the six Allied planes to

pounce down upon two dozen of the finest fighting pilots and ships in all the world was sheer suicide.

Then two thoughts swept all others out of his mind. One was the fact that up there at the head of that diving formation was Baron von Baer. The other was that down below were hundreds of helpless officers and men whose doom was sealed if the Red Devils ever reached the airdrome.

Stormy never signaled to his men. They could make up their own minds. Like a flash he shoved the stick forward and banked steeply at the same time. Behind him the other ships wheeled into place. Farther and farther forward went the stick and the throttle was wide open.

Two thousand feet—three thousand feet down. They were overhauling the more slowly diving Fokkers so speedily that the red single-seaters seemed to be standing still. Anti-aircraft bursts puffed out here and there, and a moment later the Blackbirds and Colonel Danville were flying through a barrage of fire from Allied guns.

Stormy's mind was concentrated on that one lead ship. Hunched down in his cockpit behind the windshield to escape the air stream which was like a rushing torrent trying to sweep him out of his seat, he looked back of him once. Like so many hooded devils in the wan light of the bulbs on their instrument boards, were Groody and Evans, Zeke and Archy rushing to their doom with masklike faces. And behind them Colonel Danville, his spirit unafraid.

A lump rose in Stormy's throat as he turned his head and stared over the cowling at the foemen now two thousand feet ahead of him and a thousand feet lower. Three or four miles on searchlights had been turned on the Fifth's Airdrome, and hundreds of men could be seen rushing like so many insects toward the line.

Then as though all of them had been animated by the same thought at once, that formation seemed to explode. Ships banked, zoomed, and dived in all directions. They had seen their enemies and were preparing to receive them. Still Stormy's eyes never left von Baer's ship and the baron unconsciously helped him by continuing straight ahead. He was going to leave his calling card on the airdrome of the Fifth—one of his customary dramatic onslaughts.

Stormy did not vary his course. A few hundred yards ahead of him his antagonists swarmed like so many wasps. It would be impossible to run that gauntlet and come out unscathed. If he plunged squarely through the center of those ships, many of them might be afraid to fire for fear of hitting one of their own men. And so it was that a roaring Sopwith

flashed like a black meteor squarely into the center of its foes.

Bullets ripped through it and sang around the pilot's head. He looked only at a single diving Fokker five hundred yards ahead of him. Then it seemed that a red-hot poker had been plunged into his side. He groaned as his hand loosened on the stick and he grabbed at the wound. It came away red with blood, but when it grasped the stick again it was steady and firm.

There seemed to be millions of Fokkers. They were all about him. Bullets were ripping through the Sopwith until it seemed impossible that the ship could hold together. Then a groan came from him. They'd got him in the leg this time. He tried to press harder against the rudder but couldn't—it was as though that leg was paralyzed. He knew that his radiator was perforated with bullets, and that the water was leaking out. Half a dozen shots had splintered against the guns on the cowling in front of him. His face white with agony, beads of icy sweat on his brow, he dived downward.

HE didn't look back of him and so he didn't know that already two Fokkers had gone down before Danville's guns, and that then the DeHaviland had seemed to explode in a ball of fire. He didn't see the four Blackbirds zooming and banking around the edges of the Red Devils and picking off straggler after straggler and conserving their extra altitude.

Then suddenly he was through that wild melee of Red Devils. Behind him three of them were diving on him. He knew and he started swirling his ship from side to side, dodging on his way. Another bullet caught him in the shoulder.

Now he was close enough to von Baer—why wasn't the German dodging or paying any attention to him? Von Baer was still in that straight dive.

"Perhaps he thought that Stormy's guns were jammed," that semiconscious flyer was thinking.

He hadn't fired a shot yet or doubtless the Baron could not believe that he had hurtled through his foes and remained alive. Well, the German would find out in a second—

His hand gripped the gun control on the stick, but no answer came from the guns.

Again he clamped down on the gun control and again there was no answer. Now he could see von Baer looking back at him. He knew then that his enemy was helpless—

Funny thing, he thought dispassionately as a bullet seared the side of his neck, how peaceful and calm he was.

The Fokker was but a few feet ahead of him. Von Baer was staring over his shoulder curiously. Stormy sat like a statue. An instant later his flailing propeller pressed squarely into the tail surfaces of the contemptuously self-confident von Baer. Instantly Stormy jerked back on the stick. His ship seemed to buckle in the middle as a horrid din filled the air. He felt the Sopwith wrench loose from the crippled Fokker and knew that it was stalling. The whole front of it was a wreck.

The Fokker was streaking earthward now.

"It would hit almost on the edge of the Fifth's Airdrome," Stormy thought quickly.

He saw von Baer rise to his feet and gesture. It seemed to be a last salute to his conqueror. Then his body left the ship and disappeared from Stormy's gaze, turning over and over as it dropped like a plummet. In death as he had been in life, Baron Friederich von Baer was not an ordinary man.

"Well, there went a man," Stormy thought.

He was spinning now himself. He tried to jerk back on the stick and noticed with a sort of impersonal curiosity that nothing happened. Maybe his arm hadn't moved. That would be a funny thing. He was falling—falling terribly slowly it seemed to him and he was tired—more so than he had ever been in his life. He drifted off into un-consciousness as the crippled Sopwith spun ever so slowly toward the ground. As it crashed on one wing, rescuers got there and Stormy was still alive.

He was still alive a week later, but it was four days after that before he felt enough interest in life in general or himself in particular to make any inquiries. Bit by bit he extracted from his nurse the information that he wanted. Every Blackbird save Zeke Benjamin was in that same hospital. Zeke was dead.

"Well, he died the way he wanted to," Stormy thought dully. "Eight Red Devils shot down and destroyed—four others forced to land and captured. That hadn't been a bad record." And he drifted off into a coma again.

And for two more days he ceased to think about himself or them. He didn't even awaken when General Mallory stopped at the hospital to see him. The young chief of the air service in France stood looking down at the wan face bound with its curly black hair and framed by the pillow.

"When he gets delirious, he talks a lot about being shot against the wall or something," the nurse said.

"When he comes to," Mallory said very slowly, "tell him that it has been recommended that he stand against the wall in Washington and be given the Congressional Medal when he gets back."

"I guess it will be quite a while before he cares much one way or another," she said.

And she was right. Such matters as medals of honor and the fact that fleets of Allied planes had arrived in time to wipe out the Red Devils that night before a shot was fired at the airdrome of the Fifth were unimportant matters to Stormy Lake. For him the war was over and his days as a Blackbird were done.

CHAPTER XV STORMY DOUBLE

LIEUT. COL. STORMY LAKE was tramping up and down his hospital room in a manner which indicated that, if he was an invalid, there was nothing wrong with his legs at least. He was unbearably restless after three months in the hospital, and he vaguely suspected what really was the truth. That was, that the doctors had decided that the flyer needed a rest above and beyond that necessary to allow the various fractures, contusions, wounds, and internal injuries to heal. In the process of being in command of the famous Blackbirds, the lean-faced, impulsive Lake had practically drained his reservoir of nervous energy dry.

So it was that the rangy young man in slacks and a khaki shirt who patrolled his restricted beat ceaselessly was, although in a hospital, nevertheless in the best physical condition he had enjoyed in a year.

However, he was not seething with impatience to return to the Front again. He had had what might be properly called a "bellyful" of war. What the irrepressible Westerner was thinking of with wistful longing was a grand party. He wanted, for an indefinite length of time, music and lights and pretty girls and access to such excitement as France afforded.

Captain Lewis Driggs, M.D., suddenly appeared at the door. His cherubic face, garnished with a blithe and well-waxed mustache that stretched wide apart in the middle when he grinned, was so cheery that it gave him four laps ahead in the race for the best bedside manner among the doctors in France.

"What ho, Stormy, what ho?" he caroled blithely in a throaty high tenor. "I am about to take you calling."

"Good," snapped Stormy sourly. "Has this hospital at last got a nurse that's under fifty and hasn't got a sty in her eye?"

"If it did, do you think I'd introduce a flyer to her?" queried Dr. Driggs.

"Well, then, who do I call on?" Stormy demanded. "Some frog who wants to kiss me?"

"No," Driggs said genially. "It's another flyer, an American, who's been here ten days or so, and you two look enough alike to be twins."

“Anything to break the monotony,” Stormy told him. “Let’s go.” When they got out in the hall he exploded.

“Say, listen, Doc. For the love of Mike when do I get out of here? There isn’t a thing wrong with me, and you know it. If I don’t get out, I’ll be butting my head against the wall and adding to your work.”

“It won’t be long,” Driggs told him soothingly as they tramped down an aisle between two long rows of beds.

The contents of many of those beds were not pretty to look at and in some cases far from pleasant to listen to. Stormy, like hundreds of thousands of others, had built up a resistance to such horrors—a resistance which enabled him to walk through that chamber of horrors as nonchalantly as Driggs did himself.

“This flyer Andrews,” Driggs told him, “was badly banged up. He’s been wanting to meet you ever since he came out of delirium. Here we are at last.”

He led Stormy into a tiny cubicle in which lay a long, emaciated figure with so many bandages around his head and neck that they looked like a white helmet outlining his hawklike face.

Stormy was startled at the resemblance of that face to what he saw when he looked in the mirror.

“Lieutenant Andrews, Colonel Lake,” Driggs introduced them, and Andrews’ wide mouth stretched in a smile.

“Can’t shake hands with you, Colonel. One flipper’s in a cast and the other one’s half paralyzed,” Andrews said blithely. “Nevertheless, I’m glad to know you. We two look alike, although you’re not quite so handsome as me.”

His blue-gray eyes twinkled.

“Well, of course,” Stormy said with dignity, “that’s a matter of opinion. Those bandages are very becoming to you and give you a little head start.”

“Now I suppose,” Andrews said with another flashing grin, “that you think I couldn’t rest until I laid eyes on the famous ace. But you’re wrong. I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart.”

“For what?” demanded Stormy, standing beside the bed. He liked this double of himself.

“For all the parties you’ve let me in for,” Andrews told him blithely. “Every once in a while in Paris or somewhere somebody will spot me and say, ‘That’s Stormy Lake.’ ” Of course I would protest—very weakly, you understand—that I wasn’t saying I was Stormy Lake, but if they suspected I was maybe they were pretty smart at that. You know, gave the idea that I was incognito without actually saying so. Boy! You wouldn’t believe how many bottles of wine have been bought for me on the strength of that, or how many winsome wenches I’ve had to comb out of my hair!”

“Just because you’re a cripple,” stated Stormy, “you needn’t take advantage by kidding me—”

“Kid nothing,” Andrews told him. “I’m telling you the truth. So thank you, sir; thank you for looking like me. And if ever you run across somebody that reminisces about what they did with you in some town where you’ve never been or something, don’t get surprised.”

THEY went on to talk for a few minutes while Lake’s liking for the half-paralyzed, completely banged-up Andrews grew. Finally Driggs forced him out of the room because Andrews was weakening.

“How badly is he hurt?” Stormy asked Driggs. “Will he live?”

“Sure,” nodded Driggs. “He won’t leave that bed for many a month, though.”

Lake’s face became fleetingly serious.

“As long as he does leave it sometime, that’s O.K.,” he said.

In a rush, a thousand recollections of wild, thrill-packed seconds in the air came back to him. If he had prayed once, he’d prayed a thousand times to the flyers’ gods that if anything happened to him, he would be killed and not crippled.

He was shaken out of his reverie by the sight of five French officers walking down the corridor toward him, led by none other than Colonel Sax, C.O. of the hospital.

“There must be at least one big bug among ‘em,” Stormy decided, as he turned into his room—probably the wide-shouldered, stocky French officer with a hump who was walking beside the colonel. His tunic was weighted down with decorations and there were two scars on his square face for every decoration.

“Colonel Lake!”

It was Colonel Sax’s voice, and Stormy turned in the doorway.

“Colonel Millaire, may I present Lieutenant Colonel Lake,” the thin old surgeon said ceremoniously.

A little tingle of pleasant surprise ran through Stormy as he extended his hand to meet the bull-dog jawed colonel’s.

“I’m certainly glad to know you,” Lake said, his slightly one-sided smile wide and sincere. “You certainly raised a lot of Cain over on the Eastern Front, Colonel.”

“As you have been doing on the Western Front,” the stocky colonel responded.

Sax introduced Stormy to the other officers, and Stormy greeted them absent-mindedly. This Colonel Millaire, he was thinking—there was a guy. Almost from the beginning of the war, stories had started to

seep through about the exploits of a French soldier of fortune who had been in Russia and joined on there. One yarn alone—of how he had taken command of two thousand Cossacks and as a guerrilla army raised havoc with the Germans—was a classic. Then he had gone on over to Italy and performed prodigies with the Alpine troops. Even in the Dardanelles he had put in his oar. He was supposed never to have formally enlisted anywhere and wild stories were about that he was one of France's most famous secret service men in addition to his other duties. Practically no one in France knew him, according to the stories, for since boyhood he had roamed around the world—Indo-China and the Congo, a general in one of the Chinese bandit armies—those only a few of his stops. All France had been waiting to get a sight of their countryman, and here he was in the flesh.

"If you gentlemen will permit me," Colonel Millaire said, his French as perfect as his English had been, "I will stay a few moments with Colonel Lake. You can come back here when you are ready to go."

The other French officers saluted smartly and departed.

Millaire came in and sat down on the bed. He removed his cap, and his appearance changed amazingly. That square, scarred face with its bulldog jaw, heavy nose and long, level eyes, became a bit more youthful and less hard with the hair to soften it.

"Well," said Stormy, "when did you get into France?"

"About two days ago—incognito," rasped Millaire.

"Why incognito?" inquired Stormy. "With the whole country waiting to make a hero out of you; why didn't you go in for some of the gravy?"

Millaire shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm a soldier, not a lap dog," he said sardonically.

From somewhere within the hospital, an excited shout made Stormy turn his head. Some interruption in the routine had apparently caused excitement, for he heard hurrying footsteps and tense words thrown back and forth.

"Seems to be a little trouble somewhere," he remarked. "Or maybe they've found out you are here."

"No one but you and the colonel are to know that," Millaire said. "I do not care to—"

"Stormy!"

It was Captain Driggs, swathed in a white operating apron and carrying a long bright steel instrument in his hand.

"Yes? Whats up?" snapped Stormy.

"They've just found Andrews, your double, murdered!"

"What?" barked Stormy, and suddenly he was on his feet so quickly that it was hard to tell how he had gotten there. "How?"

"Stabbed," returned Driggs, his high voice cracking a bit. "Stabbed with a long, very thin, dagger or knife that scarcely left a wound. But that isn't all."

"Well, go ahead, man," commanded Stormy, his eyes pools of blinding light.

AT that second, he could not comprehend all the possible implications in what had happened, but a sixth sense told him that Stormy Lake was involved somewhere.

Driggs gulped a lungful of air and seemed to gather himself. Then he said very slowly, as though striving for control—

"On Andrew's forehead there was pasted a tiny figure."

As Driggs stopped again, Stormy felt that if he had a minute to think he could tell what that figure was, but for a moment it was as though all his physical functions were suspended.

"And that figure," Driggs went on, his eyes staring into Lake's, "was that of a little Red Devil."

For a second there was absolute silence in the room. Outside a cordon of American soldiers was being thrown around the hospital, and in corridors and wards and rooms it seemed that every inhabitant was discussing the tragedy excitedly. Shuffling footsteps, raised voices, barked commands, all united to form a chorus which made Lake's nerves tingle.

"Was it the von Baer Red Devil?" he asked very slowly.

"Exactly," Driggs told him, and again silence fell.

Suddenly Millaire crouched forward on the bed where he had sat as motionless as an image.

"Let me get this straight," he rasped. "You say Colonel Lake's double was just murdered. What do you mean by double?"

"A flyer that's the spitting image of me," Lake said.

"And the mark of the Red Devils," Millaire went on. "You and your Blackbirds' most famous exploit was the wiping out of Baron von Baer and his Red Devil squadron, was it not?"

"Right," snapped Stormy.

Suddenly he was pacing up and down.

"But we didn't wipe them all out, and it's fifty to one that some of those wild yahoos that were left are over here behind our lines—why, in this very hospital starting to take their revenge!"

"But listen," Millaire said with utter calm. "How long has it been since anyone saw that Andrews alive?"

“Driggs and I saw him alive just a few minutes before I met you.”

“Where is his room? On the outside like this one?” said Millaire.

“Yes.”

“You think that Andrews was mistaken for you and that it was you who were to be murdered?”

“Of course. The Red Devil was pasted on his forehead to make certain that everybody’d know they were at work—”

“But wait a minute,” Millaire interrupted. “Anyone in the hospital would know that Andrews was not Colonel Stormy Lake, eh?”

“Right,” piped Driggs, wiping the sweat from his brow.

“So there’s nothing to fear from the attendants in the hospital,” Millaire said as though soothing children. “The murderer came in from the outside, killed the wrong man by mistake, and went out through the window again. Although it might be a miracle that he wasn’t observed, it will certainly be a miracle if he is not apprehended immediately.”

“I never thought of that,” Driggs said. “The colonel and I and other officers were going crazy wondering who to suspect among our own men. Let me go out and tell them—”

“And let me see Andrews,” Stormy cut in. “I’ll be back in a minute, Colonel.”

It was as though the fire inside the rangy Lake had suddenly had fresh fuel thrown on it. That internal flame shone through his eyes and seemed to be diffused through every pore of him. He walked swiftly and quietly as though stealing his way through a forest of enemies as he sped through the excited hospital to Andrews’ room.

His double face was peaceful, and the eyelids had been closed. What drew Stormy’s fascinated gaze was the tiny image of a sardonically grinning Red Devil pasted to Andrews’ forehead, squarely between the eyes. It was not more than two inches high, and made of bright red paper, but it was a complete simulation in every detail of the tailed Red Devil which Baron von Baer and his squadron of madmen had made famous throughout the world.

Military Intelligence men and two French detectives arrived on the scene as he was gazing at Andrews, but he had no information that he could give them. As he made his way back to the room, the doctors and patients looked at the tall flyer with something of awe in their eyes, but he was not aware of it. The whole world knew of the epic series of struggles between the crack outfit of the German air service and the Blackbirds of the American air service.

BUT there were Red Devils left, the looks of the patients seemed to say, and the despairing audacity of those that were left appeared to be even more colossal than it had been when they were in the air, scourging the skies under their idolized leader.

Two minutes later. Colonel Sax, a little quaver in his voice, was expressing the same thought to Stormy and to the calm Millaire.

“What strikes fear in my heart,” the aged medico said quietly, “is that even one German murderer with the nerve to strike as this man did is behind our lines. If there’s one, there are probably more. The sublime audacity of that emblem, plus the fact that he or they glory in being known as one of the Red Devils, almost makes me think that no guard or no precaution short of shipping you back to the States, Stormy, would save you—”

“And don’t bank too much on that going back to the States business,” Colonel Millaire interrupted. “If the remainder of this outfit hate the Blackbirds enough to make them do a thing like this, they won’t stop until they finish the job. There’s been many an outfit in the world—some police forces, your own Texas Rangers, the Constabulary in South Africa, certain tribes of Tibet—who have had the same esprit de corps. It may take years, but they track down their enemy eventually.

“I know very little about the Red Devils, just news stories, but it would seem that they are of the same caliber.”

“You don’t even know the half of it,” exclaimed Stormy Lake, and got to his feet.

The words from Colonel Millaire, which foreshadowed his doom, seemed to have an effect diametrically opposite to what they should have had. His eyes were flashing, his mouth smiling, his head thrown back as though alert for some peril which he looked forward to with joyous ferocity.

“Let me say this,” he said slowly. “I suppose I know more about that von Baer crowd than anybody else in the world outside of the Germans. I was their prisoner once. I watched them eat and drink and heard them talk. If they’ve gone from the air to the ground, and there are many of them behind the lines, it’s not only bad news to me and Groody and Evans and Bentham—all that’s left of the Blackbirds—but it’s very likely to be darn bad news to the Allies in general!”

CHAPTER XVI SKY KILLERS

IT was an hour later when Lieutenant Colonel Anthony Ross, chief of staff for General Mallory,

walked into the hospital where Colonel Millaire still sat with Stormy.

The big, shaggy-headed Ross acknowledged the introduction to Millaire brusquely and turned immediately to Stormy.

"I took off the second I got your message," he said in his heavy bass voice, "but I cannot stay but a minute. Have they found out anything?"

"Not a thing," Stormy told him. "Somebody just slipped in the window, killed Andrews, and got out again unobserved. The village is being combed, of course, and I understand that a cordon of troops has been thrown all around it and that every road is being watched within a radius of fifty miles."

"I have very little confidence myself in their ever catching anybody now," Millaire stated in his forthright manner. "Right after the murder—yes. But any enemy operating, behind the lines must have things so fixed that he's above suspicion, and he's had an hour to lose himself."

Ross nodded, a brooding look in his turbulent black eyes. His dark, heavy face was lined with worry.

"I've got to get over to Alloire and have a short talk with General Pitieri which cannot be postponed," he said. "Then I'll meet you, Stormy, on the airdrome at Calton. That's only fifteen miles away, and I will be there about as quick as you can check out of the hospital and get there by car. I'll say this to you now, though. Through certain Intelligence channels we have reason to believe that the remnant of the Red Devils, wild for revenge, are planning some sort of coup, the exact details of which we don't know as yet. Groody and Evans have already been wired to drop out of sight and disguise themselves and hold themselves in readiness to report secretly to General Mallory when notified. You've got to do the same thing. Disguise yourself as soon as you reach the airdrome and drop out of sight so far as possible."

"I have a suggestion to make," Millaire said. "I am going to Velay for a dinner in my honor tomorrow. Let Colonel Lake disguise himself as you suggest. I will personally arrange that he be allowed to wear a French uniform and for the next day or two go about with me. It will be a recreation for him after his long period in the hospital, and I don't think that anybody would suspect who he was."

"Great," yelped Stormy. "What a break!"

"Sounds all right to me," grunted Ross, now Stormy's firm friend. "In a couple of days, you'll have to see Mallory. And it looks as though the Blackbirds would have to fly again!"

"If they're not wiped out in the meantime," suggested Millaire sardonically.

"Right," grunted the harassed Ross.

Half an hour later he was in full uniform, clambering into an official Dodge wherein sat, in addition to the chauffeur, two guards, armed with rifles as well as side arms.

It was great to be out in the open air again, traveling over rutted roads through a stricken countryside which nevertheless seemed beautiful to his unaccustomed eyes.

As the car rolled into the airdrome, Stormy Lake would have refused a month's leave in Paris with all expenses paid because it would delay his revenge. He was looking forward joyously to the Blackbirds' flying again, and hoping devoutly that the information of an impending coup which Ross had mentioned would prove well founded.

By the time Stormy had reported to the commanding officer, parked his duffle in the quarters of Lieutenant "Ham" Eggloff, changed from his officer's uniform into that of an enlisted man, and put on a pair of borrowed dark glasses, it was almost time for Colonel Ross to arrive if he had kept to his schedule. Lake's arrival at the airdrome had been inconspicuous, and aside from Eggloff and the commanding officer, no one, so far as Lake knew, had any idea that the flight commander of the Blackbirds was on the post.

"I feel foolish in this rig," he confided to Eggloff, "but if they can steal into a hospital and commit murder, they could do it on this field."

"Nobody'd give you a second look now," Eggloff assured him.

"Well, I'll stroll out on the field and see," Stormy said. "I know a half dozen guys here."

He passed one of them a few minutes later, saluted smartly, and received a return salute and a quick look which had no recognition in it. His battered campaign hat set at a rakish angle, his ill-fitting uniform the replica of hundreds of others, he had a feeling that he had successfully melted into the mass on the airdrome.

He was idling on the line, smoking a cigarette and listening to the far-away rumble of big guns on the Front twenty miles distant, when the drone of a faraway motor reached his ears. As the speck in the sky drew closer, he recognized Colonel Ross's private S.E.5. The colonel was right on time.

He watched the ship go into a gradual dive a mile from the airdrome and start shooting for the field without a preliminary circle thereof.

"Tony shouldn't do that stuff," Stormy thought, "even if he is chief of staff. How does he know that one of these ships on the line isn't about to take off or something?"

He watched the ship come over the hangars at the northern end of the field a hundred and fifty feet high.

“He’ll never make it unless he side-slips,” he thought idly.

THEN suddenly he became taut. The flyers and mechanics in the vicinity looked up too, as though some sixth sense had warned them that something unusual was happening.

The S. E.5, its motor cut to idling, had come level in the air a quarter of the way across the airdrome. It lost speed in a couple of seconds and hovered in a stall. Stormy’s unwinking eyes stared unbelievably as he saw it stagger drunkenly and then snap down in the start of a spin.

He found himself running out on the field as the ship darted to the ground. It hit nose-on with a terrific crash and bobbed over on the right wing. There came the hideous ripping and tearing of crushed wood and rending cloth, as the wing crumpled. The S.E.5 was a shapeless mass of wreckage from which projected the uninjured tail surfaces like a monument over the dead.

For the moment Stormy didn’t let himself think as he led the race to the crack-up. Subconsciously he knew that what he had seen could not be explained by ordinary logic and subconsciously he doubted that Tony Ross could have survived that terrific head-on crash. The ship had come down in that normal glide functioning perfectly and then that unexplainable stall—

He found himself tearing at the wreckage like a gopher digging his hole. He ripped and tore his way through it to the limp body of his friend and superior officer. Fearful of the fire that might break out at any second, he was temporarily a madman. He handled Ross’s hundred and eighty pounds of limp flesh as though it were a doll.

A breathless crew of enlisted men and officers surrounded him as he dragged the colonel’s body clear and laid it face up on the ground. He dropped to his knees beside it as the ambulance clanged across the field.

Stormy got to his feet slowly as a medical officer shoved his way through the crowd. The surgeon leaned over the body briefly as the stretcher bearers came up. Then the medico gently turned Ross over.

“Great guns!” he exploded, and Stormy’s eyes were suddenly frozen to his friend’s back.

A deathlike silence fell over the crowd which now numbered more than a hundred. The fight surgeon dropped to his knees again to look at a hole in the middle of the left hand side of Ross’s back. He got to his feet slowly, and his voice rang out as though he was confiding his utter bewilderment to the world.

“This man was shot through the back—from behind!”

“He’ll be okay,” the medico replied as he jumped in the ambulance and sped away.

For a second the silence held, while the doctor’s words seemed to reverberate through the still air. Suddenly an icy clarity seemed to take possession of the ordinarily dynamic Lake.

He found himself striding swiftly toward the wreck. Perhaps some planted gun had been so arranged in the ship that it would go off at a certain time. Colonel Ross had been the superior officer of the Blackbirds on the ground, even as Stormy had been in the air.

Then, before he had touched the wreck his eyes were drawn as though by magnetic attraction to a section of the motor cowling which had been ripped off and which lay upside down on the edge of the debris.

Neatly pasted to its underside, where it would have been invisible when the cowling was in its normal position, was the tiny figure of a grinning Red Devil.

It was eleven o’clock the next morning when Stormy, sitting alongside Colonel Millaire and Mr. Emil LaVoise in the back seat of the finest automobile that the town of Velay afforded, was driving out to the hay field where he had landed his DeHaviland airplane the night before. In the front seat was the mayor of Velay and the chauffeur.

Stormy was not in a French uniform. That idea had been discarded in a conference between himself and General Mallory over the telephone. Instead he was in the uniform of a flight Lieutenant of the Royal Air Force. So far as Velay was concerned, his name was Cecil McDonald, and his eyes needed protection from the sun because of a recent fire in the air. Colonel Millaire and Mr. LaVoise were the only people except General Mallory who knew that he was the flight commander of the Blackbirds.

THE omnipresent topic of conversation whenever he and Millaire and Millaire’s great and good friend, LaVoise, were able to talk without being overheard, was being thrashed over for the hundredth time as the car sped for the field where Millaire was to take his first airplane ride by special request. “Of course,” Millaire was saying, “so far as you personally are concerned, Stormy, there are no precautions which you can take to ease your mind. If the Red Devils can strike as they have at Andrews and Ross, I can think of no conditions under which you yourself could be sure that you were safe. For all that you know, I may not be Colonel Millaire at all. I might be one of the Red Devils who ran across Millaire, killed him, took his papers and uniform, and posed as the well-known soldier of fortune.”

He grinned sardonically, the scars deepening on his face as always. La Voise chuckled behind his heavy

black beard. He was not a resident of Velay—he had come from Paris to greet the friend with whom he had fought until wounded in the Russian Army.

“Is it not true?” he inquired oratorically, his black eyes snapping. “But it will not be for long, Colonel Lake. The best detectives in all France are at work on the case, to say nothing of military intelligence men from all the Allied armies.”

“*Mon Dieu!*” exclaimed LaVoise. “Look at the field! You will have a large audience for your ride, Henri.”

“You sure are a fourteen-karat hero in this town,” stated Stormy, as his eyes swept the crowd of at least four hundred Frenchmen who were packed at the edge of the field.

The crowd was surging around the car as they got out, and it was a hard task to keep them back from the ship as Stormy cranked it and started warming it up.

“What kind of a ride do you want, Colonel?” he asked, as he saw to it that Millaire’s safety belt was properly fastened.

“No stunts,” Millaire told him. “Just straight and level. I’ve lived too long and gone through too much to take any chances on a pleasure trip. That makes me a coward, eh?”

“That’s great,” agreed Stormy. “Because these DeHavilands aren’t supposed to be stunted. Not that a loop or two would be dangerous. But straight flying it is!”

He climbed into the front cockpit, saw that all was clear and taxied out for the take-off. The physical and mental burdens which oppressed him, lightened subtly as he guided the ton and a half bomber out on the field, opened the gun wide and, with right rudder and left stick, swept it around in a half circle. Save for the flight over to Velay the evening before he had not been in the air for three months—and Stormy Lake was born for the air.

He reveled in the feel of the ship gathering speed beneath him, and enjoyed easing it smoothly off the ground with a barely perceptible movement of the stick. He eased forward on the stick immediately, letting the D.H. pick up speed as it scooted along level, barely a foot above the ground. Then he zoomed smoothly. The DeHaviland cleaved its way upward buoyantly, and he leveled out just before it lost flying speed. It did not settle so much as a foot. He had neither over nor underestimated his flying speed.

“Well, I guess I’m not so rusty at that,” he thought to himself contentedly.

He sent the ship into a vertical bank to make the turn around the field. Again he waited critically for some sign that he was slipping or skidding in that bank. He felt no wind on his left cheek, which meant

that he wasn’t slipping, nor any air pressure on his right cheek, which would have told him that he was skidding. He was making a perfect vertical bank, and it filled his flyer’s soul with glee. When he changed direction again, he did it in a wing turn, pulling the ship upward in a zoom and turning it to the left with left rudder as the nose dropped. That simple maneuver came off all right, too.

For the next fifteen minutes, the bellowing twelve-cylinder Liberty, cut to sixteen hundred and fifty revolutions a minute, climbed steadily in ever-widening circles. Every time he turned he made it a maneuver for the sheer joy of feeling an airplane answer to his will again.

Finally the altimeter read ten thousand feet and the air was growing slightly chilly. He turned to look at his passenger for the first time. Colonel Millaire stared back at him through his huge goggles and smiled a brief, thin-lipped smile. He was not acting as most passengers did on their first trip, Stormy reflected. His hands were not gripping the cowling tightly, and his body seemed thoroughly relaxed. Stormy turned again to gaze casually at his instrument board.

Then suddenly he was staring fascinatedly at the floating compass which projected from the instrument board. Its glass-covered black face made an almost perfect mirror, and reflected in it was the image of Colonel Millaire standing up in the rear cockpit.

THE two cockpits were separated by the gas tank which was approximately three feet long. The belt in the rear seat was an observer’s belt, designed to allow its wearer to stand up if necessary. There was no reason why Millaire should not stand up to stretch his legs—but for some reason Stormy was on the *qui vive*. Some instinct made him continue to stare into the compass rather than to turn around.

A second later he saw Millaire’s right hand raise as the colonel leaned forward. In his hand was a clubbed revolver.

The colonel struck with the speed of lightning. As the gun swept through the air, the amazed Lake quickly bent all the way forward. The revolver thudded against the rear cowling, just grazing his back.

Lake snapped upright as Millaire drew his arm back again, and as his eyes met the expressionless ones of the colonel, a thousand thoughts strove for precedence in his brain. Had Millaire gone mad? Was Millaire really Millaire?

Again the colonel struck and like a mongoose eluding a cobra, Lake leaned forward out of harm’s way. The gas tank between them was saving him—

As the second abortive blow bounced off the rear cowling, the motor died to idling and the shriek of the

strained wires was the only sound. Millaire was covering Stormy with the gun now and his shout reached Stormy's helmeted ears clearly:

"Fly me into Germany or I'll fire!"

For a second Stormy stared at him, his mind racing along on a thousand different trails. Millaire must be able to fly, he thought swiftly, or he wouldn't have attempted to knock his pilot out. His main object was not to kill Stormy, or he would have fired. His intention must be to capture him.

It was then that the process of turning Stormy Lake into the audacious madman of the air that he had been before going to the hospital was completed. Instantly he saw the desperate gamble that he might take. His conviction was that capture and not murder was the mysterious Millaire's objective. He was more than half convinced that the man had gone suddenly mad, but nevertheless it was not in him to give up without a struggle. Without an instant's hesitation he decided to gamble on his hunch.

Never in his tempestuous life had he done anything harder than to shake his head negatively as he stared into the muzzle of that menacingly steady gun.

At the same second he turned on the motor again. Millaire leaned forward until he was half resting on the gas tank. His hand moved swiftly. Stormy's body went forward again, but instinctively he felt that this time Millaire would get him on the head. Automatically his left hand went to the clasp of his safety belt just as a terrific blow caught him at the base of the neck. He was half dazed with the shock of it. An inch or two higher and it probably would have broken his neck. Temporarily stunned by the blow, he unclasped his belt and at the same second a desperate subterfuge flashed into his mind. He fell forward, his body jamming against the stick and pressing it all the way forward.

He lay there inert against it as though he had lost consciousness. The DeHaviland nosed forward into a dive. Stormy could not see Millaire, but he felt the stick press back against him as the colonel, in the rear seat, strove to pull the dual-control ship out of its ever-steepening dive.

Seconds that were like so many eternities—and the DeHaviland's speed had increased until the frail bomber was shaking in every strut and spar.

Then the colonel cut the gun, but the speed of the dive did not decrease. The ship was in a nose dive now, speeding toward the ground like a falling meteor. Then the tense Lake, peeking under lowered eyelids, saw Millaire's grim, set face appear above him. The colonel's only salvation was to pull Lake's supposedly unconscious body away from the stick. He did not have his gun in his hand now, and Stormy knew that

he must have unfastened his belt in order to reach that far forward. He was walking into the trap—

Stormy gathered himself. As Millaire's hands extended toward him, the rangy flyer made his move. His right hand and arm were free. He struck like a rattlesnake and his fist thudded home to Millaire's jaw with bone-crushing power. The next second Stormy was on his knees—then on only one knee—and as he rose he shoved Millaire's body back. The universe was a bedlam of roaring motor and shrieking wires.

For an all-important second, the colonel had to grasp wildly at the cowling to retain his equilibrium. By that time, Stormy was in his seat hauling back on the stick with all his might. He had not fastened his belt and his feet were not on the rudder. His elbows were pressed into the sides of the ship, his feet thrust under the walking beam, as the D.H. darted upward in a clean arc with all the speed engendered by that terrific dive.

AS it got halfway up in the first half of a loop he saw the colonel's arm raise again. Stormy jerked the stick all the way back. The DeHaviland shot over on its back and instantly Lake, his head turned to watch the colonel, shoved the stick all the way forward. The great ship stayed on its back, its nose dropping slightly, as it went into an upside down dive that no DeHaviland had been built to endure. He saw Millaire grabbing wildly at the cowling, saw his body half leave the ship.

Then it was that Lake, his face set and his eyes two blazing torches, wiggled the stick rapidly from side to side. He had one last glimpse of Millaire's contorted face and bloodshot eyes, saw his mouth open in what must have been a scream of utter horror, and then saw the doomed colonel thrown off like a drop of water from a spinning wheel.

For the next fifteen seconds, Lake was almost certain that any instant he too would be hurtling toward the ground five thousand feet below. It seemed that the shaking D.H. would fall to pieces before he could get it level again, or, if it held together, that he himself would fall out before he got it under control. His face was pale, and his forehead beaded with sweat beneath his helmet when he finally got the shivering ship right-side up again. He looked down in time to watch Millaire's body catapult into the roof of a small stone building, rip through it like a cannon ball through a pane of glass, and disappear from sight.

On the field, three miles away, the crowd was rushing around like so many distracted ants. The hero of the day in France was dead—dead by the hand of Lieutenant Colonel Stormy Lake.

CHAPTER XVII
WANTED FOR MURDER

WITH motor throttled to a thousand r.p.m., Stormy sent the shaking DeHaviland straight for the field in a fast power dive. He could find no explanation for what had happened. It did not seem possible that Millaire was an imposter. The most logical thing he could think of was that the real Colonel Millaire, despite his record, had always been, or perhaps had recently become, a German spy.

As he came in for the landing, he thought for the first time of what might lay ahead of him. LaVoise, easily recognizable because of his flowing black beard, was addressing the crowd, gesturing energetically.

Stormy found time to wonder briefly why so young a man as LaVoise, who could not be over thirty-five, should sport such luxurious foliage on his chin. The crowd seemed composed of statues as he taxied toward it. He found himself growing taut as he drew close to them. Not a person moved as the D.H. trundled to a stop, and Lake jumped out of the cockpit. He left the motor idling—just why he could not have explained himself. He had a sudden panicky feeling as he turned toward the spectators, twenty yards away. Without conscious thought he turned back to peer into the rear cockpit. A feeling of relief swept over him as he saw Millaire's gun wedged under the seat. He leaned over and got it, thrusting it inside of his belted coveralls. He had a feeling that there might be trouble ahead and the feel of the gun was comforting.

That feeling grew as he walked forward against that invisible wall of silence. His gaze came to rest on La Voise. The Frenchman's beady black eyes stared at him balefully from either side of an aquiline nose that suddenly appeared to Stormy to be the beak of a bird of prey.

"Well, I've got a darn funny story to tell," Stormy said quietly.

His head was thrown back like that of some wild beast scenting danger, and his lanky body was a mass of coiled springs although he gave the impression of being utterly relaxed.

LaVoise's answer was surprising.

"You speak practically no French, I believe?" he said in English.

"No, I can order an egg and a bottle of wine and that's about all," Stormy told him. He was increasingly aware of the enmity of that menacingly silent crowd.

"Then I will be glad to translate for you what you have to say," LaVoise said very slowly.

It was as though he was controlling himself by main strength, and that bottled up within him was a raging torrent of words crying for release.

For a second utter silence reigned as the unpleasant possibilities in the situation flashed through Lake's mind. LaVoise was Millaire's friend and comrade in arms—an unfriendly interpreter. Even so, Stormy dared not insult LaVoise at the moment by asking if there was no one else in the crowd who could speak English.

"Very well," the flyer said finally. He was standing ten feet from LaVoise, facing the silent crowd.

He raised his voice until his words carried clearly to them all.

"I don't know whether Colonel Millaire went suddenly crazy in the air or not," he said steadily. "I do not know whether the man I took up was really Colonel Millaire or not. I do know that the man known as Millaire suddenly pulled his gun and tried to knock me out, then tried to kill me!"

He stopped and for a second fought a battle of eyes with the swarthy, hawk-faced LaVoise.

Suddenly the tall Frenchman turned to face the crowd. A torrent of French poured from him so rapidly that Stormy could get no idea of what he was saying. On and on went LaVoise, and now he was gesturing madly. Stormy was as certain as he was standing there that LaVoise was making no attempt to tell the true story.

Suddenly the flow of passionate words stopped, and LaVoise whirled to face the motionless Lake.

"Last night at the banquet you attended," he said carefully, "Colonel Millaire liked the mademoiselle who was supposed to be your partner. Am I not correct?"

"Well, what of it?" snapped Stormy.

"He asked your permission to pay attention to her, did he not?"

"Again what of it?"

THEN as the import of LaVoise's questions came home to him, the battle flag started flying in the impulsive Lake's eyes, and he took a quick step forward.

"Listen here, LaVoise," he snarled. "If you're trying to cook up a yarn that I got jealous over a girl at the banquet and took Millaire up and killed him, I'm telling you that you're a liar and that I ought to kick you where you stand!"

A low guttural growl came from a dozen throats as the peasants and townfolk heard the words which they could not understand but the import of which was unmistakable. A dull flush came in LaVoise's cheeks and suddenly there were little red spots in his eyes. He

smiled beneath his beard and once again whirled to face his countrymen. Again he addressed them passionately. Suddenly imprecations were flung from dozens of throats, and the entire mob was moving restlessly.

Stormy did not await the onslaught. A stone image could have felt what was coming. To them he was undoubtedly an English flyer who had killed their famous countryman through jealousy over a girl.

He whirled like a flash and bounded toward his idling ship. He was beside it almost before the crowd got in motion. He vaulted into the rear cockpit and, as he jammed on left rudder and shoved the throttle all the way ahead, he saw LaVoise's bearded face looming up five feet away. His left hand was on the stick as the DeHaviland started to turn. His right hand darted for his revolver.

As the Frenchman's hands gripped the cowlings, Stormy shot him in the shoulder. LaVoise's scream could not be heard above the roar of the motor.

A few seconds later he was taking off. He did not stop to circle the field, but took one farewell look at the mob below him. LaVoise was being carried to the mayor's car.

Flying blindly eastward, the blazing Lake took stock of his situation. Within half an hour the alarm for him would be out all over France. Andrews, Ross, now himself; Millaire, LaVoise—for the moment it was an inexplicable tangle which with his limited information he could not hope to unravel. He came to one decision immediately. He must get to General Mallory—not so much to hide under the chief's powerful wing as to find out whether anybody had found out anything which might throw light on what had become a dizzy nightmare of successive tragedies. He wanted the Blackbirds at his back again too—Groody, Evans, and Bentham.

Colonel Stormy Lake craved a showdown.

It was a forty-five minute flight to general headquarters. Five miles from the village there was a converted pasture lot which was used as the flying base for a few airplanes. Stormy, however, decided that he would not risk landing there. Instead he brought his DeHaviland down in a pitted stubble field five miles from the field. He flew low the last few miles so that he was sure that his ship had not been observed by anyone at the airdrome.

The few French peasants who gathered around the ship when he landed had evidently heard nothing whatever about the death of Millaire, and Stormy had little trouble in renting a shaggy farm horse for an amount twice the animal's sales value. He bestrode his lethargic steed bareback and by devious routes arrived on the outskirts of the village at three o'clock.

Stormy would have given a month's pay to have his own uniform on again. At the moment he would prefer to expose himself to the machinations of the Red Devils rather than be arrested before he got to Mallory. He made up his mind not to go to headquarters but rather to seek the general's quarters. The middle-aged chief of the American Air Service in France occupied a small dwelling on the edge of the village. Stormy knocked at the door and the enlisted striker who answered it informed him that General Mallory had just arrived.

"Great," yelped Stormy. "Tell him that Colonel Lake wants to see him—Colonel Stormy Lake," he added.

The striker's eyes narrowed.

"Colonel Lake?" he said doubtfully.

"Oh, fer goodness sake go and get the general and let him look at me!" demanded Stormy. "This uniform doesn't mean a thing."

So it was that General Mallory himself, guarded by the wary soldier, appeared at the door.

"Well, hello, Stormy," he exploded in his staccato way. "Come in here quick. Samuels, not a word about this, understand?"

"Yes, sir," nodded the enlisted man. "Beg pardon, Colonel Lake, but you understand."

"Sure, sure," Stormy told him as he came into the hall.

"Well, you're a sight for sore eyes," Mallory told him. "How in the world did you get here without being picked up? We just got the news ten minutes ago about Millaire. A delegation of French and American M.P.'s are waiting for you at the airdrome."

"I thought they might be," grinned Stormy, conscious of a great feeling of relief.

THE general had removed his tunic and boots and was pattering around comfortably in breeches that flapped around his shanks and a khaki silk shirt which was open at the neck. He was idolized by the American flyers because he not only knew as much about military aviation as any other man in the world, but he would never give an order to his flyers that he would not have carried out himself.

"Come on in," the chief said with a wave at a tiny room which was a miniature library. "Before you tell me what happened, let me tell you that while you were taking this Millaire for a ride, there was a message for you at Velay to get here as quickly as you could. Groody and Evans and Bentham will be here sometime this evening or tonight."

"Great!" said Stormy, sinking into a chair. "But General, listen. Before another thing's done, there's a man named LaVoise, a fellow with a long beard who's

Millaire's best friend that's got to be picked up in Velay before he gets away. I believe he can explain everything—"

"O.K.," Mallory said brusquely, "but that can wait a minute, I guess, while you tell me exactly what happened."

This Stormy proceeded to do. Without another word the general picked up the private telephone between his quarters and G.H.Q. Orders flowed in a stream from his lips.

"You'll have no trouble getting cooperation from Colonel Moliere," he concluded to the major to whom he was talking. "The French are just as interested at getting at the truth as we are. Put the whole story in front of them and tell them that I am personally responsible for Colonel Lake. You'll have to explain how Stormy came to be wearing an English uniform. Tell them the truth and see to it that no time's lost."

He replaced the phone and ran his hand through his gray-streaked brown hair.

"Well, that's that," Stormy said. "And General, I sure hope something's been found out that you can tell me before I go crazy. About Tony Ross, anyway. By the way, how is he?"

"Coming along fine, but he'll be in the hospital for a long while yet."

"What happened?" Stormy queried.

"He says that some innocent-looking plane sneaked up alongside him, got flying at the same speed and all of a sudden, this supposedly friendly pilot took careful aim and fired. He lost consciousness and came to in the hospital. The surgeon said if the shot had been an inch farther to the left, he would have been a dead man," Mallory explained.

"Then the Red Devil mark was pasted to Tony's plane before he ever took the air," Stormy pointed out excitedly, "which means that the man flying and another man on the ground were all involved—"

"And it also means that we have no idea how many enemies are behind our own lines," Mallory finished for him.

"It sounds as though all the Red Devils left had sneaked into France!" Stormy said, leaping to his feet and pacing up and down restlessly. "Why I—I never heard of such a thing, General!"

"You never heard of such a bunch as the Red Devils, did you?" Mallory inquired. "I guess I—and you Blackbirds—bit off just about as much as we could chew when we started gunning for them."

CHAPTER XVIII DEATH STRIKES AGAIN

IT was less than five minutes later when there came the muffled thud of a knocker against the general's door. Stormy's heart gave a little bound. He felt as though every ring of the phone, or knock at the door, meant that he had been cornered. From without, came an indistinguishable jumble of words, and then Private Samuels' voice was raised in protestation not unmixed with respectful anger.

"But I've got to see, sir, whether—"

"Oh, nuts!" came a well-remembered voice, and the next moment, followed by the anguished Samuels, the figure of First Lieutenant George Groody filled the doorway.

"Hello, General! Hi, Stormy," Groody greeted them.

He removed the excessively long and ludicrously slim black cigar from his mouth and gazed at the two men with smiling eyes.

"Hello, George," grinned Stormy, walking forward to wring the bronzed veteran's hand, "Where's Slim?"

"Slim, my lad, will be here in a moment," Groody answered. "He stopped to talk with some jane a block or two away from here, but I didn't waste any time."

Long narrow eyes, that sloped downward from his thin aquiline nose, glinted with saturnine humor. He replaced the cigar in one corner of his mouth—he had them made to order, and they were not only of a peculiar aroma which no one else liked, but of a shape that never had been seen before on land or sea—and grinned at the general.

He had no sooner sat down than Lieutenant Slim Evans hove over the horizon. He just walked in without knocking and stooped to get through the doorway. He made a broad and spacious gesture of greeting with an arm which was like one of the longer tentacles of a particularly large octopus.

"Greetings," he said. "Well, well, Stormy, so you're still alive. Isn't that too bad!"

"Sorry to disappoint you," grinned Stormy. "How's Lieutenant Slimuel X. Evans?"

"Lousy, thank you, lousy," stated the six-foot-six human beanpole.

He collapsed into a chair and twined one leg around the other. He seemed to have no bones in his lathlike body, and not a care on his mind.

The comradery between the general and the members of the special flight, which had been his pride and joy, was that of an older brother with the younger members of his family. There was no more indication of his rank in his actions or attitude than there was on his clothing. That spirit prevailed for the next five minutes while he and the three Blackbirds proceeded to chaff each other unmercifully about their lives, loves, and flying feats. Each one of the three had

been in the hospital for at least six weeks following the aerial battle which had done away with von Baer and the backbone of his squadron.

“Well,” Mallory said finally. “I’m going to talk now, so make yourselves comfortable.”

The flyers were motionless in their chairs as the general started pacing up and down.

“I don’t need to go over what has happened in the last couple of days,” he said crisply. “This mark of the Red Devils on these would-be murders speaks for itself. The circumstances are such as to force us to recognize that an unknown number of spies—undoubtedly ex-members of the Red Devils—are behind our lines.”

He stopped beside the mantelpiece and took time out to light a cigarette.

“The Intelligence officers of all the Allies,” he went on, “plus some of the best police officials in France, are at work on every detail. The Germans are not the only people in this war who have ways of getting information. In fact, possibly one of the most brilliant spies in all history is in Germany for us now and information of the utmost importance has come through this very afternoon. It concerns the Red Devils and clarifies somewhat the situation in which we find ourselves.”

HE stopped walking and planted himself on widespread legs before the mantelpiece.

“The remnant of the Red Devils swore vengeance on the Blackbirds and on the American flying corps. Not, mark you, the English or French air service. The reason is that they believe that the gentlemen’s agreement about that duel you Blackbirds were challenged to was broken. The fact that later on they themselves more than evened the score by using similar methods seems to have escaped their memory.”

Stormy nodded, but didn’t speak.

“According to our informant,” the general went on incisively, “their first objective was to wipe out every member of the Blackbirds, which objective they are well on their way to attain. Luck has saved Stormy twice. Tony Ross almost got his. Undoubtedly the Millaire incident has some connection—”

The telephone rang and the general answered.

“Yes, Mason,” he said. “O.K., go ahead. Great! That’s fast work. What? Repeat that! . . . O.K. When he gets here, call me, and I’ll come over to the office.”

He hung up the phone, his eyes glowing beneath bushy black eyebrows. While he had been talking, Stormy had given a quick whispered resume to Groody and Evans of what had happened in Velay.

“Well, get set, Stormy,” Mallory said swiftly. “We got the cooperation of the French all right, and Mr. La

Voise has been apprehended and is on his way to G.H.Q. to be questioned. It is the opinion of the French investigators, who have been at work for the last hour in Velay, that your hunch about LaVoise being phoney is correct. There’s no sense in wasting time and mental effort in trying to figure it all out when LaVoise will be here within an hour or two, and we can get at the truth. So let’s go back to the information which has just reached me.

“Our spy is sure he’s on the right track, although he hasn’t got the definite details yet. Briefly, he is certain that the Germans are planning to send from five to eight Zeppelins, largely manned by the remnant of the Red Devils on the greatest bombing raid of the war—which means the greatest of all time. The men manning the Zeppelins never expect to return to Germany. They expect that they will all be killed. But they also expect to practically wipe out either London or Paris with hundreds of tons of bombs. When you figure what eight Zeps loaded to their utmost capacity, can carry in T.N.T., you get some idea of the magnitude of what they are plotting.”

He stopped, his eyes thoughtful and brooding as they stared at the floor. The silence was so complete that the ticking of a clock on the mantel sounded like machine-gun fire.

“One more thing,” Mallory went on finally, as though still immersed in thought. “The bombing of Paris or London naturally is no revenge on the American air service. But our spy says that in some way which he doesn’t know yet, the expectation of the Germans is that they will achieve their revenge on us through this bombing business. How, I don’t know, but after a year of familiarity with the goofiness of the Red Devils, far be it from me to say anything is impossible!”

“How trustworthy is your man’s information?” Groody asked harshly.

“It’s just this trustworthy,” Mallory said, lowering his voice. “If any of you ever say a word about it, even to General Pershing himself, you ought to be shot against a wall. The man himself is on the waiting list of the Red Devils!”

Stormy barely repressed a yelp of surprise.

“He isn’t cheek by jowl with the big bugs, of course,” Mallory went on. “But he is being trained right now on Zeppelins.”

There was a moment of quiet as the Blackbirds digested what the general had said. Then the thud of the door knocker snapped the silence. Evans elongated his swanlike neck slightly to peer out the window. His Adam’s apple bobbed up and down like a rubber ball that had been bounced as he announced :

“Captain Archibald Bentham, no less, of the British Benthams, Fourteen East Salisbury Road, Derbyshire, Hoots, Hants, S.W.”

A second later, Bentham was standing in the doorway, holding himself rigidly erect.

“Good afternoon, sir,” he said, saluting meticulously. Mallory waved a greeting.

The man who had been England’s leading ace up until the time three months ago when he had been reported dead after the von Baer scrap, but finally discovered alive, looked more like a prosperous and slightly fleshy young broker than he did like one of the most cold-bloodedly skillful flyers in the world. His ruddy face was adorned with a brisk brown toothbrush of a mustache, and one fishy gray eye looked frequently through a monocle. It was rarely that the aforesaid orbs took on a human look, but this was one of the times.

“Well, what ho, what ho?” he said in his clipped British way. “You all look fit, what?”

“So do you,” Mallory informed him. “I’ll get you caught up in a few words. The boys can fill in the details later.”

THIS he proceeded to do while Bentham listened with an occasional “haw” of understanding. He showed no surprise whatever, had the Angel Gabriel suddenly appeared in person and tooted his trumpet, Bentham would have said “haw” in a highly bored fashion.

“So there you are,” Mallory concluded as he brought Bentham even with the others in the matter of information. “Our man doesn’t yet know where these six or eight Zeps are quartered—the Red Devils are being trained on one outmoded ship at Kindhof—but the information will come over as fast as he receives it. And the climax is about here.”

“Rum go, what?” stated Bentham.

Stormy grinned. It was great to see Bentham again as it was to see Groody and Evans. Only Zeke Benjamin was missing from the famous five who had made up the Blackbirds. He felt able to move mountains with those three at his back.

Bentham took a long slim cigarette case from some repository inside his immaculate tunic, offered it to the others, meticulously selected a cigarette himself and tapped it out on his case.

“So our vacation is jolly well over, eh?” he remarked.

“Right,” grunted Slim.

Bentham put the cigarette in his mouth and started to replace the case. Suddenly his eyes seemed to grow starry. The cigarette dropped from his mouth, as his

jaw sagged. He gave an inarticulate grunt, took a step, half turned as he fell unconscious at their feet.

Mallory was at his side in one bound, leaning over him. Stormy was on his feet as though coiled springs had been released. Scarcely a sound had been made and yet the three Blackbirds were instantly at the side of their fallen comrade. Not a word was spoken as the general loosened the collar of Bentham’s shirt. As he stooped over Bentham’s face, the general suddenly became almost as rigid as the Britisher.

Then he bent closer, his ear to Bentham’s heart. He twisted his head to look up at his subordinates, and his eyes were as though he was seeing infinitely horrible visions.

“Bend over here and see if you can smell anything!” he demanded shortly. “Bend over his mouth, but don’t touch him, for God’s sake!”

The stunned Stormy was first. “Sort of smells like almonds.” The general got to his feet slowly. “That’s enough,” he said. “Gentlemen, Bentham is dead, undoubtedly poisoned by cynaide of potassium!”

CHAPTER XIX THE BLACKBIRDS FLY

THE next hour and a half was a nightmare to Stormy and the other two Blackbirds. It wasn’t grief that made Stormy’s eyes wet half a dozen times during the period while doctors were arriving and military Intelligence and police officers made their investigation. They were tears of helpless rage and hate.

The three men paced the floor upstairs like so many trapped tigers. They had been warned by Mallory not to touch their own lips nor to allow anything that their hands had touched to come in contact with their mouths. The deadly poison acted instantly. And not until they had washed their hands carefully in some mixture which a colonel in the medical corps brought could they commence to feel safe.

It did not take long for the assembled experts to come to a tentative conclusion.

“The probabilities are.” Colonel Allen, chief of military Intelligence said, “that someone deliberately smeared his hand with the poison. Perhaps he merely shook hands with Bentham, and left some of the poison clinging to his fingers. When he tapped out his cigarette, enough of it came off on the end to have an instant effect when he put it into his mouth. If that is so, it is almost too horrible to think of. Bentham could have passed it on to half a dozen other people—children, anybody.”

“It’s a wonder,” Stormy said bitterly, “that the murdering rats didn’t attach a little Red Devil to him somewhere!”

“Maybe when they take his clothes off, they’ll find one,” Groody snarled.

“All right gentlemen, listen!” snapped Mallory. “General Pershing is at Chautain only fifty miles from here with Marshal Foch and others. I’m going to fly over there immediately and obtain *carte blanche* orders for us so that when and if the time comes for action, as I am certain it will, you will have unlimited authority, and there will be no delay. I will be back by dark. Meanwhile you will stay secluded in this house. You, Major Brothers, will see to it that a guard is posted around the house.” And with a hurried good-bye he was on his way. The flyers heard the drone of his motor as he sped over town.

An hour and a half after Mallory’s departure, Major Brothers phoned them from headquarters.

“The chief has just left Chautain,” he stated. “I called up over there because LaVoise has just been delivered on the hoof. The general says for you to wait where you are.”

“Right,” barked Lake, and hung up.

“I’ve got a feeling we may be going places with this LaVoise,” he stated to the others.

“Well, there’s certainly plenty to clean up,” announced Lieutenant Slimuel X. Evans. “Very nice little mess, all around, I’d say.”

It became an even nicer one nearly two hours later when Major Brothers called up again from headquarters.

“Did the chief stop by the house?” he asked.

“No!” Stormy answered, as black foreboding descended on his spirit. “We haven’t seen him!”

“Well, neither have we,” came Brothers’ voice over the wire, “and he’s had more than twice enough time to get here. If he had a forced landing, he’d have got to a telephone by this time.”

“Unless he’s hurt,” snapped Stormy. “Let us go look for him—”

“Stay where you are,” rasped Brothers. “He’ll be looked for all right. We’re getting plenty from LaVoise, and we’re about to get more. Don’t worry.”

But the Blackbirds did worry—worried until it seemed to Stormy that if he wasn’t allowed to leave the house and do something he would go crazy. Darkness fell and still there was no word, although four planes had roared out over the town an hour before to scour the course to Chautain.

Finally they returned to land by the light of flares and a few minutes later Major Brothers was on the phone again.

“He left Chautain nearly four hours ago,” Brothers half shouted into the phone, “and he was all by himself in his private Bluebird. There’s not a sign of him on the course between here and there. As for you fellows, get up here to headquarters as quick as you can and don’t move a step without your guards!”

As quickly as they could was very quick indeed.

“Let’s not go crazy,” Slim admonished them airily, “nor yet forget to care for our bodily needs. I feel about the same as the rest of you, but it’s been my experience that a year from now nothing means a thing.”

STORMY, however, could not for the life of him accept that philosophy. He was a black-headed demon when they burst into G.H.Q. Behind him George Groody, chewing on his unlit cigar as though it was an enemy, gazed at the world through narrow eyes that were like strips of silver in his face. That face was set and harsh, and he looked like some bronze eagle as they strode into a room where a half a dozen men sat around a table at the end of which was the bearded LaVoise.

Brothers, his long horse-face haggard and his gray hair tousled, rose to greet them. LaVoise, as calm and poised as a May morning, smiled behind his beard.

“We think we know from LaVoise what happened to the chief,” Brothers said jerkily, “but we don’t know how.”

“Well, what was it?” barked Stormy,

“He was abducted—made prisoner,” Brothers snapped. “Sit down, all of you. You’ve got a heavy night ahead.”

He introduced them to two Frenchmen and two Britishers, General Claney of the American army, and one French detective.

“All right,” Brothers said, passing a hand across his forehead wearily. “To summarize, the man you knew as Colonel Millaire was not Millaire at all. The real Colonel Millaire went into Germany as a spy, was discovered and, by accident, happened to look a great deal like the man you knew as Colonel Millaire. Inasmuch as Millaire was almost unknown in France, Kirsh, the name of the man you killed, was assigned to take Millaire’s ring and one or two other things which proved his identity, and come into France to impersonate him.”

“You were on the list to be kidnapped along with General Mallory and half a dozen other men of equally high rank or fame, Stormy,” Brothers concluded.

“But why?” inquired the absorbed Lake.

“According to LaVoise,” Mason told him, “and it checks with the information our own spy has sent us, the object of these abductions is first, to hurt our pride,

and to indicate the audacity of these theatrical Red Devils; secondly, to have as many eminent Allied prisoners as possible aboard a caravan of Zeppelins which are scheduled to start to destroy London or Paris on the first night when the weather's right. These Zeps, manned largely by Red Devils, never expect to return to Germany. They intend to drop notes over the city they select, explaining who is aboard one of the Zeps and to force our Allied ships to shoot down some of our best known men as their last ironical revenge on us for destroying von Baer and so many other German air heroes."

"And who are you?" snapped Stormy, forgetful of the ton of rank sitting about him as he whirled on LaVoise.

LaVoise smiled his thin smile.

"It so happens," he said carefully, "that Kirsh was as much of a soldier of fortune before the war as the real Colonel Millaire had been. I was his comrade in three countries. I am as little German—although born in Germany—as the real Colonel Millaire was French. All three of us were, I may say, men who fought for a living. I became a German spy in France—I do not mind admitting it, because these gentlemen have offered me my life in return for information—before Kirsh arrived as Colonel Millaire. If I had any loyalty to Germany, I would naturally be shot rather than give the vital information I am giving now. Personally I do not care who wins. I have no country."

"You steamed up that mob in Velay, didn't you?"

"Of course I was as loyal as I could be to my friend and my trust."

"What about Tony Ross? What about Bentham? What about Andrews?"

Stormy threw those questions out like so many hot coals.

"Ross was shot because he foolishly refused to obey the bidding of a ship ordering him to fly on into Germany," LaVoise told him. "A rifle was used in an endeavor to avoid detection. Bentham's death I know nothing about. It is my opinion that some Red Devil who is perhaps a trifle crazy simply made up his mind to murder rather than obey instructions—which were to abduct the Blackbirds—not kill them. Andrews' death was an accident—you were supposed to be kidnapped also."

"All right, enough of that," the overwrought Mason burst forth. "If you fellows are game for it, we are going to send you over into Germany tonight. Now listen."

BUT as a matter of fact, Stormy and the Blackbirds did little listening. A spark or two dropped by Mason ignited a consuming flame in the blazing Lake.

Groody and Evans, heroes of a thousand mad escapades in the air and on the ground, added their suggestions to the ever-broadening scheme which had been born in the minds of the men at the table and now was being expanded by them all.

So it was that three Blackbirds were warming the motors of three black Sopwiths at midnight that night. Their helmeted faces illumined by the ghostly half light from the dashboards, they seemed to the silent group of high-ranking spectators like figures of immutable fate.

Stormy raised his head and then his right hand. Groody's right hand answered the signal as his left thrust an unlit cigar in his mouth. Slim's long arm waved blithely. As one, the motors roared and the three black scouts turned. As one they took off in a perfect V formation, Stormy's ship its spearhead. Higher and higher they winged above the field until they were looking down from an altitude of nineteen thousand feet at the shadowed earth. Forty miles ahead of them pin pricks of red light which were bursting shells at the Front glowed like beacons blazing the way to destiny.

Stormy settled back in his cockpit. Down below LaVoise, that passionless man without a country, was directing the chase which he knew would run many a Red Devil into a world that might be more comfortable than the Western Front at that. It was not pleasant to think of Mallory, and God alone knew how many others, over in Germany awaiting the slaughter like helpless human sacrifices on the altar of the god of war. And it was horrible to think of the thousands of men, women, and children in London or Paris whose lives not even all the Allied airmen could save. The dirigibles could steal in above the clouds from any direction and drop their hail of death before they were sent to their own doom.

It was three-quarters of an hour later when Stormy waddled his Sopwith from side to side and looked back at Groody and Evans. The two flyers raised their right hand in acknowledgment and a parting salute. As one they banked their ships in opposite directions and went roaring off into the darkness on their separate ways.

There was a great feeling of loneliness in Lake's mind and, for an instant, it seemed to him that he was on the craziest mission of his entire life, and that there was no hope whatever but that he was bound for certain disaster.

"Well, here goes," he said aloud and pulled the wire which had been placed in his ship two hours before.

He cut the switches while the gas ran out of the tank. Finally he snapped them back on again, but the

silent motor did not answer. All the gas was gone—that would be his excuse for a forced landing in the midst of his enemies.

He was less than five thousand feet high, winging his way down in great circles over the German airdrome, before there were any indications that he had been noticed. He went into a steeper dive to get to earth as quickly as possible. As he came within two thousand feet of the now animated airdrome he saw a single figure suddenly outlined in the lights that had flashed on here and there. That should be DuPuy.

He landed deliberately as far away from the camouflaged hangars as possible. Sure enough, that tall figure brandishing a revolver was at least twenty-five yards ahead of the mob of soldiers and officers who were speeding toward him. As his ship trundled to a stop, he climbed out quickly and waited tensely, his hands in the air for the leader of his oncoming enemies. The man was within ten feet of him before Stormy was able to make out his features. And then Lake saw an aquiline nose and a little mustache and as the man's cap fell off, a mane of hair as yellow as corn silk. Eyes that were so blue that the color of them could be made out even at night burned into Lake's, and a smile that matched the devil-may-care glint in those eyes suddenly made the taut Lake feel ever so much more comfortable.

"I'm DuPuy," the man said quickly.

HE stopped five feet from Stormy, his gun pointed, and waited for the others to catch up. A few seconds later, Lake was surrounded by jabbering Germans through whom a short, squat, square-faced officer shoved his way.

"What is your name?" an officer asked slowly in English.

"My name is Lake—Lieutenant Colonel Garry Lake," Stormy said steadily.

"Ah!" It was an exultant, but unbelieving exclamation. "You are more than welcome."

Stormy found himself surrounded with half a dozen enlisted men and was ordered to walk toward the hangars. Ten minutes later he was in an automobile, an officer on each side of him, and DuPuy sitting in the front seat beside the chauffeur. He would have given his soul to understand German.

With every passing moment DuPuy was proving to Stormy his right to the title that General Mallory had given him. The greatest spy that the war had brought forth was evidently not only completely above suspicion so far as his comrades were concerned, but was respected more highly than his rank would deserve. Suddenly DuPuy, after listening attentively to

a flow of words from the officer to Stormy's right, looked squarely at Lake.

"We wish to know," he said in English, "what your mission over Germany was?"

"They do not understand English?" countered Stormy.

"They have asked me to interpret for them," DuPuy answered, his wide-set eyes blazing with that half laughing, half hard light. It was apparent that DuPuy was not so sure of the German's lack of knowledge of English as to dare risk any confidential communication with Stormy.

"General Mallory was captured, and so we came over into Germany with the intention of strafing an airdrome in revenge," Stormy said. "I wonder if any of you have any information as to what happened to the general?"

DuPuy translated his words into German and joined the other two officers in a hearty laugh. The officer at Stormy's right talked again with much gusto.

"Colonel Lodhoffer authorizes me to tell you that General Mallory is alive and well, and that tomorrow night, if all goes well, he will accompany you on a very interesting expedition which the Red Devils plan to make."

For a second Stormy stared into DuPuy's dancing eyes. The information which the spy had sent to the Allies was well founded then, and the crisis was only twenty-four hours away. If only the two little packages hidden below the bandages around his ankles, screened from the sight of the casual observer by the soft field boots he wore, could remain undiscovered, all might be well.

CHAPTER XX ZEPPELIN TRAP

AT eleven o'clock the next night Stormy was pacing up and down the floor of a tiny little room which he had not been allowed to leave since thirty minutes after his arrival the night before. Just inside the closed door sat a German soldier and another patrolled the hall without. He did not know where he was nor had he been allowed to even peek out the shaded window. Food had been brought to him, and the priceless cargo which the bandages on his ankles concealed was still intact. He wondered whether Groody and Evans had been similarly fortunate.

The thud of purposeful footsteps reached his ears and he stopped his restless pacing. His heart leaped as he recognized DuPuy's voice barking an order to the sentry outside. A second later the door was thrown open, and the blond spy said something in German to

the guard. The guard saluted and went out into the hall.

"In a moment you will accompany me," he said in English. "I have time for a cigarette."

He offered Stormy one which the flyer accepted, and then sat down and sighed as though with relief.

"I am very tired," he said smilingly.

Outside the open door the sentries were waiting just out of sight. Stormy jerked his head at them.

"They do not talk a word of English," DuPuy said swiftly.

"Groody and Evans have been brought here. General Mallory is here. The eight dirigibles start within an hour. We all will be on the same one. What do you plan to do?"

And Stormy told him in three staccato sentences, while he unlaced the small opening in the front of his boots at the ankles and swiftly loosened the bandages which had been specially designed for that very purpose and drew from under them the two rubber containers like miniature inner tubes and handed them to DuPuy. Never, if he lived to be a hundred, would he go through seconds more packed with suspense than that brief interval when at any moment one of the sentries might poke his head into the door. DuPuy put them in a pocket in his tunic, and his eyes laughed into Lake's.

"It may work. Who knows?" he said, shrugging his shoulder. "And now we must go."

And go they did, two sentries marching behind them. A moment later when they reached the field, Stormy was gazing in stupefied awe.

Two great Zeppelins were being held down to the ground by one hundred men hanging to the ropes. Another one was being floated out of a huge hangar so beautifully camouflaged that Stormy could scarcely believe that it was a hangar even from the ground. Coming in from the east were four great sausages flying in single file less than one hundred feet from the ground.

DuPuy led the way to one of the huge balloons, while he spoke in casual tones that he might have used in talking about the weather.

"I will attend to the details. Remember these signals. I should have thought of this before."

He quickly outlined three signals which he and Stormy might use to communicate with each other. Stormy repeated them twice. Then a shout reached his ears above the noise of the excited airdrome.

It was Slim.

"Got your ticket?" he yelled.

A few seconds later Stormy was greeting Slim, Groody, and General Mallory.

"What did they do to you, chief?" Stormy demanded tensely as the general's hands were being tied behind his back.

"A spy hid himself in the fuselage of my ship and popped up after we were in the air," Mallory said swiftly.

Every one of them was as taut as drawn wire, Stormy most of all. The Germans, too, were in a fever of excitement. When they spoke, it was mostly in short staccato barks. One by one the captives were bound, the laughing DuPuy looking on.

Presently Stormy was being assisted up the ladder into the control car. Behind him came Groody, Evans, and Mallory. Directed by a brusquely courteous German, they were walked through the car with its maze of dials, instruments, and levers and were jammed uncomfortably in a small room which had no windows.

"We do not dare talk. We might be overheard," whispered Mallory.

"Everything O.K. on your end?" whispered Groody.

STORMY nodded. Suddenly he felt the great ship lighten. Then it angled upward. They were on their way. He would have given his soul to be able to see anything—above all to help DuPuy. Suddenly a great feeling of helplessness swept over him.

About fifteen minutes later a medley of excited shouts and running footsteps made the four Allied airmen strain their ears.

"He succeeded in doing something," Stormy whispered and at the same moment the door was flung open.

A square-faced German was covering them with a revolver. Behind him was DuPuy, his eyes blazing like torches.

"You're wanted in the control car," he said, and his eyes glanced quickly upward and then down to the floor. The poison was at work; the Germans were being defeated by their own trick.

They filed out under the gun of the excited German and into the control car. A glance out of the window apprised Stormy that they were a half mile high, the last ship in a stately line of great silver sausages. At the wheel up forward was an enlisted man, but the four officers who were in the car were paying no attention to the navigation of this ship. They were facing their oncoming prisoners as though they were so many executioners watching their victims approach. The eldest of them snarled a command to DuPuy.

"Four officers and three enlisted men have dropped dead within the last ten minutes," DuPuy said in

English. "First of all you are to be searched. You will please get undressed, all of you."

As he and the German whose gun was drawn started untying the ropes which bound the prisoners' wrists, the other officers drew revolvers. One of them glanced out of the window and then stepped to a speaking tube. He shouted some commands into it. Stormy, undressing rapidly, watched him as though his life depended on what was going to happen. The German's lips were very close to that mouthpiece—

His heart leaped as he saw the German press his lips against its edges, the better to make himself heard. A second later he dropped like a stone.

The enlisted Germans seemed paralyzed. The youngest of the three remaining was suddenly shouting hysterically. The oldest roared an oath and leaped forward toward the body, limp on the floor.

DuPuy had been standing next to a machine gun mounted on the shelf which ran all around the side of the control car and which held, in addition to instruments and charts, six machine guns so mounted that they could be swung to shoot out the windows.

"Now!" he yelled, and Stormy's heart gave a great bound. "Jump back!"

At the same instant he swung the machine gun to command the whole front of the control car. The Allied flyers, Groody and Evans in nothing but underwear, leaped out of range. For a second the control car seemed occupied by nothing but statues as the blazing DuPuy poured forth a flood of German. The muzzle of his machine gun swung slightly from side to side while he eyed his captives alertly. Suddenly he switched to English.

"At your service, General," he said without turning around.

"Right!"

General Mallory's voice rang through the control car.

"Stormy and Groody, see whether those enlisted men are armed or not; then tie them. Slim, get one of those other machine guns loose and get over close to the officers."

STORMY fairly bounded ahead. There was not the shadow of resistance from the stupefied Germans as they were disarmed and tied up. DuPuy was at the door of the control car, two revolvers in his hand while he told General Mallory what he had done.

"I had a chance to spray the speaking tubes with poison and to put some in the liquor which I felt sure all the officers would take a drink of as they toasted the success of the trip," he said rapidly. "I was unlucky because these officers you see didn't drink out of the

same bottle. For God's sake, stay away from those speaking tubes—"

"O. K., now listen," snapped Mallory. "You go out on the keelway and order everybody on board to report here. Do it one by one to give us a chance, understand?"

"Right," yelled DuPuy.

"If this isn't one for the book," shouted the transfigured Lake, as he finished binding the last enlisted man.

Mallory came forward to help Groody with the last of the officers.

"Oh, I jimmied up the radio so the ships wouldn't have any idea of what's been happening aboard here," DuPuy threw over his shoulder.

A pair of legs had appeared on the ladder leading up to the keelway. DuPuy waited until the soldier's feet had touched the floor. Then he unceremoniously poked his machine gun into the man's side, while Stormy leaped forward to bind him.

The next ten minutes were like some outlandish dream. At Stormy's own suggestion they took time to dress themselves in the ill-fitting uniforms of the German officers instead of their own clothes and then with demonic gusto they placed themselves around the foot of the ladder as German after German, in obedience to the absent DuPuy's order to each individual, came down the ladder to be made captive, bound and laid on the floor like so many dead fish.

Finally DuPuy himself appeared when a total of eighteen captives lay on the floor.

"That's all, General," he yelled, "except the men in the back gondolas. I called each one of them up to the keelway and made them prisoners myself."

"O. K.," snapped the general. "Now we're turning this buggy back toward Berlin. If the other ships sense that something's wrong and follow us, we'll go on and bomb the town before we go down. If they don't, we'll circle back, put on parachutes, jump and get word to England in time to have every airplane in the country waiting for this outfit over London. DuPuy, you and Groody handle the controls. Slim, you and Stormy and I get in the back gondolas. Each one's got a machine gun, I notice, and in case of trouble we want to be able to shoot from as widely separated points as possible. Turn all motors wide open!"

Stormy fairly flung himself up the ladder and ran like a cat down the narrow keelway under the twenty swaying gas bags high up under the roof of the great ship. He stopped at the first port gondola and turned the throttle of the motor wide open. Then he raced on down to the single gondola hung under the stern of the ship and ensconced himself in it.

By this time, the great ship was turning in a circle back into Germany. The flash of the guns was visible at the Front fifteen miles away. And three thousand feet above them was a thick layer of clouds the existence of which had made the raid possible that night. Stormy took his eyes from that line of Zeppelins which were like so many ghosts against the blackness of the starless night.

Would they be observed?

They were not. He shouted aloud as he saw the nearest Zeppelin start to turn. They were all turning

His heart seemed to stop for a second as he saw a face loom in the opening above his head. Then he saw it was DuPuy motioning him up the ladder. He climbed up the ladder onto the keelway.

“We got a better idea, Groody and I,” he shouted above the roar of the motor, “and we got away with it. We started figuring that they would radio back into Germany to watch out for us, so I fixed the radio and sent a message to the other ships. I signed it with the name of the C.O. of our ship, of course, and told them that DuPuy had been discovered to be a spy, and that he had radioed news to the Allies of this raid and of the fact that Mallory and you fellows were aboard this ship so that they wouldn’t shoot it down. So they’re all turning back—”

“Where do we get off?” barked Stormy.

THEN suddenly a great light broke over him. “We can shoot these babies down!”

“Exactly,” grinned DuPuy. “We’re getting up underneath the clouds, slowing our motors to let the others catch up with us. It doesn’t take much to set these babies afire, you know. So come on up and get a parachute on. This is going to be a scrap!”

Five minutes later, plans hastily made while they were strapping on parachutes, all were back at their posts once more. Under DuPuy’s experienced hand their ship was floating directly underneath the clouds. A thousand feet below a long line of dirigibles slowly caught up with them and the lead ship passed underneath them. Stormy waited tensely.

The signal light glowed on the dash-board in front of him. Stormy sighted along his machine gun, and his finger pressed down on the trigger. He picked the third ship in line. Groody ahead picked the second one, and up in the control car DuPuy and Mallory would shoot at the first.

For a second nothing happened. Then before an answering shot had been fired, Stormy gave a mighty shout which could be heard above the drone of his throttled motor. As though a gasoline-soaked pile had been suddenly ignited, the third Zeppelin burst into flames. He didn’t take time to watch men diving into

space from it, their parachutes whipping out in white splotches toward the ground two miles below. He swung his gun on number two, raking it with fire from stern to stem. Suddenly number one ignited like a huge torch. Those Germans down there could scarcely get a shot at the captured Zeppelin, their own gas bags shielding the ship above them. Number two had not caught fire, but it seemed to Stormy that it was out of control and drifting helplessly.

Suddenly he felt mist on his face. For some reason the ship was starting to cleave its way upward into the clouds.

Then the dirigible suddenly seemed to be all by itself in the night sky as the mist closed in about it. Stormy climbed up the ladder and ran up the keelway. Ahead of him Groody and Slim were already running toward the control car. Stormy leaped down to the floor of the big gondola.

“Where do we go from here?”

“You go back and turn the motors wide open,” the general yelled at him exultantly. “Did we get a couple of them, or didn’t we?”

It was as though the years had rolled off Mallory’s back and he were eighteen.

“We fly west keeping in the clouds,” he went on. “If German airplanes don’t catch up with us first, we may be able to get down with whole skins. We may not be able to wreak havoc in Berlin, but you bet your life we’ll give some Heinie village a surprise when we let loose with these bombs. I’ll be darned if I know where this thing can be landed short of England, but it’s been a long time since I’ve seen London anyway.”

Again Stormy raced down the keel-way. He started at the rear power gondola, turning all the motors wide open. He came forward again to find Groody and DuPuy at the controls and Slim in the radio room tapping out a series of messages which Mallory was writing out, designed to prove to Allied radio stations at large that he was General Mallory and that the Zeppelin should not be shot down if discovered.

Slipping through a world of opaque mist the dirigible flew steadily westward. Lieutenant Colonel Stormy Lake did a rather unusual thing under the circumstances. He had been in the hospital a long time and not yet hardened to endure the ration of action which had been his lot in the last forty-eight hours. He fell asleep on the floor alongside as strange a set of bedfellows as a man ever had.

And Stormy Lake, veteran of many tempestuous battles in the air, slumbered peacefully on while the great Zeppelin floated westward. No burst of bombs disturbed his rest—in fact he did not open his eyes until General Mallory shook him roughly and said, “Wake up, Stormy; this is London!”