

This Guy Weston

By O. B. Myers

NOW take it easy, and don't get excited," said the leader of B Flight. Big Jim Hand's voice was in itself a reassurance, thought Gale Weston, as he listened to this last-minute advice before his first real patrol. He tried to nod calmly.

"I'll keep my eyes open," he promised. "Do my best to see everything there is to see, Jim. Er—that is—"

"Jim is good enough any time," said the other, smiling with his eyes as well as his lips. "And don't worry too much about seeing everything, son. I never knew anybody yet that didn't miss half the ships in the sky his first time over. You just stick close to me; you'll fly first on the flight, today. Watch me all the time, so we don't get separated. Then if there's any excitement, you'll be all right. Savvy?"

"Right," said Gale, feeling of his chin-strap for the tenth time. If there was only some way, he was thinking, for Jim to sit beside him in the cockpit and talk to him, he would feel no nervousness about this, his first momentous trial.

"Come on, you sick horse!" shouted a nearby voice. "It's sixteen hours by my Big Ben."

That was Stan Coates, over by the second Spad, looking at his upraised wrist. Funny, the way the army ran the day on the basis of a twenty-four hour clock as the French did. He never could quite get used to it; had to figure back each time. Let's see, sixteen; that would be four o'clock in the afternoon, of course. He felt a resounding slap from Jim between his shoulder blades, and walked quickly toward his ship.

He adjusted the belt carefully, wriggled against it to make sure it would hold. For three hours yesterday, and another hour this morning, he had flown this Spad back and forth above the field, trying the feel of every stunt he knew. Yet, after the Nieuports of Issoudun, it still felt strange and new, a machine whose moods he had yet to learn. He was still speculating on the difference in rudder feel when he found himself in the air, trying to adjust his distance from Jim's right wing.

Once he looked down at his stick; those trigger grips were queer things, always right next to a man's fingers, and yet not in the way. Would he use them today? He felt the skin prickle all along his spine. Tried to tell himself that Jim, having a green pilot along, would of course avoid combat if possible. He'd probably use those grips to warm his guns, and no more.

He began taking his eyes from Jim's Spad, to steal glances about him, ahead, and below. When he picked up and recognized a reconnaissance Salmson, also on its way up, he felt quite proud of himself. Of the terrain below he could make neither head nor tail, however, in spite of having studied the map religiously all last evening. The only item which clicked with what he remembered was the river, way over on the right, and as soon as Jim started his first series of turns. Gale lost track even of that.

Jim turned slowly and easily, so that following was not difficult, but Gale dared not look away for long. A horror of finding himself suddenly alone in those strange skies lurked at his elbow, increased by the fact that he hadn't the foggiest notion whether he was over Allied or enemy territory. His sensations were those of a man in a labyrinth; he had to stick close to his leader, if for no other reason than to be eventually led home,

A swing to the right, followed by another, brought the sun exactly in line with the tip of his right aileron, and it struck him that they were pointed south. Time up? He looked at his dash clock, and grunted in disgust when he saw that it said four-thirty. It seemed like hours; he resolved to look at the clock no more.

ANOTHER wide swing of Jim's Spad, to the left this time, was followed by many more. Gale almost gave up looking at the sky. Busy dogging Jim's rudder, he never saw anything, anyway. Hello, there he goes again. Gale slid up into a smooth bank to follow. But the leader's ship seemed to shoot away from him sharply; it took

full aileron and rudder and a touch of throttle to boot, to regain his position. Lot sharper turn that time, he thought; perhaps Jim was trying him out, seeing if he could be caught napping.

He grinned; as he did so Jim's ship again rolled into a vertical turn. Gale lost no time slamming on rudder and stick; he came out still the same fifty meters behind and above Jim's tail. With a certain triumph he looked around to see if the three others had done as well as he. No, their formation was loosened up, spread apart much more than before. The quickness of those two turns had caught them off guard. He wondered if Jim noticed that; perhaps the leader would compliment him, on their return, on his alertness. His grin broadened. It did not occur to him that the spreading of those others might have been done on purpose, to allow themselves more room for sudden maneuvers, or that they saw something which he did not see.

Jim's plane seemed to be drawing away from him slightly, as if Jim had opened his throttle wider. But perhaps he only imagined that; he'd wait a bit before using his own to catch up. Then, with startling abruptness, he saw Jim's plane leap upward into a maneuver. His hand gripped the stick, ready to follow, while he waited to see which way the turn was going this time. But then he was at a loss, for instead of veering off left or right, the leader's plane was about-faced, coming back straight toward his own, some thirty meters higher. That was a strange stunt; he hesitated, not knowing quite what to do.

What was that odd noise? He wasn't used to these Hissos yet, hadn't learned the sounds which meant trouble. Was his motor going to conk out? That rapid tapping made him think of a chattering valve. He ducked his head inside the cowl, the better to listen, and found he no longer heard it. Funny!

When he raised his head, Jim's plane was just shooting past, above, in the opposite direction. He heard the tapping noise again, still very indistinct through the roar of his engine. Perhaps it was Jim's motor that was making it. Maybe Jim's motor had developed sudden trouble, and this last turn had been a turn for home. Well, in any event, it was his place to follow. Calmly he began a split-air to the right.

The tapping sound had faded away now, but his ears caught another, equally strange. Just once

he heard it, a sound such as would be made by a man who, walking in the dark, steps upon and crushes a cigar box. Now, what the devil was that? Imagination again? He craned his neck ahead of his turn, saw a Spad at some distance, pointed toward him. Then he saw another, higher, pirouetting upon a wing-tip gracefully. And off to the right were two more—no, three more. But wait a minute; how could that be? There were only five in the patrol. . . What was going on?

A lump of icy horror formed in his stomach, and was immediately up in his throat, choking him. His eyes swept back to a point in front of his propeller, and there dilated in uncomprehending terror. Something like a cloud hung in the air; it didn't seem to resemble smoke so much as the cloud of dust kicked up by a swiftly moving automobile. It tapered down to a point; here, already some distance below, it plunged and careened a shapeless mass, resembling nothing that ever flew. He still failed to grasp its full significance, yet one detail burned itself upon his mind. He saw a part of a wing—or perhaps of a fuselage—bearing four white painted angles which formed between them a cross.

There were Boche around here! Unwittingly he did the best thing possible. He banked swiftly, first in one direction and then in the other. This in itself served to keep attack off his tail, though that was not the thought in his mind. He was searching madly with his eyes to find the enemy. There was one—no, that was a Spad. There—no, another Spad. He mustn't lose his head, shoot at his own comrades. Where the hell were the Boche, anyway? Every way he turned, he met Spads. Not a black-crossed ship could he discover. He didn't dare cease twisting now.

A PLANE swooped from above, flattening out right alongside. Gale glanced over quickly; it was a Spad, and the pilot was gesturing at him. His motions seemed to say. "Come along; follow me."

Gale leveled off to obey, but his head kept jerking over his shoulder, his agonized stare raking a sky that seemed to be swept bare, even of clouds.

The other Spad flew without turning; now he saw that the rest of the patrol had dropped in on either side, taking up once more the regular

formation. Had the Tripes all run away as quickly as that? Why, he hadn't fired a shot!

That was rather a joke, he thought; yet he felt no desire to laugh. For several minutes he gave his attention to keeping formation, while his racing heart slowed down to something like normal. He noticed idly that the Spad he was following was number 16; that, he thought, was "Buzz" Ward, though he wasn't certain. He wondered why Buzz had changed off with Jim to lead; Jim's number—the only one he was sure of—was 11. He craned around, at first only curious to see what spot Jim was flying now; only then did he see that instead of five, they were now but four.

His eye leaped from ship to ship; there was no number 11. Why, where was Jim? He wasn't—but he couldn't be—not shot down? Suddenly two parts of his numb brain seemed to come together, and at least a portion of the awful truth began to dawn on him. He remembered the tapping noise; machine gun, of course—why hadn't he guessed that? It had started before Jim's turn was complete, so must have been from some other, a Boche, perhaps. That explained why Jim turned so fast, of course.

Then he recalled that single, sharp crunch, like a smashed cigar box. What had that meant? He recoiled from the first intuitive flash which crossed his brain; it was too hideous to believe. But how else explain it? He knew that a Boche had gone down; he had seen the markings. And Jim was no longer here.

And now he realized sickly that the misshapen, whirling thing at the base of that smoke pillar had looked less like one plane than like two locked together. A surge of nausea twisted him in his seat, and sweat was cold in his palms.

When he saw field and hangars creeping toward his wings, he pulled out of formation, and circled widely. He didn't want to land first; somebody would be sure to ask him what had happened, and he didn't know! At least not enough to tell a connected story. He'd try to listen to the report made by one of the others first; that would help him to piece together things that now were to his ignorance fragments of a jigsaw puzzle. He felt a fool, but did not yet realize the whole grotesqueness of his situation.

Three Spads swooped and settled on the level rectangle of the field; he followed the third, not too closely.

He purposely taxied slowly, so that when he reached the hangars, three figures were walking side by side toward operations tent. He muttered an unintelligible reply to his mechanic's greeting, slid to the ground, and walked stiffly after the others. He slipped softly through the flap, and found himself listening to Stan Coates' voice.

"Almost straight down on top of us," Stan was saying. His tone was hard and jerky, as if he forced himself to speak. "If Jim turned away, he'd give them our tails, so he turned toward them. Their leader went on his back, and dropped on the tail of that new chap—Weston's his name, isn't it? Jim split-aired back to force the Boche off. Whichever way Weston turned, Jim would have had a shot. But Weston must have frozen stiff; he never turned at all. Jim wouldn't turn aside—you know Jim. Neither did the Fokker until it was too late. They went down together."

"And the others?" said a voice behind the table which Gale knew for Major Burr's.

"Pulled up. One of them mixed for a minute with Buzz, here. But when they saw what happened to the leader, they lost their taste for fight, I guess. So did we."

GALE stood very silent, engulfed in a flood of dismay. Now he saw what had happened, when it was too late. That firing had been directed at him. Jim Hand, seeing the peril of which he himself had been blissfully ignorant, had turned to help him. And then, finding no other way, had deliberately rammed that Fokker head-on. Jim had given his life, that he, Gale, might not die on his first patrol. Oh God, this was awful!

"Wash out the balloon-strafting at dusk for B Flight," came the major's voice from a great distance, "Ward, take a whirl at leading the flight tomorrow, will you? Right."

Gale found that the others were leaving. In sudden terror of having the major ask him a question, he turned and plunged through the flap after them. They were walking toward the barracks, not speaking; Gale followed at a little distance. As he passed the hangar his mechanic ran up, pointing at his standing Spad.

“Three holes in your wing, sir. One right close to the motor. You must have been right in the thick of it, sir?”

Gale looked at him with eyes that were blank and far away. After a long time he said, “Yes,” and moved on.

In the barracks he threw his helmet down, and sat on the edge of his bunk without moving. His eyes roved from the opposite bunk to the door, to the stove, as if seeking something they could not find, some surcease from the terrible torture which pressed upon his brain. Other figures reclined on blankets, or moved about, but did not speak to him, nor much to each other. Just across the narrow aisle Stan Coates was doing something; part of Gale’s mind wondered why Stan was fussing around a bunk that was not his own. Without prelude Stan was speaking, in a voice harsh with strain.

“Why didn’t you do something, you fool? Turn, slip, dive—anything. Why, damn you—why?”

Gale realized that Stan was speaking to him. He tried to swallow something in his throat that obstructed his speech.

“I—I didn’t see.” The voice didn’t sound like his own,

“Didn’t see!” sneered Stan. His face was scarlet with emotion, and Gale saw that his fists were clenched. “What’s the matter, blind? See, hell! Don’t try to tell me you couldn’t—”

“Draw it fine, Stan,” said another, calmer voice. That was Buzz Ward, thought Gale. “He’s not the first guy that didn’t see everything on his first trip over. No use getting riled about it now. He couldn’t help it.”

“But—but, Jim!” Stan was almost inarticulate.

“I know, I know,” said Buzz soothingly. “We all feel the same way about Jim, Stan. Weston, too, I guess. But there’s nothing to be done, is there? Let him alone.”

“Agh-h!” rasped Stan, turning on his heel. “I hope to hell the major ships him out!”

As the next three or four intolerable days dragged by, Gale more and more hoped for the same thing. He was numb with grief and despair, his unanswerable thoughts would not let him sleep, and the attitude of the others was calculated to break what spirit he had.

Nothing was ever said again about Jim Hand in his presence, and no reference was made to that fatal patrol. But he found himself quietly shunned, left to himself when what he needed most was friendly companionship. They were entirely civil, spoke upon meeting, but that was all. He felt himself regarded askance, as an outsider, someone beyond the pale of fellowship, as a mere numeral on the side of a ship. He was not one of them.

He became morose and sullen. But what could he do? No one ever came out and accused him of anything specific; he wished they would, if only to make conversation. His position was grotesque; he lived because another man had died, but to express gratitude or achieve atonement was denied him. Those chaps, without saying so in so many words, regarded him as responsible for the death of Jim Hand, one of the finest that ever sat behind a stick. Their aloofness was slowly breaking his heart, already crushed.

AS THE interminable days wore past, Gale gradually resolved that he must do something to change their attitude. He must show them that he was not such yellow scum as they thought, that at least he had some guts of his own. If he could only get them to accept him as one of them, his terrible hurt might heal, or become bearable. Their studied, casual politeness he could not stand. If, perhaps, he threw himself into combat, let them see that he was not afraid, they would revise their opinion of him.

It was exactly a week after his first patrol when the moment came. Buzz Ward led a low-flying mission in the morning, with instructions to strafe the roads and woods north of Romagne. Gale flew, as usual now, last on the right. They had raked the crawling ground with burst after burst, diving to fire and zooming away, until their belts were about half gone. Then Buzz, wise enough not to use up the last cartridge while still over enemy territory, climbed to reconnoiter.

Gale saw the black-crossed two-seater, he thought, before Buzz did. But perhaps Buzz did not dive as soon as he saw, waiting to get between the Boche and the sun. Gale, at any rate, was ready, fingering his triggers impatiently when Buzz led the dive. He saw Buzz fire, a flashing splash of tracer, and saw the Boche observer reply in kind. Buzz wheeled off, ducking that rain of

steel, and the next Spad lunged in. Still another executed the same maneuver, swooped aside, and then it was Gale's turn.

He knew what he was going to do before he pushed the stick forward to start his dive. No short burst, withdraw, and try again for him. He would stick close, observer or no observer, until either he or the Boche was done for good. His fingers closed on the triggers, and Vickers hammered out many rounds in front of his eyes before he saw that he was wide of the mark. He stopped firing, swooped left and under, and then was up under the belly of the Boche. His guns stuttered murderously, but the belly canted up, and Spandaus spit down into his face.

His target passed his sights; he slid off on a wing. But he did not circle away. Instead he came about sharply, zoomed, and bored in from the other side. That German observer was ready for him; their shafts of fire crossed in mid-air. Gale gritted his teeth, and traversed his guns from side to side, trying to think only of his own aim and not the other man's. Closer and closer he bored; when the hump-backed ship seemed to hesitate, staggering, he grazed its wing as he veered. He spun in his seat, pulling the stick with him, but did not lunge again. The two-seater was spinning slowly, but dropping swiftly. While he still hung in a turn, it melted into a cloud of upthrown dirt and stones below.

Buzz started immediately toward the field. Gale fell into his place in formation, and wondered why his breath came so hard and fast. He felt, physically, as if he had just sprinted a fast quarter-mile. Mentally he was elated, but it was not the natural exhilaration of his first victory which dominated his thoughts. It was the effect that victory would have on the attitude of his comrades. Would it break down the barrier of their coolness, bring about a change in their cruel unfriendliness?

Again he waited until all the others had landed; he wanted them to be the first to report. When he stepped into operations tent. Buzz Ward was writing in the log book. The other three stood lighting cigarettes; the major was not there. Buzz looked up.

"Good work, Weston," he said simply. "Your first, wasn't it? Keep it up, son; we need plenty." He resumed his writing.

"Thanks," mumbled Gale.

Bill Jordan said something which sounded like, "Congratulations." He couldn't be sure, because Stan Coates was at that moment swearing violently at having dropped his cigarette in the mud. Gale nodded stiffly; then they were all outside.

"Come on, you buck-toothed kiwi," said Bill vigorously, seizing Stan by the elbow, "let's go swallow some firewater. Er—come and have a drink with us, Weston?"

The change in tone with the last sentence was a slap in the face.

"No, thanks," said Gale, turning away.

WHY did they always use his last name, in studied formality? He had a first name, like the rest of them. Or any nickname, he didn't care what, would be better. Why didn't they ever refer to him as a "buck-toothed kiwi," or some other familiarly insulting phrase, making a jest of the insult by the very manner in which it was uttered? No, they had not changed. What he had done that morning didn't make any difference. He had shot down a German plane, that was all. It was not enough to make them alter their feelings toward him. Would anything ever be enough?

Another year-long week passed. Gale withdrew more and more into himself, with naught but his thoughts for company. Not that he wanted to. Far from it. He craved companionship as a drug fiend craves the needle, but he could not take what was not offered. Some hopes of starting on a different footing with new replacements coming up, who would know nothing of Jim Hand, were rudely shattered during this week.

A pilot named Farnsworth arrived, a thin, rather sharp-faced chap, whom Gale had known slightly at Issoudun. But it turned out that Stan Coates had also known him, somewhat better, in the States, and he and Stan got together over a bottle the very first night. What Stan told him Gale did not know, but Farnsworth's chilly greeting the next morning told Gale plainly that the new man had been put wise. Gale ground his teeth in hopeless despair.

Patrols, like everything else in life, had become a routine, something to be gone through with, endured as stoically as possible. Each day was misery, each night a separate hell. To continue

seemed beyond his powers, but to end it was equally impossible. His past was dark enough to think upon, but the future was blacker still. What had he to live for? Would he have to die to prove to them that he, too, was regular?

Buzz Ward put Farnsworth first on the right for his first trip over, as was customary, and called Gale's attention to the necessity of keeping a watchful eye on the green pilot. Gale merely nodded, and noted the newly painted number 14 on Farnsworth's Spad.

As they zigzagged up and down the lines, without getting very far into Germany, Gale esped back and forth behind Farnsworth's tail, and wondered idly why Spad 14 flew always left wing low.

Buzz, he knew, would be keeping a wary eye out for trouble, and they were at the dead end of the sector, anyway. The result was that the attack took him completely by surprise. They must have sneaked up in the sun, those Fokkers, and waited until the Spads were in the confusion of a turn before pouncing. But then they came down in a body, guns blazing, each one choosing his particular antagonist with machinelike precision.

Gale saw the thin gray lines slicing by his cockpit before he heard the metallic chatter of the Spandaus. An instantaneous kick on the rudder threw him sideways, and up, to dodge the blast of steel from behind and give him a chance to turn his head. With the first look he knew that this was going to be serious. The sky was fairly dappled with planes, some close, and some above, awaiting the moment when reinforcements would be needed, if ever.

He squeezed his triggers, releasing them instantly. The burst shot across the nose of Farnsworth's ship, ahead of him. That would warn the recruit, if he had not already seen. Then Gale let himself drop in a slip, perhaps a hundred meters. When he jerked out, the speed of his fall lifted him in a tremendous zoom; he was back at his former level, but behind his previous position.

He saw that the Fokker which had fired first at him had passed on over his head as he slipped, and was now hurtling toward the tail of number 14. Farnsworth was turning, but slowly, as if not yet fully awake to the danger. The Fokker was boring in fast, but not yet quite ready for a shot.

Gale whipped his nose about, and jammed his triggers down.

GALE was much too far off for accurate aim; the burst, however, slithered close enough to the Fokker for the pilot to see the hissing tracers. The Fokker promptly abandoned its game, and wheeled into a split-air turn. This brought it face to face with Gale, who now closed on his triggers, not to warn or frighten, but to kill. The Fokker straightened out; at incalculable speed the two ships rushed toward each other, head-on.

The fateful irony of the situation struck Gale at once. He was plunging headlong at an enemy to force him off the tail of a green pilot. Repeating, in another role, the very maneuver which had once saved his life. Well, if it was decreed that he should this time give his life, he would not shrink. He screwed his eyes to slits, through which he watched his tracers disappearing into the glinting circle of the oncoming prop.

He thought at first that the whole plane exploded. What actually happened, he reasoned afterward, was that a bullet shattered the Boche's propeller, the racing motor instantly reduced itself to flying junk, and the fragments tore the wings and struts to shreds. The Fokker seemed to be wiped from the sky with the suddenness and completeness of a magician's trick.

Before he could swerve he knew that there was another behind him. As he went on his back in the beginning of an Immelman, he saw that there were two. He fainted toward one, still on his back; then whirled upright to plant his sights on the other's tail. But his groping fingers missed the triggers, and the Boche was gone. He found himself between them, maneuvering dizzily.

For minutes that seemed like hours he was boxed. If he paused to fire at one, the other caught him with a vicious crossfire which stabbed his fuselage to the likeness of a sieve. Spiral, twist, zoom, spiral again. His taut muscles began to ache; his head grew giddy and dense with the unrelenting pressure of the turns. A furious desperation seized him.

He zoomed, fainted the start of another spiral, then zoomed again. He repeated the maneuver. He was out-gaining them for altitude; he tried it once more. This time he went on his back with a flip, and found both Fokkers below him, close

together, with noses in the air like howling dogs. As they saw him drop, they split and dropped, too. He saw his chance, and seized it. If he could get one now, before the other got behind him, he would be on even terms again. He drew a careful sight, waited, not too long.

In spite of all the concentration of effort in his aim, he knew a vast surprise when he saw the first puff of smoke from the punctured gas tank. He sat so long staring at it grow—two seconds, by air combat clock, is a long time—that the second Boche was almost on his tail. But then the terrific velocity of his dive carried him up in a zoom which out-soared the other, and he settled grimly to the final issue.

He was whirling out of his second turn when he saw another plane rush across his vision, Spad number 14. Farnsworth was still here, then, he thought. Better yet, the recruit was plunging to attack the same Fokker Gale was after. Gale drew aside, to see what would happen. Spad 14 leaped for the Fokker, firing madly if not accurately. But then, when a turn became necessary, Farnsworth made the fatal mistake of turning the wrong way, so that the Boche got the opening which should have been the Spad's.

Gale was just quick enough. His guns opened up at the same instant as the Fokker's, but his aim was sharper.

That Fokker shied sideways, like a frightened horse; then, as the drilled body of its pilot toppled forward against the stick, it nosed over into a screaming dive from which it never came out.

The patrol never took up formation again. Gale and Number 14 flew southward together; ahead he could see a lone Spad which sank lower and lower as it neared the field, as if exhausted, and another swung in gradually from his left. He let the others land first, as had now become his habit, and looked at their numbers as they taxied hangarward. Buzz Ward, and then, Stan Coates, He knew better than to look toward the northern sky for Bill Jordan and the other. He slipped softly toward the ground.

THREE Boche today, thought Gale. Would that make any difference? Three victories in twice as many minutes, and he had saved the life of a new pilot. That was something for which a man might be made a hero. But he didn't want to be a

hero; all he wanted was to be called by his first name, and invited to have a drink in a manner which said that he was really one of the gang. That was all.

In the operations tent there was considerable talking. Stan Coates was writing in the log book as Buzz had a burn where a bullet had grazed the back of his right hand. It seemed that Stan had downed one Boche, and chased another, and Buzz claimed two.

"You get any?" asked Stan, looking up at Gale.

"Three," said Gale quietly.

"Three?" said Stan, raising his eyebrows. Gale only nodded.

"Congratulations," murmured Stan, and went on writing.

Gale slipped out of the tent before the others. Farnsworth had begun to describe his sensations excitedly, and Gale didn't care about listening. He wanted to be alone. That was the way they wanted him to be, too, so he wouldn't give them any trouble about it. They still felt the same way. His afternoon's achievement made not the slightest difference in their attitudes.

It was hopeless to hope more; no matter what he did, he was still, and always would be, an outsider. Even if he had overheard what Stan Coates said to Buzz that night, he would probably have been no wiser.

"What if he got thirty Boche in an afternoon. Buzz? I wouldn't have to love him, or ask him to drink with me, for that, would I? It isn't what a man does, Buzz; it's the way he does it. Poor old Jim never got but three Boche in all the four months he was up; yet I'd rather fly or drink with him than the greatest ace that ever lived. If you ask me, I think this guy Weston is just out for glory-grabbing, and that's all."

"You've a right to your opinion, and to your choice of friends," shrugged Buzz, and the subject was dropped.

It was two nights later that Gale ran into Farnsworth behind C Hangar, long after midnight. Gale had been walking; he couldn't sleep, so always stayed out of his bunk as long as he could. With the moon at his back. Gale saw the other first, and was about to pass on when something in Farnsworth's attitude made him halt. At his casual, "Hello," the new pilot started violently, and peered at him strangely before answering.

“You’re up late,” said Gale, without curiosity. “Not tired?”

The other did not reply at first; for several moments there was a silence, broken only by the distant mutter of artillery.

“I was thinking about—up there,” said Farnsworth finally. His gaze was fixed on a faint sparkle, as of faraway fireworks, on the northern horizon. “Tomorrow morning I’ve got to go up there, at dawn—alone. Oh, God help me! I hope I can do it!”

“What?” exclaimed Gale in surprise. “You on balloon patrol at dawn, tomorrow?”

“Yes,” came the reply in a shaking whisper. Farnsworth’s head dropped into his hands now, and his shoulders trembled.

“Look here,” said Gale encouragingly. “Don’t think about it like this. Just don’t think about it at all; that’s the way to do. When the time comes, you go out and do it—and that’s that.”

“That’s all right for you,” murmured the other brokenly. “You’ve been through it, but I haven’t. It all seems so queer and strange, even when you fellows are along. But alone—”

He broke off.

Gale was thinking rapidly. Farnsworth, it was plain, had a bad case of the funk, and Gale didn’t blame him a bit. His third day on the Front, and assigned to dawn balloon strafe; somebody in headquarters must have made a mistake. What could he do? It came to him suddenly.

“Look here, Farnsworth. When the batman wakes you in the morning, come over and poke me. Then you go back to bed, and don’t say anything to a soul. I’ll do the trick for you, and nobody’ll be the wiser.”

Farnsworth almost went on his knees with gratitude.

“Forget it,” Gale told him. “It doesn’t amount to a damn.”

THUS it was that in the murky, pre-dawn gloom of the following morning, Farnsworth’s mechanic stood watching Spad number 14 fade into the mist, with a puzzled expression on his face,

“Now why doesn’t he want me to tell anybody?” muttered the honest grease-ball. “There’s somethin’ queer about this, I’m thinkin’. Spies, maybe, or worse. I’d better wake the C.O.”

Almost an hour later Gale set that Spad down gently in the middle of the field, taxied to the hangar mouth, and jumped out. With an anxious look around, he almost ran to operations tent; he wanted to get his entry in the book before being seen. He snatched the pencil, and scribbled hastily.

“5:45 a.m., Sept. 24th. Attacked balloon north of Bantheville. Fired four hundred rounds, no result, balloon too damp. Fired on from ground. Returned 6:38. L. Farnsworth.”

He thrust the book closed, and sighed with relief. That was done, and no one the wiser. Little did he guess the trail of questions and answers which, starting in his absence with the mechanic whom he had abjured to silence, led to the C.O., thence to Lieutenant Farnsworth, and finally to the ears of every pilot in the squadron.

That he met no greeting on his way to the mess did not surprise him; he was used to that sort of reception by now. He entered the mess shack and took three steps toward his seat before he looked up. Then he froze in his tracks. Every pilot was present and in his place, and they were all looking at him. Something intangible, elusive was in every face.

“Hi, Gale,” said a voice. “How’s the air this morning?”

“Hello, big boy,” said another.

“Mornin’, fella,” came from others.

“Where’s our little kiwi been so early?” Stan Coates was half rising from his place near the head of the table.

“Come up here,” Stan was saying, “and explain yourself. You see, we found out what you did this morning.”

Gale’s eyes fastened on Stan, and he flushed hotly as he realized that they all knew.

“But I didn’t do anything,” he managed to stammer. “I didn’t even get the balloon.”

“Balloon, hell!” snorted Stan, with broadening grin. “I don’t mean what you did after you went over. I mean what you did first. I suppose you even had the gall to sign my buddy’s name, Farnsworth, to your report in the log book, eh?” He stopped to laugh at the look of puzzled discomfiture on Gale’s countenance, then shouted gleefully, “Come here, you cockeyed cow, and sit up here next to me after this, will you? I want you

where I can poke my finger in your eye if you
don't eat your soup like a nice, quiet gentleman,"