

The Glory Gambler

By Frederick C. Painton
A "Squadron of the Dead" Adventure

Death lay behind those men in the somber, black uniforms, for every man in that squadron had been sentenced to die. Death lay ahead of them, for to them were assigned the grim missions no other squadron dared to take. Then at last came a task which even those ghosts of the war skies dreaded to face—yet it was a task in which death played no part.

THEY swung across the magnificent tarmac, sixteen of them, swaggering, hard-bitten, and no one there had ever seen their like, before. Mechanics, working on glistening new Spads fresh from the factory, stopped their work to stare at the men in the jet-black uniforms with the crimson piping. Officers who had yet to fire their first shot paused to stare curiously, and perhaps enviously, too. There was a reckless air about these men that thrilled the soul.

"Gee," said one greaseball, "who're they? Never saw that uniform before."

The sergeant addressed smiled oddly. "Those," he answered, "are dead men—the Squadron of the Dead. Those men have lived more life in the last six months than you'll ever live, even if you don't die till you're a hundred."

"Squadron of the Dead!" exclaimed the greaseball. "I don't get you."

"I heard about them during that stretch I did at the Avenue Montaigne, in Paris," the sergeant went on, still staring enviously. "Every man you see there has been kicked out of some army. Frogs, Limeys, Aussies, Belgians—yes, and I hear tell they take in Krauts and Austrians, too. That big fellow with the black beard is a Russian, if I know one. And every man's an ace."

The greaseball wagged his head helplessly. "Take in Krauts," he repeated, "belong to no army, all aces—it's crazy, I tell you."

"It isn't," Sergeant Petry insisted. "I wish I had a chance to serve with them. You see, those men all did something in their armies—slapped a general down, or broke discipline, and instead of putting them into the cooler until their hair was in a braid, they put them in this Squadron of the Dead. They're all officially dead because they've been reported dead by their armies. Then they put them in this skull squadron, and they do everything no other ace would have guts to do. When they get killed, they have the reward of being honorably mentioned in dispatches for what they did. Then they're really reported dead, and their folks get the Legion of Honor."

The greaseball took a half-smoked cigarette from behind his ear, and lighted it. "I get you, now," he said. "They're bound to get killed, so they call them dead to save time."

"Right," said the sergeant. "And they take some killing—that gang."

A LEAN, bronzed man in one of the black uniforms strode briskly across the tarmac and inspected the row of Spads still smelling of dope. Another in black, Willie the Web, looked on, a little dazed, and turned his cheery eyes to Skipper Barry Dale.

"What's it all about, skipper?" he demanded. "They haul us out of bed in the morning after a tough night. They ship us here, make us leave all our stuff, and say it'll be a long time before we get back. Then they give us this brand new set of Spads. Has the world come to an end—or the war?"

Barry Dale was not as big as many of the pilots in the skull squadron, but those who had seen him lift the tail of a Breguet, single-handed, could tell you of his prodigious strength. His face was not

old, yet it had the look of a man who has peered into the far spaces of high adventure. His cool gray eyes always remained calm; his features were keen, and his jaw revealed the tremendous will of the man. About him was that indescribable something which proclaims the leader.

He smiled now, patiently, hiding his own curiosity at this mystery. "Cartwright will be here presently," he said. "Then we'll know what it's all about."

"Something dirty, you can bet," growled Steve Brazier, a huge, rawboned man, who had accidentally killed a brother officer with one blow of his great fist.

"We might look around at the quarters," Barry Dale suggested.

The quarters were in a magnificent chateau of more than eighty rooms, some of which had great, canopied beds. In the kitchen, two chefs toiled with chickens and roasts, as in feudal times. Downstairs, there were game rooms with billiard tables, a great bar, and a music room.

The men in black, staring at this luxury, compared these quarters with their own in the camouflaged, subterranean headquarters, near Souilly, the location of which was known to only two men aside from the pilots themselves. There, they slept on wooden bunks, ate plainly but well, kept out of sight by day, and did most of their work by night.

"The only thing I don't get," muttered Steve Brazier, perplexedly, "is what they've got a tarmac set up back here for. Why, it must be twenty miles to the Front."

Pousoff, the Russian, said dryly, "The dear darlings who fly from this field are not interested in fighting. They are just playing war."

The group came at last to the great salon, and stood waiting. Such magnificence irked them, made them nervous. As soldiers, they were used to sleeping where they could, eating what was available, fighting and drinking hard, so that dreams did not come of nights.

"It's a home for a stuffed shirt," muttered Steve Brazier.

Ten minutes later, they sighed with relief when Cartwright, the pudgy liaison officer between the Squadron of the Dead and the Allied Supreme War Council, came rolling in. Behind him came several soldiers carrying enormous bundles.

"Barry Dale," boomed Cartwright, cordially, "how are you?"

"Sinking in the lap of luxury." Dale grinned, shaking hands.

"And lonesome for our own diggings," muttered Brazier.

"You'll stay here and like it," said Cartwright. He turned to the enlisted men, and added, "Put the bundles down there. That's all."

The bundles were put down and opened. A gasp of surprise went up.

"Uniforms," muttered Dale. "American uniforms."

"Right," chuckled Cartwright. "And complete from silver bar to spurs. American officers wear spurs, Barry, my lad, to hook their feet to the desks. Let's see—I had them made according to the old measurements. Each one is marked with a name."

He waved his hand at the men. "All right, grab your uniform and change right away."

"Wear American uniforms!" the chorus rang out. Some stared in amazement—the Russian, Pousoff, the Britisher, Ashley, the Austrian, Von Zankt. The few Americans, Steve Brazier among them, bit their lips, and for a space a terrible light of longing and despair came into their eyes. Once, they had worn that uniform. But now

"Never mind looking dumb," snapped Cartwright. "You haven't much time. Get into the uniforms. Barry will tell you all about it. All the rooms in the east wing are yours. Divide up to suit yourselves. But get busy."

Cartwright pulled out a pint flask of liquor. He smacked his lips. "Five Star Napoleon brandy, Barry—and just you and I to work on it."

He unscrewed the cap. Barry grinned, and took the flask. "When the devil brings greetings, something tough is in the wind. Well—here's to death."

He drank, and Cartwright drank, sighed, wiped his mouth. "Now," said Cartwright, "here's the story. I'm putting one man into your keeping who is so precious that if one hair of his head is disarranged, we all catch hell."

He began to explain, and Dale listened with deepening interest.

A HANDSOME young man stood languidly at one end of the private car which the French

government had supplied him, and stared at the striking young woman beside him.

"You are adorable," he was saying. "So much so, in fact, that I think you and I will be married."

She was lovely, and it was not merely a matter of beauty, of being straight, and slim, and clear-eyed. There was something unforgettable in the way she moved, and spoke, and laughed—something that was called glamour, and drew record crowds whenever the name "Mara" flashed in lights from moving picture houses the world over.

She stared back at the handsome young man, an amused smile on her lips. "Your modesty is touching," she said. "Does everything always fall into your lap, Ronny, like a well-ripened peach?"

She watched him as he turned to her. Every movement, she realized, was instinctively made to reveal him at his best. Years before the camera did that to a man. The world's finest tailor had made his olive drab uniform, and it fitted him so that not a line was out of place. In it, he looked more like a bronze statue of what a perfectly-dimensioned man should be, than a human being. His face, too, was perfect—almost too perfect, a face that women raved about. Even men who hated him paid grudging tribute to his schooled physique.

"Perhaps," he answered her mocking question, his expressive face quickly darkening. "But what I have, I've earned, Mara. Life was hard enough until I found my forte." Bitterness shadowed his eyes. "I've known cold, and hunger—years of it."

"And now—" she shrugged—"you are America's perfect hero. Every twenty-four hours that passes puts a thousand dollars into your hand. I wonder if you're really better off. I wonder if you're real at all, any more. You're only a portrait of a man, Ronny."

He flushed. "A portrait!" he repeated.

"Exactly!" Her cool indifference was suddenly lost. "You never had a real emotion in your life. You never had a real adventure, a real experience. You act. You are aware only of yourself, from the time you get up until you go to bed."

"And what about yourself?" he flung back at her. "You happen to be the highest-paid screen actress in the world."

"I—" she turned, lips curling—"I work for my living as an actress, but when I'm off the screen,

I'm real. And if I marry, it will be a real man—not you!"

She saw she had hurt him and was instantly contrite. "Sorry, Ronny," she said gently. "Let's get Chauncey Olroy in here and discuss the script. You know we have only two weeks in which to make this picture."

At the mention of the picture, the hurt, bewildered look left his face, and he grinned, the famous Ronny Steele grin.

"Ah, yes, the picture!" He was cocky, assured once more. "There, at least, you've got to admit I'm real. You heard the president of the United States himself say that my picture here would be the most valuable service performed for the nation by any actor. He is going to give me the Distinguished Service Medal."

"Yes," she admitted slowly, "making this picture is a great thing. It will dramatize the war and its heroism for the people of America. They will go to see you playing a gallant young flying ace, and contribute millions to the Liberty Loan. This picture itself might bring a billion dollars to the government. That money will be real; the emotions people get from seeing you dashing about in an airplane will be real—but you'll miss all the reality."

She paused, gestured toward the devastated country through which their special train passed. "There is reality. Villains don't always fall before the hero. Bullets do not turn aside because a hero is needed for another picture. You can't act war, and death."

She turned, then, and vanished through the car door, leaving him to wonder.

THE fifteen men in the trim, olive-drab uniforms of American first lieutenants turned appalled eyes on Barry Dale, as he concluded instructions.

"This movie is for propaganda purposes in the United States. It takes money to pay for a war, and this picture will raise millions. So, for that reason, Ronald Steele's life is so precious that we have been assigned to guard him, as well as help make the picture. I expect you men to carry out the job without any trouble."

Steve Brazier growled in his throat. "Ronald Steele!" he exploded. "That pomaded ass they call the 'Perfect Hero.'"

Muttered protests went through the room. There was no fighting in this; merely acting.

"About that movie," said Jessup, coughing. "Me and Hoare, my pal, wouldn't like to be in that. You see—"

"Sure," cut in Steve Brazier, "the police would find out where you were at. As for me—"

"No man's face will show in the picture if he doesn't want it to," cut in Barry Dale. "You will wear helmets and goggles. Some of you will be dressed as Germans, and fly the Fokker and Albatross they brought over."

Cartwright stuck his head through the door. "Ronald Steele is here, boys," he announced. "He's looking over the layout we put up here, and he doesn't like it. He's wondering where the Germans and the guns and the heroic doughboys are."

Barry Dale made the introductions as Cartwright brought the great film actor in to meet the Squadron of the Dead. An audible gasp went up at sight of the hundred-dollar boots, the beautifully cut blouse, and the handsome face above it.

"Mama!" murmured Steve Brazier plaintively, "buy me that."

Jessup sighed ecstatically, and sniffed. "I always did love Lily of the Valley," he trilled.

At these remarks, the charming grin which Steele reserved for his public vanished. In its place came the haughty, angry look with which he met the villain, on the screen.

Smoothly, to avoid trouble, Barry Dale's voice cut in. "Lieutenant Steele, we are glad to welcome you and offer our cooperation in this patriotic endeavor of yours. I present to you the gentlemen of the Squadron of the Dead."

Ronald Steele bowed, gracefully; the gentlemen of the Squadron of the Dead merely stared. They didn't like him or the job, and they showed it.

Brazier broke the silence. "Do you eat spinach for that lovely complexion?" he asked innocently.

"Steve!" Dale barked angrily. "Shut up."

Ronald Steele drew himself up. "I can lick the smart aleck who said that," he thundered.

"Boy, oh, boy," muttered Steve, "what could be sweeter."

He came forward, tearing off his coat, great, rippling muscles bunching under his shirt. Ronald

Steele squared off. Before Barry Dale could interfere as he had intended, a tall, cadaverous man with eyeglasses from which drooped a wide, silken cord, sprang forward. It was Chauncey Olroy, the director.

"Don't be an idiot!" he told Steele. "This is not an actor you're fighting. He might hit your nose and break it. Your career would be ruined—and so would be the picture. Remember, the American government is depending on you."

The flash of fury that Ronald Steele had felt died as suddenly as it had been born. Olroy was right. Many of the interior shots of this great propaganda picture had been made before his departure from Hollywood, and for anything to happen to him meant ruin to the picture. And yet....

"I can't fight you now," he muttered to Steve, "but afterwards—"

"Ronny, what are you saying?" Into the room came Mara Gray, cool and amused. "You can't fight with a man like—" her dark eyes turned speculatively on Steve Brazier—"this one," she concluded.

Chauncey Olroy, the tall, emaciated director, said, "Stop the nonsense, now. I'd like to have some work done on this picture. We've only two weeks, and time is important. Ronny, go get your flying togs on, and we'll send the camera up with you and with some of Captain Dale's men, to make some experimental shots. Hurry, now."

Vaguely disturbed by the look he saw pass between Steve Brazier and Mara Gray, Ronny bowed stiffly and left the room. Many pairs of eyes, cold as chipped flint, followed him, then swung back to Mara Gray.

Chauncey Olroy broke this up. "Mara, get into that French peasant costume. I want to test the light on your make-up."

She nodded and smiled at the Squadron of the Dead. "I think I'm going to enjoy working with you, gentlemen," she murmured.

Steve stared after her. "She's got everything," he muttered under his breath.

Ronald Steele, his face heavy with yellow powder, met her as she came from her room.

"What men they are," she breathed. "They have lived, those men, every minute."

Ronny again felt the point of some weapon pierced at his inner armor. "You like them," he muttered.

They arrived together in the salon, and Olroy greeted them. "Just in time," he said.

"The newsreel photographers are here, and have instructions from Creel to make quite a number of shots. So let's get about it."

IT was a strange scene to those hardbitten men of war to see what followed. Cameramen, dozens of them, yelled greetings and instructions.

"Fix that helmet, Ronny, so it doesn't shade that beautiful mug."

"Take off the helmet and wave it like you just had a victory!"

"Climb into the crate and sit there. Don't smile. Be grim—the relentless hunter of the air."

They saw Ronald Steele acting, masking his face in the artificial smile, the scowl, the grim killer look. He did his job well. He posed behind the twin Vickers machine guns, and beside the fuselage. Olroy produced the flipper cloth of a shot-down Hun that had the Iron Cross on it, and Ronny posed with that, too, looking every inch a conqueror.

At this, the Squadron of the Dead roared. Dale covered his own smile and sternly ordered silence.

Olroy, after the cameraman had gone, set about the business of using the rest of the sunny day. A Fokker triplane, one that had been captured intact by a frontline squadron, was wheeled out and warmed, together with three Spads.

"Now," said Olroy, "here's the sequence. Ronny Steele is shooting down his first German. The Fokker will be taken up by one of your men, Captain Dale, and maneuvered. A dogfight between it and Ronny's Spad will take place. Then a smoke pot in the Fokker will be touched off, and the plane will spin down the sky. We'll cut before the landing, and make the crash later."

"Can the tulip fly?" asked Brazier.

"You'd be surprised," said Olroy grimly. "Now, the other two Spads will be in the picture. The Fokker will get on one's tail as if about to shoot it down. Ronny's Spad will drive off the Fokker, then shoot it down. This will show how Ronny saves a squadron-mate's life."

The Squadron of the Dead snickered, then roared. Barry Dale frowned. "Now, listen here,

men," he said, "I'm sick and tired of this attitude. You've got a job of work to do, and by God, I'll have no more kidding. This is vitally important, and you treat it as such."

Silence fell after that, and Dale went about the assignments. As the best stunt pilot in the squadron, Steve Brazier was assigned to the Fokker tripe, and Steve's old friend, Jimmy Orchard, to the Spad that was to act in trouble. Dale himself chose to fly the Breguet, with the cameraman and Olroy aboard. They rehearsed the stunt until Olroy was satisfied.

Steve, in his leather coat and goggles and helmet, took his place in the Fokker.

Mara stood beside the plane. "I know you'll be good," she said encouragingly.

"For you, lady," he said, "I'll be perfect."

Brazier hated bitterly the thought of Steele's gaining even a phantom victory over him in front of her. But before he was shot down he'd show her some flying.

"We might go to town, tonight, and hoist one," he suggested hopefully.

"We might," she said, enigmatically.

That was all, but Ronny Steele saw the interchange, and his vaguely felt sense of trouble grew. Life had been so easy, so perfect before. What he had wanted he had taken. Here, he wasn't so sure of himself.

Olroy called, "In the excitement, dear fellow, tear off your helmet and goggles so we can catch you with the TP lens. Register excitement, ferocity, battle lust, y'know. And stunt better than you've ever done before."

Ronny Steele took his place in the cockpit. He had found no difficulty in learning to fly, and he had insisted on being as nearly perfect in this, too, as possible. He had been given the finest flyers to coach him, and the safest planes. He was at home in the air; and it hurt him to have Olroy tell him to stunt better, when he could have stunted far better at Issoudun, if the director hadn't been afraid that he might get hurt.

He tested his controls, looked to the guns and was surprised to find them loaded with real ammunition. He stared, fascinated; he had never had real bullets in his guns, before. Then came the cry to get away. He jazzed the twin-banked Hispano-Suiza motor, gestured for the blocks to be pulled, and gave the gun to the crate.

Blipped into the wind, he got the tail up, sped down the field and hoisted the ship in a neat, climbing turn. As he leveled off and began to wind the clock for altitude, he thought of Mara Gray down there. She believed him a fraud. He smiled. She just didn't understand, he thought. But despite the fact that he told himself this several times, an irresistible desire to show her differently gripped him. He'd fly rings around the sky this afternoon, and she'd see.

At a thousand meters, he caught the signal from the Breguet, made a neat pivot turn and swept close to the Breguet so that the cameraman could catch the name Ronny Steele lettered on the fuselage in glaring white. He pulled up in a whipstall, and fell away until the two Spads and the Fokker could reach position. When they did, Ronny Steele's unhappy speculation stopped. He became an actor, a man with a job to do. Despite his apparent outward air of superiority, the fact that he was doing this for his country had struck deep. He would make this the finest picture he had ever done.

The one Spad went tearing down the sky with the Fokker wheeling over it like a striking hawk. Ronny opened the throttle, fell over into a vertical dive, and raced in pursuit. He carefully kept his fingers away from the stick-trigger because of the real bullets.

He dropped three hundred meters, gaining by the second on the Fokker. He did not see the signal which caused Steve Brazier to pull away, but it evidently came, for the redheaded firebrand suddenly hoisted the Fokker in a terrific zoom that nearly folded the wings back. So swiftly was it done that Ronny Steele could not meet it. He mushed, nosed up in pursuit and suddenly found the Fokker tripe roaring at him. He tried to pull away. With a scream of sound, the Fokker went past, wheeled up in a chandelle and came dropping down like a game cock springing to the attack. He was on Ronny Steele's tail instantly, and had he fired, the actor's doom would have been sure.

"Hah!" muttered Ronny. The thin stiletto of reality stung through his armor. He could not help but think what might have happened had this been a real enemy. Then his acting instinct asserted itself. He rolled twice, spun upward and, with a wing cocked down, began to turn swiftly in

pursuit of the Fokker's tail. The Spad was not the fastest turner, but Steve, presumably realizing that this was where he was supposed to lose, slowed up, and the Spad gained.

Faster and faster Ronny turned. The Breguet came close, taking telescopic shots of his facial expressions. Now, it appeared, was the time for Steve's plane to fall in a cloud of smoke.

It never did. A dark shadow shot in front of Ronny Steele. Something plucked at his shoulder, and he turned in amazement to see that his coat was shredded and torn. Turning back to the front, he saw the tachometer dial explode. A bullet glinted blue off the cocking handles of his Vickers. Something was tearing through the fabric of his left lower wing.

Above the torrent of sound from his motor came a pattering sound, like the polite applause of people in a theater, but this was not applause. Another shadow flitted in front of him. His ship gyrated, nosed upward. He saw planes, many of them—black planes.

"Good God!" he screamed. The sky was raining Fokkers. The movie tarmac had been placed twenty miles in the rear of a quiet sector, where no German had ever come. But by some mischance, a patrol of Fokkers, digging deep after a reconnaissance ship, had espied what they believed to be a comrade outnumbered and in distress. They had climbed to the sun, and now dove to aid him.

Gray tracer smoke whipped the sky, and golden tracer, too, where startled Yanks made a bid for their lives. Planes rolled and zoomed like puppets in frantic confusion, with death jerking the strings.

RONALD STEELE sat motionless in the cockpit, numbed by the clashing fury. It was a miracle that he survived the first storming attack, for he did nothing to protect himself. He was too stunned, his face gone suddenly gray. His eyes, large with horror, gazed out across the white whorl of his prop, and saw death everywhere. Gold streaks pelted around him. Gray threads of tracer smoke spun weird designs against the blue. The faint patter that sounded like polite applause, he found to be machine-gun fire, hurricanes of it.

Before his eyes, a Spad went tearing down, and behind it came a black ship with white crosses. It

was not a triplane, but a real enemy. Instinctively, Ronny Steele banked and dove in pursuit. This, at least, followed the plot of the story. He was supposed to dive on a German and drive off the man. He became momentarily an actor again, and that permitted his tangled muscles and nerves to act.

Bullets pounded at his back. A ship screamed in toward him from the side and banked, mushing so close that he thought the wheels would hit his left wing. Instinctively, his fingers closed on the Bowdoin stick-trigger. The blue, smooth Vickers bolted to the cowling began to hammer. He saw blazing sparks, like the tail of a skyrocket, shooting out in front. But they weren't going near his target, and before he could correct his aim, somebody's prop wash thrust his Spad violently, making it shake.

He twisted away and looked down to see the Spad below discharge a huge cloud of smoke. He heard the rattle of machine guns now, pounding venomously, like the suddenly unleashed fury of a fighter who has his opponent groggy. The pilot in the Spad flung up his arms. A sheet of flame curled around the cockpit.

"Oh, God!" moaned Ronny Steele. Before his eyes, the Spad broke into burning pieces, as if the gas tank had exploded. Out of it hurtled a tiny, forked thing that fell, twisting and turning, through the sky.

The blood drained from Ronny Steele's face, leaving it putty-colored. That was no movie fire, no trick stunt. Those flames really burned. The ship was actually in pieces. That forked stick turning slowly, lazily, was a man, and he was dead, as dead as if he had already struck. Nothing under the sun could save him. Death was real—and terribly close.

Ronny Steele pulled up blindly into the tangle of fighting ships. He lost all coherent thought, then. His mind became virtually a blank. He felt bullets at times, and made mad maneuvers with the plane to get away. The windshield had four holes in it through which the wind shrieked and made an icy blast on his face. Bullets burned around his face, then the blizzard of them was gone. He saw another Spad pass, with a black ship streaking after it, and instinct asserted itself. He had to stop the burning of another plane, stop a

man from going hurtling down there to smash to oblivion.

He came down on the Fokker. It was not difficult, for the Fokker was ignoring his own defense in the lust for the kill. But when he was close, Ronny Steele did not find any stream of sparks shooting from his gun. He pressed the triggers. He stood up, cursing them—and then he saw.

In his spasm of horror, he had kept his fingers tight on the trigger. Now, the empty belt streamed away in the wind to the right of the breach and the triggers rose and fell with sickening clicks.

Suddenly the Fokker ahead faded from view. It might have been a magician's creation—there one second, gone the next. Steele wheeled the Spad and found that the sky was empty. No, it wasn't, either, for the Breguet two-seater came tearing up from the right, and an arm gestured peremptorily for Ronny to land. He did so, mushing the crate, setting it down only half aware of how he did it. He never knew how close he was to the ground, in fact, until a black ship with a set of white crosses slid past him, crashed, and blew up almost in his face. The upburst of hot air sent him weaving, and when he set the ship down the second time, he pancaked it.

Feeling numb and dizzy, he climbed out of the cockpit and leaned his head against the fuselage. Chauncey Olroy came rushing up.

"Ronny!" he screamed. "Your face—let me see it. If anything has happened—" He jerked away Ronny's arm, and stared into the pallid face. "Ah, not a mark," he sighed. "Thank God for that. It could have been so much worse."

Slowly, Ronny Steele lifted his head and stared. "So much worse," he repeated. "That man in the Spad—his ship caught fire, blew up. He fell out. I—I saw him fall." He turned and buried his quivering face in his arms.

Men came up. He heard Barry Dale saying, "They were Fokkers from the Mad Baron's *Jagdstaffel*."

"And you got the only one shot down," said Cartwright.

"Steve got one, too," Dale corrected. "He fooled them in the tripe."

Ronny Steele straightened, turned. As he did so, Steve Brazier, blood dripping from a cut on his forehead, came striding up. His face was a black

mask of rage and fury. He shouldered past Cartwright and Barry Dale. A heavy hand shot out and jerked Ronny Steele toward him.

"You yellow pup," he roared, "why'd you turn away and not try to save Jimmy Orchard?"

Ronny Steele merely stared, while Dale said, "Cut that out, Steve."

"You keep out of this, Barry," Steve said hoarsely. "This guy was dropping down on the Kraut that had Jimmy's tail—and he let that German smear Jimmy. The plane blew up—the poor devil never had a chance. And this tailor-made ace could have saved him."

Ronny Steele listened. In the stories, the hero always saved a pal, but he, apparently, hadn't. And yet, he had tried, he remembered vaguely.

"But I—ammunition—the guns—" For Ronny Steele even to mumble was a terrific effort.

Steve Brazier's face twisted. "You posing fool," he muttered, "you aren't a man. You're—"

Suddenly Brazier's fury and heartbreak exploded into action. His great fist came back before Barry Dale could even take a step. It shot out—a streaking blur that ended with a dull crunch as knuckles cracked on Ronny Steele's jaw. Steele's head snapped back. His eyes glazed as he tried to take a step. Then he crumpled in an unconscious heap.

Steve Brazier blew on his knuckles. "That doesn't half pay for Jimmy Orchard. I'm going to town and get stinko."

For a moment, Barry Dale stood irresolute. His heart was really with Steve Brazier. Steve was a seventeen-victory man, solid, a little rough—but a braver man never flew a crate. And he had lost a friend, all over the making of a lot of damned pretense. Yet Dale felt a stab of pity for the dazed Ronny Steele.

"Get out of here," he said in a strange, rough voice. "I'm sympathizing too much with you, Steve Brazier. I ought to knock your ears down. And if you ever lay hands on that kid again, I'll take you apart."

Chauncey Olroy came forward, feeling the senseless actor's chin. "He might have broken it. Then what would have happened to the picture of a century?" he raged.

In the background, white-faced, taking no part, stood Mara Gray. Her eyes moved between Ronny Steele's unconscious form and the burned

corpses of the German and the American who had been dragged in for burial. Her hand pressed hard against her mouth a moment. She looked again at Ronny Steele, and then turned and walked slowly toward the *chateau*.

THAT night, because he could not stand his own thoughts, Ronny Steele went to town with the others. He drank, although he was not a drinking man because drinking spoils complexions and ruins a man to be an actor. Moodily, he watched Mara ending a dance with the huge, bearish Brazier.

Something clicked in Ronny Steele's brain, like the trigger of a gun before it is fired. Roughly, he strode to Mara Gray as she stood talking to Steve Brazier.

"Let's dance," he said imperatively, and took her away before Steve Brazier could say a word.

"What part are you acting now?" she asked coolly. "Caveman?"

"No, I had to talk to you." His suave, easy manner was gone. He was not an actor, now, but merely a desperate, harried boy. "Mara, you were right. I've lived in a world of make-believe—but I've changed. I've learned. I'm not going to finish making this picture," he said savagely. "I'm going to transfer to a line outfit. I'm a first lieutenant, and a pilot. I learned how to fly well. I learned up there today that I can kill—with some experience. I'm going to fight this war, not act it,"

"No, Ronny." Her voice was more gentle, now. "You can't do it. The picture—"

"The devil take the picture!" he broke in furiously.

"You can't say that," she said patiently. "The government has to bring the war home to people who can't visualize it, and you're the person to bring it home. You dramatize it, and through you they can know what it really means. You've got to go through with your part."

"And let men like Steve Brazier laugh, knock me about, make a fool out of me in the air!" He stiffened. "I won't do it. I'm through, I tell you."

Even as he spoke, the music stopped dead. Through the night suddenly cut the shrill, bitter wail of a siren. In the street outside, a man passed in the clatter of a car, blowing piercingly on a bugle.

“Les Boches arrivent dan les avions,” screamed the cafe manager. *“A l’abri—tout de suite!”*

The cry was taken up. “Air raid! Lights out. Get into a dugout!”

Through the sudden, stark silence, struck the deep-pitched thrum of motors, wailing across the sky, high, high up. The lights went out.

The air raid proved to be meant for another objective, for the motor drone passed on. The searchlights ceased to sweep the sky like a battalion of white bayonets. The Squadron of the Dead and its problems went home and to bed, to sleep—all but Ronny. All night, the drone of raiding planes hummed in his ears.

The next morning, he definitely announced his intention of asking a transfer to the Front.

“But, you idiot,” cried Cartwright, “the job you’re to do is a thousand times more important. All you’d do up there is add another name to the Mad Baron’s game list. You’d be running out on a real job.”

Ronny Steele would not listen. He had to prove himself to Mara, and to himself, to stifle his own fears.

Calmly, he said, “I’m through. If I make a name for myself up there, the publicity will mean more than the picture.”

“That’s a lie,” snapped Barry Dale. The idea of the propaganda picture had grown on him until he saw how valuable it could be. And he was angry at what he thought was merely a bit of temperament. “Many of us have distasteful jobs in war-time, but we carry them out. You’ve got a big job, and you’d better be big enough to do it.”

“No,” said Ronny stubbornly.

Cartwright flushed, and his eyes burned angrily. “Now,” he roared, “I’ve had enough of this nonsense. Do you know what I’ll do if you continue this stupidity?”

“No, and I don’t care,” retorted Ronny.

“You will,” Cartwright promised grimly. “I’ll have you slammed into a jail charged with disobedience of orders. I’ll see that the publicity goes all over America—Ronny Steele, the perfect hero, refuses duty in war-time to help his country. Where will you be then? Why, the people of America wouldn’t hear your name mentioned. They’ll call you yellow—as you are. They’ll call

you a selfish, temperamental little fool—and you are.”

Some of the stubbornness went out of Ronny’s pale face. Despairingly, he saw the insuperable obstacle to his plans. A sudden flash of truth illumined his mind, and he yielded to it.

“All right, I’ll go through with it,” he said, adding insistently, “but later, I’m going to the Front.”

He kept his word, too, and performed faithfully. Olroy, who was a great authority on acting, said one day, “Ronny, you’re doing superbly. I’ve never known you to act so convincingly.”

Somehow, Steele had caught that subtle undertone of sadness and despair which characterized the young pilots who lived on borrowed time. As he climbed into a cockpit, underneath the smile, the attitude of cheerfulness, was the grim look of one who must kill or be killed. In the air, the lust of battle which made granite of his features was real.

Barry Dale, watching him act, told Cartwright, “You’re seeing a soul born in a man.”

“I wonder,” said Cartwright, cryptically.

ONE dangerous complication arose in the ensuing days. Olroy experimented, and found that Steve Brazier photographed well as the big, primitive type of man. Realizing the possibilities of picturing real drama, the director cast Steve as Ronny’s rival for Mara, a French peasant girl, in the picture. The men played the part not only before the camera, but at all times. Their hatred for each other became a continual, fierce, inward boiling that could not go on long without an explosion. Only Mara’s coolness kept the situation in hand.

It was Olroy who unintentionally brought things to a climax. With his passionate desire for realism, he decided that there should be at least one real air battle in the picture. Calmly, he announced that Steve Brazier would fly Ronny’s Spad and, well-protected by the other pilots of the Squadron of the Dead, catch some Boche two-seater and shoot it down, while a telescopic lens in a camera would record the event.

“He’ll double for Ronny,” he concluded.

Ronny Steele caught the glance Mara gave Steve as Olroy finished speaking. Revolt flared anew.

"I won't stand for that!" he began.

Olroy coldly cut him short. "You'll go along in another plane," he said, "and fly close to the camera plane after the victory, to register."

Again, Ronny Steele's mouth opened. He caught Steve Brazier's glance of cold amusement, and an idea was born.

"Very good," he said submissively.

Scout ships were sent out to make a reconnaissance, and one returned shortly before noon to report that a Halberstadt two-seater was flying without escort protection, over Fismettes, and could be cut off. The crates had been greased and serviced. A new Spad had been lettered in white with Ronny's name. When he climbed in, the cameras shot a few hundred feet of preparatory work. Then Mara raced out, as required by the script, and climbed on a lower wing to bid him goodbye.

Under cover of the acting, she murmured, "Don't do anything foolish, Ronny."

"Would you care?" he asked.

"I'm not thinking of myself," she said.

"Oh, of course—my duty," he rejoined, and that was all.

Nineteen crates swept off the field in fast climbing turns, rapidly outdistancing the Breguet that carried the best cameraman in Hollywood. Flying at point as the presumed commander of this mythical American squadron, Ronny Steele went through his sequences, aware of the Breguet circling upward and close beside him, with the camera grinding. The people of America must be convinced that the gallant Ronny Steele had no double when it came to acting dangerous scenes. Outside the camera range, while the flight slowed down for this operation, Steve Brazier rolled and looped and twirled upward in a chandelle, mocking him.

They found the Halberstadt still circling over the Vesle river, directing two batteries of heavy artillery. Thick clouds hung above it, but so far as could be seen, it was depending on its own speed, and had no pursuit escort.

Under Barry Dale's expert direction, the ship was quickly cut off. Part of the Squadron of the Dead went upstairs and hid in the clouds; the rest

formed a circle to cut off the Halberstadt's retreat. So far, they had gone unperceived. The Breguet, carrying Olroy, gave the signal for attack, and with a wild swoop, Steve Brazier went down the sky in a power dive.

ANOTHER plane fell, too, in a shrieking vertical dive that made it fall like a smoking comet. In the cockpit of that second plane, Ronny Steele was standing on his rudder bar, with the wind howling past his ear, his whole body trembling with excitement. He leaned forward and fastened his eyes to the ring sights. His fingers hovered over the stick-trigger.

A great ecstasy flooded his soul. He was dropping down to his first kill. To the astonished onlookers, it seemed as if the two planes fell foot for foot, converging in on the Halberstadt.

Steele nosed even deeper. The wings trembled on the pins, and the high shriek of wind in the struts and brace wires became a frightful scream of mortal agony. The twin-banked Hissó grew red; raw fire sprayed from the exhaust stacks. The tachometer needle pressed against the pin, and the air-speed indicator broke at the pressure.

Into his sights came the Halberstadt, growing with fierce speed until it filled the whole portion of the sky at which Ronny looked. Distinctly, he saw the rear cockpit gunner swiveling his parabellum machine gun, tracking the two attackers across the sky. The pilot turned a white face upward, and the great Halberstadt wheeled and faded from what was to be the first machine-gun burst. Ronny could see the pilot's white face clearly.

The Halberstadt turned, as if to start for home. In that second, Ronny Steele unleashed a blizzard of bullets from his blue Vickers. The guns trembled, and the shooting storm of tracer slugs made a parasol of flickering gold. He tore into a streak of gray smoke tracer that ripped through the floorboards. One slug burned him as if he had touched fire.

Then the Halberstadt was above him. Brutally, he yanked the Spad out of the dive. It munched on bending wings. The Hissó began to howl with a desperate note as it pulled the Spad up in a sweeping zoom, but Ronny Steele held the course. His eye found the bottom of the Halberstadt fuselage. He put a slight pressure on the rudder.

Now, let him have it. The Vickers trembled on their bolting. The shooting tracer spread like a parabola and bit into the Halberstadt in a direct hit.

The German crate staggered like a stricken falcon. It fell off on the right wing, just as another spurt of bullets from Ronny's guns slammed it squarely at the forward cockpit. A dozen bit into the drip pan. Bits of motor flew in black specks as the cupro-nickel bullets ate their way through. A spot of orange flame, and a big cloud of smoke now trailed behind the plane. The Halberstadt faded off to the right in a wing-slip. Ronny shot past it within yards. He saw the gunner's desperate, frightened face behind the parabellum that tracked him, spitting tiny flickers of flame. The gunner, eyes bulging, vanished in a cloud of smoke. Ronny threw the Spad in a pivot turn.

The German plane was now a mass of flame that no side-slip could control. Ronny's eyes blazed, as out of the Halberstadt a figure dropped, like a man plunging off a diving platform. It was turning over slowly, falling languidly. Then came another. With a terrific roar, the Halberstadt exploded like a great red pin wheel. Down through the sky, the two black figures dropped, rolling sometimes like logs in water, falling end over end like acrobats. Then the dun earth swallowed them and Steele could see them no more.

He uttered one terrific shout. "I did it!" he screamed, and the slipstream swept away the sound of his voice. He threw the Spad across the sky in a series of full rolls. He chandelled. He fell off and dove vertically, and went screaming upward in a full loop.

"I did it," he shouted, with every mad maneuver.'

In front of him flashed the Breguet, and Olroy was standing up in the rear cockpit, waving frantically. Laughing hysterically, Ronny Steele stood up as far as his safety belt would let him. He jerked off his helmet and threw it into the void. His goggles sailed outward.

"There," he screamed. "Grind a crank on that. Show them that Ronny Steele can down his own enemies! Show them that. Show them Steele is no tailor-made ace!"

He tore through the surrounding Spads, circled the Breguet. Within him, something grew and

grew until it filled his mind. He forgot to act. He forgot everything except his mad triumph.

They had to herd him back toward the Allied lines.

WHEN Ronny Steele set the Spad down on the tarmac, the right lower wing collapsed, it was so completely shot up. He climbed out of the ground-looped wreckage, and saw Mara standing there, staring at him.

"I shot it down!" he cried. "I set it afire. Let them say anything, now," he told her. "Inside here—" he thumped his chest—"I know what I am—and I'm not a counterfeit."

She said, "Ronny," in a strange voice, and then her eyes shot past him.

He turned, instinctively, to find Steve Brazier bearing down on him. He laughed, welcomed the arrival.

"You tried to make a fool of me," said Steve.

"Start your trouble now," Ronny Steele retorted happily. He tore off his flying coat, and advanced, thrusting Mara firmly to one side.

Brazier stripped off his coat, his great muscles coiling and rippling. He was a magnificent specimen, dwarfing Ronny Steele.

"A show-off," muttered Brazier. "Shooting down a piece of white meat and burning them up. Trying to make a fool out of me."

He sprang across the few yards that separated them, savage, crouching. His fist was a white streak against the green of the grass. There came the dull crunching sound of broken bones, and a tiny trickle of blood ran from Ronny Steele's nose.

It was no longer a perfect nose, and never would be. Under the impact of the blow, Ronny Steele staggered back, dropped to one knee. In that time, while he rested there, one knee down, he knew what had happened, what this fight entailed. Steve Brazier had broken the nose that had made Ronny Steele's profile the finest in America. He would do more if Ronny got up. He would rip and tear that handsome face to shreds with brutal lashes of his great, bony fists.

There was a second, then, when Ronny Steele thought fast. He had his decision to make. A plastic surgeon might remedy to some degree the ruin already wrought, might repair Ronny Steele so that he could still be the perfect screen hero.

But if that were to be so, Ronny Steele must stay there on his knee, admit defeat.

A sudden primitive growl echoed in his throat. He rose upward, and with a leap sprang to his feet. He came plunging in, deftly feinting Steve Brazier off balance, hooking a terrific right to the man's mouth. The fight really began then, with a steady pound of bony fists driving into yielding flesh.

After the first outcry, Mara Gray had fallen silent. She did not hear the rest of the Squadron of the Dead pilots bring their ships in. She did not see them rush across the tarmac and surround her and the two struggling, savage men in a tight, silent circle. She did not see anything, until suddenly Chauncey Olroy, speeding from the Breguet, uttered a despairing shriek and rushed through the press of men.

"Stop it!" he cried. "God! Look at Ronny's face! Stop it, I say."

A wild punch nearly knocked him down. Then Albernathy, the Englishman, snaked out a hand, jerked him back.

"Don't stop the machinery of destiny," he said mildly. "You always get ground up yourself when you try."

Olroy was in agony. He swung confusedly, spotted Barry Dale and went to him with a rush, seized his arms.

"Stop it!" he moaned. "Look at Ronny Steele. A million dollar property, that face, and it's being destroyed. The picture! Captain, can't you stop it? It's murder, I say."

Barry Dale, his face quiet and patient, watched the terrific hammering, as the two men stood toe to toe and slugged until the skin over their ribs was red and cut, and their arms grew weary. He looked at Ronny Steele's battered face, the ruined nose. Then Dale saw the savage joy of battle flaming in Steele's eyes, and he shook his head.

"Let it go on," he said simply. "You're seeing a man come to life and who am I to stop the process?"

HUMAN endurance, it seemed, could stand no more. The fighters fell, at times, into each other's arms, pounding feebly as their straining lungs gasped for the air that whistled through their lips. Round-house swings hit home with a thud that

drew grunts of sympathetic pain from the silent onlookers.

The pain inflicted was reflected by the silent watchers. They strained forward at the attack. Their muscles tensed to dodge or strike, as they instinctively followed the actions of the fight. Their faces grew red; their eyes sparkled, and their breath hissed quickly through parted lips. Every so often, one would mutter ecstatically, "What a fight!"

Suddenly, under the impact of a lucky straight-arm right, Ronny Steele went backward, tripped in sheer weariness, and fell down. Steve Brazier stood back, grinning triumphantly.

Unexpectedly, Steele came upward, and brought with him an uppercut that hit like an explosion against Brazier's jaw. Confused, Steve did not see the right that started from the ground and hurtled upward and over, with all the force of Steele's body behind it. A sickening thud followed it as it struck.

Brazier went down, and Steele stood over him, hands hanging limply at his sides.

"Had enough?" The famous Steele voice was a hoarse whisper.

Like an electric spark, the sound galvanized Brazier into action. He got to his feet. Blindly, he came on, like a wild bull, and the hammer of fists went on.

Suddenly a soldier raced frantically across the tarmac, tore his way through the press of excited spectators, and gasped to Barry Dale, "Telephone call—G.H.Q.—the Zeppelin—that bombed London got lost. It's flying back home—going right over here—orders to get it."

The man was nearly out of his mind with excitement. Barry Dale instantly flung himself forward, and tore the antagonists apart.

"Cockpits, everyone!" he yelled. "A Zeppelin that was bombing London has been blown off its course, and will come over here. It's got to be shot down!"

A sigh went up, and with the sigh, the Squadron of the Dead again became aware of its job. There was a war to be fought.

Ronny Steele ceased, then, to see the world through a bloody mist. His nerves numbed by pounding, he was aware only of a fatigue that made his arms hang like lead. He wavered on his feet and staggered toward Dale.

The leader shook his head. "You two men are tired," he said. "You're out of the detail."

"Tired!" It was Steve Brazier talking. "Who's tired?" He glared at Ronny Steele. "You're so good—why don't you try shooting down a real enemy instead of a set-up?"

It began to dawn on Ronny Steele then. A Zeppelin—a vast enemy dirigible was flying over here. His hands went to his face. A bloody ruin, it was, as his fingers told him. Ronny Steele, the movie star, was done. America's perfect hero had vanished out there in that savage battle. He thought of Mara Gray. That was hopeless—she couldn't bear the sight of him, now.

"Come on!" he snarled to Steve Brazier. "Do you want to live forever?"

He hurried to the deadline, took Howard's old crate, and examined the controls, the greased spine of cartridges feeding into the Vickers breeches. He jazzed the motor, listened to its purr, and turned to order the blocks pulled. He saw, then, that Mara Gray was standing on the wing of Steve Brazier's Spad. She was talking earnestly, her pale face upturned. And suddenly as Brazier smiled and nodded, she caught his hand in hers a moment, desperately, and then climbed down.

Ronny Steele saw no more. He cursed the greaseball until the blocks were pulled. He poured the gun to the Spad and jerked out of line. Then as he waited, after getting into the wind, he heard Barry Dale's voice call out.

"Zep last reported twelve kilometers south of Dorcy, headed north by west two points, at sixteen thousand feet," the leader roared. "Go and get it!"

RONNY STEELE laughed as the high-pitched roar of his Hiss thundered across the tarmac. The Spad flew down the field, tail up, and shot up the sky in a straight zoom that nearly ended in disaster. Ronny caught it just in time, leveled off and spiraled tightly upward, fighting toward the clouds.

He had minutes, then, in which thoughts could not be driven from his mind, minutes while the Spad wound around the sky, ever climbing. Steele's blood cooled; his nerves quieted. He was aware of pain, even at the slightest movement; but most of all, he was aware of a sense of defeat. He had lost. His career was gone. He who had loved

so passionately to be a part of the theater had thrown that career away in one wild surge of rage, and he had lost Mara Gray.

He was circling upward through the clouds now. The sun was blotted out, and cold, gray moisture surrounded him. Mist congealed on the wings and struts, dripped from the bracing wires, clouded his tiny windshield. Dark and clammy, the world of cloud was dreary, in keeping with his mood. Mara Gray loved Steve Brazier. A cold rage followed the thought, but he conquered it. And there—just as he broke the Spad through the clouds at twelve thousand feet, and the sun warmed him and threw the Spad's shadow against the tumbling white cloud ocean below—there a strange change came over Ronny Steele.

He no longer hated Steve Brazier. Now, he was only afraid that something would happen to the man. That would hurt Mara, and he couldn't have that. "I can see that he gets back to her," he told himself.

A silver glitter to the south put a stop to thought. It was the Zeppelin. There it hung against the blue dome of the sky. The upper half was darkly painted, but the lower half was silver, and the sun reflection from the clouds made it a thing of beauty. Steele's eyes searched the sky, but he saw no escort flight.

The hunter's excitement swept him alive once more, killed the hurt of his bruised body. Fascinated, he watched the Zeppelin coming, six hundred and eighty feet of it, nosing straight toward him. He leveled off, aware that the giant balloon was two thousand feet above him, and that the Spad was almost unable to climb in the rarefied air. Frost rime formed on the leading edges of his wings. The air was bitterly cold, and he was cold, too, and could not stop his shaking.

He fought the Spad upward, as it faltered in the thin air. The altimeter needle stumbled, picked up. He edged closer to the mammoth bag. A thin silver spray fell from the Zep as the crew dumped water ballast to rise above the threat of the tiny orange dragonflies below.

Steele could see that the Zeppelin could not go higher. It had been gone from its base for many hours, and had lost hydrogen. Even their desperate attempts to hold altitude until the haven of Germany was reached were futile.

"It's got to come to me," he thought.

So too thought the crew, evidently. He saw tiny objects appear on the great thing's back—men with machine guns, ready to stave off attack. He looked to his own machine guns. Every fourth slug was an incendiary. He fired a short burst to warm the oil and clear the guns.

Two more dragonflies hung in the vast emptiness of the sky above the cloud ocean now, hoping, like him, for the first chance at the gigantic prize.

He gave his every thought to winning the battle. Nursing the Hisso, watching his guns, fighting the controls, he edged upward. The altimeter went to sixteen thousand—sixteen thousand, five hundred, hanging there for minutes while the Zeppelin came closer. Steele fought to get another five hundred feet out of the ship.

He got a thousand, but by that time the dirigible was past him, and it was a stern chase. His lungs fought for air, and his hands were blue, and his body was a chunk of ice—but he thought only of edging another few hundred feet. Then he could dive, dive on that floating monster and set it afire.

CIRCLING high, a tiny speck against the vastness of the sky, Steele was ready to dive. The Zeppelin was fighting a head wind, and as Ronny piqued over, and the whine of the Hisso rose to a scream, the great, gray shape seemed to leap at him.

He was standing on his rudder bar now. The Zeppelin floated directly beneath him. Farther down, was the vast, shifting ocean of cloud. The Zeppelin's shadow passed over it, like some dark, pointed projectile. He saw the men on its upper surfaces, turning as he turned, watching him, tracking him with gun snouts.

Suddenly, as he unleashed the first bite of his guns, a hurricane of steel tore into him. Skeins of gray thread tangled around his ship. The wing edges unraveled as if someone had pulled the key string. Blue flashes bounced from his guns. A bullet had furrowed his cheek, and another burning blow struck his arm. One foot bounced upward from the rudder bar, and Ronny Steele could feel the bullet burrowing its way up, through his boot and foot.

The shock confused him. He saw the great, gleaming side of the dirigible lunging at him. His

thumbs struck home on the Bowdoin stick-trigger, and his own slugs began to spray. Across the last half-mile of sky the diving Spad sprang like an arrow loosed from a gigantic crossbow.

Numbly, Steele was aware that he had fired a quarter of a belt. Then the enormous gray hide was almost in his propeller. Frantically, he hauled back on the stick and edged his rudder over. The Spad shot up the sky in a climbing turn, howling like a stricken thing.

Then he was clear of the Zeppelin. It was a mile or so away. He made a skid turn and took himself in hand. Thoughts rambled. He was wounded.... Damn it, why didn't the Zep burn? He'd pumped fifty slugs or more into it, but there it floated, each second bringing it closer to safety.

He was hit badly. His foot was numbed, yet it responded when he pressed on the rudder bar. His face hurt like hell—and what a sight that face was now.... He looked down at the oily crimson that dripped to his coat. He was cold.... Why the devil didn't the Zeppelin burn?

He could not know, as he turned and came in pursuit to strike again, that other pilots had asked the same thing, not alone about Zeppelins, but about *Drachens*, as well. Incendiary bullets penetrating at such high speed went through the hydrogen bags so swiftly that they failed to ignite.

Something of the sort occurred to him as he prepared a new plan of battle. It seemed useless to dive from above. Those German gunners were entirely too accurate. Attack from the rear—that was it. Then he could dodge the slugs from the gondolas, too.

He came up on the Zeppelin in a rush, better able, now, to handle his ship in the thin air. He poured another fifty rounds into the great stabilizers, but the ship ploughed steadily on its way. He attacked from the side, and thought the Spad would be shot out from under him before he could escape the deadly fire the German gunners poured into him. He dived from astern and slanted his slugs just right. The Vickers purred.

Raging, he saw the blazing incendiaries go into the gray bag—uselessly.

Did he have to get out and touch a match to it?

Drawing off, aware that his ammunition was giving out, as well as his gas supply, he became aware of other Spads, two of them. They circled and dived as he had, and were met with blasts of

machine-gun fire. While he fought up for new altitude, he saw one of the Spads suddenly become a puff of smoke, a blaze of orange fire. It went turning downward into the clouds. He watched the black smoke, red fire, and the little object that detached itself, and slid without haste into the clouds.

Someone was down. Someone was feeling the claws of this giant aerial dragon. Someone was dead.

STEELE attacked again, and when he zoomed up and turned away, he had forty slugs left in the ribbon, and fifteen minutes flying time in the tank. The Zeppelin still flew on, steadily, remorselessly, like some strange world swimming in its orbit.

He cursed and screamed. He was not quite sane. The fight, the loss of blood and the altitude had sapped his energy. All he could think of was downing the Zeppelin. He raved, his blackened, bloody face gaunt as a death's head. A cunning thought came. He'd show them how to down the dirigible. He'd go out in a blaze of glory.

He turned and pushed the stick out, just in time to avoid another Spad turning beside him. He swept past it and climbed. The other Spad turned closer. It was Steve Brazier, his Spad hacked by bullets. He was wounded, apparently, for his chest was bloody. He pointed down peremptorily, as if ordering Ronny to land.

"Like hell," screamed Ronny. "And let you get the credit?" He waved his hand, pointed at himself and his ship, and then at the Zeppelin. He laughed, a high-pitched scream that was not a sane sound. Then he thrust out the stick.

On the side of the great bag was a huge, black Maltese cross. He caught this in his ring sights. He leaned forward, and deliberately aimed his Spad at the great cross. Those Germans would be mighty surprised when he went into the bag with guns barking, and the propeller tearing a hole right through their snug, silver world.

He was making better than two hundred miles an hour in that last dive. It did not seem as if the Spad could hold together another instant. Yet something went by him, flashed in front, sun glinting off its wings. It was a Spad—Steve Brazier's Spad, whipping ahead of him to fire on the Zeppelin!

"No, you fool!" howled Ronny Steele. "You've got to go back—to her. Get out of the way!"

In his frenzy, he loosed a short burst from his guns at the Spad that was pulling away from him. It still went away from him. He saw tracer sparks glint as Steve's guns opened fire. He saw the smoke tracer of the German answer. The great flank of the Zeppelin filled the whole sky for them. Then Ronny came out of his insanity. He knew what Steve Brazier intended.

"You mustn't," he whispered, eyes sick. "You mustn't. You're—"

In that last dreadful second, Steve Brazier, with guns blazing, hit the flank of the Zeppelin squarely on the great black cross.

Flames ran with the speed of thought, sweeping the whole, gray carcass. As Ronny, in a swift upward zoom, swept over the doomed Zeppelin, the millions of cubic feet of hydrogen ignited with one whoof of sound like a muffled explosion. The upward blast of air caught the Spad and sent it reeling, helpless, turning over and over like a leaf in a gale. Steele lost track of direction, went numb, blind.

He came out of his stupor only when a dreadful heat scorched his face, and he found his Spad spinning down beside the slower-sinking Zeppelin. It was one terrific bonfire, seven hundred feet long. Aluminum girders rained out of it like jackstraws. Men, alive and dead, fell from it. And as Ronny righted the plane and turned away from the heat that had his fabric smoking, he saw the ruins of Steve Brazier's Spad break through the bottom of the terrific blaze and fall in flaming fragments toward the ground.

Helplessly, Steele heard himself sob. He was too weak to lift a hand when he put the Spad down on some wavering tarmac. Men ran out to help him from the cockpit, while others pointed to the fearsome spectacle of the slowly sinking Zeppelin that blazed worse than all hell's fire....

RONALD STEELE looked up idly at the pretty nurse. Usually, he would have smiled. Now, he merely said, "Is it yesterday or today—and who cares?"

She smiled at him, pityingly. "This is Convalescent Hospital Four at Neuilly, lieutenant,

and you've been here nine weeks. We've had to do a lot of work on you."

"I imagine so," said Ronny. "I suppose I'll live?"

"Yes. I'm disturbing you because two men from headquarters say they must see you. Do you want to?"

"No," said Ronny, "but what difference does that make?"

"Not much." She smiled again and went away. When she came back, she was followed by Cartwright and Chauncey Olroy.

The director moaned reproachfully, "What a lot of trouble you've caused me, you young idiot. The picture—"

"Oh, yes, the picture," said Ronny vaguely. "I suppose you'll have to get someone else."

"No. I processed some shots and used other men's backs. The picture's finished."

"Right," said Cartwright, "and it's a big load off my back. What we're here about, Steele, is to find out if you could stand a sea voyage."

"For what?"

"You're to make personal appearances in all the big towns where the picture is shown," explained Olroy, patiently.

"With this face?" Steele's mouth quivered. "Not me."

The two men exchanged glances. "Have you seen it?" Olroy asked.

"No, I'm not interested. Where's Mara? I've got to explain something—"

"Shut up a minute," said Olroy. "Cartwright—that mirror. Now, take a look at yourself."

Ronny Steele reluctantly took the mirror and held it up in an unsteady hand.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he muttered.

The face reflected was deathly pale, and there were scars over the eyebrows, and on one cheek. The nose had an uneven line, but it's very irregularity gave character to the face. It was not a handsome face. It never would be handsome again. It was rugged, and ravaged—with the scarred strength of a buccaneer or duelist.

"By the Lord," he muttered, "it's me all right. Pretty bad, but it isn't so bad as I thought it would be. But you couldn't show that face off, anywhere."

"The devil you couldn't," snapped Olroy. "Don't you see—your face has character, now. It

was just a handsome face, before. Now, it's a strong face. You won't ever again play hero roles, but you can play character parts, and make them like it."

"About Mara—" said Ronny, handing back the mirror. Somehow, the knowledge that he could go on in pictures left him cold. "I told you I had—"

"I'll send her in," cut in Cartwright.

She came in a moment or so later, and she was changed, too. Steele saw it in the shadows under her dark eyes.

"Hello." He tried to be casual. "They've had me in moth balls, here, repairing damages. I wanted to tell you about Steve." Ronny gave up the pretense of lightness. "He was a great guy. He'd have licked me, if our fight had gone on. And when I went cuckoo up there, he dived into the Zeppelin."

"He did it for me," she said, and suddenly was weeping. "Ronny, I told him, just before he went up that I loved you. That I had been a fool, trying to goad you into dropping all the posing. He promised he'd look out for you—up there. And now, I've cost poor Steve his life, and I've ruined your career."

"No," he said, lifting her head, rumpling her hair with his hands. "You've started me on a better one."

A week later, after they had been married, they went to the Gare Saint Lazare to take the boat train for Cherbourg. As they paused before the compartment, there came the swift clack of marching feet. Men in black uniforms with red piping, men wearing silver wings with a death's head between them, swung across the platform. There were fourteen of them, swaggering, hard-bitten and devilish. Officers who had yet to fire their first shot looked at them enviously.

"The Squadron of the Dead," one murmured. "There go fighting men, you can believe me."

Barry Dale paused before Ronny Steele. He was smiling.

"We heard about the marriage," he said, "and we offer our congratulations. Also, we are about to present a delayed tribute."

"Tribute?" Ronny asked, puzzled.

"Yes. When we first met you, I presented you to the Squadron of the Dead. You acknowledged the introduction—they did not." He turned on his heel. "Attention!" he barked.

The line of black stiffened. “Gentlemen of the Squadron of the Dead, I present to you Lieutenant Ronald Steele,” said Skipper Dale.

Their hands flew to the black overseas caps in a salute—the salute of hard-bitten men who lived on borrowed time. It was a salute of Austrian and German, Russian and French, English and American, a salute to a man whose courage had earned their tribute.