



THE HANGER OF HATE

by DONALD E. KEYHOE

For the first time in months, the bitterness left Arnold Trent's eyes. Ahead lay the the 77th—and a chance of escape from the mocking fate that had trailed him. But one man who knew him waited on that tarmac—and the old hatred smouldered again.

SREECHING DOWN from a leaden sky, two bullet-scarred Spads slid in toward the muddy tarmac of the 77th Pursuit, a pitiful remnant of the flight which had gone out at dawn.

The first ship came in crookedly, wind moaning through its tattered wings. It struck on one wheel, slued crazily around and raked off its landing gear. The Spad's nose ploughed into the mud as the splintered

prop crashed to bits. The pilot lay slumped over his stick.

Scurrying greaseballs dragged him out, pulled open his flying suit. Stretcher men ran up. The pilot was carried away, coughing out his life, red foam upon his lips and a great crimson blotch above his heart.

The second fighter landed, stalled into the mud with dragging tailskid. "Thug" Wallace, leader of what had been Flight A, climbed out of his riddled ship,

cursing hoarsely, bitterly, a look of stark rage and hate on his fierce and ugly face.

“He’s done it again,” a greaseball muttered. “The whole flight gets shot to hell—and he ain’t touched. Damned if he don’t wear horseshoes in his pants!”

Thug Wallace had turned to a line sergeant. “Get that bus ready to go out again,” he rasped. “And when you load the guns, make every fourth slug an incendiary.”

Thorpe, the S.C., was waiting down the line, his thin face a grim white mask from which two burnt-out eyes peered forth. His gaze was on Wallace’s battered Spad, where burst after burst had gouged holes through the wings and tail, where a trail of slugs had ripped up the side into the pit, tearing windshield and instrument dials to fragments. He turned as Thug stalked toward him.

“Just you two?” he said huskily.

Thug scowled. His hard blue eyes, sunk deep under bristling brows, shot a glance toward where the stretcher-bearers had vanished.

“Thomas is done for,” he grated out. “The rest are gone—”

“Six out of seven,” Thorpe whispered. Then, “Von Kroeder again?”

“Yeah—damn his soul! They moved in two squadrons since yesterday. That dope G-2 got must’ve been a plant. They’re runnin’ low-altitude stuff all right—with a flock of Fokkers upstairs, pulled in from the Conflans sector, most likely.

“Moultrie and Johnson went first crack, both of ‘em in flames. Krauts were using incendiaries. Kid Stewart went down on fire right in front of me. God, the way he looked! Waved back once—”

“Never mind,” Thorpe broke in gruffly. “There’s a bunch of replacements here—they’ll hear you.”

THUG GLARED at the gaping youngsters just back of the line. “Let ‘em hear it,” he snarled. “They’ll be goin’ the same way soon enough. What’d they send us—a flock of ten-hour kids to throw in against that gang of butchers?”

“Not this time. They look pretty good, and they’ve had more hours than most.”

“They’ll need it. How many of ‘em?”

“Five. There’s another one coming later today; he’s ferrying in a new Spad from Latreecy. He’s senior to you, Thug, but don’t let it worry you. He’ll go right in with the rest of the new men.”

“Who is he—some gold-bricker with a drag?” Thug demanded.

“I don’t know. His name’s Trent—Arnold Trent. That’s all I know.”

“Arnold Trent!” Thug’s none too prepossessing face had gone purple. He started to speak, but choked. When he did loosen his tongue, it was to let forth a profane avalanche.

“What’s the matter with you?” snapped Thorpe. “What have you got against this man Trent?”

“What have I—say, did you ever hear of ‘Miss Isabelle’? Well, that’s Arnold Trent. He’s a sweet sister what used to play woman parts back on Broadway. For cripes’ sake, what a smack this is! Next thing, they’ll be sending us a bunch of old ladies—”

“You mean he’s a female impersonator?” demanded the S.C. incredulously.

“Yeah, that’s what they called him. You see, I lamped him once when—” Thug broke off, again going purple. Too well he remembered the occasion. Unaware of Trent’s identity, he had fallen heavily for what seemed a dainty bit of femininity back of the stage footlights of a rest-area theatre near Issoudun. Befogged with cognac, he had failed to learn that a masculine heart beat beneath the feminine apparel Trent wore so well—until three of his gleeful buddies had led him back-stage to meet the object of his ardor. There had been a row, and it had taken him three months to live that story down, even partially. And now—

“A female impersonator,” grunted Thorpe. “Well, I’ll be—”

“Wait’ll you see him. He’ll probably be wearing divided skirts to fly in.” Thug thrust a plug of tobacco into his capacious mouth and bit off a large piece. “Miss Isabelle!” he muttered. “I’ll take that bird over the hurdles—and then some.”

If the S.C. heard this last, he did not show it.

“Tend to these men,” he said briefly, and headed for the office.

“Hey, you birds,” Thug bawled, scowling around at the replacements. “Beat it over and pick out your billets, and then come back here. You won’t have any trouble finding empty billets,” he added significantly. “Maybe you’ll find some dunnage in ‘em, but you can set it off to one side. The guys that own it won’t be back.”

As the replacements scattered with their gear, one of them spoke in a low voice to the one nearest him.

“Did you hear that?” he said. “Miss Isabelle again! I guess that tough egg hasn’t been keeping up on things. Boy, I want to be right here when Trent hits this tarmac.”

FOR the first time in months, the smouldering bitterness had died out of Arnold Trent's dark eyes. He bent over the controls of the brand new Spad he had brought from Orly, finding a keen thrill in battling his way through the thick gray mists which all but obscured the ground.

Absently, he fingered the map and stared ahead through the murk. Somewhere beyond lay the 77th—and a chance of escape from the mocking fate that had trailed him with diabolic persistence.

"Miss Isabelle!" A dark flush came to his cheeks as he thought of that hated name. His blood ran hot as he recalled the bitter jests and ridicule of the past year.

A thousand times he had cursed the fate that had made him a child of actor parents, brought up to stage life, schooled for juvenile parts of both sexes, and then—much against his will—the exploiting of a newly discovered talent for mimicry of women. An adept at make-up, with an amazing range of voice, he had become a hit on Broadway, a star at seventeen.

For three years he had kept on, secretly hating it, feeling the ridicule of men back of the applause that roared over the footlights. At last he had rebelled, demanding a man's part or none. A long fight—but finally success. A contract for the masculine lead of a new play—and then the war.

War, with an opportunity for a new life, a freedom from the stage—and a chance to come back after the war, when that other part of his life had been forgotten.

One of the first to enlist, he had exulted in anonymity for two glorious weeks. Then it had come—discovery that A. Leslie Trent was none other than Arnold Trent, the famous female impersonator. A sudden change in the attitude of his cadet mates. Subtle ridicule, some of it not so subtle. Sneers, laughter that cut and burned him inwardly. A blunt instructor's comment, "There aren't any petticoats in this outfit, Trent!" His pent-up rage bursting forth, and the fight that followed. A threatened kick-out. Sudden intervention from a senator at Washington. Then the beginning of persecution.

But he had stuck. At last the trip to France, with hope alive again. The long drag at Blois, waiting as a casual for orders. Efforts to drag him into an open break, with court-martial awaiting. Torture—and then Issoudun, after he had surrounded himself with that bitter shell.

Issoudun, where he had made the grade, backed by a few who had begun to understand. Then that

frightful day when a snickering staff officer had ordered him to display his talent publicly, at a rest-area theater, for the amusement of men and officers.

Three performances—a day of plain hell. Back-stage, a mixup with some drunken fool who had not known the truth of the impersonation. There had been a fight. Then court-martial. Back to Blois, still fighting for his chance. Unexpected aid from a high officer at Blois—and sudden orders to the Front!

The Front—a magic word. He looked at his map and then peered down through the mist to check his position. A puzzled look came into his handsome face; then his cleanly molded features drew together in a frown. He was lost. The highway he had been following had disappeared. He was over a rugged, wooded hill.

He glanced at his compass. Hazarding a guess at his location, he turned north. The mist was thicker. Soon it stretched down to the tree-tops and he was forced up through the gray mass. He found clear air at 3,000 feet. He kept on toward the north. Minutes passed.

SUDDENLY he saw some darting specks ahead. They were circling above an open patch in the mist. Planes! He started. Fokkers!

"Where the devil am I, anyway?" he muttered.

He dropped the Spad lower, until it was almost hidden in the top of the cloud. The Fokkers ahead of him had ceased to circle. Tilting down, they dived swiftly through the broken spot in the clouds.

Trent's eyes gleamed. He gunned the Spad wide open and raced for the break, orders forgotten. At least he would have a look!

Instinctively, his fingers crept to the trips of his Vickers. He was clear through the opening and beneath the cloud before he realized his speed.

A thousand feet below him were seven black-crossed Fokkers, streaking down the sky at a flight of Allied fighters. His heart leaped. He pitched the Spad down and dived.

This was what he had fought for! It was for this he had stuck through that hellish year. There was a wild light in his eyes as he thundered down on the tail of the nearest Jerry ship. The Fokker pilot was hunched over his guns, rocketing toward his startled quarry below. His Spandau guns blazed once. Then he stiffened, half-turned in a wild, incredulous stare back of him—and died under Trent's second vicious burst.

Below, an Allied ship fell off in dizzy circles, a sinister plume of black smoke swirling after it on its

earthward dance of death. There was a flash of darting wings before Trent's eyes—red-white-and-blue circles. He let up on his trips, and the spouting Vickers ceased their snarl. He kicked out frantically as a zooming Spad came before him. It swished by, guns pumping a deadly stream above his head, into a Jerry who had turned in dismay at Trent's unexpected onslaught.

It was a fatal turn for the Boche. Gray tracer probed across his pit, lanced into his huddled form. The Allied Spads had gained the Fokkers' level, as the Germans zoomed away from Trent's screeching ship.

Trent pulled up short, threw the Spad into a screeching renversement. The spotless wings of his brand-new fighter were suddenly dotted with tiny black holes. He rolled onto his wing tips, shot up in a chandelle. A Fokker followed through, Spandaus bathed in flame. The compass vanished in a shower of glass and metal before Trent's eyes. *Br-t-t-t-t-t-t-t!* Another burst sawed through the fuselage behind him. The Spad jumped wildly.

Panic hit him for a second, then cold, deadly reason. This wasn't the way! This wasn't any time to get stagestruck! He grinned. If he didn't do better than this, they'd be getting the hook for him. Another Spad whipped past him, a white-faced pilot staring over his shoulder. Just a flash—but Trent knew him. Archibald, one of the kids from Issoudun who had been ordered up at the same time.

The 77th! This was part of his own outfit—his new squadron! A replacement flight on its first patrol. He gritted his teeth and went after the grinning Jerry on Archibald's tail. But a plunging Spad was past him, leaping in with slashing guns before he could fire a shot. A lethal stream of incendiaries and solid slugs raked the suddenly terrified Boche. The grin froze into a look of agony. Again the flaming Vickers crashed their wicked load into the stricken man. The pilot writhed upward in his seat, then fell inert. A puff of smoke rolled out from before him, became a greedy, licking flame.

ARCHIBALD had zoomed free. But with the speed of light, an avenging Boche was on the striking Spad. Trent saw, but was momentarily paralyzed by the terrific onslaught. The Fokker scorched past him, guns pounding the man who had rescued Archibald. From the side of the orange fuselage glared the emblem of a hideous, snarling wolf.

A little chill ran down Trent's spine. Von Kroeder! The Spad was as good as gone!

But with a miraculous twist, the man in the Spad evaded that first frightful barrage. Whipping about in a mad turn, he drilled for the Fokker's tail. Von Kroeder flicked his ship to the left, then with a rapid whirl threw it back into a right chandelle that put him above the Spad. He banked into a savage turn, glaring down his sights. For the instant the Spad was almost before his guns.

A sobbing prayer was on Arnold Trent's lips as he kicked his trembling ship up at the hurtling German ace. The Spad skidded, stalled as he unleashed his Vickers. Back of him von Kroeder's battered flight cut through the replacement pilots and raked him with a furious leaden blast. But he clung to that desperate climb, eyes glued to his sights and fingers frozen to the tips of his blazing guns.

Twin torrents poured briefly from the German's smoking Spandaus. Then he sheered out hurriedly as Trent's bullets ate through the bottom of his ship. The next instant seemed an eternity to Trent. Splinters flew from his struts; his Spad shook under a withering fire from four pumping guns—and then it was over in a breath-taking whip as the fighter lurched down from its stall.

Dazedly, Trent pulled out of that dive and looked upward. There were two Fokkers in full flight. A third came spinning down past him, the pilot's bloody head lolling from side to side. He watched it fall, crash through the trees below and become a mass of flame. Slowly, he climbed up and rejoined the flight.

There were four ships besides his own. That meant three had gone down. The horror of it came over him, but he forced it back. Falling behind the other Spads, he watched the leader signal for a climb above the cloud before the return. Once he saw the leader turn and stare at him. For the first time he recalled his orders to keep well behind the Front in his flight to the 77th Pursuit Field. Ruefully, he surveyed his bullet-marked Spad.

Fifteen minutes later he snapped off the Hisso 225 and climbed out on the muddy tarmac of the 77th. The flight leader leaped down from his ship, jerked off his helmet and goggles. There was something vaguely familiar about his weather-beaten, homely face. Trent watched him approach, a stocky fellow with a lumbering, belligerent gait.

"I guess the drinks are on me," the flight leader rumbled, inspecting Trent keenly with deep-set blue eyes that gleamed from under bushy brows. "That Kraut butcher sure had me in a tight spot—"

He ceased. Slowly his jaw fell.

“Well, I’ll be damned! It it isn’t Miss Isabelle!”

SUDDENLY THUG threw back his head and gave a bellow of laughter that echoed across the field. Mechanics stopped and stared. Thorpe, hurrying across the tarmac, halted in amazement. The blood receded from Trent’s face. He stood stiff, tense—inwardly a seething volcano. Escape! God in heaven, was there never to be an end?

All the mockery of that bitter year seemed to live itself again in those moments as he stood there, branded by that hated name the instant he arrived at his new post. A white-hot fury grew within him. The sight of Thug’s face, flushed with his mirth, made something snap within his mind.

“Shut up, you fool!” he lashed out, and his voice was like the crack of a pistol.

But Thug Wallace never heard. He was off in another spasm of roaring laughter.

“Wait’ll von Kroeder hears that one!” he guffawed. “Lettin’ Miss Isabelle chase him—”

Crash! Thug Wallace staggered back blindly. Blood spurted from his lips. He shook his head as though to clear his befuddled brain. Then, with an angry roar, he charged in.

Trent’s right fist met him, drove like a piston to Thug’s jaw. Thug grunted in pain, but came in again. He swung wildly. Trent sidestepped with expert ease, plunged an upper-cut through Thug’s flailing guard. Thug went to his knees.

The field was a bedlam. Thorpe dashed across to the scene. But Thug was up again, murder in his eyes.

“You lousy gigolo! I’ll batter that pretty face of yours into raw meat for that!”

With a bull-like rush, he threw himself on Trent. Trent stumbled, fell, and twisted from under the maddened flight leader all in a second’s time. He got to his feet just as Thorpe’s acid voice cut in:

“Stand back—whoever you are! Get up, Wallace. Now, what’s the meaning of this?”

Wallace got up slowly, staring at Arnold Trent. “It’s a personal matter,” he told Thorpe grimly.

The S.C. looked around at the crowd of mechanics. “Go to my office, you two,” he snapped.

Silently, Trent followed Thug to the squadron headquarters. In a moment Thorpe appeared. He had an odd expression on his weary face.

“So you’re Captain Trent?” he said, eyeing the actor closely.

Trent nodded. All the old bitterness was back in his eyes.

“Lieutenant Archibald says you were mixed up in this last scrap. Just what were you doing over the lines?”

Trent flushed. “I was lost. I ran into fog and got too far north by mistake. Then I saw those Fokkers—”

“You had orders to keep out of any dangerous situation,” Thorpe rasped. “Never mind what the result was—I’ll grant your popping down behind that Fokker flight may have helped. But it’s just another example of insubordination. I’ve just got your record—it’s full of black marks.”

Trent set his teeth to keep from a disastrous explosion.

“You’re a trouble-maker,” Thorpe went on sternly. “And we’ve got enough trouble up here. One more break and I’ll send you back to Blois!”

THUG WALLACE shuffled his feet uneasily. He seemed on the point of speaking, but Thorpe cut him short.

“Wait a minute, Wallace! I’m talking now. Trent, I’m going to overlook your getting over the lines, inasmuch as you probably saved part of Flight A from von Kroeder and his mob. But don’t think one victory makes you a combat pilot. You’re green—as green as the rest of those men out there. You had luck.”

He paused and waited. Trent did not speak; his face was cold, immobile, and his dark eyes inscrutable.

“Understand?” barked Thorpe, reddening.

“Yes, sir.”

“Now—about that disgraceful exhibition in front of the men. Just what, Captain Trent, caused that outbreak?”

“I prefer not to say, sir.”

“You prefer—why, you—you—” spluttered Thorpe.

“I’ll tell you,” blurted out Thug. “He got sore when I recognized him, and called him Miss Isabelle. Maybe I was—”

“Is this right, Trent?” rapped the S.C.

“I took exception to his manner and remarks, both,” said Trent coldly.

“Humph!” Thorpe glanced sideways at Thug’s battered lips, and at a mauve-colored bruise just under his right eye. “I see you did. Well, considering that it was a public place, you were wrong. I can’t have officers fighting on my field. But—”

“If it’s an apology he wants,” growled Thug, “I’ll give him one—seeing he chased that Heinie off my tail.”

Trent faced the S.C. grimly. "I wouldn't accept an apology. The least I have to do with this officer—unofficially—the better I'll like it."

"He'll be your flight leader," Thorpe said drily. "You'll fly the dawn patrol with him and the rest of Flight A tomorrow. Until you've had more experience, you can't expect to do any better, regardless of your rank."

Trent saluted and went out. He found that Archibald was his billet mate. The youngster was still nervous after his baptism of fire.

"I've got a lot to thank you for, captain," he said to Trent. "If you hadn't—"

"It was Wallace that nailed that Jerry," Trent told him. "I wasn't even started when he jumped in."

"I guess we'd all have got it, if you hadn't come along when you did," Archibald replied. He hesitated. "Did the Old Man—that is, are you going to get a court?"

Trent smiled wryly. "Not yet. Maybe I'll last a week or so."

"I've been talking with one of the older men, a guy in B Flight. He says this bird Wallace isn't such a bad egg. But it seems there was some kind of a frame-up that time when you were in that show back at Issoudun."

"There was a frame-up, all right," said Trent bitterly. "But I wasn't in on it. Not that it makes any difference now."

"Well, he thinks you were in on it," grinned Archibald. "They still kid him about falling for Miss Isabelle," he broke off, noting Trent's hard-set jaw. "Oh, I beg your pardon."

"Never mind. Let's forget it. As far as Wallace is concerned, he can go to the devil. I'll fly behind him if I have to—and that's all."

THAT NIGHT Thorpe strode into the mess just as dinner was over. It had been an ordeal for Trent, sensing the eyes of the older pilots on him with what he felt to be contempt, and Thug glowering down the length of the table.

"Important information has just come in from Group H.Q.," the S.C. announced. "As you all know, von Kroeder's squadron was partly wiped out last week, and his base was changed after it had been discovered and bombed. Group has reliable information that not only von Kroeder but two other squadrons are planning to move tonight to the old base of Count Arntz, directly across from us and only seventeen miles back of the lines.

"According to our spies, there will be no Archie ready for action until late tomorrow morning, and very few machine guns on the field till after dawn. In other words, for at least an hour, about dawn, the only protection the Boche can have will be the guns on their ships. The 77th will go over half an hour before dawn. Flight B will act as protection for the 109th Bombing Squadron, which will attack with us. Flight A will join the 213th French *chasse* squadron at 14,000 feet, over Bar-le-duc, and will be ready for a low altitude strafe.

"The whole chance of success depends on surprise, of course—surprise and striking *en masse*. The weather will probably remain the same, with a ceiling of not more than 2,000 feet above von Kroeder's field. In case of trouble, the formation can spread out and duck into the clouds."

That was all. He went out. The mess broke into a babel of excitement. Except for the youngster, Archibald, the pilots ignored Trent, and he left the building, went to his cubicle, filled with rankling thoughts.

There was a mimeographed paper lying on his bunk. He picked it up. It was an announcement of a series of theatricals to be produced at the nearest concentration center. It ended with a request for the services of any one with stage experience. Underneath there had been scrawled in pencil, "Bring your own dresses!"

Crumpling the paper in his hand, he started toward the mess. Halfway, he stopped.

"Not now," he muttered. "Tomorrow—after we get back."

Off to the northeast, hidden in the misty night, the guns of the Front rumbled their incessant reminder of the war.

THE FIRST HINT of dawn had not come into the sky when the 77th broke into a furore of activity, preparing for the attack on the German drome. Flight B took off first, blurred shapes in the gloom. Thug Wallace beckoned his pilots around him for final orders.

"If the coast is clear, the bombers will do their stuff first. That ought to knock off half of Jerry's ships, anyway. As soon as the bombers get clear, we go in and mop up any heinies that we see on the field.

They'll be tryin' to get their buses out. Stick your ships down and let 'em have it. Watch out for machine-gun nests. I'm not any too sure about that dope that they won't have any gunners stuck around."

He assigned formation positions briefly, ending up with, "Trent, you'll take No. 2. If I drop out, you're flight leader. Savvy?"

Trent looked at him closely. This was unexpected. Thorpe had already made it plain that his rank meant nothing till he had more experience.

"Say, are you deaf—or what?" barked Thug. "I said you were No. 2. You're to keep an eye on me and take over if I flop."

"I understand," Trent said crisply. He felt a vague wonder about this hard-looking pilot. Was this Thug's way of indicating he regretted the performance of yesterday. Then he remembered the crumpled paper in his blouse, that scrawled, insulting sentence, "Bring your own dresses!"

He climbed into his ship. The signal came. Seven Spads trundled out, roared down the field. Trent watched his neighbor carefully. Risky flying, this, with replacements who had not more than an hour of night flying at Issoudun, if that. For the first time he blessed the long delays which had kept him at training schools, piling up hours, practicing, concentrating on every point. He smiled to himself. They had tried to break him because they didn't want him in their damned Air Service. Well, he was still in the outfit—and he had three times as many hours as any of the new men in that flight.

It gave him a strange confidence, though it was only his second time in action. He felt for his trips, patted them grimly. Just ahead, Thug's exhaust pipes showed red and blue in the darkness.

Over Bar-le-duc they met the French squadron. Up through the gloom they roared, a French flight on either side, Thug Wallace leading. Higher, higher, so that the drone of engines would not betray them to their prey.

The sky became faintly gray, a mere hint of dawn. Thug signaled, tilted into a slow glide, engine revving gently to retain its warmth. Like phantoms, the score of Allied fighters followed down. Trent hunched forward in his seat, peering down into the broken clouds below. Had Thug's calculations been right?

They went through the cloud mass, engines idling now. It was clear beneath, with a lightening rim around the horizon. And directly ahead swarmed a flock of planes, the Allied bombers, with Flight B of the 77th darting down alongside.

Then, out of the eery stillness, broken only by the whine of wires and wings, came a thundering chorus. Smoke puffed from the bombers' engines as they went

full on. Down they plunged at von Kroeder's drome, where suddenly terrified men sped in all directions, fleeing from the hurtling death-eggs that screeched upon them.

A hangar went up, a mass of flame and whirling fragments. Burning ships were hurled through the canvas sides. The drome was bright with the glare of bursting bombs. Diminutive figures ran madly for open ground, or lay like rag bundles where they had fallen.

Trent, watching in fascinated horror, almost failed to see Thug's sudden upward leap. He rammed his throttle home, zoomed on Thug's tail. The stick trembled in his hands—but his grasp was firm! Bullets shredded his wings. Dismayed, he flung a look back. A squadron of Pfalzes had erupted from the sky. The truth struck him with a jolt. One of the three German squadrons had not arrived at the new drome on schedule. The Allied ships had nosed themselves into a trap!

THE BOMBERS PULLED UP frantically as the first of the Pfalz fighters plunged into their midst. Two of the big ships careened together. Wings locked, they went down in a twisting mass of metal, wood and cloth. The sound of their impact crashed through the roar of darting planes. A great puff of fire leaped out of the wreckage, as though from a flaming bellows.

Three of the Frenchmen had gone down in the first moment of the Pfalz attack. The sky was filled with faint pink tracer lines, a fantastic network across the graying heavens. A French Spad whipped past Trent in a wild chandelle. A charging Pfalz drilled the pilot at first burst. Trent kicked out just in time to miss the spinning ship.

Another Allied bomber went down, a red-hot inferno. Trent saw two figures go leaping into space, tumbling over and over till they hit. He felt a savage fury surge through him. With spewing guns, he went after the Pfalz that had caught the bomber. The Boche had cut around, raking another bomber from beneath. Trent jammed his trips hard, yanked the stick half back. Livid flame played about his Vickers, like greedy red tongues. Through narrowed eyes he saw the German pitch forward in his ship. The Pfalz rocketed down with engine at full gun.

The fight was but one minute old, yet the Boche had equaled the odds through their sudden, unexpected attack. Trent searched the sky swiftly for a sight of Thug. The streamers on Thug's ship showed

500 feet below. The flight leader was tearing down into the drome, spraying a trundling, black-crossed ship.

Trent's wings scorched the air as he followed. Almost a dozen ships were taxiing furiously from the only hangar the bombers had left intact. One plane struck a crater, flopped onto its back. The one behind it piled into the wreck before its pilot could stop. Trent laughed, flicking his ship onto the leading plane, now ten yards off the ground.

The drome surged up. A black cross swam before his eyes, full in his ringed gun-sights. The Vickers screamed their throaty, murderous song. The Fokker slipped, rolled upside down and struck on its nose. With guns still ripping out their slashing death, Trent strafed the German drome, raking a knot of frightened men as the Spad's nose barely missed the ground.

A machine-gun nest let loose a double torrent. Fabric tore from Trent's wings. He whipped over at the top of his climb, flung back at the nest. Thug Wallace drilled in like a bullet from the left, heedless of Trent's diving Spad.

Trent zoomed, a blistering curse on his lips. Thug roared below him, straight down in a headlong plunge at the ground gunners. The little group of men melted into riddled flesh. In spite of himself, Trent felt a swift admiration for this man who had flown straight down that deadly stream of pounding steel and lead, staring into death's face, but holding grimly to his dive.

Something came shrieking down from the melee. It was a Nieuport, stripped of its fabric in a sharp zoom. Trent looked away as it crashed. He stared upward. Two red Very stars burned in the dawn sky. The signal to pull out, to climb for the clouds!

Or was it a Boche signal of some kind? Trent jerked around and saw Thug rocketing down on the Fokkers that raced from the drome. Thug had not given that signal—but the Allied ships were streaking for the ceiling!

Two Pfalz fighters slipped away from the swirling planes above and dropped like meteors on Thug's Spad. Trent rolled and caught one in its dizzy plunge. The Pfalz smashed through a ruined hangar and was instantly bathed in scarlet flame. The other was gone before he could bank around. Two tracer fingers shot down into Thug's diving ship, from the German's smoking guns. The Spad came out of its dive crookedly, half-zoomed, then fell off and struck flatly.

ARNOLD TRENT was less than 200 feet from the Pfalz, a red haze before his eyes and black rage in his heart, before the gloating Boche saw him. Gone from

Trent's mind was the memory of Thug's insulting welcome to the 77th. All that remained was a driving hate for every man that flew a black-crossed ship, and the swift resolve to even scores for the man who had just gone down.

The Pfalz skidded away from his spouting muzzles—but too late. So close that he could see the German's stricken face, Trent poured in one last burning blast. The Boche slipped down in his cockpit, one bloody arm dangling over the side. The Pfalz slipped and skidded earthward like a falling leaf.

Trent gave one fleeting glimpse at Thug's wrecked Spad. A stocky figure was crawling out of the crumpled ruin. Men in field-gray uniforms were running toward him, rifles in their hands. In a moment Thug was a prisoner.

Trent snapped his stick back and bored for altitude. The remainder of the Pfalz squadron had zoomed after the Allied ships. Two Fokkers from von Kroeder's squadron raced across the sky on Trent's tail. He flipped his ship from side to side, gaining in his climb. There was no time to turn now. His guns were all but empty, and he might need those few remaining slugs when he got upstairs.

He plunged into the lowering clouds, eased through the top cautiously and looked around. The Allied ships had banked into a milling circle, each one covering the man ahead—a new maneuver, Trent recalled, known as the Lufberry Show. The Pfalzes, after one brief attempt to break into the circle, drew off and zoomed. The Allied ships piqued for their own lines.

Trent raced after them, but his laboring Hisso left him behind the formation. He throttled the missing engine and held close to the cloud while he cruised back to the 77th,

When he arrived, the rest of the squadron had landed—or what remained after the Pfalzes' disastrous onslaught.

A queer silence greeted him. Even Archibald looked at him and turned away without a word. There was an ominous undercurrent in the grease-balls' muttered conversation. Trent turned his ship over to a surly mechanic. The man eyed him and then spoke with a hint of a sneer.

"The major wants to see yuh soon as yuh come in."

Thorpe stared up from his desk as Trent came in. "Well?" he demanded curtly.

"You wanted to see me?" countered Trent. He met the S.C.'s gaze defiantly. What in Hades was coming now? Would they never let him alone?

‘You’re damned right I want to see you. Do you realize you’re responsible for the death of half a dozen men today?’

Trent looked at him in amazement.

‘I’m responsible?’ he repeated stupidly.

‘Yes, you! According to Randolph in B Flight and also the French *chasse* leader, there was a good chance of knocking down those Pfalzes and keeping von Kroeder’s gang on the ground—until you fired that pull-out signal.’

Trent’s dark eyes flamed. ‘I never fired that signal! Whoever says so is a liar!’

‘Keep still till I ask you to speak,’ rasped the S.C. ‘You needn’t bother to alibi. It’s plain as day. You saw a chance to pull out and leave Wallace in a trap. And because he called your bluff yesterday—’

Trent stepped forward, fists clenched. ‘By God, you nor anybody else can talk like that to me!’ he raged. ‘I’ve stood all the hell I’m going to in this army. I never fired any signal. I was down there trying to cover up Wallace when a Pfalz got him. And I’m as good a man as you or anybody else on this field, and if you take off those gold leaves, I’ll prove it!’

Thorpe stood glaring at him for full thirty seconds. Neither man moved.

‘You realize you’re liable to a court-martial for that?’ Thorpe said tersely, at last.

‘What difference does it make?’ snapped Trent bitterly. ‘I might as well take it as go on with this farce. Go ahead and order your court.’

Thorpe shook his head. He was studying Trent more carefully.

‘Not just yet. I’ll look into this thing. Meantime, you’re grounded till further orders.’

‘May I ask one question?’ Trent said harshly.

‘What is it?’ Thorpe somehow seemed less severe than he had been before.

‘Who reported that I gave the signal?’

‘That,’ said Thorpe quietly, ‘is something I must keep to myself for the time.’ As Trent turned to go, the S.C. called him back: ‘You saw Wallace shot down, you say?’

‘Yes, but he’s not hurt.’ Briefly, Trent described what had happened.

Thorpe sighed. ‘Too bad. He was a hard-boiled egg, but a mighty good combat pilot. I may as well forget about that, though. He’ll be given von Kroeder’s usual send-off and then he’ll spend the rest of the war in a prison camp.’

‘Send-off?’ said Trent curiously.

‘Von Kroeder’s idea of humor. He keeps each captured Allied pilot at his staffel for one dinner. A sort of exhibition affair—trophy-of-the-chase idea, while all the pilots razz the prisoner in German.’

‘I don’t think von Kroeder will get much satisfaction out of Thug,’ said Trent. Then, realizing that he had unbent slightly from his former bitter resentment of the flight leader’s actions, he hastily turned to go. To his surprise he heard a faint chuckle. But when he turned, Thorpe’s face was quite impassive, save for a peculiar gleam in his weary, bloodshot eyes.

TRENT WENT OUT. He found his cubicle empty. He was taking off his flying suit when he happened to feel the paper which he had crumpled in his uniform blouse. He took it out, was about to throw it away. Suddenly he stiffened. A strange idea had popped into his mind. He lit his pipe and restlessly paced the floor. Slowly, the hard lines about his lips relaxed. He grinned as if in contemplation of some huge joke.

Ten minutes later he strode toward the transportation shack with an empty suitcase in his hand. After a short argument and a furtive exchange of French coin of the realm, he obtained a motorcycle and sidecar from a bewhiskered sergeant.

It was after dark when he returned. The side-car was splattered with mud, and so was Trent.

Trent carried the suitcase, much heavier now, to his billet. To his relief, Archibald was still absent. He shaved carefully, manicured his fingers meticulously, and then put on his flying-suit, slipping a small but efficient-looking pistol into his pocket. After a cautious inspection of the area outside his cubicle, he headed toward the end hangar with his suitcase in his hand.

A sentry appeared, lounging along in the dark. Trent slipped back into the shadows, then darted into the hangar where he had seen a Bristol two-seater. He secured the suitcase firmly in the rear cockpit, examined instruments and guns. The tanks were full and both nose and rear guns armed, for this was one of the ‘*alerte*’ ships of the 77th. Trent had not been certain of this. His success thus far brought a gleam of satisfaction into his eyes. He pulled the canvas away from the entrance, jerked the chocks from the Bristol’s wheels and then started the engine.

The moment the Rolls roared into life, he jumped into the seat and taxied quickly onto the field. As he had expected, the hoarse challenge of a sentry greeted his appearance. He bent low as the man fired. The

sputtering engine picked up speed. He eased the throttle full on, held the two-seater to the ground till the trees loomed before him, and then zoomed with a prayer on his lips.

The Bristol staggered up through the topmost twigs, held its altitude gamely under a cold engine, then began to climb. Trent sat back in relief. Down on the field lights were flashing. A searchlight flickered up at him. He kicked out of the beam. Probably they wouldn't shoot—and yet they might!

He got away from the 77th, gained five thousand feet and then turned toward the Front. He had reached 12,000 feet when he passed over. The night was cold and damp, but he hardly felt it. He was still grinning, thinking ahead.

Whoof! An almost invisible puff of Archie appeared off to one side. The Boche had picked up the drone of his engine, and had determined from its sound that an Allied ship was passing over. He climbed a little higher. There wasn't much danger from Archie, but he wanted to be out of listening range in a very few minutes.

At 15,000 he cruised along at two-thirds throttle. He was counting the seconds now, eyes on the compass. The place must be almost under him. He started down, slipping like a wraith through the night.

At 3500 feet he broke through. Orienting himself by the gun-flashes from the Front, he circled back to the northeast. There had been a field close by von Kroeder's drome. He had seen it that morning. Suddenly a cold doubt assailed him. What if the German had moved his outfit into that field after the bombing?

He strained his eyes, but could see nothing as he glided down with a dead engine. At last the almost shapeless bulk of hangars loomed off to his left. He turned away from them, slipping at right angles. There should be a row of trees. Ah! The field was still vacant!

He dropped in with a thud, but the landing-gear still held. The Bristol rolled to a stop. He climbed out, pistol in hand, waiting. There was not a sound, save from the Front. Quickly, he took off his flying-suit, threw it over the motor to keep it warm for a swift start. Then he lifted out the suitcase and tiptoed across the field, away from the German drome.

AFTER TEN MINUTES he found what he sought, one of several ruined peasant houses scattered along a deserted road. Shellfire had reduced most of them to wreckage, but Trent was not interested in the structure that remained above ground. He plunged into a dark

cellar with his suitcase. His flashlight played around the grimy hole. There was a battered table at one side. He opened up the case, took out a mirror, a make-up box with cold cream, rouge, greasepaints, mascara, and the other accessories of an actor's or actress' stage table.

Stripping off his uniform, he set to work. His clean-cut, masculinely handsome features gave way under his deft artistry to a strangely feminine charm and beauty. He worked swiftly but well, stopping now and then to listen for alien footsteps. He had shaved his arms and wrists that afternoon, bleaching them to change their sun-bronzed tint, using a powerful re-agent.

After ten minutes he lifted the flashlight and made a minute inspection of the pretty face that smiled back at him from the mirror. He made a grimace of disgust, then forced himself to apply the last touches of rouge and powder.

"You'll do," he muttered at last to his reflection. "But don't forget you're playing the biggest role you ever had, old fellow."

He had no illusions about his crazy plan. If he had luck, he would win. If not, he would be shot as a spy, once von Kroeder learned who he really was.

"But that's what he's not going to learn—not till we're ready for him," Trent told the face in the mirror.

He slipped the blond wig in place. It changed him instantly into a golden-haired, dark-eyed witch whom not one man in a thousand would ever have failed to notice twice, thrice—and as many more times as was possible.

Trent fastened the silken dress about him, grinning as he recalled the lies he had told the Recreation and Theatre officer at the concentration center where he had obtained the outfit. Forcing his feet into the borrowed pumps, he stood up and threw an expensive evening cape about his shoulders. Inside the pocket he slipped the pistol. With flashlight ready, he tiptoed out of the cellar.

He was halfway to the junction of the deserted road with the thoroughfare that led to the drome when he heard a group of Germans. They passed by, arguing noisily in German. Trent listened, but they were talking of nothing important.

He waited till they had vanished, then went on to the main road. From the direction of the *jagdstaffel* he heard the sound of airplane motors. What was happening? Was his plan to fail after he had gone this far?

In his attention to the sound from the drome, he

failed to hear an automobile approaching behind him, moving along with darkened headlights. Brakes squealed suddenly. A glare from the headlights enveloped him briefly.

Trent stood rooted to the spot, his hand on his pistol inside his cape.

“*Teufel!*” exclaimed a husky German voice. “It is a woman!”

Trent stepped, out of the glare. He saw there was but one man in the car, which bore official insignia of the Imperial Air Corps. The driver was a stolid-looking sergeant. He looked at Trent in stupefaction as he saw the rich attire and beautiful face of what appeared to be a most aristocratic lady.

“*Gott im Himmel!*” he muttered half to himself. Then, “It is not safe out here; you might be hurt—”

“My car became stuck in a ditch up this road,” Trent replied in a carefully pitched musical voice, though his German rolled fluently from his tongue. “My driver is working on it. I am hurrying to see Major von Kroeder.”

The sergeant opened the door. “It would be a pleasure to assist—” he began, with undoubted visions of aiding this most gracious lady and perhaps earning a gold mark for himself. But his dreams ended abruptly. To his amazement, a rocklike fist flashed up from the evening cape, and with astonishing strength and power that fist crashed into his jaw. Whereupon he sank into a state of complete forgetfulness.

TRENT SMILED pleasantly and examined his hand under the glare of the lights to see if it was bruised. Then he switched off the lights, carried the unconscious sergeant well off the road and dumped him into a thicket. Two minutes after this he stopped the car, at a startled sentry’s challenge.

“Tell your *Oberst* that the Countess Lilli von Gelsen has arrived and wishes to see him at once,” Trent directed imperatively.

The sentry blinked, obviously amazed to see a lady of the countess’ importance and beauty arriving alone in an official car.

“But your credentials, countess,” he mumbled. “And your driver—”

“Carry my message to Major von Kroeder as I told you,” Trent said haughtily. “Unless you wish for trouble on your stupid head!”

In a few moments a bowing *Ober-Leutnant* hurried to the side of the car.

“If you will come with me, countess,” he said,

smirking. “You will forgive the sentry—he is new and does not understand.”

Trent concealed a start. What trick was this? Von Kroeder could not have been expecting any Countess von Gelsen, for that name had been picked at random, the first that popped into his mind. Then he saw the *Leutnant’s* curious grin and understood. He had been mistaken for some paramour of the German ace; he remembered now that there were many rumours as to the flying Boche’s *affaires du coeur*.

“The driver became drunk when I stopped for dinner at an inn,” he explained with an air of disgust. “I left him and drove through by myself.”

“The countess is a lady of great courage as well as beauty,” purred the *Leutnant*. He opened the door of a somewhat battered quarters. “If you will wait here, the major will soon join you. Be careful of that farther wall; the cursed Amerikaners surprised us at dawn and all but ruined the staffel. We have been working all day to get it back into shape.”

He departed. Trent made a swift observation. There were two doors to the room. One was the door by which he had entered. The other opened into a shadowy area stretching toward the trees that surrounded the field.

From the direction of the mess came a sudden uproar, then boisterous laughter. Trent was peering out of a window when the door swung open. He turned. His eyes fell on an arrogant, cruel-lipped face, the face of von Kroeder, the Prussian ace. There was a flush on his grim countenance. It was obvious he had been drinking.

He stopped short as his glance rested on Trent. A greedy flame raced into his chill blue eyes as he stared at Trent’s face, then let his glance sweep down the silken gown Trent had donned. He drew his heels together smartly and bowed stiffly from the waist. Trent had sudden desire to smash his pistol butt against that close-cropped, bullet-shaped head, but he refrained.

“I am honored,” said von Kroeder. “But I do not understand. Otto told me—that is, I expected—”

Trent smiled. He raised a roguish finger.

“You need not explain, major. Your reputation has flown far and wide. I only wonder I was able to find you unsurrounded by lovely women.”

“The countess will always find a swift welcome to this field,” von Kroeder said with a smirk. He came closer, staring boldly into Trent’s eyes. Trent’s fingers closed tighter around the pistol in his cape.

"I have had a hard ride," Trent said a little breathlessly. "Perhaps—if you would be so good—some champagne?"

Von Kroeder smiled, eagerly. "But surely you are hungry, too. Why not a dinner for two, here in my quarters? Then you can tell me what it is that brings so charming a lady to this field—in the official car of the Corps commander," he added slyly.

A loud outbreak from the mess gave Trent the cue he had been seeking.

"You dine late—you and your pilots," he said. "Or is there some unusual event taking place?"

Von Kroeder grinned wolfishly. "An event, yes, but not unusual. We have taken a prisoner today—one of the all-wise Yankees who do not believe that bullets will bring them down. We are giving him a dinner before he goes back to prison camp."

"Dinner? But surely you do not dine with one of the filthy American pigs?" said Trent in a horrified tone.

"He does not enjoy it," said the German with a grim laugh. "You should see him now; he does not understand what we say—but he knows what we mean. He is a hairy ape of a fellow. It is quite amusing."

"I must see him!" said Trent. "But not there, in the mess, with all your men. They might not understand," he said softly.

"It is easy. I will have him brought here. He will amuse us while we dine!"

HE WENT to the door, rapped out an order. A minute later, a red-faced, angry American was shoved through the door by two stalwart

Boche soldiers. Trent tensed himself as he saw Thug Wallace's face, still bearing signs of their fistic affray of the day before. If Thug should recognize him, remember that day on the stage and see in him the same Miss Isabelle, the game was up!

But Thug was too angry to see anything but a superciliously smiling German beauty who stood beside his tormentor and watched him through mascara-tipped lashes. He shook off the hands of his guards and glared at von Kroeder.

"Well, what is it now?" he demanded hoarsely.

"Keep your mouth shut, swine," snapped von Kroeder. He turned to the guards. "Remain outside. Let no one in—except the messmen with dinner and wine."

The men went out, but Trent could see the tops of their heads, visible through the window. He tiptoed

over and drew the fabric-cloth shades, smiling at von Kroeder.

"If we are to dine alone—after this uncouth Amerikaner has left," he said significantly. "You do not mind?"

Von Kroeder's piggish blue eyes lit with an unholy fire.

"The countess is most discreet. Perhaps it is as well. After all, the German High Command would not approve a lady's presence—"

"Surely they would forgive their greatest ace," gurgled Trent coyly. "And you forget. I have powerful friends who are bound to me."

"I am sure of that. No one could resist the most lovely countess von Gelsen," the Prussian ace said with an oily grin.

Thug Wallace broke in with an angry scowl, in good plain English.

"Listen here, you stiff-necked baboon! You can sit here and chin with this floozy of yours all night, but I'm tired of playing the monkey for you and your cutthroat."

"The monkey!" shrilled Trent in bubbling merriment. "Then he knows he is an ape, this horrible-looking person?"

He had spoken in English, purposely to attract Thug's attention to the fact that he knew that language, knowing von Kroeder would not consider it unusual for an educated German *Fraulein* to be a linguist.

"Who's an ape?" shouted Thug. "Listen here, sister—that blockhead you're playin' for ain't any beauty prize, either!"

"Quiet, fool!" hissed von Kroeder, his cruel lips flat and bloodless with wrath. "Another outburst, and I will have you flogged!"

"I know damn well you won't try it yourself," Thug muttered sotto voce, but von Kroeder lost this as a mess-man appeared with the champagne.

As the German ace turned toward the messman, Trent slid close to Thug. For a second he was close enough to risk a swift whisper.

"Watch yourself. Be ready to move!"

Thug Wallace jumped. Von Kroeder turned suddenly. Trent pushed Thug angrily away from him.

"Keep your hands off me, you filthy dog!" he said sharply. Then, as von Kroeder bent over the bottle, struggling to pull the cork. Trent took two swift steps, thrust his gun into the German's back.

The messman had gone out. Von Kroeder bent over the bottle, struggling to pull the cork. Trent took two swift steps, thrust his gun into the German's back.

“Stand still!” he rasped. “One little squeak and I’ll kill you!”

VON KROEDER’S FACE went yellow. He lifted his hands, turned in blank amazement and faced Trent. “A spy!” he said hoarsely.

Thug Wallace stood paralyzed, his mouth wide open.

“Get over here, you dumb cluck,” Trent snapped at Thug, and there was nothing of the Countess Lilli’s soft voice in his crisp, low tone. “Stuff something in this bird’s throat so he can’t yip.”

“Hell’s bells, and I pegged you for his floozy,” whispered Thug. He yanked out a dirty handkerchief from his pocket. “Here’s a good gag for him.” He rammed the wadded cloth into the glaring German’s mouth, tore a strip from a napkin on the table and tied the gag in place. “Where do we go from here?”

“There’s a Bristol two-seater in that field east of here,” Trent said swiftly. “We’ll go through this side door—but first tie up von Kroeder. You’ll find some bedding in on his bunk. Grab it!”

“Say, who are you?” Thug demanded as he trussed the Prussian with his own blankets. “I don’t get the hang of this!”

A rapping at the door cut him short. Trent called out in a passable imitation of von Kroeder’s gruff voice, “What is it?”

“The dinner, sir,” came the mess-man’s voice.

“I’ve changed my mind. Take it back. Keep it warm till I send for it.”

Trent waited a second, then seized Thug’s arm in a steel grip.

“Out that other door. Here—take this butcher’s Luger. You may need it.”

He stooped to give a last yank at von Kroeder’s bonds. The German kicked futilely at him. Trent jerked back. The blond wig slipped awry, disclosing his dark hair. The Prussian’s eyes bulged. Thug Wallace took a step forward. A look of amazement and disbelief was on his homely, battered face.

“Holy jumpin’ catfish—Miss Isabelle again!” he blurted out.

For once the name did not rankle in Trent’s breast, for this time there was nothing of scorn, but rather an awed admiration in Thug’s husky voice.

“Yes, you pug-nosed gorilla,” he bit out with a ghost of a grin. “It’s Miss Isabelle. And don’t talk so damn loud or I’ll hang a shiner on your other eye.”

Thug grinned. He seized von Kroeder’s Luger. “Let’s move,” he barked hoarsely.

Together, they faded into the night outside the curtained structure.

“This way,” Trent directed. He had kicked off his pumps and was running in his stocking feet. “We’ll have to go like the devil. If he breaks loose—”

“Look out—there’s a sentry post over this way!” warned Thug. “You go one way—I’ll take the other side.”

They divided. Trent was almost past the spot when he heard a hoarse cry.

“*Halt machen! Donnervetter—*” then a crash and a brief groan. Thug came running through the gloom.

“That bird won’t trouble us any more,” he gasped. “I’ve been wantin’ to sock one of these Krauts all day, since I flopped on their lousy drome.”

The Bristol was still a hundred yards away when a tumult arose behind them. A searchlight flashed across the surface of the ground, silhouetted them, held at at their backs. Rifles cracked viciously. Speeding bullets whined overhead, thudded into the trees beyond them.

“Those Heinies couldn’t hit the backside of a barn,” yelled Thug. “We’re oke unless they get a machine gun on us.”

A LITTLE KNOT OF MEN appeared in the road ahead of them. Boche returning from a near-by village, Trent guessed—probably the same ones he had seen going out. They were drunk, but they were still sane enough to spot two fleeing prisoners. Three of them turned and made for Thug, who was nearest. With a wild war-whoop, Thug launched into battle. A German tottered backward, fell ignominiously on his head. Another dove in low. Thug kicked out and caught him under the chin.

Trent raised his gun as he saw the third man swing a club. The pistol cracked once. The club fell from nerveless hands and the Boche spun onto the ground.

Mercedes engines were roaring back at the *jagdstaffel* when Trent and Thug reached the Bristol.

They raced up into the night, cut across a flickering searchlight beam, and piqued for the lines. Up from the German drome flitted three Fokkers, orange-red in the brief light of the floods. Three black-crossed vultures, and at point rode a ship with a snarling wolf on its sides!

Trent threw the Bristol into a savage bank, flung down on the leaping Boche. Spandau guns crossed flaming streaks with belching Vickers. Trent felt something stab hotly through his shoulder. He bit into his lip with set teeth and kicked hard rudder. The Bristol ate through space, nose guns spurting furiously. The Fokker shook under the blast that chewed into its

tail. A snarling burst from Thug's swivel guns poured through the German pilot's pit.

A dozen machine guns on the drome broke loose in vicious song, as the ground men reached their Spandau nests. The air was instantly filled with a frightful hail of hurtling, red-hot steel. Trent felt the Bristol stagger. He backsticked and pitched up into a dizzy zoom. The ground fell away. They were free of the searchlights—out in the night. They had lost von Kroeder and the other Boche.

THROUGH BLURRED EYES he saw flaring guns below. Archie shells burst around the Bristol too close.

Abruptly, something pounded upon his right wing. As though a gigantic needle stitched its way through the fabric, a line of holes ran swiftly toward his pit.

What a fool he had been! Von Kroeder had kept above him, knowing he would pass above the flaming guns at the Front.

He fought down an impulse to dive. That way was suicide! He rolled into a crazy turn, putting Thug's guns in line with the second plunging ship.

Von Kroeder had skidded out as the Bristol flung onto its back. For a second he lay straight before Trent's blazing Vickers. He slipped off, but recovered and was up in a wild climb. Trent pulled his stick back and dived out of the stall.

The two Fokkers had swept off, to dive in from opposite directions. With a screech of wings, the Bristol snapped into a half-split, as Trent fixed his glassy eyes on a hurtling shape. For a second the two-seater hung in a vertical bank, while four pumping Spandaus gouged through its riddled wings. Then a sudden, dreadful whip that threw Trent up from the stick, though his icy fingers clung to the trips. Von Kroeder's leaping fighter seemed to come up with lightning speed.

It surged into Trent's dazed brain that they would crash. The German had shot past them in his frenzied plunge. Yanking up in his zoom, he had whirled straight into the path of the whipping Bristol.

Two glaring red eyes flamed from the Fokker's nose. Trent stared down into those fiery snouts, with half-unseeing eyes. The Vickers before him had gone white-hot, but he held the triggers down.

Von Kroeder half rose under that bitter touch of death. Then his head fell forward, and the orange Fokker was gone in a fearful plunge to earth.

DOWN INTO THE LIGHTS of the 77th Pursuit field came a bullet-torn Bristol. As it settled to the ground,

it was hastily surrounded by a crowd of mechanics and pilots. Thorpe pushed his way through the excited throng.

"They brought the Bristol back," he heard some one cry. "Wonder who it—good cripes, look!"

Thorpe halted, his jaw hanging. Out of the stolen Bristol's rear seat peered a strangely familiar face. The lights shone on Thug Wallace's fierce visage.

"Hey, you mudhawks," he roared. "Get a stretcher out here, quick!"

He leaned forward and reached down into the front cockpit. When he straightened up, a chorus of amazed voices broke forth. For in his arms Thug had lifted the limp form of a beautiful woman, whose silken dress was stained with blood. The helmet had fallen away from her head, exposing golden hair that gleamed under the field light's glare.

"My God, Thug," Thorpe cried out. "Where did you get this girl?"

"Girl!" Thug yelled. "She ain't no girl! Look here!"

He lifted the blond wig. Thorpe started.

"Trent!" he muttered dazedly.

The man in the silken dress stirred weakly.

"Hold on, you birds," he whispered. The stretcher-bearers stopped. He reached inside a fold of the silken gown, drew out a crumpled paper. He looked up queerly at Thug, then held it out. "Well, I took your advice. I brought my own dress!"

Thug looked at the paper, puzzled.

"I never sent yuh this," he growled. "But I got a good hunch who did." He glared around the crowd. "Where's Randolph?"

"You won't find him," said Thorpe quietly. "He's gone to Blois. I found out it was he who pulled that trick today. He fired the pull-out signal, and blamed it on Trent."

"The dirty rat!" growled Thug. "I'd like to lay my mitts on him."

"You'll have your hands full, getting von Kroeder," Thorpe told him grimly.

Thug stared at him, then laughed. "Not me, I won't," he said. "That wise-heimer got his about twenty minutes back." He looked down at Trent and grinned. "Von Kroeder thought he knew women—but he sure made one big bust tonight."

"You mean Miss Isa—Captain Trent got the butcher?" Thorpe exclaimed.

"Lay off the Isabelle stuff," said Thug. "You bet he got him—and how!"