



DEATH'S LAMENT

by WILLIAM E. BARRETT

*In the crucible of duty-tortured skies was welded the stuff of which fighters are made—
for only in the thunder of red-eyed guns could Angus play his death music for a friend.*

BILLY NORTH had ridden the long vengeance trail from the Colorado Rockies to Fienvillers, France. Fienvillers was trail's end. Vengeance died there helplessly, smothered by the red tape and the cursed efficiency of an army that cared nothing for the individual and his private feuds.

The battle of Arras was in full swing and the guns had been muttering sullenly for days; a mutter that became a roar of hate as one flew to the lines from the comparative quiet of the drome of Fienvillers. The gun fury was nothing to the fury in the heart of Billy North.

Thousands of miles behind him was the ranch and the cattle of his father. A rough sixty miles north

of him lay the muddy flats of Ypres into which his brother had crashed in a D.H. 2 when the war was young, the brother who had been a fool and who had left the States to fight the battles of England. Their father, of course, had been English, one of those Englishmen who pioneered the West. That made no difference. Dick North had no debts to pay England.

But Dick North had died. He had blazed like a comet out of the misty skies of Flanders and his scorched body was rotting somewhere in the mud. Billy North was in Fienvillers and Vengeance was a thin mocking ghost. England had given to Billy North everything but the thing for which he had enlisted. England had given him training and a commission and a ship. The training had been good, the commission was all right—but the ship was a two-seater.

Billy North never forgave England for that. His pleadings and rage had been spent uselessly. He had been met with raised eyebrows and soft phrases, patted on the back and sent to Fienvillers in spite of hell.

He was striding now to the accursed Sopwith Strutter in the same gloomy rage which he had always taken to his patrols. There had been three weeks of them and Billy North, the avenger, had not yet fired his guns at the foe. Twice his observer had had shots but he had never had one.

"The jolly old R.A. raised merry Ned last night." Dink Stebbins, Billy's observer, remarked cheerfully. "Fair parched the line from Queant to Lens. I'm taking a good supply of pencils."

"Pencils!" Billy North spat. "Yes. And you'll need pencils on this damned job. Pencils instead of guns. Isn't that a laugh? Pencils! A bunch of thrice-blasted messenger boys for the guns, that's us. And I enlisted to fight."

His eyes fastened resentfully on the broad back of the "twa Jocks" ahead of him. Angus MacDonald and Jamie MacTavish flew in kilts as did all their proud breed. In the full regalia of their Highland regiment, they went out to do their part in the carrying on of air warfare. Tartans ballooning behind them and sporrans swinging, they matched strides down the road to the hangars. Angus was six foot two and Jamie five foot eight but their shoulders were of equal breadth and they were a match in heart. As was their morning custom, they went to war to the tune of Highland music. Angus was the piper and his "pipes" was a tuppenny whistle. Out of its narrow throat, he coaxed the wild music of the clans.

Come as the winds come when forests are rended;
Come as the waves come when navies are stranded;
Faster come, faster come, faster and faster—

The music was the "Pibroch of Donald the Black." Clan call of the MacDonalds and marching song of the Cameron men; a wild, weird, pulse-stirring call of the Clans. It left Billy North unmoved. He spat again and his rage seemed to center on the swinging, kilted figures ahead of him in the road.

"DAMNED Scotchmen and their skirts," North growled. "That's the kind that should be on this messenger-boy job. They fly out and they fly home when the Germans come after them and they scribble with their damned pencils and call it a good day if they get home without seeing a German. *Bah!*"

The young Englishman beside him raised his eyebrows. Billy North was dead sick of Englishmen who raised eyebrows at him. Dink Stebbins didn't know that.

"After all, old chap," he said gently, "the pencil work and the getting home is the idea, you know. We're an observation squadron and we do a good job of work." His eyes clouded. "A better job for England, probably, than the scouts, if the truth were known."

Billy North's jaw hardened but he set his lips against the words that fought for utterance. No use in talking with this Limey. He wouldn't understand. Who in seven hells cared about doing a job for England and all that gravy? Billy North hadn't come over to do a job for England. He had come over for the same reason that he had climbed a rocky slope after "Breed" Clymer when he was sixteen years old.

He frowned. That had been four years ago. He had crossed an open field and climbed a rocky slope to shoot it out with a liquor-crazed half-breed and he had got his man. A lot of fools had talked then of giving him a reward. He had been told that he had served the law. He hadn't. He had killed the man who had killed his father. Some people never understood. Now they were talking about serving England. England be damned. He had Germans to kill in the name of Dick North who was sleeping in Flanders. And these fools wouldn't let him kill Germans!

The Highlanders had made a precise turn off the road and were striding across the frost-sprinkled edge of the field behind the hangars. The soft purr of engines turning slowly over came down the wind and the whistle shrilled into another tune.

The Campbells are coming, oho, oho;
The Campbells are coming, oho, oho.

With a curse, Billy North cut off the road and took the short cut between the hangars. That military music and the proud stride of two men who imagined themselves a whole regiment got under his skin. "Just as if they were going to war instead of going out to do a pencil job," he muttered.

In his mood even the purr of rotary engines in the despised one and a half Strutters was music of the finest sort as compared to the shrill notes of a tuppenny Scotch whistle.

When his ship bounced down the field and roared off into the sky a few minutes later, he relaxed. There was something about this taking off for the front line that was like nothing else on earth. Or, yes! He had felt like this when he left his horse and started up the slope after Breed Clymer; a feeling that Death walked close behind and that Destiny was clicking the dice for his body. If only he could feel once more as he had felt when the breed went up on his toes and spun— A little sick, that feeling, but something had been satisfied.

The pitted plains that had known the shells of two nations rolled below. In that mess and goo and slime and corruption men were crawling around with the breath of eternity in their faces. Many of those men had no desire to fight Germans. England made them do it. Billy North wanted to fight the blasted Huns and England wouldn't let him. Of all mad business!

The Scots and the plane that held Cross and Richards had a job to do around Cambrai. They swung south at the lines. Billy North touched rudder gently and banked northeast. He and Stebbins were paired with Markwith and Davies for a job along the Queant-Drocourt line. Obs squadrons did not fly big formations in April, 1917. A job that one ship or two could do was done by just that many ships and no more. No seven man formations. Reconnaissance was done without protection—though Sop Strutters had small chance against fast enemy scouts.

BELOW them was the line that last night's barrage had battered. In the other ship, Davies was busy taking pictures while Markwith piloted a steady course. Billy North's plane took no pictures. His observer recorded the German efforts to remedy the damage caused by the guns; the other observer recorded the damage itself. One job took a pencil and keen eyes, the other required a camera. And this was how the Strutters waged war.

"Throttle down, old bean. Got to get all this. Jerry is busy as the ant below there." The evenly modulated voice of Stebbins came through the speaking tube. North throttled. He also snorted. "Old bean!" Out in Colorado he had been called "Tall Shorty". The "Tall" part had been added when he refused to stop growing after earning the "Shorty" title. These polite Englishmen called a man "old bean". Hell!

"If I had a Yank to talk to or one of my own kind. I'll go nuts. I know I'll go nuts. None of these Limies ever saw a mountain or heard a man speak. Oh, dammit."

Slumped in his seat and plying the controls mechanically, Billy paraded over the shell-torn Queant line without interest. There wasn't a Hun scout in the sky. He cast an indifferent glance over the side. His muscles twitched.

A casual A.E.G. two-seater was chugging its way through the wispy cloud off to the left, headed for the Allied lines. As he was about to say something into the mouthpiece, Billy became aware of the quiet voice of Stebbins.

"There's a Hun," he said calmly. "Blighter's got the same job we have but like a lazy swab he starts an hour later."

Billy North slumped into his seat again. There was nothing to say. If there had been a Yank in that rear cockpit, he'd have yelled "Lookit the Hun." Then they'd have chased the A.E.G. The German had a long start and he'd probably get away, but it would be fun. They'd let the observation job go hang and they might get the Hun at that. But these Englishmen! Two planes would let one German go ahead on a job over Allied territory and never even make a pass at him.

"Leave it to the scouts!" Yeah. Billy hadn't seen an English scout in a week.

Up the line to Drocourt. Down the river to Fresney, then south over the battlefield. Khaki and gray-clad figures were in motion at a dozen points below and the guns were wild and hungry in their growling. Archie spat and hissed and barked and hurled his hate. A flight of Fokkers flew high and made no attempt to come down. There was a war but Billy North was not in it.

Where the railroad line dips at Feuchy to the east of observation ridge the war came to the Sop two-seaters. They were flying high to the dropping clouds as a precaution against archie when it happened.

A whip cracked angrily and a shadow swept down like the dropping of Death's signal flag. Billy North

turned his head and kicked rudder. There was a faint cackle in his ears, distinct and piercing to his eardrums for all of its lack of volume. A patter like the falling of hail on a roof—then the shadow passed.

Stebbins slumped in his belt with his arm around the Lewis gun and his shoulders shook with the cough of punctured lungs.

Red rage surged through Billy North and the nose of the Sop Strutter lifted in a climbing turn that took it toward the clouds. He sobbed with the futility of it as he saw the whale-shaped scout that had made the kill. A fast climbing streak, it was disappearing already behind a rolling hedge of vapor. No Sop two-seater ever built could catch that German now.

Billy North tried. He tried till reason cooled the red flame that heated his brain; then he thought of the possibility that his observer lived, that the man could be saved. Like an arrow shot earthward from the bow of some sky-born archer, the Sop Strutter went home.

ARCHIE snarled and thundered. A German machine-gun battery sprayed the empennage of the hurtling ship. Billy North flew on. There was another entry in his vengeance book, another account to be collected on some red judgment day. The bullet that killed his brother had had no name. The bullets that cut Dink Stebbins down were marked with the trademark of Kitschmark, the Hawk of Havrincourt.

Billy had not seen this German work before but there was no doubting him. The man was a tradition in the R.F.C. messes. He had always worked over the grim spade-shaped wood on the Somme Front, d'Havrincourt. He had evidently been moved up for the Arras push. A skulking murderer, this Hun, a man who lurked in the clouds, dived and fired one burst only. He killed or missed in one short, swooping dive. He never stayed to finish his work or to fight it out. No matter how old or decrepit or unfit his foe, Kitschmark would not chance combat. He did not have to. His score was third highest in Germany's tally sheet on the fruits of guerrilla warfare.

"But I'll kill the dirty skulking coyote if all the observation jobs in the calendar go to hell while I'm doing it. I'll kill him. I swear I will."

Billy was swearing between his teeth and the Strutter dropped down past the north outskirts of Doullens and rocked in the updraught from the Canal as it settled flatly toward Fienvillers.

Billy was fishtailing as he came in and he popped out of the cockpit before the dust had settled in

his wake. He reached up to the rear cockpit and his hand turned red with the life that had been in Dink Stebbins. The Englishman leaned on his belt and his monument stared whitely from his work shelf, the notes on German activity along the Drocourt-Queant line.

Willing hands were aiding Billy North now and the limp form was lifted out. Billy turned away and something inside of him shivered. It was not fear; it was upheaval, an inability to sort out his own beliefs. He had criticised this man because he had not been excited about a German going to work over the Allied lines. The man had preferred his damned pencil to his gun. He hadn't wanted to fight, but he had not been afraid to die. He had laid the pencil down and had taken the lead on his feet. Swaggering badmen and cold-eyed marshals of the Old West had done no more. Yet?

Another Strutter rolled in and the two who had been taking pictures joined the solemn little group that watched Stebbins being borne away; then a lurching, badly piloted ship rocketed across the trees to the south and settled toward the drome. It hit, bounced, bounced again and rolled in. A dishevelled Scot leaped from the observer's cockpit and waved the group back. With kilt billowing, big Angus MacDonald swung up to the front cockpit and wrenched at the belt that held a sagging figure in the pilot's seat. With a grunt, he dropped to earth and the squat form of Jamie MacTavish slid over the side into his brawny arms.

Several men rushed forward to offer assistance but the Scot snarled at them and strode out alone with his burden, a towering figure of a man carrying one who weighed nearly as much as himself—and carrying that man as one would carry a child.

"Ye cud do nae guid," he said. "He's dead. Wee Jamie is dead."

There was no Clan music now, no shrilling of a tuppenny whistle. There was only a giant, kilted figure plodding heartsick over the hard earth that two Highlanders had trod a short two hours before.

"MacTavish was dead. Angus piloted the ship home," somebody said in awe-struck tones. "And Angus never took instruction."

Billy North turned away. The Scotchmen hadn't been fighters, either, but one of them had met a fighting man's finish. He shook his shoulders impatiently.

"If they'd fight back, they'd live longer," he growled. "A fighting man wouldn't sit and take it."

Somehow, his words didn't carry conviction to himself. He turned on his heel and headed for quarters. "I'm goin to get out of this mess," he muttered. "I'm through being a messenger-boy for the damned guns."

CHAPTER II WHISTLE OF THE CLANS

CROSS AND RICHARDS never came home from their patrol and there were four names in the black book of the squadron, four places vacant at mess that night. In the fashion of their kind, the Sop pilots and their observers ignored the loss that was theirs and drowned personal feeling in liquor and artificial gaiety. Markwith pounded the dilapidated old French piano. "Navy" Blake sat atop the piano and led the chorus.

There's a red, red ring about the good eye;
And the black eye?
Oh, the black eye's a present from the Huns.
We get little jobs to track
And we sometimes don't get back;
We're an observation squadron and—
The eyesight of the guns.
Oh, assuredly, the eyesight of the guns!"

They roared the last line and Billy North got up and stamped out of the room. To him, it seemed the glorification of their shame that these fellows should do so much whooping over the job of being a moving target. Until he came to France, no one of the North breed had ever been shot at without slinging lead in return. He couldn't understand the kind of men who were content to take it while others shot it out with the foe.

Outside the squadron hut, the night pressed down on him, a starless night of mist and black darkness. The earth under him vibrated to the deep thunder of distant unseen guns. The horizon to the east was streaked with flashes of flame. Here there was quiet of a sort, the quiet of a behind-the-lines berth with an obs squadron. Nothing to do until to-morrow and then, everything to do but fight.

He moved away from the door of the squadron hut through which came the muffled sound of the observer's song. Ten paces toward the hangars, he stopped still and swore softly. Carried weirdly on the

shifting wind of the starless night came the thin wail of a whistle. There was heartbreak in the song that it shrilled to the mist-shrouded moon; heartbreak and a great loneliness and the knowledge of Death.

But oh, there is one whose sad fate I deplore;
Nor house, ha' nor hame in his country has he.
The conflict is past and our name is na more,
There's naught left but sorrow for Scotland and me.

Billy North did not know the words to the "Lament of the MacDonalds," but it made no difference.

That wailing whistle needed no words. It spoke all too plainly without them and, in his present mood, Billy was in no humor to listen to laments. With an impatient snap of his fingers, he strode down the road to the village.

He was halfway to the village before he changed his mind once more. There would only be Limies there, Nieuport pilots who would talk of their fights and their patrols until he went red-eyed listening to them. Reckless of the target that he might make for a Hun bomber, he stopped in the quiet road and lit a cigarette. Then he spun on his heel and started back to headquarters.

"I wonder if the French would take me if I chucked this show," he said thoughtfully. "There is a bunch of Yanks up there with them. Dammit. I could stand it, even in these two-seaters, with a Yank along. A Sop can be made to fight."

The thought steadied him. A man could fight a real fight in a Sop Strutter. Once upon a time, the British had used them for fighting ships. It was the red tape that held him; the knowledge that he would be broken, robbed of his chance to serve further, if he failed to obey orders. But, with a Yank, they could break orders together and who would know?

NORTH was back again almost to the hangars before he was aware suddenly that the whistle no longer shrilled. He stopped. A panted oath came down the wind, the sound of a scuffle and silence.

The blood stirred in his veins. A bit of action now. He broke into a run and as he turned the corner of a small supply shed, he stopped short.

A man lay on the ground with another towering over him. A cloud blew off the face of the moon and he made out the standing figure clearly. It was Angus MacDonald. The Scot, half turned, was looking at him gravely. The man on the ground raised himself on one arm.

"Ah, there, Yank. I say, keep this bloody madman off me, will you?" Billy North recognized one of the men he knew only slightly, a pale-faced observer named Cottiswood. The fellow was getting to his feet.

"And I call you to witness, Yank. He knocked me down. This Scotchman knocked me down."

Angus MacDonald was standing very straight with his arms folded. Billy North frowned. This had all the earmarks of being none of his business. He shrugged.

"Not any of my put-in, Cottiswood. I'm sorry."

Cottiswood was on his feet. His hands were trembling and he was mopping his forehead with his handkerchief. "Oh, I say, old chap. That won't do. You're my witness. If I plead to a court-martial—"

Billy North stiffened. He didn't like that. The thing looked like a private quarrel. If this fellow was going to bring the army into his affairs, Billy North wasn't going to be much help to him willingly. He looked toward the Scot who was standing with his feet wide apart, arms still folded.

"Ye're nae mon enough to face a court-martial."

The Scot's tone was biting. His eyes turned to Billy.

"'Tis nothing to you, Yank. Aboot yer business and leave trouble to them as finds it."

That was Billy North's idea, too, but he didn't like the idea of a kilt-wearing old woman of a Scot telling him so. His jaw set. "I got into this accidentally," he said. "As long as I've got cards, I'll play them. What's it all about?"

"Bravo, Yank." Cottiswood tried to pat him on the back, but Billy shook him off. He hated back-patters. The Scot challenged the white-faced Englishman with his eyes.

"Tell the mon what aboot is it," he challenged.

"Speak up."

The Englishman avoided that direct stare. "Come on, Yank," he said. "We'll have a drink." He reached for Billy's arm and again Billy shook him off. He was disgusted now and when men are disgusted in the country that bred Billy North, men walk out on the show. That is precisely what Billy North did. He wheeled on his heel and walked away. Behind him, he heard the shrill voice of Cottiswood.

"I'll fix you, MacDonald, if I never do another thing. You win this time, but you just wait. Just wait."

His lips curled. It was just like a kid threatening to bring a big brother around. Men didn't fight like that where the Rockies towered. Men didn't let other men shoot at them and sing songs about their luck in escaping the lead. Men didn't fight with pencils and they didn't call each other "old bean."

The world war was a rotten show and Billy was sick of it. As he made his way disgusted to his own quarters by a roundabout route he became aware of the whistle again. It was piping shrilly, a thin wail through the distant thunder of the guns.

THE man who blew the misery of his soul into that tin whistle was as miserably out of place as was Billy North. In his lonely isolation beyond the hangar, Angus MacDonald piped the lament of his Clan on the only instrument he had; the lament for the fallen. Every thin note brought the bold, stocky figure of Jamie MacTavish before the eye of memory.

Jamie had walked with him in the hell of fire that ushered in the first Ypres. Jamie had stopped when the machine guns were pelting the muddy flats to give a drink to a dying Hun. Jamie had carried Alex Patterson on his back for a mile when Alex was hit at Lens. Jamie had been a true comrade and now he was done in.

The lines deepened in Angus MacDonald's face as he recalled the afternoon. There had been one Hun who dived from a cloud, who fired and who darted back to safety. He saw it vividly and the music changed to a wild song of hatred and revenge as he lived it over.

Lead had pelted them and Jamie threw up his hands. In a weird choked whisper, his voice had come through the speaking tube that connected pilot and observer.

"Angus, laddie, I'm done in. Oh, laddie, laddie. Can ye bring it hame again. Can ye noo? Laddie, are ye hearing me. I'm beating oot a sma' fire as I'm dying."

The voice had choked away, then it came back. "It's fair awful, laddie, hoo it burns. The murderin' Hun were using an explooseeve bullet. Will ye no square the score, laddie? It wouldna heal if I lived and it makes hard dying. Aye—"

Choking and sobbing and rattling, the voice had talked to Angus as he fought to bring the ship home with the duplicate controls of the observer's cockpit. The broken phrases were burned on his brain. The German had violated the laws of warfare. He had used phosphorus bullets. Angus had checked later and found where one of them had burned half through a longeron. For many heartbreaking minutes, though, he had listened helplessly while Jamie died in agony. Hard dying, indeed; then the last broken cry.

"I'm going, laddie. I'll see hame na'e mair. Swear it, laddie, if ye live, ye'll pay him in his ain coin. Swear it, laddie. I'll—fight—nae mair—"

At that deathbed in the high blue of the skies over

the Arras Front, Angus had sworn his oath, sworn that he would kill Kitschmark, the hawk of Havrincourt. By the word of a Cameron and by his own clan of the MacDonald, he had sworn it. Now he piped the sorrow of his soul through a tuppenny whistle and the gray mist of night was red in his sight through the deeper mist of his hatred.

On the map of the world the highlands of Scotland are small. The men of those highlands are close to one another because of that. When two men are of one clan—

Angus MacDonald rose wearily to his feet. "My heart is sair," he said. "Such thoughts as I think are a mockery to my God. It willna do. I maun go to my bed."

CHAPTER III DOUR DUTY

MAJOR JOHN GALBREATH, C.O. of the Sop Squadron, sat in his quarters and sipped the drink before him. Outside, his men were still singing, still drinking deep to Death and to his cousins and his aunts. It was as well. They would be grim men to-morrow. The C.O. had seen many such binges. He would see many more. Commanding Officers in obs squadrons were forbidden to fly. He reached out and touched a button. His orderly presented himself.

"Has Lieutenant MacDonald come in yet?"

"No, sir."

"Tell him to come in when you see him."

The C.O. ruffled the papers on his desk, then he set them aside with a sigh. He was sitting with his feet on the desk and a small glass in his hand half an hour later when Angus MacDonald came in.

"Ah, Angus. No end sorry, old chap, to hear about Jamie. Rotten shame."

MacDonald's face was granite. No emotion or feeling broke the mask. "Death is nae more than a guid soldier expects. Jamie was a guid soldier. Nane there were better."

The C.O. shook his shoulders. Damned unfeeling blighters, these Scots! "Yes, he was a good soldier," he said. "You can be proud that you were his friend."

"I am."

Centuries of Clan pride went into that one short sentence. The C.O. did not look up. He was frowning at a paper before him. "The taking off of MacTavish," he said, "leaves us a spot. The C.M.S. tells me that your ship will have to go back to the pool. Lieutenant North lost an observer today. I want you to fly with him."

MacDonald's grim face never changed expression but the lines seemed to deepen in the wind-seamed face. "Aye," he said. The C.O. leaned back. For the first time he seemed to notice that the Scot was standing.

"Dammit, man. You should have grabbed a chair. No need of ceremony around here. We're on active service, you know."

The Scot's lips tightened disapprovingly. "Acteeve service or no," he said, "'Tis nae military to sit down without invitation."

The C.O. cleared his throat noisily and the sound was almost a growl.

"Harummph. Well, MacDonald, about this chap North. He's a Yankee, y'know, and damned if I'm pleased with him."

The Scot was not one to gossip. He sat grimly and uncompromisingly erect. "Is there aught against the mon?"

Major Galbreath frowned. "Well, not exactly."

The Scot rose. "I'll fly with him then," he said grimly. The C.O. snorted and waved his hand.

"Sit down, dammit. I'm not through." The Scot sat down reluctantly and the major leaned forward. "I'm not talking about a man behind his back, MacDonald, so wipe that stern look off that rocky Scotch face of yours. I'm talking to you for the lad's good and for your own—and for the good of the squadron."

Angus sat straight. "I'll listen," he said.

The C.O. tossed a neat drink and pushed the bottle across the table. For the moment he almost wished that Scotland and America were joined up with the Germans. "This lad North," he said, "has a hate on the service. The pool sent him out on two-seaters when he wanted to fly scouts. He's never got over it."

"A mon's duty is duty whether on scouts or no," he said. The C.O. nodded.

"Exactly the point. I'm picking you to fly with him; not only because of the unfortunate circumstances connected with loss through death, but because I need a solid man I can depend on in back of that youngster."

MACDONALD'S eyes were level and his expression unchanging, but the C.O. was suddenly possessed of a friendlier feeling for Scotland. A man who took duty so seriously was good to have around once in a while.

"I'm going to ask your pledge, MacDonald, that you will not let this youngster fly pursuit in an observation plane. He's on the verge of it. I want you to hold him in check, lean on him and keep him reminded of the fact that his duty is not to fight, but to get information."

Angus MacDonald still sat straight but there was a tightening about his mouth and he seemed to be listening to something besides the voice of the C.O.—the rattling voice of a dying man coming down a tube, perhaps. His lips moved.

"A mon that canna do his duty ha' nae right to fly," the words came hard as though the speaker were struggling within himself. The CO. nodded.

"Right! It's your duty to get the information that we are charged to get. I'm depending on you to get it in spite of anything and everything, including your pilot. It's a trust, MacDonald, and I know that I can depend on you. We'll leave the fighting to the scouts and we'll fight only when attacked and when it is necessary to protect ourselves. Am I understood?"

Angus rose stiffly. "Aye!" he said. "Ye can depend on it."

He was gone with a precise "about" and the military tread of a highlander. Outside, however, the hardness went from his face and his bewildered eyes stared into the shadows.

"Wee, Jamie," he said, "what's to do? There's the matter of duty, lad, and an oath of the Clan. There's ain agin the ither and a mad Yankee in the bargain."

On the eastern horizon flashes of flame tore the black curtain of the sky and the ground trembled softly under the distant shock. MacDonald's shoulders squared. There was a war. Just as he and Jamie had marched for the whole battalion of those who slept in Flanders, so he had to march alone for Jamie and himself.

"What a mon should do we'll do," he said grimly, "as it's given a mon to understand the likes of it."

Behind him, Major Galbreath was setting himself to another interview. No stiff-necked fencing with words here, no nice distinctions of military etiquette and abstractions on duty. Billy North was facing the C.O. and Billy North's eyes were hot.

"North, I'm posting you to fly with Lieutenant MacDonald."

"I won't fly with him." Billy's jaw set hard. The C.O. straightened.

"Yes, you will. A refusal on your part would get you a speedy court-martial. The least that would happen to you is the loss of your buttons and your stripes."

"I'd love it." Billy North's lips curled back. "Then,

I'd go up to the French where I'd get a chance to do what I came over to do—fight."

The C.O. made an impatient gesture. "You'd be a foot-slogging private soldier and you'd go into a filthy trench with the Legion," he said. "That is, if you got in with the French. You wouldn't. If we fire you, you'll go back to America and you'll have hell's own time arranging your passports. My word on it."

GALBREATH was a grim man now and Billy North was trained to know when a man was bluffing. This one wasn't. The C.O. pushed his bottle over as he had with the Scot.

"Some men, North, would get nasty over the attitude you're taking. I want to be your friend. Have a drink and let's look at this sanely."

Billy pushed the bottle away. "I'll look at it sanely enough," he said. The C.O. shrugged.

"You're in an observation squadron," he said, "and I didn't put you here. You came to me and I have to use you, just as I have to use these ships when I'd like better ones. You're making my job hard and you're not helping yourself."

There was force to that and it was language that Billy North could understand. A puncher who didn't do his share made extra work for every man in the spread. He nodded. "I guess I was wrong to take it out on you," he said, "but I'm over here because my brother died for England. I have a right to the vengeance I enlisted for."

The major looked at his bottle. He'd seen the brothers and the sons of many men go. It was a deep subject. "The whole army is engaged in the job of avenging its dead," he said. "Everybody who does his share, shares in the vengeance."

Billy North's eyes were hot again and the major shifted fast. He saw that the idea of group vengeance wasn't going to go over. "North," he said, "I'll make a bargain with you. Help me to carry out the orders that I get from higher up. Save me the trouble of worrying about you and about the ships that you take out. Do a job and let the vengeance wait. If you do, I'll pledge my word that, the first chance I get, I'll recommend you for duty on scouts. Fair enough?"

Billy North stared, then he came to his feet. "Okay," he said, "that's all I want from England—a ship that I can fight in. I'll take your bookkeepers over the line for you and I'll bring them back. I'll do anything you ask except march in a damned parade to my ship with that Scotchman."

The C.O. smiled wearily. "You don't have to do that, North," he said, "but don't call the lads 'bookkeepers'. They're better fighters than you know, even if they never fire a shot."

Billy North whitened. He had forgotten Dink Stebbins who laid down his pencil and coughed his life away over the Lewis that protected Billy's back. An apology would do no good now and he wouldn't know how to make one anyway.

"I'll do my best," he said. "And—thanks."

He was gone and the C.O. tilted the bottle. He didn't lower it till the tears came. "I wonder," he said, "if there's any poor suffering fool in the trenches who'd like my bloody job."

THE dawn was clear and cold and the rumbling thunder of the guns was closer than it had been in weeks. Billy North walked to the waiting ships with his head bowed, hands thrust deep in his thigh pockets of his flying suit. Ahead of him marched Angus MacDonald.

Head thrown back to the stiff breeze of the morning, sporran swinging with each long stride, the Scot marched to his own music. The swelling notes of "Donald, the Black" wailed on the wind and the tartan billowed. This one man was the regiment that had marched to the first Ypres, he was two men who had marched often to a waiting ship, he was Clan MacDonald answering the call of duty. Billy North didn't realize all this, but something stirred in him as the shrill music of the tuppenny whistle floated and tossed in the wind. His hands left his pockets and unconsciously he straightened.

A hand clutched his arm, slipped up to his shoulder. He knew who it was without turning around and he disliked being pawed. He shook himself impatiently.

"I say, Yank, that's no end of a silly show that the Jock is putting on, what?"

Billy North turned. He didn't like the Scot, but he liked Paul Cottiswood less. "He walks by himself like a soldier," he said bluntly.

The Englishman's hand dropped from Billy North's shoulder, but in another minute, he had an elbow grip while he leaned forward confidentially. "I say," he whispered, "have you seen him throw anything over when he flies?"

Billy North frowned. "What do you mean, throw anything over?"

The Englishman looked mysterious. He shrugged

his thin shoulders. "You'll see what I mean," he said. "Watch him."

He sidled off and Billy North frowned. In a few minutes he had forgotten the incident in the activity of pre-patrol check-ups. They were to patrol south of the district where he had lost his observer. Carefully he checked the map with the Scot. They would cross over shell-battered Croiselles and dip south to the hilly region around Hendecourt where the Hun was reputed to be up to tricks. Good enough.

As he was putting his map into his case, he became suddenly aware of what Angus MacDonald was doing. He stopped short and stared. With the utmost gravity, the Scotchman was stacking a half dozen assorted bottles in the cockpit.

"What in hell?"

The Scot looked up and a red flush of embarrassment overspread his wind-toughened cheeks. "They're my wee bombs," he said.

"Bombs?" Billy North's face lighted with interest. He looked more closely, "Shucks! They're empty." He looked again at the embarrassed Scot. "What do you mean, bombs?"

Angus shrugged. "They've na got explosive but they would fair ruin the head they landed on," he said soberly.

Billy North was fascinated. So the Scot was a Hun hater. Maybe he'd been wronging the kiltie. Maybe this bare-legged jasper was really a fighting man. He stuck out his hand. "Scotty," he said, "we're going to get along. I'd rather kill Huns than report on them myself."

Angus half extended his hand and then he remembered. He was pledged not to encourage this Yank in his folly. He was to set an example. He had been false to his trust in allowing the lad to see his own personal vent for pent-up feeling. His hand dropped.

"War is no a perrr-sonal matter," he said grimly. "The Guid Book says 'Rejoice not over the enemy that is dead. Remember that we die all'"

Billy North stepped back as though he had been struck. For a moment he stood tense, then he shrugged and turned his back. Angus sighed and climbed stiffly into the observer's cockpit. A wall had gone up between the two men that neither would scale willingly.

CHAPTER IV "WE DIE ALL"

IN SILENCE THEY TOOK OFF and in silence they crossed the blazing lines. Billy zigzagged through the destructive archie blossoms and climbed steadily toward the southeast and the objective over Hendecourt. Angus sat glumly in his office, his eyes alert for surprise in the sky and for activity on the earth below.

German troops choked the road behind Fontaines-Croiselles and the Scot became alert. His hand dipped into the cockpit and came up with one of the bottles. It whistled over the side. Billy North turned and his eyes widened as he followed the course of the bottle downward. A feeble thing of itself, it made a noise like a fiend kicked out of hell. The wind brushing past the open neck produced a shriek that rose above the roar of the engine; a long wailing cry from the air that produced pandemonium below on the road.

Billy North grinned. "Give 'em hell!" he said. His grievances for the moment forgotten, he flew with better spirit. From time to time, the Scot hurled another bottle over side. Such little things livened up the patrol. For the first half, it needed such livening up; then the scene changed.

In sight of Queant a tight flight of Halberstadt scouts pushed through the high clouds and dropped down on a long slant. "Noo, Laddie. Keep your head. They're noo close enough to do hurt. Fast as ye can and straight ahead."

The Scot's rolling voice came through the tube and Billy's teeth clicked. He had figured those scouts as accurately as Angus had. He didn't need any damned one wing to tell him how to pilot his ship. For the moment, he was tempted to turn and do battle just to show the Scot. Cool reason, however, took control. He had promised to fly an observation job. He'd keep faith with the C.O.

Full out he raced before the scouts and they dropped steadily back, giving up the chase before it was fairly begun. Billy was aware of a sense of disappointment.

"This is a good bus, this Sop," he growled. "If I could only do what I wanted to do with it, there would be a few surprised Huns in this country." They were over Queant now and archie was bracketing

them. Angus was making his pencil fly as he marked corrections on his map and jotted down surmises and deductions subject to future verification. Looking over the side, even Billy was impressed with the amount of traffic on the roads. Such mass movement was unusual in daytime. His blood stirred. There was something in the wind. Angus would have something to report that would excite H.Q. this time.

Off to his right, he saw the broad flat surface of a German drome. Five Albatross scouts were taking off, probably excited by the presence of the Sop. Billy shot a glance at his altimeter. It would take ten or twelve minutes for the Germans to get up to him. He wouldn't be waiting around when they got up. He'd be farther away from them than he had been from the Halberstadts.

He kicked around to the left and raced down the line as Angus signaled that all was well and that he'd got all the dope he needed. The German drome dropped behind. Ahead of him, clouds dipped low. He curved away and then lightning struck.

Two whale-shaped Germans came out of the clouds like shells from the red mouths of the guns. Darting messengers of Destruction, they roared down, bounced off the end of their dive and came up for the blind underside. Angus leaped to the Lewis and the shadow of one grim bird of prey fell momentarily across Billy's cockpit. Tracers bit the sky off to the left. Billy laughed.

"ROTTENEST shot in the world, that Hun." Billy's blood was racing in his veins now and his heart was pounding. He warmed the Vickers and dropped one wing toward the earth. He'd give that fellow below a thin target.

The Hun was coming up in a wild zoom. The voice of Angus came from the tube. "Hold her steady, laddie. Hold—"

The Lewis spat. Billy threw a look backward over his shoulder and his heart seemed to roll over. The German was standing on his tail, his prop fruitlessly biting at the air. Even as Billy looked back, the Mercedes' weighted nose whipped down and the sad song of whistling wires rose above the engine roar.

That was one Hun who would fight no more. But there was another.

Billy looked up. He was kicking around to meet the other as the German dived. With one half-hearted burst that missed as widely as his first, the German veered off and zoomed for the clouds. It was over and a Sop messenger ship had licked two scouts.

Then it was that he saw the insignia of the Hun plane. He cursed and made a futile effort to catch the fleeing Albatross. He might have known, from the feeble, cowardly feint that the man had made once he saw his enemy resisting, that it could be only one Hun out of all the Hun crew, Kitschmark, the Hawk of Havrincourt!

Revenge for the dead Stebbins had been within reach and he hadn't known soon enough. Kitschmark did not usually team with another Hun in his hunts. Billy North swore.

"We might have got him in the time it took us to get the wrong Hun," he said. In his blind rage, he remembered the Scotchman's words as they took off. He snarled into the mouthpiece.

"How about that 'we die all' business now? Crying your eyes out over downing that damned Hun?"

Angus made no answer. He, too, had seen those black wings and he had a bitter score with the Hawk of Havrincourt. He was listening now to another voice; the voice of a dying Scot who went out in the agony of explosive bullets. His jaw was hard and the lines deep in his face. Some day there would be a loophole in the ring of duty that surrounded him and when that day came, he would break through and the Hawk of Havrincourt would feel his lead.

Till then? "Wee Jamie," he whispered, "bide a wee. I ha'e na failed ye, laddie. Ye wouldna be less a mon if ye had the trust that they gie to me.

In the front cockpit, Billy North was gloomily occupied with the controls. MacDonald's victory over the Hun would have been a cheering thing if Kitschmark had not been so close. It meant less than nothing now that the other had escaped.

He kicked the Sop toward home. His petrol was low and if he was to keep his pledge to Galbreath and do a good job for observation he had to get his observer home in a hurry. He knew that they were carrying news for the guns to-day.

The lines! Billy dropped his nose and raced toward Croiselles. Suddenly he stiffened in the cockpit. Three tiny specks off to the right had become planes—more than planes, a scene of tragedy.

Hopelessly trapped by two fast German scouts, a lumbering, unwieldy R.E.8 was weaving desperately in a struggle to survive. Around and about the ancient observation ship, the two Germans darted and zoomed. The Eight was putting up a good show but the end was inevitable. It had no chance whatever. With a growl, Billy kicked rudder.

THEY had licked two Albatrosses already to-day. They could do it again, Billy was telling himself. And this time they would have the help of the R.E. 8. A harsh voice barked through the tube.

"Na, na, laddie. 'Tis nane of yer duty. Gae hame!"

"Go to hell. Think I'll let those birds be murdered?"

Billy was already cutting across the long stretch of sky. The frantic voice of MacDonald came to him. "Nay, lad. 'Tis the lives o' thousands o' guid lads that hangs on oor information. Stay oot."

Billy never swerved and his jaw set hard. Something jabbed hard in his back and he turned half around. The Scot was holding a service pistol in his back.

"Back!" he shouted. "Ye cannot. They're starting oot. We've got information. I'll shoot—"

Billy knew that the man would. He knew that the Scot had his own ideas of duty and that the man would not hesitate to shoot him and bring the ship in himself for the sake of the damned information. He hesitated, then his jaw squared and he turned to the controls again.

The R.E.8 was spinning down in flames.

The hot breath of Rage blew across him so strongly in that minute that he turned sick with the heat of it. A pillar of flame was rising behind the R.E. and he could almost hear the shriek of the wires as that fiery funeral train raced earthward. Through the horror mist in his brain, he was conscious of a parallel. There had been the bottles of Angus MacDonald. They had gone shrieking to the earth, too, just as these men did. And these men were empty bottles. The stopper had been pulled and the life had run out of them like fluid.

Empty bottles shrieking down the sky!

Nose down, Billy thundered across the lines and raced for the drome by the Canal. He skimmed over the trees and slapped his nose down toward the spreading brown expanse of the field. His wheels hit and he bounced slightly; then he was in. The ship was still quivering when he vaulted from the cockpit, face grim and shadowed, eyes aflame. He swung on Angus.

"You murdering son of a horse thief!" he growled. "Get out of that ship! You killed those boys out there, damn you." He spat and scraped the ground with his foot. "And you stuck a gun on me, you—"

Angus MacDonald slid down, hand upraised. There was no fear in his face, only shocked surprise. "Whist!" he said. "Wud ye scandalize the enlisted men? 'Tis na military for officers to—"

"To hell with what's military' I'll show you whether any damned Scotchman anywhere can—"

Angus was very straight against the plane. "If it's satisfaction ye want," he said, "I'll meet ye to-night at eight ayant hangar noomber four by th' side o' the south road."

The mechanics were trotting out to take charge of the plane and the C.O. was standing on the line. Billy North clenched his hands helplessly, his eyes still aflame. "Be there then," he said.

The Scot made no answer. He whirled in a precise parade-ground turn and strode straight and tall across the field. He was no longer Angus MacDonald with a fight to settle. He was Lieutenant Angus MacDonald who bore important information.

That was something that Billy North would never understand. Billy was always one person. Angus MacDonald was never less than two individuals.

IT RAINED that night. The dam of the heavens broke and uncharted oceans poured from the clouds. Across the western sky, jagged lightning played as though the gods were mocking the flaming arcs of the guns in the east. Nature's cannonade rumbled in the south and east; man's guns roared in the north and west.

Billy North walked through the torrent with his head down and the wind beating against him. As he turned the corner beyond Hangar Number Four, he saw a tall, erect figure outlined against the lightning-split sky. He quickened his step and the Scot threw aside his ulster at his approach.

"Ye ready?"

"Yes."

Billy dropped his slicker and stepped forward. The Scot raised his clumsy guard and Billy crouched low. In a pantherish charge, he came in. His left flashed and as the Scot covered, a whipping right crossed to the bony jaw and Angus sprawled in the slippery mud.

He was up in a flash and his charge was a thing of fury. Outweighing Billy by thirty good pounds, he was not to be turned aside by science nor skill. His long arms lashed out in looping arcs and Billy gave ground. His left came in short to the Scots' body as he retreated, looped over a mad right and flicked the grim jaw, stabbed twice to the mouth. The Scot came on. Billy's right poised waist high. The left stabbed again. Then the right came up.

It came as an Albatross comes to a two-seater, a fast, zooming thing of destruction. Angus was coming into it as it hit and it almost tore him apart. With a gasp, the fight went out of him and he clutched wildly. The

flailing arms, flailing no longer, locked around Billy North's shoulders and the two men went down to the mud and the water of the field.

In vain, Billy tried to fight back to his feet. The mud gave no purchase for a grip and the Scot's weight bore him down. Panting heavily, the Scot was slugging now; short, punishing blows for which Billy had no guard. The American squirmed under them and twisted. The rain was beating on them and they rolled and slugged and wrestled; then a bit of loose earth gave and they went down into the ditch that separated field and road.

It was filled with water, that ditch, and Billy was underneath. So sudden was the fall that he had no warning. His lungs filled with water and he gasped, sputtered and felt the world going black before his eyes. The thunder and the distant rumble of the guns became a soft thumping of piano keys and he was slipping—slipping—

He was scarcely aware of the lifting of weight from his body, nor did he have any distinct impression of being pulled out of the water. He only knew that presently the guns came back in their deep bass and that the thunder was playing heavily to the south. He was back in a world of sound and sight—combat.

He struggled to his feet and wiped the back of his hand across his eyes. His hair was wet and the water streamed down his face and his neck in rivers. It was cold and it revived him. He blinked as lightning ripped the sky open.

Angus MacDonald was waiting for him. A tall, grim figure that stood erect against the fury of the storm.

CHAPTER V SOP WAKE

BILLY NORTH GOT UP. He felt strangely weak but he knew what had happened. He would have drowned with the weight of his opponent on him. Angus had pulled him out and waited for him to recover. His lips felt stiff, but he shook his head and power came back to his vocal chords.

"Thanks!" he said. It was the first word that either man had spoken since the fight started. He was moving in as he said it and the Scot made no answer. Angus could not have answered in a sentence. He would have had to explain why a man deserves no thanks for

doing an inescapable duty. He had no time for such explanations yet his mind worked like that. He said nothing and Billy North charged.

It was a more savage Billy North now; a man who was traveling on his last reserve, the last atom of power. The water had taken a lot from him and he knew it. His petrol was low. He had to finish this fight quickly.

He was weaving in low, both hands waist level. No more did the left hand jab and flick. The Scot swung.

It was a roundhouse swing that would have taken Billy's head off. Billy ducked under it and his head was scarcely higher than his waist, eyes still fixed on his foe. The left came up. It came with thunder and lightning in it and Angus went back on his heels. The right came over and that was, "horse, foot and guns."

Angus went down on his face like a man who has met an angry machine gun in full blast. He lay there with the stillness of death on him and Billy North panted above him. A referee could have counted several tens. There was no referee but lightning flashed twice. Then the Scot started slowly up.

Wabbling for a second, he balanced. Billy let him gain full balance, then he came again and the Scot dived instead of striking out. He dived and his long arms locked again in a wrestler's grip. Fighting as jungle beasts fight, the two men rolled again in the thick, sticky mud. Hands slipped from bodies that were too slimy to grip, fists lashed madly and they pushed and swayed shoulder to shoulder. Billy fought grimly erect and again the Scot launched himself in a dive.

Billy North met this one with a slashing uppercut and Angus stopped in his tracks. Left. Right. Left.

Billy North was coming in slugging. All that he had left of reserve and fury and of power went into blow after blow of swift and sudden fury. Like a brute standing in the slaughterhouse, Angus MacDonald took it. He took it with the breath pulled into his lungs and his head down; then as Billy's strength oozed and his breath shortened, the Scotchman dived again.

There was a split second then when Billy knew that he stood on the thin line that separates victory from defeat. If he crashed again to the ground, the Scot would finish him. The Highlander was far the better man in the wrestling, rolling, slugging game that they played on the ground. Weight counted there.

A split second! One mud-caked figure dived and the other, gasping and spent, called up his reserves. Science, skill and footwork were empty dreams on

this muddy field. Punishment, endurance; on these hung victory. His right hand came from his waist like a weighted shaft.

The big body of the Scot stopped in mid dive. It seemed to hang for minutes in the air unsupported. Then it crashed as an axed tree crashes and the thunder boomed from some hidden vault in the sky.

In the stillness that followed that terrific last clap of thunder, a stillness in which even the distant guns were smothered, Billy rocked on his feet and sucked in great draughts of the moisture-filled air. If the Scot got up, could he go on? He didn't know. He wanted to lie down beside the Scotchman in the mud and call it Armistice.

He didn't surrender to impulse. A fierce pride held him erect and the Scot lay where he fell. For time that could not be reckoned, Billy stood thus, then he bent over and lifted the other man's face out of the mud, rolling him on his back and mopping the thick black soil from the battered features with a dripping handkerchief.

SLOWLY, the Scot's eyes blinked open. He stared for a long minute, then struggled slowly up. Billy stepped back and the Scot fought for balance. He was a long time getting that balance and when he did he paid no attention to Billy. He weaved unsteadily across the ooze and stooped over his soggy ulster. Billy's muscles relaxed.

It was over and he had won. Winded and spent, with his wet clothes clinging to him and the cold wind chilling his flesh, he had a moment of doubt. He wondered what he had won; then he shook himself impatiently. That made no difference. He had had to thrash that Scot. The dirty coyote had kept him from saving two poor lads who cooked to death, had pulled a gun on him.

With a growl, he turned on his heel and stalked back to quarters.

Behind him, Angus struggled slowly into the wet ulster. He was engaging in no thoughts of why he had lost. Angus did not consider that he had lost. In his code, he could only lose by not fighting. In fighting and in keeping on fighting as long as strength remained in him, he had done all that a man could do. Results didn't matter. A man did his best and nothing remained to be done.

He turned toward quarters and sloshed glumly along through the rain. Only about thirty yards of actual distance separated the two men, but they were as far apart as the poles.

Billy was first in. A wide-eyed orderly looked at his mud-caked clothes in amazement, but Billy's grim face did not encourage comments. The man swallowed hard. "The major is waiting for you, sir. He had several of the officers in his quarters. It's important, he says." The man was awed by Billy's appearance and evidently afraid that Billy would refuse to come.

"I'll be there in a few minutes."

Billy strode off to his quarters and the door slammed behind him as the other door opened to admit Angus MacDonald. They reached the C.O.'s office at the same time fifteen minutes later.

The C.O. was in a jovial mood. He sat with his feet on his desk and with a brace of bottles in handy reach of any one who was so inclined. There was a full glass at his elbow. It had been full for over an hour, but never long with the same fluid.

At sight of Billy's bruised and skinned countenance, his eyes widened. On the point of commenting, he saw Angus. Angus, despite careful application of court plaster, looked worse than Billy. Major Galbreath let his remark die in the morning. He was no fool, the major, and there are some things that a commanding officer does better to ignore.

"We're holding a wake, gentlemen," he said, "and you two are the last of the mourners to appear."

"A wake?" Billy looked around. There were six pilots, counting himself, in the room and five observers including Angus MacDonald. The C.O. was lifting another drink.

"Right!" he said. "A wake. These other gentlemen didn't know that it was a wake until you came in. I was saving the announcement until I could make it *en masse*."

Billy North frowned. He suspected some joke at the expense of himself and his late opponent. The tense expressions on the other men in the room, however, told him that he was wrong. The C.O., too, was suddenly grave.

"Gentlemen," he said, "Lieutenants North and MacDonald brought back some rather exciting information today. From their report, it would seem that the Germans are shifting their plan of attack."

Billy North felt a quickening of interest. That reconnaissance of theirs had been important, then. And evidently they were the only ones who got back from that district. The C.O. did not mention any report but theirs. He looked at Angus. The Scotty was sitting stoically calm in the corner.

He had a big black pipe between his teeth and his eyes were fixed on the major.

The C.O. leaned forward. "Gentlemen, the Hun sometimes bluffs a concentration close to the line. It is too costly a job to carry a bluff deep into his own territory."

THE C.O. paused, then his voice swept on. "Either the Hun has shifted his attack or he hasn't. It will take a deep reconnaissance to find out for sure. The lives of thousands of men depend upon the verification or disproof of that shift. The job has been given to us."

His eyes were ranging the small group of men before him. Billy North hardly saw him. Suppose he and Angus had not come back. Suppose they had gone to the rescue of the R.E.8 and the Huns had shot them down? Maybe H.Q. would have no word of that shift. Thousands of lives! Scotty had said that, too, he remembered.

Major Galbreath leaned backward in his chair. "I have tentatively chosen you gentlemen present here tonight for that job to-morrow morning. Do you realize what it means to travel to the limit of petrol over territory that holds a Hun secret?"

Markwith was sitting in the front row. He threw a casual look around, then back to the C.O. "It jolly well means that most of us will be some place else to-morrow night."

The C.O. nodded gravely. "Exactly. In recognition of that fact, I'm violating a rule of the Nabobs. I'm flying with you."

Angus MacDonald lowered his pipe. "Ye ha'e na right," he said bluntly. "'Tis a guid rule. Ye're worth more on yer job. Yon is our duty and ye ha'e none o' it."

Major Galbreath's lips tightened. "I'm commanding here, MacDonald, and I know my duty. I go where I send men when sending them means what it means this trip."

His eyes ranged the tense faces before him. "As I said, I've only selected you gentlemen tentatively. This is a volunteer job. Any or all of you are at liberty to withdraw if you want to. I will think none the less of you nor will any one else. Every man here has already proven his courage. Your courage is not on trial. Any resignations?"

The tense silence of the room was a tangible thing. It pressed down on every man there and made breathing difficult. Billy North felt his heart kicking a pulse in his throat. Then one man rose. It was Paul Cottiswood, very pale now and with hunted, desperate eyes.

"I—I—wish you'd excuse me, sir." He didn't look at the other men, but he almost pleaded with the commander. A shadow of disappointment crossed the major's face.

"Why?" he asked. There was ice in his voice despite an obvious effort to be natural and unprejudiced.

Billy North growled. He did not like Paul Cottiswood, but he hailed from country where a man backed a statement to the very mouth of hell and where a man who didn't was worse than any coward. He got slowly to his feet.

Paul Cottiswood was groping futilely, his hand pawing at the air as though seeking support. "I—I—" he mouthed.

"You don't have to answer that, Cottiswood." Billy North was on his feet now and his voice cracked like a pistol shot in the room. The C.O. looked at him startled and every eye in the room turned toward him.

"Aren't you out of order, North?" Major Galbreath's face was flushed.

"Not by a damned sight. If you'd asked for volunteers and Cottiswood didn't volunteer, it would have been all right. You just told us that nobody's courage was on trial. Okay. Any man here, then, can drop out of the burial party without apology and without answering any damned questions."

The red deepened in the C.O.'s face. "I did not question his right to go," he said stiffly. "I'm sticking to my original proposition. That goes for you, too, North if you care to drop out."

A TINY spark danced in Billy North's eyes, flickered and went out. He laughed shortly and there was real amusement in the laugh. "If I didn't want to go, I'd do just as Cottiswood did," he said, "and I wouldn't be yellow enough to pretend I wanted to go when I didn't." His mouth hardened. "I'd make it rough, too, for anybody that made any cracks about my dropping out. I'll do the same thing for Cottiswood. The first man that throws to-night up to him has to take me on, too."

The major was pouring a drink into his glass. He looked up and nodded in friendly fashion to the trembling Cottiswood. "All right, old man," he said. "North has spoken for all of us and I thank him for doing so."

North sank slowly back into his seat and Paul Cottiswood turned to the door. There were tears in his eyes and it made Billy squirm to see the look that the man gave him. He disliked the pawing son of a such, but what the hell?

The major was talking and he sat back. The discussion now was on routes to be flown and details of ground indications to be watched for. With that cleared up, the major looked gravely at his men. "This is the most important thing," he said. "You must fly as straight as possible to your objectives. Fight only when necessary to defend yourselves and if your observer gets the data required, for God's sake get back with it on a beeline. Don't stop or detour or delay for anything under Heaven. The fate of the British army may be riding your ship. Only your ship may get back. A toast, gentlemen. The King!"

They rose and drank; then the party broke up and the men drifted out. Angus paused as he approached the door at a level with Billy North.

"That were a well spoken bit, laddie," he said. "Right is right and a mon that makes a bargain must hang on it, be it so that it has horns."

He was gone and Billy North stopped short in the doorway. It came to him suddenly that he had no hatred of this Scot. The man played his cards as he saw them. He stepped forward.

"MacDonald!"

The Scot turned. Billy's shoulders squared. "I took advantage of you with that fight," he said. "I could box and you couldn't. I'm sorry."

It was a hard speech for Billy North and the first of its kind that he had ever made. The Scot nodded. "I wasna compelled to accept the challenge," he said. "A mon digs the pits he falls into. Ye didna dig mine. Ye speak as ye fight, lad, and that's compliment enow for any mon."

He wheeled and was gone. As Billy North stood hesitant with his eyes on the broad back, he was conscious of some one behind him. He turned to meet the C.O.'s eyes.

"North." Major Galbreath cleared his throat noisily. "You're the most discontented, fire-eating, troublesome pilot I've ever had in a squadron, but dammit all, I like you."

Billy North grinned. "Thanks," he said. "If you'd talk like that all the time, you mightn't have so much trouble."

"I'd have trouble with you anyway. If I cussed you and meant it while I was cussing you, I'd probably have to court-martial you for assault on a superior officer. But never mind. The point is that to-morrow is your last big observation job."

Billy North nodded. "I suspected that when you outlined the job."

"I didn't mean it that way. I'm in hopes that we will, most of us, come back. I mean that I'll get you a transfer to pursuit if you come back with the information to-morrow."

Billy North stiffened. "A promise?" he said.

"Righto. And I keep my promises even if you do not think so."

Billy North stuck out his hand. "I'll bring Angus back with the information," he said, "if I have to fly through Hell, Heaven and Purgatory to do it."

Major Galbreath smiled. "I hope you do," he said softly.

CHAPTER VI WHEN PENCILS KILL

THE WORDS OF THE SONG that he had despised kept running through Billy North's brain as he stamped out to his ship in the gray of morning. Last night's storm had passed but the road and the field showed the effects. Where there were no puddles there was thick, goeey mud.

We get little jobs to track,
And we sometimes don't come back
We're an observation squadron—and—
The eyesight of the guns.

This bunch of fellows was going to take off from that treacherous field and fly the long trail that had no returning for some of them. A vast, intangible sense of responsibility was sending them out. Unlike the scout that goes out for victories in the bag or the soldier who goes over the top to fight, this bunch was flying into fury without a thought of fighting. Targets, all!

Up ahead strode the lone Scot. As alone as Billy North, he played gallantly on his tin whistle and marched like a regiment. The wild music of the highlands whirled in the light morning breeze and an invisible company dropped into step behind him. Billy felt it without being able to put it in words. A man who played music like that was never alone. The dead would march to it if there were no one else.

But he hadn't liked that music any more than he liked the observer's song. He wasn't sure that he liked it yet. He merely recognized it for what it was, something that did not need his liking.

"North! North!"

He was taking the turn between the hangars that was his invariable shortcut to the line when he heard the hoarse whisper. He turned. Paul Cottiswood was pressed against the hangars so that the men in the road would not see him. His eyes were pleading.

"North, can I talk to you a minute? Just a minute."

Billy North stepped over into the shadow of the big shed. "Make it snappy!" he said. "This is a fairly busy morning."

"I will. I will." Cottiswood clutched the collar of his flying suit. "I want to thank you for last night. I tried to last night. Couldn't."

"Oh, hell! That's all right." Billy shook himself loose from the other's grip. People who pawed at him filled him with thoughts of homicide. The Englishman gripped his arm.

"It was the Scotchman," he said. "I know it. He'd been talking to the C.O. I could tell by Galbreath's eyes. MacDonald had been talking to him. I hate that Scotchman."

"You're crazy. Angus is all right." North looked impatiently toward the space between the hangars. His ship was waiting for him out there. "What do you mean he talked about to Galbreath?"

Cottiswood bit his lip. "Oh, nothing." His free hand gripped Billy's lapel. "Tell me," he said, "did you see him throw things out of his plane?"

Billy frowned. "Don't paw me! Hell, man, stand still a minute. What difference does it make whether he throws things out or not?"

Cottiswood shifted uncomfortably. He reached out and then withdrew his hand awkwardly. "No difference, maybe," he said, "but I've seen him. He throws bottles."

"Sure! That's all right, isn't it?"

Cottiswood laughed shrilly. "It is," he said. "Of course it is. That's his business. Of course."

He was laughing uncontrollably now and Billy North turned toward the line. The man gave him the creeps and he couldn't use any creeps to-day. He wondered why they didn't send Cottiswood home. The guy acted buggy. "Go get drunk, Cottiswood," he said. "You'll feel so terrible when you sober up that it will make a new man of you."

BILLY NORTH wheeled away from Cottiswood and double-stepped to the line. Angus was loading his bottles into the rear cockpit and Billy grinned. "Probably be another dose of laughing gas for that crazy Limie," he said, "if he saw that. Not even a tough

mission like this one makes that Scotchman forget his little gag.”

He climbed into the cockpit and ran up the engine. Everything purred okay. The Clerget 110 was giving him his full 1325 revs and he was ready. Down the line a brown streak shot out across the muddy field and raced for a take-off. That would be Major Galbreath with Bud Masters piloting. Third in line, Billy kicked off and out over the tree tops at the end of the field. He looked back and he was just in time to see number five of the formation spin into the ground.

That meant that five ships would go over and not six. The casualties had begun early. Number five was Greg Harmon and Lance Clarke. *Salute!* That muddy field had been hell for a take off.

He straightened out for the lines. Croiselles. Riencourt. Buissy and on to Cambrai. That was the program and a hard straight line was the shortest distance. The formation climbed steadily. At ten thousand feet the Sop Strutters made no better than 80 m.p.h. usually. They had a stiff tail wind to-day and they did much better. It would be hell going home.

They were behind Riencourt. It had been a tourist jaunt so far except forarchie, the toothless wonder of the war. The clouds were scattered in wild confusion back here and it was a prime place for attack. Billy North had a hunch. He was flying in number two spot, behind the leader. He looked back.

A shadow dropped from the fringe of cloud. A black messenger of the yawning grave flashed for a moment in the streaky light. Angus swore and the oath carried through the tube. Then white tracers showed and number four Sop jerked like a shot hare and went whistling down the sky below them.

The stopper was out of another bottle. Kitschmark, the assassin, had struck again.

Billy's lips snarled back from his teeth. The black plane had had to dive steeply. It was sprawling out now below the Sops. A quick dive might get him. If one ship cut him off, the others could surely get him. It was the prime chance to eliminate a man who was worse than the German fighting squadrons; worse because he killed from ambush and never fought, a wrecker of nerves and morale.

His hand tightened on the stick but the voice of Angus came through the tube; Angus who wanted this man's life worse than he wanted anything and who saw the chance as well as did Billy North. "Let him go, lad. Our work is na'e here."

Billy relaxed but his soul protested. The Scot was

right, of course. They had to go on. They had a big job to do and four of them had perished already to do that job. The rest could not fail now and make those deaths vain. A little delay might wreck everything.

He flew on while a black shadow zoomed back to the clouds and was gone. Angus MacDonald hurled a bottle overside and the shriek that was like that of a lost soul wailed high over the song of the engines. That might have been a salute to souls that had passed or it might have been the baffled gesture of a man whose hands were tied and whose soul yearned to strike.

Halberstadt scouts appeared high in the blue as they crossed Buissy. Distant, menacing specks, too far away still to be dangerous but a threat for the future. Those scouts would not be distant on the way back and there were ten of them.

BARALLE flowed under them and was gone in a fury ofarchie fire. The white highway that ran from Cambrai to Arras lay ahead of them. A little right rudder now. Billy North was tense. The road was choked with German soldiery. Trucks bowled along and forced the infantry off to the side of the highway, the sun reflected off the lances of the Uhlans. A pair of A.A. guns were going wild.

Billy North was staggering his flight now and changing altitude and direction by the second. These Hun gunners outside Cambrai were good. They had to be. Cambrai was a key that unlocked secrets,

Angus was busy with that key. His maps spread out before him, he marked, checked, drew in detail and jotted marginal notes. He was too busy to hurl bottles overside now. German strategy was an open book below him. He would copy the page and H.Q. would interpret its significance.

The other ships of the flight were spreading over Cambrai in a fan. Two German scouts hovered to the left but they lacked the courage to attack—or perhaps they deemed it unnecessary. There would be lots of time to get these stupid Britishers. One of the Huns was firing his Very pistol at intervals. Billy's jaw was hard. These Sops were going to be on the bottom of a gang pile in a few minutes. He looked back.

Angus was making his pencil race. "Across the city, lad. The railroad yards and those roads ayant ye to the north."

Billy North ruddered in a long curve and started across Cambrai. Anarchie burst that was just short by a fraction burst beneath him and his controls were useless for a moment as he lifted in the updraught. A

flying fragment from another burst tore through the covering of his left wing. These Cambrai gunners were the best that he'd seen.

Angus was counting the cars in the yard, the rolling stock, locomotives and men awaiting transport. "Can ye go doon on them, laddie? 'Tis special troops, do ye ken, that they'll send in trains. The Landwehr walk," his voice rolled through the tube.

"Okay." Billy looked back, before going down. The German scouts were four now instead of two, Rolands. A few thousand feet above, they showed no disposition to attack. They seemed to be merely sentinels against a sudden dash to escape. Billy's nose dropped.

In a long dive that fluttered the torn piece of fabric and that brought a protesting scream from every wire, the Sop Strutter went down to the yards. The German troops waiting in the yards for a backing train, scattered and threw themselves down in the face of that mad dive. They expected nothing less than machine-gun fire and a few of the more intrepid souls blazed away with their rifles. Two machine guns situated on top of yard buildings cut loose with a withering fire and the wings of Death's black Angel brushed close.

Almost down on the tracks, Billy skimmed along. He was too low now for the machine guns to focus on him and too close for the soldiers to fire. Angus was shouting. "Go up, lad. Get oot o' here. These are the Bavrarr-ians. Shock troops, laddie. H.Q. had to know about it."

Billy North laid the stick back against his belt and roared for the sky. He had to pass through crossing fire to get out but he did it with the bullets pinging through his wings, fuselage and tail. He looked around. Angus was looking aloft. He seemed to have no interest in the Death that was slapping at him. Billy looked, too. He drew his breath in with a gasp.

SEVEN Albatrosses were coming down in a long slanting dive for the other three Sops which were already racing to the western limits of Cambrai with the Rolands, active at last, harassing their tails.

"Do ye no climb, lad. We'll run over the tree tops. 'Tis safer for all the danger o't."

Billy disliked being told how to pilot his ship but he could find no fault with that advice. The idea now was to get as far away from Cambrai as possible and to keep away from those scouts. His eyes ached from trying to follow the other members of the flight and pick a course for himself at the same time.

It looked as though the Sop Strutters were outdistancing the Albatross flight; then the Germans put on an amazing burst of speed that was drawn from some reserve of power. Inside of five seconds of time, they closed up on the Sops and ship whirled on ship up there in the blue.

Three ships dropped from the mass and one of those ships was German. A lone Sop picked a spot in the circle of Death and dived through; a long hard dive that no Sop was built to endure. Four Albatrosses strung out after him but they did not stay with a dive as did their intended victim. They kept pulling out and then diving again. That Mercedes on the nose was heavy and it had been known to pull reckless Germans down into the ground. These Germans took no chances and the Sop increased his distance. Far back, the outdistanced Rolands also ran.

Billy North frantically dodging and weaving over blazing hostile territory, swore softly. "Rather be a ferry pilot than a scout like those Roland hunkies."

This game of running from the foe without firing a shot still hurt but it was balm to that hurt for him to consider the odds that he was bucking and the futility of his foes. It was something, after all, to give the other man the guns and the ground protection, and then get home in spite of all. If he got home.

He wondered about those Sops that went down. It was rather unreal to him yet. He didn't know who had gone or who was in the ship that survived. The shock would come at mess when he faced the empty places. He was too busy now to register the fact in a practical way that last night's wake had been grim, grim business.

He crossed two canals and the ground fire was less deadly. Ahead of him lay the sprawling town of Rumancourt. More troops marching in the roads. He was north of his charted route and very low. The German troops were marching south and west. He looked back. Angus was busy with his pencil again.

It took a funny kind of courage to use a pencil while you trusted your life to another man's piloting in the mad fury of a flight over hostile territory. Billy North was glad that he was a pilot. He could at least match skill with the foe. Angus could not do that. He had to ride and take what Death dealt him.

So suddenly that Billy North was taken by surprise, a German scout lunged in from the south. It was a Fokker, a rare type of scout at this period. Billy rolled out of the vicious burst that the other loosed and he heard the voice of Angus. "Fly on, laddie. No time to fight."

The Scot was at the Lewis and he was pouring lead at the German who was curving back after that first unsuccessful attempt. Billy ached to maneuver around for a shot; just one shot. But his jaw clamped hard. He had pledged himself to this job. It was his last big observation patrol whether he won or lost. He was going to see it through.

CHAPTER VII BOTTLE OF COURAGE

AS BRAVELY AS ANY MAN ever charged, Billy North ran away. Machine-gun fire cackled and Angus answered the buzzing hornet on his tail with as much lead as he took, but the German hung on.

They rushed on south of Recourt and a solitary machine gun in a field had a go at them. The voice of Angus snapped in the speaking tube. "He's doon, lad. He'll woory us nae mair."

Billy North cast a hasty look back and he was in time to see the Fokker plunge nose first into the ground and bounce into kindling. He flew on and climbed. A distant German patrol chased them for ten kilometers then, but they had a long lead. Two German observation planes passed them on the way in from Allied territory but the opposing forces ignored one another.

The lines, wreathed in gray and black smoke, loomed ahead of them and Billy had a breathing space. Soon it would all be over. He felt suddenly tired. His hands ached from the way he had gripped down on his emotions. His whole body seemed drained and he didn't care any more.

Clouds were blowing across their path now. They were higher than they had been at any time since leaving Cambrai. Only fools crossed the battlelines down low. Squinting ahead into the wispy stuff, Billy tensed.

The other Sop was ahead of them and to the left. It, too, was racing in from the mouth of eternity. Two Sops out of six that started!

The other Sop started to go down in a long dive that would clear the lines and bring it down over the canal that led home. At that moment, disaster struck.

Two German planes flashed down and bounced

off an invisible boundary beneath the Strutter, their guns flaming. The Sop half rolled and its wing surfaces flashed. Billy caught the glint of the insignia on the fuselage and his heart leaped. It was Bud Masters—and that meant that the man in the rear cockpit was Major Galbreath.

Even as he registered this, he noticed that one of the Germans had pulled off; hovering on the verge of flight above the other which was battling. His teeth flashed in a snarl. The cowardly hovering was the trademark of just one man on the Western Front. Kitschmark!

He was blind with thwarted longing, hatred and revenge, but his mind clicked on the thought that his C.O. was in that Sop down there. Whether he got Kitschmark or not, he had to save the C.O. He roared toward the battle across the far reaches of the sky. Why hadn't he been, closer? It was a long charge. Anything could happen before he got there.

A hoarse voice was shouting in the tube. "Na, na, laddie. Let be. 'Tis orders and the army needs us. No, lad. Ye canna——"

"Go to hell, will you!" Billy North was flying in the teeth of the wind. The voice in the tube became frantic. "We pledged oor worrrr-d. We maunna. The mission comes first, lad——"

Billy North flew on and the voice took another note. "Fly straight, lad, or I'm nae responsible."

"No one asked you to be!" All of the pledges he had made were unreal phantom things now. Billy North was seeing two men who had been through the same hell that he had, facing death on the very lip of safety. Observation, information, the army be hanged!

He had his nose pointed toward the flashing planes. He tried to coax an extra burst of speed from the throttle, then the Heavens fell.

He was conscious of a blinding blazing flash and the ship seemed to pass from under him. He fell into the deep blackness of oblivion.

This, some sentry in his mind whispered, is death.

SLOWLY Billy North came back to consciousness. For a while he merely knew that he was not dead. Then he knew that his head ached. After that, he started to wonder. Wondering, he sat up straight.

The familiar outlines of the cockpit framed him and he felt the sweat come out on his body. He had been asleep or unconscious or something and he was still in the air. He looked across the nose and his heart flipped over.

He was in a long glide for his own drome, the trees were rushing past off to the right and the ship was starting to settle even as he sat there paralyzed and unbelieving. He shook his head to clear the mists, then he raised his hand. He was convinced then that he was dead and that this landing on his own drome was some trick of a brain that survived the body's destruction. He had wished, dying that he might go home and his mind had raced ahead to fulfillment after his body died.

"But I didn't wish to get home." His own voice startled him. The engine was barely turning over. "I—I——"

Suddenly he clenched his fist as memory rushed back to him. He had been going to the rescue of Major Galbreath. He had wanted more than any other thing to see the Hawk of Havrincourt die in his guns. This was no dream, then; this was reality. He was really landing.

He spun around in the cockpit and looked into the grim, poker face of Angus MacDonald. The Scot was concentrated on the ground. He did not appear to see him. The wheels hit and the ship bounced awkwardly, lurched a bit, swung to the right and came slithering over on the left wing. Billy was jerked violently around and banged viciously against the side of the cockpit. His head swam and he felt the blackness opening again before him.

"The Scotchman piloted the ship. Something happened to me. He didn't want me to go in and help Galbreath." His mind clicked over the facts even as it teetered on the edge of unconsciousness. He came erect with a curse. "That Scot knocked me out," he roared.

The effort dispelled the clouds from his brain and he swam back to consciousness through the blackness. A mechanic was opening his safety belt and another one was trying to lift him. He pushed them away and climbed over the side himself, only to find that he had to lean for support against the side of the ship when he reached the ground.

By a supreme effort of will he focused his eyes. Far across a corner of the field near the hangars, he could see the tall form of Angus MacDonald. The man was striding out with the swinging erectness of the parade ground, too far away for a man in Billy's condition to catch up. He stared around the circle of staring ack emmas and his eyes rested on Dunn, a rookie pilot who had just come up. The youngster was staring as hard as the mecs.

He felt Billy's eyes on him and tepped forward. "Anything I can do? You hurt?"

"Just a bump. Light me a cigarette."

Billy sat down. The strain of the long flight, the heavy punishment of the ground guns, the sight of squadron mates crashing; these things were catching up with Billy North. He took the fag from the youngster and pulled deep. He looked off across the field. There was not another ship in sight except the two "stand-to" planes that warmed on the line.

"Nobody else come in?" he asked.

"Nobody!" The youngster's voice was husky, his eyes wide. It is not pleasant to see one ship come back out of six in your first day up. Billy pulled hard on the cigarette.

MARKWITH was dead. No more piano at mess. Jones was gone. What would they do with his canary? Navy Blake! He could close his eyes and hear Navy's voice thundering:

There's a red, red ring about the good eye
And the black eye?

Yes, there were red rings about the good eye of the guns now and the squadron had such a black eye as only ten men dead in one patrol could give it. Galbreath!

His mind had refused to jump that hurdle till last. The C.O. was dead, the C.O. who had been too game to send men where he wouldn't go, the C.O. who rode with the greenest pilot rather than send another observer out with him. Galbreath!

He might have saved him and the Scotchman had knocked him out, knocked him goofy and let the C.O. die. What good did that cursed information do now. Galbreath would never know that it had gone through, Galbreath could not be brought back with all the information in the world. Dead men stayed dead but there were always new jobs for the obs squadrons.

Not until this line of thought ran its course did he think of what the C.O.'s passing meant to him personally. It was to have been his last observation job. Galbreath was going to get him a transfer to scouts. That hope was gone now, as dead as Galbreath.

He staggered to his feet and the youngster, Dunn, put out a supporting hand. "Your head's bloody. Better let me get you to quarters and fix you up."

The youngster was trying to guide him. Billy spat.

"Quarters hell! You go down and get me a motor cycle with a side car from the C.M.S. Then, you can

take me to the village and leave me there. What I'm going to do is get drunk. I'm going to be the drunkest man in France to-night. After that——"

"But——" The youngster was shocked.

"Never mind the buts. Get that motor cycle." Billy North's voice was a roar and the rookie backed away.

"Righto," he said. "You know what's what."

He was gone and Billy sat down again. He roused himself enough to climb into the side car when the youngster brought it back. He sat in silence while he was driven to the village. Before the estaminet of "Peter the Apostle" he had Dunn draw into the walk.

"Okay, buddy. Thanks. Better get back to the squadron. You wouldn't like it in here. What I'm going to do is listen to how scouts win the war."

Weaving a little uncertainly but with his jaw squared aggressively, Billy entered the estaminet. The place, of course, would be full of Nieuport pilots and Sop Pup pilots who would argue about which group, Pups or the Nieuups, was winning the most war. The hell with them!

He took a table in the corner and he had finished a bottle of cognac before he admitted honestly to himself why he had come to this place instead of to quarters.

"If I'd gone in, I'd have killed the Scotchman," he said huskily. "I'll probably do it yet. No flying scout for me and Dick will rot in Ypres without a North firing a shot for him."

He banged the table and got another bottle. He slobbered as he drank but his mind was clear and his hand steadier than when he came in. "Galbreath is dead," he said bitterly, "and the Scotchman the same as killed him when he hit me on the head. He'll pay for that. A North can pay his debts even when his whole career is napoo."

On a dancing screen in his mind he saw Dink Stebbins coughing his life out over his Lewis, saw Kitschmark striking again and again and skulking back to the skies, heard the hoarse voice of Angus.

THE Yank growled. His bottle was getting low. Noisily he banged for another. The pursuit pilots were looking at him askance but they let him alone. Men who went on solitary drunks with as much attention to detail as did this man had something eating at the old vitals. They were best left alone.

The old man hobbled over to Billy's table with the new bottle. He made a motion to take the empties but Billy cursed him away. "Saving those bottles," he said.

"Give them to the damned Scotchman." He laughed without mirth. "Scotchman, I'll say, I'm giving you these damned bottles. But you aren't never goin' to take 'em over the lines. Never goin' over the lines again. Not you."

There were four empty bottles and one half full in front of Billy North when Lieutenant Dunn and the rescuing party took him out of the estaminet very late that night. The surgeon took three stitches in his scalp and Billy knew nothing at all about it.

It was broad daylight when Billy North woke up with Dunn shaking him. He blinked and moved his tongue around a mouth that felt like a dugout after six months' occupation. Dunn shook him again.

"Shake it up a bit, old man. There's a colonel down from Wing and he's raising merry Ned. Asking to see you particularly."

"Damn colonels!" Billy felt the bump on his head tenderly and gripped the cot tightly to keep the room from going around. The room continued to go around madly. Dunn was lifting him. A dash of cold water and he came to himself a bit. He felt very much napoo, though, and the panicky Dunn kept prating about the colonel.

"You've got to see him and be in shape when you do. Here, drink this!"

Billy drank and, for the first time in his life, he really came to an understanding of volcanoes. He was weak and shaky when the volcanic action ceased but his head was still muddy. He couldn't pick up his line of thought where he had left it last. With Dunn's help he got dressed and slicked up to pass inspection; then, walking like a tight-rope artist, he made his way to the sacred presence of the colonel from Wing.

He found the brass hat with his staff in the nissen hut that had served Galbreath for H.Q. The red bands about the caps of the officers shrieked of staff and Billy saluted wearily. Some silly twaddle about the show yesterday, he imagined. Well they could keep the blasted decorations if that was what they had in mind.

It wasn't. The colonel from Wing looked Billy over as though a pet dog of his had just been poisoned and Billy was the suspect. "I've been waiting for you, lieutenant," he growled, "and my perusal of yesterday's log shows no patrol for you later than yesterday morning. I fail to understand your failure to be on hand this morning."

Billy stood straight and unblinking. So this was glory. Only one patrol yesterday. Ugh. This blasted brass hat ought to have been along. If he had—and if

he had come back—he mightn't have been up with the godblasted lark this morning either. The colonel adjusted his monocle and ruffled some papers on the desk.

"However," he said icily, "I have not the time to hear your explanation now. I will expect a full explanation later in writing. I want to know if you are familiar with your observer—er, Lieutenant Angus MacDonald's custom of dropping bottles within the enemy lines."

CHAPTER VIII BLACK WORDS

AT THE SOUND of the Scotchman's name, Billy found the loose line of thought that had eluded him. He remembered what he had been thinking about last night when the bottles on the table reached a total of five. "All I know about it," he said, "is that he does it."

"Ah, you knew about that, did you? Tell me, pray, why you did not report the matter? Or did you?"

"I did not. I didn't see anything to report." Billy was bored with this colonel and his head ached. He wished the confounded brass hat would go lay an egg or something.

"You didn't see anything to report!" The colonel repeated Billy's words slowly, eyebrows raised, monocle tapping against the papers. "I am amazed. You see a man in the service of England, or supposedly in the service of England, dropping bottles into the enemy lines and you see nothing to report. I am more than amazed. I am astounded."

Billy's jaw set hard. "If an observation squadron is not allowed to fight," he said grimly, "you can't blame a man for dropping something on the Huns. That doesn't interfere with his work."

The colonel frowned. He seemed on the point of administering a rebuke, but one thing was uppermost in his mind at the time. "But bottles, lieutenant, bottles. You see nothing wrong with a man dropping bottles?"

Billy wanted to scream. He wanted to jump up and down and yell, "Hell, no." He wanted to shake his fist at this dull-witted old simpleton and tell him that the one thing that he didn't want to talk about this morning was bottles, that if he insisted on saying "Bottles" to him that he was going to get a bottle and ram it—

He held himself in with difficulty. The colonel was tapping the paper. "I have here," he said, "a memorandum from Major Galbreath, your late commanding officer, addressed to the intelligence section. I cannot understand why it should lie on his desk while the man it concerns is permitted to fly and drop more bottles. I can't understand it for the life of me. But here it is and there you are confirming everything it says."

Billy frowned. He was wishing that his head would clear for a moment and that he could figure this out. What memorandum had the C.O. written for intelligence? What was all this excitement about the Scotchman's bottles? The colonel was tapping his monocle again.

"I have placed Lieutenant MacDonald under arrest," he said, "and despite the fact that Major Galbreath expresses confidence in you in this memorandum I had fully intended to place you under arrest also. Your stupidity and your lack of comprehension of the whole situation is too obvious to be assumed, however. I am convinced that you were not actively a party to Lieutenant MacDonald's nefarious scheme."

Billy North's head was one big ache and he couldn't surround all of this. He was growling down deep, however, at the insulting attitude of this big dub who'd probably throw an hysteric if he heard a gun go off within range of him.

"I am at liberty to go?" he asked.

"When I dismiss you." The colonel's tone was curt. "In the absence of any duly constituted commander for this squadron, I have temporarily taken charge personally. The work must go on and I have outlined a patrol for one o'clock. Since your observer is under arrest, I have assigned Lieutenant Cottiswood to fly with you."

"Cottiswood?" Billy groaned. He needed nothing else to make this day an absolute washout. He had to fly a patrol, feeling as he did and he had to take Cottiswood. The colonel looked up from the paper which he had consulted for the name.

"Did you say something, lieutenant?"

"No, sir."

"All right, then. You will sit at that desk in the corner and write a simple statement to the effect that you have seen Lieutenant MacDonald dropping bottles behind the German lines. You will state dates and locations as nearly as you remember them."

BILLY hesitated, but the colonel's stare was too much for him in his present condition. He crossed the

room and sat down. Swiftly he wrote and five minutes later, he turned in his report. The colonel kept him waiting for yet another five minutes and then casually scanned what he had written.

"Ahum. You say 'empty bottles,' lieutenant. How do you know they were empty?"

Billy wanted to ask how any damned fool ever knew that a bottle was empty but he was in no shape to start rows with colonels. "I saw them," he said.

"Oh, you did? You examined them inside and out, I suppose. Did you break any of them to see if there were thin sheets pasted inside?"

"No. But——"

"Then you could not swear before a court-martial that the bottles were empty. You will rewrite the report, lieutenant, and merely say 'bottles' next time." The colonel smiled icily. "The report, of course, will not be used if you are able to give direct testimony, but one never knows what may happen."

The colonel had teeth like a squirrel's and he showed them now in what was supposed to be a cheering smile. His expression conveyed the impression that he did not expect Billy North to outlive the patrols that lay between the present moment and the moment when Angus faced a court-martial.

Billy sat down and wrote once more. "I wish to hell I knew what all this hooley about bottles means," he said wearily. "There's something buzzing in my head but it may not be an idea. It may just be cognac. Damn colonels!"

As the American pushed his weary feet down the road toward the hangars and the line, Paul Cottiswood caught up with him. Billy had been avoiding Cottiswood, but there was no escape for it now. The man draped his arm across Billy's shoulder.

"No end glad to be riding with you, old top. Yank or no, you're the one whitest man in this squadron," he offered.

"Thanks, but for Judas' sake, Cottiswood, walk to the ship by yourself. I'm too washed up to carry you." Try as he would, Billy found it impossible to be gentle with this Englishman. If only the man would keep his hands to himself!

Cottiswood seemed not to mind the rebuff. "I'd hate to be in the Scotchman's shoes," he said. "They'll hang him or shoot him sure."

Billy's head came up. "What do you mean?"

Cottiswood waved his hand. "It's the talk of the mess. He's been sending messages to the Germans in

those bottles. The whole time he's been putting on so much around here, he's been a blasted German spy."

Billy North felt as though he had been doused with cold water. Why had he been so dumb? His mind must have been petrified this morning. He shook his head as a fighter does who has received a heavy blow.

ANGUS MACDONALD a spy! It was a discordant note. No spy could put the fervor into the playing of war music that Angus put into the notes he coaxed out of that whistle. Whoa. Why couldn't a spy? They had just hanged an Irishman in London Tower or shot him or did something to him. The Irish weren't wholly with England. Scotland had as much reason to hate the English as the Irish did. At least, Billy supposed so. He wasn't at all clear on that point.

Suppose that Angus belonged to some Scotch crowd that didn't like England? He would play Scotch tunes, of course, and feel perfectly loyal about doing anything he could to lick hell out of England. That would explain a lot of things. Still——

He would have killed Angus himself last night. He still hated him. But he had to admit the man's strength. Angus was not the type that he pictured as playing two sides of the range. Cottiswood had him by the elbow again. He stopped short.

"You asked me about those bottles," he said. "Did you have something to do with those charges?"

Cottiswood looked surprised. "Of course not. I just had my own ideas. It looked funny to me."

Billy frowned. His brain wasn't clicking overright but it seemed obvious that Cottiswood had nothing to do with the charges. The colonel had got his dope out of a report of Galbreath's. Billy slapped the Englishman's hand off his shoulder.

"Listen," he said, "I don't like that Scot any better than you do, but did you make a report to Galbreath that led to his making a report to Wing?"

Cottiswood shrank away from the fury of North but his eyes for once were steady. "I never mentioned MacDonald in any way to Galbreath," he said. "I swear it."

Billy relaxed. There was no doubting the Englishman. The fellow had been telling the truth. He had not gone to Galbreath. All right then, there might be something to it. He wasn't going to miss the Scotchman if they did shoot him.

He told himself that, but some part of him protested. He shook his head again. A voice hailed him from the hangar.

Lieutenant Dunn was coming toward him and he waved Cottiswood away. "Go tidy up the ship or something, will you." He was suddenly aware of the fact that he liked Dunn and that he was very tired of Cottiswood. The youngster halted a few paces away and grinned.

"Feeling better?"

"I must be since I'm getting around. Glad I don't remember just how I felt when I wasn't. It must have been terrible."

Dunn grinned again, then he sobered. "I say, old man," he said, "I hate to impose when you're feeling a bit down but there's only three of us going on this patrol you know."

Billy nodded. "Maybe I did know. Forgot."

Dunn looked uncomfortable.

"Piercey and I have never been over," he said. "The one-wingers have been very decent, but I'd like a few pointers from a pilot who knew the ropes. So would Piercey."

Billy North was staring. These two lads had never been over and they were taking their first front-line hop, in a three-ship patrol. "Stay here," he said, "I'm going to talk to that fat-headed colonel."

Dunn put out his hand. "I wish you wouldn't, old top. I know that particular colonel by reputation. He's—well, rather horsey."

Billy North stopped and swore softly. He had an idea of just how he rated with that brass hat and how far he would get with a protest. "Damn colonels!" he said fervently. "Call Piercey over. We'll powwow."

A few minutes later when he took the air at the point of a three-ship V, he was conscious of the total inadequacy of the instruction he had given the two green pilots. A man doesn't learn the front line on the ground. He decided that he'd bluff the patrol as much as possible. He would not plow deep behind the lines. The hell with it. There was no vital reason behind the patrol anyway except the damned officiousness of a brass hat.

HE TOOK lots of altitude and crossed to Henin. If he stayed away from the southern area where the Germans were massing for their counterstroke, he had hopes that he would stay out of trouble. For once he had no desire to fight. He was furry around the edges himself and the men behind him wouldn't know how to fight.

Cottiswood, evidently on the thin edge of nerve, kept talking into the mouthpiece. It was like a hammer

pounding on Billy's brain. He ripped the headset off. It was like leaving the war and finding a peaceful spot in which to lie down and think. He checked up on his followers as he zigzagged througharchie's hate. They were flying bravely along in pukka formation. Fine.

The lines were hopelessly confused from St. Martin north. The trenches had been changing hands and it was impossible to tell which was which. Against his will, Billy had to push farther in to get something with which to fill a report. Then he felt the assassin.

He saw nothing, but some instinct warned him of Death a-wing. He whirled in the cockpit and his eyes caught a glint of black wings that turned in the sun. Dunn was on the right tip nearest the flashing death. Billy kicked rudder and his voice caught in a curse.

The Hawk of Havrincourt had struck.

With the skill at assassination that only he possessed, Kitschmark had brushed across that rookie-piloted plane. One burst at a perfect target! It was enough. As Billy brought his ship around in a lightning maneuver that was worthy of a scout, he saw the flames leap up from a Sop that was going down.

Madness ran in his blood and he knew every move of Kitschmark, as only one could know them who had lived with the bitter memory of a Kitschmark attack written on his brain. The German always swept down past his victim, flattened out, turned left with a slight depression of the left wing and zoomed for the safety of the clouds.

Billy hurled the Sop at a point which should cross the zoom. It was a matter of split seconds and he had a swift blurred vision of the black plane rocketing upward. He pressed the trips and—nothing happened.

The rarely used front gun of an observation pilot had been cold. It was jammed.

With a curse, Billy North did a lightning Immelman and shouted for his observer. He cursed again now at the memory of the disconnected speaking tube. He gestured and shouted to Cottiswood and a side glance showed him the Englishman crouched to the Lewis.

Kitschmark swerved and there was a sharp cackling sound above the roar of two engines; then the German was in the clouds and it was over.

Billy sobbed with the futility of it. His guns had let him down with vengeance in his outstretched hands. Then, Cottiswood had missed. At that moment, Billy wished for Angus MacDonald. The Scot would not have missed. Ice cold in the face of hell, the Scot would have counted the seconds and the feet and he would not have fired a split tick too soon.

Too late now for post-mortems. Billy kicked the Sop around and dropped his nose. Beneath him the whole sky was clear. There was not a sign of Piercey. Somewhere in the melee, the man had either got himself knocked down or had wandered off somewhere. With a puzzled frown, Billy ranged back and forth looking for him. Not a sign. He turned puzzled eyes to his observer.

Paul Cottiswood was hanging onto his Lewis and the blood was oozing out over the front of his flying combination. His eyes were very wild and dazed, but he was trying to say something. There was something pleading about him. Billy North had a throb of compassion.

The hell with Piercey. Let the fool find himself. He had to get the one-wing to the hospital or to aid of some kind. He raced on over the lines. There was a British balloon beyond Mercatel and an emergency landing field near by. He'd take Cottiswood down and see what he could do.

CHAPTER IX "LET THE DEAD PAST—"

DUNN AND COTTISWOOD and Jones! Kitschmark had hunted well today. Billy's lips were set hard. He had liked Dunn. A good kid. Now he was gone because a fool of a colonel condemned him to his first look at the lines without protection. Scrambled mess, this war. Billy wondered how his brother really had died. Had some one blundered or had he been killed by some lurking assassin like Kitschmark? No one would ever know. No matter. The dead were dead.

He was giving away his altitude recklessly now in an effort to make the emergency landing field by the balloon with a minimum of time lost. He would not circle for a landing. He would come in straight and try to Blake it. That meant giving archie a White alley. Okay.

He slanted across the German second line and machine-gun bullets whined through the deep *wouff* of archie. The Sop rocked from side to side, but Billy held it. The Germans were coming very close. He had heard of direct hits where a ship disappeared. He had never seen such a thing happen. Had that happened to the missing Piercey? Would it happen to him?

He sideslipped dangerously as a burst lifted his left

wing. There was a rip in the fabric where a splinter had torn through. It was beginning to peel. He eyed it with misgiving. Wings go quickly sometimes. He looked back.

Cottiswood was still holding the Lewis. He seemed no worse. Hard to tell!

Warummmmm! Something clanked and the air was shattered by sound. The Sop was literally lifted in the air and hurled over on its side. Billy fought the controls and for a moment they did not respond; then he had lift again and he had his ship under command.

He looked back once more. Cottiswood was slumping in the belt. That filled him with the urge to make haste, to ride through this wild archie fire or anything else in the way. It might be possible to save the kid's life if he got him down.

The Sop was over No-Man's-Land now and holding a nice glide for the emergency field. Billy wondered what had happened to it. He knew that he had been hit. He looked over the side. Impossible to see, but he was betting that his undercarriage was a washout. Two mechanics were working on a bus in the emergency field. Billy swooped over them and fired a Very light to attract their attention. They looked up.

As he came around again, he saw them dancing up and down, pointing to the two wheels of the ship they had been working on and making wide sweeping motions that meant "napoo" in any language. His teeth clicked and a fighting light came in his eyes.

He had no undercarriage and he had a wounded man to land. Okay.

He killed everything, pancaked down into the field and tipped one wing. He hit in a cloud of dust and a crashing of struts but the wing that folded took the shock. The fuselage skidded along through the dust and piled up. Billy's stomach, none too strong this morning, felt betrayed and his head swam with the shock but he was unhurt. He piled out.

The two mechanics left the shiny ship and came over on the run to help him get Cottiswood out. The man was breathing with difficulty and his finger nails were white. There was a blue line around his lips.

One of the mechanics who had seen his share of war took one look and started back to his job. The other followed more slowly. Billy dropped on one knee and raised the observer's head.

"Cottiswood, old man, can you hear me?"

COTTISWOOD'S eyes opened slowly. He seemed dazed rather than hurt. "I'm going out?" he said huskily. It was a question. Billy nodded.

"Yes, old man, you are. Sorry."

"Thank God." The Englishman reached out and clutched Billy's sleeve. "I wanted it," he said. "I was so afraid of it that I wanted it." His breath rattled. His hand stroked Billy's sleeve, gripped it tighter. "My inside pocket, quick," he said. There was horror in his face.

Billy plunged his hand into the pocket and brought out an envelope; red dyed and dampened now. "Read quick!" Billy tore the envelope. His wide eyes raced through the script.

To Whoever finds me—

If I am killed, then by being killed I have proved that I am not a coward. I can speak. If I quit before it happens, I will tear this up.

I tried to desert. Angus MacDonald caught me and I tried to shoot him. He knocked me down and took my gun. Lieutenant North, the American, knows about this. I hate MacDonald. He is common but he knows I lack courage and he despises me. He is too coarse and hard to understand.

My family has produced heroes. My brother was mutilated at Mons. I saw him. It ruined my nerve. I am a coward. If I am killed in battle, I will have overcome what I confess with shame and there will be no more shame except what I should never have done. I should never have tried to desert.

The dying man's eyes were on North's face as he read. Billy reached out his hand. "You're not yellow, kid. I'm proud you flew with me."

Cottiswood's lips twisted. "No. I forged Galbreath's name. I hated the Scot too much. I made trouble for him. I was crazy, mad. It is all false, false."

He was growing very weak now but a fierce resolve was holding life in his body. "Write that and I'll—sign," he said wearily.

Billy North's hands were shaking but he wrote as full a confession as he could think of on the moment. With a hand that moved with surprising steadiness Cottiswood signed.

"Thanks!" he said. His hand reached out and he tried to grip Billy's sleeve. He sighed and went. Billy North stood up dazedly and removed his helmet with a hand that shook.

"War has drained another bottle," he said. "Cottiswood had more guts than he or any one else ever suspected."

For a long minute, Billy North stood above the body of Paul Cottiswood. His mind was in a whirl. That man who had just gone out bravely in combat had wronged another as brave as himself and now

Billy North held the key that would unlock the doors of disaster for Angus MacDonald.

Slowly he folded the paper. The man he would have killed last night would gain freedom at his hands today. What prime practical jokers were the gods of war. He looked at his Sop and a frown creased his forehead. It was a complete washout.

"How in 'ell will I get back? And I have to get back fast."

BILLY didn't even consider taking the roads back. He knew what they would be like during a push. He'd probably be arrested for going the wrong way during an advance if he was fool enough to try it—and if he wasn't arrested, he'd be a day and a half getting back to Fienvillers. And there was the body of Paul Cottiswood to consider.

"If Galbreath was alive, I'd get to a phone somewhere and try to get word through. The colonel would have me arrested and shot for cracking up, I guess."

He looked across the field toward the black ship. Suddenly the blood started to pump through his veins in a warming flood. The two mechanics; were walking away from the plane toward a pair of officers who were strolling nonchalantly toward it. Billy had never seen one of these ships before but he knew them by reputations. It was called a D.H. 4 and it was used; mostly for day bombing; reputedly; the fastest thing on the Front, too.

He took a quick step, reached down and grasped the body of his dead observer. "Our last ride together, old' fellow," he whispered, "and what a-ride it will be."

Carrying the body of the Englishman as though it were half its actual weight, he crossed the clearing to the plane in a dozen strides. The veins' stood out on his forehead with strain: as he heaved the corpse into the rear cockpit, but he made it. Vaulting up, he fastened what was left of Cottiswood into place with the safety belt. There was a shout from down the field and the two officers were running toward him. The mechanics had left the engine idling. Billy jumped down to kick away the chocks. As he did so, the first and biggest of the Officers came into him. It was no time for parleying or for explanations that would not be taken. With a beautiful pivot, Billy North put his weight behind a murderous right hook and leaped for the cockpit.

The stricken officer went back four paces and crashed into his companion. As the two men went

down, Billy opened the throttle and roared down the field. A bullet sang past his head as he pulled the wheels off the ground, then he was going up behind the most powerful engine that had ever taken him into the sky.

Logy and hard to handle after the sensitive Strutter, this boat was nevertheless power. When the throttle was opened on this ship, things occurred.

Feeling like the kid he had been when he first came to the service that had disillusioned him, Billy North forgot danger and the disgrace that loomed ahead of him, his private feuds and the war itself. In the first ship he had ever piloted which was not charged up to him, he looped and rolled and dived and zoomed. For all of its weight and its loginess, the D.H. would do all of these things. It had what so many other fine ships had not; it had horse power.

Like a pigeon circling a take-off in order to orient himself, Billy circled the emergency field, rising in graceful spirals; then, like the pigeon that has made up its mind, he aimed his ship and went off on a beeline for Croiselles. It was shorter to go home across the short end of the triangle, but it would also be easier to get lost. He could find Croiselles by following the battleline and he could fly home from Croiselles blindfolded.

The big British balloon swayed ponderously in the stiff breeze and Billy dipped a salute to it. He was feeling like a million dollars now and wishing that he could dare go over into Germany and risk a fight. He wanted badly to see how this D.H. would act in a fight. He decided against it. If he went and did not come back, Angus might be shot.

"I may shoot him myself yet," he said grimly, "but I won't let him be shot for something that he didn't do."

THE grim mood passed as quickly as it came. He played with the gadgets and he tested the guns and he let this big ship roar. The second British balloon down the line came into view now. It had been a hazy shape before; now it was a balloon. He knew that one. It rose out of a gully in front of Boyelle to the east of the Route Internationale.

Even as he identified it, he was conscious of activity about it. It was being hauled down and the white bursts from the archie batteries were flowering above and beside it. He had to strain to see the darting dragonfly that had caused all of this commotion.

It whizzed out of nowhere behind the balloon, curled up and over in a beautiful maneuver, then

dropped upside down and fired again at the bag. It was an Albatross scout and the sun was flashing on the silver top side of its wings as it played about the bag.

"Boy, if I can only get him!"

It was almost a prayer. With throttle wide open, Billy dropped his nose and went hurtling down the sky toward the big bag and the little toy that menaced its existence.

The big B.H.P. engine was roaring and Billy warmed his guns. The gods had been kind. They had sent a Hun across the lines for him to practice on. With a contempt for his own archie that equalled that of his contempt for the German brand, Billy dived through the bursts and went down to the left of the bag.

He had guessed right. The German was coming up as he came down and it was a beautiful shot. He poured a burst and the German did an all but impossible roll. The tracers went through the wing close to the cockpit and then the Albatross went below the D.H. and zoomed beyond Billy's tail. Billy turned almost as fast as though he were in a scout. The German had passed very close beneath him and that had been salvation. If the German had had room, he'd have hung in the blind spot and it might have been curtains.

In that split second, Billy realized that he had had no business mixing into this affair around the balloon. He was carrying another man's life and honor in his pocket and Death had passed him by so close that he could hear the rustle of the shroud.

The German was diving back on him and Billy kicked to the left. The German's tracers went very wide past his tail and Billy grinned. He was feeling as he had felt the morning that he climbed the hill after the half breed; scared but curiously confident. The German was half-rolling back to the attack and Billy half-rolled with him.

In desperation, the German made a bold bid for altitude and tail position with an Immelman. Billy smiled coldly and his hand was suddenly steady. He had a feeling of deadly calm. He was climbing and he kicked now to the right. The German was driven to the outside of his arc and for a fractional second he was dead in the sights.

It was enough.

With that one burst, Billy riddled him. The Albatross did an involuntary half-roll and went down in a vertical dive with a trailer of smoke behind him.

Billy didn't wait to see him hit. With his nose down,

he raced for Croiselles. One-half of him was wild with the excitement of a well-earned victory and the other half of him was talking about Angus and about what a crude thing it was to take a dead observer into such a brawl.

Shucks! Cottiswood would be tickled to death. He had a good fight and he didn't have to be afraid that he'd turn yellow. But Angus?

Funny how he kept thinking of him as Angus instead of as "that damned Scotchman"! No matter. He had no right to risk the dope that would save the life of the Scot anyway. He wasn't kidding himself that he went into that fight to save a lousy balloon. Any flyer, Allied or German, with guts enough to go down on a balloon deserved to get it. No. He had gone into that fight because he wanted to fight and he'd been a pretty selfish kind of coyote not to think of his responsibility.

CHAPTER X GOLD-BRAIDED!

HE WHEELED AROUND CROISELLES as though it were a pylon in a race. As the D.H. straightened out for Fienvillers, a thought hit him as hard as he had been hit by Angus less than twenty-four hours before. He almost lost control of the ship as the force of it came home to him.

If he was mooning around and accepting blame—from himself for risking a lousy bit of paper that would save one life, how about Angus yesterday with his dope sheets that would save thousands?

His mind refused to jump the hurdle and he set his jaw stubbornly against the admission that was almost forced from him. "Hell with that. I'm getting soft," he said. "What I'm going to do is get that Scotchman out of the coop and then beat hell out of him."

He felt better with that resolve than with a lot of theories to battle out. In a mood that was almost light-hearted he set the big D.H. down before a gaping crowd at Fienvillers and strode toward the squadron office and an interview with a certain colonel.

That colonel never got fairly started on his line of fireworks about A.W.O.L. pilots, etc., and etc. Billy slapped the confession of Paul Cottiswood down on the desk.

"You'll be more interested in that than in the answers to the questions you are asking," he growled. The shoot-him-at-sunrise look that he got from the gold-braider didn't turn a hair on his tousled and unkempt head. Billy North was washed up anyway and the colonel could charge him with nothing more than slugging a fellow officer and stealing a plane. Let the court-martial assemble.

With a series of grunts and much tapping of the monocle, the colonel deigned to look at the paper. He stiffened and his jaw dropped. "Who—who gave you this?"

"The man whose name is signed to it." Billy was curt to the point of insolence but the colonel was too surprised to note details.

"Where is he?" he barked.

"I haven't the slightest idea. His body, however, is outside. He died right after he signed that paper."

The colonel snorted and frowned at Billy in his best judicial manner. "Young man, do you expect me to swallow this," he slapped the paper. "This obvious forgery! Your attempt brands you as an accomplice of—"

Billy made a gesture of weariness. "I don't care whether you swallow it or make one of your staff do it for you. You can compare the signature with those on file. Suggest you do the same with the report Galbreath is supposed to have signed."

The colonel was on his feet, his face purple with rage. Two of his staff moved across the room. Billy North met the combined glares coolly. A man who is washed up and resigned to it, enjoys a wonderful sense of freedom. The colonel was sputtering.

"Sir, I'll have you before a court-martial for this. Hold yourself under arrest and do not leave the field. You will pay for your imprudence. Go!"

Billy saluted, wheeled and passed out into the sunshine. He stopped outside the door to light a cigarette, then headed across the road to the mess shanty. He was suddenly aware that he had not eaten anything all day.

"Fared better than Angus did at that," he said. "They locked him up. Safe enough on a charge of spying, but the old colonel watched his step on gaol for an officer who merely said what he thought. Ho-hum! It's good to be an officer. Wait till they hear about the D.H. Then, I'll use to be one."

He was humming softly as he crossed the road. A corporal was headed for the hangars. Billy hailed him. "Tell the chief to service that D.H.," he said, "I have to return it."

As the men turned way, Billy North indulged himself in a wide grin. He could imagine himself returning that ship to the man he had slugged, a bigger man than he was! Not very often!

THE shrill notes of a tuppenny whistle came down the wind and Billy North stood still in the road that led past the hangars to the line. He had just finished a big meal and made a big resolve. Those two things had absorbed him. He had forgotten Angus MacDonald. Now the wailing whistle reminded him.

Oh, ye take the high road and I'll take the low road
And I'll be in Scotland before ye;
But me and my true love will never meet again,
On the bonnie, bonnie banks o' Loch Lomond.

Reminded him of what? Only of the fact that Angus was at liberty again. The colonel had evidently taken his advice in spite of his rage and the case against Angus had collapsed of its own weight. Billy frowned.

He felt that he should be in a rage at the mere thought of the Scot and he couldn't stir up a single quiver of anger. He had been murderous last night and now he was indifferent even to memories of the blow on the head and the death of Galbreath.

"Dammit. You fight for a man and get in an argument with a numbskull gold-braider about him and you can't be sore at him any more. The hell with him! He's probably just as right or just as wrong as I am; only in a different way."

With a shrug, Billy resumed his walk and, through force of habit, turned in between the hangars on his short cut. Too late he realized that the whistle was louder here and that he was going to pass the Scot. Then Angus saw him.

The whistle wailed away and the Scotchman rose slowly from the petrol tin on which he had been sitting. He kicked another tin upright and gestured toward it.

"Bide a wee, lad, and ha'e a smoke wi' me."

Billy North stood straight and aloof for five seconds; then he saw the Scot put the whistle away and draw out a tobacco pouch to fill his own pipe. The invitation to smoke had not included an offer of tobacco. Billy grinned. The Scotch had a reputation that way. In the grin, his last vestige of anger died. He took out a cigarette and sat down. The Scot applied flame to the bowl of his pipe.

"Ye're a mon, Yank, that any mon would be proud to hold as a friend," he said slowly. "A wee bit

impulseeve and nae military o' mind but a mon for a' that. I want to thank ye for what ye did."

He put out his hand and Billy North realized in that instant that he had received a tribute such as perhaps no other man in this lonely Scot's life had ever received. Jamie! Scots do not pay tribute to one another. They take sterling worth for granted in the pride of their race. Billy shook.

"You don't owe me any thanks, Scotty, I'd have shot you last night. Thank that poor Englishman who had to go all the way before he believed he was game."

"I do thank him." The Scot looked off into the distance with brooding eyes. "Yank," he said, "I dinna care for war any langer. When ye came, I was playing a wee tune to the Hee-lands, lad. 'Tis no like this flat France. 'Tis a braw country o' mountains and o' lakes that are na dirty pools."

"Mountains?" Billy North sat up straight. "Say, are you hungry for mountains, too?"

The Scot pulled hard on his pipe. "Aye, lad. Fair hamesick."

BILLY NORTH was staring at the grim kiltie with a new light in his eyes. He had attached no importance to the term "Highlander". He had never thought of the Scot as being a man of mountain country like himself. The thought bred a kinship. Before either man realized it, they were talking of their native mountains as neighbors rather than as flyers of a fighting squadron. The fact that one man was picturing the rugged grandeur of the Rockies and the other the craggy fastnesses of the Scotch Highlands made no difference. They were mountain men and the language of such men needed no words.

Only the noise of an engine—a powerful engine being warmed up—broke the train of thought and speech. Billy North came to his feet. "My ship!" he said. He had just remembered his big resolve. The Scot stared at him.

"Your ship, lad?"

They had walked to the edge of the hangar. The sun of late day shone on the black wing surfaces of the D.H. Billy North nodded. "Yes, Scotty. Mine for a while. I'm taking my last patrol before the court-martial takey my buttons and my wings. I'm flying this one for my brother who is somewhere under the mud in Flanders."

His face was tight and grim now. The thing that he had come to France for was very close to him and he would never have another chance. He was through

with observation patrols. When he came back, if he did come back, he would be through with flying and with war. While he flew, he would pay scores; the bill of Dick North and of Dink Stebbins, of Cottiswood and Galbreath and the rest would be presented for payment.

The Scot was standing very tall and very straight beside him. "I weel go wi' ye, lad," he said. "'Twould be a shocking waste to hae one fine gun Idle."

"You? But——"

Angus MacDonald was marching straight to the D.H., marching for the men who went to the first Ypres and for Jamie who had died with an explosive bullet in his spleen. "Aye, lad. I ha'e a score to pay that canna be paid while I'm sore weighted doon wi' duties. I'm still under orders to stay close to the ground. We'll be court-martialed taegither, I'm thinkin'."

After that first minute of indecision, Billy was glad. It would be good to have that stalwart figure behind him, that sure hand on the Lewis. He swung up to the cockpit.

"If the eyes of the guns are black to-day, we'll get them fighting, Scotty," he whooped. "You can leave your pencil home."

There were lights dancing in Angus MacDonald's eyes. "Aye!" he said.

The mechanics pulled the chocks as Billy opened the throttle. The D.H., black as the vengeance that it carried, hurtled down the field and roared over the trees. On a dead line, it roared for Croiselles and the German territory beyond. There were clouds and Billy went up after them. He was glad that there were clouds!

Up behind the German lines somewhere on the edge of the cloud there would be a grim assassin waiting. Poised up there like some obscene vulture that preyed only on those who had no defense, Kitschmark would wait. This was his favorite hour.

As the sun went down into the western sky, Allied ships would be racing home from their jobs over the German lines. Low on petrol and tired, minds filled with thoughts of the mess and rest, the men in the two-seaters were easy victims in the evening. Where easy victims were to be found, Kitschmark would be there.

Billy North sat grimly concentrated. He had to pick out the spot where Kitschmark was likely to prowl. He had to guess right and once he made his guess, he had to pray the gods of war that the German would come down and that the guns would obey the vengeful hands that manned them.

HE WAS feeling again as he felt when he went up the mountain after the half breed. Kitschmark was that half breed. Kitschmark stood for everything that he hated or had ever hated. The man had come to mean all that was evil and detestable in the German Air Force. There were brave men over there and he did not hate them. Kitschmark had not slain his brother, but the Hawk of Havrincourt stood for the thing that had slain him.

They crossed Croiselles and Billy kicked south. German secrets that were secrets no longer since yesterday's patrol were south of Croiselles. There would be many British observation ships down that way to-day. That would be the logical place for Kitschmark. The thought cheered him. He no longer doubted. He knew!

The sun was sinking slowly and he flew a long curve for the massed clouds south and east. He would head back toward the lines and come within striking distance of those clouds.

He was tense, wound tight with the craving for action. He saw two Roland scouts that he knew he could lick and he let them go. The clouds!

He was heading back into the sun. An assassin could ask nothing better. A two-seater with the sun in the pilot's eyes. Billy waited for the stroke of Death's dark Angel, his hands itching for the guns.

Then as darkness comes to mountains in one blanketing curtain, so came the shadow of the assassin's wings.

There was the high whine of Spandau lead and the rush of wings. Billy rolled and he heard the hoarse, victorious shout from the rear cockpit; clear in the headphones beneath his helmet.

"Bull's-eye, lad. I ha'e him."

Billy knew a twinge of disappointment. He wanted this foe himself. He dropped out of his half roll and he saw the Albatross below him. Assuredly, it had been hit; but just as surely, the Hawk of Havrincourt lived. The German was sprawling as he flattened out and turned left with the left wing down. He would be zooming for the clouds now.

Billy was rushing down on him with his guns spitting. No jammed guns this trip. His tracers skimmed the other's wings and the German sideslipped desperately. He had a chance then as Billy yawed wildly over the sky in a crazy attempt to make a scout maneuver in a cumbersome ship. But the German was too craven to take the chance that he had for the blind spot. Habit is strong and his habit was one burst and escape.

He put all of his chips on the escape card now and went once more for the protecting layers of cloud. Billy had time to redress and hatred hurled the black D.H. in a straight hard line.

Too late, Kitschmark saw that he could not beat the roaring two-seater to the clouds and he lost his head. He was a no-deflection shot for a split second—and Death needs no more in the air.

The burst went right through the Albatross cockpit and the plane of the assassin staggered. It seemed to hang on the tracers, then there was a puff of smoke, a cloud of flame.

Kitschmark, Hawk of Havrincourt, went straight down with a long trail of smoke in his wake. Two pairs of eyes followed him. The nose-heavy Albatross dropped like a plumline and a pillar of flame leaped skyward as it hit.

Billy banked lazily toward the Allied lines. "Not you, Scottie. Not me. We got him!"

He was content. He had recaptured the moment when the breed went up on his toes and spun. He had staked his life to collect an account and he had won. Not all of the courts-martial in the world could take this moment from him.

CHAPTER XI MOUNTAIN MEN

IN THE REAR COCKPIT, Angus was sitting very straight, but the hard lines had gone out of his face. "Wee Jamie," he said, "I hae been o'er slow but ye remember the Guid Book, Jamie. It says that 'To everything there is a season and a time tae every purpose under Heaven; a time to be born and a time tae die!' 'Tis a guid saying."

They were climbing high now over the roads that they had surveyed and reported on the day before; troop-choked roads, towns loaded with supplies, munitions dumps, all the stuff of a big German drive. They were flying high in a ship that could far outclimb the Sop. The sun was all but gone.

Suddenly the earth was split with flame and the ship rocked in the terrific concussion below. A roar like the sudden opening of the Infernal regions came from the distant earth and some unseen hand turned on the most extravagant fireworks display in the history of the world.

The men in the D.H., high above the raging horror, were numb with the shock of it. Their senses reeled and they were tossed like chips on a stormy sea. Angus was shouting something but it was seconds before Billy North could understand.

"The guns, lad. Our guns. Is it no grand?"

Billy looked down. The British guns were tearing the country to pieces; grinding to powder all of the expensive machinery of an attempted German drive. In a stunned wonder, he looked and admitted huskily that it was "grand"—grand in a most horable and awe-inspiring way. Scotty was still, shouting.

"It's oor worrk, laddie. Oors. We ha'e done it. The guns canna see o' themselves."

In a wave of comprehension it came to Billy North, the true meaning of the observer's work. The guns were blind. This German drive was being smashed by blind guns, guns that were laying flame and destruction and death along a line that he and Angus had drawn. His eyes were wide with the wonder of it.

He had said that an observation squadron didn't fight. His mind flashed back to his fight with Angus in the mud and the rain. What had boxing skill availed then? The scouts were boxers, feinting around for openings with other boxers. The observation squadrons could not box. They waded in and took the other fellow's blows until they could land their wallop. When they landed——

He looked below him and shuddered.

On through the black of night over the flaming barrage, Billy took his D.H. home. The show was over and now for the accounting. He felt for Croiselles through the shrieking fury and he had often boasted that he could fly home from Croiselles with his eyes blind-folded. Fate had called his bluff. He had to do just that. There was no moon.

He caught the gleam of the canal and he knew where the trees should be. He settled and played his controls. Behind him, the Scot sat quietly. He knew the risk but he said no word. His life was always in the hands of another man.

Billy was feeling for the ground. Their wheels settled and they rolled in. He sank back in the cockpit. It was over and he had never made a prettier landing in the bright glare of noon. It was a fitting climax to a flying career. He turned around and shook hands gravely with Angus.

"We'll go in and report to the colonel," he said. "It was a good show while it lasted."

"Aye. I hae no complaint."

TOGETHER they walked between the hangars and down the road. There was a light in the headquarters hut and Billy squared his shoulders. The Scot was right behind him when he opened the door. Billy stopped with a smothered oath of amazement.

The man behind the desk was John Galbreath.

"How—what—"

"Long story, you chaps. Have a seat." Major Galbreath filled his glass and pushed the bottle across the table. "When you see a ghost, always take a drink. That's my motto."

With a wide grin for the amazement on the two grimy faces before him, the major chopped off his story in a dozen short sentences. He had been cut off by two Huns and one had been yellow. The other had shot his gas line in two and ruined half his flying wires but Galbreath had downed him before he was through. Then he had crashed in No-Man's-Land, and he had had to wait for night and spend another day trying to get home.

"A simple story," he said, "and not half as thrilling as the exploit that won you lads a D.S.O. apiece."

"A D.S.O.? You're crazy." Billy North was staring. "We're candidates for court-martial and—"

Galbreath waved his hand. "I know all about that. Been hearing about it till I'm fed up. The esteemed colonel holds his rank merely in a bookish and clerical manner. He had a run of luck in stumbling in here when there was no one to stop him from winning the war by himself. That's all over."

Billy swallowed. The colonel had never worried him. It was the D.H. that weighed on his conscience.

Galbreath was grinning at him. "Young man," he said, "you cost me a case of the best and a lot of explaining. Next time you steal a plane, don't hit a captain. There was a lieutenant there and—"

"A captain?"

"Righto. But that's fixed. I swore by all my household gods that you, the winner of the D.S.O., were on a special and confidential mission where any measure was excusable. Plus the case of mouthwash, it worked. You can forget it. Now get washed, both of you. You're a disgrace to your outrageous nations."

They had scarcely reached the door, however, when the major called. "Oh, just a minute, North!"

Billy turned back and the C.O. tapped the pile of papers on his desk. "I haven't forgotten my promise," he said. "Your recommendation for transfer to pursuit is in this pile."

Billy snapped his fingers. "Tear it up," he said. "I've just seen a punch I started yesterday land on the button."

Angus was half way to quarters and the wail of his tuppenny whistle came down the wind. Billy grinned and stretched his legs to catch up.

"You lament grand, Scotty," he said, "but see if you can do this one. Pick it up while I sing."

Together they went down the road and a new melody wailed through the blackness of French night.

Oh, bury me not on the lone prairieeeee
Where the lean coyote howls over meeee.

They were both mountain men and' it was an anthem.