



THE SINGING MAJOR

by **RAOUL WHITFIELD**

He looked mild, but he was rough, tough and nasty—that Singing Major. Up and down the Front he was famous for anything from arson to mayhem until he answered his third curtain call and found the Reaper himself blocking the wings.

THE FIRST TIME I SAW Major McCrae he was singing, but I didn't know that singing was an outlet for him. When he was singing he was thinking about something else. He was hard and a fighter, and I guess the singing sort of helped him. He wasn't an easy man to understand; his actions were contradictory and they got him talked about.

I heard his name mentioned in New York, before I went overseas, by a captain who had been sent along home by way of a Blois court-martial, merely because a certain Colette had been caught week-ending in the captain's quarters of a front-line squadron. And I heard about McCrae at Issoudun, while I was ground-skimming wingless Nieuports.

He didn't seem to have a hard-boiled reputation; this singing business had got him the tag "the Singing Major." And from what I heard I got the idea that

he was pretty hard to figure, and to get along with. I gathered that his squadron was flying a tough sector of the Western Front, and that Major McCrae didn't go in much for discipline on the ground. But he liked things done his way in the air. And I got the idea that the major's way was to shove Boche crates out of the sky in a hurry.

And then there was a mistake somewhere along the line. After six months of training, instructing and ferrying, I was ordered to aerial gunnery school. And then, very suddenly, after I'd finally hit a sleeve a few times, I was ordered to the Fifth Pursuit.

That seemed typical enough. I'd had my last training on DeHavilands, I'd ferried the first DeHavilands assembled in France, and I'd taken aerial gunnery on the big, two-place crates. The Fifth Pursuit was flying fifteen-meter Nieuports from a sloping field somewhere near a village called Perney, on the Nancy-

Toule sector. And the C.O. of the outfit was a major named William McCrae, who had picked up a tag because of his voice, but whose reputation didn't rest entirely on the voice.

Anyway, I went from St. Jean de Monts to Paris, got drunk and sobered up partially, took the train to Nancy and got drunk again. The next morning, pretty early, I caught a truck that was going to this village of Perney. It wasn't much of a village; guns had smashed it a lot. An M.P. who regarded me with considerable suspicion gave me directions, and I hiked to the Fifth Pursuit Squadron, I was a bit over twenty-four hours behind schedule when I arrived at the end of a path through a fairly thick woods and looked down on the Fifth Pursuit. It wasn't a particularly inspiring sight.

Camouflaged canvas hangars, two clapboard barracks not so well camouflaged, a small, sloping field, and a drizzling rain that was pretty cold coming out of low, gray clouds. The ceiling couldn't have been more than fifteen hundred feet or so.

I set my duffle bag down and lighted a cigarette. My head didn't feel too good, and a little sleep wouldn't have hurt matters any.

"No patrol this morning, so I haven't missed that. If this singing major is in a good humor—" I muttered.

I took a deep pull on the cigarette and reached for my duffle bag. And from the most distant of the two barracks a voice reached me. It was a deep voice, and it had a rollicking sort of note. I stood still and listened. It wasn't exactly a trained voice, but it was good. I'd heard this particular song before; it was about mountaineers and their more or less intimate habits. It had a nice swing, and some of the verses were new to me. New and good.

I stood there and grinned; it seemed as though Major McCrae would be in good humor. I picked up my duffle bag, which was a combination small mattress-roll and bag, and moved down the sloping path. A new sound reached me, the whining drone of a ship. It grew louder and then changed tone. Another ship.

I whistled softly; my idea about the patrol was probably wrong. There had been one, and some of the crates were coming in. I couldn't quite figure how their pilots could find the camouflaged squadron in such a sky. And the country around Perney was pretty hilly. But they found it. Two little ships streaked out of the gray stuff and circled the small field. One of them stopped making the droning sound and dove. I went down to the bottom of the slope and watched enlisted men come from the nearest barracks. The singing

had stopped, and there was the roll-crunch noise of a landing gear taking the strain of a ship hitting tarmac.

AS I reached an end door of the farthest barracks a voice boomed out, singing mountaineer words again. The door opened and McCrae came out. I let my duffle bag slide to the ground and straightened. McCrae's singing stopped, and he narrowed blue eyes on my dark ones. He was a big man with broad shoulders, red hair and a lean, hard face. There was a curving, red scar across his left cheek. He had long arms and strong fingers. He stood with his feet spread and his body hunched slightly forward, and his blue eyes got very narrow. I saluted.

"Lieutenant Crocker reporting for duty, sir."

He nodded his head and let his narrowed eyes look me over from head to feet. Then he answered, mimicking my tone.

"Lieutenant Crocker reporting for duty, sir—twenty-four hours late!"

I started to smile but changed my mind. McCrae wasn't smiling and the expression in his eyes was getting harder. His right fist was clenched at his side, and his body was swaying a little. He looked as though he were getting set for a swing at me, and I took my eyes away from his and watched that right fist. He spoke again, in his own, deeper tone.

"Lieutenant Crocker reporting, sir, and scared as hell that Major McCrae is going to hit him in the jaw!"

I shook my head and smiled a little. "No, sir," I replied. "Not a bit scared of that."

His body stopped swaying and he looked surprised. Then the surprise went from his eyes.

"No?" he said grimly. "Not scared, eh?"

I just shook my head. "Not a bit," I replied.

There were shouts out on the field beyond the hangars and barracks. But the major didn't take his eyes off mine.

"What held you up, Crocker?" he asked, and his voice was very grim.

"I met some of the boys in Paris—had a few drinks too many," I said. "Missed the train, by five or six hours. Felt rotten. Went back to bed. Damned if I didn't repeat the next night, but I got a later train—"

McCrae nodded. "Nice of you," he said very grimly. "And while you were getting drunk I lost three pilots. Lost 'em because I didn't have enough to send out in pairs, because you weren't up here, where you should have been. Lost 'em because staff was yelping for 'em, and they couldn't go out right."

I said, "I'm sorry, sir."

His eyes widened and smiled in a peculiar manner. He shook his head.

"Like hell you are!" he snapped at me. "But you will be sorry, Crocker. You'll be so damned sorry that it won't even be funny!"

I said, "I'll never be any more sorry than I am right now, sir. I can hardly believe that my absence was the direct cause of the three pilots' deaths—"

He cut in sharply. "Get the hell into the adjutant's office, lieutenant. Tell Phelps that Lieutenant Crocker, formerly amateur boxing champion at State, has finally got through drinking and is up here. Tell him that the mark on your jaw was from a little scrap you had in Paris, and that it doesn't matter at all."

I stared at the C.O. of the Fifth Pursuit. He was smiling and his body was swaying slightly again.

"What mark on my jaw, sir?" I said slowly.

He chuckled hoarsely. "This one—" he said in a very slow voice.

His body stopped swaying and he pitched forward. His left fist came up like a streak, and my head swung away from it. But it didn't swing away from his right. That right fist pounded my protecting right arm up, and smashed through it. Something seemed to explode under my right ear, near the end of the jaw bone. I felt my body slipping downward, but I didn't feel it hit the dirt. Things went black.

WHEN I got to my feet, seconds later, no human was in sight. There was a buzzing in my ears that was growing less loud with every second. A Nieuport was being taxied into a hangar, her Gnome engine droning sound at intervals. Now and then there was a shout.

When I opened and closed my mouth something clicked, along the right jaw bone. There was red on my lips and I felt pretty weak. A slow rage gripped me; the attack had been so sudden, McCrae's pistonlike movement of his fists had caught me by surprise. And I'd been out, cold. A squadron commander, a major, battering down a reporting lieutenant because he was twenty-four hours late! And seconds before he had been singing.

I tried to stand without swaying. I muttered to myself.

"He struck me, knocked me cold. I can make a report."

My thick words died away. I could make a report, without a witness. McCrae could call me a liar. He was a C.O. and a major. He wasn't a fool. I was twenty-four

hours late in reporting to the Fifth, and I'd admitted to him that I'd been drunk. And he'd known that I'd boxed at State, boxed pretty well. But why had he hit me? To show me that he was tough? Because I'd said I wasn't afraid of that clenched fist? Because I'd been late?

I drew a deep breath and went to a bucket of water near the end of the barracks. It wasn't very clean water, but it was cold. I doused my head in it, several times. It made my mouth feel better.

AFTER a few minutes I got my duffle bag and went into the barracks. A lieutenant, who was shaving with the clapboard door of his coop open, stared at me and told me the adjutant's office was at the field end, across from the C.O.'s.

"You Shevlin?" he asked.

I shook my head. "Crocker," I told him, and went along to the adjutant's office. When I got inside the adjutant was sitting back of a crude, wooden desk. He was a captain. McCrae was standing behind him, looking at a map pasted on the wall. I saluted the adjutant.

"Lieutenant Ben Crocker, reporting from St. Jean de Monts, sir. I'm twenty-four hours late. Had a few drinks in Paris and missed a couple of trains. Sorry, sir."

My voice was thick and not too steady. Major McCrae didn't move; his back was huge and his arms hung at his sides. The adjutant frowned and held out a hand.

"I'm Captain Phelps," he said. "Pretty bad, coming in late like—"

He stared at my face. "Get hit by a camion, lieutenant?" he asked grimly.

I smiled, though it didn't feel too good. "That's from a little scrap I had in Paris, captain," I said very slowly. "It doesn't matter at all."

I thought McCrae's shoulders moved a little, but I couldn't be sure. I handed the adjutant my orders. While he was looking at them McCrae faced me. He spoke to Phelps.

"No leave of any duration for Lieutenant Crocker for thirty days. Two Nieuports are coming in this afternoon, maybe. Let him have his choice, and send him out with Hammond for a rear-line patrol at five. No word from this Shevlin?"

Phelps said, "Very good, sir. No word from Lieutenant Shevlin, sir." McCrae looked at me with calm eyes and smiled.

"Twelve hours late," he said cheerfully. "I'll see him when he comes in." He smiled at me. "I believe you were boxing champion at State, Lieutenant Crocker?"

I forced a smile. "Yes, sir," I said. "In my particular class, which was not the heavy-weight."

His lips twitched. "A man's either a fighter, or he isn't," he said harshly. "To hell with the class!"

He walked away from the map and into the narrow corridor that separated the barrack's coops. He called back to me.

"Better see Lieutenant Hale about that face of yours, lieutenant."

I said "Yes, sir—thank you, sir." He chuckled, or it sounded something like a chuckle.

"That's all right, Crocker," he replied.

A door slammed across the corridor, and his voice reached the adjutant's office. He was singing loudly and cheerfully the same song I'd heard as I'd come along the path. The adjutant frowned down at my papers, then looked up at me.

"Because the major is singing, don't get the idea this outfit isn't catching hell from the Boche, Crocker," he said. "The major has peculiar habits."

I tried to keep grimness out of my voice. "Yes, sir," I said, and added in my lousy French, "*C'est la guerre.*"

And Phelps opened up just a bit. "Yeah," he agreed. "It's the war—and some other things."

CHAPTER II ROOKIE STIFFS

JAKE BENSON had the coop across from the one assigned me. He came in and introduced himself; he was short and thick-set and didn't have too much hair on his head. I was lying on my bunk and had a cold towel over my jaw, trying to keep the swelling down. At intervals I'd curse McCrae. It had been a pretty surprising introduction to the squadron, and while I'd heard some strange tales about the singing major, I'd never heard that he was given to slamming down reporting pilots.

Jake Benson grinned at me. "Must have been a free-for-all," he observed. "McCrae announced at mess last night that an amateur fight champ was late coming up, and that he hoped none of us would provoke you."

I sat up and stared at Benson. "He said that?" I

breathed softly. It looked to me as though McCrae knew more about me than I did about him, and that he'd been laying for me. But why?

"Yeah," Benson replied. "He said that, and he said that it might be a good idea to have you get up a series of boxing matches, and cut out the flying for a while. We couldn't keep ships in the sky, anyway. He ended up by telling us we were all too good natured."

I lighted a cigarette. "What did McCrae do, before the war?" I asked.

Jake shrugged. "A lot of things. He was a racing driver for a while. He knocked around South America. Sang in vaudeville, I think."

I frowned. "Nice flyer?" I asked. Benson grinned. "Nice shot," he replied. "He's got three Boche officially, and two or three unofficially. He takes off with the left wing low and cracks up every now and then coming in."

I said, "He's a C.O. who flies, then?"

Jake Benson swore. "He flies, shoots, sings, drinks, swears—"

I looked at Benson narrowly. It seemed to me that he wouldn't talk too much.

"And knocks out pilots who report twenty-four hours late," I said softly. Benson looked at me and whistled softly. "So that was how it was!" he breathed.

I nodded. "Just that," I said. "It's between the two of us. My story is that it happened in Paris. But actually he just slammed me down, and he didn't give me much time to see it coming."

Benson whistled again. After a few seconds he spoke slowly.

"I sort of think my hunch is right. He wants to quit."

I blinked at the short pilot. "Quit?" I said in a puzzled tone.

Benson nodded. "Too much responsibility," he said. "Two months ago he was a captain, a flying adjutant. He didn't mind that so much. Before that he was a first lieutenant, in the Seventh Pursuit. He was good, and he liked it. Then staff started shoving him up. He hates being C.O., if you ask me. He says what he wants, and he does pretty well what he wants. He's been acting pretty tough lately. My hunch is that he'd like to be kicked out of the C.O. job."

I grunted. "Bunk," I said. "If he wanted that, he could let down in the sky—"

Benson shook his head. "Not that way," he said. "McCrae's a fighter. He won't do anything that'll hurt the squadron in the air. Things are bad enough there,

as it is. But I think he'd take a court-martial, would welcome it, if it would relieve him of command."

I said grimly, "And he figured I'd get busy with brigade staff and make a complaint because he knocked me out?"

Benson nodded. "Either that or that you'd fight back and there'd be hell to pay. He said something about your uncle being a staff officer."

I grinned. "In San Francisco," I said. "The damned jackass!"

Jake Benson grunted. "Well, that's my hunch, lieutenant."

I had an idea. "This Shevlin that's coming up," I told Benson. "His father's on Pershing's staff. If you want to prove your theory, let that get to McCrae. Then we'll see what happens."

Benson grinned at me. "Is that straight about Shevlin's father?" he asked.

I shrugged. "Does it make much difference?" I replied. "If you tip McCrae off—"

Benson's grin was broader. "I'll try it," he said, and went from the coop.

AFTER the noon mess I saw Benson talking to the major. McCrae seemed to be listening hard. Lieutenant Shevlin hadn't arrived at the squadron, and a Lieutenant Brandis had failed to return from the morning patrol. McCrae paid no attention to me.

I picked out the Nieuport I liked best of the two I looked over in the hangars. Lieutenant Hammond came into my coop around four-thirty and said that we'd get off in about twenty minutes. We'd lay back of the Front, north of the squadron and I could work the guns on cloud fringes and stunt around a bit. He'd watch for Boche. We'd stay up about an hour, and he told me the signals we'd use.

I got a helmet flap over my swollen jaw, took my pet goggles and headed for the field end of the barracks. I had to pass the adjutant's office, and the C.O.'s across from it. As I neared the corridor spot between the two I heard McCrae singing. He wasn't singing so loudly, and there was a grim note in his voice. The song was the one about the fellow's girl who was a lulu, every inch a lulu.

I was about ten feet from the C.O.'s door when an officer in a trench coat stepped out from Phelps's office, and I heard Phelps say, "Right across the corridor, Shevlin. Just walk right in." I stopped and watched Shevlin go into the C.O.'s office. I took off my helmet and fooled around with it as though something

needed adjustment. McCrae stopped singing, and I heard Shevlin's voice, reporting. Then McCrae answered.

"You know what happens up here when an officer reports more than fifteen hours late?"

His voice was slow and calm. Shevlin answered smoothly.

"There was a chance for me to see my father. I haven't seen him in over eight months—"

McCrae said again, "Do you know what happens when I'm handed a lousy excuse like that? Do you know what happens when a squadron that needs replacements doesn't get them soon enough to save other pilots from going down in flames?"

There was a little , silence, then Shevlin said quietly, "No, sir."

And the C.O.'s voice said just as quietly, "Well, this happens—"

I heard one of Shevlin's boots make a scraping sound, and could imagine him trying to twist his body away. There was a sharp, crackling sound. Shevlin's breath was expelled in a whispered groan. There was a crashing sound, and his head and shoulders were suddenly on the corridor boards. He lay motionless, on his back.

I pulled the helmet over my head again and walked along the corridor. When I reached Shevlin his eyes were blinking stupidly. I stepped over him and Major McCrae looked at me with narrowed eyes, from the doorway of his office. He looked bigger than ever; his huge shoulders were hunched forward. I smiled at him.

"Good afternoon, major," I said. "I'm going up with Lieutenant Hammond."

He didn't know just how to take my disregard of the officer on the floor. I went on but before I reached the barrack's field door he called after me.

"Ask Lieutenant Hammond to report to me about you, when you come in. I want to use you on the dawn patrol, if you're worth using."

I said, "Very good, sir," and went outside.

The major's office door slammed behind me, and when I was fifty feet or so from the barracks, going toward the camouflaged hangars, I heard his voice. He was singing the one about Frankie and Johnny, and he seemed to be enjoying it. I smiled with my lips pressed together, thinking that if the Colonel Shevlin who was attached to Pershing's staff did happen to be Lieutenant Shevlin's father, then McCrae might get where he wanted to get, if he wanted to get there.

I SAID to Lieutenant Hammond, who was tall and thin and who had sharp features and restless, grey eyes, "The C.O. wants you to report to him about me, when we get back. If I'm worth using he wants to use me on the dawn patrol to-morrow." Hammond looked surprised. "The dawn patrol," he breathed. "That would be shoving you over pretty quickly."

I grinned at him. "I've got an idea that McCrae is working fast these days," I said.

He looked at me sharply, started to speak but didn't. We climbed into our crates, revved up in the canvas hangars and took off cross-wind. My take-off was sloppy, but I got the crate into the sky. Hammond was off dirt ahead, and he zoomed toward the Front. The clouds were hanging around four thousand feet and there was a nasty wind. At a cloud ceiling we leveled off, and I stuck pretty close to Hammond's ship, moving my head like an owl. At intervals there were rain squalls.

A mile or so from the front lines Hammond got an arm in the prop wash and pointed toward something that looked like a burning dump. The smoke from it was very black, and there was a lot of it. Hammond banked to the northward, and I followed along. I practiced using the gun sights, and nodded when Hammond pointed out what looked like a DeHaviland winging along the lines.

It happened very suddenly. Hammond's plane was getting away from mine and I tried to shove the throttle lever forward another notch. It stuck, and the air didn't seem to be mixing right with the gas feed. I swore and lowered my head to see what was wrong with the throttle lever. The spring wasn't working and I couldn't get the lever out of the notch. I lifted my head and saw Hammond's ship standing on her tail. Tracer bullets were streaking upward, and a second stream was streaking downward from a ship diving out of the clouds!

A second ship was slanting down toward mine. There was a second of panic, and then I was calm. I had a glimpse of flames in the sky ahead, and of two ships whirling downward. Hammond was finished, but so was the plane and pilot that had dropped from the clouds on him.

The ship slanting downward at my plane looked like an Albatross. She banked off and I swung my Nieuport away from her. But she banked in again, and dove. I pulled the nose of my crate up and toward her. Tracer color sparkled downward at an angle, to the left of my ship. I worked both guns and swung the nose of the Nieuport

straight toward hers. Her prop shattered and there was an explosion. She seemed to break up in the sky.

I was in a stall, and fell out of it into a tight spin. When I pulled the crate out of the spin she was less than a thousand feet above the earth, and I was pretty shaky. I used my eyes on the sky below the clouds, but saw no other planes. Banking mildly, I looked toward the gray-brown color of earth below. Two ships were burning, not far from each other. There was a flare of red. The plane I had shot out of the sky battered down and sent wreckage flaming from the ground.

After another careful look at the sky above, I dove the Nieuport over the wreckage of the three ships. They were down in a valley, and I didn't see any troops around. I roared the Nieuport over them at several hundred feet; the pilots could not be seen.

CHAPTER III CURTAIN PATROL

I'D SPENT almost an hour looking over a map of the country around the Fifth Pursuit, and the Front the squadron flew. I winged back of the lines very low. Even so, it took me almost an hour to find the squadron. It was growing dark when I made a bad landing cross-wind. The rotary engine nearly pulled me into a ground loop. As I taxied toward the hangars and the ground-crew men ran out, my eyes picked up the curving line of bullet holes along the left wing-tip fabric.

Near the hangars I cut the engine and climbed out of the ship. A sergeant stared at me and said, "Lieutenant Hammond, sir?"

I shook my head. "He won't be in," I said. "He went down—in flames." The sergeant turned away from me, and I saw McCrae hurrying over. I was lighting a cigarette with shaking fingers when he reached my side. He looked at my fingers, and his blue eyes were hard on mine.

"What happened?" he asked.

I told him. When I'd finished he frowned at me.

"You picked a hell of a time to worry about a tight throttle lever," he snapped.

I said grimly, "My eyes weren't looking inside the cockpit more than five seconds."

He nodded. "And during those five seconds the Boche jumped you," he replied.

"They didn't jump me," I said quietly. "There was nothing the matter with Hammond's throttle."

He swore. "If you'd kept your plane near his, they wouldn't have dropped down on you," he said.

I shrugged. "Maybe not," I said.

His blue eyes were little slits. "Dawn patrol to-morrow!" he snapped. "I'll lead the flight. You and Lieutenant Shevlin will be with me."

I stared at him. "Shevlin," I muttered. "He's just come up."

McCrae nodded. "Right, fifteen hours late. And you've just come up, twenty-four hours late. If you'd been up here when you should you'd have learned something. And Hammond wouldn't be out of things."

I felt anger gripping me. He'd knocked me out, he'd knocked Shevlin down. He was blaming me for Hammond's death and not giving me credit for the ship I'd downed. I was green, and Shevlin was greener, yet he was taking us along on dawn patrol in the morning.

He seemed to read my thoughts.

"The devil help you if you don't stick close to me to-morrow!" he snapped. "I won't wet-nurse either of you; I'm through wet-nursing this outfit. See that those fabric holes are plugged and doped, and look your guns over. Two-hour patrol, it'll be. And if you get back alive you'll have learned the stuff you should have learned twenty-four hours ago!"

He turned his back on me. I thought of Hammond, and then of Jake Benson's words. I wasn't so sure, now, that Benson was right. McCrae might want to be busted, and to be just a pilot again. He was fed up with his squadron, that was sure. But the thing that was burning him inside was that I'd reported twenty-four hours late, and that Shevlin had reported fifteen hours late. He wanted to make us suffer for that, and he was willing to take his chances of not getting much support, to make us suffer.

I shook my head slowly, gave orders to the ground crew sergeant and went into the barracks. That one sky fight and victory made me feel a little like a veteran. But enough like one. I couldn't get the coming dawn's patrol out of my mind.

Jake Benson came into my coop while I was washing up. He sat on my cot for several minutes without speaking, then he said, "Hammond, eh?"

I nodded. We were silent again for a while.

"What about Shevlin?" I asked.

Benson smiled a little wearily. "It didn't work," he said. "He's not saying much—grinning on the

outside, and feeling pretty sore on the inside. But he hasn't got any father on Pershing's staff; his father is on some commission in Paris, not in the army. It's another Shevlin on the staff. He told Brooks that maybe he rated a crack in the jaw, but that if he'd seen it coming he wouldn't have taken it. He went up about fifteen minutes ago, just before you winged in, with Lieutenant Gales. Rear-line practice flight"

I grunted. "That's fine," I said with sarcasm. "He'll be all set for the patrol at dawn, with this practice flight behind him."

Jake stared at me. "What patrol at dawn?" he asked.

I told him, and he swore slowly. I spoke very softly.

"I don't think he's worrying about being busted, this singing major of ours. But I do think he's sore as hell because we both came up late. So sore that he felt like hitting, and when he got that out of his system he decided it wasn't enough punishment. So he's flying us just as though we'd been up here when we should have been up."

Jake Benson shook his head. "I don't think that's it, Crocker," he told me. "That may be part of it. He's always been hard, but not this hard. He's seen a lot of the boys go out, in the last month. He'd like to lead every flight, but he can't. Two hours a day is all he can put in in the sky, and he shouldn't do that. He's running this outfit, and it should be run from the ground."

I smiled grimly. "He's running it, all right," I said.

There was a knock at the coop door, and Captain Phelps came in. He asked me a detail about the sky fight that he wanted. When he started out Benson called, "What's wrong, adjutant? I don't hear the major singing."

Phelps smiled twistedly. "He's sore as hell," he said.

I sat down on my cot, beside Benson. "About Hammond going West?" I asked.

Phelps shook his head and lowered his voice.

"Brigade just buzzed a message in. The papers are on the way. The squadron has been cited for its work along the line. Major McCrae gets the Croix de Guerre on recommendation of that Frog pilot he helped when the four Fokkers dropped on him. And Brigade buzzes that they're recommending him for the D.S.C."

Benson grinned. "He should feel good, but he'll hate that," he stated. "He hates everything staff does, and he thinks he's running the lousiest outfit up Front. Getting citations and medals, he'll be raving."

Phelps shook his head slowly. "He's a tough one to figure," he breathed and went from the coop.

Benson was chuckling. "Can you beat that?" he muttered. "He tries to get himself busted out of the major job by acting real tough with a couple of lieutenants he figures might be important. It doesn't work. And right on top of that the squadron gets cited and he gets a couple of decorations!"

I LIGHTED a pill, leaned back and closed my eyes. My jaw still ached. "There's a decoration I'd like to give him," I said very softly.

Jake Benson said thoughtfully: "You know, I sort of like that guy, Crocker. He's colorful, and he's got guts."

I swore. "He's taking Shevlin over the lines without any rear-line flight that counts. I haven't had as much back-line air as I should. And his excuse—"

Benson interrupted me. "You guys took it pretty easy getting up here," he reminded. "We've kept up patrols and we've done it thinly, against big odds. We lost pilots, and he knows that while we were losing them you two were in Paris."

I grunted. "So he shoves us across the lines when we're not ready, to make things right."

Benson smiled grimly. "He leads you across the lines," he corrected. "And what you don't know hurts him plenty."

"Just the same," I replied very slowly, "I'd lay a little bet that he comes in from patrol to-morrow, and that he sings a flock of songs before he doesn't come in from a patrol, and that he wears his decorations—"

I broke off. Jake Benson and I both raised our heads and listened. The major wasn't singing with great gusto, but he was singing. And this one was about a lone cowboy, who wanted to be buried out on the prairie. It ended abruptly, with the sound of glass crashing. Jake looked at me and spoke slowly.

"So that's it—the major's celebrating the decorations!"

I groaned. "That'll make it fine for to-morrow morning's patrol," I muttered.

Jake Benson shook his head. "He doesn't get tight," he said. "He just gets sore."

I swore. "He doesn't have to celebrate to get sore," I reminded him.

Jake Benson grinned. "He's a swell C.O.," he announced, and his voice sounded as though he meant it. "He doesn't like it when things are bad, and when things are good—"

"He doesn't like it," I cut in grimly. Jake nodded. "Sure," he said.

That night there was wine at the mess, which got started late. The wind had risen and rain was slapping

against the glass windowpanes, covered on the inside with thick burlap. We could hear the rain on the roof too. The field was getting soggy; it had been pretty bad when I'd come in from looking over the patched and newly doped surface of the left wing.

No one seemed to know where the wine had come from. The feed was a pretty good one; Benson told me in a low voice that Lieutenant Gales had reported that Shevlin was pretty green in the air, but that it hadn't appeared to have altered the C.O.'s decision any. The flight was chalked up on the assignment board as the A group of the dawn's patrol—Major McCrae and Lieutenants Crocker and Shevlin. And there was no "weather permitting" qualifications beneath the chalked order.

CHAPTER IV BEARDING THE LION

MCCRAE WAS IN pretty good form; he told two stories that were funny and a lot that the officers laughed at but which weren't funny. He drank a good deal of wine, and it was evident that he'd had a start before the mess. But I got the idea he was very, very sober. He wasn't such a good actor, and I figured he was acting. Benson did, too.

"Something's up," he stated softly. "He's setting the stage for something."

I thought that over. "We'll both go down to-morrow," I told Benson. "Shevlin and myself. He'll come in and figure some one in the outfit hates him enough to turn him up as having still been drunk when he led us out. He'll get a court-martial but they won't break him all the way."

Benson shook his head, and I didn't think much of that theory, myself. It was a possibility, though.

After the coffee, which was pretty bad, McCrae stood up and threw back his big head. His red hair was ruffled; he swayed back and forth. When we started to rise he shouted at us. "At ease, gentlemen!"

We sat down, and when the scraping sound of the chairs died away he started to sing. It was a pretty good number, about a certain Italian who had discovered that the world was "roundo." McCrae did it well. At the end he made a sweeping movement with his long, left arm and things crashed from the table to the floor.

He threw back his head and roared with laughter. The other officers were pretty quiet. When McCrae went from the mess room his walk was unsteady. Chairs made scraping sounds, and I heard a lieutenant whose name I didn't know mutter, "Tight as hell." I caught Shevlin looking at me with a puzzled expression, and when that lieutenant went from the barracks into the rain, I followed him. He seemed to expect that I would.

"What's wrong, lieutenant?" he asked me as we walked slowly toward the unlighted hangars. "There's something wrong, that's sure."

I shrugged. "The C.O.'s a bit fed up, maybe," I said. "You do queer things when you reach a certain point."

Shevlin shook his head. "He's a rotten actor," he replied. "He's cold sober right now, but he wants his officers to think that he isn't."

I said, "Maybe."

Shevlin looked at me sharply. Our boots made sucking sounds in the soft turf of the field we were cutting across.

"He slammed you down, and he slammed me down," Shevlin said. "And they tell me he's never hit any one before, around the squadron. We could break him for that, by both turning him in."

I smiled grimly. "I think we could," I said. "But he knows now that we're not going to turn him in." Shevlin was looking at me again. The wind blew gustily.

"What's he going to do with us, to-morrow, Crocker?"

I shrugged. "What are the Boche going to do with us?" I countered.

SHEVLIN said a little shakily, "I don't mind going down if I've got a chance to fight back."

I was silent for several seconds, before answering.

"It isn't exactly murder, lieutenant. You're liable to get it in flight behind the lines. I almost did, this afternoon. Hammond went down, and he's been up here almost a month. You've had one practice flight, and so have I."

Shevlin's voice held bitterness. "One! I could use a few more."

"War isn't that easy," I replied. "The Boche are fighting over Allied territory, and McCrae has to put ships in the sky. And we both came up late."

Shevlin nodded his head and swore. "That's what's eating him," he said. "He's going to lead us across the lines to-morrow, and if we don't get dropped on he'll

find us a scrap. He's not worried about himself, and he's hating us plenty. But we stand a good chance of both going down, and that might mean trouble. So he gives himself an out; if they court-martial him he can say he was drunk."

I groaned. "That's a lousy theory," I told him. "He wouldn't bother finding an out for himself. And if we go down, it won't mean any trouble. Nieuports are going down every dawn, a lot of them."

"Well then, what's his game?" Shevlin asked.

I shrugged again. "I can't figure it," I said. "I agree with you that he's cold sober right this minute, and pretending he isn't. I don't think he hates us too much for coming up late. I do think he's fed up running a squadron, but he's not fed up with flying over the lines."

Shevlin answered shakily, "This Lieutenant Hammond went down a few hours ago, and yet McCrae can stand up and sing."

I swore. "The Fifth is used to men not winging back again, Shevlin," I told him. "If you don't think you're getting a square deal, refuse to fly the dawn patrol."

Shevlin swore. "I'll fly it, but I'll do some writing first."

I grinned. "It'll be a big help for a dead man to have some one else think that you got a rotten deal."

"Well, I'll feel better about it," Shevlin spoke tightly.

We reached the hangars and turned around. We were both getting pretty wet. A door opened and faint light struck the field surface. A figure came out and Shevlin muttered, "McCrae!"

It wasn't McCrae, but I got the idea that Shevlin's nerves were pretty shaky. He was thinking about the dawn patrol, and seeing things. That didn't make me feel much better. One green pilot, one green and shaky pilot—and Major McCrae. It wasn't exactly my idea of a steady flight group.

The figure that had come from the barracks was near us now. It was Phelps.

"That you, Crocker?" he asked.

"Crocker and Shevlin," I told him. He came up to us.

"Surprise inspection," he said. "Colonel Stetters, of brigade. In the mess room. Get fixed up as well as you can; he wants to meet all the officers. Has a speech of congratulation."

Shevlin said bitterly, "Fine—for the dawn flight, I suppose?"

The adjutant looked at Shevlin, then at me. Shevlin went ahead of us, into the barracks. Captain Phelps spoke softly.

"A little shaky, eh?" he asked.

"Well—why not? Knocked down by the C.O. and given one short flight back of the lines in rotten weather. Then slated for a dawn patrol."

Phelps swore. "You got almost the same dose, didn't you?" he asked grimly. "You seem in better shape."

I grinned. "I think Shevlin has got a girl," I said. "He's pretty bitter about his chances of not coming back."

The adjutant grunted. "How about you?" he asked.

I shook my head. "I had one," I said. "She married the other guy a couple of months ago. He was the first one to get back a hero."

Phelps whistled softly. "You and McCrae, eh?" he breathed. "Both of you—"

He checked himself. I stared at him and sucked in a deep breath.

"So that's it!" I muttered. "But I don't see—"

Phelps said slowly, "Keep that quiet, Crocker. I know what he did to you, and I know how he feels, he's pretty bitter."

"Sure," I replied. "But I haven't been running around slamming down corporals because—"

Phelps swore. "You haven't been running this squadron for two months, either. You haven't seen a hundred and twenty per cent replacements in that length of time, lieutenant. And that girl business—that's just a part of it."

I FOLLOWED Phelps into the barracks and went to my coop. Another reason for McCrae losing control. I knew how I'd felt when I'd got a certain letter from the States, and I guessed how McCrae would feel. And I began to think that Benson had the right hunch. McCrae wasn't the type to run a squadron, not on the ground. But perhaps because of the girl, he'd taken on what they'd handed him. When she was through he didn't care. He wanted to fight, but not to worry about details. And he was sore, too. He'd taken that out on us. He was still taking it out on us, and playing for a chance to be broken, at the same time. That was the way I figured it.

I got fixed up as well as I could and went into the mess room. After a while Colonel Stetters and his aide came in, with McCrae behind them. The colonel's face was red; there was a grim expression in his eyes. McCrae staggered a little and leaned against the wall after Phelps had called us to attention.

The speech the colonel made was pretty bad. But he complimented the squadron, spoke of great odds and line work. His voice was very formal the one time he

mentioned McCrae, and the thing he said might have been said of any C.O. It certainly wasn't the thing a brigade officer would say of a man who was elated to get two decorations. Something had happened, and I could guess what it was. Major McCrae had been given an opportunity. He was cold sober, but he wasn't acting that way.

We all filed past and shook hands with Colonel Stetters, when the speech was finished. Phelps introduced us, and McCrae leaned against a clapboard wall and chuckled. There was a grin on his face all the time. When Phelps introduced me the colonel smiled a little and told me there had been a verification of the ship I'd shot down.

"On your first flight from here, I understand. Fine work."

I thanked him and McCrae said thickly, "Crocker was amateur boxing champion at State. I've heard of him. A fine fighter."

He grinned at me. The colonel frowned.

"In my particular class, sir," I said to the colonel, and McCrae laughed loudly.

"Lieutenant Shevlin's a fine fighter, too," he announced. "Never been knocked off his feet."

He laughed again, and the colonel looked puzzled. He said, "That's what we want in the air—fighters." It didn't make such of an impression on me, because it wasn't exactly original. But McCrae seemed to think it was very funny. He threw back his head and roared.

When the colonel and his aide left the mess room, McCrae went with him into the rain. My coop was near the road end of the barracks, away from the field, and I could hear him roaring with laughter. The colonel and his aide seemed to be pretty quiet. There was the hum of their car engine and they were gone. McCrae came through the barracks, singing. It was the one about the mountaineers again. His office door slammed and his voice died away.

I was lying on my cot, half undressed, when Captain Phelps came in. He was frowning. He shut the door behind him.

"Well, he gets his wish," he said softly. "Colonel Stetters is going to recommend that he be relieved from the C.O. job."

I swore. "Too bad," I said, and really meant it. "I sort of like McCrae."

The adjutant grunted. "He's a sweet fighter, in the air," he muttered. "But he couldn't lick staff, on the ground."

I said, "Does he know what the colonel thinks about it?"

Phelps smiled grimly. "I'm telling him now," he said. He went from the coop and along the corridor.

CHAPTER V SQUARED BLOWS

ABOUT FIVE MINUTES after Phelps had left, as I was thinking about turning in, there was a wild whoop from McCrae. And he started to sing at the top of his lungs. Jake Benson came in and wanted to know what was up now. I told him that Stettens was relieving McCrae, and that the adjutant had just broken the news.

Benson smiled grimly. "Relieving him for being drunk, and he was cold sober!" he muttered.

I nodded. "They'll probably send him back to the States and give him a job training pilots," I said.

Benson shook his head. "He won't go," he stated. "He'll swipe a crate and finish things off over the lines, if they hand him that dose."

Benson went out and McCrae kept on singing. I hauled on a pair of flannel pajamas and got between blankets. After a while McCrae stopped singing and things got quiet. I slept, and dreamed of the broad-shouldered C.O. slashing at me with his fists and singing at the same time. After that I dreamed of a dawn patrol and ships going down in flames. Then I just slept.

I was awakened by some one shaking me, and stared into the eyes of McCrae. His red hair was more mussed than usual, and his lean face was close to mine. There was a peculiar expression in his eyes.

"Get up," he ordered. "Put a shirt and your breeches on. Douse your head. Don't make too much noise, it isn't getting very light yet."

I got up and put a shirt on. I said, "What is it, sir?"

He grinned at me. "It's your chance to get even," he said. "I weigh more than you, but you know more than I do. We'll go up the path, away from the barracks."

I blinked at him. "Forget it, sir," I said. "I rated that slam-down. I was twenty-four hours late."

He spoke sharply. "You didn't see it coming. I lost control. With Shevlin it was different, I meant to hit him. I figured the two of you would get together and report me. I didn't hit him as hard as I hit you, and he isn't a fighter. You can be getting even for him, too."

I grinned. "No, thanks," I said.

He walked over close to me and slashed out with a half opened right fist. The blow rocked my head. It stung. He said, "Scared of me?"

I stood up and swore at him. "You're a damn fool!" I muttered.

He smiled with his blue eyes hard and narrow.

"Outside, and up the path!" he snapped, and turned his back on me.

I followed him outside and up the path. There was the first uncertain light of dawn breaking. It had stopped raining, but it was gusty and cold. I shivered a little. He led the way to a cleared stretch in a little gully. Then he turned and faced me.

He was smiling and his long arms were at his side. I stood still and tried to think of something to say. While I was trying to think of the right thing, he lowered his head and rushed in. I went to the right and clipped him with a swinging left. He got in close and tried a couple of upper-cuts, but they were easy to get away from. He was awkward; his foot-work was rotten. I knocked him off balance with a straight left and feinted his guard up, then sent in a heavy body blow. He grunted and sagged, and then rushed me again.

I kept off and got in two light rights to his face. He was bleeding and his grin had faded. His breath was coming in short gasps and he was missing me with his wild swings, missing badly.

"Better—quit—major—" I panted.

He swore at me and caught me a glancing blow on the shoulder. It knocked me off balance and he rushed in. A straight left stopped him short and a hard right knocked him backward. He swung wildly and I ducked under his right arm. He was off balance and his head was thrown back. I brought up a sharp, snapping right, and it hurt my knuckles when it landed. I was in close and the blow was perfectly timed. McCrae's breath went out sharply; he dropped heavily to the wet ground, and rolled over on his face.

I STOOD looking down at McCrae and rubbing my knuckles. After a few seconds his legs and arms moved. He dragged himself to his knees. I helped him to his feet and he grinned weakly at me.

"Sure," he breathed thickly, "I had—that coming."

There was a little stream in the gully and he went down and got his face in it. He wasn't cut up much, and he had strength in his big frame. When he reached my side again he wasn't grinning.

"You can tell Shevlin about this," he said. "But if either of you let it get around the squadron—"

I shrugged. "No need to tell Shevlin," I said.

He nodded. "I want you to tell him," he instructed. "Make him feel better. Tell him before we get in the air. And Crocker, this isn't going to be a front-line flight. I'm no killer. Shevlin hasn't had enough air stuff up here, and you could use a couple of hours. But don't tell Shevlin that. I want to see what he's got, before I turn the squadron over—"

He checked himself. But he saw in my eyes that I knew he was to be relieved.

"The colonel caught me drunk," he said. "He thinks a couple of months up here has smashed me. I'm praised, decorated, caught drunk and relieved."

His voice held an amused note. "Like hell you were caught drunk," I said.

His eyes got hard. Then he smiled, a slow, hard smile.

"Damn glad you're not the colonel!" he breathed. "All right, let's get coffee."

We had almost reached the barracks when a sergeant came up and saluted. He seemed a little excited. He spoke to the C.O.

"Brigade just sent a message, sir. It's Colonel Stettters and his aide, sir. Lieutenant Lane. And the corporal who drove the machine."

He hesitated and McCrae said grimly, "Well, what about them?"

The sergeant spoke rapidly. "They took a short cut to brigade headquarters and got on a road that was being intermittently shelled. Direct hit, sir. All three of them were instantly killed."

McCrae's breath was sucked in sharply. The sergeant said slowly, "Brigade thought we should know, sir. They just got word."

McCrae said, "Damn!" He put a lot of feeling in the word. "Send brigade my regrets," he said sharply. "That's all."

The sergeant went away. McCrae looked at me. It wasn't anything to smile about, but I was having a hard time not smiling. All the C.O.'s acting for nothing. He wouldn't be relieved now. He hadn't been reported as being found drunk, incompetent to handle a squadron. And Shevlin and I hadn't turned him in for knocking us down. As things stood, a brigade officer had come down and congratulated the C.O. and the squadron. Then he'd gone off and had been killed.

McCrae saw the edge of the smile I was trying to hide.

"Funny, eh? Damn funny!" he said fiercely.

I looked at him and shrugged. He wiped a bit of

red from his lips, with the back of his hand, stood very straight. I said, "Almost as funny as a fellow's girl jumping for the other officer, the one that got back first."

McCrae's eyes got very slitted. "Just whose girl did that, lieutenant?" he asked very grimly.

I smiled a little. "Mine," I told him. "And probably a lot of other guys."

His eyes widened. "Yours?" he said very slowly.

I nodded. He pounded a clenched fist into his left hand, and it made a sharp sound. He spoke in a voice that was hurt.

"Hell, you're young. You can get another."

I knew that he was thinking that he wasn't so young, and that maybe he couldn't get another. He'd been hit hard. Phelps was right, a girl had done it.

McCRAE was thinking about Colonel Stettters again; he shook his head and smiled grimly. Then he looked at the gray clouds in the light of the dawn, and shrugged.

"See that Shevlin has coffee, lieutenant," he said in a hard voice. "Be at the hangars in fifteen minutes. By the time you get back from this flight both of you will have learned something."

I said, "Or we won't need to learn anything."

He nodded slowly and his blue eyes met mine.

"You might even learn how to die," he said very steadily.

I stood very straight. "Listen, McCrae," I started, "don't be a—"

He cut in sharply, "Major McCrae, lieutenant. And I don't want advice from you. I've had all I wanted from you. Get coffee and get out on the field!"

I said, "Very good, sir."

Fifteen minutes later, McCrae stood between us, near the hangar in which his Nieuport was being revved up. Shevlin was nervous, fingering his goggles and looking at the ground. McCrae spoke in a low, hard voice.

"I want you pilots to pay strict attention to my ship and my signals. This is a formation patrol, and our chances of getting anywhere and getting back depend on keeping formation. If I signal an attack, we attack. If I signal a formation break-up, we break up. And if I signal you two to return to the field here, you return. I do the thinking and you do the sort of flying I think. Clear?"

Shevlin said, "Yes, sir," in a voice that wasn't too steady, and I nodded.

I thought I had the key to that little speech McCrae had made. "If I signal you two to return to the field here, you return." That was the line that was wrong. Why should he signal us to return? There was just one reason; Major McCrae was completely fed up. He'd made two bids for a court-martial and neither had worked. He wouldn't do anything that would reflect on his fighting record, and he'd tried the other two ways. He was going to take us along and show us a few things, make sort of a farewell gesture, and then he was going to signal us to return to the squadron. His particular code of honor had let me even things up with him; he felt that he was pretty nearly square with us. He wasn't sure of Shevlin, and he wanted to make him or break him. A bit of vanity, perhaps. But after he'd given us the return signal, he'd go over the lines and do his stuff. And I had a hunch that he'd do it until he couldn't do it any more.

He was looking at me with narrowed eyes, and trying to read my thoughts. He spoke very suddenly.

"And if I give the signal for you to return, and you don't return, I'll shoot you out of the sky!"

Shevlin looked at him in surprise. The major's eyes were on mine. I said:

"Yes, I think you'd try it, major," I said.

His head sank on his shoulders, and he glared at me. There was silence for several seconds, then he smiled. It was a hard smile.

"You know damn well I would, lieutenant," he said quietly.

I didn't know anything of the kind. You couldn't figure McCrae. He was strong, but he had his weak spots. The girl who had gone for the other guy was one of them. Squadron routine work was another, ground work, paper work. Reports, assignments. The girl and that other stuff had beaten him.

We went to our ships and McCrae got off first. Shevlin followed him in a not too smooth take-off. The sky was getting lighter and there was a higher ceiling than there had been yesterday. The rain had stopped, but the wind was nasty. I got off all right, and at two thousand feet, a few kilometers east of the squadron, we picked up formation. Shevlin was off McCrae's port wing and above it. I was off and above his starboard wing.

CHAPTER VI "—BUT UNBOWED."

WE HAD TEN THOUSAND FEET when we neared the Front and McCrae signaled a left bank. Shevlin was shaky, or he missed the signal, and there was nearly a crash. We broke formation, and when we picked up again McCrae got a gauntleted fist in the prop wash and shook it. We were flying pretty tight and not wide open.

There was a two-place ship winging southward over the lines, a reconnaissance ship without an escort. McCrae pointed her out and shook his head. She was an Allied plane. I could see the trench color below, and here and there shells were landing. McCrae kept moving his head constantly and pointing out things. Shevlin was having too much trouble with his ship to notice much; he was falling back and coming up, or zooming and banking to lose air.

We ran into a rain squall and McCrae signaled for us to space out a bit. That made it easier for Shevlin, but it still looked as though he were having enough trouble. I looked at his crate and swore. Either he was pretty scared or he shouldn't have come up front so soon. His flying was very ragged.

We swung back of the lines again and I watched McCrae's arm get out in the prop wash and point downward. At first I didn't see the ship, and then I did. She was a slate-gray color and she was angling back toward the German lines. She was pretty big and looked to me like a Rumpler getting back late from an early morning bombing party.

I watched McCrae for the attack signal; we were in pretty good position. His head was tilted back; he was searching the sky beneath the clouds. I'd been doing that at intervals almost from the start of the flight. I hadn't forgotten Hammond going down. But there was no sign of ships above us now.

The wings of McCrae's Nieuport rocked, and her nose dropped. I banked off and then in again to give him first crack at the Boche. Shevlin was supposed to bank very wide and come down in third position, but he messed things up and roared his little crate on at even keel. I dove my plane.

Something white sailed up from the cockpit

flooring, when the dive breeze got inside. It landed on my lap, on the leather of the short, flying coat I was wearing. Oil splattered back from the rotary and dimmed my goggles glass; I wiped it clear. The Boche plane had stopped angling toward the lines now and was winging straight for them. McCrae's Nieuport was a quarter mile from her, and I wasn't far behind and above him. Shevlin had banked and was diving off the tail of the Rumpler.

I groaned. It seemed to me I'd heard something about the bigger Rumplers having guns in their tails. And Shevlin was dropping in what looked like a power dive.

I read a few words of a scrawl, on the white paper that had caught on my safety belt. They were, "Tip I'm to be boosted to colonel—given field back of lines—training—"

That was enough for me. I knew now the real reason for the things that McCrae had been doing. Redheaded, singing Major McCrae, boosted to a colonel's rating and given a school back of the lines. That would kill him, I knew. Discipline, routine, reports—paper work. Nothing but those things, the very things he hated.

I grabbed for the slip of paper, stuck it in the left pocket of my leather coat. McCrae had pulled his ship out of a dive; he was rolling her. Tracer bullets were streaking from a rear cockpit gun in the Rumpler. But they were missing McCrae's ship. He was out of the roll now, and going close in a short dive. I could see his tracer bullets crashing into the enemy plane. She zoomed and shot off at an angle. Momentarily she was framed in my guns sights, and I let her have a short burst from both guns.

There was a roaring explosion that I heard above the whine of my rotary. She was all red, flaming. McCrae had got her, and perhaps I'd finished things off. I couldn't be sure.

I TWISTED my head, remembering Shevlin. And I saw him. I saw him. His ship was so close that I could see his white face, his body sway as he worked the stick and rudder desperately. But there wasn't a chance.

With all the sky in the sector, he had come banging down to get in my way. I swore fiercely, jammed stick and rudder to the right. The left wing of my Nieuport was lifted, jerked, shaken. The whole ship vibrated. Something snapped and made a whistling sound; the propeller exploded, and I got my head beneath the cowling as bits of it shot back.

I cut the ignition switch, groaning. For a second I was hot, burning. Fear gripped me and twisted curses from my oil-smeared lips. And then all that passed. I got my head above the cowling level again and looked at the shreds of the left lower wing. The Nieuport was already beginning to pancake down, and the upper wing of the little biplane started to go, too.

There was no fire. McCrae's plane shot close to mine, zooming. His engine roar died, and I heard his voice shout hoarsely, "Use that good wing section."

I tried to use it. At Issoudun I'd seen a lieutenant use the left wing of a monoplane all the way down from fifteen thousand feet, and live to talk about it. But I wasn't flying a monoplane, and this wasn't Issoudun.

She was still in a flat spin at two thousand feet, and I had a glimpse of Shevlin's plane just before it crashed. She was in a spin, but it wasn't flat. I breathed grimly, "S'long—Shevlin!"

At about five hundred feet, after pulling the Nieuport out of a dive, she was in a flat spin again. A slow spin, but still she was losing wreckage all the way down. And McCrae was taking terrible chances of tangling with that wreckage, and winging past, grinning and shouting at me.

There was mud below, brown-black in color, stumps of trees and shells bursting. I caught a glimpse of tangled wire, and then the ground was coming up fast, as she dove again. I thought it was the finish. But it wasn't. She came out of that dive just skimming a rise. She started to spin again, but before she could do much of that she hit dirt. She hit on the good wing, and that helped. I shoved the goggles glass away from my eyes, over my helmet. I got my arms up and broke most of the force of that jerk forward. But, something cracked me on the back of the head.

WHEN I saw things again Major McCrae was standing over me. I wasn't thinking very clearly, and it seemed to me that he'd knocked me down.

"Damn you, McCrae, you can't do that," I said.

He grinned at me. "Didn't do that,* he said hoarsely. "Steady, Champ! Can you stand up?"

I stood up and touched numb fingers against a handkerchief he'd tied around my head. I saw that he had a Service Colt in his right hand. A shell exploded and shook the ground. "Where—are we?" I asked.

He shrugged, still grinning. "We're through fighting, in just a few minutes, Crocker," he breathed. "We're on the Boche side, and there's wire all around. I saw the coal-scuttle helmets as I came down."

I said weakly, "What in hell—did you come down for?"

He grinned more broadly. "I was going to give you my crate to get back with," he replied. "But a shell hole finished that. She's on her nose with a splintered prop."

I reached for my own Colt. My head was aching pretty badly, and I swayed a little. Another shell landed and shook the earth.

"Get my note?" McCrae asked.

I nodded. "In the dive," I said. "Only had a chance to glance at it." McCrae kept grinning. "They were going to give me a school, figure that! A lousy, pilot-training school. But that's all right, now."

I said, "Shevlin?"

He frowned, then shrugged. "He dug in," he said. "I was just going to signal both of you to go back to the squadron. I figured seeing that Fokker go down would give Shevlin confidence."

I muttered, "Fokker? I thought she was a Rumpler."

McCrae groaned. Then he grinned again. He waved his Colt a little and I watched three coal-scuttle helmeted Germans come over a rise. Two of them had rifles, and the third something that looked like a Luger. McCrae dropped to one knee, and I got low, beside him.

"Don't shoot until you see the whites of their eyes!" he said mockingly.

I SHOT when the first Boche raised his rifle. I missed and McCrae got him. The whole stretch of mud was under heavy shelling now. The German with the Luger got flat in the mud, and so did I. I tried again, for the other one, the one with the rifle. But my hand was shaking, and my arm was weak.

I heard McCrae say, "You're lousy, Champ!"

He was grinning, and his eyes were shining. He was a fighter and this suited him fine. The one with the rifle let it fall, took a few steps forward and sat down. McCrae said, "Two."

There was a thudding sound and McCrae swore. He let his Colt fall into the mud, then grabbed for it with his left hand. I tried to get the German with the Luger,

but I couldn't steady up the Colt. McCrae swore and fired again. There was another thudding sound, and his body jerked. He breathed hoarsely.

"I got two Boche—and I got two bullets—"

There was a terrific explosion as a shell burst not far from us. I dug my head into the mud and waited for things to come down. Something clipped me above the right ear, but it didn't hurt much. When I tried to move it didn't work. It seemed to me I heard McCrae singing the one about the mountaineers. And then I didn't hear anything.

When I came out of it I was lying on a stretcher and guns were making distant sound. I expected to see Germans all around, but I didn't. They were French. A weary orderly gave me some water, told me that some of my scalp was gone but not enough to make it fatal. He said I'd been picked up by stretcher bearers following one of the waves of attacking French. The Germans had been driven back a mile or so, along the sector. It was a big drive.

I sighed and turned over on my right side. McCrae was lying on another stretcher, on his back. He grinned at me.

"Can you beat it, Champ?" he asked weakly. "There I was, all set to get things finished, and the French come along—"

I smiled at him. "You'd better quit trying to beat staff," I said huskily. "How bad are you hit?"

He swore. "Shoulder and thigh," he replied. "A couple of months, maybe, and then I'll get that damned school."

I sighed. "It's a long time," I said weakly. "You ought to be able—to think up something by then."

He grinned broadly. "That's right!" he breathed. "I'm not licked yet, lieutenant."

I dozed off after that, and when I got awake again I was in an ambulance. I didn't feel so bad; the sleep had helped. The ambulance was making racket in a big way, and some one else was doing it in a little way. It was Major McCrae, and he was half singing and half humming his favorite number. It was the one about the mountaineers.