



HARD-BOILED and HANDSOME

by JAMES PERLEY HUGHES

If you didn't like somebody in the Game-Cock Squadron, you just arranged for him to fight a duel with von Steuben, famous German ace. It sounded easy—until those three tough boys from South Boston tried it on a certain replacement!

A KNOT OF PILOTS gathered in the yawning arch of A Flight's hangar. The buzz' of speculation ran around the circle as they fixed their eyes on the door opening out onto the field from Major Crossley's office.

A new flyer had come to the Game-Cocks, but he

was far different from the usual neophyte, fresh from the fish ponds of replacements or straight from the school at Issoudun. Many of these had come to the Game-Cocks, fought their brief, but unseasoned, battles in the air and then gone on—into the unknown. They had been young men, soft-voiced and self-effacing, but this one—he was a fish of another species. They had

caught a flash of him in the mess hall, a scintillating flash which made the gilded looies of the staff look like barnyard wrens.

“We’ll give him a ride if it’s the last thing we do,” Skag Kelly, once of South Boston, announced to all the world. “Name is Beeson—well, what we won’t do to Mr. Beeson will—”

“It may be our last chance,” Dinty Dugan, likewise from Beantown, reminded his friend. “Remember what the major said. He thinks we’re going to learn a lesson one of these days. In fact, he predicts it.”

“Says we’re paying too much attention to horseplay,” Mugs Miller, the third of the trio of hangar comedians, put in. “He told me that we’d better let this handsome—”

“Handsome! Cripes, this bird is plain pretty,” snorted Kelly, “A regular Beauty Boy! Believe me, I’m going to give him a ride if the major grounds me from now on for it. College bird, they tell me. Probably will want to ‘rah-rah-sis-boom-bah’ before he starts trading tracer with the Jerries.”

“If we tangle with Count von Steuben’s Devil Doves, they’ll make him wish he’d joined the Girl Scouts,” Dinty Dugan declared, “but still—after we get through grooming him—”

A laugh went around the little knot of birdmen. They knew the kind of grooming Skag, Dinty and Mugs Miller would give. They were case-hardened comedians and had given Major Crossley all kinds of trouble by their weird ideas of what made a joke. The quiet, bashful fledgling was usually let off with a short hazing, but the fresh fish were tormented until the three were satiated. Orders against this hazing had been issued time and again, but they were difficult to enforce.

“We’ll just take this baby for a little—”

Skag Kelly’s words were cut short as the door from Major Crossley’s office opened and a perfectly tailored figure stepped out onto the flying field. A meticulous salute and the man turned to walk toward A Flight’s hangar. From the top of his rakishly tilted cap to the points of his resplendently polished boots, Lieutenant Fred Beeson was a thing of joy to any inspector general.

His uniform was regulation, but even at that distance, its superior quality was apparent. The creases in the fawn-colored riding breeches were achievements of mathematical perfection. The flare of the blouse below the encircling Sam Browne belt, the sweep of the shoulders, the close-fitting waist line—each and all shrieked Bond Street across the Game-Cocks’ landing field.

An oath came from Skag Kelly, a growl from Dinty Dugan, and a sneer from Mugs Miller.

Other pilots edged away. They would be spectators, rather than participants in the scene to follow. The three comedians generally provided some good laughs, but at times the party got a little rough. Besides, the major had been rather waspish of late regarding horseplay. He might do something if the fun-makers went too far. He had threatened several times to teach them a lesson.

BEESON, the neophyte, strode across the field, flicking an imaginary speck of dust from his uniform. He was humming a little tune and he looked back toward the headquarters building and laughed, as though remembering one of the major’s jokes. As he neared the hangar, Skag Kelly assumed the position of a college cheer leader, facing his two companions with his arms extended.

“Now, boys,” he bawled, “lay aside you’ cigawettes and give thwee wousing cheahs foh deah old Hahvahd. Not loud enough to be boisterous but sufficiently vociferous to show ouh enthusiasm.”

A guffaw of merriment issued from the assembled pilots, while from the dark shadows of the hangar came the raucous laughter of the greaseballs. Then instead of a cheer, three blatting razzberries sounded in the oncoming pilot’s ear.

“Once more, fellows,” Kelly shouted. “Make them wousing, manly cheahs. Remember—you could die for deah old Hahvahd.”

Once more the razz came in even louder tones.

Beeson stopped as he neared the three. A smile held his handsome face, a smile which bared twin rows of perfectly matched teeth. Here was a man who could have posed for a collar ad or toothpaste display. Not as young as many of the pilots, but—

“Thanks for the reception,” he said, as though they had really cheered him, “but you’re wrong about Harvard. I’m a Boston Tech man.”

“My—my—my—what a fwightful error we’ve made, old deahs,” Kelly addressed his companions. “Once more, my men, and this time—thwee wousing cheahs for deah old Boston Tech.”

And for the third time the razz-berry sounded blatantly.

Beeson’s smile widened. “I didn’t know you fellows went in for saxophones,” he said. “They’ll sound better after you have had them tuned.”

It was Skag Kelly’s face that turned deep crimson.

As high priest and necromancer of the Kidders' Klan, he had always resented bitterly being made the butt of any humor. He made no answer to the newcomer's thrust, but went on with the remainder of his oft-rehearsed ceremony.

"We, therefore, as a committee appointed by the Chief Skyscraper, welcome you into the Cloud Duster's Union."

Skag Kelly extended what was apparently a welcoming hand. Its palm was filled with lubricating grease of the most brunette shade.

"Enter into the mysterious golden circle and receive the grip of fellowship."

Fred Beeson seized the grease-filled palm with a force which made Skag Kelly wince. The dark lubricant squeezed through his fingers and dripped upon the ground. Mugs Miller pressed forward. In his hand was a quantity of graphite, blacker than midnight. He, too, welcomed the new pilot to the Game-Cocks. Dinty Dugan approached. He had provided himself with a quantity of wing dope, sticky and evil of smell. He also shook the newcomer's hand.

Next they crowded around him. Skag laid an affectionate hand upon the perfectly tailored shoulder, leaving an indelible print. Mugs Miller grasped the meticulously pressed sleeve as though to lead the newly initiated brother into the deeper recesses of the hangar. Dinty Dugan patted him upon the back, affectionately.

Fred Beeson's smile apparently widened as he appraised the havoc the greeting had wrought upon his spotless uniform. The blouse was a ruin. Spots of graphite and transmission grease were showing on the perfectly tailored breeches. Blobs had fallen upon the highly polished boots. His eyes held Skag's glance as he spoke.

"Now that you boys have had your little prank," he said in easy tones, "you can pay for this uniform. A second loonie's salary in this man's war isn't large enough for him to throw away hundred-dollar suits."

"You're going to," Skag answered.

"We never pay—for anything," a bellicose note sounded in Mugs Miller's voice.

"And no sissy like you is going to—"

Dinty Dugan's words came to a gurgling stop. A convulsion seemed to seize the little group in front of the hangar door and the onlooking pilots and mechanics were too dazed by the swiftly moving drama to see accurately the almost flickering action.

Biff! Bang! Plop! The committee had made a crash landing.

To the spectators' distended eyes, the blur ended suddenly and they saw that Lieutenant Beeson was the only man still standing. Mugs Miller had made a pancake descent upon his face, while Skag Kelly had gone into a sideslip and then piled up. Dinty Dugan apparently zoomed and followed that maneuver with a dive that ended with a one-point contact on his nose.

"Orderly," they heard Beeson calling, "get me some high-test gas. Maybe we can remove this grease before it sets. Shake a leg now. Put some jazz in it."

"Yes, sir," came a chorus from the assembled mechanics, and half a dozen men leaped forward to do his bidding.

WHILE the airdrome of the Game-Cocks buzzed with excitement and Lieutenant Beeson soberly supervised a bath of high-test gas for his grease-spotted uniform, Skag Kelly, Dinty Dugan and Mugs Miller held secret war council in a small back room attached to a wayside estaminet not far from the flying field.

"Just what happened?" Mugs was still a trifle hazy.

"The dirty, double-crossing bum caught us when we wasn't looking," Kelly growled, his hand tenderly caressing a swollen jaw.

"I bet he didn't learn that punch at Boston Tech," Dinty Dugan muttered.

"Cripes—anybody can catch a guy when he isn't expecting it and hit him on the button," Skag declared.

"Not anybody can crash me cold with one sock," Miller retorted.

"That ain't neither here nor there," Kelly rasped. "The question is what-cha going to do about it? We can't let that bird get away with that rough stuff. I bet the major is laughing so hard that he's liable to swallow his upper plate. He told us we'd get ours. Well, we ain't going to take it lying down. I ain't."

"Me neither," Mugs mumbled.

"It's more than I'll stand for," Dinty grouched.

Another round of Three Star was ordered for the sake of inspiration. Then the three great minds turned to the task before them. To gang the newcomer was out of the question. Major Crossley had warned them several times, and now he was probably kicking over the office files in a sort of ghoulish glee.

"We can't do anything right now," Skag pointed out. "The Old Man will be watching us."

"So will Handsome Harry or Beauty Boy or whatever his name is," said Mugs.

"Let the Boche do it," suggested Dinty. "If we

tangle with that Devil Dove outfit, they'll settle our troubles if we just shoot wild. The major will probably sandwich him in between us like he always does the fresh fish and now, instead of coming down and saving his bacon, we'll just let nature and the Boche take their course. The chances are this baby ain't so hot in the air as he is with his dukes."

"If he is," Skag Kelly predicted, "he'll be an ace by the time we get back from the evening patrol."

"We'll just wait and see what he does," Mugs said.

They had their eyes filled before the sun piqued down behind the western horizon. Major Crossley led the formation and assigned Beeson to the position usually accorded new men. Kelly rode ahead of him, with Mugs Miller just behind, while on the other side of the V was Dinty Dugan. Crossley knew his men and was certain, no matter how they might hate this newcomer, they would fire no treacherous burst from behind. Meantime he would keep an eye upon them.

The squadron had barely reached the lines and started in the direction of Soissons when a Boche flight of more than usual size dropped down from a bank of overhanging clouds and charged with Spandaus aflame. Skag Kelly took one glance at the onrushing Boche and then turned around to where Fred Beeson was riding, immediately behind him. His resolution to let the Boche do what they would with the new pilot was weakening. After all, what was a punch in the jaw between members of the same outfit? He tried to signal to Dinty and Mugs that their plan was off. Then his eyes went wide with astonishment and an oath smoked from his lips.

The tail of Beeson's Spad dropped and the little ship nosed up. Skag had expected a dive for the carpet, if anything, but now—the newcomer was climbing swiftly, his cowl guns spitting like angry serpents.

"The poor fish has gone cuckoo," Kelly growled. "He's so damn scared he don't know which way he's going."

For a moment he followed Beeson's line of flight. The man was carrying the battle to the Boche instead of waiting for them to strike. He was leaving the formation and going solo against a whole flock of Germans.

"The major sure will give him hell for that," Skag muttered. "He'll make him wish he'd joined the Salvation Army instead of this outfit! Well, I'll be damned! Whatcha know about that?"

The streamered Pfalz of Count Heinrich von Steuben, leader of the Devil Doves, had veered to one

side, dodging the upward-shooting American. The Number Three man in the German formation had continued to pique, his guns sputtering viciously. But as he neared the lonely Spad, Number Three performed a strange maneuver. Instead of zooming or leveling off, the Pfalz stood on its nose and then the tail tumbled forward, beginning the outside loop. In another moment a blazing torch was swirling toward earth, marking the fall of what had been an airplane.

"That baby sure has luck," Kelly mumbled. "He caught that Boche when he wasn't looking and socked him on the button just like he socked me—only twice as hard."

BUT from then on, Skag had small time for sightseeing. The two squadrons were intermingled, filling the air with their crisscrossing lines of tracer. Fighting desperately, each took chances that added to their casualties. Kelly found himself battling for his life before he fully realized the melee was on. Two black-winged Pfalzes had singled him out and their Spandaus hurled endless drags in his direction.

The hotly beset pilot put his ship through all the tricks of which a Spad was capable, but he could not shake off his enemies. He cast wild glances around to see if he could flag Dinty Dugan or Mugs Miller, but they were lost in the maelstrom of flashing wings. He caught occasional glimpses of Fred Beeson, as he charged through the fray. The Pfalzes made no attempts to gang him. On the contrary, they flipped up their tails when he neared and dusted off the carpet.

"Cripes, can't you come and help a pal?" Kelly bellowed, as Beeson shot by, riding hard on the tail of a frantically fleeing Boche. "Gee—we was only kidding you this morning. What's a little graphite and grease between buddies?"

Beeson, however, was too busy to mark Skag's plight. The fleeing Pfalz was overtaken and sent into a tail-spin by a short, savage burst. The last Kelly saw of it was a rocketing, helpless thing, tumbling through a cloud.

By desperate fighting and flying, he managed to shake off the two Boche who had been knouting him so unmercifully, but as he circled, looking for a close-up shot, a yell of apprehension came to his lips. Far below, a full flight of Pfalzes were striking at Major Crossley simultaneously.

"Here's where I get a break," Skag told himself.

He brought his ship around, making ready to dive to the aid of his squadron commander. This was a

chance for something worthwhile. He would save the major, and the Pfalzes were so busy trying to crumple up the American leader that he ought to have a couple of easy shots.

Then he saw Dinty and Mugs flying toward him.

"I'll get them in on this play," Kelly soliloquized. "Then maybe the Old Man won't be so waspish the next time we pull a little horseplay."

He signaled his companions and pantomimed his strategy of battle. They nodded and the noses of their Spads went down, but as they tipped forward, a screech of outrage came from Kelly's lips.

Tearing through the air below them was Fred Beeson, striking like a bolt of storm-driven lightning. His machine guns seemed afire and the Pfalzes flicked out of his way as he ripped into their formation. A signal from Major Crossley's cockpit, and he whirled and joined the new pilot, fighting side by side with him, charging the Devil Doves and driving them into fear-spurred flight.

Night was near and a wing-waggle from the plane of Count von Steuben called off his Doves and they veered toward Germany. After them raced the Game-Cocks, but the chase soon ended. The squadron reformed and followed its leader toward their home airdrome.

"Whatcha know about that!" Skag Kelly frothed, glancing back at Fred Beeson, as they winged for their own field. "Not only does that fresh pickerel sock me on the jaw, but he beats me out of a sure shot. Hell, I might be an ace right now if I didn't always have such bad luck. Somebody's always taking the soft ones."

And his groushings continued as the ground slid under his trucks. This man Beeson had done the unforgivable. Back on their landing field, Kelly's sense of outrage grew. Instead of bawling the new man out for breaking formation, Major Crossley had a lot of pleasant words about "resourceful initiative" and all that baloney, which made Kelly's South Boston blood boil.

"Ain't no justice in this man's army," Skag told Dinty and Mugs, as they rode a camion for Fontaine, a lively little city near the Game-Cocks' drome. "Cripes—just cause a bird looks like a cigarette ad isn't any reason that he's J. Joseph Pershing. If I ever get a crack at Beauty Boy, I'm going to sock him in the nose and talk about it later."

"Maybe you'll get it tonight," Mugs Miller whispered. "See who's got the major's baby buggy while we have to ride a truck."

An olive-drab Dodge had just passed the truck and at its wheel was Fred Beeson, his uniform more spotless than ever.

ONCE in the little city of Fontaine, Skag, Dinty and Mugs forgot their outrage in the great in-and-out-door sport of talking to the petite *mademoiselles*, whose challenging eyes were always smiling when they saw the wings of a pilot upon the manly O.D. chest. Ninon, Ysobel and Yvette were ready to split a few bottles of sparkling cheer, and the little party clustered around one of the many iron tables adorning the sidewalk in front of the *Cafe des Aviateurs*.

Because of their troubles during the day, the three plunged deeply, seeking forgetfulness. The party got off to a flying start and by ten o'clock, song and laughter held their lips.

"I tell you what, pretty little cabbage," murmured Skag Kelly, as the wine took a firmer hold, "if it wasn't for you, this war wouldn't be worth the fighting. I go out and spill my life's blood for France because I'm nutty over a little Frog girl whose name is—"

He paused when he noted Yvette was not listening. Usually she lapped up this kind of chatter like a kitten with a saucer of cream, but a preoccupied look had come into the girl's blue eyes and Kelly stopped to follow her glance. Then an oath rumbled up from his thorax.

"It's just like this, darling," Mugs Miller was saying, "I ain't what you'd call handsome, but—"

He waited for Ninon to assure him that Adonis paled in his presence. She had always done it before. Then Mugs noted that the girl's gaze was fixed on another table. He looked up. A dry sound rattled in his throat.

"Why so silent, lambkin?" Dinty Dugan murmured in Ysobel's pink ear. "You don't seem to have your mind on your liquor, or on me either. What's holding the young and maidenly thoughts?"

"*Voilà—un homme*," she whispered.

"Sure he's a man. We all are—" Dinty's eyes narrowed as they encountered the classically regular features of Fred Beeson. The man was seated a short way from them, but was paying no attention to the party.

Dugan's gaze next swept around the circle gathered at the table. The eyes of men and maids were fixed upon the handsome aviator. Upon the faces of the girls were expressions of rapt adoration. Warm blushes held their cheeks, while lips were parted with inviting

smiles. Murder, mayhem and malice gripped the masculine visages. The average German would have turned tail and scorched for Potsdam if he had seen the hate-filled frowns which had gathered on the brows of Skag Kelly and Mugs Miller.

“The lousy bum,” growled Skag, “chiseling in here!”

“For two pale pink francs I’d bust him in the jaw,” Miller was muttering.

Dinty Dugan peeled a five-franc note from his roll and dropped it in front of his companion.

“Keep the change,” he said, “or give it to the waiter.”

Mugs Miller had drunk enough pep-ful waters to build up his courage, and he had not forgotten the sock on the jaw Beeson had given him. He arose, swaying slightly, and walked over to the table where Beeson sat. The aviator looked up and gave a smile that would have been worth money to any toothpaste company. Then he extended a welcoming hand.

“Sit down and have a drink,” he invited, as his fingers closed over Mugs’ uncertain palm.

A squeak of pain came from the man who had voiced his brave boast but a moment before. His punching hand was trapped and he heard Fred Beeson speaking through those spotless teeth in low, but not uncertain tones.

“If you’ve come over here to start anything,” Beeson began, “you’d better have a grave-digging detail tolled off so they can have the hole ready for you.”

“Whatcha mean—grave-diggers?” Mugs demanded, trying to wriggle loose.

“That I’m going to knock you for a series of loops and then a tailspin,” Beeson answered. “You only stopped one this morning. This time they are going to have set your jaw in four places.”

MUGS MILLER felt his courage ebbing like a tidal wave that has penetrated far inland and has to hurry back to rejoin the sea. He was no coward, but his jaw knew when it had had enough punishment.

“Who said anything about starting something?” he muttered, freeing his hand at last. “I just came over to ask you to join us. The girls want to meet you. They’re dippy over your looks. Fine girls, but—say, Beeson, leave that blonde with the green eyes alone. That’s Ninon and she’s my own special sweetie, compray?”

“Don’t worry. I’ll leave them all alone,” the aviator retorted, “Come on, have a drink. I thought you heard me the first time.”

But Fred Beeson’s promise to ignore the three smiling French girls had no binding effect upon them.

Mugs Miller returned to the table with the handsome birdman in his wake and the scowls and mutterings of Skag Kelly and Dinty Dugan were ignored. But after that, the party turned into a wake as far as the three comedians were concerned. Thoughts of murder flashed through Kelly’s mind and he regretted that he had left his automatic at the airdrome. Dinty Dugan toyed with the idea of dropping a little poison into Beeson’s glass, while Mugs Miller speculated on the possibility of employing some hard-boiled M.P. to shoot the good-looking aviator in the back of the head and then turn in a report of: “Shot while trying to escape.”

Meantime the *petite mademoiselles* set down a barrage of smiles, coy glances and lovelorn sighs. Beeson seemed impervious to these frank offers of girlish adoration. He could not, however, ignore them. They were French and knew their smiles and eye gestures. But while their valiant labors had no effect on Beeson, Skag, Mugs and Dinty were soon well past the boiling point and making small effort to conceal their seething emotions.

“What’s the matter with you birds?” the man finally demanded, his glance traveling from one to the other. “I’m not trying to steal your white hot mamas. This town is full of them. As far as I’m concerned—”

Skag Kelly shoved back his chair. He did not care if he looped the loop or what. He had reached the zero hour and was ready to hop off for eternity and all points west before he would tolerate this smiling, handsome face another second.

“Listen to me, you damned sissy—” he began, clenching his fists.

A shriek from Yvette, Skag’s own current sweetie. The girl arose and flung her arms about his neck.

“Doan’ you dare heet zat *Monsieur* Beeson,” she screamed. “I keel you eef you—”

“By cripes, I’m going to—” Mugs Miller forgot the fear which had gripped him a moment before.

He snatched a carving knife from the hand of a French major, who was about to unjoint a partridge at a nearby table.

“Oh—oh—oh,” Ninon sprang at him and buried both teeth and nails in the hand which held the knife. “Doan’ you touch heem.”

“Hell’s bells!” swore Dinty Dugan. “I’m not going to stand for any such—”

But Dinty had no chance to make even a bellicose movement. Pretty Ysobel entangled her fingers in his hair and dragged him down, shrilling a warning that

she would tear his eyes out if he laid one finger upon their handsome guest. Pandemonium was in full charge of the situation. Sidewalk diners looked on with amazement at the strange scene. Some one put in a call for the *gendarmes*, while a waiter went screaming down the street, demanding that the M.P. save them from destruction.

Fred Beeson shoved back his chair. The fight was confined to Skag, Dinty and Mugs, who were battling with their sweeties. There was nothing for him to do.

"Thanks for the drink," he told them. "I'll be seeing you later, I hope."

"You're doggone tooting you will," Skag Kelly bawled, as he struggled to disengage entwining, girlish arms, and when you do, you'll wish you'd seen the devil instead."

ONCE more a war council gathered in the back room of the little *estaminet* near the Game-Cocks' airdrome. Skag Kelly, Dinty Dugan and Mugs Miller had come to a decision that something must be done, something drastic and final. Two days had dragged by and Fred Beeson was as hard-boiled and as handsome as ever. The gladsome horseplay of other days was forgotten and they conjured plans for revenge.

"I'm no traitor," Skag pointed out, "and I'm not going to do anything to him, not me, myself, personally. I could have given him a belt of tracer in the back of the head this afternoon when we were swapping lead with that Fokker layout, but I didn't." Kelly swaggered just a trifle, as though demanding applause for this great act of repression.

"What are we going to do?" Mugs demanded, staring stonily into his Three Star. "This bozo'll be the cock of this barnyard before long. The rest of the squadron say he's the best gink that has come to this outfit since it was organized and those Frog girls are simply nuts about him. We've got to do something—but what?"

"I told you the other day," Dinty Dugan retorted. "I said—leave him to the Boche."

"Yeah?" Skag had plopped himself down into a chair. "I can't see where the Boche are doing much but let him win an ace's star. He socked three of them for a goal the first flutter over the lines, and this afternoon he crashed another. I can't see where the Boche are going to do us much good, or themselves, either."

"Suppose he should tangle up with Count von Steuben himself, in person," Dinty replied. "That hard-boiled baby would crash this fresh fish while he was

trying to line up his sights. You've seen the count work. He knows his *Wienerschnitzel*."

A moment of silence, and the three great minds concentrated some more. Then from the last drop in Skag's glass came a throb of inspiration. The big idea was born and in another minute he was explaining it to his enraptured companions.

"What we'll do is to drop a note on the Devil Dove field, telling the count that Beauty Boy Beeson thinks the Krauts are bums and beer-hounds," Kelly explained. "Then we'll point out that von Steuben himself dodged meeting this fresh baby the other day. Well, if that don't pull something, I don't know my Prussian nobleman!"

"About all that'll pull will be a cork," Dinty mumbled.

"It'll pull a challenge," Skag answered. "*Herr Graf* will think his honor has been questioned and he'll demand satisfaction. He'll send over a Challenge to this sweet-faced young thing—one of those fight-to-the-death things, you know."

"Suppose Handsome doesn't accept," Mugs suggested.

"Listen, buddy, you and me and Dinty have seen enough of this drop of poison to know that he's not yellow. He may be green, but he sure ain't yellow. You can take that from me."

"And after he accepts—then what?" Dinty asked.

"Nature and the Count will take their course," Kelly replied. "We won't get blamed 'cause Beeson will have stepped into his grave on his own."

"But supposing he licks the Count," Mugs Miller made a specialty of suppositions.

Skag Kelly swallowed hard. "If he does, it'll be up to us to get transferred to Texas or Alaska. The old war and the *mademoiselles'll* never be the same."

BUT the possibilities of a victory by Fred Beeson over Count von Steuben were regarded as too remote to stay their hands, and that evening Skag Kelly dropped a message cylinder on the landing field of the Devil Doves. It told Count von Steuben that a certain braggart on the American side of the lines by the name of Fredrick Beeson regarded the count as a four-flusher, a carpet knight and a mere beer-hound. More than that, the said Beeson had pointed out in half the *estaminets* in the district that *Herr Graf* had dodged him in battle, proving that a wide and yellow stripe ran down the noble spine.

With the message delivered, Skag and his two companions sat down to await results. They had

gathered in Kelly's quarters and continued to stare out onto the landing field until darkness descended. Even after that, they kept their vigil. At last the buzz of a motor from high above sent them peering out the window. They saw a parachute flare drop. Then through its globe of dazzling white light, a dark object hurtled, to fall upon the landing field.

"Orderly's got it and is taking it to the major," Dinty announced.

A few minutes later they heard one of Crossley's messengers calling to Fred Beeson, whose room was further down the hall.

"It worked," Mugs Miller jubilated. "The Old Man is sending for him now. Cripes, Skag, you sure do have swell ideas."

"I'll say I do!" Kelly believed in joining in the applause.

They pussy-footed down onto the landing field and hid themselves in the shadow of a hangar. A wait of half an hour and then a muffled cheer came to their lips. Fred Beeson had come out and they heard him order the greaseballs to prepare his Spad for a night flight. Another wait and then—they saw him take off and roar through the night toward the German lines.

"Some prophet, Skag, some prophet!" Dinty led the cheering this time. "Say, if you had been born a couple of hundred years ago, they wrould have burned you for a witch and then made a saint out of you. You sure can foresee things."

"Vision—that's what I've got," Kelly replied modestly.

The sequence of events was as plain as the nose on the major's face—and he had a beak like an eagle. The count had issued a challenge for battle with the man who had questioned his valor. Fred Beeson had accepted, and now everything was set but the funeral arrangements.

"They'll probably get together tomorrow," Skag told his companions when they were in their quarters once more. "Beauty Boy will ride out to meet the dragon and after that—all our crosses will be decorations."

"I don't like it!" Dinty Dugan was beginning to lose faith. "I feel as though I was going to have a hand in somebody's murder."

"Cripes—forget that sob stuff," Kelly barked. "Beeson wasn't forced to accept that challenge. He could take it or leave it, couldn't he? He had to get the major's O.K. first. The Old Man could have stopped him, if he wanted to. He got first look at the challenge."

"Oh, I guess it's all right," Dinty mumbled, "but—"

MORNING found them on the tarmac before the first hangar greaseball went on duty. The squadron had no patrol until evening, but they wanted to see Beauty Boy take to the air and start on his long, long journey. He appeared, glanced up into the sky with his binoculars and then returned to the major's office.

"He's probably praying for rain, wet grounds or something," Skag Kelly explained.

"I guess it ain't any use for us to hang around here," Dinty Dugan began. "I'm glad he's not starting out. I can't help but feel that I've done something that—"

A gesture from Mugs Miller caused him to halt his speech and stare up into the sky. All three bared their tonsils to the morning sun and saw a black-crossed plane circling high above the field. Then they glimpsed a tumbling speck, growing larger each second. An orderly ran out to pick up another message cylinder. Then he hurried into the headquarters building.

"Wonder what the trouble is," Skag Kelly's brow wore a deepening frown of puzzlement.

"Maybe he tried to sideslip a fight and the Count is bawling him out," Mugs suggested.

"I hope they don't meet." Conscience still had Dinty by the throat. "I hope—"

"The major wants to see you gentlemen, all of you," an orderly announced.

A quick exchange of glances. Suspicion gripped each heart. They had started to put Fred Beeson where he belonged, preferably in his grave, but now——

"I bet he's squawked," Kelly growled.

"How would he know that—"

"Somebody saw me hop off last evening," Skag replied. "If he didn't, some one told him."

"Gripes!" muttered Dinty.

"Hell!" mumbled Mugs.

They entered the orderly room, outrage shining in each eye. They were ready to denounce the man who had gone to their commanding officer in hope of avoiding combat. As they filed into the private office, they noted the grave expression upon Crossley's face. Fred Beeson stood to one side, his features supremely solemn.

"Gentlemen," the major began, after they had lined up in front of him, "I am sorry to have to call upon you this early, but something out of the ordinary has developed. It seems that Count von Steuben, the commander of the Devil Doves, is looking for a little trouble, and he has gone to the pains of issuing a challenge to Lieutenant Beeson here."

"Yes, sir," the three murmured almost inaudibly.

“And—” the squadron leader continued, “as Beeson is the latest recruit in our outfit, I thought it a rather stiff proposition for him to go against an ace of *Herr Graf*’s reputation.”

“Yes, sir.” The words were even more muffled than before.

“Although he was anxious to meet the count, I finally convinced him that a duel would be foolish under the circumstances, but at his suggestion I permitted him to make a counterchallenge in which von Steuben will be accompanied by Three aides and Beeson will have a like number. That is—four of the Game-Cocks will meet four of the Devil Doves. Compray?”

“Yes, sir,” came three hoarse whispers.

“Count von Steuben has just accepted the counter-proposition and—Lieutenant Beeson has selected the men who will fly with him against the pick of the Devil Doves.”

Skag Kelly had turned a slight pea-green, while Dinty Dugan was seen to pinch the lobe of his left ear. Mugs Miller only gaped until his chin rested on his right collar ornament.

“Who—who did he pick?” Skag finally managed to croak.

“You, gentlemen!” Enthusiasm sounded in the major’s voice. “It is a great honor and, I might add, I heartily approve of his selection.”

“Who has the Count picked?” Dinty Dugan stammered.

The major referred to the letter upon his desk. A smile crossed his lips as he looked up. “*Herr Graf* names as his aides Lieutenants Heider, Weidemann and Hahn. All aces, gentlemen, and pilots who know their Spandaus. The hour of meeting is noon. The place—five thousand feet above Fismes. I suggest that each of you see that your plane is prepared for a battle for your lives.”

“Yes, sir.”

The voices sounded as though they had come from the tomb.

“PROPHET!” snorted Dinty Dugan, as he labored on his Spad in the shadowed depths of the hangar. “Skag Kelly couldn’t see through an empty glass of Three Star.”

“I’m commencing to see through something else,” Skag retorted with a flash of anger.

“F’instance?” Mugs wanted to know.

“That crack the major made a week ago about us

getting too damned funny,” Kelly replied. “He’s framed us. He’s the bird that got Beauty Boy Beeson to pick us for this show.”

“And he’s slipping us the poison pill,” Dinty finished.

“You said it, buddy—giving us the wooden cross with skunkweed.”

More muttered oaths as they continued their task. At last their planes were ready and trundled out onto the tarmac. Fred Beeson appeared and ordered their arrangement. His own would lead with Skag and Dinty on either side, while Mugs would ride high and in the rear.

“Now listen to me, you birds,” Beeson addressed them just before the take-off. “I know you think you are a swell crowd of jokesmiths, right out of one of Wally’s comic strips. You’ve horsed around here until the Game-Cocks think more about your next gag than they do of crashing Boche. After this show, we’re all going to get back to business, which is socking the Boche right on the jaw.”

“Gee, you don’t need to get so hard-boiled about it,” Skag Kelly growled. “I don’t see any gold leaves on your shoulders.”

“They’re tattooed on my skin,” Beeson shot back, “and as for getting hard-boiled, that’s my middle name. It’s going to be tougher and rougher for you after we get back, if you don’t snap out of this barnyard comedy. Get me?”

“Fat chance we have of getting back,” Dinty muttered.

“If you don’t, I’ll sock you on the jaw—if I have to wait until the war is over,” Beeson barked. “The only chance you’ve got is to kill or get killed. That goes for all of you. Crash those Boche or keep on riding right into hell. Now get into your cubbies and follow me. You’ll have been somewhere when you get back.”

They obeyed his orders silently. They had thought they were tough birds from South Boston, but this iron-jawed Adonis had beaten them to every punch. He posed as a college man, but Skag Kelly knew a muscler when he saw one, and Beeson could give lessons to some of the gorillas of the underworld.

“There’s something funny about this—something damned funny,” Skag Kelly mumbled, as he studied the situation in which they found themselves. “Here’s a fish fresh from the pond giving us orders. It don’t look right!”

A signal from Beeson’s cockpit and their motors roared. In another moment they were in the air, streaking for the rendezvous where they would meet

Herr Graf von Steuben and his trio of hand-picked aces. But as they raced onward, Skag Kelly's mind continued to be gripped with the problem before him. He glimpsed the town of Fismes below. A glance ahead and he saw four Pfalz planes maneuvering for position.

"Cripes, I've got it now," Skag yelled. "I ought to have known that—"

The dry clatter of machine-gun fire broke in upon both thoughts and words. He had been so gripped with his plans that he had failed to note the swift approach of the enemy. He looked up to see an all-black Pfalz bearing down upon him, twin flashes of red coming from its cowl guns.

SKAG did a quick sideslip out of danger and then hauled back on his stick. As he twisted into a renversment, he caught a glimpse of Dinty Dugan hunting the carpet with two Pfalzes riding his tail. Next, a streak dropped from above and a burst of fire threw one of the Germans into a tailspin. Fred Beeson had tossed his empennage into the air and had scorched down in a full-powered dive, riddling the German before he could dodge. The daring maneuver had saved Dinty's life. There was no doubt of that.

"Look at that baby!" Skag Kelly shouted. "He may be hard-boiled to us, but he's plain poison to the Jerries. I ain't going to let any Beauty Boy show me how to get tough with Brother Boche. I'm going to be as rough or a whole lot rougher."

A sudden battle madness seized him and he charged with savage fury at the nearest Pfalz. He caught flashes of Beeson hurling his plane from one enemy to another, fighting with a fury that stirred Kelly to even greater effort. A curse came to the man's lips as he saw Mugs Miller tumbling through the air, fighting to regain control of his partially disabled plane.

"If Beeson don't sock him in the jaw, I will," Skag growled, while he watched Mugs level off and then glide to the American side of the lines. Miller managed to bring his ship to a lumpy landing.

"He'll wish he'd stopped that burst with his head before I get through with him," Kelly continued.

Another clash with the nearest of the Pfalzes. The American struck with blind rage. The fight was going against them. Miller was down, and they were letting Fred Beeson do all the fighting. Minutes of mad melee followed, in which the swirl of wings and the clatter of machine guns made each moment one of madness. And then—

"What the hell's the matter with you?" Kelly screeched.

Dinty Dugan was coasting for the carpet again, his prop barely moving. A coal-black Pfalz was racing after him, knouting the injured Spad. Dugan was making valiant efforts to reach home territory. He could not bring his guns to bear, but had twisted in his cockpit and was firing at his pursuer with an automatic pistol.

Skag shoved his stick forward and dove. At the same time, he saw Beeson roaring earthward on the other side of Dinty's ship. Their crossing lines of tracer caused the German pilot to pull up and climb in a tight chandelle to join the two remaining Pfalz above them.

"Three against two, but these two are hard-boiled," Skag growled.

A cheer came to his lips as he saw Beeson lunge at the nearest of the enemy. The plane bore the streamers of a squadron commander and Kelly knew his comrade was attacking Count von Steuben. Beeson was flying with the rare skill of a seasoned veteran, while his machine-gunning had the mark of acelike skill.

The savagery of the attack caused Count von Steuben to change his plan of battle. With two of the Americans down, he sought to crash Skag Kelly and then have three ships to hurl at Fred Beeson. He flashed a signal from his cockpit and two of the Pfalzes turned on Skag.

Skag shot his Spad, first at one and then the other, but their concentrated fire kept the flashing ship in constant danger. Kelly's wings were becoming riddled and the marks of tracer showed along the fuselage.

"This looks like the finish," he yelled, as a burst barged into the cockpit.

THE roar of his engine suddenly ceased. The moving line of tracer had gone forward instead of toward the tail. He had escaped being ripped to pieces, but his Spad was tumbling, cutting weird patterns in the air. The Pfalzes were after him like hounds from hell. Although he was falling out of control, they followed, lashing his helpless plane.

Skag Kelly pulled out of his spin. Then he saw a streak shoot past him, flaming as it went. For an instant he thought Fred Beeson had been conked and was falling in a mass of blazing gasoline. Next Shag's clearing vision told him that his companion had come to his aid, and the flashing tongues were quickly repeated drags hurled at the down-charging Germans. Beeson had saved him, but—Kelly caught a glimpse

of Count von Steuben racing after his comrade. The American, however, gave small heed to the Count. He was too busy driving off the men who were seeking to give Kelly the *coup de grace*.

“Cripes, that’s showing them.” Skag yelled, when he saw one of the black ships stagger and then turn toward the German lines, wobbling as it flew. “Maybe that hard-boiled baby can’t fight!”

His own ship was nearing the ground and he fought to hold the nose up. Of the eight planes that had begun the battle, only three remained to fight. Two were Germans.

Kelly looked down and kicked the rudder to bring his crate down-to where Dinty Dugan had landed.

Wham! Bang! He was on the ground again. A glance at his injured motor told him that the timer had been shattered. Next he raised his eyes to the sky. Count von Steuben and his remaining aide were slashing Fred Beeson to pieces with their alternating fire. If something did not happen, the man would be, riddled. Skag Kelly did not pause. He raced to where Dinty Dugan was staring up.

“Hey,” he ordered, “help me get that timer of yours out and into my bus.”

They labored hectically for several minutes. At last the timer from Dinty’s ship was installed in Kelly’s. Then the pilot scrambled back into his cockpit.

“Twist her tail and make it snappy,” he bellowed to Dugan.

A roar as the motor caught again and Skag took to the air. He could see that Fred Beeson was battling for his life. Up, up climbed the quickly repaired Spad. At last Skag was on the level of the combat.

A ripping burst from his machine guns as he plunged at the man who was riding Beeson’s tail. The German turned and counter-attacked. They were roaring at each other, flying on the same level. A crash would come if neither changed his course.

A blinding flash of red and saffron and the Pfalz fell away!

Then Kelly whirled. Fred Beeson was flinging drag after drag into Count von Steuben’s frantically dodging plane. Then one of the nobleman’s wings started to buckle. He turned in the opposite direction, seeking to save himself from an immediate crash. There was a roar as Beeson swept down upon him. The nose of his Spad held its course until Kelly thought a

collision could not be avoided. A flick of flame from Beeson’s cowl and then—

“I guess I’ll go down and bust Mugs Miller in the jaw,” Skag growled. “This show is over.”

FOUR pilots stood before Major Crossley, commander of the Game-Cocks. They had returned from battle victorious. Two of the Germans had been killed and two driven down out of control, but it was not of this the major was speaking. His eyes were fixed on Skag Kelly, Dinty Dugan and Mugs Miller.

“I hope you young gentlemen will realize hereafter that this man’s war is serious business and not an occasion for horseplay,” their commander said in sober tones. “I believe in fun, but you were all getting to where you believed that fighting was an annoyance.. I think you’ve learned your lesson, but if you haven’t, I’m going to ask my old friend, Major Beeson, to pay us another visit.”

“Major Beeson?”

Then they saw that golden leaves had taken the place of the single bar upon his shoulderstraps. More than that, a collection of decorations had bloomed upon his chest.

“Yes, Major Beeson, commander of the Night Hawks. He’s next to Rickenbacker in the list of aces. I was telling him of my troubles with you gentlemen and he offered to come up here when he got a week’s leave and give me a lift and you a lesson.”

“He sure taught me something,” Dinty Dugan mumbled.

“I’ve learned a lot,” Mugs Miller added.

Skag Kelly continued to stare at the handsome features of the Night Hawks’ leader.

“Look here, Handsome—” he began. “What I want to know is where you get this college stuff. Boston Tech ain’t so rough.”

“I worked my way through school driving a taxicab—nights,” Beeson explained, “and I never got further uptown than Scollay Square. You’ve got to be hard-boiled in that game—the same as war. Say, I’d like to see some of the generals in this man’s army collect a twenty-six-dollar taxi bill from some of the boys from South Boston when they are soused and scrappy. They’d know what an offensive was after they got through with a job like that. Boy—the Boche are infants compared to those babies!”