



# AKBAR THE BLACK

by O.B. MYERS

*They called him Akbar the Black. His cannibal ship spewed hate through black skies—  
but even outlaw wings must crack when the ghost of the past calls "Time!"*

**S**HORTY CALHOUN DREW the quivering stick just a little closer to his stomach, and the horizon reeled even faster than before through his center section. His Spad was in a tight vertical spiral; on the opposite side of that spiral whirled a Fokker, as

intent as he upon achieving the slightest advantage of position or speed. Yet in Shorty's steel-cool mind lurked not a shadow of apprehension as to the outcome of this struggle. It was by no means his first. And furthermore, his sixth sense told him that just outside the circle of his turn roamed a second Spad, in

which Johnny Sexton awaited eagerly the psychological moment to spring to his aid with the finishing blow.

One more full turn, and Shorty calmly shifted his eyes from his foe to glance past his right wing-tip. Then, in the space of one unforgettable second, he saw that which congealed the blood in his veins and struck his brain numb with horror. He saw Johnny's Spad banking gently and Johnny gazing straight toward him over the cowl. With the same look he saw the fleeting black shadow of death, which plunged like a stone from the zenith. He saw the hissing, smoky tracers which poured in an endless stream from its nose, and he saw those pencilled threads stabbing Johnny's very cockpit. He saw, in that one brief instant, death come to his closest pal.

"Johnny!" shrieked his dry throat. "Johnny!"

His first cry was one of warning; his second a groan of despair. For the convulsive twist which wrenched Johnny's plane told its story, only too plainly. Down reeled the stricken Spad, while the darting Fokker rushed closer and closer, to pound the sodden hulk with a vicious and fiery rain of steel.

Forgetting his own antagonist as if such a one had never existed, Shorty wheeled on a wing and dove. Before him he saw Johnny's Spinning Spad, bursting into flame as it fell. To say Johnny was already out of the question, but to avenge him was still possible. The second Fokker, still diving, was curving off to the north; with a growl of rage Shorty followed. For just a moment he got a good look at that dark-hued enemy, silhouetted sharply against a yellow field of wheat far below, and something about it—something strange, bizarre—registered on his brain. But for the moment it meant nothing to him, and in the eagerness of his wish to come to grips he forgot it completely, giving all of his attention to immediate pursuit.

But he found promptly that it takes two to make a battle. Like a dagger in the moonlight the other had delivered his blow, and with the swiftness of a vanishing shadow was beating his retreat. Down and away shot the Fokker; the accumulated speed of its dive, added to the pull of full motor, gave it the pace of the wind. Far from overtaking it, Shorty found that try as he would he was only losing ground, and at the same time being drawn deep into Germany. He spat out a hopeless curse, fired a long-range burst more as a gesture of challenge than anything else, and gave up in disgust.

"Won't stay and fight, eh?" he grated furiously.

"Well, we'll meet again, damn you! You got Johnny—but some day, I'll get you!"

With grief and anger in his heart he pulled up and around, and found to his faint surprise that his previous antagonist had disappeared. He was alone in the sky, and seeing that his gas was running low he set a course for the drome of the 22nd, whence he and Johnny had taken off an hour and a half before. Fifteen minutes later his Spad essed once over the barracks, and rolled to a stop before the second hangar. He slid stiffly to the ground, to walk slowly toward headquarters. Red Stevens was there, with the major; they listened to his detailed report of the combat with stoic calm.

"A DIRTY, cowardly way to fight!" ended Shorty with tense anger. "But I'll get that Boche! I swear, if it's the only thing I do in this war, I'll get the Boche that sent Johnny down!"

Major Downes regarded him with a certain grim pity.

"I appreciate your feelings, Calhoun. I've lost buddies myself. But don't waste your energy chasing a will o' the wisp. Tell me, did you notice anything particular about the Jerry's plane, so that you would know it if you met him again?"

Shorty was plainly taken aback. "Why—no, sir, I didn't, come to think of it. It was a Fokker, that's all I know. But then I won't be able to tell—"

"Exactly," said the major. "You may shoot down a dozen Boche—I hope you do—but you won't know when you've got the right one. One Fokker is just like another."

"Wait a minute!" cried Shorty suddenly. Something in his memory had clicked, and he saw again that dark-hued shape, as it had curved into flight against the yellow background of a field. "I did notice something—I just remembered! On one side, the right, it was, that Fokker had a V-strut, just like a Nieuport 27!"

The major's evident astonishment melted into a smile.

"I guess you were a little excited," he said without unkindness. "No Fokker was ever yet built with V-struts, to say nothing of a V-strut on one side only. It probably wasn't a Fokker at all, but one of those new Pfalzes the Jerries are bringing up."

"No, no!" insisted Shorty. "It was a Fokker. And it had the regular N-strut on the left, but a V-strut on the right." The major looked at Shorty incredulously, and was on the point of dismissing the subject with a wave of the hand. But abruptly he went two shades paler

beneath his tan, and his jaw sagged as if he had seen a ghost. He half rose from his chair, to seize Shorty's arm.

"One V-strut!" he croaked breathlessly. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, sir, positive," averred Shorty stoutly.

The major turned, to bend a meaning look on Red Stevens; then slowly his eyes came back to Shorty's face.

"Akbar!" he muttered, with livid lips. "It must be—Akbar!"

"Who?" queried Shorty curiously. "Akbar the Black. You've heard of him?" Shorty shook his head. "That's right; you didn't come up till June. Wait a minute."

The major sank back into his chair, and hunted through the papers in a bottom drawer of the ramshackle desk. After several seconds he drew one forth, and handed it to Shorty. The pilot saw that it came from French headquarters, was dated nearly a year earlier, and read as follows:

Memo, to all intelligence operatives, and to all Air Squadron Commanders: Wanted, for desertion, as a renegade and spy, the following: Full name, Akbar Swaali Ajjaszid, known as Akbar or Akbar the Black (*le Noir*). Half-breed African, mixed negroid and Arab parentage; skin dark brown in color. Born in French Somaliland, about 1890; left Jibuti to come to Paris in 1915 as the body-servant of a major of Spaliis. Left his master after arrival, to join a gang of apaches. Involved in stabbing affray in Cafe Fouleau in August, 1915. Enlisted, French Foreign Legion, September of same year. Assigned by request to flying service; trained Pau, Avord; sent to Front in January, 1916, with 5th Escadrille de Chasse (Pursuit). In three months of action gained two accredited victories. Disappeared April 19th; believed to have deserted to the enemy, and to be at the present time actively engaged in their flying forces. Report of his capture, or evidence of his death, will please be sent to this office at once.

IN THE upper corner of the paper was glued a photograph, such as was used on a pilot's identity card; at this Shorty gazed with a horrible fascination. The face was inhuman, bestial, even in complete repose; the deep-sunk black eyes seemed to glitter with a fierce hate, the mouth was a loose-lipped leer. Kinky, black hair covered the bulletlike skull tightly, like a helmet glued on.

"But, major," he asked haltingly, "how do they know he—this man—deserted to the enemy?"

"He as good as said so," replied the major. "You see, in 1916 the French planes weren't what they are now;

were, in fact, far inferior to the German, especially as regards motors. Engine failure was an every-day occurrence. So it happened, according to the story told by other members of the 5th, that twice in succession this devil Akbar got an enemy ship at a disadvantage, got all set to shoot the other down—and then his motor quit. He raved and cursed at being robbed of a victim, and swore that if it happened again he would go over to the German side, where they built decent engines. He was a killer, pure and simple; it made no difference to him which side he fought on, as long as his lust to kill was satisfied. Well, on the 19th of April the same thing repeated itself, and sure enough, the next morning he was gone.

"For some time nothing was head of him; then an intelligence operative reported him flying with a Jerry staffel, in the Vosges. That staffel later moved up to Flanders, and there he slowly but surely began to run up his string of victories, and build up the reputation which has made him the most feared and hated of the enemy flyers. At last, about six months ago, a Britisher shot him down. His plane was seen to crash, though not badly, on German soil; he fought all his combats over his own territory. Every one hoped that he'd been killed, or put out of action by wounds. But now, worse luck, it looks as if he had come back to life again."

"But how do you know," demanded Shorty, "that it was this Akbar that I saw this morning?"

The major tried unsuccessfully to repress a shudder.

"That's the part that gives a white man the creeps," he said softly. "You see, in this devil's veins runs the blood of one of the cannibal tribes of East Africa. One of the age-old customs of that tribe was for the victor in a mortal combat to tear out the heart of his fallen enemy and eat it. It was supposed to give him added strength, and make him invulnerable. Well, Akbar, true to his savage instincts, adhered to this custom, though in somewhat altered form. His fellow pilots, of course, being civilized, wouldn't stand for any such actual barbarism, but he carried out the same idea in a different way.

"Each time he crashed an enemy, he took some part of the plane, and had it built into his own. First it was merely the clock, or the windshield; then the stick, the rudder bar, or the rudder itself. Always something, with the result that the ship in which he flies by now is a hybrid, a mongrel, an amalgamation of many fallen foes. That V-strut you saw was not merely similar to that of a Nieuport; it was undoubtedly a Nieuport strut, retrieved from the wreck of some one of his

earlier victims. That one feature marks him Akbar the Black, sure as Fate; there is no other like him.”

Shorty listened to the major’s explanation, spell bound; he glanced once more at the photograph, and stirred uneasily.

“Then that, sir, is what makes him so hated and feared?”

“That, and his tactics. He combines the murderous savagery of his black ancestors with the guile and cunning of the Arab in him. In the first place, he fights only on his own side of the lines. Secondly, he will not start a scrap unless he sees that the advantage is with him. His attack of this morning is typical; a lightning dive on an unsuspecting foe, and a quick getaway, aided by the speed of his first plunge. He never stays to fight, unless he feels certain that his opponent is inferior, or crippled. Revolting as is his method, it had earned him, at last reports, twenty-odd confirmed victories. This morning adds another; and now that he’s back, the end, I’m afraid, is not in sight.”

The major shook his head slowly with worried apprehension.

“The end?” said Shorty quietly; and in his eye was a peculiar glint. “But perhaps, major, it is in sight. You heard me say before that I’d get the Boche that sent Johnny down. Well, black or white, German or renegade, it makes no difference. I still mean it!”

“I WARN you, Calhoun,” said the major seriously, “you’re up against a terrible foe. Even if you can draw him into equal combat, remember that three years of flying have given him uncanny skill with the controls. And with the confidence of more than twenty victories behind him, he’s damned near invincible. I’ll say this; it would certainly be a relief to every squadron commander on the Front to know that he was down. But don’t add yourself to his string trying!”

“Leave that to me, sir,” answered Shorty briefly, as he saluted and backed out of the door. His steps took him first to Johnny Sexton’s bunk, opposite his own. Here, after he had packed his dead comrade’s things into the battered trunk, and written a brief and halting note, he sat down in a kind of daze, his eyes fastened blankly on the opposite wall. He seemed like a man in a trance, whose thoughts wandered among ghosts, in forbidden places. The others, with true and understanding sympathy, left him alone, until more than an hour later Red Stevens, returning from mess, approached and laid a hand on Shorty’s immobile shoulder.

“Buck up, old top,” murmured Red softly. “He’s gone now, where the Boche can’t bother him any more. If there was any use in thinking about him, I’d be doing it myself, but—”

“I wasn’t thinking about Johnny, Red. I was thinking about George Marr. Remember him?”

“George Marr?” repeated Red, puzzled. “Oh, yes; now I do. He was bumped off back at Issoudun, when we were all there together, wasn’t he? A tall, lean chap, with a moustache.”

“That’s the one. You remember how it happened?”

“It was at Field Eight, wasn’t it? Stunting in combat practice against some other ship, as I recall, and the wing of his Nieuport crumped in mid-air. That right?”

“Yes, that’s right. I was the man in the other ship.”

“But what the devil happened to make you think of George Marr, now?” asked Red, more puzzled than before.

“Oh, nothing; just a crazy idea, I guess.”

Without further explanation Shorty stood up slowly, tossed helmet and goggles to the bunk, and departed toward the mess. Red gazed after him, muttering thoughtfully.

“Hm-m. Kinda queer! Hope he don’t go off his conk, like Bill Pier!” The following morning Shorty was on the tarmac early, although not slated for patrol until ten. In response to his curt instructions the mechanics rolled out his Spad, started and warmed the motor. Without a word of explanation he climbed in and took off. But he did not take the usual course toward the lines; his ship climbed in wide sweeping circles until it reached a height of three thousand meters or more, directly above the field. Here it began a series of maneuvers; renversements, spins, barrel rolls, tight spirals, followed each other in monotonous succession. Gradually his altitude was eaten up; when but five hundred meters remained the stunts ceased, and once more he climbed, only to begin again.

Red Stevens, coming from the hangars toward headquarters, found the major in the door, peering curiously upward.

“Who the devil is that up there, Stevens?”

“Must be Shorty Calhoun, sir. Flight A is over the lines, and no one else has taken off this morning, far as I know.”

“Well, what’s the idea?” the major wanted to know.

“Search me. Brushin’ up on his air work, I guess.”

“Oh,” said the major softly. For a moment neither spoke; then Red put into words what both were thinking.

“You think he’ll ever be able to lick that—Akbar, sir?”

The C.O. gave Red a cryptic look, and answered one question with another. "You think the war will be over next week, Stevens?"

With which enigmatic reply he turned on his heel and left.

SHORTY was down in plenty of time to join the ten o'clock patrol, but immediately after noon mess he was again high above the drome, alone, putting his Spad through its paces. He volunteered no explanation, neither then nor later, and in barracks that evening his attitude was so cold and distant, so different from the old Shorty, in fact, that none cared to risk a question. He sat brooding on the edge of his bunk, nodded absently when greeted, and rolled into his blankets while the poker game was still in full blast.

The next day it was the same story; Shorty flew with the regular B flight patrols, but worked in more than two hours of unremitting practice in between. But those who watched began to perceive that his maneuvers now were confined almost entirely to one particular stunt. A full barrel roll to the right, followed immediately by a half roll, or renversement, in the opposite direction. Time after time, with monotonous regularity and precision, this gyration was repeated, until it seemed that an automaton, and not a man, sat behind that stick. Late into the dusk he was still at it; then at last he must have run out of gas, for the drum of his motor ceased abruptly, and he glided into a deadstick landing. As he walked stolidly past headquarters the major emerged, and accosted him.

"Considerable strain on a ship, that stunt you're practicing," he warned. "I wouldn't try it after being in combat, if I were you. Apt to have a spar let go on you, you know."

"We had no combat this afternoon," replied Shorty briefly.

The major nodded. "Just the same, there's a risk. A Spad is a good strong ship, but you might pull that one once too often."

Shorty's shrug was more eloquent than any words could have been. The major was on the point of asking the question uppermost in his mind, which might have been expressed by the single word, "Why?" But something restrained him, something told him that Shorty's motives were purely Shorty's own business, and that questions would not be welcome. In this he was perfectly correct.

The days passed, lengthened into a week; then into two. And not a day went by that Shorty did not

spend at least an hour, high above the field, repeating endlessly that same maneuver. But now, in addition to all the regular patrols for which he was slated, he was doing others; solitary sorties over the lines once and sometimes twice a day. Of where he went, and why, he told not a word, but all knew without his telling. Since his sworn enemy never fought against numbers, Shorty was seeking to meet Akbar the Black, alone.

On the ground he withdrew more and more into himself, became a man apart, neither speaking nor spoken to. The loss of Johnny Sexton haunted him day and night; his revenge grew to an obsession. His whole existence seemed to have narrowed down into a single rut, which led to but one end, the destruction of Akbar the Black.

To others his problem might have seemed a double one; first, to find his enemy, and second, to destroy him. But to Shorty only the first part mattered. Once let him get that renegade Fokker into combat, and he would know exactly what to do. With a patience which was limitless, and a dogged concentration which was almost inhuman, he traced with his Spad the ever identical pattern across the sky; a full roll to the right, followed by a half roll to the left. And waited. And watched. And hoped.

It was on a Friday morning, and he was out with a B flight patrol. Led by Red Stevens, they had scoured the back areas near Romagne, strafed a column of troops on the Cierges road, and driven into flight two enemy two-seaters. Now, as they curved out toward the lines, he saw the V of Fokkers coming out of the east, and he understood why Red swerved quickly away. An hour and a half of gas gone, every one's ammunition nearly spent—the Spads were in no shape to begin what might be a long drawn out dogfight.

But Shorty, peering intently over his shoulder, saw something that the others did not see. Far, far above that enemy formation hung a mere speck against the blue, hovering as does a vulture above an expected kill. Waiting, too high to be attacked from above, but in position to plunge without warning into a *mêlée* below.

Shorty's eyes strained upward, but the distance was too great; he could make out no details of that floating speck, except that it had the general outlines of a Fokker. Yet somehow in his mind there was no doubt as to the identity of that lone pilot. Akbar the Black it must be!

ON THE heels of the others he raced into the south. But when, once safe across the lines, the others

eased off to cruising speed, Shorty left his throttle wide open. Gradually he drew away, and made the field while the rest of the patrol was still a mile away. Without a pause he taxied directly to the hangars, and switched off. He pushed himself up from the seat until he sat on the fairing behind the cockpit, but did not jump to the ground.

“Gas her up, quick!” he snapped at the mechanics who trotted toward him “And fill those belts; I’m going right out again!”

They knew better than to question that tone, and set swiftly to work. Gas gurgled through the hose, with what to Shorty was exasperating slowness, while the gunnery sergeant was thrusting into the feed slot what looked like the end of a long, flat snake. A snake in truth, whose bite was vicious and deadly. Shorty, fuming in silent impatience, tried to polish the lenses of his goggles, but found that his fingers were shaking with excitement.

The rest of the B flight patrol was coming in now. One by one the Spads touched their wheels, and taxied noisily to the hangar line. From the cockpit of the first one down Shorty saw Red Stevens slip to the ground, and walk rapidly toward him.

“All set,” announced the mechanic, twisting the cap of the gas tank on tight, and scrambling down to lay hold of the prop.

“Switch off!” rapped Shorty, dropping into the seat.

“Hi, Shorty!” cried Red, coming up to the side of the cockpit. “What’s the rush—goin’ up again right away?”

Shorty nodded. “Didn’t you see him?” he asked curtly.

“Oh-h!” Red’s manner showed plainly that he had seen that lone Fokker against the sky, but had intended saying nothing, half hoping that Shorty had missed it. “Now hold everything a minute, Shorty! Wait till we get gassed up, can’t you? We’ll come along with you—only take us a few minutes, then—”

“No, no!” cried Shorty in sudden fear. A crowd with him would spoil everything. The renegade ace would never allow himself to be drawn into combat against a whole patrol. Never. “For God’s sake, don’t do that, Red! Let me alone; don’t try to come—”

“But you can’t tackle that devil all by yourself. He’ll—”

“Contact!” shouted the mechanic at the prop, poisoning himself.

“Contact!” barked Shorty in reply.

The Hisso was warm, and caught at the first turn.

Red Stevens was shouting something, but his words were drowned in the slipstream. Shorty never idled his motor at all; there being no chocks before his wheels, the Spad began at once to move. A momentary backward glance showed him Red, waving frantically; then he was taking off. In a long sweep he rose from the field, and set the ship into a full-motored climb.

As he climbed he approached the lines in a wide, sweeping zigzag. But he did not cross at once. That Fokker, he estimated, had been at four thousand meters, or higher; he himself, therefore, wanted to be around thirty-five hundred. Up, and still up, crept his altimeter needle, while the torn earth faded into a dim carpet of greens and browns, far below. At last he passed three thousand, and could wait no longer; with a fearless kick at the rudder he turned his nose into Germany.

His anxious eyes swept the clear blue vault of the sky from one end of the sector to the other. Well off to the west he picked up a formation, somewhat below his own level, and his gaze concentrated keenly on a point directly above it. But he found nothing. Was it the same group? Or had that lone Fokker, like himself, been just at the end of his gas, and meantime returned to his field? There was no way of telling. On and on he pressed, deeper and deeper into Germany, his brow creased in a frown. Now his gaze, leaving the vicinity of that formation, swung slowly around toward his right.

He froze into a man of stone when he saw it. Though his heart tried to pound its way out through his ribs, and his muscles jerked convulsively, yet by an effort almost superhuman he forced himself to leave the controls alone. There it was, a dancing speck—above his right wing-tip, and just moving into the sun.

Every instinct of self-protection warned him to swing sharp right, before he lost that speck entirely in the glare. Yet still he did not move. For a bank, a turn, a sudden change in course, would warn that other that he had been seen. And that must not be, for Akbar, if Akbar it should be, must believe that his attack was coming as a complete surprise.

SHORTY’S gloved thumb came up, to cover the ball of the sun itself. It helped some; for a moment he could see that dark shape, indistinct and blurred. Then it vanished entirely in the terrible glare, and continued looking only made his eyes water until the tears ran down his cheeks. The attack might come, or it might not. He could do nothing now but wait, and hope. His tense fingers gripped and ungripped on the stick, and his chest seemed about to burst.

He saw distinctly the very first tracer. It crossed his vision like a thin gray line, drawn against the background of the blue by an invisible piece of chalk in a ghostly hand. It stabbed his wing, just to the right of the center section, and was gone. Instantly his hand pushed the stick forward, and his pent-up breath burst from his lungs in a mad gasp.

His Spad nosed over into a wild dive, the obvious resort of one surprised by attack from above. But with a certain difference. For instead of placing his hopes in escape by mere speed—that false trap which had counted so many victims already—Shorty was gradually putting weight on his left foot, and swinging the stick over against his knee. The result was that his plunge, instead of being a straight line, began immediately to be a curve, and the flicking tracers, instead of centering quickly upon the cockpit in which he crouched, veered unwillingly off toward his wing-tip.

As he careened out into a stiff bank he got the first good look over his shoulder. Instantly his doubts vanished. The thick upper wing of a Fokker loomed behind him, but at the right-hand end was joined to its lower wing by what could be nothing else than the V-strut of a Nieuport. And that was not all. The landing-gear drew his momentary attention; the wheels, he saw, were not mates, and neither was painted black to match the fuselage. The windshield was rounded, instead of square; the tail-skid was a foot longer than that of any Fokker he had ever seen. It looked as if it might have once been part of a Salmson. And the rudder—at sight of that, Shorty, remembering Johnny Sexton, shuddered and ground his teeth. For it was the rudder of a Spad, blackened and charred about the edges, but still whole, and still showing the little diamond-shaped pattern of four patched bullet-holes, near the top, which Shorty knew so well.

A mongrel, a gruesome and revolting hybrid it was; both the plane and the renegade who crouched within its cockpit. Something unwholesome and unearthly about it made him wince, as if he were gazing at some ghoulish monster conjured up by the brain of a Frankenstein, pieced together from better men's flesh and bones. A nightmare; the reincarnation of a savage beast; a winged vampire.

A hissing burst of steel singed his upper wing. He tightened his bank, but not too much. He still had a part to play, and he must play it carefully. So far, so good; he had succeeded in luring the cautious Akbar into an attack, which had not achieved its purpose at

the first blow. But would the wily Black stay to fight it out? Only, he recalled the major saying, when he feels that his opponent is inferior, or crippled. He, therefore, must feign weakness, a certain inferiority, lest his antagonist flee before his opportunity came. Akbar must be led on, must be given the impression of gaining the upper hand, until the last possible moment. Shorty must make all his maneuvers appear defensive, and half hopeless.

After two full turns he whipped out of the spiral into a zoom. The Fokker followed closely; Shorty's zoom inverted itself in a renversement, from which he dropped, with just a moment of lost time, into a twisting dive. But in that moment came the harsh clamor of machine guns behind him, and invisible death pecked tiny holes in the fabric at his very elbow. Again he swooped upward, with the Fokker hard on his tail; again he corkscrewed into a half roll. But this time there was no necessity to pause to give his foe a shot. The tracers were ripping slantwise through the center section, not a foot from his eyes, even before he sagged into the dive.

His hand gripped the stick more tightly, and his glance traveled over his shoulder. Abruptly he realized that it was not necessary to play at being inferior, to restrain himself to nothing but defensive maneuvers. He was already, willy-nilly, on the defensive; that Fokker was riding his tail, and riding it hard. As he swung from one maneuver into the next, with swift and precise movements of the controls, he saw that he gained not an inch. Like his own shadow the hybrid clung to him; nay, crept a little closer. From those belching Spandaus one burst pursued another, to slash the air, first above, then below him.

HE DOVE, he zoomed, he whirled on a wing-tip. He followed one stunt with another, in rapid succession, almost too quick for the eye to follow. He dodged from side to side, like a runner who reverses his field; he threw away a thousand feet of altitude in a spin, from which he emerged with crafty abruptness. But not once did he so much as gain time nor opportunity for a burst from his own guns. Relentlessly the Fokker of Akbar the Black dogged his tail, always behind him, always pressing the attack. Pretend that he was being beaten? He gave vent to a horrid, cackling laugh, in which was more despair than amusement.

From the top of a vertical sideslip he looked back, and up. A square black radiator leered at him; above

it showed a rounded knob, which would be the pilot's head. Did he imagine it, or could he see those coal-black eyes, burning with fierce hate, which seemed to drill a path into his very skull? A swath of tracer streaks cut off his glance, and he careened out into a turn just in time.

He zoomed, but unexpectedly cut it very short. The Fokker nearly overshot as Shorty dipped downward, but with a desperate twist was once more behind him. In a wide curve Shorty was veering away now, his nose down to gain every inch of speed. His eye was over his shoulder, calculating distance and time; his hand trembled on the stick. A vicious burst crashed past his end strut, then ceased. The next one, he knew, would come closer. But when the next one began, he would not be there. If only the Black would follow him!

The first flicker of red appeared in the mouths of the Spandaus; Shorty's head snapped to the front, and hand and foot moved together. Like a coin thrown into the air his Spad corkscrewed upon itself, while the horizon reeled before his eyes. A full barrel roll to the right, in the twinkling of an eye. A quick correction with stick and rudder, followed by a harsh and desperate thrust. The movement stopped; the Spad groaned in every spar and strut, and went into a half roll to the left. Down Shorty dropped, to come off his back with the motor shivering on its blocks. As he curved out into a glide, his gaze swung hastily, hopefully over his shoulder.

His heart fell, and a cold sweat broke out on his forehead. For he was looking full into a tracer blast, which sang with venomous whine about his very ears. The Fokker had followed his maneuver to the letter; had, in truth, executed the difficult turns a shade faster than he himself. So that instead of gazing back upon a victim of his design, he was staring into the maw of a fresh assault.

Somehow he got out of that flailing stream of steel, but not before a fistful of bullets had battered one end of his instrument board to splintered shreds. In frenzied, desperate haste he threw his Spad from one maneuver into another, keeping ahead of the pelting rain of hot lead by the flicker of an eyelash. No time for close calculating now; no time for measuring glances over his shoulder. No time for anything but frantic efforts to dodge that spitting image of death which stalked his trail. For the dreaded Akbar was at his very shoulder; his bullets seemed to be reaching out hungrily after another victim; his lips drawing back in a snarling grin at the thought of another gruesome souvenir.

Shorty popped out of a right-hand spiral into a left-hand spin, which changed to a steep glide before one full turn had been completed. For a moment he had thrown off his pursuit, though a lightning glance showed him the hybrid Fokker howling swiftly back toward his tail. That moment he used to gain speed, coaxing every possible revolution from his throbbing motor. Not speed to escape—but speed to once more try the fatal maneuver. Perhaps he had not been quite fast enough last time; this time he would out-speed chain lightning itself. He set himself grimly, drew a deep breath.

Jam on the rudder; jerk on the stick. The world spun like a top, as his Spad rolled upon its axis. A sudden stop, a quick reversal of the controls. With a wrench he was gyrating to the left, on his back, then falling out into a glide. His eyes went over his shoulder, to widen with horror and dismay.

A GROAN welled up into Shorty's dry throat. His maneuver, the stunt which he had practiced interminably, was of no avail. The dark-skinned hand that guided that stick was the hand of a wizard; quick, tricky, cunning, and confident. To out-fly him was impossible.

A cold horror gripped his heart in icy clutch, as he prepared to die. The sweat poured down his cheeks, and his fingers gripped the stick until the knuckles showed white. With convulsive, frantic jerks he flung his Spad about the sky.

Then, while the earth whirled crazily about his head and the wind tore at his goggles, something clicked far back in his brain. A tiny, whispering voice spoke to him; the voice of that sixth sense which in man operates only in moments of greatest danger.

"You tried it both times to the right," said that voice. "Why not try it to the left?" He came bolt upright in his seat, and centered stick and rudder with a swift jerk. Instantly steel clawed at his center section, and a pang, like a hot needle, pierced his leg. For a moment the horizon reeled; a violent effort of his will steadied it.

Again the full barrel roll, but this time to the left. Like a leaf tossed by the wind he spun once upon himself. Then sharply, at the precise instant, hand and foot reversed their pressure. Like a reined steed his Spad halted in mid-air.

Then over he went, in a half roll to the right. And as he careened onto his back, his eyes swung behind him. There came the Fokker, the hybrid monster, hot upon his trail. Duplicating his every move, it came out of the

roll, and started to twist in the opposite direction, in the beginnings of the renversement. Then—he gasped, he cried aloud—his brain recoiled.

He was once more sitting in a Nieuport 27, a combat practice plane from Field 8. Behind him, in a similar ship, sat George Marr. They had been engaged in mock struggle, with camera guns, stunting furiously. He had just slammed through a barrel roll to the right, following immediately with a half roll to the left. George, on his tail, matched his maneuver perfectly. But, as he looked back at George's Nieuport, the blood turned to ice in his veins. For before his very eyes he saw the apex of the V strut, where it joined the

lower wing of George's plane, tear loose from its single fastening under the terrific stress of the grotesque maneuver.

His rigid gaze fastened itself on the Fokker behind him. The lower wing on the right was already gone, vanished as cleanly as if cut off with a knife. Then, doomed to destruction by its own inbred weakness, it plunged like a stone. Shorty, wheeling out level, looked down just in time to see the end. A fountain of dirt and stones and metal arose, to be swallowed up before it fell back in a billowing wave of flame and smoke. The hybrid Fokker was wiped from the sky. The renegade ace, Akbar the Black, lived no more.