



DEATH'S DOUBLE

by FREDERICK C. PAINTON

Into the hard skies of war-aged pilots came a movie idol under special orders. They hated his guts and called him yellow, until that red day when hell broke loose over their heads—and a man was born.

JOHNNY THE INK” read the first four paragraphs of the order from corps, and his spurred boots slid from the table to the floor with a crash. “Well, for crysake!” he muttered. “Can you tie that?”

And the kiwi adjutant, inured to most grief that war can create, was not given to astonishment.

Captain “Digger” Banks, the skipper of the Ninety-second Pursuit, frowned, looked up from the morning report, and growled, “Tie what? What’s eating you now?”

But Johnny the Ink was finishing the extraordinary order and did not reply. Digger Banks squirted a yard of tobacco juice at the spittoon which heaved and rocked at the impact, and repeated, “What’s biting you? Corps got some nasty job for us again?”

The adjutant looked from the paper to the rocklike, bronzed face of Digger Banks, and then back again. Suddenly he began to smile. The smile became a chuckle and then a downright hearty laugh. He doubled up with mirth.

“Man! Man!” he gulped between spasms. “This is good.”

“Cut the comedy and let’s see.” Digger was impatient. He was a flyer and he hated all this paper work that cluttered up a C.O.’s life and made the orderly room a worry-room. Johnny the Ink scaled the sheet of paper to him.

“Read it and weep, captain darling,” he chortled.

Digger rolled over his cud and grasped the paper with big, apeline hands. The order, couched in the strained military parlance of the A.E.F., read:

FROM: COMMANDING GENERAL, SECOND AMERICAN ARMY
CORPS.

TO: OFFICER COMMANDING NINETY-SECOND AERO PURSUIT
SQUADRON.

SUBJECT: SECOND LIEUTENANT GERALD GALLENS.

1. The above-named officer is hereby transferred to temporary duty with the Ninety-Second Aero Pursuit Squadron as of July 19, 1918. He will report on that date with replacement Squad 2794 from Orly Field for special operation hereinafter to be described.

2. Second Lieutenant Gallens is being assigned to the Ninety-second for thirty (30) days at special request of the Committee on Public Information, George Creel, chairman. There will also arrive Civilian Dolliver J. Boothby, executive chairman of said committee's subdivision on motion-picture propaganda. A special section of signal corps cameramen will report on the said day. Also being forwarded from Chateau Thierry is a captured Fokker biplane, reconditioned, to be used in any manner that Civilian Boothby desires.

3. The Commanding Officer of the Ninety-second will and is hereby ordered to give every cooperation to Civilian Boothby in the preparation of a motion-picture film for propaganda purposes in the United States in connection with the Third Liberty Loan Drive. The subject of the same film will be Second Lieutenant Gallens who will be directed by Civilian Boothby. Lieutenant Gallens is to return to the United States upon completion of the said film and will tour America with it, lecturing in behalf of the said loan.

4. The Commanding Officer of the Ninety-second is hereby ordered to use every precaution while Lieutenant Gallens is in the air. If patrols are made near or over the front-line region where encounters with enemy craft may take place, the said Commanding Officer will exercise every skill to prevent Lieutenant Gallens' life from being endangered beyond the hazards of ordinary air flight. No enemy airmen will be permitted to imperil Lieutenant Gallens' life. Nor will he be placed in any predicament before completion of the said picture that might mutilate his face and body and otherwise prevent him from finishing said picture.

5. Newspaper and magazine correspondents, duly accredited by G.H.Q. to the A.E.F., will arrive at the Ninety-second's airdrome to report these operations. They will be given all reasonable liberties and rations and quarters will be furnished during their stay.

6. At such times as Lieutenant Gallens is not acting under Civilian Boothby's direction, he will be under the command of the Squadron C.O. But this shall not be construed as hampering his motion-picture duties nor ordering him on perilous missions.

Captain Digger Banks looked up from the astonishing communication and spat. The spittoon rang like a Chinese gong.

Then he looked at the amused face of his adjutant.

His narrow eyes held a bewildered look.

"This ain't a joke, is it?" he asked after a while.

Johnny the Ink shook his head. "Holy Ike, no! Motor-cycle courier from corps. It's straight enough."

DIGGER still looked puzzled. He was rather a simple soul, probably because he was after all merely a professional soldier. For ten years he had sought and found fighting in the Foreign Legion. Cambodia, Madagascar, Tonkin and the Algerian desert had heard the roar of his Lebel rifle. The world war and American friends had gotten him into the Lafayette Escadrille and thence, with a chestful of medals, he had gravitated to the American forces four months ago. And so such extraordinary documents as this befuddled him whose sole purpose in life was to fight to kill and be killed.

He shook his head dubiously. "I don't get it, Johnny. Who's this Gallens anyway?"

Johnny the Ink now looked astonished and puzzled.

"What!" he stared at Digger. "You never heard of Jerry Gallens—the Jerry Gallens? Holy Ike! I supposed that Gallens was known even in the back-woods places where you've been soldiering. I thought—"

"Never mind what you thought. Who is he?" There was something hard and ominous about Digger now.

"Ah, man!" sighed Johnny, who was genuinely fond of his skipper. "Such ignorance overwhelms me. Well, captain darling, Jerry Gallens is the American flapper's big crush, the swoon of old maids, the envy of every young American man, the sweetheart of the United States. He is America's outstanding musical-comedy star, a Broadway matinee idol. He is a great movie actor, the only one outside of Charley Chaplin who's had his pictures translated into the Chinese."

Johnny paused for breath. "Such ignorance as yours, skipper, is astounding. I can believe that you never heard of Woodrow Wilson, or George Washington, or Lydia Pinkham or even Abraham Lincoln. But never to have heard of Jerry Gallens—mama, bring the smelling salts."

Digger Banks got to his feet. He was a huge man, more than two yards tall and a yard wide with a rugged sun-leathered countenance that had professional soldier stamped on it. He had Nordic blue eyes that could either twinkle good-naturedly or glitter like bits of ice. Just now they resembled bits of blue ice. But he kept his rising temper in leash.

"What are they driving at with such nutty orders?" he demanded.

"Simple enough, captain darling. Propaganda! The old horsefeathers! Come to think of it, I remember now that Jerry Gallens enlisted in New York and was shipped from Fort Slocum to Kelly Field. The papers said he slipped away and did it all by himself. I thought he was on the level. But I suppose after all it was just publicity."

"The hell with your supposing," cut in Digger impatiently. "What does that triple-damned order mean?"

Johnny ignored the impatience and calmly lit a cigarette. He and Digger understood each other.

"Can't you see the set-up, skipper? Jerry Gallens is a stage and screen hero to millions of American people, particularly women and young men. The nation is mad about him."

Johnny paused and inhaled a lungful of smoke.

"Whether he enlisted on the level or as a publicity stunt doesn't matter. The Committee on Public Information found out he was in the service. They get hold of him, ship him to France, to us. And here by the grace of God, and this Boothby and a half dozen cameras, they'll make a movie air epic. Make people think he's a real honest-to-God ace!"

He chuckled amusedly. "Lord, it's good. They'll photograph him posing in and out of his Spad, investigating enemy bullet-holes in his crate, the said bullet holes being made with an American .45 at a range of one foot. Surrounded by our outfit he'll fly over the lines so the cameras can photo No-Man's-Land, the Jerries, and archie fire."

"Yes," said Digger, his voice terribly grim.

"And in sending us this Fokker I seem to see the perfect ending of a propaganda film," chuckled Johnny. "One of our outfit will fly the Fokker crate back here behind the lines. With Gallens diving at him, and smokepots burning aboard, he'll crash down toward the ground. Cameras will grind. And the American people will see the epic result and read a caption, 'Heroic Gallens Crashes Enemy Ace.'" He sniggered outright, then. "And that'll make Jerry aces with America. Make him an ace, the Ace"—he guffawed—"a tailor-made ace."

"Go on," croaked Digger. His face was flushed; a forked vein stood out bluely on his forehead and pulsed swiftly. His eyes seemed to redden.

"The end is simple," said Johnny. "Accompanied by this film which portrays him as an ace, Gallens will tour America, speaking in behalf of the loan. Young girls will simper and ask their daddies to

buy thousands in Liberty bonds. Maiden ladies will sigh and dig into the old sock. Money will roll into Washington. They'll have to have drays to cart it."

A SILENCE fell on the room, broken only by the heavy breathing of Digger through his ruined nose. Johnny stared thoughtfully. The amusement left his face; he grew suddenly serious. "By the Lord Harry, skipper, it's a swell idea. You and I over here, fighting the battle of the air, don't realize that it takes money to buy us drinks and planes and food. And somebody's got to raise the money. This Gallens is doing no mean job of winning the *guerre*."

"Faugh!" exploded Digger.

"Faugh yourself," retorted Johnny. "Nowadays when a nation goes to war, the war has got to be popular to be supported. Without money we could declare war, but it would be only a gesture. Jerry Gallens can raise more dough than any man in America including J.P. Morgan."

Digger Banks folded his huge, long arms across his chest. He spat thinlipped.

"And this means, then," he said grimly, "that with von Manteuffel moved into this Front to drive us out of the air, we don't get a chance to fight him. We stay here on the ground and make a lousy movie. And if we do fly over the lines with this lollypop and von Manteuffel shows up, we'll have to turn tail and run away from him."

"Just for a while," assented Johnny. "You can get a whack at von Manteuffel's circus later on, after Gallens has gone."

The strain was too much. Digger Banks exploded. A blistering curse burst from his lips.

"By hell!" he cried. "I won't do it."

"And by hell," mimicked Johnny, "you will. Them's orders, captain, and the penalty for disobedience of orders is too frightful for my weak mind to contemplate."

"Orders, my—"

"Listen," cut in Johnny, suddenly coldly serious. "Just because you've been packing a Lebel rifle around in the Legion Etrangere these many years, you got an idea that fighting men are the only ones who win wars. That's wrong, skipper. For every guy up here within sound of the guns, there are two in the S.O.S. and three in America supplying us with food, munitions, weapons, clothing. Those have got to be paid for and somebody's got to raise the money. I think Jerry Gallens is doing a swell thing. And your job is to

cooperate cheerfully and help it through. I'm telling you."

Digger Banks walked to the worry-room door and stared out over the grassy tableland that made this one sweet tarmac. Sky-blue Spads were grouped around the camouflaged canvas hangars with mechanics working on them. The cheerful chink of metal on metal came to his ears. Pilots were tinkering here and there. The whole picture was one of industry and efficiency, a fighting squadron that ran like a machine.

And as he gazed, Digger Banks' brows contracted. He suddenly swung and his icy eyes were a chilled blue, like the twin muzzles of Colt six-guns.

"And I'm telling you," he cried hoarsely, "that nobody, not even Black Jack Pershing, can make fools out of me and my outfit. They called me back from the French where I was having a good time shooting down Krauts, to take command of a squadron on paper. I obeyed orders—that's a soldier's job.

"And I built a squadron, Johnny. I made this outfit from the ground up. I made it so damn good that the Krauts call us *Sturmtruppen* of the air, and we're the only pursuit bunch that's got that title. Our pilots hold the air when they're told to. Hold it so well that the Germans bring in von Manteuffel's circus, the best damn outfit on the Western Front, to knock us off.

"I built loyalty into this outfit and *esprit de corps*. The men are proud of the outfit, and so am I. And you want me to let a goofy order like this one make a laughing stock of the outfit. I say no! By God, nobody is going to give us the razzberry."

"Where do you get this razzberry stuff?" demanded Johnny the Ink. They were both tense now. "Where's this hah-hah stuff?"

Digger spat out a blood-curdling French oath. "I may be a dumb soldier but I can see what will happen. We've been twitting the Krauts with notes about being yellow. About sending von Manteuffel after us. And now what happens? We stay home day after day while von Manteuffel roams the skies looking for us. And if we do go over the lines in full patrol with this lace-pantied stuffed shirt and von Manteuffel comes for a dogfight—we run, for fear this Gallens will get a slug through his nut. We'll be branded as yellow."

THE hard-bitten C.O. shrugged furiously. "The Frogs will laugh, the English will laugh, and von Manteuffel will bust his corset. The Ninety-second, he'll say, was hot stuff until he came to the Front, and now we stay at home. It'll raise hell with our morale.

And I won't be laughed at."

"But the orders—"

"The hell with the orders." He swung savagely.

"Let me tell you this. If they want to pull this foolery behind the lines I can't interfere. But by God, if this Gallens goes over the lines on patrol and von Manteuffel shows up, this Gallens takes his chances on living or dying the same as the rest of us." He turned again and went to the door. The faint muffled kettledrum beat of guns came to his ears. He flung up his arms, fists doubled.

"Sweet Buddha!" he croaked hoarsely. "Me, a fighting man who's got real fighting men behind him, ordered into a cheap-skate lot of hokum like this. By God, Johnny, wars ain't won by doll-faced boys in silk panties making pictures to raise dough. They're won by fighting men." He pounded his chest till it thudded like a bass drum. "Fighting men, by God, like me."

A thrill went through Johnny the Ink. He stared at the huge figure drawn to its height, silhouetted there in the doorway, a primitive fighting man, the born soldier whose like had made history down through the ages.

"By Judas, skipper!" he muttered softly. "In ancient days you'd have been a king, a Norse king, a king of fighting men. I don't wonder you got thirty Krauts and the Frogs gave you all those medals."

Digger turned back from the door. "It ain't me," he said, more softly. "It's the gang, my outfit, Johnny. They're used to going out there and fighting. They either kill the Kraut or go down themselves. No middle course. The Germans know that. It makes them cautious. Our boys know that; it makes them brave. And that gives them an advantage in aerial combat, don't you see? And if now our lads run from the Krauts, the Germans will think we're afraid and that makes them bold and hurts our morale. We'll lose lives by it."

There came silence once more in the worry-room. Digger Banks went to his desk and picked up the morning report on which he scrawled his signature.

"If Jerry Gallens goes over the lines with us and can't protect himself in a dogfight, then God help him, because nobody else will."

Johnny knew the inflexible will that had spoken.

"And so," he murmured, "I seem to see an early grave in a crushed cockpit in the gray mists beyond the Vesle. And Jerry Gallens will probably be in it."

"If it comes to that," said Digger stubbornly, "why, so be it."

CHAPTER II CELLULOID GLORY

IT WAS FOUR O'CLOCK that afternoon The dusk patrol had warmed up and taken off, leaving behind an odor of burned castor oil that still pervaded the air. There came no chink of metal on metal from the repair hangar now. Instead, mechanics and grease-balls gathered in small groups near Number One Hangar and smoked cigarettes and watched the cloudless blue vault of the sky. Nor were they alone, for the pilots of B, C and D Flights also gazed expectantly to the southwest.

The word had passed; the famous Jerry Gallens was coming, due any moment.

Even Digger Banks was there, pacing restlessly up and down and stopping only now and then to expectorate a yard or so of tobacco juice at a scurrying ant. Johnny the Ink, spotless from overseas cap to polished boots, strode over to join him.

"Curiosity killed a cat once, captain darling," he grinned. "Waitest thou for His Nibs, Jerry Gallens?"

Digger scowled around the tarmac. "I'm waiting for the rest of the army of propaganda," he muttered. "A couple of divisions are here now." He waved his hand disgustedly. Johnny turned to look.

At the south end of the field stood a couple of olive-drab trucks. Men in khaki were near by working on movie cameras, while several others had large box cameras. Besides these, there were four men wearing the red arm brassard and the white "C" that designated them officially accredited war correspondents.

"You wouldn't think," said Digger, "to see them and this that a million men are up there on the Vesle fighting and dying. They'd make a comedy out of a man cutting his throat."

Johnny said nothing; you couldn't argue with Digger when he was aroused. The adjutant smoked his cigarette and watched the movie men place themselves at advantageous points. Presently, a Cadillac limousine drove out onto the field. It was a huge car and it disgorged a very tiny man. He trotted in birdlike fashion toward them.

This man weighed about ninety-eight pounds and was about five feet four inches in height. His face was

thin and wizened like a sparrow's. He looked more and more like a sparrow as he approached.

"Hah," said he in a high-pitched voice. "You Captain Banks? Me, I'm Dolliver J. Boothby, the Dolliver J. Boothby. How-de-do, how-de-do?" He proffered a tiny, clawlike hand which Digger reluctantly smothered with his own. Johnny shook hands.

"Great idea," cried Dolliver J. Boothby. "Great idea taking the war to the people. And my idea, if I do say so myself. Jerry Gallens' name will ring down history as a great ace. And I'll make him an ace, with camera and cutting. I'll tell the story of the knights of the air. We'll sweep America."

"Ah," said Digger, grimly, "so you're responsible for this."

"Me, Dolliver J. Boothby, that's the man." The little fellow drew himself up tall. "Couldn't get into the army myself. My feet, you see. Very long, very narrow, and very flat. Hah-hah! But my contribution to the winning of the war will be as great, if I may say so, as if I had donned the khaki of my country."

A peculiarly vulgar sound made by inserting tongue between lips sounded on the air. The little man looked startled, stared, and then smiled.

"I'll need your whole squadron for a week or so, captain," he said. "And we'll fly over the Front, shooting shots right in the enemy's country. Yes, sir. I've two Breguet two-seaters coming up for the aerial shots."

He pursed his lips and cocked his head sideways like a bird.

"But we mustn't try to fight the enemy in those front-line shots, captain. Can't afford to have anything happen to Gallens' face before the picture is finished. We wouldn't have any star then. His face is his fortune, and mine, too. Hah-hah!" he laughed abruptly. "If he were shot down he couldn't tour America. He's precious. Hah-hah!"

"The face that brought a billion bucks," nodded Johnny.

"Yes, sir. No kidding. Altamount Pictures has his face insured for a million dollars. Think of it, a million."

THE little man talked on steadily and gave no one else a chance to speak a word. Digger stirred restlessly. So did Johnny.

Then Dolliver J. Boothby said, "And by the way, captain, you'll help me on protecting Gallens from himself, won't you? Such a reckless fellow. Won't use a double. And we had a hard time to get him to consent

to making this picture. He really enlisted to see some action. But I can't have him killed or mutilated, you know."

"Really?" Digger's sardonic smile tinged his contempt. "Such a brave-hearted lad!"

Again Dolliver J. Boothby looked startled, stared in a birdlike way, and then nodded. "Yes. Quite. Gave General Howard his word of honor after a session that lasted four hours, yes, hours, that he'd do nothing to endanger the film."

He paused a moment and in the interval they all heard a faint droning hum coming out of the southwest sky.

A tremor of excitement swept the tarmac. Men craned their heads upward and made no pretense of disguising their interest. They saw a tiny speck, no bigger than a fly, silhouetted against the blue vault.

"Here he comes," passed the word.

The cameramen fussed with their instruments. Every one drew together near the point where the oncoming crate would probably stop. The drone grew louder, and became a reverberating roar that echoed over the countryside. A sky-blue Spad came lower and suddenly the pilot cut the gun. At two hundred feet altitude it circled the field, caught the wind direction from the sock and skimmed down like a falcon to fishtail to a three-point landing that was sweet. Whatever else he might be, Johnny thought, Gallens was a flyer, a natural.

The spluttering Hispano-Suiza ceased to bark and a tall, leggy young man hoisted himself from the cockpit and dropped gracefully to the ground.

"Hold it, Jerry," came the cameramen's cry, and cranks began to grind.

Jerry Gallens stopped. In a rather reluctant fashion he took off his helmet and now it could be seen that he was a fine figure of youth. He had hazel eyes with long lashes, regular features, a full sensitive mouth, and a bulging chin that had a distinct cleft in it. Either from the front or in profile, he was perfection of masculine good looks.

Gallens' body went with his head. The shoulders were very broad, tapering to a slender waist and finished with good stout legs. There were strength and muscle there.

Johnny the Ink thought, "Here's a good-looking guy that don't look sissy. I'd bet a nickel to a Dijon franc he's a bang-up guy."

The expression on the face of Jerry Gallens between camera shots bore this out. For it was an expression

of ineffable weariness, as if this sort of thing sickened him. But he carried on and responded with his famous smile that revealed an even row of white teeth, when the cameramen demanded it.

Presently, when shutters ceased to click, the youth walked toward the group. Instinctively he picked Digger to speak to.

His hand came to salute in respect to the twin bars on Digger's shoulders. "Are you Captain Banks, sir?" he asked. His voice was low and pleasantly modulated.

"I'm Banks," replied Diggers curtly.

"I'm Gallens, sir," Jerry held the salute, "reporting for duty."

As Jerry's hand dropped from the tip of his overseas cap, he half-extended it. Apparently Digger didn't see it. His face was frozen and blank.

"Got a letter about you," he replied curtly. "Come on into the worry-room and we'll fix you up."

Johnny, closely studying the fine features, saw Jerry Gallens blink at the undisguised dislike betrayed. Slowly the actor's gaze roamed the group. All eyes were on him, but not one pair was friendly. Gallens' mobile lips tightened, the hazel eyes narrowed, and a slight shrug moved the broad shoulders. He betrayed no other sign of emotion and turned to follow Digger to the orderly room.

JOHNNY the Ink fell in step beside Gallens. "I'm Kelcy," he announced, smiling, "kiwi of the outfit. Better known as Johnny the Ink."

Jerry Gallens shook hands. This little chap seemed friendly.

"Saw you in 'Golden Youth,'" went on Johnny. "Damn good, I thought."

Jerry Gallens did not simmer; he frowned. "Forget all that, will you? I—I'm trying to get away from it. I came into this man's army the same as any one else and wanted to be treated like the rest." A bitter expression twisted his features. "But the damn politicians in Washington want me for propaganda, so now I'm a manikin dressing their window. But I want to forget all the other just the same."

Johnny the Ink listened and sympathy tugged at his heart. Behind the words he heard and felt the protest of a youth who couldn't be himself.

"You're jake with me," he said, softly. "And any time you want a shoulder to weep on, you can have mine."

Jerry Gallens smiled. "Thanks," he replied simply.

They entered the orderly room. Digger Banks was there, half-sitting on a table desk, a leg crooked around

a corner. He nodded coldly and started at once to speak.

"Not much to say, Gallens. I got corps' order. I'll only add this. Let them take your picture here behind the lines. By the yard or by the piece, it doesn't matter to me. Let them interview you, describe your food and your sleep and what kind of salts you use in your baths—when you get one. That's okay with me. Let them fake a Fokker fight here behind the lines. That goes, too."

He paused and a frown knitted his brow.

"But if you go with the squadron over the lines where the lives of my men may be jeopardized by this tomfoolery, you'll be a combat pilot and you'll fight or go down. All this crapple and your reputation won't count for a damn."

There was an undertone of contempt in Digger's voice, and it made Jerry Gallens flush. His fine hazel eyes hardened.

"I think I understand, sir," he retorted, evenly. "And while we're on the subject let me say something. I came into this war to fight like any one else, because I wanted to, and not because of a publicity stunt. They found me out and are forcing me to make this picture and ordering me to go back to the States. They got my word of honor on it. I'm obeying orders just like you. And I don't like it any more than you do. But I gave my word of honor, and I'm going to stick to it. I know you don't like my reputation or my—er—face. But it's the only face I've got just now, so you'll have to get along with it."

Johnny the Ink felt like giving three cheers. This was no stuffed shirt speaking. He was beginning to like Jerry Gallens immensely.

Digger Banks chose to ignore the statement. "Flying over the lines," he went on calmly, "is always done in formation until the C.O. gives orders to break. There are certain rules of cooperation that hold. If an enemy crate is on a mate's tail and you're free, you're supposed to drive the enemy off. Never let a pal down. Don't try the lone wolf act. In a dogfight it is usually every man for himself and death for the hindmost. You probably won't get over the lines because they're afraid something might happen to your face. But I'm telling you anyway, same as I tell any rookie pilot."

"Yes, sir." Jerry's expression did not change.

"Then that's all. I shan't try to interfere with this damn civilian and his hokum. But when you're not under him you're under my command." He turned to Johnny. "Put him in Stokell's old quarters, Johnny, and assign him to Allenby's flight as of to-day."

WHAT with the changeable weather and other delays, Dolliver J. Boothby was nine days in making his ground sequences and throwing the screen air story into shape. And during this time he was the boss of the Ninety-second's tarmac. Digger Banks scowled and blistered the air with oaths: but Dolliver J. Boothby had papers from G.H.Q. in Chaumont and Digger could not disobey.

No dawn or dusk patrols took off because Dolliver J. Boothby needed pilots to group around Jerry Gallens. No squadron flights were made because Jerry couldn't be spared. The tarmac ceased to be a place of war; to the Ninety-second it became a huge, interesting comedy.

The pilots and mechanics, hugely amused at this strange business, did not mind the lay-off, even though Digger growled about morale. It was a treat to see Jerry Gallens posing with his shirt open to show the column of his neck and hear Dolliver J. Boothby cry, "Turn your head, Jerry, and give the gals the thrill of your profile."

Camera! Camera! Camera! And Jerry Gallens! Tinkering with his sky-blue plane, spots of grease carefully affixed to his yellow-powdered face. Taking off, while six cameras recorded the event for posterity. Fixing his Vickers!

You could see Gallens didn't like it, but he played the game. With face taut and impassive when the cameras were not grinding, he obeyed like an automaton. Slowly he was being manufactured into an ace.

This creation of a tailor-made ace didn't set well with a lot of the fellows.

"Cripes," said Timmy Carson, "here's 'Shorty' Callahan with a face like a baboon and fifteen Krauts to his credit and America will never hear of him. They'll be cheering this baby-faced doll."

Jerry Gallens heard; Timmy wanted him to. But Gallens gave no sign that he had overheard. He went on with the acting. This didn't help him with those who thought he should have socked Timmy on the jaw.

By the ninth day every one was fed up and the explosion came.

"Here," Dolliver J. Boothby cried, "the rest of you pilots lift Jerry onto your shoulders and carry him from the plane over here to Number One Hangar. Cheer—cheer hard. You're congratulating him, see, on him getting his fifth victory. You're cheering because he's an ace."

The pilots thought of pals leaping from flammers, of others full of Spandau slugs or rotting out there in a crushed cockpit. And that memory, together with nine days of inaction, was too much. They mutinied and only Digger's reluctant order made them obey Boothby's instructions. Even so their cheers were filled with mockery. Some pinched Gallens on the legs, in the seat, on the arm. They made vulgar sounds with their mouths.

And when Boothby told them to yell out something so that the cameras could catch their lips movements, they howled jeering things.

"Oh, mama, see the bad sojer boy who killums nassy Germans. What is an ace, mama?"

"An ace, my boy, is one who stays at home and kisses all the nice girls."

Jerry held himself tense. He had to act because the cameras ground. He smiled, waved his hands, looked modest and followed Boothby's shouted directions. It was a good piece of acting. But Johnny the Ink knew the boy was boiling inside.

And he was filled with indignation. "The kid's trying to carry on and they're making it damn tough."

But he did not blame the pilots either, for they couldn't understand this sort of thing. Johnny blamed the damn-fool publicity men.

This was bad enough but it got quickly worse. Shortly after the jeering pilots had lowered Jerry to the ground, von Manteuffel took a hand in an already complicated situation. Boothby had just finished a close-up of Jerry loading his twin Vickers when a droning sound came out of the north. It came closer with the swiftness of light itself. A plane!

It was a black plane and it was not flying high. Eyes centered on it with sudden interest. And then white fleecy powder puffs dotted the sky around it. Allied A.A. This was a German crate. Presently you could see it was a triplane.

"By God," cried Digger. "It's one of von Manteuffel's circus."

CHAPTER III IDOL'S HONOR

THE TRIPE PLOUGHED contemptuously through the shrapnel bursts. It roared toward the tarmac. A few men ran to their crates. But it was obvious that this was no ground-strafting job. The Fokker Tripe circled the field, nosed over in a power dive and swooped with terrific speed across the tarmac. There was a tremendous howl of a motor, a black shadow like a shark hiding on sandy bottom and the Fokker zoomed and disappeared over the tree-tops.

But the German pilot had waved his hand and dropped an object that struck in the center of the field, rolled a few feet and stopped.

Digger raced to it and picked it up. It was an old, patched German army boot. To it was affixed a bit of white paper. Digger Banks roared its message aloud, liberally punctuated by curses.

Greetings to the Blue Hawks. We came to this Front having heard much of your prowess, courage and skill. We have waited impatiently to see your insignia in the air that we might try some small meeting to test your merits. You have not come. Perhaps our arrival has made you reluctant to go into the air. Perhaps your reputation is quite exaggerated. We are sending you this boot, thinking, possibly, that you may need it to boot yourselves into the air to meet real fighting airmen. May we expect to see you soon? Von Manteuffel.

Jerry Gallens and the movie-air epic were forgotten in rage at this coolly calculated insult. If Jerry were remembered it was only with glances of anger that he should have been indirectly responsible for this sarcasm.

Digger Banks was furious. "To hell with this monkey business," he roared. "No Kraut can get away with that. Five ack emma to-morrow we take off and everybody in his crate. No sore throats and no hangovers. We'll show von Manteuffel."

Johnny the Ink, who had expected a protest from Dolliver J. Boothby, was surprised to hear the director agree.

"Okay by me," said the bird-like man. "I'm ready now for the front-line shots. I want to do them first

and see some action, so I can direct the Fokker fight back here."

Digger stared at him. "Keep that Breguet out of the way of von Manteuffel. And remember"—he stopped ominously—"Gallens goes, and he fights. I'm the skipper now."

"He'll go with your squadron," assented Dolliver, amiably, "but he won't fight. We couldn't have that. He might get killed or his pan might get smashed and then where'd we be?"

"I know where I wish you were," growled Digger. "And as for—"

"Listen," cut in Dolliver. "Jerry will go. We'll take some long pans and telescopic close-ups showing his plane number mixing with the Krauts. But if any scrapping starts he leaves pronto."

"If he goes with us he fights—and he goes," yelled Digger.

"Don't be ridiculous," said Boothby, and turned on his heel and stalked off.

Johnny the Ink found Jerry Gallens in his cubicle. The youth was moodily smoking a cigarette. His yellow grease-paint had been washed off and he looked tired and haggard.

Johnny looked at him for a while before he spoke.

"Listen, Jerry, you know your own business best, and you're doing a swell job of winning the war with this picture. But why didn't you cut loose and bust one of those pilots in the nose this afternoon when they pinched you. If you'd handed Carson a beating the rest would have laid off you."

Jerry jerked upright. "God, didn't I want to?" he suddenly blazed. "But, you see"—the fire went out of him and he dropped wearily—"you see, the general made me pledge my word of honor I wouldn't do anything that might hurt me or my face until this picture is finished. They're banking heavily on it in the States. And I promised."

He paused. "I've never broken my word in my life and I can't begin now." Johnny nodded sympathetically. "Puts you in a tough place."

"The general knew it would. That's why he made it a word of honor pledge. Boy, Johnny, it's been tough going through with this. I'm human, you know"—this wistfully—"and I'd like those fellows to like me. They're real and I think I am."

THE door opened and Dolliver J. Boothby came in like an angry sparrow. "Now listen, Jerry," he burst out, ignoring Johnny the Ink. "The hell with that big oaf,

Banks. We've got a picture to make. You fly with that squadron to-morrow until you get a signal from me. A big red cloth, see? Then you beat it back where it's safe. It's going to be dangerous enough as it is. And I won't have this Banks making it worse. You might get killed."

Jerry looked at the tiny director, eyes smoldering.

"Don't you realize," he asked bitterly, "that when I fly with that squadron I owe support to it? I'm not on my own out there. Another flyer may be dependent upon me. One may get in a jam and—"

"That's no argument," cut in Boothby angrily. "You owe the picture everything. It'll raise hundreds of millions of dollars. If you get killed or ruin your pan and the picture fails, then the idea fails, you won't tour, and you've wrecked a swell plan."

Jerry maintained a stubborn silence. "And besides," added Boothby, cunningly, "you promised the general you'd play ball and do as I say."

At that Jerry Gallens got up and began to pace the cramped quarters. His body trembled and his eyes blazed. Johnny the Ink, pitying from his heart, watched this inner struggle. Then on a sudden Jerry Gallens' shoulders slumped.

"You win," he said hoarsely, "I passed my word. I'll come back when you wave the signal."

"Good!" chuckled Boothby, good-tempered again. "Now you're acting sensible. After we get these final shots you'll go back to America and live the life of Reilly and be away from all this bunk."

Jerry looked at him queerly. "Yes. I'll be away from all this," he said quietly, "but I won't be away from myself, Boothby. A man has to live with himself a long time and if he's not pleasant company why—why—"

"Don't be temperamental," cut in Boothby, and went out the door.

Johnny followed after him. "Poor Jerry," he thought. "That's a jam he's in now."

NEXT morning when dawn exploded across the heavens, the sky was a blue vault that extended upward into eternity. Far below, the green and brown carpet, checkered and spotted with tree clumps, slid with a circling movement under the wings of the Ninety-second Pursuit. The whole squadron was there, twenty-one droning ships in stepped V formation, thrumming across the sky like homing geese. Above and to the rear were two Breguet two-seaters with cameramen in the rear cockpits grinding steadily at their cranks.

Jerry Gallens was flying at number five in the

upstairs flight. The numbers of his Spad, outlined in black, could be seen for miles, and the telescopic lenses of the cameras up there were missing no part of this panoply of war.

The squadron was flying at twelve thousand feet, safely above archie fire, Digger sneeringly said; it was cold, desperately cold. The sun shone yellowly without warmth and Jerry cuddled down into his furs.

He was very bitter, quite lonely, and it seemed his brain was a dull lump in his head. They were slowly breaking his heart, though he would have been the last to admit it. He dare not even think now for fear that his pent-up emotion might burst in one explosion. He was hanging on to himself by will power alone.

Dimly he realized that these were the last sequences of the propaganda picture. To-morrow would come the Fokker mock fight and then the finish. After that Jerry intended to do something to redeem his self-respect, but he wasn't mentioning it to any one, not even himself yet.

He looked ahead and saw Digger Banks, flying at point, signal a climb. The squadron stood on its tail and howled up the sky. Fourteen thousand feet. Below now was the churned terrain of No-Man's-Land. The silvery Vesle stretched across the landscape like a coiled snake.

A few archies took potshots at them, and the greasy black roses of the explosions dotted the air beneath them. But the shooting was erratic at this range. But the shrapnel and high explosive bursts made a fine show for the movie men above.

Bazoches slid behind; the rolling hills of the Vesle heights passed astern. Puffs of smoke came out of the green carpet now, like steam from a locomotive. Shell fire! A couple of photographic busses with Nieuport fighters guarding them passed on the right.

And then Jerry sighted Pont d'Arcy and the railhead. Away across the landscape stretched the gleaming steel rails. But closer to Pont d'Arcy was a string of gray Pullmans, von Manteuffel's headquarters. His circus lived on the Pullmans and moved from Front to Front as the German High Command needed control of the air. Von Manteuffel had the shock troops of the air. And if Jerry Gallens or Boothby didn't know it, the others did; this was going to be no picnic.

Suddenly Digger Banks' ship rocked violently. The signal. The Spad nosed over. And as one, the squadron dove toward the German tarmac. The air was filled with the human howl of the Hissos. Shrapnel bursts

suddenly littered the air. And as the squadron got lower, tracer fire glinted as frantic Germans at Maxims mounted on wagon wheels strove to stop the tarmac strafing.

Jerry Gallens brought up the right flank. He grew excited; this was war, no fake. There was the enemy. His eyes blazed and his fingers clenched on the stick while his thumbs groped for the Bowdoin stick trigger. In this sudden action he found outlet for his feelings.

AS QUICKLY as it had begun, the strafe was over. Planes following one after the other droned over the tarmac. Five-pound bombs blew holes in the landing field. Two bombs set a canvas hangar on fire. Spitting Vickers and slugs drove the German ground crews Scurrying like frightened rats.

And then they were zooming once more, zooming into trouble.

Jerry saw the Germans first.

Far to the west, looking like gray triangles, came von Manteuffel's circus from the day's patrol, coming fast. Digger saw them, too, and the throttles hit the wide open pegs as the squadron chandelled in frantic haste to reach a high ceiling. Here was desperate fighting in sight.

The Breuguets hung to the rear, already retreating. But von Manteuffel, thinking likely that the Breguets were a trap to cause him to split his Jagdstaffel, ignored the two-seaters and in a staircase of Vs the German circus tore for the Americans.

The Germans suddenly ranged out quickly in the form of a huge arrow and got between the Americans and the Front, cutting off their retreat. The peril loomed stark and terrible. It was a case of fight through or die. No middle course.

Digger Banks' plane suddenly wobbled in the signal for attack. The Yanks also took an arrow formation and on a sudden order drove headlong at the Germans.

Drive through, no change in altitude, and the Germans on the same level. That was the order!

It was crisis. Either the Germans gave away or forty crates would lock prop to prop in deadly collision.

Like a meteor Jerry's Spad screamed toward the German line. A wild yell left his tongue; his lips were skinned back. He was suddenly berserk with lust. The disappointments, the humiliation and insults he had endured burst now in one explosion of fury. He wanted to kill, smash those onrushing Tripes out of the sky.

The distance between the lines of planes closed magically. How much guts did these Krauts have?

A mile. A half mile. And then, suddenly, only yards separated the spinning props. Black Tripes with white crosses roaring at blue planes with cocardes.

And then on a sudden the Germans zoomed, a maneuver done as if all the ships had been but one. Up the sky they climbed, rolled on their backs and nosed down in an Immelman—and were tearing after the tails of the Yanks.

But Digger had expected this. He was wise in the ways of the air. His own signal had been as quick as von Manteuffel's. The Yanks zoomed, rolled and flopped back. The next second the sky held a ball of howling planes, a mile wide, a mile deep, rolling over and over like a giant wheel. All semblance of order vanished. Banking, zooming, darting planes made a mad confusion in which death struck with a sure hand.

Jerry Gallens found himself twisting, and plunging in the heart of this deadly fight. Ships zoomed in front of him, knifed past him, shot at him. Slugs Whacked into the Spad. Tracer fire seemed to make golden threads around him. A quick burst from some German slapped into his center-section. Instinctively he rolled and no more shots came.

He chandelled to the top of the heap, got on a German's tail and chased him with red-lipped Vickers. He reached the outside of the ball and became vaguely aware of a Breguet, a Breguet with a bit of red cloth floating. It was Boothby and the signal to run.

"No," cried Jerry, and the slipstream tore the word from his mouth and hurled it into the roar of his motor.

But even as he rebelled there came to him the picture of the little fat general. The general had said, "I ask your word of honor as an officer and a gentleman."

CHAPTER IV THE RUN-OUT

A SOB WRENCHED from Jerry's throat. There were men out there, fellows he could like, and they were fighting to the death. Their Vickers loosed deadly steel. And he was part of them. This was his meat. He wouldn't go. A German Tripe plunged past him, the pilot hanging half out of the cockpit,

dead, the wings slowly disintegrating from his plane. Another ship, flaming and smoking, dropped past. He felt the heat of the flames.

This was a fight, a man's fight. And up there was a signal to make him run like a yellow-bellied fool. He cursed and tried to ignore the signal.

"Your word of honor," the general had said.

"I always keep my word," Jerry had replied.

He beat at his chest. He yelled in fury. He angled and fired a twenty-shot burst at a German chasing a Yank down the sky. It was Allenby, in trouble, he started to follow. He saw the red flag, again, peremptorily waving, ordering him to run.

"Damn 'em! Damn 'em!" he howled.

A Yank fell twisting down the sky, a German on his tail battering him to bits with Spandau steel. A German knifed downward to climb Jerry's tail. He had to decide.

On a sudden his face became like granite, as stiff, as expressionless and as gray. He neutralized the controls, opened the throttle and tore straight through the mass of twisting ships for the Breguet. He came close. Boothby repeated the signal and with Jerry alongside the two ships fled straight for home.

Jerry climbed out of the crate on the tarmac. Boothby ran to him.

"Swell!" he yelled. "Wonderful! We'll take America by storm. Such pictures. My God, I've never seen anything like it. You did yourself proud, kid."

Jerry Gallens emitted one word—blistering, hot, terrible.

Then he turned on his heel and walked to his cubicle. Boothby looked after him.

"Well, can you tie that?" he asked the world. "Ah, well, he'll get over feeling like that. He's an actor, that kid is."

Jerry Gallens, face impassive, mouth tight and thin, heard the motor drone of the returning squadron and walked out to see them fishtail in. He betrayed no emotion, but his eyes roved anxiously over the dotted sky, counting ships. Fourteen, fifteen, sixteen—and that was all. Sixteen crates home. Where were the others?

The ships were bullet smashed. Motors stuttered. First-aid kits were ripped open and bleeding wounds were bandaged. Jerry lit a cigarette and strode closer. Who hadn't come back?

Digger Banks espied him, and walked to him. His face was hard and bitter and cruel.

"So," he said harshly, "you took a run-out powder,

huh? Couldn't stand the gaff. Ran for it. Left the outfit with the fight of its life and ran."

He came closer, his eyes bloodshot with fury. But before he could say what was in his mind, Timmy Carson of C Flight came running up. Tears poured down his oil-grimed cheeks. He was shaking with sobs. He could scarcely speak.

"They got Allenby, skipper," he choked. "Burnt him down. He was falling in a spin, trying to shake loose—and couldn't. Followed him and burnt. And that Gallens"—he burst into unprintable oaths—"he was right there. Instead of driving the Krauts away, he ran—beat it—and Allenby burnt. God, skipper, he jumped—jumped from a flamer—a mile up."

He sobbed again. Then his eyes found Jerry's. He quivered and jerked straight.

"You lousy rat," he screamed. "Allenby was my pal, my pal. Damn you, I'll kill you!"

CARSON was mad with rage and shock. He lunged for Jerry. Jerry, ashen now, made no move to dodge or defend himself. He merely stood. Digger Banks' big arm came up and blocked Carson's charge. He caught him and held him fast. His voice when he spoke to Carson was gentle.

"Too bad, lad; it happens that way sometimes. I'll attend to this. Johnny," he yelled. Johnny the Ink trotted forward. "Take Carson some place and give him a couple of slugs of liquor."

He waited until Carson, hardly able to walk, was led away. Then he turned and looked at Jerry.

"Why did you run?" he asked curtly. "You knew my orders."

Jerry was trembling now.

"The picture's not finished," he replied, haltingly. "I gave my word I'd stay out of trouble until it was finished. My face—"

"God curse your face!" roared Digger. "You lousy actor, you God-awful ham, you yellow rat! Because of that picture you run out of a fight and a man has to die because of that face. God, I don't see how you can look at it in a mirror any more—with a man's blood on it."

Jerry flinched visibly. He was holding onto himself only by the most terrible of efforts. His eyes held a pathetic light. "I'll—remember—that," he said. "I'll—never—forget it. But the picture—I gave my word, so I came back." Digger lost his head. Oaths that he hadn't used since marching days in Algerian deserts poured into his mouth and were spat out. He blistered the air.

He flayed Jerry. But Jerry didn't move, he just stood there, his finger nails digging curves of blood in his palms.

"Why don't you answer back?" raved Digger. "Why don't you play the man and call me out of my name? Are you a jellyfish? Why don't you put up your damn lily white hands and fight?"

"The picture isn't finished. Gave my word—no fight."

Digger flung up his arms and let them drop. He took a quick step.

"You louse!" he gritted.

There came a report like a pistol shot. His hairy, calloused right hand had swept around in a powerful arc and smashed against Jerry's cheek. The force of the blow almost knocked Jerry over. He caught his balance, stiffened for a second and a wild light came into his eyes. His fists balled. Then he settled back and merely stood. His face was white save for the marks of Digger's fingers.

"Take that face out of my sight," snarled Digger thickly. "I never want to see it again. I can't look at it without seeing Allenby."

At ten o'clock the next morning Johnny the Ink knocked at Jerry Gallens' cubicle and without waiting for an invitation walked in. Jerry was seated on the end of the bunk, his elbows on his knees, his clenched fists supporting his cheeks. His hopeless eyes turned as Johnny walked in, but he did not speak or change his posture.

Johnny stood for a moment looking at him. His eyes were filled with pity. "I told you, old fellow," he said gently, "that I had a hell of a good shoulder when a guy felt like weeping."

Jerry looked up at him dully. "There are some things weeping won't help," he muttered. "Allenby, for instance. God, I can't sleep for thinking of it." Johnny looked at the youth pityingly. He decided against sympathy. A word of it and Jerry would smash and sob.

Instead he said, "Boothby says it's a swell morning and is going to pull the Fokker stunt. Your crate is warmed up now. Kingsley is flying the Fokker for the fake fight."

JERRY smiled bitterly.

"The fake fight. That's a laugh, isn't it? Kingsley can fly rings around me. But he'll go up there and act like an old woman with the crate and I'll get on his tail and he'll laugh and touch off smoke pots and spin down out of camera range. God, what mockery!"

"You got your job to do, old fellow," said Johnny the Ink, softly. "We all have. You don't think it's easy for me, do you, working here day after day on lousy paper work, eating out my heart to take a Spad off and climb into the sky for high adventure? But it's my job, so I stick to it."

"My job will be done to-day," said Jerry thickly. "And when it's done—"

"When it's done you're going to challenge Digger and his big fists will smash your face flat while he glories in it. You want to remember that when you make that lecture tour the people tire going to turn out to see the face you've got now—not the face Digger would leave you with."

Jerry punched his fist at his cleft chin.

"My face—God, I wish I never had one," he blazed.

"Childish!" chided Johnny. "It's your stock in trade, the thing you have, to sell. Without it you couldn't act, could you?"

"I could push a truck."

"But would you?"

Jerry's hand clapped on Johnny's back. "I used to love the stage, Johnny. I gloried in it, wanted to think I was a real artist. It was my life ambition. I suppose after this wears off I'll eat out my heart to be back on the boards, if anything happens to me. But right now, fella, I don't care if I die."

"That's a naughty fib," said Johnny. Jerry Gallens sat down. "Yes," he responded wearily. "I suppose it is. But when I think of Allenby, of what they've made me do—I'm pretty sick, Johnny."

"Well Johnny broke off sharply. Dolliver J. Boothby, looking more like a bird than ever, popped his head through the door.

"Come on, Jerry. This is the finish. The cameras are up, and the air is clear, and we'll put a smashing climax that'll tumble them out of their seats."

Jerry turned obediently to the door. Johnny followed. "Buck up, kid, and remember a lot of us understand," he muttered, and patted Jerry's shoulder.

On the tarmac, pilots sullenly stood around and the glances they flung at Jerry were filled with hatred. Digger was there, his great fists opening and closing.

"Get it over with," he called thickly "And then get to hell off my flying field." Overhead in a bowl of cloudless blue one Breguet droned. It carried two cameras.

Boothby was calling instructions. "Here's the dope. A balloon, directing fire of a battery of artillery that's protecting the front of an isolated battalion of infantry,

is being threatened by an enemy airman. He's going to burn it. The alerte comes through. Jerry is the only pilot available. He must save the blimp. He rushes to his crate and takes off. He meets the enemy airman before the German gets to the balloon and shoots him down, thus saving a thousand lives. Now—we'll rehearse the arrival of the alerte and you rush for your ship, Jerry."

The pilots looked on contemptuously. There were close-ups of Jerry in yellow greasepaint and powder. His expression of concern as the corporal arrived with the warning. The loping run across the tarmac. And then the leap into the sky-blue Spad and the thundering take-off.

It was all done well, very well.

Boothby trotted to his Breguet. "Get Kingsley into the air," he ordered. "I'll take the close-ups of him later. We'll get the fight now while the light is right." His Breguet roared down the field and soared into the air.

OFF to one side, out of camera range, was the Fokker, the Maltese Crosses on the wings accentuated by new paint. A cameraman ran to it and yelled to the helmeted and goggled figure within. A nod responded. The Mercedes blatted; cherry streaks of flame stabbed from its exhaust stacks. With a reckless run it took off cross-wind and howled up the sky in as daring a piece of flying as the Ninety-second had ever witnessed.

"God," muttered one pilot. "I hope it never gets out that Kingsley was flying that crate. Him lettin' a droopy-drawered kid even pretend to shoot him—"

"Stop him!"

A shout of surprise, amazement and consternation came from the left. Johnny the Ink, fear clutching at his heart, turned. Out of Hangar Two a figure was running in wabbling fashion. The man had been hurt. Blood streaked down the face. But even so Johnny gave a terrible groan.

"My God!" he groaned. "It's Kingsley!"

"Stop him," repeated Kingsley and gestured toward the chandelling Fokker. "It's Timmy Carson in there. He socked me with a Stillson wrench. He's going to kill Gallens."

Johnny shook his head, bewildered. "Holy Ike, he can't. There are blanks in the belts. Boothby put them in."

"Blanks in Gallens' Vickers, yes," groaned Kingsley. "But a grease-ball says he saw a guy he thought was me rethreading on the Fokker. And the belts we took out of those Fokker Spandaus are gone from the locker. Timmy's got them and he's gonna burn Gallens up."

"My God, he's mad!" yelled Johnny. "Get up there, some of you guys, and drive him away."

He turned his staring eyes to the sky. Gallens had made a ninety-degree bank and was diving on the tail of the Fokker. Both ships were squarely in the center of the invisible lines which marked the camera zone.

The two planes sliced around each other with Jerry getting into position. The two Breguets from opposite sides put cameras on all angles of the fight.

The pilots on the ground held their breath in agonized suspense. What would Timmy Carson, mentally unhinged by the death of his pal, do? They realized this was stark tragedy. What had been humorous to these who had heard the whir of enemy wings, the spat of Spandau slugs and cowered before enemy bursts, became suddenly more intense, more terrible than anything they had ever known. An armed madman attacking a defenseless man.

On a sudden the two planes howled toward the earth in power dives. Gallens was roaring on Carson's tail. But the Fokker outdove him, and with a whining roar nosed up in a zoom that might become a loop. Gallens tried to follow; was a split-second too late. The Fokker reached the top of the loop, rolled out, and suddenly fell off in a bank and nosed over to swoop down on the Spad. It came like a thunderbolt.

Out of the whirl of light that was the Fokker's prop shot glinting sparks which left threads of gray smoke. *Rat-tat-tat-tat!* Spandau steel!

"God," moaned Johnny. "He's got him. Got him."

Again came that patter of sound like a man applauding with his gloves on. The Spad seemed enveloped in tracer fire. The slugs that missed the target thudded into the field not so far from where the horrified group stood. But they did not think to move; they stood frozen by the tragedy being enacted over their heads.

"Digger!" screamed Johnny the Ink. "For God's sake, do something—ah, Jerry's got away! Swell work, kid. Run for it. Run! You haven't got a chance." A double roll had tossed the Spad out of the line of fire. "Now," cried Johnny, "all he's got to do is make a run to Chery and land there. There he goes—my God, he's banking. He's diving back. Ah, you fool! You fool!"

CHAPTER V COMEBACK

THE SPAD, GLINTING BLUELY in the sun, knifed around and thundered back to the center of the invisible stage. Now it flopped down onto the Fokker's tail. Spitting flashes came from the whorl of the Spad's prop, but no tracer fire came out. There was blank ammo threaded to Jerry's Vickers. He, defenseless, was back to the attack.

"Ah, man," screamed Johnny, beside himself, "and you said Gallens didn't have any guts, Digger. Look at that. He came back and he's likely to die for it, but he came back because he knows the cameramen are up there after a picture. And he's giving it to 'em. He's risking his life for that lousy picture and you said no guts."

With a roaring flash the black Fokker angled out of harm's way. She climbed with her nose at the sky. Gallens chandelled to keep up, but the time had not come when a Spad could outclimb a fleet Fokker. They chased each other around the sky with the Fokker gaining by the yard.

Digger stood there, hands opening and closing, spitting mechanically, his mouth brown and drooling at the corners.

Johnny gave a groan of horror. The distance between the Fokker and Gallens' tail was closing.

"Ah, Jerry! He's got you now," he moaned.

"Shut up," gritted Digger thickly.

He, too, could see Jerry's position. Flying in a ninety-degree bank the Fokker was on the Spad's tail. It was the kill position and everybody there on the ground knew it. *Rat-tat-tat!* Spandau slugs!

Jerry took the only chance out. The Spad suddenly stood on her tail, clawed by her prop up the sky.

"He'll whipstall," muttered Johnny. "Whipstall and fall on his tail right into Timmy's line of fire."

The whining howl of the Spad's motor filled the sky. She climbed, seemed to hold on by her nose, flopped feebly over on her back. She had lost flying speed to the point where she was beginning to slip. The Fokker, with a mad Carson at the stick, instinctively met the desperate maneuver with its

answer which was to level out, climb slightly and wait for the stalled Spad to drop within range.

The Spad hung on her back, motor popping as the gasoline ceased to feed properly. She was held there, it seemed, by Gallens' iron will alone. And then she started to slip. A groan went up from the pilots. The right wing caught, the air. She was over, right side up; the prop bit the air. The Spad, fluttering, kept from spinning or slipping by flying skill alone, finally got her nose over and began to dive straight for the Fokker.

Timmy Carson saw he was trapped but realized that Gallens had no bullets. So he turned to get up flying speed and dove away with the intention of zooming for a roll and coming back down on Jerry's tail.

"Damn him!" screamed Johnny. "He knows he's got nothing to fear. He'll—oh, man! Look at that!"

They held their breaths; they forgot to move. Their bulging eyes followed the skyrocket plunge of the Spad. The Hisso screamed. The flat wire braces shrieked. The Spad came down the sky, a blue streak, and overhauled the Fokker like a striking meteor. What did Jerry Gallens hope to do?

And then Johnny shouted. "Look! Look!"

The whirling light of the Spad's prop leaped at the Fokker's tail. It clawed at it. A grinding, smashing crash! Pieces of fabric and strut flew. The Spad prop shattered into a thousand pieces. The Hisso motor released from the brake of the club screamed a terrific roar and would have burst asunder, but suddenly Gallens cut the gun.

In a trice both ships started down the sky. The Spad was without a motor. The Fokker had her tail assembly half eaten away.

"Wow!" Johnny the Ink was as pale as ashes. "Jerry can make a deadstick landing. But poor Timmy—Timmy's finished."

"By hell, no!" roared Digger. "Listen! He's got the motor wide open to hold the nose up. There's enough tail surface for him to—look out over there! He'll land wide open."

THE black Fokker streaked toward the ground. The nose gradually lifted as the pull of the motor settled the balance. Jerry Gallens, without a prop, slipped neatly to one side to be clear of the Fokker's gliding angle.

The roaring howl of the Mercedes filled the air. Men scattered and ran

She came down the sky in split seconds. Dove like a

thunderbolt. It was a race between the leveling off and the uprising earth. The Fokker won by a scant five feet. Her wheels skimmed the grass and she was on a level. She roared across the field.

Then the wheels struck. The ship bounded fifty feet. The motor madly clawed the air to hold her level. She settled back again a hundred yards; her tail skid bit, dug a deep gash and broke off. The wheels stayed off the ground. Madly, Carson fought to keep the ship straight on her wild run. But a wheel struck, skidded and the Fokker partly turned, going down the field now on an angle. The wheels struck again. *Crash!* It was a sound like the breaking of a sack full of bottles.

In a second the Fokker was to right angles of her line of run and she began to roll over sideways. The wings flew into a thousand pieces. The motor tore off and was flung twenty feet. And the fuselage, like a coffin, rolled over and over, until finally it broke in two, tilted upward and gave a final weary flop. Here it rested upside down, a motionless figure hanging from the safety strap in the cockpit.

A blue streak flashed by. Jerry sat the Spad down near the crash. And before any one else could move, Jerry Gallens had leaped from the cockpit and dashed across the space to the inert figure. When the others arrived he had cut Carson loose from the belt and was supporting his head. Blood came from the nose. The arm and leg were badly crooked, broken. It looked bad.

"He's alive," snapped Jerry to Digger. "Get the Dodge and rush him to a hospital."

Digger roared at the mechanics. He snatched Carson's limp figure from Jerry's arms.

Jerry stood up and leaned heavily against Johnny the Ink's arm. His eyes were horrified.

"What was I to do?" he croaked. "It was his life or mine and it was ruining the picture."

Digger gave a terrific roar. The forked vein in his forehead bulged.

"Damn the picture," he howled, "It's wrecked my outfit. It's cost Allenby's life—and now Carson, if he lives, will go to jail until his beard hangs in three braids, all because of you and a picture. I'll blow the world off that this picture is the lousiest fake ever—"

"Wait a minute," it was Dolliver J. Boothby who cut in. He was still like a sparrow, but a pugnacious sparrow. "You've been blowing off a couple of days about telling the world this is a fake. Well, I've got the record on the film up there. Carson tried to kill Gallens, Gallens was only saving his life. And that fight was no fake. And by God, if you say it is a fake, then

Carson will go to jail and I'll see that he goes." Jerry Gallens stepped forward.

"I'll have something to say about all of this," he remarked quietly. He turned his regard to Boothby. "Is the picture finished? Did you get what you wanted up there?"

"Did I?" Boothby forgot what had happened in his enthusiasm. "I'll say I did. What a picture! Between the fight action on the Front and this, we'll get them on the edge of their seats. We'll knock them for a row of ash cans. Most wonderful air shots ever made."

"Then you're cleaned up, finished with me," said Jerry.

"Yep. Finished. Here, anyway. We'll take a few shots when you get to New York."

JERRY ignored Boothby and walked over to Digger Banks. It was as if a load had been taken from his shoulders.

"You've been calling me a lot of names, Banks," he said, evenly. "So I'm telling you this. Carson goes free. I'll never complain and nobody on this tarmac will say a word. It's not his fault. So don't think about Boothby's bluff."

He paused and took a step closer. His eyes flashed.

"Just think about this for a minute."

There came a sharp crack like an explosion. Digger Banks' seamed face snapped to the impact of the slap. He took a step back.

"You want to smash my face," said Jerry coolly.

"There's a reason for doing it."

He stepped forward and waited. He fell strangely at peace. His pent-up emotions went with the slap.

Digger stood there, gasping hoarsely. His eyes were red. The forked veins on his forehead pulsed. His great hands opened and closed, hands big enough to tear Jerry Gallens' slim figure in two. All waited tensely, looking for a spring.

"It wouldn't be fair, now," croaked Digger hoarsely.

"You been up there—tough spot. To-morrow at nine—back of hangar. Get to hell away now"—thickly—"before I lose hold."

He turned and walked blindly toward the orderly room.

Johnny the Ink escorted Jerry to his cubicle. "You fool," he sighed, "you foolishly brave fool! Digger will bust you in two."

Jerry Gallens said nothing at all.

But he stood straight and walked like a man who is not ashamed of himself.

AT QUARTER past nine that night, Jerry Gallens sat on the edge of his bunk. His outfit was packed even to his duffle bag. Johnny the Ink stood by the door.

"Digger says he'll pull the bout all square behind Number One Hangar at nine to-morrow morning," he announced, slowly. "He's a rough and tumble artist. Legion stuff. But there won't be any of that. He's promised. I'll second you and O'Reilly will referee. You'll get a square break."

Johnny came forward and sat down in an unpainted chair.

"I think Digger's changed his mind about you," he observed, presently. "He didn't return your wallop because you'd just had an unnerving thing happen in the air, and he didn't want to take advantage of you. Digger's square you know, Jerry."

"I know it," responded Jerry wearily. "He means well. He doesn't understand my kind. I'm sorry I blew up and slapped him. But I'd have burst if I hadn't. I really could like him—and to hit him—oh, well."

"Fight it out to-morrow and shake," said Johnny.

Presently Jerry began to talk in a flat monotonous voice as if he were conversing with himself.

"I'm glad it's over, Johnny. I carried out my pledge to the general. I played square with my word. They've made an ace out of me, in the films. I promised the general I'd let nothing interfere with my making the picture. But I didn't say anything about going back and lecturing."

"But you'll do it," said Johnny. "That's part of the job you've got to do."

"How can I?" Jerry's tone was one of pain. "How can I hop Pullmans night after night and think of Allenby, out there, jumping from a flamer? How can I get up and face a thousand people and tell them lies about myself—and remember poor Carson gone nuts because of me? How can I go back, wanting to do something real in this war, and turn out a stuffed shirt?" He got to his feet restlessly. "God, I couldn't live with myself. I hope Digger bashes my damn face in. Then they won't want me."

"Bashed or not, you'll go back," reiterated Johnny. "A job's a duty. You're brave and it takes a brave man to do his job when he doesn't like it." Jerry laughed hysterically. "My duty. Ah, God, maybe. But I'll think of you chaps over here, reading about my riotous receptions, reading of my marvelous record, and laughing. God, how you'll laugh!"

The door plunged violently open and Digger Banks spurted through the opening. The skipper's eyes found Johnny's.

"Johnny!" he rapped. "Listen! An alerte just came through from Rheims. There's a hellish big Zeppelin *en route* to Paris with a carload of bombs. By her course she's going to pass just west of us. Listeners picked her up and said she was at fifteen thousand feet, clear above the clouds." He broke off and cursed. "We're ordered to make a night attack and every man Jack is in Roncours getting drunk over Carson and Allenby."

He flung a glance at Jerry Gallens and turned to leave the room. "Get out my crate. I'll go alone," he said to Johnny.

"Just a minute." Jerry's voice had a whip-crack lash to it. "Did you mean that I'm to blame about all your pilots getting drunk?"

"Take it any way you like," growled Digger. "If you didn't have to save that lollypop face of yours you could earn a day's pay to-night by bringing down that Zep. But you—"

"I'm yellow, you're going to say, just to protect this face you want to smash up. All right! I'll try to earn a day's pay." He turned to Johnny. "Get my crate wheeled out too, Johnny. Belts changed, every fifth slug an incendiary." He looked at Digger. "I'll follow you wherever you've got guts to lead."

Johnny had loped through the door. Digger paused on the threshold. "You talk a good war," he growled. "We'll see what kind of a one you fight. It takes guts to sink a Zep. We'll probably both push daisies trying. They don't come down as easy as some people think. But I won't weep over you. Come on." He ran across the tarmac.

Jerry, exaltation in his heart, grabbed his leather flying coat, helmet and goggles and ran after him. Electric torches glowed by the hangar, the spattering crash of cold motors filled the air.

An orderly ran up with the last minute report. "The sound squad at Fismes reports Maybach motors at twelve thousand feet, above the clouds, flying south by southeast. Probable speed seventy miles an hour."

The mechanic stepped out of Jerry's cockpit. "Okay, incendiaries one to five, sir. Full tank."

Jerry hopped in. Digger Banks came over as he was fastening his safety belt.

"You fly alongside me until we see the Zep. Then I'll attack the left side and you the right. We'll hammer at her until she goes down, or we do."

"Right," said Jerry evenly.

Digger stared at him a second, then wheeled on his heel and ran to his own ship. A second later the tarmac roared to the crash of goosed motors. Cherry-red

flames touched with orange jabbed the darkness from the exhaust stacks. A mechanic on a motor cycle had raced to the end of the field and now held a blinking flashlight to mark the take-off line. Digger roared into the wind.

Jerry's crate moved trundling over the ground. He kicked the rudder, goosed the motor and flung the tail around. She nosed into the wind. He jammed the throttle wide open with the heel of his hand, pushed forward on the stick to get his tail up, and went racing down the field like a sparkling comet. Ahead of him the flickering exhaust stacks marked Digger Banks climbing into the night.

Johnny gazed after them both. He watched until the flickering lights of the exhausts moved across the blackness like a squad of fireflies. Then he shrugged.

"Kismet!" he muttered. "No man may dodge his fate."

CHAPTER VI LASHING STEEL

THE CEILING WAS LOW and there was cloud up to ten thousand feet. Jerry stuck the Spad at her best climbing angle and chandelled in wide sweeping spirals seeking the top of the storm heads. He seemed alone in an eternity of grayness, thundering through a world that had no top, bottom or sides. The congealing mist touched his face with the clamminess of death itself. Moisture gleamed on the wings, revealed by the flickering luminance from his spitting exhaust stacks. The prop flung it back like hail; the cool black steel of his Vickers was soaked with it.

His two hands clutched the joystick; his narrowed eyes never left the tell-tale turn and bank bubble whose mercury ball, jerking back and forth, told him when he was on even keel. That and the altimeter needle working slowly to the right were the only two guides he had in flying upward through thin opaque substance.

A Hiss, its spitting explosions dulled by cloud, throbbed faithfully; the tiny fighting plane fought its way upward. Eleven thousand! Twelve thousand! And still no sign of clear air! It grew cold; the mist frosted and froze. Jerry's eyes glanced upward uneasily. He was

getting near the Spad's ceiling. The altimeter needle had perceptibly slowed its march to the right.

And then, like a swimmer struggling upward from deep water, the dripping Spad forced herself clear. A few wisps of mist, thicker, then thinner; and the lighting ship thrummed clear of cloudbank and tore through a clear plush-blue night that stretched away to right and left and above, world without end. Up there, in the center of the black velvet, hang a full moon like an arc-light. A silver radiance flooded downward, touching the roiling uneasy cloud plain with incredible beauty.

A vast ocean of silver cloud, rising and falling like the breathing of a giant, fumbling and puffing like an ocean before the whip lash of storm wind. Even Jerry Gallens, overstuffed with emotion and seeking savage action as an outlet, had perforce to pause and drink in this wild, weird sight with an awed exclamation of delight.

A million miles of closely packed cotton balls; a solid prairie of white touched with gray shadows, reaching on endlessly. A plume of cloud as graceful as a feather in a woman's hat shot upward like a spouting geyser and fell. Holes filled with blackness opened and dosed as if the cloud-bank had a million eyes.

Up here was a feeling of aloneness in the world. There was just Jerry and the vast weird panorama. It held its spell for several minutes. Then, flickering exhaust stacks to the right called him abruptly back to himself and his mission.

That was Digger over there, two air foils tipped with silver, a white disc for a prop and the stabbing cherry flashes.

The crate angled in toward him sharply, slipped, and a second later the two Spads droned across the sky wing to wing. They ran straight for five minutes until the compass needle ceased the gyrations caused by the upward chandelle. And then, on signal, Jerry hooked the stick and the ships began the south by southwest run. A stern chase but not necessarily a long one.

Above was a vast blue-black bowl with a white hole in it. Below a tumbling cloud ocean, and in between two gossamer fighting ships thrumming at full throttle in pursuit of a gigantic gas bag.

It was straight flying now, with a clearly steady air; Jerry's hands on the stick scarcely moved it for minutes at a time and then only to correct wind drift. He leaned forward, eyes on the instrument board, driving onward through the night.

IT CANNOT be said that Jerry Gallens thought. The rush of sensation in his overwrought brain could not be coherent thinking. He was like a man bound hand and foot who is finally released and wants to run and strike and fight to release the stored up strength. He had forgotten insult and humiliation, disappointment and heartbreak. He had forgotten the propaganda picture, the fact that he must go back to the States. Up here, roaring along the trail of a German Goliath, he found some release in the vivid speed of his Spad, and saw the climax in a mad dash at the gray flanks of the Zeppelin.

His whole being waited for that moment, when his eyes would glare down the steel barrels of his Vickers and catch the enemy in the ringsights. That second his thumbs would crash home on the Bowdoin stick trigger and death would fly. Then would come this second internal explosion and mental peace. He did not think of possible death for himself; nor of mutilation or of that vast drop three miles to earth itself.

He was tense only for the second when battle would begin.

On through the night the Spads thundered, burrowing with spinning club into the blue-black vault of soft darkness. Time ceased to be.

And then Jerry saw the Zeppelin off his port wing.

She was all of three miles away, and with the white iridescence of the moon touching her gray hide with silver, she looked at first like a runaway cloud. Then she took shape, became a long silver cigar floating through space. The moonbeams polished her to beauty; she became like a glittering steel projectile.

Straining his eyes, he could see faint exhaust flashes from the two Maybach motors in her port gondolas. She was flying slightly above their level, fifteen thousand feet at the least.

Jerry saw Digger lifting his Spad, and pulled back on his own stick. They'd have to reach close to sixteen thousand for attack position. And that would be tough, for Spads might go to eighteen thousand feet but their maneuverability and stability were lost in the rarefied air. At the same moment the two Spads turned sharply right. Digger was detouring, keeping the nose of the ships between watchful Germans and the tell-tale flashes of their exhaust stacks.

Jerry shivered as the air began to frost. A scum of ice dimmed his goggles; he tore them off.

The Spads climbed, props clawing for altitude. The air grew thinner. Jerry's chest rose and fell more

quickly, his heart thumped; and the slipstream tearing past him bit icily through his clothing. His eyes never left the huge monster floating through space. A wild furious desire to burn it down sent the blood racing through his veins.

Suddenly he felt rather than saw Digger Banks' ship rock. He turned his head. Barely twenty-five feet separated the two knobbed heads in the cockpits. He could see the glistening moonbeams on Digger's black leather helmet; catch the glitter of them off the goggles which Digger held in his left hand.

The goggles gyrated up and down. The signal for Jerry to bank to the right and make a flank attack on the right stern of the Zep. Another movement and Jerry knew Digger would bank to the left and come on the left stern, abaft the enormous horizontal and vertical stabilizer fins.

Quick upward and downward movements. One, two, three! In three minutes they would make a simultaneous attack. Jerry waved his own goggles, kicked right rudder and crooked the stick. The Spad bore away to the north. He pushed the throttle against the peg. His eyes began to blaze.

JERRY looked at the Zeppelin, at her stern now. The moonbeams made of the stabilizer fins a sort of silver Maltese Cross, with a little nubbin of a tail in the center. He could see the flashes of all four Maybachs for a second or two, then he was on the right side. He banked. He was about five hundred feet above the Zep.

His chest rose and fell; the blood, thrumming in his ears, drowned out the roar of his Hisso. There was a split-second when the world stood still waiting for this adventure.

"Let's go," he shouted, and jammed the stick forward. His eyes, gazing along the smooth barrels of his guns, picked the spot behind the stabilizer fins for his slugs. The Spad slipped down the air-hill with the mighty roar of a power dive, and flashed to the attack.

A mile intervened between the roaring dragon fly and the dirigible. The Spad leaped the gap like an electric spark. A tiny roaring meteor crashing toward a floating silver world. Jerry's thumbs punched the stick trips. The Vickers shook on their boltings, their muzzles stabbed the night with flashing fire, and golden tracers streamed like sparks into the black void.

Digger could have told Jerry this was a terrible mistake, for the glinting tracers betrayed him to the watchful Germans. But Jerry didn't know and if he had it is doubtful if it would have made any difference.

The high altitude had stiffened the oil in the guns; it must be warmed so there would be no jam. So he would have fired a heating burst, sacrificed anything to sink this monster. And on the Zeppelin's whale-back a grim-eyed officer spotted the shooting parabolas of tracer light and screamed the warning of attack.

The huge dirigible instantly nosed upward. Jerry cursed, for if the Zeppelin shot up to twenty thousand feet it would be above the Spad's ceiling and safe from attack.

The Zeppelin's slant brought her deck guns to bear, and now, marked by the flickering flashes of his exhausts, Jerry was a marked man. From the Zeppelin suddenly shot two magnesium rockets that filled the night with light. Maxim guns began to chatter. The air streamed with gray-yellow phosphorus streaks, marking the passage of incandescent slugs. The air swarmed with them like incredibly swift lightning bugs. Jerry's Spad was bathed by them, surrounded by them, cursed by them.

Stern guns! Deck guns! Gondola guns! They spat at him like cats of hell. Hun strafe! Slugs pounded at the Spad, chewed at the wings, sewed a seam in his fuselage, tore through his clothing, bounced with blue flame off the cocking handles of his Vickers. And yet the Spad tore on with a wild horrific roar, a lightning bolt to strike this monster from the sky.

And now! The dirigible filled the sky. He could see nothing else. He had split-seconds to avoid collision. It was time to repay that fire.

"Ah!" he screamed. His fingers pressed the stick trips and held them down. The snouts of the Vickers spat stabbing flashes like a snake's angry tongue. Out of the muzzles came steel and fiery death. The belt of slugs leaped into the greedy breeches and red hot brass empties spat from the ejector and went glittering down into the void below.

Vickers chatter! The fiery tracers drew strings of golden light across the space and thumped with flickering glows into the gray hide of the aerial monster. They streamed from the Vickers as sparks storm from a soaring sky-rocket.

Downward plunged the Spad, the Vickers eating up slugs for every fraction of an inch. The flat wire braces shrieked, the motor screamed, the guns chuckled. The wind battered at Jerry's head. The huge gas bag lunged at him like a striking fist. Those aboard sought to fight him off. Guns belched.

A slug tore through his helmet. A fistful ripped the base of a V strut. Another tore through his flying

pajamas and on through the firewall. But nothing could stop that diving fury or the death it spat.

The Vickers crashed without let or hindrance. In that split-time of roaring attack, eighty brass empties slithered out of the breech. One hundred and sixty steel and incendiary slugs ripped into the bag.

THE dirigible leaped at him. Scant yards separated him from the huge elevator. He could see nothing but the huge thing now. Forward he wrenched on the stick, to the side, full right rudder. Could he avoid plunging into it?

A split-second and the gray hide was so close he could almost reach out and touch it. And then the knifing Spad fell through the sky. He was a thousand feet or more below the Zeppelin before he could flatten out and chandelle upward.

But Jerry was in seventh Heaven. One hundred and sixty slugs tore into the monster. He crowed, his eyes blazed; he shouted in sheer ecstasy. He had won.

"Burn, damn you!" he howled.

He looked upward expectantly to see the bright bonfire the inflammable hydrogen would make.

There were no flames, no saffron glow. Jerry rubbed his watering eyes. He cursed. This couldn't be. No fire, after he had pumped more than thirty burning incendiary slugs into her gas cells. Incredible!

But it was true. He could see the Zeppelin plainly now. Her nose had dipped. Unable to gain the security of height, she had nosed over and was burrowing through the night for the protection of the thick cloud-bank roiling below. And there was no sign of fire.

Wait a minute! Sparks flew from the dirigible as they fly from a spinning emery wheel. Other sparks glinted to the left. That must be Digger, diving to the attack.

Jerry forgot his own desire to burn this monster. He leaned forward, holding the stick knob in his stomach.

"Burn it, fella," he croaked. "Burn it."

The sparks continued a long time from the Zeppelin. And she plunged down, was even with Jerry's climbing Spad and now below it. Dropping with a ponderous swiftness. Finding haven in the cloud bank.

And then the sparks ceased. Digger Banks, too, had failed.

Jerry groaned. He was not the first pilot nor the last that cursed the obstinacy of hydrogen bags that would not burn. He could not of course know that the British after investigation had determined that flying

incendiary bullets fired from machine guns apparently carried a ball of air on their noses that insulated the fire from the hydrogen gas bags. That the slugs flew so fast, their contact was so swift that this ball of air prevented the hydrogen from igniting. He did not know that the British airmen were now sending two-seaters on balloon strafing, the second man throwing a flaming javelin at the bag to insure destruction.

He only knew that two attacks had been made and the dirigible was whole and nosing into the obscurity of cloud. He kicked the Spad around and drove headlong for the dirigible.

She was nosed down at a steep angle now, her horizontal stabilizer cocked downward at an acute angle.

Reckless of consequences, Jerry, seeing her prow now almost at the cloud sea, drove at her huge bulking flank. At two hundred yards he opened fire.

Foolish Jerry! On a sudden the full fury of the Zeppelin burst upon him. Chuckling Vickers manned by silhouettes on the whaleback of the dirigible spat at him. Gondolas burst into sparkling savagery. The air around him seethed with ripping streaks of light. Slugs tore through the fabric and the wind ripped at the holes. With a shock that half turned him inside the safety belt, a slug smashed into his left arm. It hung useless in his lap and he held the bucketing Spad with one hand.

The dirigible dropped below him as he zoomed to go over her, but the lashing of her steel never left him. It was a miracle he survived. A hundred steel slugs spat at him.

CHAPTER VII SCARLET SCISSORS

THEN JERRY WAS SLIPPING over the monster, his Vickers pecking, sewing a seam of holes along her sides. A split-second there was when the shadowy gunners on the top platform were in his ringsights. His golden tracer stream drew beadlines on them. One flung up his arms and plunged. Jerry had a fragmentary vision of a barrel-like object rolling from the dirigible and dropping, kicking and rolling, down through the sky to vanish into the cloud bank.

Then he zoomed, tore away, and the Spad was out of the fire zone. But the Zeppelin, stately, inevitable in her plunge, ploughed down through the night. Frantically Jerry banked; his head rolled, looking for Digger.

"Digger," he howled. "Get her." But there was no more fire from the Zeppelin. No spitting flashes to mark Digger's exhaust stacks in the night. Digger has vanished.

Jerry banked on around. The nose of the Zeppelin was buried in the clouds. She was sliding in as a sword slides into its scabbard. It was as if the clouds were a huge mouth, devouring the Zeppelin foot by foot. Jerry raced back, desperate to get in one more burst. But he was too late.

The roiling clouds opened and swallowed the stern, a hole remained for a fraction of an instant and then the clouds came together and the Zeppelin had vanished.

Jerry was alone in the heavens.

He swore, he raved aloud. He was heart-broken. He didn't know a great deal about Zeppelins, but he knew enough to realize that the cloud-bank was no handicap to the dirigible in finding its destination. By ordinary navigation, it would plow straight through to Paris. There it might have to drop down to pound its target with bombs, but until then the cloud-bank offered a blankness where Jerry could not find it.

He looked many times around the blue-black vault through which he knifed, seeking signs of Digger. There were none. A sudden furious determination seized him. He glanced at his gas gauge. He had started with three hours supply; he had been out nearly an hour. He settled the plane on straight flying for a full three minutes, heading in what he believed to be a southwest direction. The compass needle steadied. Picking his course, he dove in a power dive through the cloudbank, leveled off at five thousand and headed toward Paris.

"I'll chase it to hell, but I'll get it," he vowed.

The earth was black below; not a light showed, for this was the Zone des Armees and lights were forbidden lest they should guide the Boche on their way. The cloud canopy shut out light from above; and Jerry flew by the instrument board alone. It occurred to him that he would have to come down when his gas gave out, and he wondered how it would be negotiated. But that time was two hours and more distant yet; and there still remained the dirigible. If he burnt it down, let a night crash come. He flew on.

He probably would never have found Paris at all if he had not subconsciously taken his bearings from the Zeppelin's course; and the German Goliath had not varied her course even during the attack. It is still more probable that he would never have known he was over Paris but for the sound machines which had picked up the Maybach drone and brought to the alert the Paris defenses on Mount Valerian and the chain of fortresses.

For Paris was dark by night as was the surrounding country. But the dirigible, running by dead reckoning and aware of her air speed, had found Paris. And the French defenses were looking for the Zeppelin. And so Jerry found Paris and the dirigible.

Jerry first became aware of this when out of the blackness below a sword blade of radiance shot upward and roved over the sky like a beckoning finger. It flung a little round ball of white light against the low hanging clouds and it investigated every crevice, searching for the drone the sound machines had found.

And the same sound machines had heard the roar of Jerry's Hisso. Another searchlight flooded upward. And then another. Six. Now ten. And now on a sudden, thirty or more weaved back and forth across the sky like a battalion of shining steel bayonets. They crossed like glittering scissors blades.

ON A sudden a roving searchlight fastened to Terry's Spad with a tenacious grip. Another weaved hastily across the sky to pin him in the crossbeam, the scissors hold from which it was so hard to break loose. Still another. He was blinded by the glare.

Erugh! In the center of the second searchlight a ball of white greasy smoke suddenly formed. A red eye winked malevolently out of its center. The roar of the shrapnel detonation was deadened to a gigantic cough by the roar of his own motor. But it was close. A piece of the casing ripped a foot long hole in his right wing.

He cursed. Didn't the idiots see his cocardes? He didn't know that the Germans frequently came over Paris wearing just such cocardes and the French took no chances. Another archie tore itself apart to the right. If he stayed in the searchlight's grip, they would down him. He rolled twice, dove sharply and then zoomed.

And he was just in time. Where he had been twelve shrapnel bursts, the product of three batteries, bloomed whitely. He was clear, for the moment, of the frightful glare. He promptly forgot this danger and searched for signs of the Zeppelin.

Twice he went over the sky and saw nothing. On the third try he found the hint of a gray bag that a searchlight was investigating, a bit of the control gondola. And at the same moment, down below, a gigantic red flash leaped upward and a quivering detonation announced that the first hundred-pound bomb had detonated.

Jerry's eyes thinned, and his lips curled back in a primitive snarl that showed all his teeth. He horsed the bucketing Spad up the sky. Searchlights came and found him, but he tried no stunting now. There was the Zeppelin, nearly at a standstill, drifting with the cloud-bank down over Paris and dropping a periodical bomb.

Shadows like bats flitted below him through the searchlights. These were the night-flying pursuit groups of the French storming up the sky for the kill. Jerry ignored them as he did everything else but that glittering bit of bag that the searchlights were trying to pry out of the clouds.

He had made up his mind to one thing; the Zeppelin would come down if he had to come with it. He had over two hundred slugs left in the twin belts. These he would fire and he would do it flying angularly the whole length of the Zep. Instinctively he had an idea that a slug piercing lengthwise of the monster would finally reach a gas cell and ignite it.

Such a tactic entailed running the gamut of the Zeppelin's deadly batteries, but he did not care about this. Digger had disappeared, brought down, likely, by the hail of fire. And if Jerry followed he didn't much care.

The Spad was tearing through the first mazes of the lowering cloud rifts now; through the swirling holes much of the Zeppelin's hide could be seen. A splash of red fury burst below. And then Jerry's Spad rocked violently. A lurid red eye blinked evilly to the right; a blossom of white smoke drifted into a searchlight glare.

The archies were firing on the Zeppelin!

In true French style, taking note only that the dirigible must be brought down before it hurt Paris, the anti-aircraft guns fired on, oblivious that they might down their own ships, as they had frequently done.

The closer Jerry came to the Zeppelin—it was a matter of yards now—the more the blinking red eyes flashed at him. The air jumped, the clouds swirled and opened gigantic holes as the concussion of the three-inch shells tore the air to bits.

Jerry roared straight at the Zeppelin's curved nose that came straight at him. He angled slightly to the right. Now, partly hidden by cloud drifts, he could see nearly the whole seven-hundred foot length of the monster. The archies were bursting close to it, some even seeming to vanish within its hide. But oblivious to this, the Zeppelin was dropping its eggs faster the earth below was spotted with the red eruptions of their fury.

THE Spad howled toward the huge target. Flying time was low; the gas needle was clear to the left. But Jerry didn't see it; he had eyes only for the ring-sights. That bag was the important thing.

He came under fire. Machine-gun fire spattered from the dirigible, painted him with livid streaks of darting fire. He went on. The huge gas bag leaped at him out of the night. Closer. Closer.

His ringsights settled on a point just abaft the nose and above the forward control gondola. His fingers jammed home on the stick trigger.

"You burn or I crash you," he mumbled.

Rat-tat-tat-tat! The Vickers trembled on their boltings. The flickering orange flames darted like a snake's tongue from their ugly snouts. The slugs poured in never-ending stream into the gigantic flanks of the monster. They pecked holes but inches apart for yards and yards. Jerry angled along the side; his present course would make him collide with the monster just where she bulked fattest.

Around him streamed living fire. A Maxim slug smashed through his gas tank. His already riddled wings sagged at the impact of the Maxim slugs. He was being shot out of his crate.

But he held his thumbs pressed home; the Spad carried a true course. *Rat-tat-tat-tat!* He was within feet of the side of the monster now. Would she bum? He cursed, and yelled into the teeth of his motor howl. Gasoline flooded his feet. A chance shot from the German now and he would burst into flame. Fuel was going fast. The Hiss sputtered. The Spad raced to her destiny. The Vickers crackled and pat-patted without let.

Suddenly Jerry gave a delirious shout of utter joy! There, just where the heavy stomach of the dirigible bloated out, a trickle of blue flame had started. It spread, clawing along the side with an indescribable fury.

Jerry jerked the stick and started to haul off, shouting and yelling, hysterical with happiness. His

left wing tips seemed to graze the huge bag. And he had not yet pulled far enough away when the center gas cells, ignited by his last burst, suddenly exploded at once.

There was a terrific puff of air, a belching, lashing sheet of flame that licked out for yards. A gigantic blossom of orange fury painted the clouds a blood red. It licked out to the Spad, bathing it in a spotlight of death.

And Jerry, side-slipping away from the dirigible, saw that his left wing was on fire!

The fabric on the wing-tip, reached by the gigantic puff of boiling flame, had a curl of yellow that was eating rapidly toward him. And his gas tank had wet him with gasoline from the knees down.

"This is the end," he muttered.

Yet love of life is paramount. Desperately he gave the Spad full top rudder. She kept on slipping, driving the flames to the left and keeping them from reaching the fuselage. A hurried glance at the altimeter showed him four thousand feet. A long way to slip. He would be a torch by the time he was down. And in that blackness below, crowded with miles of houses and streets, where would he find a landing field, if he made it? He gave himself up for lost.

He became aware that the world was bathed in a horrible scarlet. The burning dirigible, seven hundred feet of solid flame, a colossal bonfire, was dropping toward the earth. Far below jagged red flashes leaped up in never-ending stream as the panic-stricken crew of the doomed monster dumped over the rest of the bombs. Looking down was like peeking through the doors of Hell.

SUDDENLY Jerry's motor gave a couple of dying clucks and quit. The gas tank was empty of the bit that had remained below the bullet puncture. He no longer had power to hold the doomed ship in the slip. He dove for a few brief seconds to keep up flying speed and then began slipping again. But those few seconds brought him closer to horrible death. The flames gained, fanned by the dive. The fabric was eaten into for yards. He could see the blackened wood of the frame. It seemed only a matter of minutes now.

The Zeppelin dropped even more quickly than the Spad. It was below him by this time, lighting up the sky and earth for miles. Jerry glancing below in hopeless search for a spot to land, saw a macabre picture out of Dante's Inferno. A vast city was limned in blood-red scarlet and deep black shadow.

It stretched away for miles. The clouds above were bathed in red, and through this scarlet world the searchlights cut white swaths that became, as they fastened to the dirigible, pink swords of illumination.

A thousand feet up! The wing was half-eaten by fire and the aileron, stripped of fabric, was not responsive to his controls. A few seconds and he could slip no more.

Whe-e-e-e! A black bat, touched with red, skimmed close to him, a black bat with small yellow lights on its wings. A French pilot. The man was waving at him, gesticulating. In the horrid red that made this a small hell, the man's teeth gleamed, his eyes glittered; there was horror on his face. He was gesturing as if he wanted Jerry to follow him.

Jerry choked over a mirthless laugh. Follow him where? This was but a foretaste of the Hades to follow.

The Spad started to spin. He caught it and nosed down to regain flying speed. The flames took advantage of the wind and stole over a third of the remaining wing. The fabric here, grease-soaked, burned faster. He stood her on her right wing. The deadly slow slip down continued.

He tried to follow after the Frenchman who was banking at ninety degrees around and around, offering to lead. But the bad aileron and the slip made the Spad almost uncontrollable. Yet gradually Jerry edged after the Frenchman.

Five hundred feet left to go! Endless squares of streets, endless vistas of saw-edge roofs, all bathed in scarlet from the flaming, boiling Zeppelin. He looked at her. Bits of fabric floated down. Aluminum girders tore loose and slid down into the red inferno. Men leaped, unable to endure the agony of roasting alive.

It was brighter now as the boiling flames, loose of the gray hide, roiled and puffed outward. The clouds caught the radiance and flung it back. The city below was lit as by red daylight.

Jerry slithered on down. The eating flames were within a foot of the fuselage now. Seconds only left. The Frenchman continued to lead him and Jerry tried to follow.

He was rather numb about it all. He dreaded the idea of being eaten by flames and determined to jump. And for that purpose he unloosed his safety belt. Time passed with the speed of a turtle. Minutes became aeons, centuries.

Dive! Slip! Catch her as she started to spin. Slip! Dive! Watch the encroaching flames, past the V strut now, pecking greedily at the base of the engine cradle,

where the gasoline-soaked drip pan was. Two hundred feet left to go. The blood-red houses had depth now. He could even make out streets lined with trees. The jagged housetops reached up to trip him. He slipped. The Frenchman banked around him, came dangerously close and pointed straight ahead.

Jerry laughed again mirthlessly. What was there except houses? The Spad started to spin. One turn. Two turns. The flames hit the motor and began to spout. It was all over.

He jammed the stick forward and the nose pointed down. One turn. The Spad came out into a shrieking dive. And with that came a puff of nauseous black oily smoke, and a sheet of flame. The skin seared on his face, his brows caught on fire. He was glad now for his goggles; they saved his eyes.

Then he leveled off as best he could for a shallow glide, gave her top rudder and decided to spin right into the street. It was less than a hundred feet below. He'd let the right wing take the impact.

He couldn't see very well now. The smoke was tremendous. The sheet of flame rose up to blind him and cut off his view. His clothes were burning. Where his leather coat touched his arms, it seared his flesh. Flames licked his flesh and he moaned in agony. He could stand it no longer.

He stood up, jiggling the stick with his good right hand, and got one foot out of the cockpit, and hooked into the little half-moon step.

With a shrieking roar the Frenchman sped past him straight ahead. The man's Spad barely cleared the housetops and then he dropped down out of sight. Pain that crazed stopped Jerry from thinking. It was only instinct that tried to make him follow.

He leaned far out so the sheet of flame from the motor partly missed his face. He was sobbing, sobbing with horrible pain. He seemed bathed in fire. But he would hold on, if he could clear that housetop. Chimney pots loomed up. Instinctively he dodged. The Spad tripped as the landing gear struck. There came a rumble of falling bricks. He was over. And at that second the flames reached his gasoline-soaked legs.

There was an upflaring of blue flame. He held his breath. His legs were burning off. It was madness. Terrible! He shrieked. Started to jump.

Then the ground leaped at him.

Numbly he cornered the stick. The Spad rocked. He staggered. The stick drew back to the right and the next second, with an upbursting of flame, the Spad struck.

There was a smash like breaking bottles. A flare of flame! A body, burning like a torch, shot through the air, struck the lower wing, bounced off and crumpled onto the ground. And the flaming Spad roared greedily and reached out fiery fingers to destroy the limp figure.

CHAPTER VIII "UNDER THE SKIN—"

JERRY GALLENS had many vague memories before he really regained consciousness. Memories of torture when he yelled to be put out of his misery. Memories of little pricks in the arm that were followed by blessed oblivion. Memories of bandages on body and face and strangest of all, memories of Digger Banks. In these memories he did not hate Banks, nor wish to smash him with his fists. He even wanted to apologize for the blow he had struck as childish.

And then one morning he found his head perfectly clear. He discovered that he could see. Bandages covered all his face save for eyes and nose, but he could see. Blessed sight! He rolled slightly and found it hurt like the devil.

And when he rolled he saw another bandaged figure beside him.

It was Digger Banks!

Jerry stared quite a while. The bandages over his mouth were a nuisance, the thought of moving his seared, mutilated face, a misery. So he just stared. And then he began thinking. His face was gone now; he pictured it a huge welt of glistening scar tissue filled with little red splotches and broken veins. He had seen a burned fireman once; the man may have looked like something before the accident, but afterward he was just horror. And Jerry knew he'd look like that.

It sort of constricted his heart, that thought of people turning away to hide the disgust his mutilated face would arouse. And of course, his stage career was done. People wouldn't come to look at a hideous face no matter how splendid the acting or how melodious the voice. He might, after all, have to take up truck driving. Well, what of it? Nothing made any difference now.

He continued to stare at Digger. How did the squadron skipper get here?

"I thought you were dead," he said, after a while.

It didn't hurt him as much to talk as he had expected.

Digger grinned back. Jerry could just see his eyes and the tip of his nose.

"Me, killed? The earth ain't tough enough, kid. I ran into a fistful of bullets up there that lost me my prop, sunk the motor, and damn near sunk me. I made the lousiest crack-up landing in a peasant's back yard, and did a nose dive into his manure pile. It stunk like hell, but it saved my life."

Jerry considered this a while. Then, "How did I get here? And where is here?"

"You're in the American hospital at Neuilly in Paris. You were making a swell bonfire of yourself after cracking up and a Frog pulled you out. You damn near kicked off from second-degree burns. Head to foot. No more hair than a rabbit. And that strut you bounced off busted your nose."

Jerry tried to nod indifferently, but the bandage pile wouldn't let him. He thought a while.

"Did you land near Paris?" he asked. "I mean, when you cracked up?"

"Hell, no. I was the other side of Chateau Thierry. Nothing much the matter; a couple of slugs nicked me, but no bones busted. Clean flesh wounds."

Jerry began to wonder how Digger was here, all bandaged up.

Then a nurse came, pinched his arm and jabbed a little stinging needle in and he went back to sleep. When he had his senses again, Digger Bank was gone.

A month later he was up and around, but wouldn't look into a mirror.

"I don't want to vomit looking at myself," he said to the nurse.

"But good heavens, lieutenant, the doctor's worked like mad on you to save your face. You're a great actor and he wanted to save your face. He's a whiz on plastic surgery."

"That may be," said Jerry, "but no doctor can do anything without the skin. And all mine was burnt off."

A WEEK later when Jerry was thinking about getting out of the smelly hospital and back to the Front to die decently, Digger Banks and Johnny the Ink came in. Jerry saw that Digger's face was newly healed. Must have smacked it against the cowling, he decided.

Johnny the Ink shook hands. "Lots of news, fella," he said gentle. "A cable from America says the picture is a knockout. People flocking to see it."

Jerry shrugged. "Why?"

"My God, the fella says why, Digger! Listen, Jerry, the cable's been working overtime reporting the yarn of your shooting down the Zeppelin over Paris. Some reporters got hold of the Frog that led you to safety and he said he saw you within feet of the thing when you torched it off. It's a big story, in America."

"What's the rest of the news?" asked Jerry.

"Well, Black Jack is going to give you a little jigger called the D.S.C."

"Let him keep it," said Jerry. "I don't want it. I didn't earn it. And there are lots of men who did that haven't got it. They're giving it to me because I happen to be Jerry Gallens." He paused and added as an afterthought, "I don't like medals, anyway. They're public advertisement that a man is brave. And he may not be brave at all. He may just have lost his head, got mad, as I did."

Digger stared at Jerry. His eyes were wide in the scar tissue around them. On a sudden his huge hand shot out.

"By God, that's the truest thing you ever said, Gallens. Shake. I'll never wear a doo-dad again."

Jerry looked at the hand. "What about the beating you were going to pass me?"

Digger looked bewildered. "But, my God, boy, I don't want to spoil your face."

Jerry laughed raucously. "Spoil my face with a punch? God, that's a laugh. If you could sock it and put it in some sort of shape, I'd like the idea."

Digger and Johnny the Ink exchanged glances. Jerry wore no bandages, and the nurse had shaved him. Johnny dug into his upper blouse pocket where he carried a small steel mirror issued with trench kits in America.

"I'd hate to have Digger spoil that face," he chuckled. "Take a look."

For a moment Jerry rebelled; then curiosity overcame him. He looked. There, staring back at him, was a fine white skin just as smooth and firm as it had ever been. His nose, to be sure, was just, a wee bit off line, but this slight shadow, together with new lines that were etched from nose to mouth, strengthened the character in Jerry's face and accentuated in the man what had been there in the youth. It was a face any young man would have been delighted to own.

He looked up to find Digger and Johnny grinning at him.

"Hell's fire, Gallens," said Digger. "I'd hate like hell to spoil that map, particularly as I feel responsible for it. You sort of borrowed my skin."

Jerry looked at the slight scars that seamed Digger Banks' face. He was speechless. He just held out his hand.

"Hell," chuckled Johnny. "We couldn't send you back to America any worse than we received you. By the way, the gang sent their regards. We're writing to every one to see your picture." Jerry held out his other hand. "The hell with the picture," he said. "I'm not thinking about that now. You've been good to a tailor-made ace."

His eyes glistened and he could say no more. So the three stood there grinning inanely at one another. And Digger finally said, "Tailor-made, hell— self-made."