



# THE LAUGHING MAJOR

by GEORGE BRUCE

*The pilots of the Fourth fought black-crossed ships, but they kept their hate for the man who led the way into the sky. They hated his sneer, his jeers, his scorn—but most of all they hated his laugh.*

**T**HE FOURTH HATED MAJOR POWERS. Not as a few individuals, but as a squadron. That hatred seeped out of the soul of the lowliest of the ground crew exactly as it surged unceasingly in the souls of the pilots. They hated his purple face, his gleamingly bright eyes, his cutting speech, his cruel humor, his white teeth, and his never diminishing nervous energy.

They hated him in the early mornings, in the gray dawn, when he strode through the billet, fully dressed, even to a correctly buttoned tunic, and snapped sarcastic urgings at them. They writhed beneath the sarcasm in his eyes as he regarded sleep-drenched faces and bloodshot eyes, tired bodies and jangling nerves.

They hated him at sundown when he left them with

a gesture of good riddance and left them to their own devices while he buried himself in his own quarters, which also served as operations office, and did not emerge until they heard his voice lashing harassed cooks and mess attendants, or slow-moving pilots, in the shadows of another dawn.

No one knew exactly how Major Powers spent the hours of the night. He merely disappeared, ceased to exist—then he was among them again, driving, scourging.

He never seemed burdened by fatigue. His eyes never lost the half-feverish, half-mocking light—never lost a peculiar brilliancy which seemed to feed upon his soul. His face was never anything but a pale mask, contorted by a never-changing grin which drew his

thin lips back over his white teeth—and made every man on the field harbor the insane desire to smash his fist against Powers' face and drive those wolf-like teeth down the Major's throat.

They hated the purple outline of a healed wound which coiled over his forehead and down over his right cheek like a venomous puff adder. A purple outline which grew at times until it stood out from the flesh in a rounded ridge, and disappeared at other times until it was merely a delicate tracery of color against the white background of his forehead and face.

It gave him a sinister look. It seemed to frame his face, to intensify his gleaming eyes, to emphasize the constant grin. It gave them shudders at times—when he was excited. Then the purple snake increased in size—throbbed, moved, pulsed—like a vein which has burst and threatens to tear its way through flesh.

]Raven-black hair—so black that it made startling contrast with the whiteness of the Major's face—was pressed flat from many hours of confinement beneath a flying helmet—but never matted, never uncombed, never unwashed. His hands were uncanny in the swiftness of their movements—at times the fingers seemed nothing but white blurs. His wrists and forearms with hard, bulging muscles, proclaimed a prodigious strength.

The Major was smaller than any of the pilots of the Fourth, yet he seemed to tower over them, to browbeat them, to dominate. At times he arose to the stature of a giant in their eyes—a terrible ogre who feasted his soul upon their bewilderment and laughed at their sufferings.

They hated him from the moment the pilots had first been introduced to him. That had been two months ago on a training field at Issoudun.

Whispers had reached them that a new squadron was going up to the Front. That twelve men out of more than a hundred in advanced training would be picked to form an American unit. The rumor had it that this same Major Powers would command the new squadron.

Then, twelve of that hundred in training had been summoned to the Field Commandant's office.

AN ADJUTANT lined them up. They stood proudly. Men who had been singled out for high honor—of being among the first destined for the Front. Hearts raced—stomachs were just a little weak—a faint feeling was mixed with the exaltation within souls. Eyes eager for a first sight of Major Powers.

He came out of the Commandant's office. The first sound they heard was his laugh. It seemed like a whiplash cutting across the face. Instinctively they winced before that laugh. He was walking side by side with the French Commandant. The Commandant was laughing also—nervously, doubtfully. His eyes kept glancing quickly at Major Powers' face.

Then Powers was walking before the twelve drawn up to receive him. In turn, each of the twelve had the experience of seeing the Major's face at close range, of having those eyes eat into his brain. It was like a sudden dash of ice-cold water over sweating flesh.

But his laugh! It seemed to twist stomachs into knots—to cause hands to grip hard. And he laughed many times in those first minutes when he reviewed the pilots he was to command. He laughed at them as a group and as individuals.

Finally he turned away—dismissed them without so much as a word. They heard his comment to the French Commandant. It demeaned them, made them squirm.

“You haven't anything else in stock, have you?” he asked. And he laughed. How that laugh grated!

There was a great relief upon the Commandant's face when Powers walked away with his unbounded energy to look over the ships he was to take up to the lines later in the day.

Later that morning there was more laughter. Powers inspected the kits of the men he was taking to the Front. He touched kit after kit with the toe of his boot, and with a look up at the face of the man who owned it. Under his sarcastic eyes kits were unpacked, contents spread upon the floor of the barracks, for his examination. His voice seemed never still. The laugh rose from his throat and leaped at them, hounding them, bringing red to cheeks and anger to eyes.

“Not going to a picnic,” he said to one of them as he tossed a gorgeous bathrobe contemptuously upon a cot. “Things like that are nice—in an old ladies' home. Here it's just useless junk which clutters up transportation. Nobody will mind seeing your manly figure when you take a bath up there—if you're lucky enough to get a bath. Toss that out, and buy yourself a box of insect powder. It'll be more useful.”

His hands touched things which had been made sacred to the twelve. Things which were the last ties to home, things which had been successfully smuggled through the point of embarkation. His voice and his laugh derided them, his eyes missing nothing.

He ruthlessly stripped them of everything not

needed for the business of fighting. Bulging kits were deflated. Men stood about in impotent fury. The pile of personal possessions mounted upon the cot. Pictures in silver frames. Souvenirs from Kelly. Souvenirs from France.

Then the summoning of the barracks detail.

“Take this stuff out to the incinerators,” he ordered. “Don’t let anyone see it as you take it away. The American Army has enough to answer for.”

He left them, his laugh echoing through the barren room.

Later in the afternoon they flew up to a position behind Coeuvres-et-Valsery in the Aisne-Marne sector.

THE billet was an abandoned farm. Once there had been neatly kept fields, a stone house which had survived the violence of men and the elements since the time of Louis le Grande.

But modern warfare had left its mark upon the age-old pile of stone masonry. There were gaps in the walls smashed by shells. The gray stones were pockmarked with machine-gun fire. There were bloodstains on the polished oak of the floor. Ugly red pools, dried, showing a queer greenish tinge when the rays of the sun touched the spots.

The fields were cratered by other shells. Here and there lines of crooked posts supporting remnants of rusted barbed wire ran as far as the eye might see. Shallow rifle pits, dug by men who had lived in the midst of the hell the bursting shells had created, were like graves begun but never completed.

They had their first sight of aircraft engaged in the business of war that first afternoon.

Strangely enough, even after almost a year of living on terms of intimacy with aircraft, the gray and gray-blue shapes which droned through the heights within sight of the field were endowed with a mystery. They came over one horizon and disappeared into another. They moved slowly across the arc of the sky and left these initiates in the rites of winged warfare staring after them, a queer, intense look in their eyes.

Major Powers identified the ships for them.

“Nieuports Twenty-fifth French Squadron,” he said jerkily. “They belong to this Corps. Oh, yes, you’ll have plenty of company—good company. Our own Forty-second Squadron, the Third Balloon Company, ourselves and the French Twenty-fifth all belong to the Corps right now. We’ll have even more company as we go along. This Corps keeps the ball rolling—they make it hot—steaming. They use up balloons faster

than any outfit on the Front. The Sixth and Seventh Balloon outfits are on the way here now. The Eighth Observation Squadron is under orders to join.

“Don’t worry—you’ll see plenty of flying.”

The laugh again. That nerve-chilling, short bark of laughter with its unpleasant suggestion of sinister meaning.

In the twilight he acted as a guide to a battlefield.

“They call this place Grandplaisir Farm,” he said in his staccato manner. “Imagine it—The Farm of Great Pleasure! You can look around you and see how pleasant it has been for some of the occupants. See that bulging mound of earth over there? That’s a grave. Several hundred dead—and one grave.

“The Farm of Grand Pleasure! With that mound—two hundred yards long—and a dozen others like it within easy walking distance.

“See those holes in the ground? Men squirmed into those with a stream of machine-gun slugs tearing over their heads—wallowed like cornered rats. A second away from death—looking it in the face, breathing it, smelling it, feeling it—and the gas rolling over them.

“See those trenches over there? Jerry trenches—taken with the bayonet—and in the face of murderous machine-gun fire—our Corps turned that trick. Made this Grand Pleasure Farm safe for the Fourth Aero Squadron, A.E.F.

“Cleaned it up for us. Gave us this stone house to live in. Just a couple of days ago fifty or sixty fat square-heads lived in that house—sure, the one you’re going to live in. You can smell ’em—after a while you’ll be able to smell the enemy—a kind of greasy, leathery smell.

“Don’t go near those shell craters. Sometimes the burial details have to go over the ground in the night. They can’t see everything—especially the bottom of a shell hole—and lots of men pick out places like that to pass out. Besides, the gas is always in such places—sticks to the lowest levels of the earth.

“See those piles of empty cartridge cases? Looks as if somebody dumped them down by the box load. Machine-gun position. Go over and look at the empties. You’ll find they were made in Germany. Enemy guns commanded this field—men had to cross this open space in the face of those guns. You’ll see lots of that.”

He looked at their solemn faces, their anxious eyes. His mouth opened. The purple welt on his forehead and cheek swelled and came to life. A wetness came into his eyes.

He laughed.

Rolling peals of laughter gurgled up from his throat. He laughed until his body shook as if with an ague. Then he left them to their own thoughts.

THEY studied maps that night. Under the faint illumination of oil lanterns. Major Powers' voice filled the operations tent, coming out of the half gloom. Sure, curt, repeating from positive memory.

"Look at your maps," he said time after time.

"Look for the boundaries of our own position. Locate yourself—you'll need to have that map etched upon your brain—up there you won't have time to study maps.

"Look at the dotted line—consider what it means. We're pushing the Boche back—understand? Each new dotted line means an advance of just that much.

"You'll find Missy-aux-Bois, Chaudon, Montplaisir Farm, Ploissy, Berzy-le-Sec. A few days ago they were towns held by the enemy. Now they're ours.

"Don't get the idea that we did it all. We didn't. There are a million men out there, and only a few of them are Americans. Look at the divisions marked as holding that line. French—First Senegalese—didn't know they brought Africans up here and threw 'em into the lines, did you? Well, you'll see them—and hear from them before you're here twenty-four hours.

"Get a picture of it! Black-faced Senegalese in red nightcaps, French infantry in baggy pants and long overcoats—and our own doughboys in o.d. All thrown together—all lighting to bust the Boche.

"That's what you're over here to do—make common cause with the Senegalese and the furious French. And how you'll fit into the picture! White Lilies from Issoudun! It's a swell war! Bathrobes! Foot warmers! Crocheted pillows! Love and kisses! Ah-h!"

Hour after hour. The incisive voice smearing on the color of conflict, carving pictures in whirling brains, voicing ridicule, sarcasm and biting humor.

One thing, Major Powers knew his war. He never made a mistake in his locations, nor his component elements. He had the make up of every division on the Front at his finger-tips. His brain was an inexhaustible file of facts and information. The geography of a dozen fronts—the action through a dozen campaigns. He knew his war—he had lived in the midst of it for four years.

He told them tales. Queer tales—stories they listened to with little shudders racing down spines. They hated him as he recounted unheralded deeds of

daring—of superhuman bravery. Hating him because of his scoffing voice, his absolute lack of feeling. They listened as if hypnotized with the scenes he described passing before them like a series of moving pictures through which his voice sounded. They sat under the spell of his glittering eyes—watching the purple snake upon his face swell and diminish, watching the play of his hands as he gestured—quick, eloquent gestures, sometimes moving too fast for the eye to follow.

When he had finished they stirred reluctantly like men awakened from a dream-filled sleep. They stumbled upstairs which were hollowed by the tread of countless generations, scarred with the boot nails of enemy and friend. Threw themselves down upon cots, stared out of the windows, saw the ghostly outline of other stone buildings in the brilliant moonlight. Saw mechanics working ceaselessly upon gray ships, and upon black bulks of impatient lorries.

War! That was it! They were in it! Brains were boiling with the thought. War! Led into it by Powers. Then came the memory of his laugh—and fists clenched under blankets.

But the climax had not yet arrived. It came the next afternoon.

The first flight the Fourth made as a unit.

Up off that shell-torn farm, toward the muddy outlines of two rivers, over an earth smoking and rumbling, belching a ruddy glow which stained the horizon. Up and up, until ears were singing and the drone of a dozen motors filled the heavens.

## CHAPTER II FLIGHT

**F**OR A TIME during that morning, the pilots of the Fourth forgot that a hate for Powers was growing up within them. They lost it in admiration of his leadership.

The lowliest Kaydet can appreciate the abilities of a master pilot. So could these green pilots of the Fourth appreciate the abilities of Major Powers. He seemed to instil a strange confidence within them, even before the wheels of the gray Spads left the earth, before the mighty Hissos roared and whirled black propellers into a froth of motion.

The manner in which he walked across the field to

assume command. The easy, almost flippant greeting he tossed to each of them. The poise of his body, the case with which he donned helmet and goggles and climbed into his ship. He might have been a master of fox hounds, taking a few selected gentlemen out for an early morning canter.

In his cockpit, his body sank below the padded line of the fuselage. Only the top of his head emerged, and the line of his goggles. Watching him, the youngsters who were to follow in his slipstream forgot the tenseness of the moment, forgot the nervousness of the night before. Instinctively they attempted to copy Powers' nonchalance, the manner in which he tested the controls, checked the motor. And then, before they could realize the fact, they were flying.

The field was floating away into nothingness under rising wings. Somehow they were in a V formation, the world spinning slowly below them as they spiraled for altitude. Gashed trees, gashed earth, gashed buildings, merging into a blue-gray mistiness which seemed to soften the picture of destruction.

Muddy water below, spanned in a dozen places by hastily erected pontoon bridges. A never-ending caterpillar crossing each of the bridges. Caterpillars in the o.d. of the A.E.F. Farther along, other caterpillars going forward along the roads, route marching, heading toward the fog which obscured the north horizon. A fog which rose up from earth and seemed to draw a smoke-screen across the blue skies.

Guns and lorries in a helter-skelter of orderly confusion. Single cars dashing along the roads, with men scurrying to give them free passage. Tiny bugs—motorcycles—shooting like rockets on a horizontal plane, threading in and out through the traffic. More guns and more lorries.

Then the frontier! The mass and welter of conflict. The thick mixture of blood and earth. Vistas of barbed wire trampled under plunging shells.

The air here was different—even at three thousand feet it seemed surcharged with a sulphur-like smell. It seemed to rise in clouds from masked positions, behind which guns bucked and recoiled after vomiting thick flashes of red toward the north. The ground seemed in constant flux. It seemed like heavy dough in a faker's pan, moved about by a lazy spoon. Irregular, makeshift trenches ran in parallel lines east and west, and the parapets of the rude shelters seemed aflame with bursting shells.

No lorries here—no moving guns. A morass—a wilderness through which men were fighting viciously,

the men in o.d. forcing a slow way forward in the face of stubborn resistance. Men stood or crawled in one instant—in the next they melted away as if whipped into thin air, as a gaping hole opened in the face of the earth.

Over the motor drone, the rumble of gunfire rose at times to a blasting crescendo which seemed bent upon battering the world into bits with the savageness of its outburst. Trees and pits dug into the ground spat flame—constantly. Steel necks, swift as striking snakes, appeared for an instant, only to disappear again quicker than the eye might follow.

War, revealing itself to these young pilots of the Fourth who passed above it, a gray V, spread across the sky.

FROM half a dozen points, sullen columns of smoke rose into the air, dancing and shifting as heat eddies tossed them about. Those smoke columns rose from the still burning ruins of Chaudon, Missy-aux-Bois, Ploissey, Berzy-le-Sec. Once were peaceful gems of ancient architecture upon the bosom of northern France, those hamlets. Once things of beauty, with the fresh green of the fields and the trailing branches of growing vines. Now, ashes, still hot, still smoldering. Gray ruins—caved-in dwellings, buried under the onslaught of disaster.

Slow-moving columns of troops in o.d., in baggy French pants, were pressing forward, there stomping through the smoke and fumes, dodging under the impact of enemy shells which still inundated the towns.

Out toward the open country, spreading widely as they debouched into range of the enemy, crawling on bellies after a few minutes. Then up, short dashes forward—a dozen steps, flinging themselves to the ground again—plunging figures falling out of each rush, stumbling, knees buckling, falling forward to the ground.

War—below the wings of the Fourth.

And war above the wings. Lightning striking out of the sky.

Striking into the faces of youngsters who felt compassion within their hearts as they looked down from the far heights upon the panorama of fury spread below them. Who, in spite of the forebodings which filled them, seemed solaced by the thought that none of the horror of earth could penetrate into the reaches of heaven. Who looked down upon the death of earth mortals, feeling remote, far removed

from a like death—gods feeling themselves clothed in immortality, pitying the death throes of less fortunate creatures.

But the god-like feeling, the sense of aloofness from conflict, the immortality ripped itself away from them. It was flung aside with a rude gesture of derision.

And death did penetrate the far reaches of heaven.

Death streamed through space with the speed of a comet. It came screaming down upon them with the thunderous roar of a tidal wave. It engulfed them, caught them up, tossed them about, half-blinded, half-staggered, half-stunned by the suddenness of the visitation.

A ghastly picture of blue-black planes diving from the emptiness overhead. Blue-black planes marked with a smear of white, formed into the shape of a Maltese Cross.

Snarling gunfire stabbed from the nose of each of those sinister destroyers. Thudding and chattering swarm of death pulsing through frail gray fabric and the woodwork of glistening Spads.

In the center of the ghastly picture, a streaking shaft of gray light.

It was Major Powers' Spad.

He zoomed madly—two Vickers flamed in a red blur, wings standing outlined against the blue of the heavens, cockpit tilted in a vertical bank so that the entire body of a pilot could be seen by each of the men of the Fourth.

That streaking shaft of gray light smote the first of those blue-black shapes—seemed to crumple it with one terrific blow—left it to falter, to swerve in its dive, to wobble—and then to burst into a hideous mass of curling flame. It went fluttering downward with a pilot clinging to the sides of the cockpit, fire from gashed tanks swirling about him, touching his face, his chest, his helmet, finally devouring him with one gulp.

Youngsters who had pitied death as it stalked over the earth now clung to gun trips, throwing controls about in a mad attempt to escape the rush of other blue-black ships. Remembering to squeeze triggers, to line fuselages in gun-sights. Gouged brains quivering with crazy thoughts and insane impulses, fear, courage, terror mingled and intermingled.

Death among them, striking right and left, ripping and slashing at the gray ships. Death which spat a hot venom—death which beat against tight wings and drummed a threnody. Death which touched flat wires and caused them to sing and whine.

They huddled together—sheep before the attack

of wolves—crowding, guns in a mad staccato, firing erratic bursts at each blue-black shadow which flashed in and out of gunsights. Bursts which found targets in gray ships as often as in blue-black.

And over all, the one gray Spad flashed in and out like a shuttle weaving an invisible pattern in the sky. Through the press of the enemy, through the press of the Spads, beating off attacks at the flanks of the Spad squadron through the sheer ferocity of attack, the Spad dived and banked, whirled and turned—seemed to be in a dozen places at once. It threw itself upon enemy ship after enemy ship—five times within two minutes saved another Spad from destruction before raging Spandaus—

Major Powers!

SOMEHOW in the midst of the frenzy breath seeped into the lungs of those youngsters of the Fourth. Somehow the thick scum which seemed to blind them cleared from eyes. Hands which had danced crazily upon controls and triggers eased their tension. Feet moved—became more than useless lumps of wet clay.

The formation opened slightly—the Fokkers seemed to strike less frequently, there was less power in the attack.

Something had happened to change these youngsters from graduates of an advanced training school into actual war pilots fighting for life.

Perhaps it was the sight of three gray ships falling toward that horror which covered the face of the earth. Three Spads, one of them gushing flame, giving off dense clouds of black smoke. Another spinning grotesquely, controls flopping from side to side, the limp hand of a pilot dangling over the side of the fuselage. The third—a ghastly mass of wreckage for an empennage—falling in a rocking-chair motion, checking its speed by nosing up now and then—but falling—

Or it may have been the spectacle of Major Powers fighting the enemy squadron single-handed.

There was an arrogance in his deadly tactics. Each flip of his wings seemed to say: "I realize that I have to fight this out alone. What help could anyone expect of White Lilies from Issoudun? Watch how a pilot fights. Maybe some day you'll be able to look after yourselves. As it is, I've got to make a stab at nursing you back to the field—that is, as many of you as are left—" And the mental sound of Powers' laugh rose above the rivet-hammer banging of guns, and the roar and scream of

overtaxed motors. The very sight of Powers hurling himself at the enemy maddened those youngsters.

They hated him—hated his guts. They had to make good in order to go on hating him. No one can hate a man who represents an ideal. They had to crush that picture of him out of dizzy brains—the picture of Powers checking the attack of an entire squadron, of saving the lives of green youngsters. To be under obligation to him was to invite an added torture—especially an obligation which gave them life.

So they fought.

Tigerishly, feverishly they fought with a surge of rage causing hands to grip sticks until the knuckles showed white through the skin. They discounted lack of skill with the reckless abandon of their attack.

After a while they discovered that they were making mad lunges at empty atmosphere, and that Powers' Spad was whipping around them like a shepherd dog herding a band of sheep out of a mad stampede—herding them back into formation. They were like men trapped within a thick fog peopled with murderers—expecting each instant to have a knife plunge into the back, to feel the stinging agony of a bullet, and then to have the fog miraculously lift, to find the dangers gone.

Strength seemed to ooze out of them. Arched spines sagged, bodies felt limp. One or two of them, were laughing—with tears streaming down cheeks. Others were sitting with tense faces, still peering through gunsights. One was working upon a stoppage, his fingers bleeding, nails torn to the quicks, thick white blisters over the fingertips.

A haze of smoke drifted across the sky. Two thousand feet below there were new hits of wreckage added to the ruin littering the surface of earth. Crumpled shapes of once brilliant planes. Three Spads—as many Fokkers. The air still seemed impregnated with the odor of hot oil and raw gasoline, and with the nostril-inflaming smell of exploding powder.

A cluster of black dots smeared against the sky overhead, breaking with a vicious intensity, vomited out of a red flash which erupted against the clean blue of the heights. Whistling and whirring fragments snapped angrily about them.

They followed Major Powers in a series of turns and banks, a long dive and a zoom. Behind them the anti-aircraft bursts spread out like huge umbrellas.

They were lost. They were merely speeding shapes above an unknown land.

Until suddenly, following after Major Powers, they

discovered the home field below wings, and circled slowly for a landing. One after the other they glided down, touched wheels, taxied to the line.

THEY climbed from ships to find that legs were brittle, suddenly too weak to support them. Niagara was roaring within their heads. They saw mouths opening and closing, but no voice penetrated that roar. Bodies seemed suddenly heavy—as if they had taken on a double weight in the hour they had been gone. Flesh seemed smothered by clothing. Unconsciously they flung off flying coats and ripped open tunics and shirts.

They stood there, unmoving, looking about with bloodshot eyes and gray faces smeared with oil and powder fumes. It seemed impossible that they could descend from the midst of death to find life flowing about them. It seemed impossible that they could ever return to life—could ever again walk the solid surface of the earth.

They saw a face swimming toward them through the mist. Powers' face. The purple snake of his wound was throbbing—standing out from his forehead and cheek. They saw his eyes looking at them—like twin scourges dawn across lacerated flesh.

The white smile was plastered across his mouth. He was walking with the same energy, his body was as straight as an arrow. For a moment they grew sick. There was a trickle of blood miming from under the sleeve of his tunic. It coursed over the back of his hand and dripped to the ground as he waked.

His voice seemed to cut through the deafness—through the roaring in their ears. It came to them, clear, incisive.

“Well?” he asked, lighting a cigarette. Applying the match with the hand wet with blood. “How do you like it? Lot different than the fairy stories you’ve been hearing, isn’t it? Figure you can make the grade—or do you think that you’d be bigger and better heroes in the infantry?”

They stood in dumb silence—watching the play of that bloody hand, staring at his face, at that purple welt which moved with each word.

“For a minute up there I had the idea that you were selling out, that you figured that maybe it was a lot easier to take it early—and all at once—than to get it a little bit at a time. Can’t say that I blame you much—if that was the idea—it takes a man to stand up under the gaff in this racket. The nincompoops take the dive early—”

Then the hate and the fury exploded within them. The picture of Powers' gray Spad fighting against impossible odds—the picture of Powers as the “beau ideal” pilot was tramped upon by that mad tide of hate.

He was mocking them, scorning them. With Raines and McDonald and Storer lying out there—Raines burned to death in his ship, McDonald and Storer crushed in the wreckage of two Spads. Three boys who had died. The newspaper word for death seemed so inane at the moment—“the supreme sacrifice”—it gave them a shuddery feeling of insincerity. Not the supreme sacrifice. They were not ready to die. They had been killed—blasted out of life, knocked down, riddled because they had been surprised—because they didn't know how to fight off the death which had struck at them.

And now this Powers was accusing those boys who had died of being yellow, of selling out to the enemy—of giving up rather than go on living.

THERE was a dry sob from some one's throat. A hoarse voice, a voice choked with emotion, sounded from the center of the knot of youngsters.

“You lousy devil!” screamed the voice wildly. “Don't you say those boys were yellow! You can stand there looking at us with those damn eyes of yours. You can laugh at us, think what you want about us—we're living and can take it—but you keep your tongue off boys who have died! You're not fit to call any one of those three boys by name! And I don't give a damn what you do to me for it—”

“You'll get over that in time,” smiled Powers with a careless gesture of his hand. “You'll find that you can take your deaths or leave 'em alone. It won't mean so much to you in a couple of days. In fact, you'll forget those fellows ever lived. You'll be too wrapped up in the problem of keeping yourself alive to feel particularly interested in the successful career of anyone else. You'll find that this living thing is a strictly personal equation. No one can solve it but the man doing the living.

“I've had friends—men—men who were born and bred to powder and smoke—who flew ships when they didn't know enough to put guns on 'em. Men who went through hell—before they died. They're out there on a dozen fronts in this man's war. Some of them went down so long ago that I don't even remember where they fell. A dozen armies have charged over their graves. In four years a man sees a lot of killing—it

doesn't pay to grow too morbid on the subject. It just makes it easier for some Jerry to get credit for another kill.

“You've had your first baptism. The first shock has worn off. You know what to expect now, you know that men do die—you've seen it with your own eyes. It's hard to believe when you first come up here and go flying around, looking down at other poor devils dying on the ground and figuring how superior you are to the poor infantry drawing thirty bucks a month, minus twenty-nine fifty for incidentals, floundering around in the mud. It's hard to believe—until a slug hits you in the back of the neck, or your bunk mate doesn't show up when it's time to go to bed.

“Well, after a while you'll get so that you can laugh those things off.”

He turned abruptly. Then he faced them again. The mouth contorted, the eyes wrinkled at the corners. Through the deafness which surrounded them, they heard his laugh.

They seemed to recoil—to clench fists. For an instant it seemed that they were about to spring forward.

But he turned his back and walked away.

### CHAPTER III GRAHAM

IT WAS NIGHT. Major Powers sat before his desk in the operations office. A yellow ray of light from a burning oil lamp threw weird shadows over the starchy whiteness of his face, gave the scar across his forehead the appearance of a crown of thorns. That part of the scar which ran down over his cheek seemed like a thick stream of blood running out from under the hair above the temple.

His eyes were half closed. There was a harsh whiteness about his mouth. He was staring into the darkness outside the faint circle of light. He had been staring for minutes—eyes unblinking, glittering.

There was a pen in his hand. A sheet of note paper was on the desk before him. There were written lines on the sheet of paper—firm, seeming etched in black upon the whiteness. The writing stopped abruptly in the middle of a sentence.

My Dear Mrs. Raines:

As your son's squadron commander I am writing these few lines in the hope that they may in some way soften the anguish which the War Department's official notification of John's death will bring you. A telegram of a few words, couched in formal language, is poor recompense for such a loss as yours.

I feel sure that you would be better able to bear the shock of John's death if you could know that he died fighting for his country, his face to the enemy—unafraid and giving his all—

Powers' eyes fell upon the unfinished letter. A wave of revulsion moved his face. He thrust the letter away from him; threw the pen down upon the desk. He kicked the chair out from under him and paced the floor with short, nervous strides. He stopped for a moment before the window and looked out upon the dark field.

Shadows were moving before carefully masked lights within the hangars. Shadows—mechanics, laboring over ships, fitting them for the day to come.

There was an ineffable weariness stamped upon his face. It seemed that a mask had been stripped from him. The domineering, sarcastic smile was gone. There was only strained, tired flesh, and two burning eyes—and the purple scar.

His hands clenched and unclenched. He looked at the stalls of the room about him as if moved by a tremendous urge to fling himself out of the place—to escape unseen and unheard ghosts which seemed to lurk in the shadows.

After a moment he returned to the desk and took up the pen again. He put another word on the white sheet.

Then his body stiffened. He hurled the pen away from him, crashed it against the wall with a vicious gesture of his arm. His body seemed to grow lax. His head fell forward until it rested upon his folded arms on the top of the desk. There was a shuddering sob in the half-darkness of the room—mutilated words from Major Powers' mouth—words which sounded like a tortured, "I can't—I can't!"

FROM another room the scratchy strains of canned music filtered through the stone walls of the operations office. A strident voice was singing triumphantly—"It's a Long Way to Berlin, But We'll Get There." The high notes were nothing but a series of blurred squawking. There were voices rising above the impossible music. Voices muted—made wordless

by the thickness of the walls and the noise of the phonograph.

Powers whirled away from the desk. He almost ran to a closet built against the wall. He flung open the door and reached into the darkness. His hand emerged clutching the throat of a gaudy cognac bottle. He stood looking at it for a moment with eyes hypnotized by the green and gold label. Then he replaced the bottle with a slow movement of his hand.

For an instant the ghost of the white smile played about his mouth. The laugh rose gurgling in his throat. He shook his head.

"Not yet," he whispered to himself. "Not yet—there'll be time for that. I don't want to borrow from that time by nibbling. It's the last thing I have to look forward to." There was a deeper grayness in his face as he turned away from the closet.

He stood close to the wall listening to the voices and the music. He was talking aloud to himself—holding a onesided conversation—asking himself questions which went unanswered. In the shadows of the room he seemed a wraith—a soul wrenched from a body—a soul which has suffered all of the tortures of hell and has been cast back into a world in which it has no place.

"Listen to them!" he said in the half whisper. "Listen to that phonograph! 'It's a Long Way to Berlin!' They're trying to believe that. They're trying to believe something—trying like hell.

"They've got to believe something. They're lost, too—blundering along in the middle of an existence they don't understand. They were living this morning—they had nothing to think about but life. They were playing a game. They know now that it isn't a game.

"They're trying to make one another believe that they don't see the faces of those three kids looking out at them from every corner in that room. They're sitting in there, dead for sleep—and yet not one of them has nerve enough to go to bed. They're afraid of those faces—afraid they'll find them in the darkness upstairs."

He was silent for a minute. "Cursing me. Sure, They've been cursing me ever since I got them. Maybe they can forget other things if they curse me enough. I laugh at them—I've heard 'em say it—I laugh at 'em!"

The sudden sound of his laughter echoed from the walls of the empty room. Chuckling, agonizing laughter—

"My dear Mrs. Raines! Just a line to let you know

that your son was knocked off because a lot of silly saps figured that high school boys with a few hours in combat acrobatics could stack up against a flight of trained pilots and get an even break. Just a line to let you know that your kid—the one you saw off at the station in his new uniform, with his wings glowing on his chest—was murdered by rats who figured that no mother should raise her son to be a soldier—and then took your kid and ran him into a spot where he never had a chance!

“That’s the kind of letters I want to write. I want to tell the mothers of these kids that the peace-at-any-price birds have crawled into their holes for the ‘duration’—and other poor goofs are fighting the battles—‘the army of a million men which sprang to arms overnight.’ They sprang all right—but there weren’t any arms, and the enemy had plenty of machine guns—”

He was suddenly quiet, tense, listening. Feet were pacing along the ground outside the window of the operation’s office. Voices were coming to him—words now, low-spoken words, but vibrant with feeling. He flattened himself beside the window and looked out. He seemed almost to be spying upon whoever walked outside his quarters.

THE voices drifted to his ears. First one voice and then another.

“I had to get out of there,” the first voice said. Powers recognized the voice as that of Kildaire, one of the kid pilots. A serious, blond boy. Tall, and graceful as a reed swaying in the wind.

“It was like sitting up with a lot of dead men. It got thick. For a minute my head started to spin. I had funny thoughts—about us all being dead—only making believe we were living. I got the horrors—I had to get a breath of air—”

“I felt the same thing,” said the second voice.

Powers strained his hearing. The second voice belonged to Graham. Paul Graham, black-headed, bright-eyed, slight of stature. Dark face tanned everlastingly by the suns of Arizona, his native state.

“It wouldn’t have been so bad if the major hadn’t—kind of—poked fun at those boys,” said Kildaire seriously. “Laughed at ’em—laughed because—we were kind of shocked—”

“Can’t he feel anything?” demanded Graham bitterly. “Doesn’t he know that we’re trying to do our best? That we realize how good he is and how dumb we are?”

He stopped suddenly. Then there was a blazing note in his voice.

“I could love that man,” he declared half-savagely, as if ashamed of the admission. “I could love him like—well, how can one fellow love another? Something fierce—something hellishly powerful surges up in me every time I look at him. I could follow him around—be like a dog to him—if he were only a little more human.

“He has something that gets to you. I think it’s because he is so utterly fearless, so recklessly indifferent to what happens to him. Today—out there in that fight—he took ships off my tail twice. Just a flirt of his tail—driving a Fokker in front of him each time. Giving it hell with his guns. Riding that whole outfit. Flying like a madman. You have to love a guy like that. Besides—there’s something else. There’s a look in his eyes of dumb suffering sometimes—it gets away from him when he isn’t smiling that damn smile of his.

“A look that makes you think of an outcast, hungry for companionship, hungry for someone to talk to. Like a starving kid with his face pressed against a window, shivering with the cold—looking in at a Christmas party given for other kids. With a table loaded with things to eat—things he never tasted.”

“I’ve noticed that, too,” said Kildaire breathlessly. “It kind of stabs you in the heart—unexpectedly. Takes your breath—makes you wonder—”

“It makes me want to go up to him and throw my arm around him.” There was a short laugh from Graham as he made the statement. “Can you imagine what would happen to anyone who threw his arm around Major Powers, consoling him for something?”

In the darkness of the operations office, Powers’ nails were biting into his palms as the grip of his hands grew tighter. He seemed drained of his strength. His face was a ghastly smear of gray. The words which floated in through the window seemed to harrow his soul. But he listened, gripped by some strange spell.

“It would be great to have a guy like that for a friend,” said Graham, almost reverently. “A bird who can fly and fight like the Skipper. A bird who has been through everything—from the first day. Who can tell the stories he has lived. Imagine having the Skipper for a teacher—trying to make good for him. It wouldn’t be so tough getting bumped off—it’s tough right now only because we know that we can’t even put up a decent fight for our lives. It’s just a matter of going out and getting smacked down—because we don’t

know what it's all about. I wouldn't care how much he laughed at me—if he taught me—if he'd let me make good for him." The two heads glanced in unison toward the window of the operations office.

"He buries himself in there—no one ever sees him after supper. Couple of the fellows have the idea that he hits the bottle all night—drinks himself unconscious—"

Graham stopped with a suppressed grunt.

"Anyone who says that is a liar!" he snapped dangerously. "They can say that he's inhuman—that he hates green pilots, that he's a four-pronged devil to get along with—but I'll take a smack at anybody who even hints that he's a drunkard. Men like him don't have to drink. The bottle can't give them anything—it can only take away from them. Oh, hell, let's stop talking about the Skipper—it hurts. I've been hurt enough for one day—I'm dizzy in the head—"

The footsteps receded. There was a thumping on the steps—they were entering the house.

INSIDE the billet, Graham stopped for a moment to consult the duty board. Kildaire paused with him, as if reluctant to go on alone. After a moment, however, he crossed the room, and stomped slowly up the stairs.

There was a vague, flickering light from an oil lamp burning upon a table in the center of the room. It threw fitful shadows across the board. Graham read the names. Somehow, tonight, they seemed to have no meaning. His own name was staring out at him—written in stark letters of chalk.

Graham—dawn solo.

Three words. Yesterday they would have caused his heart to leap, his pulses to race, a queer chill to pass up and down his spine. But tonight the words left him unmoved. The name seemed to belong to someone else—someone he could regard with no emotion.

There were other notations upon the board. Kildaire was going with an offensive patrol at ten. Clemson and Wood, Oldring and McCullough were down for the same mission. Offensive patrol! The words seemed burned into the wood of the board.

He turned away with a weary shrug of the shoulders. He felt sleepless, a nervous energy eating at him. He stopped with a sudden hiss of breath, and a start which seemed to tie his nerves into knots. His eyes were staring at the door which opened into the operations office from the room the outfit used as a general gathering place. The door was open for a space of two feet.

The major was leaning against it. His eyes were fixed upon Graham's face. Two swirling pinpoint spots of light standing out from the gray mask. Deep lines running about the mouth, curving down from the nose. Queer wrinkles about the corners of the eyes—lines which Graham had never observed on the major's face. The gasping breath exhaled slowly with a sibilant sound. There was no word from the major. Merely the eyes—staring. The body leaning heavily against the door jamb.

"I'm—I'm—sorry, sir," blurted Graham. "You—I—scared me half to death for a moment. In that light—or rather in those shadows—you looked like a ghost materializing out of the wall. You weren't there when I came in. And when I turned away from the board. . . . You'll excuse me—"

"I heard you talking outside," said Powers. His voice was a dry rasp.

Graham's face was suddenly pale. "I'm sorry, sir," he said waveringly. "I had no idea you might be listening—"

"No apologies necessary," said the husky whisper. "Only—I heard you say something—about me. An outcast—hungry for companionship—"

"I'm sorry, sir," begged Graham.

"You were feeling sorry—for me?" asked Powers. There was no answer.

"I thought maybe you'd like to come in," continued the major. "I thought maybe you'd like to sit up a while."

There was almost eagerness in his voice. He held open the door to the operations office.

#### CHAPTER IV SMILE!

**G**RAHAM'S EYES WERE FIXED on Powers' face. He walked forward, driven by an impulse he seemed unable to master. Then the door of the operations office closed. He was alone with the major.

There was a chair beside the battered field desk. He seated himself. The major sank into his own chair. There was a thick silence. Powers was staring into the shadows—his fists clenched on the desk.

Suddenly he spoke.

"I swore to myself that I'd never go through it again," he said, half to himself. "I swore that I'd never suffer the way I suffered when Scotty Burke went out—beside me in a hospital. I swore that I'd go on my own. I'd be a lone wolf. I'd be the kind of bird that no one would want to have anything to do with—that I'd laugh at all the heartache and misery.

"And you make a speech outside my window—"

Graham's voice. Repeating the same words, mechanically.

"I'm sorry, sir, I didn't mean—"

"Certainly you meant it," said Powers dully. "Kids like you don't say things they don't mean."

He whirled suddenly, his face was close to Graham's. The eyes were glowing fiercely.

"Ever been in a hospital?" he demanded. His hands were gripping Graham's knees.

"I mean the kind they bring the wounded to—after they pick them up off a battlefield. Ever seen the ambulances unloading—see men with bodies ripped open and rotting lousy with gangrene? Ever hear men screaming? Ever see men bleeding—men with stumps in place of arms and legs? Ever see 'em sort out the men who have died on the way in from the dressing stations?

"Ever hear a man begging for water—just moaning that one word over and over? 'Water! Water!'"

Graham's eyes were glassy. He seemed suddenly sick—green about the cheeks. His throat was working.

"And then—did you ever find yourself in the middle of a hell-hole like that? Hearing everything that took place around you, but seeing nothing—because there was a bloody bandage wrapped around your face and eyes—and you were wondering if you were ever going to see again?

"Ever hear a surgeon's voice when you couldn't see him? A cold kind of voice—tired and not very interested, saying to a tired assistant; 'Put the next case up on the table.' And did you ever smell the ether and the blood, and hear the clink of the knives—knowing that the doctor was going to work on your eyes?

"Ever go on a table like that knowing that the best friend you had in the world was on a litter, outside the door, and that a voice had spoken in the midst of that gurgling and screaming and groaning all about you? A surgeon's voice: 'It's a red tag—I've looked at him. Not a chance.'

"It's your friend they're talking about. A man who went through three years of hell with you—ate with you, slept with you, laughed with you, fought with you

and for you—and you hear him called 'red tag.' And you know that he's going out—and that you won't ever have a chance to say goodbye to him. You'll never see his face again."

The glittering eyes closed for an instant. The purple snake was swollen, squirming along his face and forehead. Graham watched it in terrible fascination. It pulsed with each beat of Powers' heart.

"I went through that," said Powers hollowly. "I went through more than that.

"I SPENT a month in that hospital. They never had a chance to move me back.

"I was a kind of miracle—the surgeons liked to show me to other surgeons while I was getting well. 'Miracle of modern surgery,' they called me. They rehearsed what they had done to me a dozen times while I listened. They didn't pay any attention to me at all. I was merely a laboratory specimen. They told how they'd reduced a frontal fracture of the skull; patched the bone; relieved pressure on the brain which had made me blind; spliced two arteries; took thirty-two deep sutures and twenty superficial. Hell, I can repeat it by heart, I heard it so many times.

"But that wasn't the worst. I had to stay there—on a cot, unable to move, to even turn my head—and listen to and see what was taking place around me. The wounded came in—a stream which never ended. Day after day there were the same groans and gurgling and shrieks of madmen—tortured men—dying men. There were screams and prayers, cursing and pleadings. There were boys praying, and boys whispering to mothers—and I had to listen."

He paused. Some of the glitter went out of his eyes. "I went through that. And, boy, no matter what the preachers say about hell, it's pleasant compared to an evacuation hospital.

"You wouldn't understand about Scotty and me. You haven't been here long enough. But it'll get you too. Scotty Burke was the kind of boy a fellow would like to have for a brother. He was the kind of fellow you can live with. He knew when to be silent and he knew when to talk. Just walking along with him made you feel a little better—a little happier.

"A cool hand, Scotty. Never flurried, never loud, never excited. Sandy hair, a fighting chin, and a pair of hands that would knock a bull senseless. A rugged, wrinkled kind of face—big gray eyes. Chest like a barrel. A born soldier and a fighter. Met him at the Bureau of Enlistments when I went to join the French

air service. We signed together—we served together. We got Nieuports together and we took our first planes over the lines together—and we were both in on our first Jerry.

“Three years! It seemed a long time while it was going on—but now it seems like only a day.

“When I was ready to get out of the hospital—before I got out—I knew that I’d never be anything without Scotty. I was wondering if they’d give me an honorable discharge from the service—but just about that time the United States came in.

“And they talked me into transferring to the American air—that wasn’t organized yet—and taking a commission and a command over American boys. Told me they needed me—badly. That I’d save young American lives if I’d use my experience to guide American boys.

“So I transferred.

“Then I saw the first American pilots. Boys. Kids. School children, parading around in cordovan boots and tailored blouses—strutting the silver wings. Smooth-faced kids, not knowing what it was all about. Coming over with a few hours’ instruction—all set to win the war for the spirit of Lafayette. I knew I’d never be able to get by in this new business. I wasn’t a murderer. I couldn’t take kids like that—like all of you—and head ’em into something that I didn’t have guts enough to face myself.

“But the orders came. And I came to Issoudun—and got twelve of you.”

POWERS drew a deep breath.

“I laughed at you. I made fun of you. I did everything but spit in your faces. Maybe you’ll understand why—after a couple of weeks up here. I had to do something to shake that colossal egotism you brought with you. I had to smash the idea out of all of you that each one of you was worth half a dozen Jerries. That all you had to do was make an appearance at the Front and the Squareheads would remember how big and how powerful America was—and sell out.

“I knew that any ignorant kid who went up to the Front with those ideas swelling him up like a poisoned puppy would last just long enough to get a crate into the air. I had to make you angry. I had to make you forget all the rot they pumped into you back home.

“More than that, I knew you were up against something that would wilt you like young wheat in a drought. You’d get one pasting; you’d find out that you weren’t such a high and mighty lot—and you’d never

get over it. I had to laugh at your dead, laugh at your attempts to be earnest—laugh at everything you held sacred—so that when the crash came you’d forget to be afraid.

“But that laughing thing—it’s done something to me. It’s like a drug. I’ve lost every other form of expression. I feel that laugh chuckling inside of me, when I’m alone. And I get up and look at myself in the glass—and wonder if I’m going crazy.”

He drummed on the desk with his finger-tips, still staring into the shadows on the other side of the desk.

“You said you wanted to learn,” he said. “You said it would be great to have a bird like me for a teacher—”

Graham’s eyes stared at the Major. There was a wetness on his cheeks, his eyes were misty.

“Yes, I said that,” he admitted. There was an eagerness in his voice. He leaned forward in his chair.

Powers shook his head.

“You don’t know what you’re asking,” he said dully. “You’re asking for everything I’ve had to face. You’re asking to have your body smashed and your brain twisted. You’re asking to have everything belonging to the past ripped out of your life—tossed away—with a laugh—”

“It makes no difference,” answered Graham. “Sometimes I feel that my whole life has been shaping toward this one point. Toward this farm and these planes—toward that stretch of country out in front. Half a dozen times today I’ve stopped short and stared around me. It seems that I’ve been here before—that I’ve gone through all this a dozen times—”

“It means having nothing to hope for. No tomorrow, no yesterday. Merely the breath you breathe and the step you take, and the minute you live. Powers’ voice sounded as if he had not heard Graham’s answer.

“You’ve lived, sir,” reminded Graham. “I’ll be satisfied to live as long as you have.”

Powers’ glittering eyes turned toward the boy. The laugh gurgled in his throat.

“That’s it!” he said hoarsely. “I see it in your eyes—I hear it in your voice. You’re saying, ‘Hell, the Major has nothing in common with us! He’s an old fogey—we’re young. This is a war of youth—’”

He stopped. Some of the lines went out of his face.

“How old do you think I am?” he asked.

Graham’s mouth opened. His eyes were studying Powers’ face.

“You’re young,” he said. “I didn’t mean to say that you were old—it sounded differently than I intended—”

He stopped awkwardly.

"How old do you think I am?" insisted Powers. The white smile was about his mouth.

Graham swallowed hard. His eyes expressed the fact that he was trying to be kind.

"You're not more than forty, sir," he said in a positive tone.

The gurgling laugh seeped out of Powers' chest. "I'm twenty-six," he chuckled. "Twenty-six—just about five years older than you are. And you tell me I'm not more than forty—but in your heart you had the idea that I was lots older than that. Don't deny it—I know men.

"Twenty-six, and even you think I'm at least forty."

His voice was suddenly fierce.

"You see?" he demanded. "You'll be like that— young kids will look at you and pity you."

GRAHAM'S face was a dull red.

"I'm sorry," he said huskily. "I— I didn't mean to be unkind—"

"And you want me for a teacher," reminded Powers. "Me!" The staccato laugh echoed in the room.

"I'm satisfied, sir," said Graham gravely.

"You're crazy!"

"You said we'd all be crazy sooner or later," reminded Graham.

"I don't want you," declared Powers. "I don't want any of you—I don't want anyone. Didn't you hear me say that? No friends—I'm a lone wolf—"

Graham shook his head.

"You couldn't change things, sir," argued Graham. "It would hurt just as much—you're not the kind of man who can laugh in his heart—at things—like today—"

"I can laugh at anything," snapped Powers.

"Outwardly. Not inside. Otherwise you wouldn't shut yourself away from the boys—you dare not let them see that you're anything else but the devil you've made them think you are—" He paused, stunned at his daring.

Powers' eyes were staring at Graham's face. His hands were shaking. There was a wordless agony in those eyes—an agony that was stamped on his face. He rose to his feet after a moment and paced back and forth across the floor. Then he stopped suddenly before Graham's chair.

"So you want me to teach you? You want to be another John Powers. You are willing to trade what you are—for what he is?"

Graham's head nodded.

Powers' fingers gripped Graham's shoulders. "You have the solo tomorrow morning?" he asked.

Another nod.

A mirthless cackle from Powers.

"All right," he said jerkily. "I'll go with you. I'll show you how to fly solo—you'll get your first lesson tomorrow morning." He looked down at Graham's face.

Graham struggled to his feet. He felt his hand crushed within Powers' iron grip. A sudden wave of feeling engulfed the boy. His lips trembled, his eyes were swimming. Then a hand was slapping his hack.

"Look up!" snapped Powers' voice. It trembled strangely. "Look up, straighten those shoulders, get that cocky Powers appearance. Nothing matters— nothing can matter. You'll get your first lesson tonight. Understand? Tonight!"

Graham's head lifted. The tears were welling out of his eyes.

Powers looked at him for an instant. He snapped his head upward with a finger beneath the boy's chin.

"The first lesson!" he announced grimly.

Graham's lips were still trembling, his throat still working.

"Smile, damn you—smile!" growled Powers.

Then he whirled the boy about by the shoulders and marched him toward the door. Closed it after him.

Returned to the shadows.

He sat for a long time with his chin in his hands, some of the weariness gone from his face—a mask strangely softened. He drew a long breath, his lips formed three or four words.

"Smile, damn you—smile!" he was saying.

## CHAPTER V EAGLE AND FLEDGLING

**D**AWN CAME SLUGGISHLY on the next morning. There was no spectacle of the sun seeming to rise from the bowels of the earth, to mount blazing into the heavens. The sun did not appear at all. The jet blackness of a starless night gave way to varying shades of grayness as the hands of the clock moved toward the hour of six.

The hangars emerged from the thick sea of gray.

Ships, moved out onto the line, were decorated with dull-looking diamonds—beads of water which formed on the wings and rolled over the tightly stretched fabric to the trailing edges, to drop in steady precision onto the ground. Mechanics, blue-lipped and shivering in the chill, walked stiffly about the hangars or tinkered listlessly.

The atmosphere seemed sodden, filled with invisible water. It made clothing feel weighted, made it itch maddeningly. It gave to leather a clammy touch and an unpleasant odor.

Overhead dense clouds were moving ponderously across the sky driven by a ten-mile breeze. Great masses of cumulus piled up, height upon height, billow upon billow, curve upon curve, until they seemed to fill the entire universe. Here and there was a crevice in the mass through which the washed-out blue of the sky might be seen.

There were lights burning in the dining room of the farmhouse. Pilots stumbled down the steps, still heavy with sleep, muscles aching because of the damp, eyes red with lack of rest. Boys who were feeling raw nerves. They sank into chairs at the table and gulped greedily at the steaming coffee.

Out on the field two specters in the complete harness of pilots strode across the field.

They had quitted the operations office a moment before. A moment before that Anthony Graham's knuckles had knocked softly on the door. The door had been jerked open, Major Powers' face had appeared. His voice had spoken.

"So you're ready, eh?" he asked with a curious glance at Graham's face. "I was just coming in to hustle that gang down the steps."

Graham watched the Major's face as Powers pulled on his flying coat. There was none of the savage of the night before. The purple snake was dormant, only a tracery of the nasty wound wound its way across the forehead and cheek. The glitter had subsided in the Major's eyes. He was alert, his body oozing energy.

"You look pretty well considering," said Powers. "Usually a young squirt scheduled to do his first dawn patrol comes onto the field a wreck—hollow-eyed and shaky. Get any sleep?"

"I went upstairs and went to sleep," said Graham. "It was funny. Even on the way upstairs I knew I'd never be able to sleep. That's why I took that walk with Kildaire last night. I seemed on fire—my head was whirling. But somehow, after I went out of here, I could sleep."

He found himself walking across the field, stride for stride with Powers—toward the hangars—toward the ships.

The Major glanced at the sky. "The Suicide Club will have a meeting this morning," he said in a confident tone.

"Suicide Club?"

"Sure, it always gets together on mornings like this. The dawn patrol boys play hide and seek under those clouds. They loaf around in circles until something shows below them. And then—it's too bad for the ship foolish enough to stay in sight."

They walked along in silence. A group of mechanics moved away from the two ships as the Major approached. There was no word of greeting. There were glances out of the corners of half a dozen eyes toward the Major's face. The two halted beside Graham's ship.

Powers' hand was gripping Graham's arm above the elbow.

"We're going up there," informed Powers. "You're going to learn a few things this morning. I'm doing the flying—you're doing the looking. Understand. No matter what happens, you're to obey orders. We'll weave in and out among those clouds for a while. "If you see me dive away from you, stay put—*sabe?* Right where I left you. Under no consideration are you to follow me.

"You're to keep your eyes open every second—watch every point of the compass, be ready for anything. Get it?"

There was a nod from Graham. His mouth opened. "But—" he began.

"No 'buts,'" snapped the Major almost fiercely. "If you disobey orders I'll bust you wide open."

His hand smote Graham a mighty slap on the back. He looked at him for a moment then boosted him into the cockpit.

"The young student!" he said. "The young student—going to his first class!"

He laughed. The sound caused the hangar detail to turn away. It cut through the gray fog about them.

Then he was striding jauntily toward his own ship. He went into the cockpit with two steps. Settled himself in the seat and fastened the buckle of the safety belt. He lifted his hand. His Spad wheeled away from the line, went bumping toward the head of the runway.

An instant later they were flitting over the ground—then flying.

The two gray ships were hardly visible to the men

left behind in the grayness about them. Shadows, flying wing to wing, boring upward—reaching in sweeping spirals for the density of the clouds overhead.

AFTER a thousand feet there was no earth, no sky. Nothing but a white blindness and a wetness which poured over helmet and goggles; ran in streams from the edges of the wings; seemed to penetrate every opening in flying coat and boots. Ahead, nothing but the churning propeller. On each side the wing tips were barely visible.

To Graham the Major's ship was an indistinct blur in the liquid murk. A shadow which kept pace with him—flew on and on through that blindness. Thoughts came to him. The sudden looming of another ship ahead—too close to avoid collision. The wrenching impact of ship against ship—and then two masses of broken wreckage drifting down through that blindness locked tight in the embrace of death. A nervous tension grew up within him as each second ticked away on the clock, and seemed an hour, and the blurred shadow of Major Powers' Spad flew on and on.

Then there was a streak of light in the white darkness.

It glowed against the cloud mist—it was like a beacon light burning through a white night. They came upon it as mountain climbers would chance upon a bottomless crevice.

Powers' ship changed direction, it went into a slow bank with the crevice as an axis. After an instant Graham followed after the Major's ship. He glanced almost fearfully over the side of his cockpit.

He saw a clear expanse below—far down, the earth and space which was clear of the clouds through which they passed. It was like looking through the small end of a megaphone.

Powers continued interminably in the swinging circle. Throttles were cut to a bare cruising speed, the clouds smothered the motor drone.

Around and around until Graham's body seemed permanently lopsided, until it seemed that he would never regain level flight. Something almost uncanny in the way Powers flew. His head was over the low side of the cockpit, he never ceased to look down that inverted megaphone of clouds.

A quarter of an hour passed. Twenty minutes. Half an hour. Until it seemed that all eternity had been passed in this lazy circling—over this open space in the clouds.

And then suddenly Powers brought his ship out

of the gentle bank. Pulled it level, poised it. Over the murmur of his own Hiss, Graham heard the sudden staccato barking of the Major's motors. It seemed to come from a vast distance—and yet the Major's Spad was not more than fifty yards distant.

He peered anxiously downward through the crack in the clouds. His heart ceased to beat for an instant.

There was a shape outlined in that open space. A blue-black shape which cruised along easily, hardly seeming to move forward—suspended in mid air. Painted against its wings were white squares in which the Maltese Cross stood out in stark relief.

HE had a sight of the goggled face of Powers. Saw a hand wave—an admonishing gesture. Then the Major was gone, his ship diving like a comet down through that narrow slit in the white blindness. Gathering speed with every foot of fall, growing smaller—traveling like a bullet—until it seemed that the wings were curved like a drawn bow and that the frail Spad must explode into particles through its own momentum. Down and down, with the red tinge of the exhaust flashing over the gray-white of the clouds, tinting them a faint pink which moved with the rapidity of a lightning stroke.

And then Powers' ship broke out into open space—was nosing for the cross-marked enemy, falling upon it, threatening to crush it, to smash it to atoms.

A new red tinge about the nose of the Spad now—gunfire.

The stabbing flashes of Vickers in action. The Spad was closing with a single leap the gap separating it from the enemy ship.

For an instant the blue-black ship nosed upward in quick alarm, threw itself into a twisting wing-over in an attempt to escape the deadly charge of the Spad. But the Spad nosed up with it—hungrily—hurled itself forward by its terrible speed.

There was an instant when it seemed the muzzles of the Vickers were pressed against the sides of the blue-black fuselage. Then the gray nose of the Spad lifted sharply, open space showed between the two ships.

Powers was going around, his wings cocked vertically, ready to spring in for a second point-blank burst.

But a pylon of flame leaped up under his wings. A great gout of flame turned the clouds overhead an angry red. Blue-black wings seemed to sag, then fall apart. A fuselage hung for a moment, a ghastly welter of wreckage hanging from fittings, and then dived for the distant earth. The flame was eating at it as it fell.

The smoke trailed, rising slowly until it formed a black patch against the clouds—became like a drop of ink in a tub of clean water.

The Spad was climbing dizzily. Going up in narrow circles, nosing back into the crevice in the clouds from which it had plunged. When it was halfway up to the level at which Graham flew, the husk of the blue-black ship crashed. There was an eddying billow of sparks, a great blot of flame. Then nothing but a rising haze of smoke to mark its final resting place.

Back in the concealment of the clouds the Major throttled his motor to the same slow cruising speed. He stared across at Graham's face. The glass of his goggles gave him a hideous appearance. The round brown ball of his helmet seemed to transform him into a misshapen dwarf. He pointed down through the opening in the clouds—toward the haze of smoke lifting from the burning Fokker.

The gesture seemed to say: "You see?"

Graham raised his hand and nodded his head. He had seen—death, destruction, terrible in its suddenness. Hurling down from out of the blind skies—smashing into extinction without warning. He was a little sick. His nerves suddenly collapsed, seemed crawling close under the skin.

He wondered why Powers kept circling about the same spot, hugging that same opening in the clouds. Hadn't they finished?

He pawed at his goggles to wipe the moisture from the lenses. He looked up after a minute—to find Powers crowding him closely, trying to attract his attention. The Major's hand was lifted and sweeping down—pointing toward the opening in the clouds.

A sudden tightness came into Graham's throat. He tilted his head—looked down the inverted megaphone. For an instant he thought that his eyes were playing tricks—but after a single instant he knew that he was not deceived.

There was another ship down there—another blue-black shape hanging in space, with white Maltese Crosses painted upon its wings. It seemed lower than the other—as if it was looking down upon the grave of a comrade.

Powers' finger was pointing toward him and then pointing toward that second ship. There was no mistaking the meaning of that pointing finger. It seemed pressing against his heart—a heart which was beating in slow ponderous cadence, forcing waves of blood to pound against his ears, flood his brain.

The finger was saying:

"There you are. You saw how it was done. It's your turn."

HIS hand reached out slowly and pushed the throttle against the forward post. He went around once more in that circle, tripping the guns, taking a final pull at the strap of his helmet.

Then, with a wave of his hand toward the Major, he sent his Spad plunging through the crevice. His eyes were fixed upon those Maltese Crosses from behind the ring of his gunsights, his thumb was poised upon the trigger. The scream of the motor rose in tempo with a screaming within his soul, the wail and the whine of the wires in unison with the sudden tautness of his body.

Down through that white tunnel, with the water dripping from his chin—until it was caught up by the madly churning propeller and dashed into his face with the impact of hail stones. Until his ears roared and his brain seemed a vacuum and the flesh of his body was bursting.

And the Maltese Crosses grew larger and larger in the sights.

He was blinded. His ship had leaped out of the clouds into the dull light of the day, but the change was enough to cause a sudden blackness before him—a blackness through which he plunged, clinging desperately to the stick, his feet braced against the rudder bat. After a moment he could see—his eyes became accustomed to the change. The blue-black ship was still there—circling lower and lower over the earth, hovering over the spot upon which the first ship had crashed.

Then he was in danger of hurtling over it. The speed of his Spad had increased to the point of madness. The wings drummed hollowly, the fuselage trembled, the motor was rocking in the base. The slipstream smashed his goggles against his eyes until it seemed that the balls must burst from the sockets. The blue-black wings were like great kites in the sights.

His thumb jammed down upon the triggers.

An answering spurt of flame broke from the muzzles of the twin guns before him.

He saw his own tracers snapping through space. They seemed slow—almost as if the Spad would overtake them before they reached the objective.

There was a sudden movement on the part of the blue-black ship in his sights. It leaped as if stung—leaped and quivered, with white tracers boring into its side; then went up in a wild zoom, the propeller

dragging it like a dead weight. He could see the pilot's head turned toward him, see the glint of light reflected by his goggles. The Jerry was leaning forward in his seat, working over his guns, crouching, whipping the Fokker out of the climb—throwing it over on a wing, diving.

But the speed-mad Spad was nosing up. Longerons shuddered as the terrific pressure came to bear. The wings groaned, the fittings grated with a sickening sound. Smoke streamed from the exhaust stacks as the racing engine took up the sudden burden. The chattering of the guns slowed—seemed to come to a halt.

The white tracers were flying over the enemy now. He struggled to bring the nose of the Spad to bear on the target—but it was shifting, slipping, turning. He flew by will, taking the Spad where his eyes directed. Once he reloaded the guns with the Fokker diving for him.

There was a dull sense of disaster growing within him. It came after he discovered that he could not force the Spad to gain upon the target, when he realized that he had used everything he knew and could not prevent the Fokker from drawing away from him. The tables were turning. The Fokker was no longer the hunted—it was the hunter. It was flying like a mad thing.

Thoughts milled through Tony Graham's brain.

"I'm a lousy pilot," his brain was murmuring. "I muck the job. I don't hit 'em between the eyes as the Major does. I mess the business and I let the Jerry kill me. He's crazy, that fellow in the Fokker. He thinks I'm the guy who got that other fellow. A buddy maybe—looking down on his crack-up—and while he's looking I jump him. He's fighting to make good for that friend of his that the Major got—a life for a life—"

The Spad was in level flight, moving at every foot of speed the Hisso could produce and the blue-black Fokker was taking position on its tail. Coming up slowly, surely, closing the gap separating the two ships, Spandaus coming to bear.

A CRACKLING noise sounded about Graham's head—like whiplashes cracked by a ringmaster—a thousand whiplashes in the hands of a thousand ringmasters. White streaks flashed between the wings.

One pinged against a wire, separated, became minute particles of sullenly burning chemicals. Bits of it were thrown into his face by the slipstream. They seemed to stick to the flesh, to burn like red-hot

needles. He clawed at them with his hands and bits of skin came away with the touch of his fingers.

Then the scourges seemed to be lashing the fuselage of the Spad. It trembled under the punishment. A snaky row of black dots appeared on the surfacing of the right lower wing—black dots which seemed to be gnawing at the woodwork beneath, which sent little showers of splinters whirling in the propeller wash.

The roar of the Mercedes behind him grew above the roar of his own motor. The rivet-hammer staccato of the Spandaus grew into a raging torrent of sound—like rolling drums, short, sharp rappings—and each time the sound smashed against his ears, the Spad shook with a sudden ague. He pulled the nose of the ship straight up, the stick in his lap—riding the whirlwind, sweeping around the arc with the blood draining from his head and eyes, welling into his stomach.

Something flashed over him as he flew out of the top of the loop. His eyes followed it—he stared at it through smeared goggles. A Fokker—diving, guns flaming red, stabbing for his stomach.

For an instant he thought himself mad. No Fokker could climb or fly that fast—to beat him in such a zoom, to get into position for such a dive! The Spad snapped out of the loop, he twisted his head to look over the vertical fin.

He saw a Fokker on his tail, driving him hard, riding out of a loop. And then—above it, a second blue-black shape—diving at a slanting angle, making him the point of a triangle—and white tracers were snapping at him from this second enemy.

He was twisting and turning desperately, attempting to shake off the two ships following him. His brain seemed boiling.

"You wanted to be like the Major. Well, here's a chance—do your stuff. You got a chance. You're just as the Major said—a green kid. You're licked, you don't know what to do—how to begin. They didn't have loaded Spandaus on those training crates you used to play with—you don't belong in this league." A flame was gnawing at his soul. A hate and a disgust, for Tony Graham, who was going out like Raines and McDonald and Storer. Who had trained a year—to live a day. The flame spread to his brain, even as it seemed to be consuming his body.

"Get one of 'em!" the voice in his brain screamed. "Get one at least! You're going anyhow—take a smash at the nearest, wreck your damn' crate, tear its wings off. They'll be off in a minute anyhow. You're going to die anyhow—"

HE whipped the controls against the left side of the cockpit and stood up on the rudder. The Spad lunged about in a groan. The right wing fluttered against the hinge-pins. The wires seemed to grow lax, then taut. The spar creaked and threatened to tear itself through the fabric. The ribs stood out in dirges under the linen.

Something came tearing toward him. He had an instant sight of a great Maltese Cross smeared against a blue-black wing. His thumb jammed the trigger. The spurting red poured from the muzzles of the black guns—then the shape was gone.

Above him, whirling about, was the second Fokker.

He forgot stalling speed, forgot everything. The Spad nosed upward—the guns were hammering again. He saw two tracers bury themselves in the bottom of the second Fokker's fuselage—then it was gone.

He whirled the Spad about again, recklessly, the flame burning within him urging him to tear the wings from the Spad—to smash it to bits in a surge of blinding rage.

He saw a blue-black shape below him. A second shape was coming out of a vertical bank above, diving at him. But he dived on the ship below.

It seemed flying more slowly than before—its nose was wavering. He centered the cockpit in his sights. The red blur from the Vickers hid it from him for an instant. Then he saw that it was falling—whirling, spinning with the right wing far down—out of control.

A gray streak crossed above his wings. A gray streak that was almost too fast to register upon his eyes. It cleaved the heavens like a rocket. He heard gunfire. He was turning his Spad to face the second Fokker—but the enemy was no longer there. It was diving—straight for the earth—behind it a gray Spad, with brilliant red, white and blue circles on its wings, driving it, lashing it.

He dived after them, throttle jammed hard against the post, his mouth open, screaming senseless words, half standing in his seat, clutching the stick with his left hand, gripping the throttle with his right.

Before he could cover five hundred feet the gray Spad seemed to smother the plunging Fokker. For an instant the Spad's wings blotted out the enemy ship. The faint sound of two Vickers rose above the scream of motors. The Fokker smashed against the ground under full throttle, bounced high, then fell again to earth—falling apart with the second impact.

The Spad zoomed with a rush. Above, sanity was returning to Tony Graham. He eased back on his own throttle, took his wracked ship out of a dive, brought it

level, flew to meet the gray ship which had taken a part in the fight. It came swimming up through the mists, leveled off when it arrived at his own altitude, flew close. He saw the number upon its rudder. Then an arm was waving to him. Pointing back to the blackness in the southwest.

He turned for home.

Together the two ships nosed through the low ceiling, found the home field, landed. One after another they taxied to the line. Props stopped revolving with a grunt.

From the first of the ships Major Powers leaped to the ground. He half ran to Tony Graham's cockpit.

Graham was lowering himself stiffly. He felt dizzy, uncertain on his feet, the ground seemed lumpy. His ears were roaring, his stomach was sick with the stench of raw gasoline and hot oil.

Hands gripped his arms, gouging into the flesh above his elbows. A face was thrust close to him. It seemed a terrific effort to focus his eyes on the face. He recognized the Major.

A queer face, contorted, white under the grime, the eyes terrible with a burning intensity. The Major's voice was asking a question—over and over. The hands were shaking him.

After a moment he was able to understand what the voice was asking.

"Graham! You all right? You hurt?" There was a brittle anxiety in Powers' voice. The purple snake on his face was distending the flesh.

"I'm all right," Graham heard himself answer. His voice sounded distant, dull, almost drowned out by the roaring in his ears. He wondered why he felt unable to walk—why the ground seemed to billow up under his feet.

"That second ship—it was playing its own game," barked Powers' voice. "I didn't see it—until it was too late. I was willing to have you take a chance with one—even after you missed the first try. But his buddy was buried in the clouds, waiting for me to come back—waiting for me to take the bait of a second Fokker ripe for killing. And you walked into that trap! On the way down—I thought I'd never make it—he was riding your tail, shooting hell out of you—"

"I guess I'm not a very good student," said Graham in a hoarse whisper. "I—missed—and then—I gave up—when I saw the two of them. I was going to smash one—somehow—because I knew I couldn't get away. They had me—even the first one had me by himself—"

There was only one hand gripping his arm now. It was urging him across the field—through the ranks of the curious pilots who were flocking about the two ships, staring at Graham's face and then at Powers'; staring at the black dots sprinkled on the wings and fuselage of Graham's Spad—staring at the raw red patches on his cheeks where the exploding tracer had marked him.

They wondered at the anxiety in Powers' eyes. They wondered at the gentleness of his manner as he guided Graham across the field.

Then, half way across the field, they saw Powers stop. His head lifted, they heard the beginning of a chuckle which rose to a peal of shouted laughter. Graham's knees were sagging.

The Major was supporting him, half dragging him across the field. And the Major was laughing.

They turned away in disgust.

## CHAPTER VI OFFENSIVE PATROL

**T**HREE HOURS LATER the pilots going out with the offensive patrol were grouped outside One Hangar. Kildaire was there, and Clemson, Wood, Oldring and McCullough.

Oldring and McCullough were sitting in cockpits fiddling with controls. Clemson, Wood and Kildaire were grouped about the mouth of the hangar talking together in low tones. From time to time they glanced anxiously at wrist watches, then at the sky overhead, then toward the operations office across the field.

"Three minutes," said Kildaire in a worried tone.

"Yeah, three minutes," agreed Wood. His hands were shaking a little as he lit a cigarette. He puffed on it once or twice and threw it away from him.

"Look at that mess upstairs," he demanded angrily. "Who expects a guy to fly in weather like this—what good is it?"

"The board says we fly—and the Skipper hasn't given us a tumble. So it looks as if we fly," said Kildaire.

"It'll be a funny attempt," growled Clemson. "What does he expect us to do? Why, we don't know who is in command of this formation."

"Looks like every man for himself," laughed

Kildaire nervously. "I hope we find the field—if we get up there."

"Say, that was a queer one, this morning—the Major going out with Graham on the solo. What was the idea of that? And when they came back, did you notice how the Skipper made a dash for Graham's crate? Lifted him down—almost blubbered over him?"

"Funny, I was talking with Tony last night, just before we went to bed. He was looking over the board when I came upstairs. Then he didn't come up himself for about an hour."

"They had a ruckus all right, if Graham's ship isn't telling lies—those were bullet marks. And did you notice his face? Looks as if someone threw acid on it—burned in spots."

"It's the way the Major took it that got me," continued Kildaire. "Why, there was a moment there when he almost became human."

"That lion tamer couldn't become human over anything," scoffed Clemson. "Didn't you hear him laugh when Tony's knees gave out—dragging him along the field, laughing at him with every step? Call that human?"

"Nevertheless," insisted Kildaire, "the Major never paid any attention to any of us before. Then he suddenly gets anxious about Tony. Flies his solo with him—"

The roar of a gunned motor drowned out the conversation. McCullough was opening his throttle, balancing his Spad on its two wheels in the slipstream.

A figure came out of the operations office and walked across the field. After the first half-dozen steps the figure became Major Powers, his flying coat buttoned up around his throat, his helmet in place, goggles raised above his eyes. He was walking with the same jaunty stride. He glanced at his wrist watch as he paused before the hangar.

"One minute to ten," he said to the group. He glanced at the ships standing on the line.

"Well?" he asked. "What are we waiting for?"

"We were wondering who was to command," explained Kildaire.

Powers stared at the boy's face. For a moment the lines about his face relaxed. They braced themselves, expecting to hear him laugh.

**BUT** no sound came. Rather, a curiously amused light came into his eyes.

"Are you suggesting that I'm not fit to lead this patrol?" he asked.

Kildaire answered again, hurriedly. "No, sir—not that—not at all. But you flew the solo this morning," he reminded. "We hardly expected that you'd fly with us. We were a little anxious—because of the dirty weather." Powers cocked an eye aloft as if he had not noticed the low-hanging clouds before.

"Oh, I see," he said slowly. "Well, perhaps it might interest you to learn that I didn't fly the morning solo. If you noticed the board last night, Graham had that job—and did it."

"But—"

"But what?" snapped Powers. "Are you questioning my right to fly when and where I please off this field? You're going to tell me that you saw me come in with Graham and fly out with him? You did—but you didn't see me fly the solo. That was Graham's job. The commanding officer of an outfit doesn't worry about solos. He merely writes a name on the board and the solo takes care of itself. Understand? Graham flew his own solo.

"And if you're interested—he gets credit for an e.a. on his first time up. Shoot at that mark—and forget any inconvenience my imagined eccentricities cause you—physically or mentally.

"One thing, before we go. You were out over the lines yesterday. You've broken the ice. You lost three men. You stood still and let yourselves be licked. Maybe it was stage fright—maybe it was something else. I'm not going to form an opinion on a first appearance. But the first appearance is over. Maybe we can run into some more trouble this morning. In fact, we're going to look for it. I want to find out if I have a bunch of pursuit pilots in this outfit, or a gang of mangy lounge lizards who can shine on a training field but lose the gloss in a dogfight.

"A couple of you took it as a personal insult yesterday when I gave you the laugh after we came back from that first miserable attempt to introduce the Fourth Squadron to the enemy. Believe me, the enemy is still laughing. They're saying—'So these are the mighty Americans we've been warned against!' You beefed because I wasn't impressed when a couple of you had been knocked off.

"Mark this! Getting knocked off is the easiest thing you can do in this game. Not getting knocked off is the toughest. If you think you'll be heroes in my eyes or in the eyes of any old-time flyer merely because some Jerry pumps your guts full of lead, you're very much mistaken. We're interested in men who can turn that trick on the squareheads and come home to get

the citations. A dead pilot is a total loss—no matter what the home-town papers say about his 'supreme sacrifice.' Each of you cost the government plenty delivered on this field. So yesterday your Uncle Sam took a loss to the amount of three times plenty.

"Don't begin any of your Hearts and Flowers stuff with me—it won't get you anywhere. You came over here to do a job. Do it or get the hell out. Now it's your turn to show me something. You started an argument yesterday when I laughed at 'three boys who had died.' Hell, I've seen three hundred die.

"But if you want to make good, show me how you feel about it—show me against the friends of the squareheads who knocked those boys down. If you feel tough, get tough with the enemy. Or else keep quiet and let all the fine sob stuff go for Sweeney. If you want to hold indignation meetings, hold 'em upstairs, and let the Vickers in the front end of those Spads do the speaking. You'll get more sympathy from me that way.

"Get in those crates and start churning."

They turned away, faces flaming, souls boiling. Each of the five scheduled for the mission were shaking with rage. They flung themselves into cockpits and snapped belts into place.

THE Major made a leisurely way to the side of his ship. About to get into his own cockpit, he paused and put his feet back on the ground, stood looking across the field.

A man was running, fastening the strap of a helmet as he moved. His flying coat was belted about him. He lifted his hand as if asking the Major to wait for a moment. When he was twenty feet away, Powers recognized Tony Graham.

He waited, scowling.

"What in the hell are you doing out here?" he demanded gruffly.

"I'm going along on this flight," answered Graham breathlessly. "I must have fallen asleep for a couple of hours. I heard the motors—I came running—"

"Why, you bleary-eyed baboon!" spat the Major. "You're walking in your sleep. Beat it!"

"But I want to go," begged Graham. His voice dropped to a low pitch.

"You've done your bit to make the world safe for the Democrats for today," assured Powers. "Even a Boy Scout has to do only one good turn a day. Go on now, back to the billet with you."

Graham shook his head. His eyes were steady and

earnest. "You're going—and you've done more than your bit for today."

"I'm different—I have to go." The Major's voice held a husky note.

"I have to go too, sir," begged Graham. "This morning—I realized what you meant when you explained about green flyers being thrown into the Front. I realized it the minute I missed that first Fokker—when I knew I was going to be killed. I have to learn—I have to fly. I'm strong—I'm ready. I'd rather fly than sit here on the field—waiting for you and the boys to come back—"

"Oh, hell," barked Powers. "Get in your lousy crate and come on."

He pushed Graham's shoulder roughly. But somehow a quick, warm smile crossed Graham's face.

"Thanks, sir," he said eagerly. "I'll try to do better this time."

He trotted away to find his ship. The mechanics had finished rerigging it after the wracking of three hours before. They gave him a hand into the cockpit and glanced at his face. It was puffed and red from the tracer burns—but there was also a confident smile.

They wound the prop for him and pulled the blocks. They watched as he followed the other ships off the ground, reckless of the fact that he was taxiing a cold motor.

Then the formation was dissolving into the mists.

AFTER the first two or three minutes of flying, the patrol became a nightmare for the pilots making up the formation. It became a desperate effort to keep in contact with the major's ship. He seemed to take a grim pleasure in diving into the thickest of the cloud banks, to disappear before their eyes, the nose of his Spad plunging into the rolling billows, the tail following, with the next ships in line plunging in after him, the fear of collision distending throats and causing hearts to stand still.

They had no means of knowing if the major changed course in the midst of the white blindness. They couldn't tell in advance if he was climbing or gliding. It was nothing more than a hideous game of hide and seek, with the major doing the hiding.

Graham had taken a place at the rear of the formation. The major flew point, after him at two came Kildaire, on his right was Wood flying three, then Clemson at four, McCullough at five, Oldring at six. Graham was number seven.

Water was running in streams down the leather

flying coats of the pilots. Goggles were useless, and the slipstream threw the mists back, in a ceaseless wave, beating against eyeballs, making it a torture to see out of narrowed eyelids. The water ran down necks, soaked bodies to the skin, caused flesh to crawl, and the chill of the heights raised goose-flesh. After ten minutes teeth were chattering and legs trembling. Feet were great lumps of ice and hands could no longer feel the stick.

The blind flying brought a near-madness to the youngsters. There was an overwhelming impulse within each of them to crash the stick against the instrument board and go diving down out of the whiteness which walled them in. To continue diving until they could see the earth—until they could be sure that they were living humans, not wraiths flitting through a half-world. The thick mists seemed to deafen them—made the drone of the motors sound muffled. Ships in the formation were mere shadows, keeping place and pace.

Now and then they came to a thin spot in the rolling clouds. They had a sight of the Major's ship, ploughing onward, revealed to them for an instant as if taunting them—the fox showing himself to the baffled hounds. Then the point ship was swallowed up again, and the blind chase was on in full cry.

Compasses were spinning drunkenly. Motors were turning over madly one instant, straining the next, in a constant battle to keep wings level with no horizon to use as a guide. Half minutes passed like eternities. The thought grew that they were lost, that they would never again touch earth—that they were doomed to wander through this white blindness forever.

And then light. A space which might have been a great amphitheater dug in the midst of the clouds. From above the sun shone with a blinding brilliance. It caused the mists to sparkle with a million leaping, dazzling colors, made a thousand miniature rainbows. Pilots lifted arms over eyes to shield them from the sudden glare while they milled stupidly to prevent collisions.

In the center of the bowl in the clouds the Major was sending his ship around in slow circles as if waiting for them to close up, take proper positions. They could see his head above the cockpit, watching them, the sun glinting from his goggles until it seemed that his eyes were shooting flashes of red fire. Wisps of clouds played about the wing-tips of his Spad or oozed under the center section.

They fell into place, and flew about with him, wings

tilted, the ships in easy banks, circling that opening a dozen times. Above them on either side the white walls rose in soft grandeur as far as the eye might see. The space might have been a tunnel driven straight upward to the sun, for at the top of the shaft the brazen disc was burning in all its fierce splendor.

Below there was a splotch of green-brown—far down the shaft. And the sight of it brought them a nervous thrill.

THE green-brown splotch was the earth. Ground. Life. They could not recognize it—it was merely a patch of ground with no identifying marks. They had long since given up any attempt to check position in that desperate drive to keep pace with the leader; but the assurance that the ground was there seemed to lessen nerve tension, restore a lost confidence.

No matter if it was enemy earth. It was the world—the actual living, existent world to which they belonged, from which they had lifted wings, to which they were hungry to return. There were deeply drawn breaths among those youngsters—breaths which passed through half-choked throats, and there was a mistiness in eyes which did not come from the clouds surrounding them.

Clocks on the instrument boards measured the passing of eighteen minutes. But those youngsters knew they had been in the midst of the white hell for a lifetime. Forever. They were getting a first glimpse of paradise after an eternity in purgatory.

Then Powers was lifting his hand and pointing down toward that distant expanse of ground. He made the “Follow me” signal three or four times to be sure that each of the men knew what was coming. The nose of his Spad sagged downward, the churning prop became a white blur, the drone of his motor rose to a higher pitch—a pitch which set up answering vibrations in the soul of each pilot, caused him to crowd forward.

They were going down—down the inside of that funnel of clouds, diving faster and faster toward that round circle of earth, wings drumming, wires moaning, motors belching flame and fumes, the slipstream tearing at them, until it seemed they were flat on faces in the midst of space riding a whirling hurricane. The blotch of green and brown swirled upward to meet them, the clouds surged upward drunkenly on either side. There was nothing but the mad urge of constantly increasing velocity—that and the angry, brain-battering scream of the Hissos.

Sweeping downward, fifteen or twenty feet between wing-tip and wing-tip, aflame with the dangers, the recklessness of the pace. Aflame with the nearness of the death riding with them. The seven Spads splitting space in a frenzy of speed—roaring down that cloud tunnel—smashing straight for the little circle of visible earth as if about to plunge headlong to destruction.

Powers hurtled out of the clouds, his ship wrenching itself away from the whiteness which seemed to clutch at it. His dive became a sharp slant carrying him almost parallel with the surface of the earth. Two by two the six following ships leaped out of the clouds behind him.

For an instant the pilots were stunned by the nearness of that earth. It seemed that they were barely clearing trees, obstructions, ruined buildings. The glinting rails of a railroad flashed under them, the roadbed fled under wings. They saw tiny locomotives and tinier cars, shunting back and forth along the track. But they saw them as distorted images living for a single instant—caught up in the wash of that insane speed, caught up, whirled about and then sucked into the center of a whirlpool.

Ahead of them the walls and roofs of a town arose out of the earth.

Smoke drifted above the roof trees. There were wires strung on poles. Red and white and black walls. Queer, unreadable signs. Streets which seemed narrow and crooked and choked with moving pygmies. Clusters of lorries moved over the ground or were gathered about great depots where ants were working busily in the business of loading and unloading. Trains stood at sidings, some crammed with queerly uniformed pygmies such as marched through the streets. Funny caterpillars moved slowly—caterpillars which became guns and caissons as they sped lower and lower over the earth.

Then the youngsters following in Powers' track understood.

This was the enemy. These were enemy troops. These were enemy guns.

CHAPTER VII  
ATTACK!

**W**ILD EXULTATION SWEEPED THEM—an exultation which brought hoarse sobs welling into throats.

No myths these, no unseen orgies these—but the enemy.

In flesh and blood.

The enemy they had spent a year in learning how to fight, had gambled with death, had traveled ten thousand miles to find. Down there—under wings.

And the major was nosing down skimming the roof tops. He was going to strafe the streets.

They saw the sharp spurtings of red from his guns as he nosed down over the one long and broad street within the place. They saw boiling confusion below, seething terror—and then they were sweeping after him.

They smelled the acrid tang from their own gun muzzles, felt the bucking and jolting as the Vickers sucked in the webbed belts and spewed the slugs into the street below. They saw chips flying from buildings, white tracers plunging into the midst of the marching guns and lumbering lorries, splinters flying from facades of houses along the streets. Men sprawled, falling over one another in the mad dash to escape the death which lashed them from under the gray skies.

Over, in a breathless vertical bank, swooping down upon the railroad yards, combing the troop trains with vicious bursts. An engine pulling four cars ran amuck as an engineman leaped from a cab and went rolling along the ground, tumbling over and over like an upset toy. The engine crashed through the brick side of a roundhouse, plowing along the tracks, crushing against other locomotives waiting for repairs, dragging its burden of cars with it—crumpling them into matchwood. Then red tongue of flame rising from the roundhouse, followed by the violence of an exploding boiler.

Black smears appeared against the grayness overhead, shattering the perfect contours of the clouds. Black smears which grew to angry stains, and burst with a core of red flame. From a dozen points

along the streets machine guns chattered madly—on roof tops, from windows, from posts all prepared to repulse possible attack from the ground—defense posts planted by an allknowing High Command. They laced the air above the town with streams of lead and steel.

Kildaire, riding hard on the Major's tail, his eyes gleaming, his face smeared with oil and soot, saw a flurry of splinters leap out of the surface of his right wing, saw gashed ribs tear through the linen, felt his Spad tremble with the impact of blows too rapid to count. His eyes swept the scene before him,

Below, on a roof top, almost in his face, a knot of men were sprawled about a machine gun. The gun was tilted upward, a wreath of smoke hung about its muzzle.

He nosed down sharply, caught the group in his ring sight. He held down the trigger until half a belt had passed through each of the twin Vickers. He saw dust and dirt leaping from the surface of the roof.

On target!

Then he passed over the spot, guns white hot, breeches smoking. He twisted in his seat and looked down under his tail section.

The knot of men were sprawled about the tripod of the gun, the muzzle was askew, silent—two or three of the gun crew were piled one on top of the other. He laughed a grim, terrible laugh, and flashed back to his place in the line.

They were spreading out. The Major's arm had lifted over his cockpit, had swept back and forth in an arc calling them up on a straight line. So together, wing to wing, they raged above the rooftops, while terror ran riot through the streets.

Then they were climbing, zooming sharply, in line, as if passing in review for the enemy in the riddled town, wings all tilted at the same angle. They felt themselves supermen and superpilots, felt that they were supreme, that they were unbridled furies sweeping through the skies, with strength enough to crush anything which might attempt to stop them.

THE anti-aircraft fire was more vicious. The bursts broke above them, at times so close that they could feel the hot breath of the explosion. The sky below the clouds was filled with a multitude of black puffs. Now and then a shell burst in the center of the clouds, blasting a great gouge only to fill it with black smoke.

But the squadron flew too low to be bothered seriously by such defense. No timer could be set for

the bare five hundred feet at which it flew. The single danger was that there might be a direct hit on a plane by a screeching shell passing in mid-air.

At five hundred feet they came out of the zoom and leveled. The Major's arm waved a new signal. They went back into the V formation. They cruised over the town as if to exhibit supreme contempt for the machine guns which filled the space about them with cracklings and snappings.

It seemed that Powers was waiting for something he expected but did not materialize.

They wondered why he delayed. If an offensive patrol was designed to create confusion or to strike a blow at the enemy, this patrol had succeeded. The town was in chaos—fires were burning in a half dozen places. One of the mountainous dumps was smoking sullenly while crowds of men labored to extinguish the blaze.

There was no movement in the railroad yards. The wrecked train in the midst of the burning and ruined roundhouse blazed furiously, and smoke poured from under the collapsed roof of the building.

And yet the Major delayed. He seemed reluctant to quit the place—and he made no attempt at further strafing. He merely held the flight together and circled swiftly about the place.

There were three heart-crowding minutes. Minutes during which the ground machine guns followed them and slugs drummed through wings. There was rifle fire from the ground—ineffective but dangerous for that very reason. Fragments of Archie shells bursting overhead rained down upon them. One jagged chunk of steel cut a gaping hole in Wood's right upper wing, fell through and stuck between the ribs of the lower. Death hissed and snarled about them, and the smoke rising from the ground caused eyes to run and lungs to gasp. The smell of burning wood seemed to fill the heavens, thick and strangling.

At the end of the three minutes they discovered why the Major waited.

Shadows suddenly flitted under the clouds hanging over the northern horizon. Shadows which hugged the flat bottoms of heavy clouds, were flitting through space like dolphins rising to the surface of the sea.

Ominous blue-black shapes.

Flying singly, in two's—in three's—as if a squadron had taken the air in response to a hurried summons too rapidly to permit it to take off in formation.

The shadows were rushing onward. Growing larger—coming nearer. The youngsters in the Fourth's

patrol watched them, saw them nosing down, flying to meet the gray Spads.

THEY saw Major Powers' clenched hand lift above the cockpit and smash downward, saw his ship suddenly spring forward toward the nearest of the blue-black shapes, saw his guns spitting crimson.

And then there was nothing more to see—nothing that could be seen as a whole. There were merely indistinct blurs under the clouds, the rising and falling whine of motors—Mercedes and Hisso. The hammering of guns—Spandaus and Vickers.

Gray ships and blue-black, plunging in and out of the clouds, recklessly; diving toward the rooftrees of the town, to zoom with a rush of wind against wings and stabbing flame flicking from gun muzzles. Riding nose to tail, wing-tip to wing-tip, slashing, driving, smashing, a whirlwind of white-hot fury.

In the gray ships the voice of Major Powers was singing in the ears of the youngsters who flew with him. "You came over here to do a job—do it or get the hell out. I've seen three hundred die. . . . If you want to make good—if you want to show me how you feel about it—show me against the friends of the squareheads who knocked those boys down. . . . If you feel tough—get tough with the enemy. If you want to hold indignation meetings—hold 'em upstairs and let the Vickers do the speaking!"

They could hear his voice—wince at the stinging contempt.

They could see the white smile about his mouth, feel his eyes eating to the bottoms of their souls.

"If you want to show me—" All right, they'd show him. This was a chance, wasn't it? He'd brought them out here to put on the exhibition.

Teeth clamped together, jaw muscles jutted from under flesh. Hands gripped sticks until the knuckles were sharp bulges. Hot shame and hot hate flooded brains, making them drunk with the emotion. They hurled Spads about without thought of consequences.

This was a personal thing—man to man, ship to ship. Each of them saw nothing but the shadows which flashed within his own ring sight. Dimly conscious of the flash and flare and concussion of the anti-aircraft fire which the appearance of the Fokkers did not quell. Sensing the withering barrage from ground machine guns—caring nothing.

Better to die here—to go tumbling down into the fires burning inside that enemy town—than to limp back to the field to meet the nerve-chilling laugh of

derision, and the questions—"Well, what about the three who died?"

Gray wraiths leaped viciously at the blue-black shadows, flying up into the mouths of Spandaus, hanging to a straight line until spinning propellers seemed about to cut into faces. Zooming or diving, a last burst smashed into the face of a Jerry.

Wild, revenge-lusting demons, these youngsters. Revenge against the Major—revenge for Storer and Raines and McDonald. Blot out the sound of Powers' laughter with the snarling staccato of the hot guns! Feed belts, pull trips, jam triggers. Smash—crush—trample! So went the gray Spads.

WOOD followed the white crosses on the wings of a Fokker. He saw the enemy pilot turn in his seat a half dozen times in a minute to look back over his vertical fin at the whirlwind which followed him. Blue-black ship twisting and squirming, slipping—desperate to escape the rush of Wood's ship and the staggering shock of short bursts at short range. Going down, fighting to maintain altitude or climb above the gray Spad, but driven ruthlessly downward, ridden hard with the wheels of the Spad seeming ready to pounce upon the dark wings of the Fokker.

Down, stubbornly but surely, over the roofs of the town, flying through the streets with the low buildings, at times rising above the level of the two ships. In and out, a frightened wild thing struggling to escape the fangs of a wolf.

Then an impact—the fall too fast for eye to follow. One moment the Fokker flying—a black streak over the town, Mercedes moaning, wires screaming. The next—a jagged pile of ruin, smoking, burning, nose driven through the bricks of a building—fuselage broken in two places. The pilot half in and half out of the cockpit, torn from his seat by the impact at terrific speed, hanging on the crash pad, doubled over, hands touching the cobblestones on the street, blood dripping from the fingertips. The flames from the twisted tanks lapping the sides of the building.

Clemson was diving his ship between two of the enemy. Going over in a roll which dragged his flippers against the wings of the nearest. The muzzles of his black guns, a dozen feet from the second of the two ships, scorched the black linen, tearing great gaps in the fuselage. Tracers tore through the cockpit, emerging from the other side—smoking, splattered.

He veered sharply to zoom up at the belly of a third Fokker that Oldring was driving before him,

ripped a long burst through the belly of the Jerry. Then, whirling crazily, he looked for new targets while the exhaust of his engine blackened the sides of the fuselage, and the flat wires whined dangerously each time he threw his ship into a new direction.

Graham and Kildaire followed after the Major. Plunging through the center of the Fokkers time after time, preventing them from drawing together, forcing them to defensive flight, slashing at every blurred outline marked with a Maltese Cross which flashed by them. Nerves taut with the speed, stomachs knotted by the whipping turns. Eyes glittering, mouths twisted into fixed grins; crouching behind the sights.

Following the Major.

Ahead of them the Major flew like a winged devil. His ship seemed everywhere, never lost speed. He lunged time after time at Fokkers which rose in front of him. The short, deadly bursts from his guns ripped linen and wood from each target. Twice blue-black wings wavered after feeling the hot breath of those guns.

One Fokker wobbled helplessly with the horns shot away from elevator and rudder, the lax cables dangling below the fuselage. There was an instant sight of the face of the Fokker pilot. A ghastly thing in which there were lines a knife might have sliced. Clutching hands gyrated a useless stick—he was bracing himself as the ship nosed over and went into a flat spin.

Another, with a motor coughing like the last gasp of a man shot through the lungs. Thick spouts of flame curled from exhaust, thin lines of smoke rose from the motor cowling. Propeller jerked spasmodically, tearing the ship, racking it, with the bowed head of the pilot far forward in his seat as he reached for the switch in an attempt to save himself.

The pilots saw a Fokker fuselage sticking through the flat roof of a house. The wings shorn from the fuselage and buried in the wreckage of the roof. The cockpit swallowed up by the jagged hole torn by the death plunge.

The blue-black ships wavered before the assault. Wavered and fell back, ceased to press, drew away.

A SUDDEN sense of power was sweeping over those youngsters. The Spads were suddenly mad things, striking with a berserk ferocity. Wings cocked at crazy angles, sweeping the earth in pursuit of a cross-marked crate, rising with it, smothering it.

The knowledge came that they were forcing defeat upon the Fokkers. That this enemy was breaking

before them—that they had fought superior numbers to a standstill. That the squadron was taking terrible toll for three lives lost. That they were showing the Major— There was a sticky mass of blood against Clemson's cheek. The stuff ran into his mouth, mixed with the taste of oil and raw gasoline, the side of Iris cockpit was studded with black dots, a splintered longeron gouged his right shoulder each time his body moved an inch backward in the seat.

A severed wire had cut a welt across Wood's mouth. His teeth were red with the blood from gashed lips, a drool of blood and saliva oozed from the corners of his mouth. The mark of the wire was like a fresh brand across both cheeks, seeming to cut his right ear through the middle; disappearing under the helmet covering the back of his neck.

A gray comet screamed through the fight, hot on the tail of a dodging Fokker. A figure half stood in a cockpit, a clenched fist raised over his head, mouth distended in a shriek of triumph. Oldring, pursuing an enemy, riding him toward the north, cursing because his Spad had nothing more to give.

But there was no pursuit. The Major prevented that.

He had to throw his ship into Oldring's path to force obedience, but he curbed the victory-mad youngsters. The Fokkers were nosing up into the clouds, speeding away to the north, broken and shocked by the viciousness of the flight's attack.

It was enough that they left the town below undefended, at the mercy of the Spads. Enough that the gray ships had cut them to pieces, had kept them on the defensive, had forced them to run, had sent five of them down to add to the horror raging within the town below.

The Spads formed a straight line. The ground machine-gun fire snapped about them, high-angle shell fragments showered about them.

For the first time they discovered that the gray ranks were broken.

A ship was missing.

McCullough's.

Eyes searched the ground anxiously. Graham found him, the gray Spad a blazing pyre between two supply dumps—a bonfire which fed upon mangled ribs and splintered longerons.

They dived in line. There was a derisive gesture in the maneuver. They raked the streets below with the last of the ammunition for the Vickers. Then they hedgehopped south, skimming under the clouds,

diving low over enemy trenches as they passed over the lines—sweeping parapets with landing wheels, leaping over the barbed wire.

Then the home lines. They picked the field out of the mists, landed—Kildaire's ship ground-looping wildly as a wheel with a tire shot to ribbons touched earth.

The motors roared a triumphant drum beat as they taxied to the hangars. Every man on the field was running to meet them.

They crawled stiffly out of cockpits. Something had happened to the five youngsters who had returned. They seemed older, bubbling with confidence—the boyishness was gone.

They stood about for a moment—then eyes were fixed on Major Powers.

He was walking toward the group. His shoulders swung rhythmically with his stride. The purple snake stood out against his head and face. The white smile was about his mouth.

Clemson spoke, his voice seeming to come from the center of the red smear on his face.

"Well, we showed you, didn't we? We did our talking with guns from the front end of the Spad."

The Major seemed not to have heard. His eyes were scanning the faces of the men who had not gone on the patrol.

"The afternoon patrol will be ready at two o'clock," he said in his incisive voice. "Just to remove any cause for worry in the minds of the men whose names are on the board, I'm going to command the flight."

He turned away from them and walked across the field.

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE LAUGHING MAJOR

**I**N THE HALF DARKNESS of the operations office, the Major sat hunched over his desk, writing a letter. For half an hour the steady scratching of his pen had sounded in the room. During that time he had not shifted his position except for the running of his hand over the pages. He was entirely immersed in the task.

He was writing to his mother.

It would have been a cold shock to every man of

the Fourth to know that Major Powers had a mother. In fact the idea had never occurred to them that the Major had anyone in the world but himself. It was difficult to connect home or friends or affection with Powers. He seemed so self-sufficient, so absolutely alone, so completely isolated.

The two weeks which had passed since that morning when the Fourth' first offensive patrol had played hell with an enemy concentration point, and had shattered an enemy squadron sent out to drive them off, had wrought few changes in the situation so far as the relations between the pilots and the Major were concerned. There was only one man among the pilots who had the right of entry to the Major's private domain. He was Tony Graham.

And because of that fact, an aloofness sprang up between Graham and the other pilots. They felt that he was trying to sneak a march on them, that he was sacrificing the bitterness that they all held, for personal gain—that he was worming his way into the good graces of the Skipper. None of them knew what took place in the shadows of the operations office during those hours when Tony visited with the Major. They did know that Graham was appointed flight leader and given command of A Flight. But on the same morning, Kildaire had been named flight commander of B—and Kildaire had never put foot inside the Major's quarters.

There was no question but that Graham was best fitted for the job, and that Kildaire's appointment was deserved. They were both piling up records for other pilots to shoot at. But Graham's friendship with the Major rankled—they wanted an explanation.

And the Major had not changed. In spite of the labors he meted out to himself, in spite of the hours in the air, in spite of the fact that he must have sensed the coldness on the part of the men serving under him, he was still the jaunty, cold-voiced, unsympathetic martinet who had given them their first command as a unit at Issoudun. His laugh still rang over the field, his sarcastic voice still rasped them.

But those two weeks had witnessed a marvelous transformation in the makeup the outfit. They were now a squadron. They had a morale which seemed unshakeable, a spirit which rose triumphant above the grueling demands made upon them. They were secure in the knowledge that the Fourth was respected by the enemy—that the Fourth was coming to rule the air in the sector, where enemy planes had passed unchallenged for three years.

There was no doubt in their minds that the Major

had brought the change. They denied him none of the glory, and secretly they were bursting with pride over his exploits—no group such as these could do otherwise. But they still hated him.

For instance, the afternoon before.

NILES, one of the kids who had come up to take places made vacant by the passing of Storer, McDonald, Raines and McCullough, had gone out with his first patrol. There had been a brush with a group of D-Sevens over Missy-aux-Bois. Six Spads against six Fokkers. The kind of vicious dogfighting the Fourth had encountered from the first day. Smashing and tearing, driving blindly—ship against ship, gun against gun, with the gray ships refusing to break the tight formation. The Major had been along on that patrol. He took no regular place in the formation. Kildaire, as flight commander, rode at point. Niles was at four, the left rear of the five ship formation.

The Fokkers had swooped down out of the afternoon sun—the fight was on. No preparation—no warning. It raged for ten minutes with Spandaus trying to blast a way through the gray ships, and the Spads fighting to recover from the surprise and hold ranks.

Then something had gone wrong. Kildaire had turned the V to the east—to the right. The ships swung in proper order—until it was Niles' turn to make the pivot. He seemed to be confused—his ship turned in the wrong direction, veered from the flight, opened a wide gap—left a fatal weakness, made him prey for a deluge of enemy ships. Three of them swarmed down on him. Kildaire swung the flight in another turn—an attempt to save the boy. The Major had dived among the three ships, his guns blasting, his motor raging—but too late.

Niles' Spad wavered weakly, went into a spin, fell—at the very moment the Major ripped a direct burst through the cockpit of the Jerry who had sent him down.

The flight, which had gathered speed, had maneuvered into position during that tragic interlude, struck with blinding speed and white rage. But Niles' Spad still was winding in that slow spin. It fell behind the French positions holding Missy-aux-Bois.

Later that night a scarecrow had stepped from a motorcycle sidecar in front of the billet. Stood swaying weakly on its feet, made lunging steps toward the door. Inside the living-room the pilots of the outfit

recognized Niles.

His tunic hung in tatters from his shoulders. His boots were scratched, his breeches torn. He was voiceless—hoarse croakings came from his throat in response to questionings. It was fifteen minutes before they could learn that he had escaped the washout of the Spad, had landed the crate with ailerons out of control. He had ridden it into the ground. Knocked senseless by the crash—picked up by a squad of the French Foreign Legion—sent back to the field.

They ganged about him and slapped him on the back. They forced a tumblerful of raw cognac down his throat. They told him that he was a hero—the first man in the outfit to go down before an enemy and return to tell the tale.

And then a sudden silence fell over the room. The door leading to the operations office had opened.

The Major was standing in the doorway.

The white smile of contempt was wreathing his mouth. His eyes were fierce, glowing. His body seemed poised on coiled springs.

“So you saved your carcass, eh?” he asked coldly, his eyes fixed on Niles’ white face. “So you’re back—and getting the glad hand. A hero—because you’re so dumb you put the lives of five men in danger, and lost a ship. A hero because you disobeyed a command—”

Niles’ hand lifted as if to protest. There were tears and a tortured light in his eyes.

“I don’t care how you managed to do it,” continued the Major. “It was disobedience of orders—there isn’t any excuse to cover that. Nor is there an excuse for an attempt to murder the men who flew with you—as you did. Men who come into this branch are credited with more education and sense than those accepted for any other branch. If you’re an example of the high standard of mentality demanded for a flying cadet, how about the infantry, who aren’t supposed to have any brains?”

“Be a hero tonight. Get the back slappings and the hand-shakings. Fire up the old courage with that rotgut they’re pouring down your throat. But mark this—you’re on probation after that exhibition. Another break—and you’ll have a chance to study the difference between doughboys and flying officers—at first hand. You’ll do the rest of your flying behind a haystack with your belly in the mud. Hero! Hell!”

The door slammed in their faces. They led Niles to his room and pulled his boots off—attempted to console him. But the stricken light remained in his eyes. His body trembled.

And downstairs, on the duty board, there was a significant line of writing in bold, white chalk: *Niles—dawn solo!* The posting was for the next morning.

AN HOUR went by. The Major sat in the half-darkness of his own quarters. The pen sounded ceaselessly as it flowed over sheet after sheet of paper. Out of sight of the men he commanded, his shoulders drooped, the grinding weariness lined his face.

He wrote with a picture in his mind.

A serene face framed by a wealth of snow-white hair. Hands which were folded placidly over the carefully ironed front of a gingham apron. A white house surrounded by poplar trees—shadows moving over the broad porch, the branches stirring and the leaves whispering as the breeze passed through them. Two deep bay windows opening upon the porch. In one of them a red flag with a blue square, and a white five-pointed star. It was peaceful back there.

The moving pen slowed as he remembered past days which seemed so distant—so far removed that they seemed to belong to another existence. Only the face of that mother shone out of that past—undimmed, still sharply focused.

It seemed strange that he should have a mother. He seemed too old—so completely used up. He remembered Graham’s words on the first night Graham had entered the operation’s office. “You’re not more than forty, sir—” and the scarlet tide which had seeped into the boy’s cheeks when he learned that the Major was only twenty-six.

The pen dropped out of his hand. He lifted the sheets and held them under the light of the oil lamp. There was a soft light in his eyes, a curious tremor in his throat.

DEAREST MOTHER:

I’ve been thinking a great deal about you these last few days—with an ache in my heart.

I haven’t been so homesick at any time in three years. But lately the desire for home has been so sharp and so intense that it seems that I must tear myself from everything and begin running home.

Perhaps it is because of the boys around me. I hear them talking when they have no idea that I’m listening. You’d be surprised how often they talk about their mothers—when they are alone, when they think no one can hear them but the chap to whom they speak. They do it in such a different way, as if uttering something too sacred for conversation, even to a best friend. They are shy—embarrassed. But after a while a warmth and a gentleness come into their voices, and they go on and

on—and every one of them knows in his heart that his mother is the best, the sweetest and kindest woman ever given to a boy as a blessing.

Somehow, they get an ache in the heart for mother. It's been pretty tough going for two weeks—since I brought them up here. War has used them pretty roughly—has trampled a lot of things out of them—but it has polished two outstanding characteristics possessed by all of them—courage, and the love each has for his mother. I see them before it is time to go over the lines away in a corner, hunched over a desk—writing and every time the last thought or the last letter is for that mother. There may be other affections in their hearts, but when the acid test comes, they remember only one.

Somehow it makes a man cleaner and finer to live with a bunch like these boys they give me to command. No one could do anything but give the best for them. Not a weakling among them—not a coward. They have come through the hardening process—and the result is seven or eight keen blades of finely tempered steel—the wonderful flexible blades of old Damascus which bend but cannot break. Grief has chastened them, pain has marked them, weariness has gripped them—but they come on and on, smiling, unafraid.

Clean, eager-eyed, upstanding youngsters. The kind that make one happy to think that he is American, and that these boys are of his own blood—of his own soil. Bodies hard, hearts warm, brains keen. Fearing nothing, and with a sense of duty that gives an immediate explanation for the success of American arms.

They take to this flying thing with an enthusiasm and ardor which is breathless. They love it—it was made for them—and they are proving it to the enemy. Perhaps there are other outfits operating along this front made up of American youngsters—but I know that these boys who live through every day with me are the truest, the finest and the bravest of all—it couldn't be otherwise—even America is limited in producing such boys as these—and I had first pick of the best. They get close to one's heart.

I love them—every one of them. I think that if I could adopt them all after this war is over I'd come home with another family of sons for you—sons that you'd be proud and glad to have call you mother—

There was a knock on the door. The Major put the sheets away from him as if awakened from a dream-filled sleep. He smoothed the tunic over his torso, and sat erect in his chair. The soft look gradually went out of his eyes. The purple snake coiled across his face was black in the shadows of the dim light. The breezes from the open window stirred the pages of the letter.

He cleared his throat. "Come in," he called.

THE door opened. Kildaire stood in the room. There was a worried look in his eyes. His khaki shirt

was open at the neck, the bronze of his chest gleamed.

"I'm sorry to break in, sir," he said in an uncertain voice. "But it's about Niles. I went past his room on the way to bed—and I heard him sobbing. I listened and the sobs went on and on. You know—Niles has the solo in the morning. He'll be a wreck—in no condition for a job like that. Still, I didn't want to break in on him. You understand, sir—"

The voice stopped suddenly with a little choke in Kildaire's throat.

"And of course you are thinking that I'm responsible for the weeping because I lit on him when he came back to the field—and that if anything happens to him in the morning I'm a murderer. Is that it?"

Kildaire's face reddened. "No, sir," he said stoutly. "I only thought that he'd be ashamed to face the rest of us—after that. And that he might do something—get himself killed—if he flew out in this state of mind."

"You're wrong, Kildaire," said the Major in a positive voice. "Boys like Niles don't get themselves bumped off—they go out and make good. They get fighting mad—as the rest of this outfit is fighting mad—and they raise hell, just to show commanding officers like me what mugs we are."

"But Niles is a little different," argued Kildaire. "He's a nervous kid, but he has guts. We knew him at Kelly—before we came over. He was heartbroken that he wasn't in the first batch of pilots to go overseas. But—well, he's sensitive I guess."

"Oh hell, I'll mother your little chick," growled Powers. "You might think I was running a nursery instead of a pursuit squadron—that one of my duties was to see that the little tots were all tucked into bed and had their bedtime stories told to them."

He surged up out of his chair. "I'll go up," he informed Kildaire.

"I'll go with you, sir," volunteered B Flight's leader.

"Not much! Audiences don't help overburdened souls. I'll go alone. Sit down here—and wait until I come back. I'll tell you what bogey has been frightening your little angel." He left the room.

Kildaire sat there for a long moment staring after him. He shook his head once or twice, a puzzled light in his eyes. He moved his arm from the top of the desk. A draft blew from the window toward the half-open door. There was a flutter of white sheets of paper—the Major's letter showered upon the floor.

Kildaire kicked the door shut with the toe of his boot and picked up the scattered sheets. He bunched them together, sorted them according to the numbered

pages. He was about to replace them on the desk when a written sentence caught his eye.

“Perhaps it is because of the boys around me. I hear them talking when they have no idea I’m listening—”

The words seemed to stand out from the page. Unconsciously his eyes read on—and with each word a drop of molten lead seemed to fall upon the surface of his soul.

He came to the end. His hand was shaking. He placed the sheets back on the desk. There was a wetness in his eyes, a strangling something in his chest which seemed to block air from his lungs. His face was crimson. The enormity of his sin against good manners lashed him. He had read a personal letter—an almost sacred letter—belonging to the Major.

He seated himself in the chair again. His shoulders squared themselves as if expecting a blow. But the wetness in his eyes remained.

## CHAPTER IX NILES

**T**HERE WAS ONLY THE MOONLIGHT in the little room at the head of the steps when the Major entered without knocking. There was a shape on the bed, huddled, miserable, a shape which sobbed. The horrible sobs of a man who has lost his nerve.

At the sound of the Major’s step the shape leaped erect—eyes red and wild in the light of the moon, hands clenched, body tense.

The face gradually emerged from the shadows. Niles. White, strained. The red eyes stared at Powers’ face. Suddenly Niles’ hands went up, covered his face and eyes. He sobbed. There was hysteria, shame, bitterness in the sob.

The Major seated himself on the cot. His hand touched the boy’s shoulder. He felt a trembling body—felt the shoulder shudder violently. Then Niles was looking at him again. There was a courage, a fine something in his face—mixed with a terrible agony. He seemed a condemned man about to hear the sentence of death passed upon him—rallying his body and soul to meet the shock bravely.

“I suppose you’ve come to tell me that—I’m

through,” he said in a low tone. “I suppose Kildaire told you about this. I heard him outside the door—he called to me once, but I couldn’t tell him to come in—I wanted to be alone. I suppose I’m not fit to stay with this outfit—you’ve decided to send me back—somewhere—to the infantry as you suggested. If you haven’t decided, you will in the morning. I’m not going on that solo—you hear? I’m not going. Call it disobedience of orders—mutiny, anything you want to—but I’m not going and I don’t care what you do to me.”

The Major was silent. His hand soothed the boy’s shoulder.

“I’m all shot inside. I can still feel myself falling—in that spin—with those controls gone. I can’t sleep. I can’t stay on the bed—it goes round and round with me—and I’m waiting for the crash to come.

“I’m not going to beg either. If I had a chance I’d get over this. I know myself. I know what I can do. I’d show you—damn it! I’d show you whether I’m fit to fly. But you’re trying to send me out there when I know I haven’t a chance—send me out to get killed. And I’m not going to get killed—I’m not going to let any Boche have a good time with me.

“I came over here to fight—I’m going to do it—even if I have to do it on my belly behind a haystack. Call me a coward—I know what I am. I’m not afraid to die—but I’m not going to die with my hands shaking and my brain drunk—”

“It’s all right, Old Timer,” said the Major softly.

Niles’ head snapped erect at the gentleness of the Major’s voice. He stared, wondering if the Major was making fun of him, but Powers’ eyes were filled with a deep compassion. His hand had crept around Niles’ shoulders.

“I didn’t know you were so all in, boy,” he said in the same tone. “I would have taken your name off the board tonight—anyhow. You weren’t going on that patrol in the morning. You can rest—go to sleep. You’ll fly when you’re fit. You don’t have to tell me that you’re not afraid. I know it. Why, I have all the confidence in the world in you, kid. You’ll come through like a full house against a four-flush. In another two weeks you’ll be teaching this outfit things—”

“But you said—”

“Sure I said it—I’d say it over again. Kind words don’t go with you squirts until you need ’em. You have to have the hell-for-glory ideas batted out of you. And you have plenty of those—your kind of kid would be sure to have ’em.”

"I'm crazy," moaned Niles. "I didn't know what I was saying. I couldn't ask any of the boys to take my trick—they have their own regular turns. I'd never be able to hold my head up. I couldn't invite anybody to get himself killed—for me—"

"You don't have to ask any of the boys to take the trick," smiled the Major. "The boy who will fly that solo will do it because it is his job—"

"But who?"

The Major slapped Niles on the back and stood slowly up on his feet. He looked down at the boy's bowed head for a long minute.

"The guy who will take your place is a bird by the name of Powers," he said softly. "And listen, kid— just between you and this guy Powers he's had birds fly missions for him—lots of them. So there won't be anything lost if he evens the score up a little. Goodnight. And if the bed still spins, get up and walk around a little. The air will clear your head."

He closed the door as he left the room.

HE GLANCED at Kildaire's face as he re-entered the operations office. "I've put Niles on the ground for three days," he said matter-of-factly. "The kid is all in. That crack-up didn't do him any too much good. Must have been shaken up more than we thought. From the way it looks he just about managed to get back to the field—" Kildaire's eyes were watching his face, gravely, intently.

"I think I understand, sir," Kildaire said in a low tone. "I've come to understand a lot of things in the last few minutes. Things—they leave me a little dizzy—a little sick—"

The Major's quick eyes glanced toward the unfolded letter on the desk and then at Kildaire's face. For an instant a look of near panic flitted across his face. He moved swiftly to the desk and thrust the pages into the drawer.

"I read it, sir," confessed the boy in the same low tone. "The pages blew on the floor after you went out. I picked them up—not knowing what it was. I saw a few words—and then I read the whole thing—every word."

Powers' face was white and the purple snake was growing in size, pulsing under the flesh. But he remained silent, his eyes fixed on the boy's face in a queer fascination.

"I never did anything like that before, sir," continued Kildaire. "But I'm glad I read that letter. You'll think I'm not fit to be in your presence—I guess

I'm not. It is pretty terrible, reading a man's letter to his mother without him knowing it. Sneaking. But still I'm glad. It's helped me a lot—explained things I couldn't understand—made me happier than anything that has happened in months. I wish every man in the outfit could have read it." He paused miserably.

But the Major was still silent.

"We'd have a lot to be ashamed of—a lot to live down. I can't explain—"

"I don't mind your having read my letter," said Powers in a strange voice. "But you're wrong about the rest of the men—it is better as it stands." He seated himself with a weary gesture.

Kildaire moved toward the door. He seemed at a loss for words.

"I'll assign someone to Niles' place, sir," he said with an effort. "That is, I'll go myself, of course."

"Don't bother," said the Major. "It's been taken care of."

"Good night, sir."

"Good night, Kildaire."

He was alone again with the letter.

IT WAS late when Tony Graham knocked on the door and received permission to enter. He took a chair by the side of the desk.

"I saw your light burning," he said apologetically. "I thought perhaps it was another of 'those nights'—that maybe you'd like to have me talk with you a while."

The Major was sealing his letter in an envelope. He placed the finished job on the top of the desk, and his hand fell on Graham's shoulder.

"You're a good lad, Tony," Powers said gently. "You'll never know how much I've depended on you. You'll never know just how much it has meant to me to have you here—when the little devils were riding me. If I never get anything else out of life, I'll have the memory of these hours in the shadows of this little room."

Graham shuddered and his eyes were overbright. He laughed, a nervous laugh which seemed to have genesis in cracked nerves.

"Whew!" he said. "You sound like a 'prepare to meet thy doom preacher.'"

"Nothing like it," assured the Major. "Why, tonight I'm so happy I feel like a balloon just before it bursts. I'm happier than I've been since this lousy mess started. It must be a sign of something—maybe we're going to have an armistice—"

"In 1958," grinned Graham. "At the rate of the hundred yards a day we're pushing the squareheads

back I figure we should be strutting *Unter den Linden* just about the time I'm scheduled to be retired from the service."

"It's a sign of something," insisted the Major. "It isn't right for a hard-boiled cuss like me to be so happy." There was a quiet smile from Tony. "No matter," nodded the Major. "You've been a life-saver to me, Tony. You've been the safety valve. There are times when I forget that I ever had anyone in the world but you. Sometimes I get a picture of you sitting there, and it seems that you're wearing a French uniform—that we've been together for years. Funny feeling."

A lump in Graham's throat moved slowly.

"I see that Niles' name is off the board—for the morning," said Tony with a glance at Powers' face. "You haven't posted another name to take his place."

"As I told Kildaire, the boy is sick, not fit to fly. He's on the ground for three days—"

"But who gets the detail?" insisted Graham.

"Bird by the name of Powers," grinned the Major. "Ever hear of him?"

Graham shook his head. "It isn't right," he said hotly. "No matter if you want to do it—this outfit can't let you kill yourself. Another two weeks like these last two weeks—"

"All the two weeks are the same," smiled Powers. "That's another thing you'll find out, you glorified flying Kaydet."

"Just the same, you'll have to give Niles' detail to one of the boys—"

"Nix," answered Powers. "The boys have plenty to do. A couple of hours extra won't make any difference in my career—it might in the career of someone else."

"But—"

"You can't argue with me tonight," grinned the Major. "And besides, it wastes time. Can I sleep tonight? Say, I have little black curtains closing over the back of my brain—and that certain feeling that only a night's sleep can correct. Will you turn in—or shall I toss you out?"

Graham climbed to his feet. The Major's grin was infectious. After a minute he returned the smile.

"Just the same—it isn't right," he grumbled.

"Close the door on the way out, will you?" asked Powers. He was pulling his shirt over his head.

## CHAPTER X POWERS FLIES OUT

**L**IGHT WAS SEEPING OVER the rim of the eastern horizon. The rays of a still hidden sun shot straight up into the heights of a purple sky like a brilliant aurora. It touched upon the dew gathered upon the tops of the hangars and transformed it into a multitude of scintillating diamonds. The grass of the field was littered with such diamonds. The lush grass was soft to the tread. The universe was filled with a mystic perfume, the odor of nature awakening after the stillness of the night.

In the north there was the deep-throated grumble and rumble of many batteries, busy with the unceasing business of raining projectiles upon a wavering enemy.

The Major walked slowly across the field, dangling the helmet from his wrist, taking a reef in the belt of his flying coat. The thump of two idling Hissos came to him from in front of the hangars where a crew was wanning two Spads.

He glanced about the field curiously. He could not remember that there was another solo on the board for the morning. Perhaps the mechanics were giving a motor a test and warming his own ship at the same time. He pulled the helmet over his ears carefully, and adjusted the chin strap.

A mechanic stepped back respectfully as he came up to his scarred Spad.

"She's percolating good this morning, Major."

"Thanks."

"She's full up—and I've been warming her for twenty minutes."

"Thanks."

A silence, then a glance at the second ship.

"That's Lieutenant Graham's ship, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir," answered the surprised mechanic.

"Testing the motor?"

"No, sir, warming it. The Lieutenant said that he was flying with you."

A frown gathered about the Major's forehead. He turned his head quickly. Graham was coming out of One Hangar, ready to fly.

"Good morning, sir," he said smilingly. "I thought I'd keep you company—if you don't mind."

The Major walked over to Graham's ship. His voice was lowered so that the mechanics could not hear above the noise of the idling motors.

"Now look here, kid," he said coldly. "You're going back across the field. I told you that I was flying Niles' assignment. I didn't mean tandem either."

There was a complete innocence in Graham's eyes.

"Of course," he said with the same smile. "Only I remembered that I was taking A Flight on an offensive at ten. I thought I'd get a look-see of the Front, kind of figure out in advance where we were going."

"Eyewash!" snorted Powers. "You're tailing me again. You've been tailing me every chance you've had for the last two weeks. I won't stand for it, you cheerful idiot. Understand. I'm big enough and ugly enough to look after myself. I won't have a damn kid playing nursemaid to me."

"I had no idea of it," assured Graham. "Only, it looked like a good chance for some fun."

"You get the hell across the field before I get sore."

Graham shook his head and crawled into the cockpit of his Spad.

"Sorry, sir," he said, the grin growing wider, "but I have my duties as flight commander—and all that. If you don't want me with you, I'll just nose out on my own for a little while and come back—"

"You're a cockeyed liar," stormed the Major. "You intend sticking on my tail—"

"You know I've been thinking about what you said last night," smiled Graham. "About sometimes it seemed that I was wearing a French uniform—that I'd been around from the beginning. If that was so—if I had been here since the beginning, maybe we'd be flying out together—"

"Oh hell," sighed the Major. "You're a lunatic."

"Yes, sir," grinned Graham. He moved the throttle a fraction of an inch forward. The Hisso became eager.

The Major's fist reached up and knocked against Graham's jaw.

"You're a swell kid, Tony," he said in a strained voice.

Then he laughed, above the sound of the motors. Until he was in his seat, the belt strapped about him, his feet on the rudder bar, his hand on the throttle.

He was laughing as he swung the ship away from the line and sent it racing down the field for a zooming take-off. The wheels of Graham's ship left the ground at the same instant.

THEY flew together, out toward Missy-aux-Bois. The sun was a flaming disk rising above the edge of

the world. The sky was changing to a violet blue. High overhead feathery tendrils of alta-strata floated in space. Below, the earth rushed under their wings like a vast cyclorama. They went along wing-tip to wing-tip, as if they desired to be close together.

They were still flying wing-tip to wing-tip when the Fokkers struck them.

There was no chance to escape the blow. It had been prepared in advance. The blue-black shadows were mad for revenge against anything bearing the insignia of the Fourth. They dived out of the brassy sunlight, swooped upon the tails of the two gray ships, smothered them, riddled them before Graham or Powers could pull trips or turn to face the onslaught.

It seemed that an entire squadron had been lying in wait, had dived in unison. The heavens were filled with whirling wings and screaming motors. The staccato bark of Spandaus shattered the stillness of the dawn. The Fokkers went hurtling over the wings of the two Spads. Flame leaped toward them, slugs sang and snapped through linen and wood.

Graham was first to go. His motor coughed and backfired. Smoke poured from the exhaust stacks. He cut the switches to save himself. He cut them deliberately, as cool as a veteran pilot about to demonstrate a dead-stick landing. Cut them with a half dozen diving and zooming shapes flashing about him. He nosed the crippled Spad toward the earth, his eyes searching for a landing space.

Three of the Fokkers rode him down. Fifty feet from the ground, the tail of his Spad crumpled. A welter of severed wires dangled from the vertical fin. The Spad nosed over, put a wing down, spun drunkenly—crashed.

Above, the Major saw Graham go. For a moment he could do nothing but stare at the falling Spad with eyes filled with terrible lights. Black ship after black ship whined down upon his tail, spat leaden slugs at him, zoomed under the belly of the gray ship. The floorboards about his feet were splintered. His legs had been fired with hot irons—and then had grown numb. He saw Graham's ship smash against the ground. A cloud of dust—wreckage.

A black shadow flashed over the leading edges of his wings. His teeth clicked together. The Spad dived, wires moaning.

A snarling burst of slugs smacked through the cockpit.

The Major jerked convulsively in his seat. His eyes closed for an instant. The grip on the stick relaxed, his face went gray, the purple snake swelled and seemed threshing about in agony.

He forced himself to sit erect. A pool of blood formed under him in the seat pad.

But the Spad was hurling itself at the enemy in front—falling like a shooting star in the day heavens—closer and closer, the Vickers chattered madly. Smoking tracers snapped through the fifty feet separating the two ships—dug into blue-black linen, smeared white Maltese crosses.

A spray of splinters flew into his face. The glass of the instrument boards shattered, the panels disappeared, an ooze of oil ran out of a space where the oil-pressure gauge had been. It was hot as it fell upon his knees. Splinters flew from the gray wings—rising up like puffs of dust under the lash of a black-snake whip. The Spad lurched, the motor missed a beat. The metal cowling leaped and danced, showed a row of jagged perforations—but the Vickers still stuttered and spat streaks of red flame.

The blue-black shape suddenly flared as flames gushed from burst tanks, licked at the white crosses. A blazing torch, it was diving nose first for the same field into which Graham had fallen.

The Major rubbed his forearm across his eyes and fought a way through the raging enemy. His back seemed to be filled with grating bits of flint. Blood welled up into the back of his throat.

But the thought of Tony Graham on the ground—smashed in a wrecked ship—

He had to get down there—had to—

He forgot those other Fokkers—ceased to hear the drumming of slugs through the fuselage and wings, the snapping and crackling about his head. The earth was swimming up with maddening slowness. Then he was jerking the stick back into his lap—he knew that it was too late.

The landing gear splintered. The Spad was sliding on its belly—nosing over.

He closed his eyes. There was a searing wave of pain—nothing more.

TO GRAHAM the time which followed was a vague nightmare of horror. He awoke to find his body imprisoned by splintered wood and smothering, stiff linen. There was a choking odor of burning wood about him. He stirred.

The effort sent dizzy waves of anguish through his head. His stomach was sick, his body felt swollen, battered. The smell of burning wood brought creeping horror. He clawed at the wreckage with his hands—it seemed that he could feel flame licking at the back of

his neck. The wreckage which held him parted with a rending sound, he clawed clear of the piled-up ruin of his ship. A red glare and a wave of heat passed over his face. His brain cleared a little and the blackness lifted from before his eyes.

A hundred feet away a great tongue of flame towered in the air, feeding upon what remained of a blue-black Fokker. The fire roared fiercely and sent showers of sparks curling upward.

A sobbing gasp of relief passed his throat. He staggered as he attempted to walk away from the danger of exploding tanks. The burning Fokker brought back memories of the plunge to earth. The Major and he had been flying together—

The Major!

He stopped, staring foolishly at the heavens over his head. But the skies were clear, neither Spad nor Fokker raged in space.

The Major—where was he?

A shell struck earth a hundred yards distant. A great geyser of black dirt erupted to a height of a hundred feet. The impact threw him to the ground. A hot wave of agony wrenched a groan from him. He discovered that he could not move his left arm—it dangled, crooked and limp at his side. It was leaping with pain.

He stood in the center of the field, turning his head owlishly from side to side.

Then he saw the Major's ship.

An indistinct gray blur, upside down, crushed against the bosom of the earth. He ran, with plodding, erratic steps, his breath whistling through his teeth, the pain of the shattered arm beating against his brain like a lead mallet.

There was a trickle of blood running from the inverted cockpit of the Major's ship. He threw himself on his face and tore at the wreckage. It seemed hours before he could free the inert shape hanging on the belt—more hours until he could open the catch; drag the Major clear of the ship.

Then he picked him up—a fireman's lift he had learned years ago. Carried him, with his knees trembling, his body shaking, his lungs seared with each breath, his brain reeling—carried him through a hell of torture which brought the jagged edges of madness close to him. The ground rocked and reeled under his feet. Time after time heavy concussions caused him to lurch—threw showers of earth over him.

When he came to understand that he could go no further, voices sounded. Shocked voices—amazed voices.

“Two flying blokes—one-carrying the other,” the voices muttered.

“Wandering around in the middle of an artillery strafe—going around in circles. Bring those litters!”

He fought them when they attempted to take the burden of the Major from him. But the grinding pain ate at his brain. He felt himself lifted, straightened out, placed on something which yielded to the weight of his body; borne along on what seemed to be a moving cot.

AFTER a while there was the sharp smell of something which sickened him. It was a new smell, one he had never experienced. More, there were new voices—thick, mumbling, groaning—one screaming in a high-pitched wail. He felt a white-hot needle thrust in the flesh of his arm. He opened his eyes.

He saw rows and rows of queer shapes on litters. The bedlam of voices were coming from those shapes. Litters covered over with o.d. blankets. In the shade of a shell-ruined church. Men in white were going about, jabbing hypodermics into arms which they took up from under the blankets—cutting cloth away from gashed flesh.

A panic gripped him. He turned his head, struggled to sit up on the litter. A voice came to him.

“Take it easy, kid,” cautioned the voice.

His eyes found the source of the voice. An o.d. blanket. A face smeared with dirt and blood—gray, like a mask of putty over which lampblack had been sprinkled. But there was a purple snake coiled under the mask—twitching, jerking irregularly.

Powers.

Graham’s voice was a hoarse croak. “Major!” he said weakly. “Major—”

“Sure,” answered the gray mask. “The Major. Himself, in person. I heard all about it, Old Timer. I came to when they brought me in. The litter bearers told me how they found us—you carrying me. You were raving—wounded yourself—fighting them because they wanted to take me away from you.”

He was silent for a moment, his eyes staring at Graham’s face. Then his lips moved. The words were very low, almost a whisper.

“Gee, you’re a swell kid,” he said slowly. “Just about the finest I’ve ever known.”

Strangely enough, most of the pain seemed to leave Graham’s body. A sense of delirious happiness swept over him. He could find nothing to say. Two heavy tears rolled out of the corners of his eyes and down over his cheeks.

“Imagine it!” the Major was saying. “They pulled that one on me—jumped me—like a greenhorn—”

The surgeon was coming back. The Major’s eyes closed wearily. The surgeon bent over Graham, examining his hurts with quick, expert movements. Unbuttoned his tunic, glanced at his identification disc. Called his name and number to an orderly, along with a list of injuries.

He passed to the Major. He studied him carefully—opened and lifted the blanket which covered Powers, drew back, felt his pulse.

Graham was watching with wide eyes as the surgeon glanced up.

“Take him,” the surgeon said shortly, with a nod toward Graham.

Then he was being lifted—gently, by strong hands. But his eyes were turned—watching the orderly bending over the Major.

A hoarse shout wrenched itself from his throat. A sobbing, screaming shout.

The orderly looked up. He was tying something to the blanket which covered the Major.

It was a red tag.

It dangled in his hands, stood out against the olive drab blanket like a precise smear of red blood.

“No—no! You can’t—you can’t—”

It did not seem to Graham that it was his voice screaming. He was dreaming—the Major’s voice was speaking to him in the dream—“You don’t know what it is—watching them tie a red tag onto your buddy—a fellow you’ve lived with and fought with—”

He was fighting the little crew. Struggling to get on his feet, to rip that red tag from the orderly’s hands.

The Major opened his eyes. He smiled.

“It’s all right, Old Timer,” he told Tony. “Keep your nose up. At least you can see me—and you can say—good-bye—and happy landings—”

He was silent again, and the weariness seemed to lift from his face. He was smiling when his eyes next opened. There was a warm light in his eyes.

“Gee, you’re a swell kid,” he said wistfully.

A black curtain blotted out Graham’s vision. He felt the litter bearers moving. An odor came to him—the pungent smell of ether. A sound—the tinkling of razor-sharp knives.

But it meant nothing. Through the blackness a voice was whispering to him.

A voice which repeated, over and over:

“Gee, you’re a swell kid!”