

LUCK IN THE BLUE

by JAMES PERLEY HUGHES

The whirring air yarn of a man who felt he had to chase his own buddy—who had to sit on his soul to shoot down his pal. Then—a zooming finish but unexpected and thrilling!



H MY GOD. Don't send me up again. Not into that hell above the earth. I can't do it. They can shoot me for a coward, but I'll never hop off again.

God! I saw poor Wright's face just before he started to fall. I shall see it always. I can't—can't ever fight again."

Charlie Spellman was having another attack of nerves. Brave, to the point of rashness, he was addicted to interludes of utter depression when the excitement of battle ebbed. As usual, he had come to Zoom Hale, a friend since prep school days and now his flight commander.

"What's the matter, old horse?" Zoom was always getting into trouble or getting friends out of it. He was the squadron joke and hero combined. He had shot down more Germans than the rest of the command combined, but he kept Major Thorpe, the field C.O., wondering if this young man were an eccentric, fired with genius, or a bungling fool who should be suppressed.

"What's the matter, old horse?" Hale repeated, as he put his arm around his companion's shoulder. "What you need is a drink." Spellman had burst into Zoom's quarters, throwing himself upon the bunk to bury his face in his hands.

"Good God—a drink! To drink with Harry Wright out there crushed to nothingness. Drink and be merry—after that!"

It had always been like this, Hale remembered. Even when they were in school, Spellman had acted this way. Upon the football field he was a lion rampant, tearing through the line with the savagery of a wild beast, but when the last whistle had sounded and they were in the dressing rooms. Charlie's nerves would shatter like fragile glass.

They had been on a late patrol that afternoon and a dog fight had resulted when they encountered a flight of Fokkers. Two Americans had crashed, Frank

Wright and Johnny Riden, but the Germans had been worsted. Zoom Hale had added two planes to his record and Spellman had sent one corsair of the air down in flames.

"Come on, Charlie, buck up. You're all right. Remember what would happen if the major found you in this state. He wouldn't understand."

"Oh—oh—" Spellman almost screamed, "I can't stand it. I'm going crazy. Blood, blood, blood—everywhere. Mangled men, charred bodies—falling—falling—falling."

"Shut up, Charlie—for the love of Mike."

ZOOM'S hand choked off the fright-filled words as he heard steps coming down the hall. The door opened and John Hunter, Hale's roommate, entered, a scowl upon his usually good-natured visage. Once a cowboy, now, an aviator, Hunter found his two callings dovetailed until he rode his winged steed with the same abandon as a pinto on his native Texan range.

"There's an Intelligence colonel here," he announced, as he closed the door, "still chasing that ghost of a spy his outfit has been trailing since the war began. Personally, I don't think—"

He stopped as he heard Spellman's half-stifled moans and turned to appraise the man now struggling in Zoom Hale's grasp.

"What's the matter—that bird gone yellow again?" the Texan demanded.

"He'll be all right in a minute. Just nerves—that's all. You know how he is."

"I sure do. He makes a canary look like a game chicken." Hunter had little sympathy for Spellman. He believed the man to be a coward and was not backward in saying so. "I'd turn him over to the major if I were you."

"So you'd send me to the firing squad?" Charlie had broken from Hale's grasp and faced the cowboy, his

face working convulsively. "You'd let me see my best friends shattered and then—"

"Oh shut up and take a drink," the Texan broke in. "You'd give anybody the heebie-jeebies. What's the matter—lost your guts?"

"No—but—I can never go up again—oh my God—my God!"

"Here—take some of this," Hunter poured out a stiff drink, "I'll—"

"No—no—no—"

"Come on, I'll take one with you," Zoom Hale urged.

"Me, too," offered the cowboy.

"Well—maybe—just a little—" Spellman's hand quivered as he took the proffered glass.

"Bottoms up," said Zoom.

"Here we go," called the Texan.

BURNING cognac coursed down their throats. Then they took another, filling Spellman's glass to the brim. Zoom Hale labored with his friend, soothing him with quieting words. Gradually the taut nerves relaxed to leave him limp and wan.

"Gosh, fellows, I'm awfully sorry—" Spellman gazed from one to the other. He was struggling desperately to smile, but only a foolish grin appeared, "that I made such an idiot of myself. I'm all in—dead tired and—"

"Put him to bed," advised John Hunter, "Don't let the major see him—like this."

"Yes—let me go to sleep—here—not there—in my room. God—with Wright's empty bunk, I'd—"

Once more fright seized him, but it subsided quickly and he sprawled upon the bunk.

"I'll flop in his room. Put him to bed," whispered Hunter.

Charlie Spellman was asleep before Hale had his boots off. Carefully Zoom covered the relaxed form and tip-toed across the room to turn off the light. He was not ready for bed. Neither was Hunter.

"Let's go down to—"

The Texan stopped. Along the hall leading to their quarters sounded rhythmical foot-falls. An order was barked and they heard rifles clump to the floor.

"What the—"

"Either a firing squad for Spellman or a decoration detail coming to hang a Craws de Gerre on you," said John Hunter, "After that stunt of yours this afternoon—"

"For the love of Pete."

A knock

"I bet that's what it is," the Texan guffawed as he reached for the knob. "Come in, gentlemen, the hero's waiting for—"

He threw the door open to encounter the grim face of a colonel. Behind him was Major Thorpe, the squadron commander.

"Do you wish to search this room, sir?" they heard the C.O. inquire.

"I shall search every room. I'm taking no chances. We know our man is here—somewhere."

"This is Colonel Hopkins of the Intelligence Corps, gentlemen," said the major. "Please answer any question he may care to ask and aid him in every way possible."

Zoom Hale's eyes widened as the man stepped into the room. A hurried inspection of the small closet in which they kept their flying togs and spare uniforms. Then the colonel turned to the bunk upon which Charlie Spellman was snoring. He rolled the young man on his back, holding a flashlight on his face, but Spellman slept on.

"Huh—drunk, I suppose," growled the colonel.

"I think not," Major Thorpe broke in. "If you wish, sir, I'll—"

"Leave him alone. I'm not investigating the sobriety of this squadron. I'm looking for an enemy agent, not a flying jag."

Next the colonel looked under each bunk and poked the bedding of the unoccupied one with his cane. Then he turned to Hale and Hunter.

"Have either of you gentlemen seen a young man about twenty-five in an American officer's uniform, blue eyes, blond hair, with a scar on the right cheek?"

"No, sir, at least—er—not recently," Hale stammered.

MAJOR THORPE flinched. Zoom was showing every indication of assuming his pose of a blatant ass.

"Who do you mean—not recently?" the colonel focussed his gaze upon the young man.

"I mean—that is, sir—we're all brunettes—"

"I said a young man with a scar on his cheek, blue eyes—"

"He laughs at scars who never felt a wound," babbled Zoom with a grin and wink for John Hunter's benefit.

"Don't be an ass—at least not more than seems to be required in order to get a pilot's wings," broke in the colonel.

"Yes, sir."

"I hope, major," the colonel turned to Thorpe,

“that you will be able to discipline that young donkey. It is evident in civil life he was a traveling man or an elevator operator and—” The door closed with a bang and Zoom Hale was unable to hear the remainder of the intelligence officer’s remarks.

But as the night wore on, the spy hunt quickened. It was more than a cursory examination of barracks and hangars. Colonel Hopkins was working on direct information and the squadron was turned inside-out as the search proceeded. Zoom Hale waxed enthusiastic and by midnight he was hopping around like a Gargantuan flea aiding in the task of rounding up the enemy.

Meantime Charlie Spellman awoke to another attack of blind fears and Zoom was torn between two duties. The result was that he rushed to his room to assure Charlie he would round up the spy in less than no time and then dashed out to inform the colonel that he need have no fears for he was far more liable to die in his bath tub than from wounds from the enemy.

“Don’t fly the white flag, old horse,” he pleaded with the colonel, “I’ll stick by you to the bitter end. Never say die. Never surrender the dear old goat Keep him with you, forever and forever. If any of these Fritzes try to pick you off, remember, I’ll be right on your tail.”

“Major—major,” the outraged and bewildered officer called. “Have some of your men put this maniac to bed. He’s crazy or drunk—probably both.”

“I beg your pardon, sir,” Major Thorpe looked at Zoom with what is called in some circles the family eye. “This is the officer who brought down two Germans yesterday single-handed. He’s the only ace in this out—”

“Aces are all daft or drunk—he’s both,” the colonel snapped.

It was John Hunter who finally persuaded Zoom to turn in for the night, but the excitement of the hunt, the day’s battle and Charlie Spellman’s seizure kept the young man’s eyes from closing for long hours after Colonel Hopkins had given up his search and had gone to bed.

AS SPELLMAN’S measured breathing came across the tiny room, Hale tried to understand those visitations of terror which gripped his friend at times. Frightful things they were for Charlie was as brave as a hornet until one of these interludes came suddenly in the wake of battle.

“Gosh ding it—I’ve got to keep an eye on him,” he

muttered as he dozed off. “Got to keep him from going into a funk when anybody’s here who—”

He slept fitfully, hovering between consciousness and dreams.

Then a slight noise caused him to sit up, his eyes wide as he stared into the gray of early morning.

The door of the room was open. He leaped out to find the bunk in which Spellman had slept was vacant. He peered into the hall to see Charlie disappear into the mess room.

“Say, listen—for the love of Mike—”

Zoom dashed after him, but Spellman was not in sight.

He looked out the window facing the flying field. Daylight was at hand, but only the guard appeared. The flight had no early patrol that day. Then he saw a figure crossing the field, gesturing to the mechanics on watch. From the hangars rolled Charlie Spellman’s ship.

“My Lord,” mumbled Zoom, as the significance of the situation dawned upon him, “he’s going over the hill—in his own bus. I can’t let him do that. What would people think of it?”

In another moment he was dashing for the hangars, calling Spellman’s name. He saw a hooded figure climb into the cockpit.

“Clear.”

The word added speed to Zoom’s bare feet.

“Contact.”

Hale leaped forward with staying hand upraised.

A roar as the motor started. Then the plane began to slide across the level ground.

“Hey, Charlie—for the love of Mike. Listen, old horse—you can’t do that.”

But his voice was drowned by the bellowing of the motor and he stopped in his tracks as the Spad gained speed. Then he raced to the hangars.

“Get me a ship—the fastest we’ve got—yes, the major’s,” he shouted.

“Yes, sir.”

In another moment he was climbing in, attired only in pajamas.

“All right—let her go,” he called.

He raced his engines madly.

“Take ’em away,” he yelled.

He felt the plane quiver, then start across the field. He would overtake Spellman and force him to come back. The major’s bus would fly circles around anything else in the outfit. Soon he leaped into the air and started in mad pursuit. A setting moon and the

first flushes of a new day enabled him to see the other plane as it started to mount in sharp spirals.

He held his eyes upon the climbing Spad. Plainly Charlie Spellman was in an awful state. He was flying as though he had forgotten the painful lessons of their final training. The hand upon the stick was nervous, uncertain.

“Gosh ding it—he’s liable to crack up.” Hale opened his own throttle wider. “He’s flying that bus as though she were a jenny. Look—”

The crazy gyrations of the other ship caused him to increase his own speed. Cutting interior angles, he soon was racing almost tip to tip with the fugitive.

“Dog-gone-it,” he growled. “I can’t argue with him. No chance to reason with the loon. Not with these motors bellowing their heads off.”

Nearer, still nearer he drew. He could see the goggled face of the other as it looked around in terror and then spurred the Spad on to greater speed.

“For the love of Mike, Charlie,” Hale screamed, “turn around and go back before it’s too late. We’ll cook up a story that we were out hunting some baby-killing bombers on their way home from Paris. Thorpe will believe anything of me.”

No word or gesture from the other. Only a crescendoing of the motor as the fugitive crowded on more power and looked distractedly around.

Next the fleeing ship took a sudden turn. They had been flying parallel to the lines, although the trenches were twenty kilometers away, but Spellman swerved to the left, banking sharply, and started for Hunland.

“No you don’t, old horse. Not if I have to ride you down,” Zoom shouted, as he shot desperately in the wake of his fleeing friend.

Pressing his craft to its utmost, he executed a maneuver which catapulted him almost across the bow of the other and Spellman looped in order to avoid collision.

That the man was panic-gripped was evidenced by his struggle to level off. Plainly in his confusion and fright, Spellman had forgotten the tricks of flight.

“Dog-gone-it, Charlie. You’re going to conk and crack up, sure as shooting,” mumbled Zoom, as he kicked his rudder over and jerked his stick until he banked on his wing tips. “If you’ll just get a little control in your head, you’ll start for home and think up a good alibi for the major. You’re going hog wild, my boy, hog wild.”

Spellman finally managed to straighten and again turned toward the German border. Zoom Hale was

outraged. It would be bad enough for Charlie to go over the hill and leave a nice new Spad at Le Bourget or some other Paris flying field, but to have him wing his way to the enemy and surrender—to be a deserter to the foe—that was unthinkable.

The squadron would never get over such a disgrace. What glory it had won would be blotted out by this traitorous act.

“Not while I have a pint of gas left,” growled Zoom.

ONCE more he charged his fleeing friend, seeking to cut him off. Faster, still faster he raced, hoping to force him back.

Then—

An oath escaped him. He was not prepared for that. A burst of machine gun fire and Zoom saw the tracer bullets tearing through his upper wing.

Charlie Spellman was firing at him. Trying to kill him, kill a man who had been his friend since prep school days. Zoom had nursed him through previous fits of terror since they had come to the front, and now—even now he was trying to save him. The answer was a blast of fire threatening to send him down to earth a torn and mangled thing.

“Dog-gone-it, Charlie. I’m not going to stand for that,” screeched Zoom. “Not even from you. I won’t try to kill you, but—say, what do you expect me to stand for—my own murder?”

Another burst of fire.

This time the shots did not come so close for Zoom had banked over, but it was plain that Spellman would kill him if possible. Once more the Spad started for the German lines with Hale in hot pursuit. Had Spellman been able to fly with his habitual skill, Zoom’s efforts would have been futile, but it was evident that the terror-stricken man was unable to get the most out of his ship.

Now Hale climbed and dove with a speed of a striking falcon. As he came down, the other threw back his stick and zoomed, spitting fire from his machine gun. Bullets tore through fabric close to the pursuer’s head. Charlie Spellman was taking no chances of being captured and ending his career before a firing squad. It was plain he was ready to kill a boyhood friend before he would surrender.

“All right, old horse,” Zoom swore, as he climbed again and fed a belt into his own machine gun. “All right, if this must be shot out, we’ll shoot. I’m not going to try to pot you and I’ll leave your gas tanks alone, but I’m sure going to try to conk that motor.”

HE THRUST down his stick with a vengeful jab and nosed the Spad until it was almost perpendicular. Like a plummet he dropped, his machine gun rattling as he fell. Nearer, still nearer. He would take long chances to keep Charlie Spellman from entering Hunland. He glimpsed the ground below. By George! They had maneuvered until they were almost over their own field.

Now was his chance. If he could force Charlie down—he would take a chance on the major.

Spellman was now returning his fire, letting loose long blasts of tracer bullets that seemed to fill the air. They were rushing together at frightful speed, Zoom diving while the other climbed up to meet him.

Hardly more than fifty yards separated them. Zoom held his gun on the nose of the other ship and cut loose a steady stream of fire.

Then he saw Spellman's plane lurch, next waver. Its nose turned down. Charlie had a dead stick in his hands, Zoom could tell by his maneuvers. The motor had been killed. Only two things remained for the fugitive to do. He must crash and die the death of a suicide or land safely and take a chance with the authorities.

Hale choked on his engine and shouted as he whizzed by the disabled machine.

"I'll fix it, Charlie. Leave it to me."

The answer was a volley from an automatic pistol.

"Good gosh! What do you know about that?"

Zoom gave his ship the gun and raced on. Then he banked and circled sharply. He had not been touched, but to have Charlie try to kill him as his engine had conked. That was too much.

As he circled above the field, Hale saw Spellman nosing down. No spin had started, but it was evident the machine was out of control. He glimpsed the man glancing over the side as he shot toward the earth.

Hale dipped down, following his defeated comrade. He could see men rushing from the hangars and pilots' quarters. Plainly the latter part of the battle had been watched. Spellman was making no effort to control his ship. It had started a spin and was hurtling towards earth at ever increasing speed.

Perhaps some of the bullets intended for the engine had glanced off and wounded him. Hale hoped not. He did not want to have it on his conscience that he had killed a friend—even under these circumstances.

"Poor Charlie. It's a darned shame. I did everything I could, but Gosh-All-Fish-Hooks—why wouldn't he listen to reason. He's got himself to blame and—and what in heck am I going to tell the major?"

Nearer, still nearer to earth. Spellman would crash into one of the hangars unless he regained control. There would be small chance of coming out alive.

"Well—I guess I'll go down and take a hiding," Hale mused, as he glanced at the wind sock. "The K.O. will certainly read me a stiff lesson for borrowing his bus. Had to use it though—needed the speed."

He pancaked down to a three-point landing, but as he looked up, he instinctively raised his arm to blot out the sight before him. Spellman's spad was crashing into the trees across the road from the barracks. A crowd of men were rushing to the scene. Zoom taxied slowly up to the hangars and then crawled out of the cockpit. The place was deserted. Everyone had crossed the road.

Hale followed, racing with feet still bare. He had not dressed for that early morning flight. He was numb with cold, but had not noticed it until that moment. He stubbed his toe on a rock and stopped to swear. Then dashed on.

A KNOT had gathered about a prone figure. The Spad had gone through the trees breaking the fall. Still—poor Charlie—he was out of luck whether he lived or died. But Hale did not want to have a friend's blood upon his hands. He hoped Spellman still lived and that some—some explanation could be made to Major Thorpe. It would have to be a gaudy one. None of the garden variety of lies would pass muster.

"I'll tell him Charlie was drunk," Hale told himself. "That Intelligence colonel will bear me out in that. I'll say I loaded him up on cognac, Hunter and I."

Zoom broke through the constricting circle of officers and men. He saw a form stretched upon a blanket. There was blood on the face and the body lay very still.

"Oh, Lord!"

Then in the agony of contrition, he flung himself beside the outstretched aviator.

"I say, Charlie, old horse. I didn't mean—mean to hurt you. I was only trying to—"

"Who the devil is it?" he heard Major Thorpe inquire.

Zoom Hale arose to face his commander.

"Why I—thought—that is—" he stammered.

"Well, what the devil did you think?" the officer demanded, "It ought to be good if you have beginners luck."

"Please, sir," the young man stammered, "please don't shoot him. He'll be all right in a few days. He's a good fellow only he gets spells now and then. He's

always been that way—even when we were in prep school. He’s just a little nervous, jumpy, you know.”

“Who the deuce are you talking about?”

“Why, Spellman—Charlie Spellman, sir.”

“Spellman! There’s Spellman. He was at breakfast not fifteen minutes ago. What’s the matter—are you off your head again or just drunk?”

ZOOM HALE’S eyes widened as they encountered the face of his former school-mate in the circle of heads gathered about the still form on the blanket. A sudden nausea came into the pit of the young man’s stomach.

What the Sam Hill had he done? He had stolen the major’s ship and then gone out to drive down someone who doubtlessly was on a special mission. There were several new men in the squadron—rookies from the replacement depot—probably one of them had gone up and he had chased him.

Visions of trouble, deep trouble flashed before his mind. What would they do to him for this? He was always getting out of things by the skin of his teeth and there was very little left.

“Gosh-all-fish-hooks, major, I guess I pulled a prize boner. I’m terribly sorry. I thought, thought I was doing something—something entirely different from what I did.”

But Major Thorpe paid small heed to the words of apology. Colonel Hopkins, the intelligence officer and spy-hunter in chief, was examining the man on the blanket. The-flyer was beginning to stir and china-blue eyes looked around with dizzy uncertainty. Now his helmet was removed to bare straw colored hair.

“I’m awfully sorry, major,” continued Zoom, still facing his commander. “You see, I was trying to get a friend of mine—”

Colonel Hopkins arose to his feet. A grim smile widened his usually firmly compressed lips. Then it spread into a grin.

“Aren’t you the young man I called an ass last night?” he asked of Zoom.

“Yes, sir—and a maniac—and drunk, sir. I’m beginning to think you were right, sir.”

“I’m not. I’m beginning to think I was.”

“But, colonel, I was just trying to explain to the major that—

“Yes. I heard your babblings. No, lieutenant, you did not go out to bring back an erring brother into the fold. You need not camouflage like that. All you did was to go out and round up that German spy we’ve been turning this man’s army inside out to find. That’s all you did—that and nothing more.”

“But, colonel—major—I say, major—I—”

“Yes, Hale, I know it’s terrible,” Thorpe replied. “All you’ll get out of this is some citations and a few more decorations and perhaps a promotion or two. Spellman told me he got up to get a drink of water this morning about dawn and that you followed him into the mess room, but you dashed out while he was in the kitchen and were up before he could call you. Too bad—now you’ll have to carry some more crosses on your chest and—”

“But, major, I don’t deserve anything. I was just trying to—”

“I don’t care what you were trying to do. I don’t want to hear anything about it. I may have to take official cognizance of your condition if you keep on babbling. What you need is some clothes and a little coffee with lots of cognac in it before you get pneumonia. All I know is that you have luck in the blue, but there’s no reason to press it—too far.”

Zoom Hale tore through the circle of grinning faces. As he neared the edge he heard a voice not unlike that of John Hunter, his buddy and closest friend.

“Talk about luck in the blue,” the Texan drawled, “if this man’s war lasts long enough, that Hale hombre will be telling John J. Pershing what he wants done next week at half-past two.”