



NO MORE VICTORIES

by DONALD E. KEYHOE

A haunting fear crept into Burke's eyes as he saw his thirteenth Boche go twisting down in flames. For it was a mocking Fate that gave him these victories — victories that he dared not claim!

GENE BURKE SLACKED HIS FINGERS from the Vickers' trips as the Pfalz fighter which was ringed in his sights went twisting down in flames. He pulled his Spad from its dive and stared up into the cloud from which the lurking Pfalz had dropped onto his tail. But there was no sign of other Boche. The Pfalz pilot had apparently been on voluntary patrol, like himself.

As his blood-shot eyes rested grimly on the wrecked instrument board before him, where Spandau bullets had crashed through on the Pfalz' first dive, the thought came sharply to him that this was his thirteenth victory. But it brought no elation to his drawn face, with the age-old look in his young eyes. Instead, a bitter, mocking smile crossed his lips.

His thirteenth victory—and he dared not claim it! Worse, he must be sure that it was not confirmed to him, or to the false name he had given on enlisting a year ago. A haunting fear came into his war-aged eyes as he quickly stared about the sky. Off to the left, three French Nieuports were drilling in, late witnesses to his success. He groaned. It was Fate, a grinning, mocking Fate that gave him these victories, only to lead him closer to a dishonored end.

Ever since he had come up from Issoudun, intent on remaining but an obscure pilot of the Royal Flying Corps, that Fate had shaped a strange destiny for him. Three swift victories had been his, longed-for but feared because of the inevitable increase of local fame. Then he had gotten a straggler from Richthofen's Circus, which he dared not hold back from attacking, and finally came the fifth scrap that had made him an ace. An ace of nine older pilots, who cursed at their bad luck while he trembled at a sudden fame that might easily lead to disaster.

With a shiver, he remembered the official photographs that had been taken of all aces, pictures to be used publicly to bolster up the hopes of those back in England. Had his carefully grown mustache, low-tilted fatigue cap, and purposely narrowed eyes been sufficient to hide the identity of Lieutenant Leroy Manners, latest ace—or would some keen eyes see through that thin disguise to Gene Burke, wanted by Scotland Yard for a murder he had never committed?

And now—his thirteenth victory!

A crooked, bitter grin twisted his lips. Eight times he had won since that last officially credited success, and each time he had fled from the scene like a criminal, filled with horror lest too great fame bring war correspondents to his billet to interview him, to ask questions of his past, his home, queries that would speedily ruin him, he knew.

But this time he had fled too late. The Frogs closed in, gestured excited congratulations. He waved back and headed west toward the sector in which lay his field. From now on, he must be still more careful. Wing Captain Browne had eyed him oddly yesterday when he denied shooting down—a Fokker in a

dogfight two days past, insisting it had been downed by another pilot. He must be careful not to arouse suspicion—but there must be no more confirmed victories. Rather incur the stigma of lost nerve than risk disaster.

AT 12,000 feet he crossed the Front. Boche gunners surrounded him with a furious storm of archie, through which he headed disdainfully, not bothering to alter his course.

He cut the gun and dived for his field behind the lines. And then as he landed, something cold gripped at his heart. He stared, ashen-faced, at the burly figure in civilian clothes standing beside Captain Browne.

Inspector Conroy of Scotland Yard, from whom he had escaped by a miracle on that awful night of Eaton's death! Conroy had come for him!

He bent over his switch, masking his despairing face, forcing back the dread that had surged into his tired eyes. The engine sputtered into silence. He climbed out.

"Hello, Burke," said Conroy. He spoke confidently, a self-satisfied grin on his thick lips.

Gene eyed him coolly. "I beg your pardon," he replied. "There must be some mistake."

"No, there ain't any mistake—" began Conroy, but Captain Browne silenced him and came forward to Gene's side.

"Manners," he began slowly, "there is a serious charge against you. But we'll discuss it in my office."

With a leaden heart, Gene followed. He was lost. There was no way out now. Browne faced him inside the office. There was a look of mixed regret and sternness on his face.

"Manners, how many victories have you to your credit?"

Gene felt the blood rush to his face, then recede. "Surely you know that, sir," he replied. Five, no six, with this afternoons. I got a Pfalz 7 miles inside their lines. Maybe it hasn't been reported yet—"

Browne shook his head. "I'm not talking about that one. What about the Albatross you never reported, east of Bourgogne last Thursday? And the Rumpler photo bus on the 18th?"

Gene fought to regain his composure. He had never dreamed that those two would be credited to him. He had reported being in another direction both times.

"There's something wrong, sir," he said, desperately. "I never got those ships. Surely, you can guess I'd be glad enough to claim any Boche I got, captain."

Back of Captain Browne, Conroy grinned wisely. He had crossed his fat hands across his paunch, and was idly twiddling his thumbs. On his face was a cocksure, triumphant expression.

"Manners," said Captain Browne, "ever since you've joined us, you've avoided mixing with outsiders. You have never asked for leave. God knows you've been a good pilot—but why didn't you turn in those victories? I'm convinced you have at least double the number on your record."

"I'll tell you why," interposed Conroy gruffly. "He was scared of publicity, that's why. No use fooling around any more. I tell you I knew him the second I laid eyes on him. He's Gene Burke, the guy that bumped off Charley Eaton. Here, take a look."

He fished out a photograph from an inner pocket. Browne took it. His eyes shifted to Gene's pale face.

"The mustache," he muttered, as if to himself.

"I'm not so sure—"

"Then have him shave it off, snapped Conroy. "I guess that'll show it. Anyway, I'm taking him back. I've got a special warrant—and that's all I need."

WITHOUT a word, Captain Browne handed the picture to Gene. Gene's tortured eyes rested on his own likeness, and then something seemed to break within him. "All right," he said hoarsely, in a voice he hardly recognized as his own. "You win. But I never killed Eaton. I swear to God I didn't!" He was facing Browne, an agony of entreaty in his eyes.

"I believe you," said Browne. He held out his hand. "If I could, I'd hold you against this warrant. For you've wiped out anything you might have done—back there."

"Well, that ain't the law," said Conroy. "He's got to go back. If he's innocent, he can prove it. And we might as well get under way. Get your stuff together, Burke. I'll go along to see—"

"I'll be responsible for him," said Captain Browne icily. "Don't forget I'm in command here!"

Conroy scowled but said no more. Gene went to his billet, packed his gear, and returned to the waiting car which had brought Conroy to the squadron. In a few minutes the field was hidden in the gloom of twilight.

After frisking Gene's clothes for a hidden weapon, Conroy slouched in one corner of the rear seat, maintaining a hostile silence. Gene's brain was busy with plans for escape. If he could once get free, it would be easy to hide himself in enlisted man's clothes among the thousands of wanderers seeking lost outfits along the Front.

The road was bumpy from badly-filled shell-holes. It ran parallel to the Front, which was rather close at this point, for Gene's squadron had been pushed up to a perilously near position. The car made slow progress under the hands of the civilian driver Conroy had hired. Twice they were stopped. Conroy produced the required papers, and they went on.

The dull rumble of gunfire from the Front suddenly increased. The intermittent flare of light became a steady glare, and in a few minutes it became apparent that part of the road ahead was being heavily shelled. The driver halted his car fearfully. Conroy swore at him, but the man refused to go on. Then from ahead, by the light of a bursting star-shell, they saw a train of motor lorries hurrying down the road.

"What's the matter?" Conroy demanded gruffly of Gene.

"Moving troops down the line," said Gene briefly. "Probably the Boche got wind of it, and they're simply shelling the road. It's old stuff."

"Maybe it is," muttered the driver from in front. "But I'm not going up there."

A quarter of a mile ahead, a shell struck and flamed into the night. The crash was hardly over before the driver of the car had jerked it about and was backing around. Just as he made the turn, a motorcycle side-car came tearing along. The side-car went into the ditch to avoid collision. The cycle driver came up with a sputter of profanity.

"Why the hell don't you look where you're goin'?" he snorted at the other driver. You damn Limeys think—"

He fell silent as he saw Gene Burke's uniform. Another figure was emerging from the ditch. It was a young officer, wearing the insignia and wings of an American shavetail pilot. His brand-new uniform was spattered with mud from his headlong plunge, but he only grinned ruefully.

"Thought a shell hit us," he said. Then he saw Gene's wings. "Say, maybe you can help me. I want to find the 206th—American outfit, you know. We're lost."

AMERICAN! It brought a thrill to Gene, for it had been a year since he had talked with any of his countrymen, and it had been two years since he had seen the United States, before his becoming involved in the tangle that made him a fugitive.

"There's a road out of the village back here," he told the pilot, who was little more than a youngster. "Get your side-car out—"

"It's busted," announced the cycle driver. "I'll stick with it and—" *Whoom!* A shell ended its screaming journey with a deafening crash on the road a hundred yards behind them.

"Get in here," snapped Conroy. "We're going to get out of this place." His face was pale.

The car plunged down the shell-scarred road, with the young American hanging to the running-board. The cycle driver was left behind. Back of the swaying car, another shell bit deeply into the earth. Gene stared back and saw that the lorries were still forcing their way through. One had toppled to a ditch and was on fire.

"Gosh, I didn't expect to get right into it so soon," gasped the American pilot. "I hope we get through all O.K. I want to be there in time for the dawn patrol tomorrow."

"You know the outfit, then?" said Gene, for he knew that a replacement would hardly be pushed into a patrol that quickly.

"No, don't know a soul in it but I've heard it's a great gang. I'm lucky to—"

WHOOM! From out of the tortured sky a shell blasted its screeching way into the roadside not fifteen yards ahead. The earth seemed to erupt before Gene's eyes in a flaming geyser of shrapnel and crusted clay. The car wrenched sidewise and he was hurled to the floor. Hissing pieces of shell crashed past his head. He heard Conroy give a shriek of agony. A muffled cry came from the young pilot's lips; then all was drowned as the car crashed over into the ditch and toppled upside down.

Something struck against Gene's head and he felt blood run warm and sticky down his face. But he kept his senses and crawled out on hands and knees. A yawning shell-hole was the first thing he saw, then the crumpled driver of the car, gashed in a dozen places by shrapnel and bits of windshield glass. He was stone dead. Gene stopped abruptly as a startling thought flashed into his brain. He went back and tugged at Conroy's prostrate body, lying half under the overturned car. The detective was mortally injured and his breath was coming in long gasps. Even as Gene hauled him out into the open, Conroy trembled and lay still.

Gene stared up into the war-torn sky. He was free again, freed by the shell that had almost taken his life. Then it was that he thought of the young American pilot. He found him lying in the ditch where he had been hurled as the car went over. He stared at him,

appalled. Hurtling shell fragments had caught the youngster full in the face. He had died instantly as some bit of hissing steel drove into his brain.

BACK on the road, the motor lorries had halted behind a wreck. Gene could dimly see men scurrying about, trying to clear the road. He got down on his knees, looking for his musette bag. He would have to hurry before he was found.

Suddenly he stopped, his breath drawing in with a startled hiss. He gazed at the silent form of the young pilot while a mad plan ran through his mind. In another instant, he was dragging the lad's body out of the ditch, tearing off the bedraggled uniform. In five minutes, the unfortunate pilot was attired in his own uniform. Gene transferred identification tags and scanned the one he had snapped around his wrist.

"Lieutenant David Wentworth, U.S.A."

He found Wentworth's bag, which had been pitched to the roadside. He flung it open, searching feverishly. Another uniform, the usual toilet gear, some letters, cigarettes—ah, here they were! Orders and the service record!

Gene Burke stood up as he closed the bag. In a little while the wrecked car would be found, with its three dead. And there was hardly a chance in ten thousand that anyone would question the identity of the unfortunate pilot lying there, his features blasted beyond all possible recognition. On his wrist was the dog-tag of Leroy Manners, and on his body was the uniform of an R.F.C. lieutenant.

The book of Gene Burke, alias Leroy Manners—wanted by Scotland Yard for murder—would be closed.

But would it? Gene started as he remembered the cycle driver. No, he was safe there. The corporal would return to his own outfit, glad to avoid the long trip—providing he were still alive after that concentrated hell. Gene swore to himself as another shell streaked into the road, two hundred yards back of him, and burst with a tremendous roar. The Boche certainly had both accurate maps and correct information tonight; their range was perfect.

He went over his plan once more, swiftly. His confidence grew. Even if the cycle driver did chance on the wrecked car, he would simply believe that Wentworth had escaped and gone on. Gene looked down again at the dead American. A lump came into his throat as he remembered the eager light that had shone in the eyes now forever closed.

"It's all right, kid," he said. There was a choke in his

voice. "You don't mind my doing this, do you? I'll be bumping them for you, too, old fellow."

As the first of the lorries rumbled down the ruined road Gene seized the dead pilot's bag and hurried off into the night.

THE gray of dawn was just showing in the sky as Gene Burke gunned his Nieuport and followed his flight leader, "Hick" Walton, into the air for his first patrol with the 206th. Three days had passed since he had reported in at the field, his heart thumping in his breast, his feet set for hurried retreat at first sign of discovery. But there had been no question, except a grunt of annoyance from the war-weary C.O., Major Armstrong, when he glanced over the flight record of the new replacement.

"Forty-three hours," he had snapped. "Dammit, and I told them to send me—well, it's not your fault, Wentworth. But get it out of your head that you know anything about this game—if you think you do. And stick close to your flight till you find out what it's all about."

"Yes, sir," said Gene Burke. And he meant it.

He recalled the C.O.'s words as he stuck up the Nieuport and climbed behind Hick Walton. This time there would be no slip. He would keep out of trouble—and keep far away from that dangerous title of ace.

At 16,000 feet they headed across the Front, turning east after five miles. The sun had pushed through the ground haze, but heavy cloud layers hung in the sky. Gene mechanically followed Hick Walton's lead, glancing across occasionally at Jerry Dixon, the third man on the patrol. Well across the Front he saw a flight of Spads darting into the German hinterland, but of Boche there was no sign. It promised to be a dull patrol. He watched the Spads idly. They were probably French, for the American forces had nothing but discarded Nieuports in this sector, the Allies reserving their best ships, naturally, for their own pilots.

He had no fear of encountering ships from his former outfit. The British had a sector well away, and only an emergency would bring any of his squadron into this area.

He was engrossed in thoughts of R.F.C. days when something far at the right caught his eye. Seven fleeting specks that showed for an instant in the southern sky and then were gone, lost in the maze of clouds. Gene started. Fokkers! Had Hick Walton seen? It looked like a trap, with the Boche cutting in to the clouds to close in the gap unseen.

Forgetting himself, he wagged his wings furiously. Across on his right Jerry Dixon stared at him. Gene pointed to the south. Jerry looked and then turned back, grinning. He shook his head, obviously amused at the fledgling's excitement over a fancied foe. Gene swore to himself. Then he sighed with sudden relief, for Hick Walton was ploughing up into the cloud layer above. Hick had seen, then.

They spread out for the brief passage through the mists. Gene strained his eyes and sheered off still farther to avoid a collision. He could see neither of his companions now, but soon they would be breaking through. His eyes narrowed after a moment. The cloud was thicker than it had seemed. He rammed his throttle full on and zoomed for clear air. He came out at last, only to find another layer not five hundred feet above. He twisted around and looked for the other two Nieuports. For a moment he saw nothing, then the blurred shape of a ship appeared almost half a mile away.

He tore after it. Apparently Hick had drifted off his course. Gene was sure he had held dead on with his compass. The other ship nosed down before he reached it. He followed through, gingerly. This cloud flying was bad business. Why in hell didn't Hick get out where they could see?

There was no telling where those Fokkers would be now.

The air thinned beneath him. The tail of a ship flashed suddenly in view, directly ahead. He skidded out to take position—and then his jaw dropped. For not two, but seven ships lay directly in front of him—and on their leveled wings were the significant black crosses of the Boche.

SEVEN Fokkers, dead in line ahead of him! Gene's hand leaped to his guntrips, then went paralyzed there. He didn't dare! Back to his mind came the old torturing fear. He didn't dare. He would have to slip back, duck the fight, before it was too late.

Then he saw something that turned him cold. The Fokkers were cruising along in the very edge of the cloud, the leader almost hidden from him. And from out of a bank beyond emerged two Nieuports, the ships of Hick Walton and Jerry Dixon. Unsuspectingly, they dived out into clear air, like lambs for the slaughter.

Gene felt rather than saw the signal that flashed back through the Fokker flight. And in that instant his hesitation was gone, in a fiery hate that drove away all

other thoughts. His eyes tightened to mere slits. He kicked his ship dead on the Fokker before him and tripped his guns into snarling fire.

Ringed full in his sights, the Fokker almost instantly burst into flame, its terrified pilot too amazed to kick out of that deadly leaden stream. Gene swore savagely and jammed the Nieuport's nose onto the next in line. The astonished Boche were pulling out wildly. The leader, his dive half-started, twisted out for a frantic zoom to determine what had happened.

The Fokker in front of Gene jerked up into a desperate loop. Gene swept up after him, jaws set hard, his fingers clenched to his trips. His blazing tracers seared the cloud mists and struck into the fleeing German. The doomed pilot pitched sidewise and slumped like a sack of meal. His ship fell off and spun crazily down through the broken formation.

But now the others had recovered, on finding a lone ship behind, and that a Nieuport. Two flung up furiously at him, riddling his wings with a hail of crossfire. He rolled out at the top of his loop into an Immelmann and leaped for the protecting clouds. As he zoomed, he had one swift glimpse below. Hick Walton and Jerry Dixon were climbing mightily to his aid.

Gene leveled out in the mists and hurled the Nieuport at full gun through the blinding murk. Then with a violent shove, he stood it on its nose and dropped like a rock. A shout of triumph left his lips as he plunged through again. He had guessed right. Two of the remaining Boche had zoomed up after him, apparently thinking he had gone up on top to escape. Three were screeching down at Hick and Jerry, guns ablaze.

Rocketing onto the nearest's tail. Gene raked him with a vicious fire. He cursed angrily as the startled Boche whipped out into a zoom. Missed! And a perfect shot at that! Forgetting everything in rage at his clumsiness, he snapped the Nieuport into a tricky maneuver he had learned after long experience. Jerking the nose up as though to follow through the first Boche, he gave a savage kick at the rudder and slammed the stick forward and to the side. The Nieuport jumped sidewise and snapped around as though struck by a pile-driver, its guns belching straight into the second Fokker, whose pilot had plunged on down, after a hasty glance back.

TOO late the frenzied Boche stood his ship on its tail. Gene was up, and grinding red-hot steel and

tracers into his back. The Fokker faltered, stalled and whipped dizzily down. Gene skidded out to lex it by, as it dived with smoke pouring from its vitals.

Hick Walton had banked over into a tight turn, closing in on the first Fokker to dive. Their tracers streaked viciously across at each other. From one side, Jerry Dixon cut about to meet the German who had zoomed away from Gene's first mad plunge.

Gene was hanging to his prop, boring up for the cloud edge. But before he could reach it, the other two Fokkers erupted nose-down. He could almost feel their pilots' fury at the trick. So precipitious was their descent that the first dived past him before it could pull up. But the second lurched crookedly out at his zooming Nieuport, its Spandaus spurting carmine streaks into the filmy mist.

Searing slugs thudded into the Nieuport's wings, pounding the cowlings before him, crashing the glass dials before his face. He felt a bullet rip by his head, snatching at his helmet as with invisible fingers. His right shoulder hunched forward under a stunning, fiery blow. He drove into a desperate climb for the cloud now so close to him, while the Boche's Spandaus shredded the air about his back.

Then suddenly it ceased. He banked quickly around and stared down. The Fokker had kicked off to spray Jerry Dixon, who raced in oblivious to a second Boche upon his tail. Gene shouted vainly in the furious din as he slammed his stick to the board.

"Pull out, Jerry—pull out, for God's sake!" he shouted.

But Jerry Dixon, intent on saving the new replacement who had been cornered on his first patrol, made no effort to cover his tail. His guns glared like burning eyes, and he threw his fighter recklessly upon his marked prey. But his crashing bullets never reached their mark. Suddenly Jerry stiffened before Gene's distraught gaze. He flung up one hand, and for a second Gene saw his face, pale, but with a grim, brave smile stamped there. Then he was gone, hanging limply over the edge of his cockpit, while the Nieuport rolled off and pointed its nose down to doom.

"Jerry—my God, he did it for me!" Gene's voice was a racking sob. Jerry Dixon, with but two Boches to his name, giving his life for him, a liar, a cheat, a pretender who had to his name more Germans than any man in the squadron.

But the sob died in Gene's throat as he saw the second Fokker dive swiftly after the spinning Nieuport. A cry of pure animal fury and berserk madness burst

from his throat as he saw the Boche dive in again and again to riddle the already helpless pilot. In a flash he was hurtling at full speed down the sky, filled with a mad lust for vengeance.

The Fokker sheered away at his terrific dive. Gene's teeth sank into his lips as he fought his shaking ship to bear on the black-crossed wings beneath. From his lips, blood trickled down his chin, but he knew it not. His wounded shoulder burned at every move, but he forgot it in a snarl of hate.

Jerry Dixon—who had died for him!

GENE'S eyes gleamed fiercely. Now he was closing in. The fingers that gripped the trips were like talons. For the instant, he was a part of the plunging Nieuport, part of the spurting guns that spewed their deadly steel and incendiaries through the screeching prop.

Something cracked ominously above the engine's frightful roar. The Nieuport's wing! He remembered then. It was their weak spot. Many a man had gone down with torn-off wings, or spars stripped of fabric.

But he held for one more burst, crouched low, blood-shot eyes glaring down his sights. A twisting wing darted before his nose, a Maltese cross. It was gone—then again. And this time he struck true. The Fokker nosed down, went off in a sudden twist that tore its wings from the fuselage as though they had been cardboard.

The stripped Fokker went streaking down like a meteor, prop still whirling madly. The roar of its last dive came up plainly to Gene's ears as he closed his throttle and eased back on the Nieuport's stick. A thousand feet down, the pilot went tumbling out into space. Gene watched him fall, over and over, until a low cloud bank hid him from further view.

The Nieuport shook oddly, and once more came that sinister crackle. Gene flung a glance at his altimeter. He had passed 10,000 feet—and he knew the meter lagged. At this speed, he would soon crash headlong. He braced himself and tugged. The fighter's nose came up; then with a rending sound the fabric ripped clear from his right upper wing. The canvas whirled back and was gone. The Nieuport fell off erratically.

Gene fought to get the wing up, but slowly it began to rotate. His hand flashed to the throttle. He shoved it on. The rotation ceased. The Nieuport lifted almost to level. He held it there with rudder and stick, settling flatly through the last cloud layer. He came through to be greeted with a familiar puff of black

smoke, as German archie batteries let loose to avenge their ruined flight. The Nieuport tossed but struggled through.

Gene peered down. Even at full gun, he would not be able to reach his field. He was settling rapidly. Another burst of archie sent shrapnel zipping through his wings. He ducked. The engine sputtered, picked up, then missed again. Gene's heart skipped a beat. If that engine died, he was gone. The fighter would fall off and he would spin right down into No-Man's-Land, where Boche snipers could easily pick him off even if he lived through the crash.

He glimpsed an open, shell-pitted stretch behind the first row of trenches. It had been No-Man's Land before the last offensive that carried the American lines forward. There was a chance. He smiled grimly, worked his stiffening shoulder to limber his half-paralyzed arm, and dropped the fighter across the trenches.

German rifles spurted flame as he soared past, not 400 feet above. Machine guns broke into vicious song. And across the desolate stretch between the front-line trenches, the American doughboys retaliated with a fierce fire to shield the crippled fighter.

The ground leaped up. Gene shoved hard left to hold up his crippled wing. The Nieuport struck, slewed around and dug its nose into a shell-hole. It went over on its back with a crash, and Gene's first American patrol was ended.

THREE hours later, bruised, dirty, pale from the pain of his injured shoulder, he reached the tarmac of the 206th. He had telephoned in from a second-line dugout and had found that Hick Walton was safe. Hick had downed one Boche and the other had piqued for home.

Hick met him. His head was bandaged where a bullet had creased it. He had a half-angry, half-wondering look.

"You should've stuck close," he said, "but I guess it's a damn good thing you didn't for once." He paused, then went on a little grudgingly. "You sure played hell with that formation. D'you realize you knocked down four Krauts?"

The C.O., Major Armstrong, was striding over toward them. Gene began to feel a sense of panic. Had they found out already.

"It—it was pure luck," he told Hick hurriedly. "I got lost and thought I saw you. I hauled in behind them, thinking the left end ship was yours. They didn't see me at first—it was pretty thick. I got those first two before they knew what happened—"

"Yeah, I saw it," said Hick drily.

"And I saw the rest, too. Who showed you that trick twist you pulled? They must be getting a blamed sight better back at Issoudun than when I went through."

"Wentworth," cut in Major Armstrong, "for a man with 43 hours, that was a pretty good show. But don't let it get the best of you. Not to deprecate your work, but frankly it was a miracle you didn't get bumped. And don't try to yank a Nieuport out of a dive like that again."

"I won't, sir," promised Gene hastily. "I've been used to a Sp—I've never been in that fast a dive before," he amended quickly.

The major eyed him oddly for a second, and then went on. Gene followed Hick Walton into the mess.

"Letter for you," said Hick, as he ruffled through the mail.

Gene started. He took the letter confusedly. It was addressed to Lieutenant David Wentworth, and it was postmarked Kansas City, Mo., U.S.A. He tore it open with a guilty feeling and glanced at the signature. It was signed "Mother."

Gene read it through slowly. It was a pathetic letter, with a mother's fear hidden behind brave words. And David Wentworth was already dead—killed before he had hardly begun to fight.

For a long time Gene sat there, staring at the missive. Then he went over to a rickety typewriter in one corner of the mess and laboriously pecked out an answer, describing his first victories, adding a word of cheer and ending it, "Don't worry." He hesitated over the signature, then typed in "Dave." Underneath he added, "I bruised my hand a little, so I'm having my orderly write this for me."

THE next three days were foggy, with drenching rains. There was little flying. Gene chafed at the restriction. On the fourth day the fog lifted somewhat, and by noon it was fairly clear. Major Armstrong called the pilots of the 206th into the office.

"H.Q.'s sent in a call for a balloon-strafting job. It's a mean spot, and I won't detail anyone. But if anyone volunteers—"

His glance was passing over the group. At that instant, it happened to rest on Gene Burke's face. Before he thought. Gene stepped out, just as Hick Walton and two other pilots moved forward.

"That's plenty," grinned the major. "You two, since you were first." He nodded at Hick and Gene. "Right about dusk, and here's a map."

They started out.

"By the way," said the major to Hick. "There'll be a replacement for Jerry Dixon in a day or so. I sent in a repeat call today and just got a confirmation."

A replacement. That meant a new face, a stranger who might have known David Wentworth! The madness of his plan began to grow on Gene. Sooner or later, he was sure to be found out.

In swift succession, the thought of Scotland Yard, of going back, arrest, of the trial, a black-gowned judge saying the words that would end his life—all this passed through his tortured mind. But an iron determination surged along with the ugly pictures his brain had drawn. Better by far that he throw himself into this mad war, knowing the one end that must come, than be dragged back to an inglorious death. There was only one other way, that of the deserter. And he would not quit!

It was still seething in his mind when he took off at dusk and headed toward the Front. And yet, pounding against the decision he had made, came the desire of youth for life. He was still young, there was already talk of the Boche weakening. Perhaps the war might end, and he could slip away before he was known.

They crossed the trenches at 12,000 feet, then cut off at a diagonal into Germany. Back of their goal, they turned and dived to a low altitude, so that they could approach the Drachen without being seen until the last moment. Gene tripped his guns for a warming-burst, then dropped still lower. Suddenly, a hidden machine-gun nest blazed away at him. He threw his nose down and sprayed the spot. The gun went silent. Ahead, he caught his first glimpse of the balloon. It was being hauled in quickly, warmed by the gunfire back in the woods. Hick darted away, according to their plan, while Gene raced down to draw attention.

A flaming barrage was hastily thrown up around the descending Drachen. An archie battery crashed its shells into the twilight. Flaming onions came streaking up at the plunging Nieuport. Gene tripped his guns again. He had full belts of incendiaries, and they blazed out in a steady stream as he hurtled down. Then from the opposite direction, Hick Walton came in like a lightning bolt. Gene sheered away. But even as he turned, a groan burst from his lips.

A lucky archie had crashed into Hick's wings. The Nieuport pitched off and hurled itself into the ground in flames. Hick was through!

THE ground forces whipped their guns around to bear on the remaining fighter. A shell screamed

past Gene's wing, off into the night. The Nieuport rocked as he kicked around onto the Drachen. He was plunging through a veritable hell of fire and smoking steel, but he hung on grimly. His bullets blazed down, twisted under a deft flick of the controls, and ate their way into the ponderous bulk of the balloon. A barrage of slugs thudded through his wings. Fabric ripped and tore. He held dead on, still firing.

A tongue of flame licked out on the Drachen's side. Then a blue-white flare shot upward, illuminating the sky. A terrified observer leaped from the swaying basket. His parachute opened, but too late to save him. The balloon slithered to earth, a fiery mass from under which the ground crew ran in panic.

Gene zoomed up into the dark that had settled. But an ominous pound told him that the Germans had scored a lucky hit. He throttled his engine, cut back across the lines. The pounding increased.

There was a French drome seven miles west of the point over which he found himself. He turned toward it, nursing his ship along. The crippled fighter stalled through the trees at the drome's edge and dropped heavily to the ground. Gene climbed out and found his prop had been clipped in two places. One tip was gone. Small wonder that it had pounded. He was fortunate that it had held to get him back.

He explained to the Frog mechanics who rushed out, and started to the office to report. A Spad was idling on the line. He glanced at it, then went rigid. It bore the British markings, and he saw it was from his former squadron. He turned away hurriedly—and came face to face with Captain Browne!

Browne stepped back, then gazed at him. Gene held his breath. He had shaved off his mustache, and it was not light enough to see well. Perhaps he would pass.

"Manners!" Browne's voice was low, but to Gene it seemed to shout the word. "Manners! Good God!"

"You've made a mistake," said Gene. "I'm Wentworth, 206th Squadron, American Expeditionary—"

"Wentworth," said Browne. He muttered the name again. Then he smiled peculiarly. "Wentworth of the 206th, who got four Boche on his first patrol?"

Gene knew then that he had lost. But he stuck to his masquerade. "Yes, sir," he said, tonelessly. How Fate must be laughing now!

"I wonder, lieutenant," said the British captain, "if you recall the exact date when you reported to your squadron?"

Gene cursed him silently. Why keep up the mockery, when he already knew? But he answered

mechanically, the light of hope gone from his weary face.

"Strange," said Browne. "The gods play queer tricks. On that day—or rather, the night before—we lost one of the bravest pilots of our Wing. He was killed by shell fire on the Montford road. Perhaps you came along that road, on your way to the 206th?"

Gene kept a dogged silence.

"I wonder if his spirit perhaps lives on," mused Browne. "Perhaps it was his genius that guided you through that first combat—"

"For God's sake, why don't—" Gene burst forth, but Browne held up his hand.

"It is late, lieutenant. I must get back to my field. I may not see you again."

He smiled. Gene stared at him. "You mean you—"

"Carry on—Wentworth." There was a perceptible pause before the name. Browne turned and went to his waiting Spad. He waved as he taxied out into the gloom. Then he was gone, and Gene Burke was standing there, gazing after him with bewildered eyes.

IT WAS exactly one week after Gene had returned to the 206th and reported that Hick Walton had died in shooting down the Drachen. On the basis of his statement, the credit for the balloon had been posted to Hick's name, and Gene was still one under the necessary five victories to make him an ace, to his secret relief.

As he returned from the dawn patrol, he and the rest of the patrol were called to the C.O.'s office. There they found two staff officers from H.Q.

"We have a serious mission on hand," said Major Armstrong, and a grave look crossed his gaunt face, hollowed by days and nights of endless strain. "Espionage reports a hidden squadron somewhere near Laincourt Forest, dangerously close to our Front. For a week now, there has been an unusual activity indicating more than the usual force of planes in this sector. Twice, the 196th has fallen into traps. This time, we will set one with their aid.

"H.Q. suspects a half-subterranean or wholly underground hanger at this point on the edge of Laincourt Forest. Several attempts have been made to photograph this area, but none of the ships have come back. Pursuit flights have found a strong resistance to any operation over that point."

He paused and looked keenly around the room at his pilots.

"H.Q. is strongly desirous of knowing what is

back there. Perhaps it is even more than a hidden squadron. The 196th will cross the Front and attempt to draw the Boche in that section off to the west. We shall divide and come in from east and south, having circled to get in behind. It is a risky scheme, for if they have more than one extra squadron, we may be cut off completely. But we'll take that chance!"

Gene's first thrill changed to a pang of disappointment when he found he was detailed to stand by on alert, instead of accompanying the squadron. He watched the other pilots take off, one after another, an hour later. He was walking back to the hangar to inspect his much-patched Nieuport when four ships dropped in from the west. Three were Spads and one was a Bristol two-seater. As they landed, he saw the cocardes of the Royal Flying Corps of Britain.

He stepped back into the shadow of the hangar and watched. Something cold touched his heart. The first pilot to climb out was Captain Browne! From the rear seat of the Bristol stepped a man in civilian clothes, revealed as he doffed his leather flying coat. The man was grim-looking, with something about him that was unmistakable. A bitter rage swept through Gene. Browne had betrayed him. Pretending to be his friend, Browne had tricked him and sent word to Scotland Yard.

The other three pilots followed as Browne and the civilian strode toward the office. Field mechanics began turning the British ships into place on the line, chocking up their wheels. All four engines had been cut off.

A sudden resolution was born in Gene's mind. He ran to his ship, where he had placed his goggles, helmet and flying suit to be ready in case of a call. He hurried into the suit, peered out of the hangar and dashed to the nearest Spad. It was not yet chocked. He flung a command at the closest mechanic. Startled, the man began to expostulate. Gene swore at him fiercely and yanked his pistol from its holster.

"Pull her through!" he rasped.

The frightened mech did as he was told. Gene caught it on the first throw. He did not wait to open out the powerful Hispano-Suiza, for the engine was still warm. Just as Browne came tearing out of the office, followed by his men, Gene gunned the little fighter and raced out onto the field. Browne was frantically waving at him, but he only grinned as he stared back. It was done now. He had made his jump, perhaps from the frying-pan into the fire. But they would not take him back!

THE 206th was well ahead of him, climbing off to the southeast. Gene followed, lips set in a grim smile. He would have this last fight—and after that, God knew what. Perhaps there would be no afterward!

He gazed back. The two Spads were climbing dizzily after him. He jammed his throttle full on, closing the gap between him and the slower Nieuports. In spite of his predicament, an exultation gripped him. This was a ship! No weak-winged fighter here, ready to shed its fabric at the first sheer dive. Then he laughed out loud as he looked along the fuselage and saw the initials lettered there. He had stolen Browne's ship!

The 206th was just ahead. He drew in, throttled his engine and took position on the left edge. One of the pilots turned and stared. Gene chuckled. This was a new stunt, an R.F.C. pilot joining up with an American squadron. He could see the C.O. gazing back, puzzled. But the formation swept on across the lines.

They were well over the Front when the other two Spads caught up. Gene saw the leader signal energetically at him. It was Browne. He waved back, derisively. Browne tried to sheer in and cut him out of the formation. Gene skidded the Spad out at him, and Browne pulled away. Then the two Spads settled behind the Nieuports.

Half an hour later, Armstrong signaled for them to pick up a Salmson photo bus which was circling as though waiting. With the Salmson underneath, they turned in back of Laincourt Forest and approached.

From out of the northwest sky, six darting specks flashed into view. The 206th twisted off toward them. In a moment, Gene could make them out. Pfalzes, and making no apparent move to escape from the superior force speeding toward them. He craned his neck around to look for a trap. No other ships were in sight. He was turning back when he saw Browne jabbing his hand toward the ground.

Racing in the opposite direction, obviously just clearing the ground from their take-off, were at least a score of Jerries. Then Gene grasped the idea. The Pfalzes were there to draw away the American squadron, while the hidden Boche sneaked from their secret base and leaped into the east to get altitude.

Sheering out from his position. Gene hurled his Spad up to where Armstrong could see. He pointed downward emphatically. The C.O. snapped his head over the side and stared. In a twinkling he signaled his squadron to separate. A flight drove straight ahead for the six Pfalzes. B flight, with Armstrong at point, and the three Spads plunging behind, tilted down madly

for the Boche below. The Salmson circled calmly above the edge of Laincourt Forest, while its observer caught his pictures.

Gene caught up with the Nieuports in a few seconds. He twisted away and warmed his guns briefly. They stuttered eagerly under his touch. The Spad seemed alive as it bored down with moaning wings on the climbing Boche.

The Germans split in two flights as the 206th dived in. Gene saw that they were Fokkers. His eyes widened as he glimpsed the crimson noses, and the death's-head ravens on each fuselage. Von Luedor's Ravens. They had found the Ravens' nest!

FROM deep in the forest, a concealed archie battery let loose briefly at the plunging Nieuports, then went silent as the Fokkers whipped around. A crimson nose came zooming up at Gene, twisting around in a wild chandelle. Fiery eyes glared at him. He jerked the Spad to one side, as tracer smoked past his head. With a single motion, he twisted back and raked the zooming Boche. The Fokker slipped, fell off and spun. Off to one side, two Nieuports caught the leading Fokker in a wicked crossfire. But the pilot skilfully ducked beneath the first, whipped around onto the second and sent it flaming down. In an instant, the sky was a mad melee of darting ships, with Allied cocardes and black death-birds flashing through red-hot streams of steel.

A Nieuport pulled into a crooked loop in front of Gene's Spad. He kicked away and almost crashed into von Leudor. A fierce hail ripped into the Spad's tail. Gene went up and around in a tight renversement. His guns snarled as a black cross swam before his sights. His smoking tracers bit through, but von Leudor twisted off between two Nieuports. Gene cursed and released his trips.

Down from the sky above spun a blazing inferno. Friend or foe, Gene could not tell. He saw the Salmson scooting for the front and home. A Pfalz tore out of the dogfight after it, but plunged off into a wild dive as two Nieuports shot in from different points.

Gene's eyes came hurriedly back to his own troubles as splinters flew from the nearest strut. Two Fokkers were closing in. He hauled back as for a loop, then shoved the stick forward and to the side, kicking hard rudder. The Spad leaped around almost onto its own tail. Directly before him a crimson nose was hurtling. He shot underneath, swept up into a vertical zoom. His fingers clamped to the trips and a withering burst poured into the Fokker's bottom.

He skidded from below and threw a hasty glance about. Browne was hard-pressed by a German, while the other Spad vainly sought to break through to his aid. Forgotten was Gene's rage at the other's betrayal of him. He banked around and charged across the trembling sky. Then he saw who it was that clung to Browne's tail, Spandaus spitting flame and steel. It was von Leudor, who had led into this bitter fray.

A Nieuport was suddenly beside him, guns spurting. He saw his C.O., Armstrong, glaring down at the Boche leader. The two ships dropped in converging dives, four torrents of flaming slugs sizzling from their guns. Von Leudor jerked about for a swift look and then zoomed mightily. Armstrong went beneath, not daring to pull up the Nieuport so sharply. But Gene's Spad hung to its prop as he trailed the Fokker's prop-wash through the sky.

Back of him, a loyal German came roaring to his leader's aid. Bullets zipped and thudded into the Spad. Its fabric lay in tatters in a dozen places, but Gene did not swerve. Tighter, back came his stick. Upside down, he found von Leudor squarely in his sights. The Fokker rolled out as he sprayed its tail, but he jerked on once more and followed that dizzy plunge. Down went the Boche, and still faster came Gene, guns hot from the steady burst under his clenched fingers.

One last wild effort, and von Leudor snapped his Fokker to the left. But even as he swept from the smoking stream that leaped from Gene's guns, a flaming incendiary found the tank. A living hell, the Fokker whirled the German ace to his last and dreadful landing.

As Gene pulled out, a frightful barrage of machine-gun fire broke loose from below. He had followed down to 600 feet above the field from which the red-nosed Fokkers came. Before his startled eyes unfolded a strange scene, a gaping entrance into a cavernous hangar, dug deep under the forest's edge. But this was not all. Under a clever camouflage lay a long-range gun, the tall trees about it pulled together to help hide the steel monster.

A HELLISH fire surrounded the fleeing Spad, as furious Germans sought to wreak their vengeance for their lost ace and his ruined squadron. The Spad trembled, ploughed on through. A red-hot slug drilled into Gene's boot, tearing through to the flesh beneath. A nausea gripped him but he fought it off.

The sky swam for a second. He yanked the stick back and climbed blindly. Something swept past

him, a blurred shadow, then another. He opened his eyes and gazed down. The two Spads! Browne and his pilot were raking the Boche unmercifully. The machine gunners were fleeing, their guns abandoned. Gene stared upward. The few remaining Fokkers were in full flight. From still higher, three Nieuports came scurrying down. There was no sign of the Pfalz fighters.

Gene pulled up and headed mechanically toward the Front. Others fell in beside him. He forgot the passage of time as a languor came over him. He could feel the blood seeping down into his boot. He was very tired. Vaguely, he remembered the stolen Spad. He must not go back to the 206th. They would be waiting for him there.

He forced himself to peer over the side as the front-line trenches appeared. The French drome—that was nearest. And he had to get down. Queer how dark it seemed. Getting dizzy, he muttered to himself.

He cut the gun, headed straight across the archie fire to the drome. He was very weak. The stick seemed to fight against his touch. He saw the ground come up and he leveled off dazedly. The Spad hit and bounced. The jolt hurt his leg. He sank down in the seat, pulled the stick back hard. Then he knew no more.

WHEN he recovered consciousness, there were several faces just outside his eyes' focus. He tried again and this time he succeeded. There was Browne, and the C.O., a nurse, two of the 206th pilots—his eyes held to the last face. It was the civilian who had come with Browne. A shadow crossed his face.

"No use," he said in a hoarse voice. "You've got me, this time."

The man stepped forward as though to speak, but

Browne motioned him back. "Don't worry, Burke. It's all straight now," he said. "It was straight when you bolted off in my Spad, if you only had known it."

Gene's eyes opened wide. "What?" he said.

"They got the fellow you accused—Riggles. He was shot in a Limehouse pub, and he confessed before he died that he framed you. I got over here as fast as I could—but you took to your heels."

"It's a good thing he did," commented Major Armstrong. "Without the three of you, it might have been another story. As it is—" he smiled down at Gene—"you're up several Boche, my boy."

"Yes," said Browne. "He's up—and I'm out one good Spad that he cracked up when he passed out in landing."

"I'm sorry, sir—" began Gene, but Browne grinned at him.

"Forget it, Burke. It was the best scrap I ever ran into. In fact, I'm strongly thinking of coming over to your outfit."

His eyes twinkled. Gene grinned back. "You'd be in good company, all right," he said. Then his face sobered, and he looked up at the C.O. "Is it—does everybody know about me?"

"Not yet. Why?"

"I'd like to have it this way, sir. Wentworth went out today—and he didn't come back. And he got his fifth Boche. He's got a mother back there, you see, and—"

He hesitated. Armstrong reached out and took his hand. "Don't worry, Burke," he said. "David Wentworth died an ace. And we've already got a replacement for him."

"Who?" said Gene.

"Captain Eugene Burke, U.S.A.," said Armstrong.