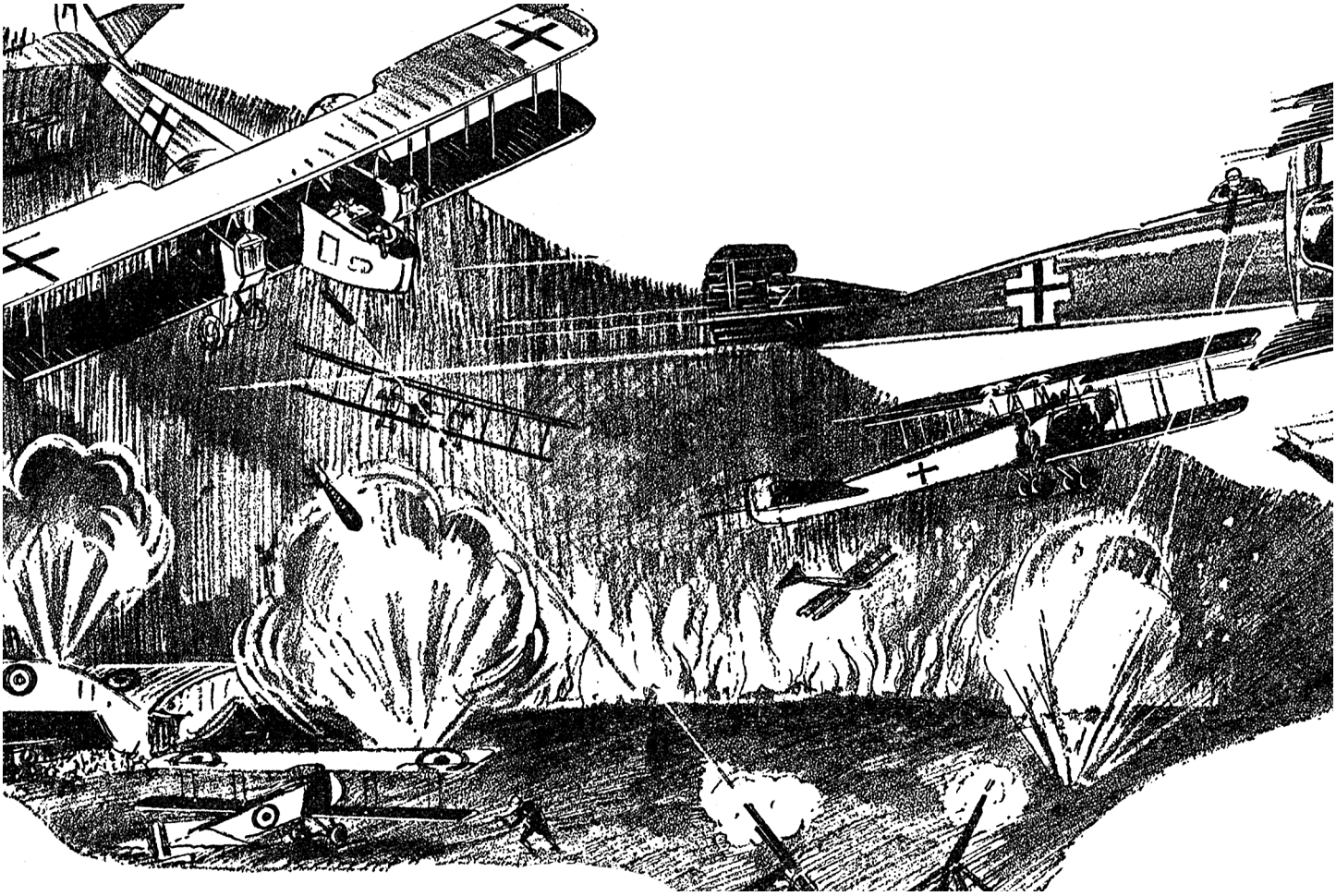

PATROL OF THE DEAD

by FRANKLIN H. MARTIN

Many strange and weird stories have been told about the war. At some of them men have shrugged their shoulders, and lifted a doubting eyebrow. Others, men have believed—because they must. Here is one of the strangest of them all—the story of a squadron, and the blood-chilling Thing that almost drove them mad. It all began one afternoon bach in 1918, when Ronny Sexton crashed at Hill 420, near Exermont, France, and his smoking-hot motor dug him a six-foot grave. A powerful and unusual novel of war skies.

CHAPTER I
AT HILL 420

RONNY SEXTON WAS SHOT DOWN in flames October 17, 1918, about five-thirty in the afternoon. One minute he was riding high and free, above and behind our flight. The next, he was spinning down with an oily black plume in his wake. He crashed at Hill 420, near Exermont, and his smoking-hot motor dug him a six-foot grave.

The Argonne push was going ahead under full

steam. Since the jump-off at dawn of September 26th, the doughboys were pushing Jerry back a kilometer at a time, along a front of about fifty kilometers from the Meuse at Regneville to within a kilometer of the Aisne River near Vienne-le-Chateau. It was a dirty, gruelling, grim job. With bayonet, hand grenade and chaut-chaut guns the doughboys moved forward, a few yards at a time, over ground that was tranversed with mines, studded with machine-gun nests, smothered by enemy artillery throwing gas and shrapnel.

Roads were obliterated, and towns became smoking heaps of masonry. Woods and field were turned into seas of mud by the incessant rain, churned up by shells. Trees stripped of leaves and branches stood like skeletons, dead, but afraid to lie down in the blood-smeared mire. And the doughboys kept moving up.

The front line ran from Grandpré east in front of Landres-et-St. Georges, Bantheville, and sloped off to the Meuse beyond a pile that was Brieules.

At four o'clock in the afternoon of the 17th we contacted a five-ship flight of Breguet day bombers over Esnes and escorted them up to Buzancy. The sun was out, sliding beneath the steel-gray ceiling of alto-stratus. Puffs of cumulus dotted the air from seven thousand to the roof. Away to the northeast were piles of dirty-looking nimbus clouds—more rain coming. It was the kind of weather that makes a motor hum sweetly, cuts the pungent smell of castor oil and forms mist on your goggles and the little mica windshield.

Buzancy was a railhead, and the Breguets were loaded with incendiary bombs—sweet little packages containing oil emulsion, thermite, and metallic sodium, a combination that burns with intense heat. If the railhead at Buzancy could be destroyed, it would help the doughboys below in their obstacle race with Death.

The bombers dropped their eggs. We were rewarded by seeing columns of smoke rise from the railroad yards. Their day's work was over. We wheeled away from there, above and behind the bombers; our necks swiveled constantly, eyes searching the sky to the north and east.

It was our job to stay between the bombers and the enemy, and I think the Breguet pilots were moping on purpose, diddling along on half throttle, hoping an enemy circus would catch up with us so they could see a fight.

They got their wish.

A double echelon line of black specks dotted the steel-gray sky to the north. The specks grew in size until they were two flights of Fokker D-7s, about eighteen of them, blackening the sky like a storm cloud, burning the wind to swoop down upon us from a superior altitude. Then a seven-ship flight of Albatrosses kicked up from the horizon and came rocketing at us like a team of bats out of Hades.

The observers in the back seats of the Breguets stood up and waved and thumbed their noses. Their pilots threw the wood on the fire and contented themselves with steeple-chasing through the black archie bursts, bound for home.

Just north of Landres-et-St. Georges we had to turn and take on the Fokkers. A two-seater, with a gunner in the rear cockpit, could fight while running, but a pursuit ship had no choice. The only way you could shoot at anything was to point your ship at it.

The metallic clatter of machine guns barked through the steady roar of motors. The fight was on.

In no time at all we were going round and round, all over the sky. The Breguets were inside our lines now, and the enemy must have decided they couldn't catch them, so they let them go and swarmed down on us.

The Nieuport 28 was a pretty sweet little ship, if you remembered to treat it gently, and it could turn with a D-7. But it wasn't so good on the climb. The Fokkers were diving on us, one after the other, then zooming like rockets to get into position for another dive, without giving us a chance to recover. You don't have much time to look around in a free-for-all like that. They were diving, banging out short bursts, and getting away, while another black-crossed Jerry took a crack.

IT WAS a new outfit to us. They had rainbow-hued tails and white bands right behind the black-and-white cross on the fuselage.

Three little holes dotted my right top wing before we were in it three minutes; then a slug pinged against the motor cowling, mushroomed, and tore a chunk out of the leading edge of my right lower. Fabric started to whip back.

We were being forced lower and lower, spread out all over the landscape. Twelve of us to about twenty Fokkers and seven Albatrosses. I tried to climb after a Fokker that was flying a black-and-white streamer from his strut. My motor was booming beautifully, but it didn't seem to be dragging the ship along very fast, seemed like slow-motion. I was leaning over, nursing the throttle, when a rivet-hammer broke out right

under me. Slugs chewed at the legs of my teddy suit and made a mess out of my instrument board. That burst almost gave some Jerry a mark on his Staffers scoreboard. While I'd been leaning over, nursing the throttle, that foxy gent had stalled, slipped and zoomed under me.

It looked like field day for the Jerries.

You're apt to lose your temper in a jam like that. I rolled and tried to ram the Fokker head on. Damned if he didn't seem to stand on his tail and go up like an elevator. A shadow flitted across the cockpit and one of his teammates was knifing down on me. By the time I'd slipped away from that one, I'd lost another thousand feet of altitude, and the sky was still black with Fokkers. I was down in the rough air. My Nieuport bobbed around like a canoe in the surf. The Albatrosses were hanging around the edge of the mill, waiting to knock off anyone who tried to pique for home.

Then they started to draw off. I yanked my Nieuport off the tree tops and looked around. Two V's of Spads were burning the air from the direction of Verdun. They were coming high and wide open, twelve of them.

The leader of the Fokker Staffel signaled his mates and they wheeled away. The Albatrosses followed suit. The Germans became specks in the sky once more, and the Spad flight droned east.

We formed again and resumed our flight toward Neuvilly. I felt pretty good when I checked up and found that none of our outfit had been downed. You didn't get much chance to watch the other fellow in one of those mills, and after those few minutes I wouldn't have been surprised to see a couple of empty spaces.

The American front line was just south of Landres-et-St. Georges, and we roared over them with the outfit still intact. All of the boys relaxed a bit when we were flying over our own territory, about five-thirty.

To the west, and banked on the horizon ahead of us, was a fleecy mass of cirro-cumulus, shot through with the crimson of the setting sun—a mackerel sky. The cumulus tufts overhead were graying around the edges. It was an arresting sight, a strange and beautiful contrast to the war-gutted terrain below.

Maybe that's what Ronny Sexton was thinking when the black-crossed ship suddenly hurtled out of the clouds and sprayed a burst into his tanks. I heard the rivet-hammer of the Spandaus and jerked around in my seat in time to see Ronny start his last plunge earthward. The German was all alone, flying a ship that looked like a Fokker D-7, except that it had an extra set of interplane struts and a Pfalz tail. You get to notice those things subconsciously.

He didn't stop to look around after he had planted that burst in Ronny, just piqued for his own lines. I kicked around after him but he had a fast ship and all the wood on the fire. What he was doing in our territory, all alone, is a mystery. There weren't many single-ship sorties in the last month of the war. But he wasn't stopping to explain. He drew away from me easily.

Ronny spun down, streaming smoke, and crashed inside our lines, near Exermont. I saw him go down, and some of the doughboys below found what was left of him and reported the crash. The war was over for Ronny right then.

I wondered how his kid brother, Ken, would take it. Ken Sexton was in the flight with us when his brother went down, and he must have seen it. I figured it would be mighty tough on the kid, because he idolized his brother, Ronny. I repeat that I saw him crash because you'll be able to see that, after a while, I began to doubt myself and my eyes.

I've heard many weird and strange stories about the war, and I believe every one of them, because this is the strangest, the most incredible and inexplicable of them all. I'm a man entirely devoid of imagination, yet it had me almost bughouse—and the rest of the squadron just about nuts.

CHAPTER II
AN EMPTY CHAIR

RONALD SEXTON AND HIS BROTHER, Kenneth, came to the squadron together while we were up near Bar-le-Duc, during the St. Mihiel drive. They had gone to school together, enlisted together, trained side by side and gotten their little gold shoulder bars and wings together. Ronny was a year older, darker, huskier and livelier. Ken was quiet and inclined to be studious. He could work out any answer in the world in a few seconds on a slide-rule—from the amount of money it cost to take a soldier from his front door and set him down on the battle lines in France to the maximum

pay load of a ship he had never seen in his life. Pretty smart at navigation, too. And in those days the Army didn't have many navigators.

It's a mystery where Ken got time to do all his reading, because Ronny liked parties, and whenever Ronny went on a binge, Ken went along. They flew together, too.

It was foolish to schedule Ken for a flight if Ronny was Officer-of-the-Day, because Ken would find some alibi to hang around the orderly room all day with his brother. People said that, when they were cadets, if Ronny was on guard, Ken would walk up and down with him on his post, and vice versa. They made a good pair at bridge, and always played as partners.

Ronny had three official victories to his credit. Ken had two. When Ken made out his combat reports, he always started off: "Together with my brother, Lieutenant Ronald Sexton—" Ronny was the same. Even their requests for confirmation of victories made it sound as if they had done it together, whether they had or not.

We used to kid them about it. They were good-natured kids, but all the joshing in the world couldn't pry them apart. One day Ronny burned his wrist on a hot exhaust pipe. It was a little thing, just rated a smear of salve and a bandage, but Ken stood there with his brother while the medico was fixing it, wincing every time the doc touched his brother's wrist.

So you can imagine that I was wondering about Ken—how he'd take Ronny's death. He must have seen him go down, yet he had held his place in the formation, gone back to the field with the others.

When I got back from trying to catch the Jerry in the new fast-flying Pfalz job, the rest of them had landed and their ships were dollied into the hangars. Neuvilly was a mud bog if I ever saw one, and it rained almost every night the last part of October. But the field had once been used as the base for a French bombing outfit in 1915 and 1916 and there was a narrow cinder runway down the center of the tarmac. If it hadn't been for that, we'd have had plenty wash-outs, taking off and landing in that sea of mud. It was bad enough as it was, and we had to take off and land one at a time. Every morning a couple of mechanics marked the two ends of the cinder runway with white lime.

I found the little white smear and came in cross-wind, feeling pretty low about Ronny, and wondering how Ken would take it. Somehow or other I was pretty sick of the war right then and I wouldn't have been sorry if I'd taken a slide off the runway and nosed over in the mud. But I didn't. I cocked the Nieuport's wings against the cross drift, dropped down on the runway, taxied toward the hangars.

Major Webster was there, waiting. He said, "Ronny Sexton, heh?"

"Yep," I told him. "How is Ken taking it?"

The C.O. shrugged. "He didn't say anything, and of course I didn't want to be the first to talk about it."

"Sure." I knew that if Ken could stand it at all, he'd want to do it alone, without anybody drooling over it.

"This war stinks," I told him.

He put his arm through mine. "Let's go to my quarters, Mac, and have a snort before dinner. They're talking about changing my gold leaf for a silver one—making a lieutenant colonel out of me and sending me to Chaumont."

I started to beef. "Something else to be happy about. They'll probably send some kiwi from the Quartermaster Corps up here to command the squadron. Why the hell don't they leave a man alone when he's in his right groove? What do you want with a promotion?"

He didn't say anything for a while. We walked toward his shack and he kicked at the mud with the toe of his boot every other step.

"I want the promotion, Mac," he said. "I want to go to Chaumont."

I stood still. "Oh, you do, hey?" my ears were still ringing a little bit, that church-bells-and-crickets sound you carry for a little while after sitting behind a roaring motor for a couple of hours and listening to the rattle of a pair of Vickers guns. I wasn't sure that I heard him quite right.

He said, "Yes, I do." His face had a grim set.

I'D SPLIT many a bottle with Webster, and spent many an hour with him, talking about the war; about the things we had done before, and what we'd do after—if we survived. He was a tall, thin chap about thirty-five, lots older than most of us. The regulations required him only to make an occasional pay hop to rate the wings he wore, but he often went out on sorties with the outfit. Not a red-hot pilot, but capable and thorough.

As far as C.O.s went, he was the best there was.

"What's the matter, Web?" I asked. "Why do you want to quit the outfit?"

He kept kicking at the mud as we walked along. "I don't know if you'll understand or not, Mac," he said

slowly. He kept his hand clamped on my elbow and steered me into his quarters, a small shack between the mess hall and the long officers' barracks.

He unlocked a foot locker, took out a bottle of cognac and poured three fingers for each of us. We didn't waste much time downing them.

"I'm not front-line caliber, Mac," he said suddenly.

"Hell!" I snorted. "You're not afraid—any more than the rest of us."

He shook his head. "No, Mac, not afraid physically, although I don't like it. If I were a hot pilot, I'd stick it out and go over the lines every day with the rest of you. But I'm just mediocre. The average kid that comes up from Orly is a better combat pilot than I am."

"What of it?" I held my tumbler out for another shot. "You're the squadron commander, and a damn good one. Nobody expects you to be another Rickenbacker."

He took another sip. "I can't stick it out here that way. It gets under my skin to sit here and send you fellows up every day; get to like youngsters and have them knocked off, one after the other, send condolences to their folks, keep up a hard-boiled front around the field. If I were fighting with them every day, like an infantry C.O., it would be different. But it's no use kidding myself. I'll never be a hot pilot."

I gave him a loud bird. "So you're going to go to Chaumont and let them send some Q.M. lad up here to take command, or one of these old martinets dragged out of retirement that will have us doing squads east and west between patrols."

"No, Mac," he protested. "I've recommended you for the job. I think they'll give it to you."

"I wouldn't like that phase of it any more than you do," I told him. "Don't you think it gets under my skin, when one of the boys gets his? Don't you think that I sometimes believe the whole lousy war isn't worth the life of a swell youngster like Ronny Sexton?"

He patted my shoulder. "You're hard-boiled, Mac. Those things get you sore, but they do more than that to me. I really couldn't stick it out much longer. You see?" His voice was quiet and unemotional.

I put down the glass and wiped my mouth with the back of my hand. I looked down at the insides of the two legs of my teddy suit, chewed by Jerry slugs. "You're lucky, Web," I told him. "Not every guy in this war can find an out when he's fed up."

I walked out of his place. One corner of his mouth was twisted down as he watched me go out. I really felt like thumping him on the shoulder and saying good luck, and telling him I understood what he was getting at. But I was still steamed up from the scrap and felt a little mean. He didn't say anything more, just let me go.

I was just about to step into the barracks when Ken Sexton came out. I stood aside. This was the first time I'd seen him since Ronny had gone down. He grinned cheerfully and said, "Hi, Mac."

I slapped him on the shoulder with my gloves. "Hi, Ken." Certainly had to hand it to him, the way he was taking it.

Suddenly his face became serious. "Sorry as hell about Webster," he said. "You can be sure we'll back you up all the way, Mac."

I stared at him. I would have bet any amount of money Web hadn't spoken to any of the other boys yet. Yet Ken Sexton talked as if it were all set, and Web had already gone. "How'd you hear about it, Ken?"

"Ronny was telling me," Ken said. "Too damn bad good old Web had to go like that. But we're all right behind you, Mac."

A queer chill ran up my back inside my bulky teddy suit. Ken Sexton looked and sounded normal enough, yet he talked as though he didn't know Ronny was dead. I slapped him on the back and walked past him through the door, mumbling some bromide like, "That's the old fight."

I sat on my bunk and thought back over things as I pulled off my flying togs. For a minute I thought it might be one of those dreams I used to have. I'd dream some bird I knew had been shot down—and when I saw him again, it would give me a start. After a while those dreams would get all mixed up with things that had happened. But I had seen Ronny go down in flames hardly more than an hour ago. It wasn't any dream.

THE rest of the gang was sitting down when I entered the mess shack later. Webster was at the head of the table. Captain Pudge Creed, the adjutant, was next to him. We didn't have any regular places, the way some of the fancy outfits had—just sat down any place—but I noticed that the place next to Ken Sexton was empty. We didn't subscribe to that empty-chair pageantry. It wasn't good for the morale. I walked over and pulled out the chair, ready to flop down in it. Ken Sexton looked up and grinned that nice, clean-cut schoolboy grin of his.

"Ronny will be here in a moment, Mac. Do you mind?"

I shoved the chair back in. "Sure, Ken," I mumbled. "I didn't notice." I went around and sat next to Ape Anderson. Ape had his big shoulders hunched over, his eyes on his plate. Out of the corner of his mouth he said, "What did he say, Mac?"

I shook my head. It was deadly quiet around the table. Understand, there usually wasn't any demonstration when one of the boys went down. Everybody made a point of going about things as usual. Sometimes when we threw a binge, we'd toast the boys who'd gone on—but ordinarily, no fuss.

The strange situation of Ken Sexton's keeping the place next to him empty, yet being so damn cheerful about it, sort of threw us off balance. Nobody could think of anything to say. Ape Anderson made a lot of noise with his soup. It sounded like Niagara Falls in the unusually quiet mess hall, but he didn't raise a single snicker.

Good old Webster came to the rescue. He told about hearing that a D.H. had come in and made a perfect landing on its own field with both the pilot and observer out cold from wounds!

"They ought to teach all those D.H. pilots to cut the motor when they're within gliding distance of their field," Ape Anderson growled, "and take their hands and feet off the controls. There'd be less crack-ups."

That was good for a laugh. Ken Sexton laughed as heartily as any of us. Then Creed said, "Some weird things happen in this man's war."

Almost every head turned simultaneously toward Ken Sexton, and the laughing died like a motor run out of petrol. We finished eating and young Sexton pushed back his chair.

"Who wants to play a rubber of bridge?"

I had to stare at him at that. He'd never played with any partner but his brother Ronny.

"See if we can stir up a couple more players," I told him.

"Get a good partner and we'll take you on," he grinned.

I knew just as sure as I was standing there that he meant himself and Ronny. Yet Ronny was dead. I'd seen him go down in flames. The short hair on the nape of my neck prickled.

"How's for a little piano first?" I stalled.

He said. "Right. Until Ronny comes." He sat down on the stool and started to play. He was good, the official accompanist of our leather-lunged quartette. I stood there and tried to make a noise like singing, but it wouldn't fire. I sneaked back from the piano, and started to ease out. All the others had ducked except Webster, Creed, and Ape Anderson. Webster had a lousy singing voice, and he knew it. He never piped up when we were agonizing. But he was standing there by Ken, shouting lustily. I had to hand it to him right then. He had a rare sense of understanding.

I ducked out.

On the way to the barracks I could hear them—Ken playing the piano, waiting for Ronny to show up, and Web singing lustily off key, keeping him company.

CHAPTER III
ON THE FIRST PATROL

IT WAS COLD AND DARK when the first motor popped on the line next morning. I snapped out of a dream where I was flying a Nieuport with no fabric on the wings. A shaded electric light bulb was switched on down at the far end of the barracks. Grunts, creaking cots, loud shivery yawns. Somebody growled, "Why does the rain always have to stop in time for patrols?"

It was still misty, gray-black outside, but it wasn't raining.

Stewart Coe and Pemberton Levy took hold of one side of Ape Anderson's cot and spilled him out on the floor. The Ape started to bellow and rave, upset two or three other cots, then dragged Levy toward the shower room.

The barracks was awake.

I rolled out. I wasn't slated for early patrol, but I wanted to make sure they went to work early on my bus. I didn't know how badly my wing had been damaged and I didn't like to go up in anybody else's crate. Then, too, I wanted to get hold of Web and tell him I hadn't meant that snotty speech about finding an out when the going was tough.

More motors spluttered and popped, roared and blasted, settled down to purr.

I went to the mess hall, took a mug of Java, dunked a piece of bread in syrup. The boys started to straggle in. Levy was accusing Ape Anderson of being a German agent, endangering the life of one of America's foremost flying officers by throwing him under a cold shower the first thing in the morning.

"Don't tell Pershing," Ape begged. He took a big

slice of bread in two gulps and started to knot his scarf. It was a very smooth scarf and Ape was exceedingly proud of it. Olive-drab silk and wool, with his initials worked in one end. His girl had given it to him. Big, hundred-and-ninety-five-pound Anderson, with shoulders like a bull and the courage of a lion, used to say he wouldn't leave the ground without that scarf—it was luck, reinforced by the prayers of his girl. He'd stand for any amount of clowning and horseplay, but woe to the man who tried to hide that scarf.

Coe was leading two flights on a high offensive patrol. No photograph buses or bombers to herd. Just go out, fly the sector and look for rainbow-tails.

Pudge Creed came in with Air Service bulletins. The Fokker outfit with the rainbow-tails and white fuselage band was headed by the celebrated Hennecke, Pudge told us, one of the best since Richthofen. He was the baby who flew the black-and-white streamers.

"He's got a neat little trick of standing on his tail, and going straight up," I told Coe, "like an elevator."

They gave me the bird. Everybody knows a plane, even a D-7 with a B.M.W., has a maximum climb angle, they told me.

"Maybe it looked like that to you because you were going straight down," Levy grinned.

Major Webster came in. Instead of his trench coat and barracks cap, he was dressed for flying.

"You going to lead the flight, Web?" Coe asked.

The C.O. took a gulp of coffee, shook his head. "No, you lead it, Coe. I'm flying in Pringle's place."

Pringle was in Coe's flight but he was out with a bad boil. There were replacements who could take his place. Web didn't have to go. That was just his way of going out with a patrol without making any fuss.

I yanked Webster's sleeve. "Look, Web," I told him. "It's bad luck to go out when you're waiting for travel orders."

He gave me a half-grin and pulled his mouth down on one side. "Or would that be just another out, for a man who's fed up with the war?"

I knew he was repeating the dumb crack I'd made last night. "That's so much donkey-dust, Web," I told him. "I don't want you to think I meant—"

He walked away. "Let's go, gentlemen."

THEY piled out, across the soggy field, to the line of ships idling in front of the hangars. Motors boomed lustily, cutting the murkiness with red and purple lances of fire from their exhaust stacks.

I trailed along with them to the hangars. Coe took off first, down the cinder runway, up through the ground mist, into the clearer air above. Eleven more after him, one at a time, filling the damp morning air with the thunder of motors.

They formed in two Vs at about two thousand feet, wheeled off to the north. The boom of their motors dwindled away into a drone. I had a funny feeling about Web, the idea that he wouldn't have gone up if I hadn't made that crack about taking an easy out.

I sent a mechanic for Sergeant Beers and we took a look at my bus. On the lower right wing the leading edge was split and one wing rib former was knocked out, but the spar was undamaged. The fabric was torn and split. The holes in the top wing hadn't cracked any ribs or spars. Beers promised to have it all shipshape by four o'clock, including a new altimeter, oil gauge and oil line.

Sergeant Beers grinned at the holes in the duck boards and the smeared instrument board. "I guess if you ain't gonna get it, you just ain't gonna get it."

The rest of the outfit was up and around when I got back to the barracks. There was a new youngster named Libbey, a cocky-looking lad with blond curly hair. The boys were giving him the business, telling him the same story I'd heard ever since I'd been in the Air Service—that Nieuports were being washed out, and the outfit was getting brand-new 220 Spads, any minute now.

Libbey had done some ferry piloting. He fooled them by saying he'd rather have a Nieuport any day. He was scheduled to go out and patrol our balloon line at Fleville, just as soon as the early patrol got back, and he was beefing about it. He wanted to go right out and take a crack at Jerry.

We sat around on our bunks, listening to the blond young fire-eater tell about what a tough time he'd had getting assigned to a combat unit, while just ordinary pilots went up before him. He wasn't offensive, for all his cockiness, just good and sure of himself.

The sun came out and melted away the ground mist. An hour and a half passed; then we heard motors overhead. The early patrol was coming back. We got up and went outside to go to breakfast. We didn't wait to see them come in; they had to set down one at a time. We went in and started to eat.

Ken Sexton was there, and the seat next to him was empty. Nobody tried to sit down in it. He looked up and grinned. I was taking a second crack at the scrambled eggs cooked in *vin blanc,* that the cook insisted were eggs Benedict, when Coe came in. He had

his flying clothes on, and he hadn't washed his face. It was grime-smeared.

He stood there, just inside the door, on widespread legs. His face was grim.

"They got Web," he said.

"Huh?" Everybody stopped eating.

"Yeah," Coe said. "That leader of the rainbow-tails knocked him down near Beffu. He caught fire and crashed in the woods."

"You mean Hennecke got him?"

"That Jerry who flies the black-and-white streamers, whoever the hell he is."

"That's Hennecke," Creed said.

"Yeah, Hennecke," I repeated.

"Well, he got Web," Coe said again. He turned and went out, opened the door again. "Save me some eggs." He closed the door softly behind him.

I COULDN'T help thinking what I'd said to Web when I was trying to get him to stay on the ground. I felt as if it were my fault. Then I suddenly remembered what Ken Sexton had said the night before, and so help me, I got another chill, right down my spine. He had said, "Too bad old Web had to go that way." Just as if Web had been dead then. He had said that Ronny had told him.

I sneaked a glance at Ken Sexton. He was sitting there, eating calmly. I got up and walked across the field to the infirmary between our outfit and the other Nieuport squadron, the Hundred and Ninety-ninth.

Captain Healy, the medico, wasn't there. A hospital corps sergeant was on duty.

"Where's Captain Healy?" I asked him.

"In his quarters, sir."

"Take my temperature, will you, sergeant?"

He got out the thermometer and stuck it under my tongue; after a few minutes he took it out and looked at it.

"Have I got a fever?" I demanded.

"No, sir, quite normal."

"Not the slightest trace of fever?"

"Not the slightest."

I walked over to Captain Healy's quarters. He was still in the hay, pounding his ear. I sat down on the edge of his bunk and shook him awake. He sat up, rubbing his eyes with his knuckles.

"Another crash?" he mumbled sleepily.

"No. Listen, Healy," I said. "I want to talk to you about something."

"Oh, it's you, Mac?" he yawned handsomely. "Mean to tell me you woke me up just to talk? If it's francs you want, get the keys out of my breeches pocket and unlock my foot locker."

"Not this time," I assured him. "Look, Healy, you know I'm absolutely devoid of imagination, don't you? My nerves are pretty good, and your sergeant just told me I didn't have a fever. Then how do you explain this?"

"What?"

"You know that Ronny Sexton was shot down yesterday. Well, his brother, Ken, still goes around talking as if Ronny were still alive—"

"Common form of hallucinations," Healy said. He cupped his hands and shouted to his orderly. "Go buscar a cup of coffee for me, will you, son?" He grinned at me. "That's so common in this war, refusing to believe somebody is dead, that we don't pay any attention to it."

"Yeah," I persisted. "But that's not all. I was talking to Ken about an hour and a half after Ronny was killed. He said, 'Too bad old Web had to go that way.' And just now Web is killed. Ken said Ronny had told him, last night!"

"Gosh," Healy said soberly. "I'm damn sorry to hear Web's gone."

"But how about Ken Sexton calling the turn in advance?" I pounded. "What do you make of that?"

"Coincidence, hallucinations, war strain—call it anything. Don't tell me you're developing nerves, Mac!" He smacked me on the chest. "Why, you short-barreled, ugly buzzard, if you're trying to gold-brick a medical leave, I'll fix it up, but nobody would believe that your nerves were strained. You're not the type."

"All right, all right." It wasn't any use trying to explain it. I'd just have to let it go. "I don't want a sick leave, but I thought, seeing you're a man of science, I'd give you a chance to study a case of psychic phenomena." His orderly came in with his coffee. Healy took a sip and made a face. "Every day I forget how lousy this stuff is." He laced it with cognac.

"See you around," I told him.

"Yeah. I'll be over for mess some time soon." He looked at me steadily for a minute. "If you really feel jittery, Mac, I'll send you away for a couple of days."

I laughed. "Hell, no. I'm brand-new." By the time I was halfway across the field, I was ready to admit I'd imagined or dreamed the whole thing.

CHAPTER IV
THE FLYING STAIRCASE

LATE THAT AFTERNOON, when my flight got back from patrol. Creed told me that word had come from headquarters that I was to assume command of the squadron until further orders, or until G.H.Q. had approved it as a permanent appointment. Major Snell, of the Hundred and Ninety-ninth, was senior officer on the field and I was nominally under him, but I was squadron commander.

I didn't care about it much. Being a squadron C.O. had its disadvantages.

The details for the next day that Creed posted on the board had my name on the bottom as C.O. American squadrons were forbidden to have bars, but I sent the mess sergeant into town with the side-car and we had a good stiff eggnog to salute Web's passing, and toast happier days.

By the time the eggnog was polished off, the outfit was mellow enough to sing a couple of songs. Ken Sexton sat down at the piano and tried to keep them on key. He played three or four numbers, then got up.

"I'm going to see what Ronny's doing," he said. The place was pretty still for a few minutes after he went out. Creed and I ducked out and went to the orderly room. I started to tell Creed how Ken had called the turn on Web's death, then changed my mind. It seemed too fantastic. Somebody knocked and I called, "Come in."

It was young Libbey. "Look, skipper," he said. "How's for letting me go out with the outfit tomorrow?"

Creed had him scheduled for another balloon line patrol in the morning.

"Been keeping up your gunnery practice while you've been ferrying ?"

"Every day," he told me.

"All right," I agreed. "Put him down, Creed."

Libbey grinned a big wide grin and went out. Creed tossed me the salvage and repair parts report and said he guessed he'd turn in. I sat there, sucking on my pipe, with my feet up on the desk. It was quite still outside, so still that I thought I could hear the clump-clump cadence of marching feet in the mud. Maybe it was my imagination, and maybe troops were moving up along the road that ran about two hundred yards from the field.

Somebody rapped on the door, and Ken Sexton walked in. "Hi, Ken," I greeted him. "Been looking over the records. Seems like you're due for a little leave. Headquarters says no more Paris leaves, but I can fix it so's you can have a few days in Aix-les-Bains or Cannes. How about it?"

He smiled. "No, thanks, Mac." He perched on the corner of the desk. "I'd rather stay here with Ronny, and I don't think he wants a leave."

That stopped me. I tried not to stare at him, knocked the ash out of my pipe and filled it again. I lighted up and blew smoke toward the tar paper ribbed ceiling.

"Say, Mac," Ken Sexton said. "I sort of like this idea of the chivalry of the air, don't you?"

"Oh, positively."

"Well, how would it be if the outfit got a wreath and dropped it on Hennecke's drome? You know, with a note saying it was from our outfit, saluting a gallant foe."

"On Hennecke's drome?" I was puzzled.

"It was really Ronny's idea," Ken went on. "He thought it would be a nice gesture because one of our men got him . . . . Odd, isn't it, that the great Hennecke should go down before the guns of a man making his first trip over the lines?"

If it had been anybody else but Ken Sexton, I would have been sore. Hennecke was very much alive; in fact he had just sent Web down that morning. It wasn't my idea of humor to drop any wreaths for a bird as alive and dangerous as Hennecke. But Ken Sexton wasn't trying to be funny.

"Knocked down by a pilot who was just flying over the lines for the first time?" I repeated.

"Yes. Ronny and I were just saying how ironical that was—for a green pilot to get the great Hennecke."

"Yeah," I humored him. "Sure, Ken. I'll talk to the boys about the wreath idea."

When he had gone out, I sat for a long time, staring at the closed door. Sexton most certainly looked and sounded normal, but what he said didn't make any sense. I doused the light and went to bed.

Thirteen of us took off the next morning for a high offensive patrol. Two flights of six ships each, with me riding high above them. It was going to be a little different from now on. As squadron commander it was up to me to keep an eye on the rest of them, so I had a good thousand feet on the top flight.

We took off and beat the sun to the sky, caught

it rolling out of bed, red and angry-looking, from beyond the distant spires of Metz. Troops crawled snakelike over the roads below. Traffic jammed up at towns and crossroads. The coast artillery outfit at Baulny was feeding its two long-necked babies their morning's ration of rosy red apples—a nice mess of applesauce for the Krauts' breakfast.

Ground bumps in the air as high as three thousand feet. The ships below me bobbed like kites. Clumps of cumulus tagged by misty mares' tails moved before a brisk east wind. High overhead a cross current was carrying them west.

At Marq, an American archie battery threw up a signal—enemy aircraft in the skies!

We climbed. In the smoother air the ships below me tightened their formation. The French altimeter on the instrument board of my Nieuport registered three thousand meters, about ten thousand feet, when I spotted the enemy formation. They were flying almost due west, parallel to our front line, over their own territory, near Remonville. Eighteen rainbow-tailed Fokkers in single echelon formation—Hennecke's celebrated Flying Staircase.

THE sun was shooting iridescent rays through the fringes of the scattered cumulus, like a picture in a church window. It glinted from moist wing surfaces, picked out the red, blue and white cocardes. We kept going up, in S-turns now. We didn't want to cross into their territory while they still had the ceiling on us. Our bottom flight had about fourteen thousand, the top about a thousand more. I hung right above the top flight, a little less than sixteen thousand feet, which was plenty thin for the Gnome in the nose of my Nieuport.

The enemy Staffel swung toward us in a graceful curve, like a chain of skaters playing snap-the-whip. Each plane held its place in formation, a little above our top flight. North of Grandpré they turned east again, about half a mile from our line. We turned and flew with them, each keeping to its own side of the fence. The men below me were rocking and wagging their wings, banking so they could look up at me and jab their hands toward the enemy, like terriers on a leash, impatient to tear into battle.

The Flying Staircase appeared to pay not the slightest bit of attention to us, but kept on a steady line, just inside their own lines. One of the Nieuports below me rocketed out of formation. I dived on it and sent a line of tracer across its bows. It was young Libbey, the lad who was impatient to show his stuff. The older heads knew better than to open the ball without a signal. Libbey hopped back into place. I squinted and peered, swiveled and strained to see if there were any more Jerries in the sky. I couldn't see another speck.

It was beginning to get my goat. This Hennecke was a fox with the wings of an eagle and I didn't want to make a sucker play the first day I was leading the squadron. The Fokkers inched nearer. We could make out their markings now. But their noses were still pointed east. Let them attack first, and if they had any friends hiding in the clouds, we'd find it out soon enough.

The last and highest Fokker in line shot over his flight. Black-and-white streamers whipped back from his strut—Hennecke. A single red phosphorous ball shot out from his cockpit. The Flying Staircase telescoped; the silhouetted Fokkers now appeared head-on. He had given the signal to attack.

Blood-red eyes winked behind the shimmering propeller arcs, and gray tracer threaded out as the Fokker pilots warmed their guns. Fanned out, they suddenly took on the appearance of an inverted pyramid, roaring at us at one hundred and ten miles an hour. The rivet-hammer of guns beat in time to the roar of motors. The first three Fokkers dived, guns flaming, on our bottom flight. While I watched, three more black-crossed, flame-nosed demons hurtled in their wake. My top flight broke up the third squad, and we were in it. I never saw so many planes in such a small piece of sky. It was the type of gang-warfare that had been missing from air fighting at the Marne and around St. Mihiel. It was the kind of tactics that had swollen Hennecke's personal score, as well as some of his mates', to huge figures in the past month. Aerial warfare had undergone a sudden change, from small unit flights to whole circuses that came over in waves, like infantry.

It was the first time I'd ever had a grandstand seat to a dogfight. Up above, hardly more than a spectator, watching, deliberately out of it.

Whirling, milling, flame-spitting planes, twisting, diving, rolling. Doing things that would have made their designers throw up their hands and quit. Strangely enough, it was the type of fighting best suited to the Nieuport, this close-order free-for-all.

I never saw such a mad tangle. Time and again it seemed that two or more ships must lock wings. Tail-skids missed propeller arcs by thousandths of an inch. Landing gears brushed top wings. Friend and foe scrambled in a mess worse than any nightmare. And

the guns kept hammering, spitting fire and gray tracer. It's a miracle that a dozen ships were not blasted out of the sky in the first three minutes.

Above the fight, I kept my position, making tight little figure-eights. Hennecke was up there too, circling high above his battle flock, watching, waiting. He seemed to be unaware of my presence, but I knew better. After the first few hot seconds the fight spread out over more sky. I saw a Fokker spin out of the fight, recover, and streak to the north. I peered below and saw we were fighting over our own territory. The crippled Fokker was making for his own lines. I checked an impulse to follow him. Cold meat was out for me. It was my job to stay up there and watch.

TWO planes were circling in a fast, ever smaller series of flipper turns—a Nieuport and a Fokker. The Fokker skidded. Flame spouted from the nose of the Nieuport. It hopped on the tail of the Fokker, pumping lead. The black-and-white-crossed ship went into a steep dive. As the Nieuport flipped over to follow it, I recognized it as Ape Anderson's ship. Then another Fokker dropped like a plummet, jerked nose up out of its dive, and sprayed Anderson's ship with a close burst. Anderson fell off on one wing and let his quarry go. The two Fokkers converged on him. I had enough watching. My hand slapped the throttle, feet dug into rudder stirrups—a burst to warm my guns.

Then, out of the corner of my eye I saw Hennecke start down. My head jerked around to watch. His bright-colored tail flipped up. His black snout cleaved the air, spouting tracer. Down in a forty-five-degree dive. Two ships, a Fokker and a Nieuport, were circling apart from the fight. The Nieuport was driving the Fokker down, herding him out of the general mix-up. The Fokker must have been flown by one of Hennecke's greener fledglings. He was going down to blast the Nieuport off its tail. Dread black-and-white streamers standing out in the windstream.

I threw another look at Anderson's plane. He was being pressed by the two Fokkers. Then I recognized the Nieuport that Hennecke was diving on. Young Libbey, on his first flight over the lines, fighting like a veteran, driving his foe before him, flushed with battle—unaware that the great Hennecke was dropping on him out of the skies. Making the mistake most green pilots did—not looking around.

Ape Anderson would have to take care of himself. He was a cool, courageous fighter, and had been in tough spots before.

My stick came back to the left-hand corner, and my right toe kicked the rudder. Throttle cut, I spun down toward the spot where Hennecke was plunging on Libbey. Couldn't risk a headlong dive like Hennecke's. Black, round head outlined above the streamlined headrest, rainbow tail, black-and-white streamers—Hennecke, diving to the kill.

I let him have a fast burst of seven. Tracer spun out above his wing, arched away harmlessly. A little forward stick, and tracer chewed at his flippers. Still Libbey didn't see Hennecke. His whole attention was centered on the Fokker under him.

Hennecke slid off on one wing and my next burst went wide. Hennecke's nose dropped and his guns sent out crimson darts of fire. Then Libbey saw him. He tried to make a tight turn, skidded a little and dived to recover. Hennecke clamped on his tail. His ship rocked on its longitudinal axis so that my shots missed, but his own bursts were going into Libbey's wings and fuselage.

Libbey threw his Nieuport into what the French pilots called a "tango," a dancing, jumping line of flight. He was keeping his head, giving me a chance to close in. So close was Hennecke's ship now that I thought I could read his instrument board. His head was filling my ring sights. Feet rigid in the stirrups, stick in both hands, I hammered out a long burst.

Hennecke went almost straight up, like a rocket. His whole ship moved through my line of fire, I waited to see him falter, catch fire, or lose control. I had pumped a long burst right into the ship of the famous Hennecke.

Before I realized it, he was on my tail, raking my ship from one wing tip to the other with a steady *rat-tat-tat.* Wasps of death stung holes in my wings, buzzed spitefully past my ears. He followed my every jump. I had the insane desire that had been becoming more and more a part of my consciousness of late—to ram him head-on!

I tried a twisting climb. A burst of tracer and slugs chewed my left wing, cut through it and severed a control cable. My left aileron flapped like a barn door in a high wind.

One quick look over my shoulder showed Hennecke falling away. Libbey was underneath him, blasting lead as fast as his prop could turn the gun cams. Hennecke's tail flipped up. Libbey cocked up on one wing and slid down with him, firing steadily.

Smoke belched out from under the cowl of Hennecke's Fokker. He slipped on his left wing, then

his right. He went down in a falling leaf, Libbey was above him now, following him as relentlessly as he had followed the fledgling in the other Fokker. His tracer chewed into Hennecke's fuselage, crept up, a full burst into Hennecke's cockpit.

The great German ace threw up both hands, snatched his goggles off and tossed them away. His head slumped below the cockpit coaming. His Fokker wound up in a tight spin, down, tighter and faster.

Hennecke was going down!

LIBBEY stuck on his tail, hammering lead relentlessly, until the Fokker shed its top port wing. Then Libbey circled lower and lower, watching the crash.

The Fokker that Libbey had been harassing when Hennecke hopped him made a quick swoop in Libbey's direction, and I sent a stream of slugs in front of his nose. A Nieuport with one aileron flapping loose is no ship to maneuver in, but the Jerry didn't seem to realize my plane was crippled. He banked around and darted off.

Hennecke's fall broke up the fight.

A green rocket shot out from one of the enemy planes, evidently a deputy patrol leader. They climbed away from us and wheeled toward the north. Libbey was circling low over the spot where Hennecke had gone down, several kilometers inside our own lines, right alongside of the Aire River, north of Marq.

I signaled for the outfit to re-form. We had to fly low to pick up Libbey. He seemed fascinated by his kill, brushing the treetops with his undercarriage near the wreck. He took his place and we flew south. The doughboys and artillerymen on the ground were flocking around the Hennecke wreck. It hadn't burned—he'd slipped the fire out—but no man could have lived through that crash.

Ape Anderson was missing from the formation.

We set down on the field at Neuvilly, one at a time. Libbey threw his ship into a couple of barrel rolls, spun down to within fifty feet of the ground, zoomed like a crazy man and came back to make a fast, strut-bending landing.

I waited for him to crawl out. "What the hell is the idea of stunting a ship that's all shot up?" I shouted.

He hopped on one foot, then the other, jiggling his fingers in his eardrums to clear them of the sound of motors and guns. His grin stretched from ear to ear.

"I felt good about getting that Jerry!" he shouted back. "I thought you were supposed to stunt when you'd knocked one down."

"Better learn to look behind you in a fight," I told him. "Hennecke damn near had you cold."

"Hennecke?"

"That Jerry you knocked down was Hennecke," I told him.

"Good Lord!" He stood staring at me, mouth open wide. Then he grinned again. "Well, there won't be any trouble about the confirmation. I hedgehopped down there, so the boys on the ground could get my numbers."

"Oh, that's what you were doing down there?"

"Sure—I didn't want any argument about confirmation."

"There won't be any argument," I told him. "You didn't happen to see me up there, did you?" I got a little sarcastic. "Sometimes the squadron commander's indorsement helps confirm a victory."

"I wasn't sure you were watching, skipper," he grinned.

I gave up. "Better learn to look around," I suggested, "or your numbers will be seen, all right. They'll be seen over the mantelpiece in some Jerry Staffel."

"Say," he asked. "How's for taking the side-car and going over to where he crashed? I want to see if I can get a souvenir of my first victory."

"Sure," I told him wearily, "go ahead."

Without bothering to take off his flying clothes, he trotted to the shed beyond the hangars that housed our two squadron motorcycles. I watched him go. A kid on his first flight over the lines knocking down the great Hennecke!

Then I remembered Ken Sexton's talk of last night. Ken had called the turn. He'd talked then as if it had already happened. I got a funny tingling sensation in my scalp. Let Doc Healy laugh that one off!

CHAPTER V
RAIDERS IN THE NIGHT

I WAS DOWN AT THE HANGARS, checking over the damage done to our ships, when Pudge Creed came running across the field.

"Ape is okay!" he panted. "He went down out of control, but managed to make our lines. He crashed into some frog's haystack behind Grandpré. He just phoned. He's okay!"

That certainly was good news. I'd been thinking

about him ever since we came back. I'd left him in a tough spot to pull Hennecke off Libbey's tail. It had been worrying me.

"Swell!" I told him. "We'll make the big baboon buy us a drink when he shows up."

"The phone's been ringing all morning," Creed went on. "Everybody's steamed up about the Hennecke kill. First Army Headquarters at Souilly was on the wire. Even Chaumont called up. They're sending up some Signal Corps photographers to take pictures of the wreck. Then a flock of war correspondents and photographers are coming here to get pictures of Libbey and a story about the outfit that got Hennecke." I groaned. "Now our privacy is all shot to hell. The world didn't know there was such an outfit as the Hundred and Ninety-eighth until now. The publicity department has been living with the Ninety-fourth and the Marines."

"They know it now," Creed grinned. "This war will get us in the papers yet."

Libbey came back just as we were sitting down to lunch. He had found the wreck of his first victim and he had Hennecke's streamers in his hand, long thick ribbons of black-and-white silk. There was a dark coppery smear on the white one.

The lad was certainly feeling his oats. "Say, skipper!" He held up the ribbons that had once whipped in the slipstream of the great Hennecke's prop wash. "How's for putting these on my ship?"

I frowned. "You're not supposed to fly streamers."

"I know, but I'd like to—just for a souvenir. Is it all right if I ask them at headquarters if I can put Hennecke's streamers on my ship?"

"Another thing," I told him. "They'll mark you. From today on, every pilot in the German Air Service will be out to get the man who got Hennecke. You'd mark yourself that way. You'd be smarter if you stayed inconspicuous until you've had more hours in the air over the lines."

"Yeah, but I think they're lucky for me. You know, a sort of token of victory."

"All right," I agreed. "Put 'em on. Paint 'I'm the guy who got Hennecke' on your ship if you want to. Maybe Chaumont will ship you and the plane back to sell Liberty bonds in Times Square."

"Thanks, skipper," he grinned, "I'll go out and put them on."

I DUCKED out behind the hangars when the high-ranking visitors and camera men from headquarters started to arrive.

Doc Healy came over from the infirmary. "I see you're entertaining."

"They aren't here to see me," I told him. "They're taking a firsthand look at the man who got Hennecke."

"You're a hell of a C.O.," he said. "Hiding behind a hangar while your adjutant is harassed by stars and eagles."

"Listen, Healy." I grabbed his arm to impress him that I was serious. "This thing has got my goat."

"What, the crowd? I don't blame you."

"No. You remember I told you that Ken Sexton appears to think his brother Ronny is still alive? He keeps saying that Ronny told him this, or Ronny told him that. He called the turn on Web's death. Then, last night, he was telling me that Hennecke had been shot down by a man who had never flown over the lines before—that's Libbey, and this morning he did just that. It gives me the creeps, Doc."

"Coincidence. Doesn't mean a thing." Healy stared at me under level brows. "Would you like to explain it by granting that Ken Sexton has established a spiritual connection with his brother Ronny?"

"Hell, I can't explain it at all. I don't believe in those things. But I do know that Ken has been calling the turn on things twenty-four hours in advance. How's for having a little talk with him? See for yourself."

We walked around the far side of the hangars, along the edge of the field, and up to the barracks, keeping as far as possible from the gang of visitors. Sergeant Beers caught up with me. "General Maybach is looking for the commanding officer, sir."

"Why don't you look around in back of the hangars?" I suggested.

"I'll do that." He winked and walked away.

We found Ken Sexton stretched on his bunk. He had a pencil, slide-rule and a pad covered with figures. We sat down on the bunk next to him. He looked up and smiled. "I was just figuring out the lift surface on a plane that could fly from here to Berlin with a crew of five men, a thousand pounds of bombs and enough fuel for the return trip." He tossed the pad to us.

Doc Healy gave me a quick look that said very plainly, "So that's your idea of a spiritual medium!"

We talked for about ten minutes and I couldn't get Ken to make a single crack about Ronny. Ken Sexton was the sanest, most practical man in the world. Healy gave my foot a kick. "I've got to be on my way, Mac. Be seeing you around." I got up to go with him, and we started toward the door.

"You're the guy who's having hallucinations, Mac," Healy grinned.

"Oh, Doc!" Ken called out.

"What?" Healy stopped and turned around.

"Ronny was telling me about your boil—tough luck." Ken smiled again.

"My boil?" Healy's brow was corrugated.

"Yes. Too bad."

Healy grinned back and we walked outside.

"Have you got a boil?" I asked him.

"No. He's confusing me with Pringle. Pringle's got a mean one. I really think you ought to apply for a leave, Mac."

"Me? Why?"

"You're as jumpy as an old woman. Your imagination is out of control."

"Maybe it is," I told him, "but if you haven't got a boil within twenty-four hours, I'll ask to be relieved from duty and sent back to Orly to check parts."

Healy laughed uproariously; then his face became suddenly serious. "Cut it out, Mac. You'll have me bughouse, too."

A BALLOON company at Fleville had a couple of eagle-eyed lads in the basket, and they were directing fire for a whole brigade of artillery that was deployed near them in the woods. Two regiments of 75s and a regiment of 155 Howitzers. The artillery had been a little slow in getting there, but now that they were in place, they were doing a good job.

Headquarters figured, reasonably enough, that some Jerry *Fliegers* might be expected in the neighborhood. First, to knock down one or both of the sausages; second, to spot the artillery in the wood. Spotting camouflaged gun positions wasn't as easy as it looked, unless it was one of those big babies that burned the grass and underbrush in a wide circle around its muzzle.

The way they did it was to send over a camera ship to snap a flock of pictures. They'd compare them with recent pictures of the same territory. If several new clumps of bushes or patches of underbrush showed in the latest picture, that was the gun emplacement. The new foliage was camouflage. Unless the guns were going full blast while the planes were overhead, it was pretty hard to spot them with the naked eye.

The camera plane or planes wouldn't invade our territory without escorts. All of which meant that our outfit was to have a patrol of two flights in the sky from about four o'clock until dusk, flying right around the vicinity. If the balloons and the artillery got their coordinates fixed before dark, Jerry would be in for a very tough night.

Coe took two flights off at three-thirty. I was down on the line when they went out. The field was still buzzing with the excitement of Libbey's victory over Hennecke. Visitors had the guards groggy. Photographers had taken plenty of shots of the hero of the day and they were going around, snapping pictures indiscriminately. That gave most of the boys the needles, because of the ancient and honorable superstition that it's bad luck to have your picture taken just as you take off for patrol. The boys were getting jittery, ducking.

Finally they got off, and I noticed that Ken Sexton, instead of going down the cinder runway, took off along one edge of the field in soft ground. I watched him with my toes curling. It was nice work, when he finally yanked her free, but he came close to bogging several times. I thought it was a heck of a lot of trouble and unnecessary danger just to keep from having his picture taken.

The crowd dispersed eventually. I went in to change my regulation uniform for something more comfortable. I heard a motorcycle pull up, and Ape Anderson's voice boomed out. He pushed open the barracks door with a whoop. There wasn't a scratch on him.

"Hi, kid!" He slapped me in the back of the neck with his heavy gloves.

I poked him back and we wrestled for a few minutes, but Ape was too much of a gorilla for me. He'd taken his time getting back, stopping at every buvette along the road.

He took off the fancy scarf his girl had given him, held it up reverently. "Boy, is this lucky! First my guns jammed. Then my motor quit. I was piquing for home and the Jerry on my tail shot my flipped controls away. I thought I was a goner sure. Then I remembered I was wearing the old lucky scarf. My ship was in a spin, and she dived out of it, all by herself. I kept her nose up by blipping the motor on and off, and I finally piled up right in a nice soft haystack. Is that luck, or is it luck?"

"Only the good die young." Then I told him about Libbey's getting Hennecke. He was glad to hear it. He even tried to convince me that his lucky scarf was casting a benevolent aura over the whole outfit. I waited for him to change his clothes, and we went outside when the sound of motors announced the return of the patrol.

THE ships came in, one after the other, down the cinder runway—all but Ken Sexton. He set his ship

down to one side of the tarmac, and for a minute I was sure he was going to ground-loop. But he got his tail back down, and taxied across the soggy field toward the hangars. I couldn't figure that play at all. There weren't any photographers around now. No reason in the world for him not to use the cinder runway.

I started over to ask him how come. Coe climbed out of his plane and shouted to me. His face wore a scowl. I turned from Ken Sexton to see what it was that had Coe all steamed up. He'd been with the British and was high-score man in the squadron, a sweet flyer and a great scrapper. Usually his disposition was as smooth as silk, but he was sore now.

"What's the trouble?" I asked. "We went out to keep Jerry from getting pictures, and do you know what happened?"

"What?"

"One single Jerry ship came over, and probably took enough shots to make a mosaic of the whole sector."

"One ship?"

"Yes, one ship. Only he flew at about twenty thousand feet, just circled overhead, paying no attention to us. We tried our damnedest to climb up within range of him, but our ships wouldn't take us within several thousand feet. And there was Jerry, up there with a long-range camera, laughing at us."

"Forget it, kid." I smacked him on the back. "We're doing our best—the angels can do no more."

The conversation with Coe made me forget Ken Sexton's funny takeoff and landing, and I didn't think of it again until he stopped me outside the barracks.

"Say, Mac," he said, "Ronny and I would like to have dinner in town with the Du Bois family. Is it all right?"

I suppose I should have said, "Look here, Ken. Ronny is dead. I saw him go down in flames. You might as well face it." But I didn't say it. I just nodded and said, "Sure thing, Ken."

He started away and I called him back. "Ken, what was the idea of taking off and landing in the soggy ground, instead of using the runway?"

"On account of the holes," he said.

"Holes?"

"Yes. The holes in the field—from the air raid."

I stood there, staring at him with my mouth open. "Air raid?"

"Yes. Beastly shame, wasn't it?" He smiled. "Must be on our way. The Du Bois family expects us early."

He walked off and I went into the mess hall. A light sprinkle of rain, the everlasting, incessant rain that came almost every night in the last part of October, pattered on the tarpaper roof.

I sat down and looked up at the ceiling. Pemberton Levy came in. "No use hoping, Mac," he grinned.

"It will stop in time for patrols tomorrow. It always does."

I gave him some kind of an answer, but my mind kept turning Ken Sexton's words over and over. "Holes in the field—from the air raid." I was preoccupied all during mess.

I was wondering what they'd think at headquarters if I called up and said, "One of our pilots is in spiritual touch with his brother who has recently been killed. It has made him prescient. He says there are holes in our tarmac from an air raid. There are no holes now, but it's a sure bet there will be soon. Therefore an air raid is to be expected."

They'd have me in a strait jacket and on the way to a base hospital before morning. If I reported that I had reason to believe a raid was coming, I'd have to make a complete report, giving the source of my information—how, when and where. If it did come off and I couldn't give a satisfactory reason for knowing about it in advance, they'd have a crew from G-2 up here, going through my stuff.

"What's the matter, Mac? Your girl turn you down?" Coe asked.

"You ought to have one like mine," Anderson said. "There's one sweet woman. She gave me that scarf with my initials on it. Nothing can happen to me while I'm wearing that scarf. Why—" And we had to listen to Ape recite, for the twentieth time, the virtues of his girl, and the lucky scarf she had given him.

RIGHT after dinner I sent for the first sergeant and asked him about our anti-aircraft equipment. We didn't have a big archie gun, just two long-range Hotchkiss machine guns, the type the balloon companies used. They were fairly effective for balloon protection, where an attacking plane had to come within two thousand feet of the ground, but not much use in a bombing raid, where the raiders stayed above five or six thousand feet.

He reported that they were in shape, belts fixed with one tracer to every five regular slugs. I told him there were to be no lights after eight o'clock.

"Air-raid drill, sir?" he asked. We had regular air-raid drills, usually at night, to make the men familiar with the handling of the pieces in the dark.

"Yes. Air-raid drill. Have all your men on the field. No passes."

"How about Corporal Hicks, sir," the first sergeant asked. "He goes on leave tonight. He's going to get married to a French girl in Bar-le-Duc. It's okay for him to go, isn't it?"

"Cancel all leaves and passes until tomorrow."

The sergeant cocked one eyebrow and stood there. As a general thing the entire enlisted personnel was in his hands. He arranged the details, duties, leaves and punitive measures.

"Corporal Hicks is getting married, sir," he repeated.

"Cancel all leaves and passes until tomorrow, sergeant." I told him shortly.

"Yes, sir." He went out. His look said very plainly, "Another good guy gone military."

I told the pilots that headquarters had warned me an air raid might be attempted. If I'd tried to tell them the warning had come from Ronny Sexton, by way of his brother, they would have gone off by themselves, shaking their heads, murmuring, "Poor old Mac. The war's got him down."

About nine o'clock I was in the orderly room, talking with Creed. We had the windows blanketed, and one single low-powered bulb burning. The rain was still pattering on the roof. Ken Sexton hadn't come back from town yet. From the road, several hundred yards away, I thought I could hear the *clump-clump-clump* of marching feet, slogging along in the mud.

The phone rang. Creed picked it up. "Enemy planes passing over Septsarges, flying very high, headed your way."

Creed slapped the receiver back on the hook, switched off the light. I picked up a piece of strut that I used to call the orderly on guard and banged it on the side of the desk. The guard came out of the little lean-to beside the orderly room.

"Sound the raid siren!"

"Yes, sir!" His feet slopped away through the mud, on the double.

The raucous scream of the power Klaxon pierced the chill, wet night. I pulled the collar of my trench coat around my ears and went outside. Voices shouted back and forth, echoed hollowly in the dead acoustics of the rain curtain. The moon was a pale-gray half-disc, ducking in and out of saoty nimbus clouds. Figures were blurred and indistinct at fifty yards. A dirty night for flying—bad visibility, chill, shifting winds.

But the report had come through that Jerry nighthawks were aloft, headed this way. The "ears" had picked them up, flying high. It was impossible to guess their objective. It seemed impossible that they could spot any landmarks on such a night.

I walked toward the hangars. The first sergeant's voice bellowed to an unseen crew in the murk ahead, "Get the 'paulins off them pieces. Snap into it."

Grunts, curses, the click of a breech lock.

"Bring them extra belts. Keep the boxes covered."

Figures ran back and forth between the two Hotchkiss guns. A squad was lining up in front of the hangars with heavy chemical fire-extinguishers.

"Shall I fire a burst to warm 'er up, sarge?" a voice asked.

"You do an' I'll beat your thick skull in with a connectin' rod," the sergeant snarled. "Why the hell don't you light a flare if you want to show Jerry where we are—" He stopped in the middle of his tirade.

Through the thick soupy night came the faint but unmistakable throb of motors. High and distant, the drone of powerful, multi-motored ships, somewhere up above those shifting sooty nimbus clouds.

"All set, you guys?"

"All set, sarge."

The soft splash of the rain. The sucking swish of feet bracing themselves in the mud. Deep regular breathing. Steam rising from the slickers of the men huddled around the two guns. And above, the beat of the motors, louder, more distinct. Eyes straining upward to pierce the dirty cloud ceiling, squinting through the rain.

THE sound of the motors seemed directly overhead now. It grew fainter, then blasted out with a fearful roar. A quarter of a mile down the road, in the direction of the town, a terrific concussion was followed by a red and orange geyser, flame and dirt.

Still we could not see the planes. It must have been fairly clear above the clouds. They were spotting landmarks through the rifts. One of our guns opened up, and streaks of pink-tailed tracer shot up toward the dark sky.

"What the hell you shootin' at?" the first sergeant snarled. "You can't see nothin'."

Another terrific explosion drowned the sergeant's words. The bomb fell nearer the town this time, seemed to explode on the outskirts. It was followed by another. We stood there, helpless, and watched.

It would have been impossible to take off and give battle in the air. We couldn't have our ships warmed in time. Taking off on that field in that weather would have been worse than foolish. We were standing, facing the town, when motors sounded above.

The force of the first close explosion hurled us to the ground. The egg dropped square in the middle of the tarmac—a fountain of fire, lighting up the field for a second. There was a shower of stones and mud and cinders. All the oxygen seemed burned from the air.

The next one hit near the hangars, almost on the apron. A man started to scream in agony.

"Use those guns!" I shouted. "They've found us, anyway. Give it to them!"

Both guns opened up with a steady clatter, sweeping the gray-black skies in the direction of the motor sounds. The bombers were going down the chute with throttled motors, dropping their eggs, then zooming off under full power. The blast of the motors told that they had jerked the toggles and were off again.

Figures came running from the pilots' barracks, sloshing through the mud. Voices shouted through the ear-splitting, lung-bursting smash of the bombs. From in front of the hangar a voice kept screaming, "First aid! My God! First aid!"

"Get a stretcher!" the sergeant's voice yelled. "Where the hell is—"

A blast blotted all sound, showed several huddled groups in front of the hangars, figures prone in the mud. The scream of the man who had been hit swelled the echo of the last explosion. The sounds of motors droned away in the sky above.

A voice I recognized as Healy's bellowed, "Where is the wounded man?"

"In here. In this hangar." A flashlight blinked on the form in the stretcher. "My God—his head's blown half off."

"Hold that light steady," Healy snapped. I cocked my head to listen. The drone of the planes was fading in the distance.

"Switch on the lights, sergeant," I called. "They're gone."

"Don't need 'em," Healy barked. "Hold that flashlight till I get this needle—that's it. Hold it." The groans of the wounded man grew fainter. Healy stood up, holding his needle in the circle of light made by the flashlight.

"Anybody else hit?"

"There's another one outside—but I think he's bumped off."

Healy followed the flashlight to where a form was lying, face down in the mud, not far from the hangar door. The man's slicker was torn and spread out on the ground beside him, like stilled wings. Doc Healy leaned over him, felt his pulse.

"Through!" he grunted laconically. He started to roll the man over, looked at his mangled front, and rolled him back again. "Get another stretcher," he told one of his hospital corps men. "Take them both around back."

"Around back? Both of them?"

Around back meant the little morgue shed in back of the infirmary.

"Yes, both of them," Healy said. "Any more casualties?"

"Don't think so, sir," his man told him.

A GROUP of men were huddled around the form that was being lifted from the mud to the stretcher. "It's Hicks," one of them said. "Look—he's got his best uniform on, all set to go. A hell of a lookin' bridegroom he is now."

Another of the group detached himself from the murk. His fist swung at the speaker's face. "Shut up, you slob. He was my buddy!" The two tangled, stumbled over the stretcher holding Hicks' body.

The first sergeant's voice cracked through the rain. "Snap out of it, you guys. Get them guns inside and dismantled. Hop to it!"

I took hold of Doc Healy's arm. "Come on up to the office—unless you can do something for those two boys who were hit—"

"Not a thing, Mac. The war's over for both of them." We walked through the rain and mud toward the orderly room. Inside, we took off our trench coats, propped muddy boots on the desk. I passed Healy the cigarettes.

"This is getting me, Healy," I told him. "Ken Sexton called the turn on this air raid, too."

Healy blew a cloud of cigarette smoke at the ceiling. "Yeah? Anybody else hear him say it, besides you?"

My feet came down off the top of the desk with a bang. "What d'you mean, did anybody else hear him say it?"

He leaned forward in his chair, his plump face pale and serious in the dim light. "A few months is a long time to know a man in this man's war, Mac," he said slowly. "You were one man I thought wouldn't crack. Tell me something, frankly—were there any neurotic cases in your family? I'm in dead earnest, Mac. You can't sit there and tell me you believe in a living man's spiritual contact with the dead—or that a dead man could tip off his brother. It's too fantastic, Mac. You'd better take a leave, go away for ten days. I'll advise headquarters that you need a rest."

"Never mind, Healy," I snapped. "Good-night."

He shrugged and got up. "A lot of good flying men have gone down in the frame of mind you're in right now. Be practical, Mac."

"Practical!" I shouted. "When Ken Sexton has called every turn for the last few days! Don't bother to advise headquarters about anything. Just forget it. I'll get along."

He dropped his hand on my shoulder. "Take it easy, Mac. Suppose I give you a little shot in the arm so you can get a good night's sleep?"

"Take the shot yourself," I growled. "Good-night!"

He pulled on his trench coat, snapped it around his neck and went out. The rain swished in the door when he opened it. I sat there for some time, then went to my quarters. The boys were sitting around, cursing Jerry and wondering how he had found our drome in the soup.

"I don't think they were looking for us," Levy said. "Probably lost their objective in the dark, and we got their package by mistake."

"Maybe they bombed us because I got Hennecke," Libbey offered.

"Maybe." That wound up the discussion. The lights were doused. The rain pattering on the roof made me drowsy. I started to doze off. I had a strangely clear dream. Corporal Hicks was standing before me, dressed in his best uniform. The front of him was all shot. He said, "A hell of a lookin' bridegroom I am now."

CHAPTER VI
"VIVE LA FRANCE!"

THE RAIN WAS STILL SPLASHING in the puddles on the tarmac at dawn. The ceiling was at zero, and showed no inclination to lift. The first sergeant had his men out with the first gray streaks of the new day, working on our damaged field. Our little Renault tractor was chugging back and forth, hauling a roller. Squads of men worked with pick and shovel.

One hole, right in the center of our cinder runway, was eight feet deep and about the same diameter. That and three other holes were being filled with rocks and dirt.

We had a late and leisurely breakfast and sat around the mess hall, squawking about the mean trick the Jerry nighthawks had played on us. Flying was out until the ceiling lifted a bit.

Ken Sexton was there, smiling cheerfully, but he didn't have anything to say about the bombing raid.

He got up to go out and passed in back of Ape Anderson's chair. He dropped his hand on Anderson's shoulder and said, "Never mind, old man, there are plenty of girls in the world."

That brought a big laugh because Ape was always bragging about his girl, and Ken was the last bird in the world you'd expect to find kidding.

Ape grinned over his shoulder at Ken. "Sure there are, kid, but there's only one like my girl."

"Don't take it too hard," Ken said seriously. "No one girl is worth it. You'll get over it, if you don't let it throw you."

While everybody was laughing, Ken went out. Anderson looked puzzled for a minute. "What d'you suppose he meant by that?"

"He was just kidding you, Ape," Coe told him. "When these serious chaps go in for ribbing, they usually do it convincingly."

"Something about the way he said it got my goat," Anderson said slowly.

That drew another big laugh. When a bunch of men live together under a steady, enforced tension, their diversion is apt to take one of two channels; horseplay, or kidding each other about little personal eccentricities. Anderson talked constantly about his girl and his lucky scarf, so he had to take a lot of joshing about both.

I didn't laugh as heartily as the others. I had gotten so that every time Ken Sexton said anything, no matter how trivial, I was on the edge of my chair, holding my breath.

A motorcycle courier brought a sealed message from headquarters, marked personal and confidential. I signed for it and ripped it open.

FIRST ARMY HEADQUARTERS
AMERICAN EXPEDITIONARY FORCES

From: Major Yancey Brown, First Army H.Q. Department G-2
To: Commanding Officer, 198th Aero Squadron, A.E.F.
Subject: Information concerning enemy movements

I. It has been reported to these headquarters through the French Secret Police that an officer of your organization, Second Lieutenant Kenneth Sexton, in talking to a French civilian family, gave proof that he had knowledge of an air bombing raid on and near

the town of Neuvilly twelve hours before this raid occurred.

2. Advise this headquarters at once if this officer made any mention to you or any superior officer of such knowledge.

3. This information must be obtained confidentially and without Lieutenant Sexton's knowledge that his alleged knowledge of enemy movements is known to us.

(Signed) Yancey Brown, *Major,*
Infantry, U. S. A.,
October 19, 1918.

Confidential. Return with indorsement.

I sat down at the desk and cussed heartily for about five minutes. Creed wanted to know what the trouble was. I told him that anybody who wanted my part of this man's war could have it. There was nothing to do now but try to explain this weird prescience of Ken Sexton's to the hard-headed mugs at headquarters.

Stating the whole thing as sanely and sensibly as possible, I sent it back to the inquisitive Major Yancey Brown at headquarters. I was ready to bet all the francs in gay Paree that they wouldn't believe a word of it. For that matter, I wouldn't have believed it myself.

Doc Healy came in, looking pretty grim about something. I thought he was going to start his argument again about my taking a leave until I got rid of my hallucinations.

"What's up?" I asked. "What are you so grim about?"

"I have a boil," he told me. The way he said it, you'd think he'd just been given five hours to live.

"What's so tough about that?" I asked. "The stuff you eat and drink, it's a wonder you don't have more of them."

His voice shook. "I don't mind the boil, Mac. But don't you remember? Ken Sexton said it—yesterday. I kept calling you crazy. I honestly thought it was all a figment of your imagination. I wouldn't believe you. Now I've got it. It's crazy, Mac, absolutely mad!"

I nodded my head. In the excitement of the air raid I had forgotten the incident of the boil. Healy stood there like a man bereft of all his faculties to think.

"I've been trying to tell you, Healy," I said. "I've just reported it to headquarters. Heaven alone knows what they'll do."

"We've got to ship him back," Healy said. "You can't have a man like that around. In a few weeks he'd have the whole outfit bughouse."

Healy drafted a report and I added an indorsement. We requested that Lieutenant Kenneth Sexton be relieved from duty and sent back to a base hospital for observation. I sent a motorcycle orderly to take it to headquarters.

I stood at the door and watched Healy make his way across the field to his own quarters. I felt sorry for him, but I was relieved that at last somebody else believed the supernatural but indisputable fact of Ken Sexton's prescience. I wondered what headquarters would have to say about it.

THE weather kept us on the ground all day, and by dark our tarmac had been repaired so that it was possible to take off and land on it again—if you were smart and lucky.

Mail came just as we were sitting down to dinner. There was a blue cablegram form for Ape Anderson. As soon as I saw it, I had a hunch something was wrong. Not so Anderson. He whooped with joy, and ripped it open. He stood with his thick legs wide apart and read the thing over and over again.

Then he looked around with a dazed expression. "My girl," he said, in an absurdly small voice for one of his size. "My girl eloped with a desk soldier in Washington." He rolled the cablegram into a tight ball and threw it on the floor; then he let a ferocious bellow out of him and strode to where Ken Sexton was sitting quietly.

"Is that what you meant this morning?" he shouted. "Is that what you meant when you told me the world was full of girls—not to let it throw me?" He seized Ken Sexton's shoulder in his huge paw. Sexton didn't answer him, didn't even look up.

"How the hell did you know?" Anderson roared.

Sexton just stared blankly at the far wall.

The enraged pilot kicked a chair out of his way and walked to the door of the mess hall. Instead of opening it, he drove his fist at it with a terrific smash that almost tore it from its hinges. He went out into the twilight.

Levy jumped up and started to follow him. Coe stopped him. "Let him go. He's got to get it out of his system. I wonder if that girl knows how much she meant to him."

I watched Anderson stride along the path, shoulders hunched, head low. He went to his quarters. In a minute he came out with his barracks cap and coat on, and crossed the field to the road that led to town.

The rain had stopped and a fresh east breeze was blowing, chill and sharp. I closed the door. We had fires going in our two French coal-burning stoves, but it somehow felt bleak and cheerless.

Right after dinner Coe and Pemberton Levy and I took the Dodge and went to town. It was only a little more than a mile and we could have walked, but I had an idea that Ape Anderson might be drowning his sorrows, and he was a hard man to carry.

We stopped at the Lion d'Or and had a round of *rhum chauds* to fortify us against the chill evening. We asked the proprietor if he had seen Anderson.

Oui. Le grand pilote who shouted like the bellow of the motor in an *avio,* he had been in. He had bought of cognac. Was it that the Boche had shot down this huge pilot's *copain?* Had his pal gone down in flames, then, that the big fellow who usually laughed was so ugly *ce soir?*

No, we told the little Frenchman, Anderson's girl had eloped with an *embusqué.* She had married a stay-at-home soldier.

The Frenchman was very sympathetic. *"Quel malheur! Quelle blague! Quelle plus grande pitié!"* Then he smiled and shrugged his shoulders. "But one does not hold a great sorrow too long, eh, *mes amis? Dans la guerre,* what is *une petite poulette?*"

We agreed with him and went out after a bit. Neuvilly is only an ant hill from three thousand feet in the air, but it held some half dozen cafes and buvettes. We made the rounds slowly, on the lookout for Ape, in case his sorrow had made him forget his capacity.

It was in the Cafe aux Armies that a *gendarme* came hurrying in. Would we come with him? A great fellow of an American who wore on his tunic wings, like ours, was making a great disturbance, *chez le boulanger.* He was battering on the shutters with great fists, demanding admittance. The *gendarmes* did not wish to arrest their gallant ally, but if he did not desist, one would have to throw the brave *pilote* in the local bastille.

WE FOLLOWED the *gendarme* and found Ape Anderson, hat and coat missing, trying to tear the front off a bakery, shouting, "Let me in or I'll take the place apart!"

He was well on his way to being plastered.

At the sight of the *gendarme* he whirled and swung a mighty blow that would have sent the dapper policeman to the Old Soldiers' Home. The *gendarme* ducked, fingered the hilt of his flat bayonet sword, and looked at two of his mates.

"He thinks it is a cafe," one of the *gendarmes* explained to me.

I went up close to him. "Come on, Ape. I know a better place."

"I fight and die for Lafayette," Ape bellowed, "and they close up their gin mills right in my face. I saw the frog put up these shutters when he saw me coming. It's an outrage!"

"This isn't a cafe, Ape. It's a bakery. It's closed for the night."

His jaw came out like the prow of a ship. "Are you with me, Mac, or are you selling out to the frogs?"

Ape was in mean shape. I knew that even when he was in playful mood, it took six M.P.s to hold his hat when he started to throw punches. Right now, it would take a whole battalion, and Ape would get his thick pate cracked with the broadside of those flat bayonets the *gendarmes* wielded so skillfully. The narrow street was pretty well packed with civilians and soldiers by now.

"Sure, I'm with you, Ape," I told him. "Let's go and have a few drinks. Then we'll come back and take the whole town apart."

"All right," he said. He saw Coe and Levy. "Where's Ken Sexton? He knew my girl was going to throw me down." Tears formed in his eyes and started to run down his cheeks. I eased him toward the Dodge.

"What is it that causes the huge one to weep?" a *gendarme* asked.

"His girl threw him down," Levy answered.

"Eh, bien! That is of small importance. Any girl would be proud to cheer up a *bon pilote* who fights in the skies for France!" The *gendarme* became master of ceremonies. He turned to the crowd, hands making eloquent gestures, mustache fluttering in the verbal barrage and explained how this American eagle was fighting *le sale Boche en haut.* Here he demonstrated with his hands, one hand chasing the other in the air. The crowd watched, spellbound. Finally the right hand got the advantage. It flipped expertly over the left. It had the left hand where it wanted it.

The *gendarme* made a noise that was meant to represent a gun. *"Tac-tac-tac!"* The left hand fluttered, did a falling leaf. The right followed grimly. The left was going down. The crowd burst into wild cheering. The left hand was a foul Boche, the right was the great, brave *pilote* whos sweetheart had eloped with an *embusqué.* The civilians crowded round Ape; girls seized his arms and smiled up at him. Not a hostile face in the crowd. That stopped Ape. He couldn't fight if everybody was so nice to him. There was just one chance.

He scowled at the *gendarme* who had done the air duel pantomime with his hands. "Which was me?"

The *gendarme's* handlebar mustache curled back in a wide smile. *"Ci!"* He held aloft the victorious right hand.

The crowd cheered again. Anderson's blunt features relaxed. The big-hearted gorilla was a sucker for a little sympathetic treatment.

"Vive la France!" he bellowed in his one-eighty-horsepower voice.

An American A.P.M., with his squad of M.P.s on the fringe of the crowd, waved a relieved salute and buttoned the flap of his holster again. We got through the mob to the side of the Dodge, climbed in and started away. Ape Anderson leaned out and kept yelling, *"Vive la France!"*

We got back to the field and Anderson walked steadily enough. Ken Sexton was stretched out on his stomach, scribbling designs on a paper tacked to a drawing board. He had been working on an idea for a parachute for airplane pilots. He had some of the ideas that were later developed in the standard pack chute. His paper was covered with designs and figures.

Anderson stopped beside him. "Listen, Ken. What did you mean this morning? Did you know my girl was going to run out on me?"

Sexton went right on, figuring and drawing designs. Ape stood there for a minute or two, then went to bed.

I sat looking at Ken for several minutes and it gave me a start as I realized that he was getting to look more and more like his dead brother, Ronny.

CHAPTER VII
THE MAN FROM G-2

COE TOOK THE PATROL OUT next morning to fly around Fleville again. We had reported to headquarters that a high-flying Jerry camera ship had spent a pleasant afternoon high above our Nieuports' maximum ceiling, but orders were to repeat the patrol.

They had been gone about an hour when a side-car pulled up to the squadron office and a chunky little officer, with a tightly belted trench coat and a barracks cap with the wire taken out, piled out and dismissed his driver. He had a kit bag with him. I thought at first he was a replacement pilot, but on second look he didn't have the appearance of a flying man.

I don't know what it is about a flying man that marks him. It isn't his size, his weight, or even the way he carries himself. I can't define it—except this bird who had just piled out with his kit bag didn't have it.

He left his stuff outside and came into the orderly room. He gave some kind of a half-salute and asked for the commanding officer. Creed jerked his thumb at me. The chunky newcomer had flat blue eyes, a ruddy face and spiky blond hair.

He said, "I've heard a lot about you."

I didn't know what that had to do with his coming to join the outfit, and if he wasn't going to join us, why the kit bag? I said, "Thanks," and waited for him to tell his business.

He dug into the inside pocket of his tunic and brought out an envelope. I ripped it open and read that Captain Horace Lovejoy, of the personnel department, was to be quartered with us for the next ten days to go over the squadron's flying personnel with the commanding officer. The order came from Air Service Headquarters at Tours.

"You Captain Lovejoy?"

He nodded and we shook hands. I introduced Creed. Creed passed the cigarettes and we sat around and chewed the rag. He told us how the war was going in the S.O.S. When he took his coat off, I noticed he was wearing the Air Service collar ornaments, but no wings. He explained that he'd done some flying, but was at present attached to the personnel department.

I found out later that the "some flying" he referred to was a ride from Tours to Romarantin in the back seat of a D.H.

This hombre had G-2 sticking out all over him. One of the stalwart chappies from the Intelligence headquarters who ran around opening officers' mail if they had German names, and trying to prove that pilots who were shot down and captured in enemy territory had sold out to Germany.

"What will your duties be while you are here?" I asked.

"I want to check your roster with you," he said. "You might have some recommendations to make about transfers. Some of your pilots might be better suited to flying reconnaissance or bombing planes. Some might not be suited to flying in combat work at all."

"Every pilot in this organization has proved himself capable and efficient," I told him. "They're the best gang of fighting men that ever flew out-moded, winged mousetraps against odds."

His face cracked into what was supposed to be a smile. "The old *esprit de corps,* eh, captain?"

"Straight from the records. The squadron has accounted for two and one-half enemy aircraft for every casualty of its own. I'm entirely satisfied with the pilots. That makes your job easy for you, Lovejoy. Just report that the personnel of this outfit is absolutely satisfactory."

"That's splendid, captain," he said, "splendid. I'll just look around, if you don't mind. I wonder if you'd have somebody take my kit bag to my quarters."

I reached for the strut and smacked the desk with it. The orderly came in. "Take Captain Lovejoy's bag to the officers' barracks. It's out in front. Any empty bunk you see is yours, Lovejoy, if you really think it will do any good to stick around."

"Orders, you know," he smirked. "I'll go over your roster with you when you have time." He followed the orderly out the door.

"You weren't any too cordial," Creed grinned.

"He's one of those G-2 smart alecks," I growled. "Why doesn't he come out and say what he wants? I reported to headquarters that Ken Sexton's knowledge of the air raid was a psychic phenomenon, so they get cagey and send a sleuth up here. If he gets in the way, we'll give one Intelligence operator something to remember the war by."

"Hell!" Creed grunted. "How do you expect headquarters to believe that story about Ken Sexton? Would you believe it? I know it's so, and still I don't believe it myself."

"I'll give this Lovejoy a chance to come clean, and if he doesn't, he's in for a rough session."

WHEN I walked down to the hangars, Lovejoy was snooping around. Sergeant Beers cocked an inquiring eyebrow and looked at him sidewise, then looked at me. I gestured with my hands out, thumbs down. Beers nodded understandingly. If Lovejoy started to ask questions around the hangars, he'd get some answers that would be pips. When a bunch of mechanics start to work confusing a kiwi, he's in for a real course of sprouts.

He was still hanging around, looking sore, when Coe brought the patrol in.

At mess he sat next to Ken Sexton and engaged him in conversation. Ken told him all about the parachute he was working on, drew diagrams for him on the oilcloth table cover. After lunch he came in the office with me and made a play at going over all records. By this time he knew we had him pegged for an Intelligence operator, but he kept up the bluff.

We went over the roster together, and from time to time he'd say, "How about this man?"

I'd tell him they couldn't be better, When he got to Ken Sexton's name, he said, "What about this man?"

I said, "What about him?" That was his chance to come clean and tell me what was on his mind. If he had, he might have gotten somewhere. He just shrugged and went on down list of names. After a while I excuse myself and said I had to get ready to go on patrol. I left him with Creed. He was beginning to get under my fingernails for sure. There was no doubt about it. He was up here to try to hang something on Ken Sexton, because Ken had dropped a hint to the Du Bois family about the air raid, The Du Bois family had told the French Secret Police. They had in formed our Intelligence Department, and this Lovejoy was trying to dig up some dope on Ken that would connect him with enemy agents. Headquarters didn't believe my report that he was prescient. So, as far as I was concerned, headquarters could figure it out for themselves.

I was taking a patrol up at four o'clock. The ships were being dollied out to the line. Motors began to bark and snort, to rant and sputter. Yellow and green flashes turned to deep purple and red as the Gnomes warmed up and roared.

My wrist-watch said 3:45, so I went in and pulled on my flying gear. The pilots of the two flights that were to make up my patrol were getting ready. Ape Anderson was all dressed in his fur-lined teddies. He looked bigger than ever in his bulky sky togs. He picked up his lucky scarf, the nifty silk and wool one with his initials on, that his girl had given him. He started to wrap it around his neck, then stopped.

He held it up and gave a mean sort of laugh. "Any of you guys want a good boot rag?" he asked. He rumpled the precious scarf up, wiped his boots with it and threw it in the middle of the barrack floor. "Help yourself," he grated.

"Hey, Ape," Levy said, astonished, "isn't that your lucky scarf?"

"Lucky? That thing?" Anderson laughed flatly. "I should say not. The damn thing is a jinx. Didn't I almost crash yesterday? If I wore that rag any more, it would choke me!" He gave the strap of his helmet a savage jerk.

"Let's go, gang," I called.

The air was clear and chill, high ceiling with fresh

east breeze. The motors were popping merrily on the line. It was a made-to-order flying day. The field was almost dry. We took off and formed into two Vs at two thousand feet, with my ship flying above the top flight. The forlorn panorama of war-gutted France unreeled beneath us. Men and guns pushing up, slogging steadily toward the firing line, a few kilometers away. I looked down at the ships spread out beneath me.

Ape Anderson was slumped low in his cockpit. There was no scarf-end whipping back in the slipstream from the side of his headrest. His head seemed to be bowed.

THE details of the grim landscape beneath us grew fainter and receded as we got altitude. We swung around Grandpré with fifteen thousand feet under our wings, and headed east. Familiarity with the terrain was all that showed us where our own first line was. The enemy had tightened up, and the American divisions below, waiting for replacements, relief and more heavy artillery, had advanced little in the last few days. From our view of the back area, seeing the constant stream of men and materials of war, we knew that the big push would soon gather new impetus.

Jerry knew it, too. He was unloading fresh divisions from railheads at Buzancy and Stenay, taking them by truck and narrow-gauge railway to strategic points along the American sector. Our big railroad gun at Marq was scoring regularly on Buzancy. An American night bombing outfit had wrought havoc at Stenay. Jerry knew he had to move fast. As many as ten divisions of enemy infantry had made a 30 kilometer jump from one point in the salient to another under cover of one dark night.

It took a lot of air protection to keep any semblance of secrecy, and the German Air Force was doing a pretty handy job of keeping the sky clear above the boys in field-gray.

Flying high above our own lines, we spotted a formation of planes boring out of the east on a line of flight that would bring them within half a mile of us laterally within a few minutes. I signaled, and the flight leaders below signaled back that they had spotted the enemy.

Near Amereville they wheeled and came right for us. Our friends, the rainbow-tails.

The pilots below me fanned out. I could see tracer spin out as they warmed their guns. This was Hennecke's old outfit, and Libbey, flying in the second flight below me, had Hennecke's proud black-and-white streamers whipping back from his strut.

There were about eighteen of them. They came at us, holding their flying staircase formation. The two top planes flew on south, passing about half a mile from our flight. The others plunged to the attack, motors thundering, red flashes of flame darting from their blunt black noses as their Spandaus chattered a song of death.

From my vantage point I watched the two planes that had flown south. It was a cinch to figure that they would try some flanking maneuver. They might even fly close to the ceiling and pounce on any straggler from our patrol that tried to make our own lines. They were between us and our lines, now, those two ships, and our anti-aircraft was sending up white puffed blasts of shrapnel. The two Fokkers jockied past the archie and climbed, disappearing behind a mass of cumulus.

They were at it, below me, milling around and around, spreading out, diving to the attack, pulling out to climb and dive again, or circle with some foeman who had closed in. One little group seemed to be the center of attack. I circled a little lower.

Firing on others only to clear themselves, the rainbow-tailed Fokkers were making a concentrated drive on Libbey. They had spotted their dead hero's streamers on Libbey's strut and were ganging up on him.

I'll bet if he could have yanked them off right then and there, he would have done it in a minute. He'd find out it wasn't a smart thing to do—flaunting the streamers of the great Hennecke in his squadron mates' faces.

They were coming at him from all directions, diving, whipping away, lunging from another angle. Libbey was throwing his ship around in a manner that would have made most men seasick. Occasionally he would fire a burst. Two of the Fokkers, converging upon him, almost collided. As one of them stood on his tail to avoid a mate, Ape Anderson came in, half-rolled and set him afire with a long steady burst. Libbey started to dive toward our lines and Levy signaled him wildly. Levy must have seen those two babies that ducked up in the clouds and were waiting between us and home.

FOR a moment Levy and Libbey were together, somewhat below and south of the general melee. Then, like runners from the mark, four rainbow-tails lanced down on them. I dropped my nose and held her down

for all she'd take. The last of the Fokkers to dart after Libbey must have been paying too much attention to that Nieuport flying his ex-chief's streamers, because he didn't know I was there until it was too late.

He was lined up square in my ring-sights when I gave him a full burst. So close was I when I zoomed over him after firing the fatal burst that I could see his face clearly as he turned. His mouth was open in a circle of annoyed surprise. Then a black plume of smoke whipped back from his motor and engulfed his cockpit.

As I tried to catch his numbers and write them on my map board, instinct told me to twist my neck. It was a good thing I looked. Two red Spandau eyes blinked behind the shimmering arc of a Fokker's propeller. Slapping throttle, I booted the rudder, skidded, then ruddered the other way. Gray-tailed tracer zipped through space where I had been a moment before.

It was one of those days when everything seemed right. I was in tune with my ship; my pulses beat with the motor and my guns ripped them out hard and fast. Every man has a few days like that, when he feels invincible. That was one of those days.

This Fokker behind me didn't want me after the first surprise jump. He, too, was making his goal the Nieuport with Hennecke's ribbons. The whole outfit seemed to be out after the man who got Hennecke.

I slid down and pushed a Fokker off Libbey's right wing, made him dive to get away, followed him a thousand feet and turned back. The fight had shifted to center around Libbey again. As I climbed, a Fokker knifed by me, slipping until it seemed that the fabric must rip off his wings. I expected to see him try for my underside. Then I saw Ape Anderson dogging his tail. Anderson was throwing his ship around with an insane fury—something no man in his right mind did with a Nieuport.

It flashed to me that it might have been a good idea to let Ape get in his fight the night before, so he could get that mean feeling out of his system. He was taking it out on his Nieuport that his girl had turned him down.

Then a line of malignant wasps buzzed past my ear and I had to start worrying about myself. When his first burst missed, the Fokker pilot who had fired on me veered off to join the ganging of Libbey. If there ever was a marked man, he was it.

Below, Anderson was dogging a Fokker's tail, giving no quarter, keeping him on the defensive. His ship seemed on the point of buckling several times, the way he kicked and hauled it around. Then it happened.

All along the leading edge of Anderson's right top wing the fabric folded back, fluttered and ripped, baring a skeleton of ribs and spars. His ship went into a spin. The Fokker pilot fired one burst, then climbed for the clouds as if the devil were riding his tail.

Anderson fought his ship, trying to pull it out. It wound up into an even tighter spin. Just a matter of seconds. Ape had yanked the wingshedding Nieuport just once too often.

I got a flash of the *gendarme* of the night before, explaining to the crowd, telling them what a great guy Ape was, pantomiming an air fight with his hands, holding up the victorious for Ape. Right now Ape was fluttering down to earth, like the left hand.

He'd never walk back from this one. All the haystacks in the world couldn't stop a fatal crash.

IT WAS rough going for Libbey. While every Fokker of that rainbow Staffel maneuvered to get a crack at him, our outfit was having good shooting. The Jerries were so determined to down him that they left themselves unguarded, and we were driving them to cover again and again. All the time, Libbey, with those black-and-white streamers, was the goat. There is one thing he learned in that fight. He learned to look around. He learned to swivel his neck constantly. And every place the poor guy looked he saw Fokkers.

Coe got two in that fight and Anderson one. Dusk was coming on, creeping up over the eastern horizon. The Fokkers had lost four to our one in their disregard for their own safety, their reckless, headlong attempts to get the man who flew Hennecke's streamers. It was not typical of the usual military precision of the German Air Forces. It just showed how thoroughly incensed they were at seeing an American pilot, a green one at that, flaunting such a trophy.

It cost them dearly. They didn't get Libbey, and they lost four ships. The only one of our outfit that I saw go down was Anderson. I couldn't be sure about any others until later.

The Fokkers started to climb away from us. They'd had enough, and were pulling out. Just in case it was a ruse, I assembled my patrol and started south over our own lines. I saw the German flight, again in formation, heading into the northeast, smaller by six planes. We never did see those two planes that sneaked off and flanked us. They were doubtless waiting to ambush any stragglers, but when none of our planes tried to

pique for home alone, they must have given up the idea of getting cold meat.

Once we were in formation again, I could see that the only casualty was Ape Anderson. Libbey was holding his place, the black-and-white streamers whipping back from his strut. I would have laid five to one that the first thing he'd do when we got back home was to take them off.

I kept twisting and turning, straining my eyes. Looking for the two Fokkers who had flown on south at the beginning of the fight. Maybe they ran into another American or French patrol. We were within gliding distance of our field when I stopped looking for them.

Creed was standing out by the hangars when we came in. Some American anti-aircraft battery had seen the fight and told him about it over the phone. According to this artillery officer, it was the maddest air riot he had ever witnessed. He said there seemed to be a hundred planes. Every minute or so one would plunge earthward in flames. Creed had expected to see half the outfit wiped out.

It must have been a pretty show at that, from the ground.

I went in and kicked off my fur-lined teddy. Something was lying in the middle of the barracks floor and I stooped to pick it up. It was Ape Anderson's lucky scarf, rumpled up, just where he'd thrown it a few hours before. It was the first time he'd flown over the lines without it.

Coe came in while I was looking at it. "The Ape won't need a lucky scarf where he is now," he said softly.

I shook my head.

"May his soul rest in peace," he added.

"I hope the girl he gets in Valhalla doesn't let him down," I said.

"Why don't you write her a letter," Coe suggested, "and tell her she's responsible? It would serve her right."

I shrugged. Coe made a futile gesture. "One thinks of those things, but one never does them. It would be called unchivalrous, I suppose."

CHAPTER VIII
THE HILL NEAR EXERMONT

FROM THE TIME WE CAME IN from patrol. Love joy, the G-2 lad, had been sleuthing around the boys who had been in the fight, asking questions, pressing them for details. I was alone in the shower room when he came in.

He looked around like a comedy dick in a stage play. Then he said, in a low, deliberate voice, "Does it strike you as strange that every time Lieutenant Sexton flies, you run into the enemy—and he is never hit?"

"You don't need a magnet with those rainbow-tailed Fokkers in the sky," I told him. It was easy to see what he was driving at, but I decided to make him explain.

"But," he insisted, "Sexton is never touched."

"All right," I countered, "several of us have been lucky so far. Does that make us enemy agents?"

He came closer. "Look here, I might as well tell you. I am from G-2, and I'm making a report on Sexton. You and I can work this out together."

I gave a snort. "It's no secret that you're from Intelligence. The whole outfit knows it. And I'll tell you right now you're barking up the wrong tree. Sexton is no more an enemy agent than I am."

He gave me a tight little superior smile that made me want to take a swing at his smug face. "He is known to have had advance information on enemy movements."

"Sure," I said. "He's prescient."

Lovejoy's laugh was brief and ironical. "You'd hardly expect headquarters to believe that."

"I don't give two centimes what they believe," I snapped. "I'm telling you."

"Is there some way he could signal, or receive signals?" Lovejoy went on.

"A million," I told him. "A man in the air can get and give signals to the enemy in any number of ways, and not even be detected. But if you're working on that angle, you'd better tell headquarters to ground the entire Air Service for the duration of the war." I walked away from him.

"That attitude won't help you, sir, when I make my report." He was very stiff and military.

"Can you keep a secret?" I asked him.

"Yes. What is it?" He was so excited his ears stood out like wings.

"We're all German spies in this outfit. A week from Sunday we're all going to bomb Chaumont, then go over to the German Air Force—it's all fixed." His face got red, then purple.

He walked away, his back stiff as a board.

A little later, at mess, he sat next to Ken Sexton, pumping him with questions. Ken was cordial enough to him, drew more diagrams on the oilcloth table cover, showing how his parachute would work. Lovejoy must have decided by this time that Sexton was a very cagey bird indeed. He had a slightly baffled look after twenty minutes of conversation with Ken.

Suddenly Sexton stood up. He said very politely to Lovejoy, "Pardon me, old man, I must go and find my brother." The buzz of conversation died and everybody in the room followed him with pitying glances. He stopped beside Coe's chair, dropped a hand on Coe's shoulder.

"We're all with you, old chap." Then he went out.

THE boys were used to Ken's strange ways by now, and general conversation was resumed. But I sat there in a pool of my own sweat. He had addressed Coe as if Coe had just taken over command of the squadron, just the way he had spoken to me the night before Webster was killed. It just looked like one answer—I was due to get it, and Coe would be in command.

It's all very well to go, day after day, expecting to get it any time. It was possible to dream three or four nights a week about spinning down on fire, and still not let it throw you. But to know exactly, and in advance, when you're going to get it—well, a man had to be pretty hard-boiled not to feel a little odd.

But, strangely enough, my predominating emotion was curiosity, wondering what sort of a bond there had to be between two people to keep them in spiritual touch after one had gone—like Ken Sexton and his brother Ronny. I was wondering if I'd be able to get in touch with people who were still on this planet when—well, any minute now, according to Ken's attitude. I got quite excited, looking forward to the prospect. I decided I'd like to haunt several people; birds like this Lovejoy snoop, who'd probably live to be a hundred, and a heel operations officer at Issoudun who almost got me sent back to the States for dropping down in a field behind a certain little *mademoiselle's* house when I should have been doing cross country.

Ape Anderson would be where I was going, and Webster, and a lot of other swell lads. The Ape would be a great partner to haunt people with. Web and some of the others would be too conservative, but Ape would be ideal—we'd do some plain and fancy haunting together that would hang up a real record in the mess hall of Valhalla. I couldn't help laughing at the image it conjured up. Then Ape and I would look up Hennecke. I had always thought I'd like to meet him, and it was a pretty safe bet that he'd be a member of our trio. He could help us haunt some people we knew; then we'd help him raise the hair on the necks of some of his pet hates. I could imagine the three of us, in spirit, waking some fat German staff officer out of a sound sleep, and watch him clutch the covers and stare into the darkness with fear-brightened eyes.

At the end of a few moments of considering the question from all angles, I was ready to go. And a month before I would have laughed anyone to scorn who'd try to make me believe those things.

I went back to the barracks and Ken Sexton was there, alone. I sat on the cot next to his. "Nice little scrap we had with those Fokkers today."

He didn't answer me. I had half-expected it, remembering that he hadn't spoken to Web nor Anderson the night before they'd been killed—just as though they were already dead.

I got up and walked away. It was in the bag, all right. I was sure of it now. My number was up. I began to feel very ethereal. Then I cracked my shin against Coe's foot locker and was painfully reminded that I was still quite unspiritual.

That night I dropped right off to sleep. I dreamed that Ape Anderson and Hennecke, with a monocle in his eye, were standing there, arm in arm. Ape's bellowing voice shouted, "Come on, Mac! We're waiting for you." Then Hennecke said in correct Oxford English, "Yes, old chap, do hurry. We're off to haunt fat generals."

I awoke and Pemberton Levy was shaking my shoulder. His face was lined with concern in the shadowy light of a dim electric bulb.

"What's the matter, Mac?" he asked huskily. "You all right?"

"Sure," I told him. "What's the idea of waking me up?"

"You were lying there laughing like a loon," he said. "Sound asleep, and laughing until the tears rolled down your face. I was afraid you were hysterical.

"Hell, no!" I yawned. "I was having a grand dream and you broke it up."

"Oh." His face showed great relief. I turned over and went to sleep again, but Ape Anderson and Hennecke didn't return.

IN THE morning I got up and had a mug of coffee with Coe and the boys who were on the early patrol. Then I went over the morning reports with Creed and strolled down to the hangars.

Libbey and Ken Sexton were on *alerte,* and their ships were rolled out on the line. Mechanics were running up the motors. I noticed that Hennecke's black-and-white streamers were still on Libbey's Nieuport. I decided that one of the first things I'd do when I got to the spirit world would be to ask Hennecke if he minded.

At breakfast I asked Libbey if he was going to take them off. He grinned a little sheepishly. "I realize I was a chump to insist upon wearing them," he said. "But once I put them on—well, it would be like backing out to take them off, wouldn't it? You see, it would show that they'd sort of made me haul down my colors, if you know what I mean."

I slapped him on the back and said, sure, I knew what he meant, and good luck.

I talked to Ken Sexton again, just for the hell of it, and he looked at the far wall as if he hadn't heard me. I knew in advance he wouldn't answer. I was slated to go up at four that afternoon, and that meant it would be my last one. Well, I decided to make it a good one.

I went back and wrote a few letters—you know, that in-case-anything-happens kind that everybody wrote home once in a while—to tell the folks what to do with my stuff. They'd get the War Department telegrams first, anyway, so the letters wouldn't frighten them in advance. I'd be with Ape and Web and Hennecke and the rest by the time they got the letters.

Creed was talking excitedly over the phone when I stepped into the office. He waved his arms at me as if to say, "Wait till you hear this!" He kept saying, "Yes, yes. I've got it. Yes."

He hung up. "Two enemy aircraft trying to get the balloons at Fleville!"

Our patrol was in the air, but they had gone to meet a concentration of planes that was putting on a big show east of the Meuse. I sent the orderly on the gallop to advise Libbey and Ken Sexton, who were down at the hangars with motors warm, waiting for just such an emergency. I followed him at a trot. Creed stood in the doorway and shouted something that I couldn't make out.

Libbey and Ken Sexton ran toward their planes, pulling on gloves and tightening helmet straps, climbed aboard and set up a terrific din with the racing of their motors. They taxied to the runway and Ken Sexton took off first. Libbey followed down the runway, but a sudden gust of wind picked up one wing tip. In straightening out, Libbey's trucks went off to one side in the softer ground. His tail whipped around and the other wing tip scraped the ground, tearing the fabric loose.

"Roll out my ship," I told a mechanic.

Libbey taxied back to the line, the propeller blast blowing splinters and ribbons of fabric from his damaged wingtip. He cut the switch and jumped out cursing his luck. "I was holding her straight!" he wailed. "How the devil did she do that?"

"Forget it," I told him. "Get them to wheel out another ship while they're working on yours. Stay here unless you get another call." I ran to my quarters and pulled on my teddy. The motor was booming merrily when I got back to the line, and Libbey was glaring savagely at his injured sky steed.

"Couldn't I take her up that way?" he demanded.

"You could," I agreed, "but you probably couldn't bring her back, and the government wants its property handled gently. Stick around while they warm another ship. I'll go out after Sexton."

He grumbled and addressed a few uncomplimentary remarks to his plane. Sergeant Beers climbed out of the cockpit of my ship where he'd been warming the motor and checking the operation of the dashboard instruments. "All set, sir!"

I climbed in, fastened the belt, looked at the instruments, and waved to the men standing around. My Nieuport waddled to the runway. I held her nose down, picked up speed, and hurdled the trees on the far end of the field. It was a little after seven in the morning. The air was clear and the sun was out, pale and a little wan, but strong enough to clear the ground mist away. The wind was freshening, driving the lower clouds before it, massing the higher ones into great cottony mountains.

I held the Nieuport down low to get all the speed I could out of her, searching the horizon to the north. I could see neither Nieuport, Fokker, nor our balloons. I climbed until I could see the balloon company's equipment and trucks near Fleville. The big, half-inflated bag was on the ground, and I judged they had hauled it in before Jerry had gotten to it. I went up, in wide S-turns, looking for Ken Sexton or the two

attacking Fokkers. They might have downed him and taken it on the run.

AN AMERICAN anti-aircraft battery at Exermont sent up two mushroom puffs of shrapnel to tell me that there were enemy planes somewhere in the vicinity. A billowing blanket of cumulus hung at about twelve thousand feet. I fed her the soup and climbed through the cloud ceiling. Above, the sun was brighter and the clouds looked as if you could get out and walk on them.

Then I saw Ken Sexton, going round and round with two Fokkers. They were taking plenty of time and room, as airmen used to before the gigantic circus and mass formation became popular. As if to say, "This is a gentleman's game, a duel, not like that free-for-all brawl that was staged yesterday."

I booted rudder and climbed toward them. If this was going to be my last fight, I was going to have some fun out of it. I climbed even with them, above them. I knew they must have seen me, but they appeared to pay no attention. Ken Sexton was going around in a tight circle at the moment with one of the Fokkers. The other had just missed a try at Ken's underside and was going up in a lazy spiral climb.

The Fokker who was circling with Ken suddenly dived out of it, and as Ken followed him, pulled up in a fast loop. Ken's tracer went under his tail by a few yards. I located the climbing Fokker over the side of my cockpit, cut the throttle, yanked the stick back to the left-hand corner and pushed my right foot hard against the rudder bar. The Nieuport's nose jerked up, fell off, and she dropped into a tight spin. I let her whip round three times, then shoved the stick forward and stood on the rudder bar. She dived out of it. The Fokker was about a thousand feet below me, making figure eights, and its pilot was watching his mate maneuver with Ken Sexton. They were having a nice leisurely time up here above the cloud ceiling.

I located the circling Jerry above the round cowling of my Gnome, and went down on him. I'd always wanted to know how much of a dive a Nieuport would take before she shed her wings. Well, my number was up. This was a good time to see. I inched the throttle forward. The Gnome bellowed. The prop bit into the air, dragging the Nieuport down in a power dive. Wind screamed in the wide, close-set struts and landing gear rigging. Taut fabric drummed against the fuselage. A gale tore at my helmet and goggles, pressing the exposed part of my face hard against the bones. Down! Down in a scalp-tingling power dive!

To die after holding a Nieuport in a power dive was not to have lived in vain.

The Fokker loomed large before me, circling in and out of range. Then he saw me. His nose dropped. One wing cocked up and he slid off furiously. I cut back my throttle so the guns wouldn't fire too quickly and jam. Now to see if I could get my Nieuport out of this dive without tearing it apart. I centered the stick. The dive flattened a little. I thought I could feel spars and longerons buckle. The stick tried to get forward again. Back a little more. The pressure on my face shifted. I was slipping on one wing. It righted. Back another fraction.

Then I had the Jerry in my sights. The Vickers guns chattered their rivet hammer song as my thumb pressed the trigger—the rivet hammer that hangs out red-hot rivets to seal a fighting man's book of life. He curled up and sank out of sight below the coaming of his cockpit. It wasn't his fault. There wasn't anything he could do about it. He just had the misfortune to run into a man whose number was up, and who didn't care about diving a Nieuport.

His plane spun down into the soft billowy floor of clouds. I eased my ship gradually to an even keel.

I looked around for Sexton and the other Fokker. I saw Sexton hard behind him, tailing him down through the cloud carpet. I sailed around for a minute or two, trying my controls gingerly. There was no sign of strain. I kicked it into a spin and went down through the clouds to see how Ken had made out. For a moment it was as dark as a coal hole at midnight. Then I was through.

A sudden clatter of guns cut through the song of my idling motor. The zing of slugs snapped me alert. Tracer drew a smelly trail of smoke across my face. Something kicked my right leg above the knee. I looked around.

I saw Ken Sexton's ship, spinning down to the earth. The Fokker he had chased through the clouds was in back of me, swinging his nose over for another burst.

I half-rolled, smacked the throttle and came around in a flipper turn. The Fokker threw all the wood on the fire and climbed for the ceiling. I knew I couldn't out-climb him. I dived away and scanned the clouds, waiting for him to break through again. I circled lower. Ken's ship righted itself, then went into a reverse spin. The nose came up for a moment, then dropped again. I kept snatching a look over the side at him while I searched the clouds for the Fokker to come hurtling through.

My right leg was beginning to feel numb. Inside my heavy flying suit, the leg from the knee down was warm and wet and sticky. I pulled back into a spin and followed Ken down, flattening out to circle the place where he crashed. He had struck a clump of trees right alongside of the road leading out of Exermont.

It was the exact spot where his brother Ronny had crashed, five days before!

THERE was a field on the other side of the road. It looked pretty good from the air. It had once been tilled ground and was grown with high grass and weeds, stained brown in spots from gas shells, but apparently free of holes. I cut the switch and brought her in with a silent prayer against hidden rocks.

Long grass swished against the under surfaces of my wings. I was down. When I climbed out, my right leg doubled under me and I had to drag myself erect by holding onto a strut. There were some soldiers clustered around Ken's wreck, and two of them came running across the road to where I was.

"How is he?" I called.

"Pretty bad. He's shot, and got hurt worse when he crashed," one of the soldiers told me. "Who shot down the Jerry? Was it you? We seen him come down like a straw hat in a gale."

"Give me a hand across the road," I asked. Two or three more had come over to where I was leaning against the wing of my Nieuport. When I asked for help, they crowded close, looking me over carefully. Then one of them spotted the torn and bloody leg of my flying suit. He put his hands to his mouth like a megaphone and shouted to some of his friends who were clustered around Ken Sexton's wreck, "Hey, come over here. This guy's shot, too!"

They wanted to make a hand hammock, but I used one of them to lean on and we crossed the field and the road to where Ken Sexton was. They had pulled him out of the wreck and propped him against a tree. A second lieutenant of artillery was kneeling beside him, canteen in hand.

Ken opened his eyes as I came up. "Hello, Mac," he smiled. "Guess we're on our way." I couldn't understand why he'd talk to me now, if my number was up and I was due to go. Unless the fact that he was on his way out, too, made it all right. But I wasn't hurt, except for the hole in my leg.

"We?" I asked.

"Ronny and I," he said. "It's better that we go out together like this. We're so close, Mac, that one wouldn't know what to do without the other. It's better for us to go at the same time."

"Sure," I said. "That's the way you want it, isn't it?"

"Anything of ours you want, Mac—Ronny and I would be glad to have you take it. No use sending it home. We haven't any folks any more. We've been alone for years." His eyes closed and the lids looked thin and pale as tissue paper. "Just Ronny and I—always together," he said with his eyes still closed.

I wanted to ask him if I wasn't going, too. After all, he'd given me good reason to believe that he—or his brother Ronny from the spirit world—considered me already gone. I didn't know how to get the question to him.

"I'll probably join you soon," I told him.

"Don't think so," he said faintly. "Ronny knew we were going to get it. He told me today, just as I was leaving the mess hall. Ronny knew it, somehow." He closed his hands tight, then relaxed them. The fingers opened slowly. The hands lay limp, palms up. The artillery shavetail looked at me.

"He's gone, I think."

He was gone. And it was because he knew he himself was going that he hadn't spoken to anybody. I had taken it for granted that it meant me, just as it had meant Webster and Anderson.

Maybe my number wasn't up, after all. Strangely enough, I didn't care a hell of a lot at the time. My right leg was burning with a searing, throbbing fire. It was out of the question for me to get into my plane and fly back.

"How about transportation?" I asked the shavetail.

"Where to?"

"Neuvilly."

"I'll send you back in a side-car. Might not be as comfortable as an ambulance, but it's all we've got here. Unless you want to wait."

"No," I told him, "The side-car will do fine."

"All right," he said. "In the meantime let's get that suit of fur-lined overalls off and see if I can't stop the blood until you get to a dressing station. Here, you, soldier, get me that bottle out of my Musette bag."

CHAPTER IX
THE ROAD TO NEUVILLY

THAT RIDE TO NEUVILLY in the motorcycle side-car was one of those confused, incoherent periods. All I remember is a series of vague and strange impressions. The artillery shavetail had put a good tight bandage around the leg and poured about half a bottle of cognac down my throat. He generously gave me the rest of the bottle to take along.

The driver was a young lad who was anxious to please. I told him I didn't want to go to a dressing station, but straight back to the field near Neuvilly, where Doc Healy could fix me up. When I said, "Step on it," he took me literally.

The roads were rough and rutted, shell-torn, pitted and gouged with heavy traffic and machinery of war. He twisted the fuel handle of that Harley-Davidson and tore over those roads like an ambulance on a wide paved highway. If any other vehicle approached, he batted down his Klaxon and held it there. At cross-roads, or passing troop units, he'd bellow, "Make way for a woundit ayveeyator!"

We missed trucks by inches, bounced clear off the road, skidded on the thin edge of slime-filled ditches; still he didn't slow down. He only pushed his Klaxon with more vehemence and shouted louder, "Make way for a woundit ayveeyator!" The bouncing didn't make my leg feel any better. I was getting a bit light-headed, so I started to take regular nips out of the bottle.

It was an eighteen or nineteen-kilometer ride, most of it over territory that had recently been taken from the enemy. Just a few minutes in the air, but a long painful trip over the bum roads with a cowboy in a rickety motorcycle.

The leg began to feel mean again and I took a few more deep swigs from the artillery shavetail's bottle. From then on it was a chaotic haze. The red face of the roaring and indignant M.P. was merged with stone walls and Mack trucks, hurtling toward us, flanked by a mass of Fokkers spitting red, changing abruptly to a row of trees who reached out their branches and tried to hit the landing gear. A confusion of impressions and effects, all wrapped up in a symphony of sound effects; the popping motor, the raucous blast of the Klaxon, and the driver's hoarse, peremptory shouts of "Make way! Make way for a woundit—"

WE WERE at the field, in the infirmary, and Doc Healy was bending over me. He gave me an antitetanus shot, said I should have gotten one right away, and doubted whether it would do any good. He said the artillery shavetail's bandage wasn't bad for a layman; then he started to give me hell in general, and when he had me arguing, he stuck an iodine probe in the wound.

"The bullet went clean through, you lucky mug," he told me. "And it probably wasn't tracer, from the looks of the wound. So all you have to worry about now is a game leg—unless lockjaw sets in. Coming all this way without getting a shot in the arm! You fool!" He started to tie me up again. "You leave here in a little while, fella, in a nice, easy-riding G.M.C. ambulance, and they put you on a train for a base hospital in the south of France, and you gold-brick around with the nurses and civilians for a couple months. What the hell did you ever do to deserve a break like that?"

He knew the old leg was hurting like hell and he was just giving me the business.

He took another needle from his case, dipped it in alcohol and swabbed my arm with iodine. "This will make you sleep."

"Wait a minute, Healy," I said. "Ken Sexton is gone. I was there when he passed out. He kept saying he was glad that he and Ronny went out together. He said that Ronny told him they would both get it today. I'm a little confused in my mind right now. Ronny was shot down five days ago, wasn't he?"

"Sure he was. Hold out your arm."

"Wait—how do you explain all this?"

Healy's face was very serious. "I can't, Mac. I wouldn't attempt to make any man believe it, wouldn't expect him to. All I know is that it happened. It gives me the creeps, Mac. Why, if Ken hadn't been bumped, he'd have gone around getting advance dope from Ronny until the whole outfit was bughouse." He shook his head slowly. "It's got me licked. If you tried to tell anybody about it, they'd say, just as I did, 'war hysteria' and smile pityingly."

"All right," I said. "That's how I figure it. Let's have that sleep neddle." He leaned over with the needle. The door opened and Captain Lovejoy brushed past the orderly. His face was grim and set.

"You fixed things up to suit yourself, didn't you?" he rasped.

"I don't get you."

"Oh, I know, the old *esprit de corps*. You knew I had the goods on Sexton, so to save the squadron's name you followed him up above the clouds and shot him down. I know the way you airmen figure. You take care of your own dirty laundry and let headquarters go hang. You shot him down up above the clouds, where there were no witnesses, so he could be listed as 'Killed in action.' I can't prove it, but I know it!" His face was apoplectic.

Healy lifted his needle.

"Just a minute," I told Healy. I sat up. "He died in action, killed by an enemy airman. He was no spy."

His face screwed up in an unpleasant smile. "Really?"

I threw my good leg off the table, slid to the floor, holding the table with my left hand. Healy moved close, but didn't try to stop me. "You don't believe it, do you?" I asked.

"Of course not!"

I swung my right from the knees. It clipped him square on the chin and sent him sprawling on the floor. He lay stretched out like a rag doll. I had to clutch the table with both hands to keep from going down. Healy helped me to climb back on the table. He was grinning from ear to ear.

"I knew you were going to do that, Mac. If you hadn't, I would have."

I took one more look at the limp form on the floor. "All right now, Doc. Let's have that needle."

I went drowsy, almost at once . . . . Ape Anderson and Hennecke, arm in arm, stood there watching. Ape said in his great booming voice. "Let's go. I guess Mac won't be with us, after all."

Hennecke shook his head sadly. Arm in arm they walked away.