



# HANDICAP FLIGHT

by WILLIAM E. BARRETT

*Death was writing on the black wings of that Yank bomber as it hurtled on toward Mouzon. It was a mad gamble—to send one lone pilot on a mission where eight ships and sixteen men had failed!*

**G**RIMLY PURPOSEFUL, the seven D.H.s droned through the sky. Beneath them was a crazy-quilt terrain of forests, streams, roads, tracks and broad, sloping fields; ahead of them gleamed the silver ribbon of the Meuse. Nestled into a curve of the river

was Stenay, beyond that was Raucourt and then—Mouzon.

Mouzon was a challenge to the American bombers. Word had come through that the yards and factories of Mouzon must be bombed. Word had evidently been passed along the other side of the line to the effect that

they must not be bombed. So far, Germany's orders had been carried out. The De Havillands had been beaten back twice when within sight of the city. Today there were fourteen very grim men riding the "coffins." Like the six hundred that charged so uselessly and bravely at Balaclava, these fourteen knew that their orders had been blundered and that there were better ways of getting Mouzon than the method adopted.

Barry Dean, deputy flight leader, flew under the right wing tip of his leader, Jack Keefe. He could sense Keefe's tension in the way the man handled his ship. Keefe was near the breaking point. He had been on the two previous unsuccessful raids; so had Barry Dean and Ed Diamond. The others were new.

Like the summoning of the genii from a rub on Aladdin's lamp, the blue tails flashed suddenly into view in the high sky. One moment, there was nothing but cloud above the bombers; then Udet was there with his bluetailed Fokkers—the grim guardians of Mouzon.

Keefe saw them as swiftly as did Barry Dean. His hand flashed a warning signal and the formation tightened. Throttles wide open, the grim ships raced the harder for Mouzon. Then light flashed on wings that tipped briefly in the blue, and the Fokkers were coming down.

As a hailstorm slashes into a field of grain, so did they come to the bombers. Guns spitting and throttles wide, they roared in. Barry cursed at the sluggish controls of his heavily laden ship as a Fokker bounced under him and lashed him with a leaden stream. Another Fokker corkscrewed out his dive and sprayed Jack Keefe's rear cockpit.

Barry saw Lonny Matthews standing by the leader's rear gun, the sweat rolling down his face, then Barry's gun was spitting and the Fokker was rolling over convulsively like a thing endowed with life and about to part with that life.

A puff of flame and the Fokker was gone. The air was filled with them. The one that had been shooting at Barry was gone, too, and Barry didn't know what had happened to him. Two more came from nowhere and converged upon Jack Keefe in two streaky lines. The leader's D.H. seemed to come literally apart in the air. A wing gave way and then the fuselage buckled. Flame leaped from the badly placed cockpit and Barry Dean turned sick as he saw the wild look of terror on Lonny Matthews' sweat-streaked face.

Jack Keefe turned once in the cockpit and threw out his hand desperately as though he would check

the awful fate that was sweeping down on him. Then the D.H. was gone in a cloud of greasy smoke. Another followed it wing over wing down the long, long sky to eternity.

HARD-PRESSED by two Fokkers, Barry Dean flashed a desperate signal to his gunner, Terry O'Day, and Terry let the bombs go down. There would be no raid on Mouzon today.

Lightened of the crippling load, the D.H. became more manageable. Barry hurled it around like a pursuit job, and his jaw was hard with the effort of handling it; then he was shooting, and he was conscious of the rear gun keeping pace with his. Terry was on the job, too, and the Fokkers faded out of his vicinity.

Off to Barry's right, a lone D.H. was chasing around in a desperate, absurd circle, while three Fokkers rode with it and peppered it with lead. Death was writing on the black wings of the bomber with his bony finger and Barry hurled his ship across the sky like a mad meteor. He had a Fokker in flames before the German knew what had hit him.

The others broke badly and Barry rattled the dice in the death cup for another until the man dived out and hit for safety. The third Fokker discovered important business elsewhere, and Barry looked across into the cockpit of the other D.H. Ed Diamond's white face gleamed behind the goggles and the man waved his hand grudgingly. Barry grunted and waved back.

Despite the tension of the moment, he was conscious of the fact that he would have preferred saving any other man in the flight.

But now the tide of battle turned. The D.H.s had dropped all their bombs on the inoffensive fields and streams and forests below. Freed of the weight, they were proving what tough fighters they could be when they were not handicapped. The Fokkers reeled under the onslaught of desperate, baffled men in huge flying dreadnaughts.

With Barry Dean flying point, the bombers drove their flying wedge through the German scouts and cleared for home. The Germans, seemingly satisfied with having downed three ships and spoiled the raid, dropped back. Barry slumped in the cockpit and cursed vehemently.

He cursed harder when his battered flight crossed the lines. Cruising in plain view of the two opposing armies were three full flights of Spads—parading Spads that flew monotonously back and forth at two

thousand feet along the American balloon line where there was not a German threat a week.

The other D.H. pilots saw the Spads, too, and Barry knew what they were thinking. A murdering brute of a German in a yellow-striped Albatross had shot down a balloon two weeks ago and had shot the observer as he floated down in his chute. The sausage men had squawked so loudly that the Spads had been nursing the sausages ever since while the D.H.s went unescorted on raids that they could not carry out. Barry growled.

"And the major is too damned polite to squawk louder than the sausage men and get us protection," he said bitterly. "He'd rather send us out and give us hell when we come back—if we do. And now that poor Keefe isn't here to take the blame, I'll get it"

He slumped farther down in his cockpit and, at the moment, it seemed like a very badly conducted war.

NOR was Barry wrong about his being blamed for the debacle which had cost three ships. Major Paul Crane, the thin lipped C.O., had him on the carpet before he could get out of his flying kit. When he emerged from the Commander's sanctum, his face was red and he was talking to himself. A group of four men were playing cards in the bull pen and Tom Pace hailed him.

"Come on, Barry. Grab a chair and pull it up."

Barry hesitated. The four men at the table had all been on the luckless raid. They were Tom Pace, Ed Diamond, Ralph Castle and Terry O'Day.

Poker was the squadron's substitute for whiskey since H.Q. had become fussy on the subject. Nerve-tortured men worked off the tension by playing for high stakes. Barry had been playing with "them regularly, but the pace was too stiff for him. Instinctively his hand dropped to his pocket.

He hadn't a sou to his name and it was still a week till pay day. Still, he couldn't admit that very well. He outranked every man at the table except Diamond, and an officer was supposed to have funds. The others had incomes from home to help out their meager pay; all that Barry had at home were obligations. Still, it would look funny if he refused to play and, besides, he wanted to gamble away the tension. He reached for a chair.

"Deal me cards," he said, "and make 'em low to start with. I don't want to win the first hand."

Castle was dealing. He grinned. "You're as bad as old lucky, over there. Diamond won't play unless he

wears that crazy jacket his girl made him. Hot as hell in here, but he will wear it."

Barry grinned feebly and took his cards. He didn't feel up to kidding Ed Diamond. He disliked the man plenty. As he fanned his hand, he looked the table over. Diamond was banking the game and, as usual, winning.

According to the rules in force, the men settled after the game. Diamond pushed a stack of chips across the table and Dean took them. In spite of his professed objection, Barry won the first hand.

After that the game went sour on Barry Dean. Luck consistently ran against him and twice Diamond topped his hands. The man was playing in phenomenal luck and the balance of cash flowed steadily across the table to the growing pile before him. Twice Barry called for more chips and got them. Tight-lipped, he played with the certain knowledge that he was in for an embarrassing time of it at settling up unless his luck changed.

Pace and O'Day were losing heavily and kidding about it. They were both well-heeled, and losses didn't bother them much. Castle was playing quietly and skilfully and, although he was losing slightly, his game was conservative and he did not get far in. Diamond played boastfully and with a lot of hocus-pocus; blowing on cards, appealing to gods of luck and rubbing the crazy buckskin jacket that was supposedly his *porte bonheur*.

It was hot in the room and the man perspired freely. Although good-looking after a fashion, he packed too much beef and his face was too red. He was the type of man upon whom perspiration becomes sweat. He had large teeth and loose lips and he smiled too much. Dean found himself hating Diamond without any definite cause.

THE third stack of chips disappeared from the table in front of Barry Dean and he called for another twenty-five dollars' worth. Diamond raised his eyebrows and counted them out. Diamond had just dealt and the cards passed to Terry O'Day. The one-winger dealt. Barry drew four queens.

No man who is a gentleman will insult four ladies, and certainly no poker player will. Barry bet them hard and, after the draw, the competition dropped out, only Diamond remaining. Diamond smiled blandly.

"I'm the big winner," he said easily, "so I'll contribute to your pot." He shoved two stacks of chips into the middle, seeing ten dollars' worth of bet and

raising ten. Barry reached for his stack. Diamond had drawn two cards.

Four queens were worth an awfully hard play but he just had enough to see the bet.

"I'll buy another stack," he said grimly. Castle, who was watching the play intently with the others, shook his head.

"Table stakes, son," he said softly. "Nobody ever buys here in the middle of a hand." Diamond raised his eyebrows.

"It's not an iron-clad rule," he said smoothly, "and I don't think we should enforce it if the heavy loser wants to bet."

Castle bit his lips. The others kept silent and Diamond turned to Barry Dean. "Let you have fifty if you want 'em," he said. Barry's mouth felt dry. He nodded.

"Give 'em to me."

Even as he reached for those chips he knew that he was getting in deeper than his ability to repay. His pay wouldn't cover his losses if he did lose, and even the pay was many days away. Terms were cash in the air service, where no man knew if he'd ever see another pay day or not. Still, Barry took the chips and then shoved them out into the middle, all in a heap. He knew that Diamond was prepared to match that amount or he would not have suggested it. He raised his eyes.

Diamond was looking at him with that infernal smile on his face and with the sweat dripping off his ears and oozing around the top of his collar. There was triumph in Diamond's face and malice in his eyes. Suddenly Dean knew that Ed Diamond hated him—had hated him for some time; probably because he, Barry, had been chosen deputy flight commander and given other privileges that Diamond hadn't rated.

Almost as surely, Barry knew that his four queens were not enough. His stomach seemed to grow cold at the thought and a swift panic rose within him. Diamond pushed fifty dollars' worth of chips into the middle.

"I'll call," he said softly, "since you have no more chips."

Slowly and with hands that felt dead, Barry turned over his four queens. Diamond grinned and then shook his head sadly. He dropped his hand on the table.

Four aces stared up into Barry's face and the room seemed to revolve.

"YOUR attention, gentlemen, if you please. Major Crane requests general assembly in ten minutes."

The adjutant stood in the doorway of the bull pen as he made the announcement. Diamond paused in the act of raking in the chips. "I guess that ends the session," he said. "Sorry I can't give the losers immediate satisfaction. Cash, gentlemen?"

He slapped a roll on the table and made change swiftly as Pace and Castle traded in. Terry O'Day had no chips showing, so he merely paid for those he had drawn. Barry's face was white. He wet his lips nervously and then squared his shoulders. Diamond looked at him.

"Two hundred dollars, Dean. Right?"

Barry nodded. "Right. Do you mind if I give you an I.O.U.?" The words came hard, and he felt the eyes of the others upon him, but there was no other out. Diamond frowned.

"Sorry, Dean, but I'd rather have cash. The rules, you know."

Terry O'Day had his hand in his pocket, but he hesitated as Pace shook his head. One didn't offer loans unless one was asked. It was rather an insult. Barry Dean didn't ask.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I haven't got the cash on me, Diamond. I'll take up the I.O.U. at the earliest possible moment"

Diamond shrugged. "I guess I'D have to take it" he said grudgingly. "After all, you did save my life this morning." There was a sneer in his voice and Barry's face grew red and then a dead white. His fists clenched and then slowly opened. He pulled out a field memo book and wrote hastily, then flipped the sheet on the table.

"You'll get your money this afternoon within a few hours," he said, "and that shouldn't hurt you. I wouldn't save your life for ten times that"

With all that he could muster of dignity, he turned and strode from the room. He had not the faintest idea of where he could get two hundred dollars within a few hours, but he knew that he had to get it. It was out of the question to ask it of any of the men in the game after what had happened. It was doubtful if any other four men in the outfit could contribute the amount needed in such quick time. But as he strode toward the general assembly room, Barry carried his fists in hard, knotted balls.

Even if it took a miracle, he was going to redeem that I.O.U. before night fell. He had to.



AMID a dead silence, Major Crane faced his pilots in the squadron assembly hall. His thin lips were drawn in a hard straight line and his gray eyes gleamed coldly. The pilots sat tensely, uncomfortably, in their folding chairs where ordinarily they would have sprawled. Barry Dean was seated next to Ed Diamond and that did not contribute to his comfort. Neither man spoke. The major laid the flat of his knuckles against the desk before him.

"Gentlemen, we have three miserable failures chalked against us. It is imperative that we bomb the munitions plant at Mouzon today. The honor of the squadron is at stake. Since an entire flight seems unable to get through and do the complete job on railroad yards and factories, I am asking for a volunteer to fly in and sacrifice himself to get the munitions plant. Before you speak, I must warn you that there is very little chance of that volunteer's returning."

He stood straight and grim before them and the pilots matched him stare for stare. They didn't need him to tell them that a one-man bombing attack would mean curtains to the one man. They knew. Iron-hard and with a bomber's rough and ready philosophy, these men were capable of throwing their lives away—but they had first to approve the cause.

They were thinking now that a flight could get through and that a one-man show was not necessary; that the major should yell like a sausage officer and get them Spads. They were remembering eight ships with sixteen comrades that had been sacrificed to three futile attempts on Mouzon. One balloon man had died over a week ago under the guns of a yellow-striped Albatross, and eighteen Spads had guarded the balloons ever since. Somewhere the proportions were wrong. Not a man volunteered.

For a long two minutes the major stood before them. Twice he asked for volunteers and each time he met only hard, stubborn glances. He was wise enough to know when he was licked and too wise to hint that anyone lacked courage. He shrugged.

"I think that I understand, gentlemen," he said heavily. "But believe me, it is necessary that we get that munitions plant to keep our reputation clean. Will you consent to having a volunteer chosen by lot?"

His eyes searched the group and he saw consent in the eyes that met his. These bombers were born gamblers and a game for such stakes had a terrific appeal. He nodded.

"We'll cut cards and the low man goes. Fair?" He

raised his hand. "Any of you gentlemen happen to have a deck with you?"

There was a stir at Barry Dean's elbow. Ed Diamond was fumbling with a deck of cards. Barry's lips curled. Diamond would have cards and should; he owed them enough.

WITH a muffled acknowledgment the major took Diamond's cards and shuffled them. He had fifteen pilots before him. "On second thought, gentlemen, we are liable to have the complication of ties and of low cards being selected first if we cut. I suggest that you each name a card and I will cut the deck. The man who names the card closest in suit and value to the one I turn is elected. Okay?"

"Right." The assembled pilots warmed up. Here was a game to a gambler's liking. A man made a guess and hoped that his guess was cockeyed. Death awaited the best guesser.

Barry Dean was conscious of the fact that the man beside him was trembling. Ed Diamond was afraid that his luck would stay with him perhaps and that he would guess right. So be it. Barry was conscious of a quiver along his own spine, but he hardly feared one way or another. His luck could hardly get much worse. He was in a terrible jam, anyway. The guessing began.

"King of hearts." "Jack of clubs." "Three of hearts."

It ran along the rows and came to Barry. He picked the four of clubs. Diamond didn't hesitate. "Trey of diamonds," he shouted.

The guessing was over. For a moment of electric suspense, the pilots sat grimly intent while the adjutant read back his list of the cards selected for confirmation. Then the major stretched out his hand and cut the deck. Fifteen necks craned and fingers bit into palms. The major's voice was a trifle shaky.

"It is the deuce of diamonds," he said solemnly.

Ed Diamond stiffened in his chair like a man who receives a heavy charge of electricity. His breath whistled through his teeth. His guess had been closest to the card drawn—trey against deuce.

Every eye in the room turned toward him and then men turned away. It is not nice to see a man's soul bared with its ignoble fear of death. Diamond's fear was all too evident. His usually florid face was a pasty gray, his loose lips trembled. Although he had been capable of taking his chances with the rest, he did not have that cold-steel something that makes a man take a forlorn or hopeless chance with a smile. The major looked at him, troubled.

"You will carry out the raid on Mouzon, lieutenant?"

"Ye—yes." There was no out for Diamond with that grim jury sitting there. Every man who guessed a card committed himself when he made the guess. The major turned his eyes away from the stricken man. He attempted a lighter tone.

"Lieutenant Diamond has our congratulations, I am sure. A cheer is in order, I believe."

To a man they gave it—a rip-roaring tiger that ended with the name of Diamond three times repeated. Then the major picked up a paper.

"Risking an anti-climax," he said, "I propose that we pick cards again for another assignment that I have for a man in this flight. Lieutenant Diamond is excused."

There was a noticeable stiffening in the ranks. Diamond left the room and the card guessing began again. No man knew what this choice portended. They were grimly alert. Barry again picked the four of clubs. When the card was turned, it was the club six. He was the closest man.

For a moment the major hesitated, his face poker calm; then he smiled his cold smile. "The assignment is a ferry job," he said drily. "Lieutenant Dean will fly that Rolls Royce D.H. to Le Bourget at Paris and return via Romorantin, where he will pick up a new Liberty D.H. assigned to this squadron. That will be all."

Paris! And a stop-over job where a man could goldbrick time and get twenty-four hours in the gay city. In a twinkling, Barry was surrounded and the others were slapping him on the back. "Luckiest guy in the service." "Horseshoes."

With difficulty Barry Dean broke away. That trip to Paris sounded great, but it did not do a man much good when he was broke—and he was pledged to raising two hundred dollars that afternoon. He mopped his perspiring forehead.

"Luckiest guy in the service, hell!" he muttered. "The kind of luck that I have just makes a fool out of me."

OUTSIDE, Diamond was waiting for him—a strangely changed Diamond who was stripped of the usual arrogance, fearful, haunted, uncertain. He clutched at Barry's arm, despite Barry's evident hostility, and drew him off into a corner. Once there, he made a bold effort to capture some of his old sneering assurance.

"You can't raise that two hundred this afternoon," he said. Barry pulled away.

"The afternoon isn't over yet," he said grimly. "We'll see." In his heart, though, he could find no confidence to back that bluff. Two hundred dollars seemed as remote as two million. Diamond shook himself.

"You can't do it. I know. Besides, I have to leave on that mission before the afternoon is over." Sweat was standing out on his forehead. "I have a right to demand payment under the circumstances. You played against my money with money you didn't have."

Barry Dean's face whitened. "What are you driving at?"

Diamond wet his lips; then he leaned forward. "I'll give you back your I.O.U. marked paid if you take that job off my hands. Volunteer for it."

Barry started. His eyes widened. "My life for two hundred dollars? Think I'm crazy?"

Diamond was very pale. "It isn't much of a life in the army for a man who passes a debt," he said. "One way or the other, you pay—and quick."

The world seemed to spin dizzily about Barry Dean. He didn't want that cold-meat mission that gave a man no chance. He had taken a chance for it and he'd have gone if the cards fell that way—but he didn't want to take it now to square a two-hundred-dollar debt. Still, he would never be able to hold his head up again if Diamond demanded payment publicly before going on the death trip—and didn't get it.

He passed his hand across his forehead. Life was sweet, but only when one had the things that made it worth while—friendship, respect, honor. He put out his hand.

"Give me the I.O.U. and mark it paid," he said huskily. "I'll go."

There was an exultant gleam in Ed Diamond's eyes. The color flooded back into his face and everything that made him repulsive to Barry Dean came back with the cockiness and the arrogance of the man. Barry's eyes narrowed.

"You won't be any too popular around here yourself," he said grimly, "after I go." His eyes rested on the good-luck jacket of Ed Diamond. Barry was superstitious and he believed in that jacket. He had seen Diamond's luck in operation too many times. "I'll swap you my ferrying job to Paris for that jacket," he said. "It will get you away for a while and save you a lot of embarrassment."

Diamond hesitated, but his eyes were clouded with doubt again. It was easy to see that he was visualizing the attitude of his comrades when they found out that Barry had taken his place to redeem an I.O.U.

"Okay," he said. "I'll give it to you before you go."

"You'll give it to me now," Barry held out his hand.

Reluctantly Diamond took off the treasured jacket and passed it over. Without a word Barry accepted it and turned toward the office of Major Crane.

LIKE a huge black coffin, the D.H. turned tail to the sun and roared away into Germany. Forests, fields, streams, trenches; the sweeping panorama of the Front flowed beneath its broad wings as it sped toward the destruction that awaited it at Mouzon—or before. Crouched in the cockpit, Barry Dean tried not to be too afraid.

Behind him was a sandbag-laden cockpit where he was accustomed to feel the presence of Terry O'Day. That gaping space in back was a reminder that the high command did not expect him to come back; it was not throwing away the lives of two men on a cold-meat detail.

Barry shuddered and bit his lip to check the tremble. It wasn't death that frightened him, but the certainty of dying. He was like a condemned man who mounts the scaffold, only the criminal would not be alone and Barry was—terribly alone in a sky that would turn dark tonight when he was no longer around to see the stars come out.

"The hell with it!" he muttered. "I'll bomb the munition works at Mouzon before I go anyway. That's something."

He had a mental picture of the inaccessible Mouzon, ringed round with archie and guarded by fleets of fighting planes. He would have to swoop low in order to be sure of his aim with the bombs. Archie would have a lot of fun with him. Then the sky would be black with avenging enemy scouts if archie missed him. He would have to fight up into faster ships that had the advantage of altitude.

Barry decided that he would live that long. He would get to Mouzon and he would live through the archie hell—and he would die when the scouts came down. Somehow it made the inevitable seem less horrible when he could visualize it that way.

He had passed the lines and the monotonously patrolling Spads that guarded the balloons. He wondered whether they would ever get the yellow-striped Albatross and whether it would be worth while if they did. On and on into Germany he roared. He saw a few two-seaters but no scouts. On a long arc, he swept north of Mouzon. He had a better chance of sneaking in from the side opposite to that in which the D.H.8 usually headed.

Suddenly the sky to his right seemed filled with fighting ships—ships that fought nearly a mile below him beyond Skeleton Ridge as he flew along the 12,000-foot level. Leaning over the side, he identified them as pusher Caudrons, clumsy French bombers, and Albatross scouts. The bombers evidently had been intent upon Triauc. There were a dozen fires between the town and the crossroads beyond its southern limits—German supply shacks and temporary barracks that flamed like tinder.

Raid and battle were over in an incredibly short period of time. Three of the French, out of six, were hitting homeward—and a lone Albatross was diving away toward a landing north of Triauc. Another Albatross was climbing along Barry's line of flight. Barry watched him for a few seconds and laughed at him. The fellow had absolutely no chance at all of climbing up to and catching a D.H. that had five thousand feet of altitude over him.

Then the laugh died. With a spatter and a gasp, Barry's engine gave up the ghost.

IT WAS several minutes before Barry admitted even to himself that he had trouble that could not be rectified short of a chance to work the engine over on the ground; a choked feedline, probably. He was dead-sticked and over German territory.

The thought was more damning than the facing of certain death. There would be no raid on Mouzon, and the squadron would be disgraced—and the comrades of Barry Dean would curse him as a yellow son. They would believe that he volunteered only to get his I.O.U. back, and that he had had no intention of going through with the raid, that he had quit cold and surrendered.

The thought brought sweat out on Barry's forehead. He was gliding down and he had to land and he was too far from the lines. He looked overside and saw the thick smoke rising from the fires outside Mouzon. A thrill of hope shot through him.

If he could land in a field that was close—but not too close—to those fires, he might have time to fix his bus unbothered and get away. Everyone within striking distance was probably helping fight the spread of fire or watching. Barry whipped the stick over and spiraled for a stubby field beside a bleak-looking wood. He might set it in there and have a chance. It was a long shot, but he was lucky to have even that.

He slipped the D.H. steeply and killed off a lot of altitude; he straightened out and prepared to slip her

again. He dipped into the breast pocket for the plug of chewing tobacco that was a bomber's solace in moments of peril. There was no pocket there.

That fact puzzled him until he recalled that he was wearing the good-luck jacket of Ed Diamond. He reached inside it to his own breast pocket and made a mental salute to the jacket. He had had good luck in finding this field and having a fire to divert attention from him—even if he had had bad luck in getting into the mess in the first place.

The sleeve of the jacket was peculiar. It caught as he tried to reach his pocket—and it felt stiff. He cursed and gave up the plug in favor of more important things. He slipped steeply again and pulled out beyond the trees; then he flipped it over and his heart went down into his boots.

There was a sharp hammering that ripped his wing and something clattered across the nose of his ship. A shadow fell over him and he remembered what he had forgotten. The lone Albatross scout had had an eye on him before he had trouble with his engine. It had stalked him, of course, and this was the result. The German was shooting hell out of him.

Luckily he was close to the trees. He put his nose down, skimmed a corner of the forest and came in cross wind in his engineless ship with a prayer on his tips.

The gods were with him again. The field was long and he held the big ship in a fair landing that did not bounce him too much and that did not break anything. He had a bad moment, thinking of the awful load of bombs that he carried and of what would happen if he jolted one loose; then he was rolling harmlessly toward the other fringe of trees that curled out into the clearing on the far side. The Albatross had been forced to zoom clear of the trees when he pulled his surprise maneuver. Now it was coming back

LIKE a mad thing, it plunged down toward the D.H., and the guns sang again. Barry cursed; then his eyes widened. The Albatross had broad slashes of yellow on its wings. This was the balloon-killer that had caused eighteen Spads to be pulled off escort duty. This was the German that had been indirectly responsible for the D.H. losses of the past week—the murdering brute who shot down observers who floated helplessly in parachutes.

And true to his reputation, the Boche was trying to shoot Barry Dean as he sat helplessly on the ground in his cockpit.

Loosening his belt with a deft motion, Barry went over the side and wormed his way snake fashion away from the ship. He couldn't afford to be too close if the fire became too accurate. There was too much in the shape of high explosive on that ship.

The German dived again and poured another burst at the ship. Barry grunted and made a mental reservation that this fellow was lazy and had failed to practice as much as he should at ground targets. He was a rotten shot.

In the tension of the moment, Barry thought again of his plug of tobacco. He reached for it and again the sleeve caught. He looked at it sharply, felt it—and then started to finger it incredulously. A deft touch at just the right place and five cards fell out into his hand.

The top card was the trey of diamonds.

At that moment Barry Dean forgot that he was in German territory and that a German scout was trying to slaughter him. His brain was reeling under this sudden revelation—the secret of Ed Diamond's luck.

The setting of that last hand in which he had bet himself into trouble flashed back to him. He had had four queens. Diamond had dealt the hand just before that one, and Diamond had topped him with aces. Barry looked down at the cards in his hand—weak cards that would never have taken any pot. He knew as he looked at them that these were the cards Diamond had drawn against his queens, and that Diamond had substituted the aces that he had held in his sleeve hold-out.

To cap his infamy, Diamond had tried to cheat when they guessed for this assignment. He had guessed the trey of diamonds, knowing that it was not in the deck. A just fate had elected that the deuce of diamonds should come up in the draw and beat him.

The song of a Mercedes engine broke the train of thought. The yellow-striped Albatross was coming in for a landing. He had not, evidently, seen Barry slip from the cockpit. He thought that he had a kill.

Barry slipped his service automatic from its holster and hugged the ground. The German's wheels hit and he rolled across the clearing. A few feet from the D.H. he came to a stop and swung down from the cockpit. He, too, was gripping an automatic in his fist, and he walked stiff-legged toward the D.H. Barry wiggled forward on his stomach.

"Hey, *Amerikaner!*"

The German was hailing, his gun held before him. And he was walking with less confidence as he approached the grim black ship. Barry slipped noiselessly to his feet.



"I'd drop that gun if I were you—and quick."

The command cracked in the stillness of the field and the German's knees buckled as he turned around. One glance at the leveled pistol and he dropped his Luger as though it were hot. His hands shot up and terror lighted in his eyes. Perhaps he was remembering that he had shot at this ship after it had landed, and that he could not, therefore, expect mercy.

Barry halted and looked at him coldly and, in that moment, became aware of an intense dislike. He had thought of the German impersonally before; now he was actively antagonistic to the man personally.

The fellow looked like Ed Diamond. There was much the same type of florid good looks, the big build, loose lips and large teeth. There was, too, the same cringing when faced with danger. Barry spat.

"I ought to shoot you," he growled. "Sit down over there till I decide what I will do. I have a bus to fix."

AN IDEA had come to him in a flash and he needed time to work it out. He also had to have the D.H. in shape. Swooping low, he picked up the Luger and tucked it away; then he waved the man to the grass within sight of the D. H. and too far away for a sudden rush. He rolled up his sleeves, then, and with an eye on the German, started to work.

It was not so simple to clear the choked feedline under the circumstances and with the terrible tension of knowing that he was on enemy soil—but Barry drove himself. He was tightening a lock nut, preparatory to calling it a finished job, when instinct whispered to him. He pulled his head down with a jerk.

With a hissing sound a heavy rock passed his head. He spun like a jungle cat. The German was drawing back his arm to throw another. Barry leaped in.

With four leaping strides he crossed the clearing and the German held onto the rock as a weapon. Disdaining to use the two weapons that were within reach of his hands, Barry lashed out with the weapons that nature gave him. His right boomed home with the force of a pile driver. The German's heels left the ground and he hit square on his shoulders. He gave one low moaning cry, flopped over onto his face and lay there. Barry grinned.

"Got a jaw like a British heavyweight," he said. "Well, that makes up my mind for me. He who lives by the doublecross dies by the double-cross. *Prosit*—or something."

He flipped the prop over on the D.H. and the

engine caught with a roar. He smiled as he listened to the purr of it. The Albatross was still alive, the Mercedes droning its deep bass in a low key. The stage was set. He walked over and shook the German erect.

"Want to die?" he asked grimly. Terror gleamed again in the man's eyes and he came swiftly back to consciousness. His expression was answer enough. Barry nodded. "Will you take a chance for your life?"

The German shook himself. "*Ja*," he said shakily. Barry smiled coldly.

"Okay. Get in that D.H. and fly it over Mouzon. When you get over the munitions works, drop the bomb. I'll escort you in the Albatross. One mistake, though, and you're gone. I'll cook you. That ship, the D.H., catches fire if shot in the right place. I know where to shoot it. If you want to cook, get crooked."

It took several minutes to convince the German, but the man did not have an oversupply of spine. Barry's heart throbbed fast as the man climbed into the cockpit of the D.H. and goosed the throttle. It was a chance in a million, but it was worth the taking.

ALMOST as one ship, the D.H. and Albatross took off from the field behind the trees. Smoke was still rising in clouds from the fire south of Triau. Barry sat tight. He was flying a ship that he didn't know—an infinitely faster and more sensitive ship than the D.H.—but two things gave him strength and skill. The honor of the squadron that demanded a bombing of Mouzon, and his own honor that demanded a reckoning with Ed Diamond who was flying a cushy ferrying job to Paris while he played tag with death.

The German was cagy. Perhaps he wanted to make a break for it and cross Barry Dean, but if he did, he fought the impulse down. His was the kind of philosophy that says it is good to fight another day if today is not so propitious. At any rate he flew the D.H. and flew it well. He bee-lined for Mouzon and Barry's mouth was dry as he saw the silver Meuse.

A flight of Fokkers started down on them, but Barry edged the Albatross over the D.H. and waved to them. They withdrew indifferently. If they thought at all, they probably figured that it was a captured ship being flown somewhere under escort. Even the archie batteries were quiet.

It was probably a tribute to the ship he was flying. Yellow stripe might be a big ace—one well known to other German airmen and gunners.

If the German was that, he behaved himself like a rookie. Not till he was right over the munitions

plant did he balk. Then he seemingly resigned the last hope of intervention, gave up the last dream of a miracle happening to save him. And he was too good a German to do what this man commanded him to do.

With a flashing turn, he brought the big D.H. about and came blazing at Barry Dean.

He had been reaching for his plug of tobacco when the German kicked the big bus over. His hand flashed out fast and the sleeve caught. That wide, crooked sleeve reminded him of Ed Diamond—and this German looked like Ed. It was enough.

HIS hand flashed to the trips and his nose lifted head-on to the D.H. The Spandaus chattered under his hand and the big bomber reeled, Barry dropped his nose and came back up in a steep zoom that gave him the underside of the ship that he had piloted across the lines.

With two bursts he smashed it out of control and, as it fell, he dived on it and slammed another burst into it that turned it nose-on for the roof of the munitions plant directly below.

Every bomb in the D.H. rack let go at once as it plunged through the roof of the factory.

A squadron of Handley-Pages couldn't have wiped out the northeast corner of Mouzon as completely as did that one D.H. that landed in the right spot.

As he streaked high above the red glow, Barry Dean dipped his nose in salute and waved a gloved hand. "Yellow Stripe," he said softly, "I'll take back all

the things I thought about you. Whoever you were or whatever you were, you went out like a German—and a "pilot, by the gods!"

Then he went home. He went home in a German ship that was marked for death along the Allied lines—and he flew the accursed Albatross with its yellow-stripe trademark to his own drome. Eighteen Spads patrolled the balloon line and not one of them saw him. His landing was a return from the dead and was celebrated accordingly. When the celebration was at its height, he thought suddenly of something that he never expected to forget.

"Where's Diamond?" he asked.

The mood of the gathering changed. There was an awkward silence, and then Terry O'Day tossed his drink and set the glass down.

"There must have been something in that lucky jacket gag, Barry," he said softly. "You got the luck. Ed took your soft job and that damned Rolls Royce blew up with him as he took off. We couldn't find him—after."

His voice trailed away. Barry Dean set his drink down untouched. He was conscious of a feeling of great awe—a nearness to some mysterious law of the universe. With this mood on him he walked out under the stars that he had never expected to see again when he turned tail to the sun a few short hours before. As he walked, he tore a hand of five cards into little bits.

"Wherever you are, Diamond," he said solemnly, "I'm sorry, and—well, all bets are paid."