



Not one of those American pilots dared approach that seething cauldron of flames—not one could read its strange secret. But when only gray dust remained of what had been a German plane, they saw—and read the—

MESSAGE IN THE ASHES

by O.B. MYERS

FIVE MINUTES BEFORE, this thing had been a powerful engine of assault and destruction, winging through the air with the speed and agility of a wasp. Now it lay, a jangled mass of wires and struts and crumpled canvas, spilled grotesquely upon the ground. Somewhere beneath the tangle of wreckage lay the form of a man—or perhaps two men, for it was a two-seater. Dead, perhaps, or if not dead—already, most certainly dying.

At a distance of perhaps a hundred feet stood a little group of men in the uniform of American pilots. They shifted nervously from one foot to the other, drove their fists into open palms, and regarded what

was left of the German Halberstadt with horror-stricken eyes. Yet not one of them approached a step nearer than one hundred feet, to succor the imprisoned flyers.

But do not believe for a minute that this was due to unwillingness on their part. Like all who daily risk death, or worse, they were always more than ready to save a fellow human being from his fate, be he friend or foe. But between them and that ship yawned a gulf unbridgeable, a barrier which made it more unattainable than the farthest of the stars. For that twisted heap of wood and metal was literally a seething cauldron of flame.

Billowing red tongues licked and leaped a score of feet into the air. Wood and canvas melted to ash, and metal glowed white in the intensity of the inferno. A huge column of ugly black smoke swirled and bellied straight up into the calm of late afternoon. The very ground, soaked in high-test gasoline, burned like so much chaff. Fierce waves of heat beat upon the air in all directions, holding back the would-be rescuers more effectively than a solid wall of masonry.

Whatever had been the object of that German pilot in flying so low over the drome of the 44th Pursuit, no one knew. At any rate, it had ended in failure when a bullet from the machine-gun pits had found a mark in the gas tank. The ambulance skidded to a stop behind the group, and the driver put his foot on the step. But after one look, he shook his head, slid back behind the wheel, and drove slowly away. There would be no lives to be saved out of that crash; lucky if the identification discs of the occupants were not melted to illegibility.

A tall, commanding figure wearing major's leaves now approached at a trot, but halted some distance away and turned to speak to a shorter man who followed him.

"Captain," he said, "order the pilots to barracks. There's no use letting them stand here watching this horrible thing. It's enough to shake any man's guts, and their nerves get enough jolts, as it is. Nothing can be done for those poor fellows in there, anyway. The wreckage won't be cooled enough to examine for hours yet. Tell 'em to take a drink and try to forget it."

At the quietly spoken suggestion from the adjutant, the pilots drifted away, but their heads turned frequently over their shoulders, and on their grayish faces was written plainly the horror of their thoughts—"when will my turn come?"

"Hey, Rip! Orderly at the door, lookin' for you."

First Lieutenant Ripawam J. Reed, U.S. Air Service, threw down the copy of *La Vie Parisienne* he had been reading, and drew his six feet erect.

"Major wants to see me? O.K. sarge, I'll be right up."

IT WAS after eleven o'clock, and Rip had been about to slide into his bunk, but a summons from the C.O. was a summons. At this late hour, particularly, it must mean something, he was thinking, as he pulled on his leather jacket and hurried out of the barracks.

In the skipper's private quarters, separated from the rest of the operations tent by a canvas partition, he found Major Barreton awaiting him. The major

answered his salute, indicated a stool by a nod, and began without further greeting.

"Reed, you were a particular pal of Burwell's, weren't you—Joe Burwell, who was lost a week ago?"

"Yes, sir, that's right," answered Rip quickly. "But Joe wasn't lost. He was taken prisoner. I, myself, saw him get out of his ship after he crashed in Germany, and walk away. Of course, he was captured, but I know he wasn't killed, thank God!"

"Yes, so you reported," went on the major briefly. "But tell me, you knew him pretty well. He was the one that kept a diary, wasn't he? Did he carry it in his pocket, do you know?"

"Why, yes, he did, major. He was always scribbling something in it, so he kept it right with him all the time."

"You must have seen it then. Can you describe it?"

"Easy enough. It was kind of thick, with black leather covers. And the edges and the corners were bound in brass, a sort of frame to keep it stiff. Locked shut with a clasp. He spent quite a bit for it, he told me, and he was proud of it."

The major nodded, but said nothing more for a few minutes. Rip wondered what the questions meant. Suddenly a strange apprehension began to steal over him; he spoke with nervous haste.

"Why, what is it about Joe, major? Do you know if he—have you heard something from him?"

"Well, in a way, yes," said the major slowly. "That is to say—here, look at this. The only thing recognizable in the ashes of that Jerry crate that crashed and burned on the field this afternoon was this."

Rip's eyes fastened on the distorted thing of metal which the major pushed across the table. It was a sort of four-sided frame-work of brass strips, with triangular pieces at each corner, top and bottom, about an inch thick. It was seared and twisted with heat, and the middle portion was burned clear through, but the metal corners still held fragments of paper, and the writing was still legible where it had been protected by the pressure of the brass binding. Rip stared, and fingered it wonderingly, but from the very first instant he knew what it was.

"That—that's Joe's diary, major," he said, with a quiver in his voice. "But how did it get—I don't understand—"

"Only one explanation I can see, Reed," said the Skipper. "Burwell must have escaped, stolen a Halberstadt, and flown over. He was trying to land here when his tank was hit from the ground."

"We—we killed him ourselves!" gasped Rip. Joe was dead. Rip tried to grasp the fact, but could not. He saw before him the laughing blue eyes, the ruddy countenance, the square shoulders of his nearest and dearest friend. He felt again the throb of relief in his throat as he had seen that tiny figure jump from a wreck, far below, and move across the greenness of the meadow. Joe Burwell dead, like this? But no, it could not be. It was too ghastly. His mind refused to believe—and yet, the evidence.

"You see, it's different paper from the diary itself," the major was saying. Rip leaned forward and tried to listen. "And the words on it are typed in German. The middle is all burned away, like the rest of the pages, but here on the corners—look!"

RIP forced his reeling mind to function, and looked at the charred fragment of paper in the major's fingers. Yes, the skipper was right, that was not a page out of the diary, it was different.

"Up here," proceeded the C.O., "it says, 'Coulonnes.' That's a town on the river—you know where it is. And down here I can make out '20th,' and something that looks like the beginning of September. And over here—'*Fünf*' means five, doesn't it? And the way it's written makes it look like it was meant for 'five o'clock'."

"That's right," muttered Rip. "But what is it, anyway?"

"Do you know what I think, Reed?" asked the C.O., sitting back in his chair. "I think that Burwell somehow discovered that there was something big coming off at Coulonnes at five o'clock on September 20th. He stole a copy of the order, or instructions, or whatever it is, and was coming back to give us the dope, when he—*er*—met with the accident. Doesn't it look that way to you?"

"Well—yes," admitted Rip reluctantly. "But do you really think it was Joe in that ship, major?"

The major shook his head sadly. "I don't want to think it, Reed, any more than you do, but I can't help myself. Look at this. Stuck under one metal flap, the red cardboard of a pilot's *carte d'identite*. And you can still read the first four letters of the name, 'Joseph.' Afraid there's no doubt." He ceased speaking for a moment, then said, "This warning about Coulonnes—I'll bet the Boche are going to try to cross the river there. Can't be anything else. But I do wish I could verify it."

For a moment, Rip was silent, as he tried to gather his thoughts into a semblance of reason. The news of Joe Burwell's grotesque death had stunned

him, but now he began to see things more clearly. He straightened up slowly, and gripped his hands hard behind him. He bit his lips, and swallowed the emotions which crowded into his throat. He blinked twice, then looked the major straight in the eye and spoke in a resolute voice. "I'll verify that, sir. Give me the necessary order, and I'll promise to find out if your guess is so."

"Joe started something," Rip said to himself. "Well, I'll finish it for him. He was trying to tell us something; I'll find out what it was."

"But how are you going to check up on it?" asked the C.O.

"I don't just know, yet. But leave that to me, major. I'll do it somehow."

"Well, all right, Reed. Go ahead, and do your best. But nothing foolish, mind you. I've lost one good man already; I don't want to lose another, even if the whole German army tries to cross the river on the twentieth. It's only four days away; you'll have to think fast. Personally, I believe that is what the message means—an attempted crossing at Coulonnes at five o'clock on the twentieth. So unless you discover something to change my mind, I'm going to have a double patrol over that spot at that hour. Then if Joe's dope was straight, we'll spoil the attempt, and if it wasn't, well, nothing is lost. But I would certainly prefer to have it verified positively. Then I could report it to Wing, and get some bombers sent along to scotch that crossing properly. But let me know what you decide to do, anyway, Reed."

"Yes, sir. I'll report to you tomorrow morning, major."

With a curt salute, Rip turned and left the tent. Already his mind was made up as to what he was going to do, but he had no intention of telling the major. For well did he know that permission would never be forthcoming for the exploit which he had in view.

JOE had been shot down in the Thiaucourt sector, reasoned Rip, and had undoubtedly been sent for confinement to the big prisoners' camp outside of Crieulles. Many times had Rip seen it from the air. It was no doubt while in that camp that Joe had gotten hold of the information he had been trying to bring back. Therefore, figured Rip, if he himself landed in the same sector, allowed himself to be taken prisoner, and transported to the same camp, he would have the same opportunity of discovering the information that Joe had had.

Risky? Certainly, but what does one expect of a war? The odds were ten to one against his finding what he wanted, and a hundred to one against his returning at all, even if he did discover anything. But it was the direct, the logical way of going after what he wanted. There might be other ways of going about it, but to Rip they did not exist, who was he to quail at risk, after Joe had given his life in vain? He threw himself on his bunk and went immediately to sleep, in the manner of a man who has nothing on his mind to be decided.

In the morning he followed B flight patrol across the lines, because he knew that they were scheduled to cover the Thiaucourt sector, and he wanted to examine his ground. Over an hour he spent with eyes riveted on a certain field, in the center of which was a mangled heap of wreckage—Joe Burwell's Spad. The rest of the day he passed hanging around the hangars. When the major passed, and threw him an inquiring glance, he only replied with a shake of the head.

Half an hour before sunset, his Spad was on the line, gassed and ready. To his mechanic's question he gave a nonchalant reply about buzzing around a bit to cool off, and then opened up his motor to drown out further curiosity. In the air he waited only to reach a thousand feet before pointing his nose to the north.

Many miles back of the lines, he circled once, low down over that field he had examined in the morning. Luck so far was with him; there were no signs of watching eyes on the ground. He cut his motor dead, and glided swiftly downward.

His landing was perfectly calculated; the Spad stopped rolling not twenty feet from the fringe of saplings on the western border of the field. Quickly he leaped out, and got his shoulder under the tailskid. He swung the ship around until the nose pointed toward the open field; then, panting and heaving, he rolled her back toward the trees. Back, and still farther back, until the fuselage was in among the trees themselves, and the wheels and undercarriage were hidden in the long grass at the edge of the woods.

This left only the motor and the upper wing exposed. Working feverishly, he bent a young tree down, bit by bit, until its leafy branches covered the center section, with twine he lashed it in place. From the other side, he did the same with another flexible sapling, lashing it to the first. Their lower branches thus camouflaged the leading edges of the wings, while their leafy tops, crossing at the middle, completely concealed the motor and center section.

After a hasty glance around to make sure that he had not yet been seen, he ran rapidly out to the middle

of the field, where still reposed the ruins of Joe's Spad. Without the slightest hesitation, he lighted a match, tossed it into the gas tank, and retiring to a safe distance, sat down to wait.

IN THE gathering darkness, the roaring holocaust which he had kindled soon attracted attention. A party of German constabulary appeared, plodding across from the nearby road, and could not miss finding Rip by the light of the flames. To the questions of the only one who spoke English, Rip replied that he had been forced to land a short time before, and that his ship had caught fire as he stepped out.

The seething inferno in the middle of the field bore crackling witness to the truth of his statements, and without even considering the idea of a further search in the darkness, they marched him off to the road in the direction of Criulles. If Rip hid a grin of satisfaction behind his hand, none of the stolid German soldiers noticed it.

He passed through the formalities of search and questioning that evening, and it was late when he was shown a space on the ground, between two huddles of sleeping figures, which was to be his bed. He slept soundly, in spite of the hardness of his couch, and immediately upon awakening began asking all the other prisoners in sight the same question.

They were nearly all Americans, of every rank and branch of the service, but he found no one who could help him. "Joe Burwell? Never heard of him." "An aviator, you say? There was an aviator here, but he had black hair." "Not here, buddy. I been here two weeks, but I ain't seen him." "No, yuh can't prove it by me. He might be in a hospital—was he wounded?" Rip shook his head, and went doggedly on to the next one.

But when the whole day passed, and he could find no trace of anyone who had seen Joe Burwell, discouragement laid hold of him. He had to find out what part of the camp Joe had been in, in order to pick up a clue to what he was seeking; surely there must be someone there who remembered Joe. But the morning of the next day—the 19th—brought no results, and it was almost noon before his hopes were raised on high, only to be dashed immediately to earth.

On a pile of blankets in the shade of a tent lay a wounded signal-corps sergeant. The gash in his arm was not bad enough to put him in the already overcrowded hospital, but was sufficiently inflamed to give him a raging fever. At Rip's question, he half-opened his eyes, and spoke weakly.

"Joe Burwell? Sure, I know who he is. Saw him over by the dressing station. Tall fella, light hair, eh?"

"Yes, yes," cried Rip excitedly. "By the dressing station, you say he was quartered? When was it you saw him?"

"Yesterday morning. 'Bout nine o'clock. Gimme a cigarette, will yuh, buddy?"

"Yesterday!" cried Rip in dismay. "But that can't be right; it couldn't be yesterday. Think again."

"Yesterday, sure as hell. Swear to it. God, I'm hot!"

Rip pulled out his last cigarette and gave it to the suffering man. But his heart sank within him as he realized that this clue was worthless. The fellow had probably never seen Joe Burwell at all; he was simply out of his head with the fever. He certainly could not have seen Joe at nine o'clock yesterday morning; at that hour Joe had been dead for thirty-six hours. Still, it wouldn't hurt to try the neighborhood of the dressing station.

IMMEDIATELY after the noon meal of soup and black bread. Rip plodded wearily to the other end of the stockade, almost a half mile away. Hungrily he scrutinized the faces in every group he passed, and a score of times stopped to put his question about Joe Burwell. But with the never-ending succession of negative replies, his hopes grew fainter and fainter.

For an hour he stood leaning against the fence outside the dressing station, racking his brain in despair. For the first time he realized the hopelessness of his task. Trying to find what Joe had done, and how he had done it, in this huge, unorganized camp, was like looking for a needle in a haystack. And already it was the afternoon of the 19th, and nothing accomplished. In another twenty-four hours he would have to admit to himself that his sacrifice and efforts had been wasted for nothing.

Marching toward the outer gate near which he stood came a double file of prisoners carrying picks and shovels, followed at five paces by a guard with a rifle. Rip raised his eyes to watch them pass. There were no familiar faces among the prisoners, and Rip was about to look away when his glance fell on the German guard in the rear. His jaw dropped in amazement, and he had to grip the barbed wire to keep from falling. Was he out of his mind, seeing things which did not exist? The face under that little round fatigue cap was the face of Joe Burwell!

His eyes must be playing him tricks, he thought. Joe Burwell was dead; how could he be walking around

in a German uniform? Rip closed his eyes, shook his head violently from side to side, and looked again. It couldn't be, it simply wasn't, yet never had he dreamed that such a perfect resemblance could exist between two human beings. Now the guard turned and looked at Rip; their glances crossed. For a breath-taking instant Rip thought he saw a flash of recognition in those light blue eyes. But before he could be sure, the guard again turned his gaze to the column before him, and marched stolidly past through the gate.

Rip took a long breath, and passed a hand weakly across his perspiring brow. That German's face had certainly given him a shock. It was impossible, for many reasons, the most conclusive of which was that Joe was dead, and yet he would have sworn—why, the man even looked like Joe from the back!

A hundred feet outside the gate the column halted at a command, and Rip saw the guard take a shovel from one prisoner who limped painfully, and wave the wounded man back toward the tents. The German then walked back toward Rip, and without speaking, handed him the shovel and indicated by gestures that Rip was to join the digging party. With an effort Rip dragged his eyes from the man's face. He could not bear to look at it; every line, every curve was Joe Burwell, and yet the eyes held not the faintest gleam of recognition. Quivering with excitement, Rip took his place in line.

A hundred paces outside the gate, latrine ditches were to be dug. The guard marked a spot by scratching the ground with his bayonet, set four or five men to work, moved off twenty steps, marked another, separated four more men from the group, and so on until only Rip was left. Moving aside fully thirty yards this time, the German marked the last ditch, and signed to Rip to get to work. Glad to have an occupation. Rip drove the shovel into the ground and started to heave dirt over his shoulder.

FOR several minutes the grate of steel on occasional stones was the only sound. Then Rip's heart leaped into his throat at the sound of a low voice behind him.

"Don't stop digging," cautioned the voice, "and don't look up at me. But tell me how in hell you happen to be here—and talk low."

Keeping his head bent over the shovel, Rip gasped, "Good God, is it really you, Joe?"

"Nobody else but, kid. But you act like you were seeing a ghost. Nothing to be so surprised about, except the switch in uniforms, is there?"

"But I thought you were dead, Joe! I knew it—"

"Dead my eye! When they took a batch of us down to the river for a bath yesterday, before shipping us back into Germany, I saw a guard stroll off into the trees. I followed, bashed his head in with a stone, and changed clothes with him. Haven't quite figured out what the next move is yet, but now that you're here, we'll make it together, whatever it is. But what do you mean, you thought I was dead? What gave you that idea?" Being careful not to lift his eyes from his work, so that any watchers would not notice that they were conversing, Rip related briefly the story of the Halberstadt crossing on the drome and the objects which had been found in the ashes.

"Why, they took that diary away from me when I first arrived here," ejaculated Joe. "Then for the first couple of days, they had me sitting in the camp office all the time, answering all sorts of fool questions. By the way, there was a Jerry lieutenant there who was a dead ringer for me—might have been my twin brother. Just remembered that. Wonder what it's all about, anyway? Say—" Suddenly Rip dropped his shovel and looked at Joe. Joe was staring at him with a look of dawning comprehension.

"A dead ringer for you, Joe? By God, do you see now, Joe?"

"Yes," hissed Joe. "He took my diary and identification card, and was going to impersonate me, as a spy. Reading the diary would give him enough dope to do it all right, and listening to my voice for two days, a good actor could—"

"But that order, Joe—about Coulonnes, tomorrow!"

"Well, what of it? He didn't have time to do anything about it, did he?"

"Joe, don't you see? It's a fake, a deliberate trap. And the major, unless he is warned, is going to send a patrol over Coulonnes at five o'clock. That's just what the Boches want. The patrol will be ambushed by a flock of Fokkers, and wiped out to a man. The Jerries know nothing about their spy being killed, you know."

"By God, you're right," whispered Joe. His face turned ashen as the fiendish ingenuity of the scheme dawned upon him. "We'll have to warn the major, somehow, Rip. But how? Quick, your shovel! There's an officer at the gate!"

Seizing his shovel, Rip diligently attacked the ground again. Without looking at Joe, he hissed through his teeth, "My Spad is hidden in the trees on the edge of the field where you crashed. Grab the first chance you get, go get it, and fly back. Don't wait—tomorrow's the twentieth!"

"And leave you here?" whispered Joe. "Not if I can help it! Listen, tomorrow morning there'll be another digging detail. I'll get you on it, and somehow we'll both make a getaway. I'll—"

But there was no time for further planning. The German officer approached and barked an order. Joe saluted with his rifle, herded his gang into line, and marched them back toward the camp. At the gate they were counted, relieved of their tools, and Joe left in the direction of the German guards' barracks without another opportunity for a word to Rip.

THAT night Rip's mind was in a whirl. Joe was not dead—thank God for that!—but a dozen of his comrades were doomed to die in outnumbered helplessness on the morrow, unless something was done to warn the major. It was all a skillfully conceived plot, designed to pull a patrol over Coulonnes at five o'clock, and there would be more than enough Fokkers upstairs to crush even a double patrol of Spads. The major must be warned!

If only Joe would go ahead by himself! In a German uniform as he was, he had an excellent chance of reaching the Spad, and getting away with it. But it was just like the darned fool to attempt the impossible and try to rescue Rip at the same time. Rip wished fervently that he had had time enough to make Joe see it this way, and had insisted on Joe's leaving him. Several times during his sleepless night, he considered trying to see Joe, but realized that such an attempt would be doomed to failure.

In the morning he paced nervously to and fro, watching anxiously for the first sign of Joe. But the hours crept by, and Joe did not appear. Rip fretted himself to distraction, thought of a hundred things which might have happened to upset Joe's plans. Then about mid-forenoon, two guards appeared, read off about forty names from a list, including Rip's, and lined up the squad. Ah, thought Rip, a digging detail; Joe will probably meet us at the gate. But they were marched to the east gate instead of the north, and Rip almost fainted with consternation when he heard the order which was given when they halted just inside the wire.

"Undress! Everything off! Come on now, *mach' schnell!*"

Instantly he knew what it meant. A bath in the river, which was always the preliminary to being shipped back into Germany. And afterwards, straight to the railroad yards; he would not be brought back into camp at all.

He groaned. Joe would be looking for him, might be looking for him even now. Would Joe give up the search in time, and make for the Spad early enough to warn the major? He hoped so, but was not sure.

"Himmel! Here is a bashful one, Korporal. Schnell!"

Under the urging bayonet of the guard, Rip reluctantly stripped off his clothes until he stood stark naked in the morning sunshine. With the forty others in the same state, he was then marched down a grassy trail to the river, a quarter of a mile away. While the prisoners made the best of Nature's bath tub, the two guards lolled on the bank, smoking their pipes and chatting. They paid but little attention to their charges, knowing full well that even a Yankee was not crazy enough to attempt escape without a stitch of clothing to cover his back—and especially his feet.

Rip plunged in with the others, swam out to where the water was over his head, and let himself float, treading water gently. The river at this point was broad and sluggish, and open fields came right down to the banks. But a hundred yards downstream, Rip could see ripples on the surface where the current quickened as the stream narrowed to curve through a copse of scrub oaks. The stockaded prison camp sprawled over the fields in front of him, and far off to the right he could see a plume of smoke from a puffing locomotive. Perhaps it was the very locomotive which was to haul him many miles into the interior of Germany.

BUT Rip was not thinking of the interior of Germany, nor of puffing locomotives, nor of prison camps. His mind was busy with a little problem in geography, trying to recall the exact course of a certain river, as seen from the air, in relation to a particular field. He nodded his head, as if receiving a satisfactory answer from his memory, and fixed his eyes on the guards.

He took a deep breath, exhaled slowly. Again he filled his lungs, and emptied them, still watching the Germans on the bank. As he inhaled for the third time, both guards turned their heads at the same moment. With a quick sweep of his arms, Rip drew himself below the surface.

Immediately he was swimming with long, powerful strokes, careful to keep always at least a foot under water. He headed downstream, that is to say, to the south. His eyes were open, and he could see the stony bottom traveling beneath him. The current, such as it was, was helping him, but still he seemed to crawl at a snail's pace.

His lungs were beginning to ache, and the pulse pounded in his temples. Steel bands seemed to tighten about his chest, as his laboring heart demanded air. He gritted his teeth, and fought to hold the breath which was trying to burst from his lungs. Another stroke, and another, and still another. The bottom was moving past more swiftly now, and he knew that he must be nearing the point where the current increased. But he also knew that he was still a long way from being out of sight; by will alone he forced his weakening limbs to drive him forward.

But now the greenness of the water turned to black, and the ache in his lungs was a stabbing pain. He knew that in a few more seconds without air he would faint. Quickly he turned face upward, and shot to the surface. The breath burst from his lungs with a tearing gasp, and he gulped greedily at the life-giving element. Once more he exhaled, then filled his lungs with a mighty breath, and down he went again.

The second time his staying powers were much reduced, but with every stroke the current was helping him more and more, and he could sense a change in direction. He was being carried around a bend; with the last ounce of strength in his body he drove himself to the right, toward the inside of the curve, and came to the top. His first glance was backward. He saw a rippling sheen of water, and a leafy bank behind, but the guards and the group of swimming prisoners were out of sight around the bend. He floated on his back and let the current carry him, while he eased his straining lungs with great draughts of air.

For what he guessed to be two hours, he alternately swam, drifted, and walked on the bottom where the stream was shallow. The water was not extremely cold, but after the first hour of submersion, the chill began to strike through to his very marrow. Once he climbed out on the bank to let the sun warm him, but when he saw coal-scuttle helmets moving along a near-by road, he took to the water again. The banks, even where they were low, kept him from being seen, and he passed only one bridge, and that a tumbled heap of masonry from a well-directed bomb.

Soon after passing the ruins of the bridge he began watching the right bank constantly, as if looking for a sign. Occasionally he stopped and drew himself up to peer around the country-side. When he saw a distinctive clump of pine trees, towering against the horizon perhaps a half mile to the right, an expression of satisfaction crossed his countenance.

"Let's see, now," he thought. "Northwest of those

pinetrees. If I leave the river about where that next bend begins, a straight half mile to the right should bring me to the spot. And then, if Joe hasn't already come and gone—"but that was a possibility which he would not let himself think about.

WHEN he climbed the bank and started across country in the fringe of some woods, he began to realize why the guards were so lax about watching naked prisoners. Every bush and twig tore and scratched his trunk and legs; however gingerly he trod, stones and sticks underfoot bruised and cut his feet, and clouds of mosquitoes attacked him viciously from head to foot.

Walking in the open fields was easier, but too dangerous. Anyone seeing a fully clothed man at a distance might not look twice, but the sight of a naked person would certainly bring on an investigation. So he kept to the trees, and tried to disregard the blood which trickled from many gashes on his legs, and oozed between his toes.

It was half an hour later when he paused in a fringe of trees at the edge of a broad expanse of meadow. In his tired eyes leaped a quick gleam of hope, for in the middle of that meadow was a charred heap of embers around a black hulk of motor. He had found the field, but was now on its eastern edge. With increased caution he crept along under the bushes which lined the rim of the field, toward the thicket of young trees on the southern boundary where he had hidden his Spad almost three whole days before. On bleeding, tender feet he made his way past the corner of the field, then parallel to its lower edge.

Now he was sure he was almost there; something told him to move more carefully than before. He slipped between two tree-trunks, pushed aside a hanging branch, and almost cried aloud for joy. Twenty feet away, half concealed in foliage, stood his Spad. The two saplings standing at either wingtip arched downward to meet where they were lashed together at the center section, just as he had left them.

He took one step forward, and stopped. A man was standing alongside the cockpit, looking in, with his back to Rip—a man in a gray-green uniform, with a silly little round cap on his head. For an instant Rip's heart came up in his throat. But immediately he knew who it was. Joe had gotten there first, and was waiting in hope that Rip would appear. Joe was the only human being beside himself who knew about this Spad being there. Of course that was Joe.

Flinging aside all attempt at precaution, Rip burst crashing through the bushes, calling happily, "Joe! Hey, Joe!" He was perhaps a dozen feet from the cockpit when the other turned.

Rip froze in his tracks, and felt the blood turn to icewater in his veins. He was staring open-mouthed at the face, not of Joe, but of a perfect stranger.

FOR fully five seconds the two men gaped at each other. It would be hard to say which was the more surprised. The German soldier's eyes almost popped from his head at the unexpected apparition of a naked man running toward him through the woods. Rip's brain, completely stunned at first, gradually recovered the power of thought, and he quickly realized the peril of his position.

His first impulse, which was to flee, he discarded immediately. That would leave the German in command of the Spad, and the Spad was his one hope of ultimate escape. As far as he could see, there were no others in sight. This Boche must have happened on the concealed plane by accident, and must be the only one to know about it. This Boche must be gotten rid of.

Before the startled German recovered the power of speech, Rip leaped like a wildcat for his throat. His naked form hurled itself upon the astonished Boche, and his fingers closed around the soldier's windpipe in the grip of desperation. One gasp escaped the German's parted lips, then silence as the two figures lunged against the fuselage of the plane, and reeled away.

With the impact of Rip's body, the Boche awoke to fight. His muscular hands seized Rip's shoulders, and shook and pried with the diabolical strength of a man struggling for his life. But Rip closed his eyes and clung to that throat like a bulldog. He felt a sudden contraction of the muscles, and twisted sideways just in time. The Boche's knee came up with a vicious jerk, but missed Rip's groin to thud against his bare stomach. Back and forth strained the German; Rip was being flung and tossed like a bag of meal, but never once relaxed his clutch on the throat.

Another thrust of the knee Rip dodged partly, but a third, coming immediately after, fetched him a stunning blow on the solar plexus. His stomach seemed to turn inside out, and the strength flowed from his limbs like water. For an instant, everything went black, and his fingers loosened. In that instant the Boche brought an elbow up between his arms, and pried them apart.

Recovering, Rip strove frantically to regain his grip, but the Boche, easily fifty pounds heavier, held Rip at arm's length while he recovered his breath in two rasping gulps. Then the German locked an elbow around Rip's head, drawing Rip's face down into the hollow of his shoulder, and with his other arm began driving pistonlike blows into Rip's kidneys.

Rip could find no grip for his hands, and his blows rained futilely against the other's sides. His feet slipped about on the leaves, betraying his balance, and every blow in his side shook him from head to foot. His long immersion in the river had sapped his endurance, and he scarcely had time to draw a gasping breath before the next pile-driver blow knocked it out of him. When he tried to twist out of the path of that flailing fist, he almost fell, and had to cling to his antagonist for support. Madly he struggled, but at another crashing impact in the side, the whole world reeled blackly. The next one he knew would finish him.

Crack! A rifle spoke sharply, near at hand. Rip's opponent seemed to hesitate, as if undecided to finish him himself or let the rifle do it. The gun cracked again, and Rip heard a brief whine end instantly in a tiny thud. The arm around Rip's head slackened, slipped away. As Rip pushed himself away, the form of the German tottered and collapsed limply, an expression of utter astonishment marking his features in death.

Rip thought that the bullet had been meant for him, and when he turned to see a German uniform springing toward him from the other side of the plane, he knew he was right. But when his eye caught a glimpse of the face under the round fatigue cap, he gasped in amazement. It was Joe!

"QUICK, Rip," yelled Joe. "There's a whole flock o' Germans bivouacked just the other side of those trees. That's why I was waiting, hoping they'd move on without finding the ship. Hurry!"

Rip, exhausted, could hardly speak. "Who—which one of us is going?" he stammered.

"Both, you bloody Injun! Here, like this."

With his bayonet Joe ripped the fabric back of the cockpit in three long slashes, exposing a space in the fuselage large enough to hold a man. Then he threw down the gun and sprang for the prop.

"Get up there and tend the switches while I spin her!"

Rip, having by this time recovered his presence of mind and some of his strength, mounted the step,

thrust his feet into the opening behind the cockpit, and leaned over to reach the instrument panel. Behind his left shoulder he heard a crashing in the underbrush. Joe was swinging the heavy prop as no mechanic had ever swung it before.

"Contact!" yelled Joe.

"Contact!" replied Rip, thumbing the switch. Out of the tail of his eye he saw figures running through the trees. Joe gave a frantic heave on the propellor. *Bang! Sputter—sputter—roar!* The Hispano came to life with a song of power.

As Joe ducked under the lower wing, Rip looked over his shoulder. He saw half a dozen men in gray-green springing for the wingtip. They had no arms; never expecting to find enemies fifteen miles behind the lines, they had left their rifles stacked. But suspecting something wrong at seeing a plane bearing the Allied cocardes, they were plainly determined to prevent its leaving without an investigation. And this they could easily do, simply by hanging on to the wingtip, toward which they now dashed.

Joe was slinging his leg over the fuselage, and sinking into the forward cockpit. Almost immediately the thunder of the motor redoubled as Joe jerked the throttle open.

Instantly the Spad leaped ahead, like a wolf-hound whose leash is cut. As it burst from the trees onto the open field, the tail went up; before the astonished Jerries could clamber to their feet and reach for the rifle which had been Joe's, it soared into the air.

OVER the drome of the 44th Pursuit, the first patrol of five Spads was already in the air at four-thirty, circling to wait for the second group which was taking off. Every pilot had heard the orders read; in another thirty seconds they would be on their way.

Suddenly there appeared out of the north a strange apparition. Weaving in and out among the planes already in the air flew a Spad, twisting and turning like a demented bird, and from this Spad two figures waved frantically and pointed toward the ground. Now Jim Coleman, flight leader of the first group, was not one to be easily fooled, nor turned aside from a definite and important mission by the mere fact of some one's waving at him. But there were several things about this Spad which made it unusual.

In the first place, every wire was festooned with leaves and twigs, as if it had slept all night in a haystack. Secondly, it carried two men instead of one, which certainly denoted something out of the

ordinary. Finally, the figure which rose from the hump of the fuselage was naked. So when Jim recognized the number on the side as Rip Reed's, he decided that it would be well to obey those gestures.

"Boys," said the major to a surrounding group of helmeted pilots a few minutes later, "I guess—no, there's no guess about it, either—your lives have been saved by a whisker. And you all know whom to thank." While the Skipper threw his arm about the shoulders of a shivering figure draped in a blanket, a cheer that was not forced arose from many throats. "But listen! Since we're all here rarin' to go, we may as well go somewhere. If Jerry has concentrated all his Fokkers over Coulonnes, there must be other points left unprotected—Dun, for instance. We'll just go over and deliver a load of hate, wrapped in machine-gun bullets, on those trenches on the hill-top south of Dun. Come on, let's go!"