

THE SHADOW OF DEATH

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Lost in the fog on their first flight over enemy lines, two Yank flyers thought to be unreliable, prove what manner of men they are in the Shadow of Flying Death!

THE ALTIMETER SHOWED a metric reading which Flight Leader Dodgson computed as being slightly better than 22,000 feet.

That was high, is high now, and ever shall be, memory without end, for Flight Leader Dodgson.

The ship in which the flight leader studied this high-pointing altimeter was a Spad-220 of our Yank Fifth Pursuit Group, A.E.F., of course. Meuse-Argonne offensive, early October, 1918.

Lieutenant Dodgson was high. Also, and this is the thing which bothered the lieutenant most, he was alone, a flight leader without a flight. It's a fact, all Dodgson had in this world were two things: a Spad at 22,000 and the answer to the question of, When is a flight leader not a flight leader? Rotten war!

"As a flight leader," he decided. "I'm the champion in our neighborhood at blindman's buff.

Dodgson's 22,000-foot perch guaranteed his complete separation from all things earthly. Miles below and under a solid sea of clouds, old Mother Earth was entirely hidden from view. When those clouds first-came in, not too quick and on the blow, Flight Leader Dodgson had been cruising along with six good boys in perfect formation and echeloning back at either side of his rudder. Near the top of the world, he had been sitting pretty.

Enemy craft had been hard to find; but Dodgson was too old at the game to worry about that. His duty was to take a certain number of ships out, do what was to be done, then bring those wild boys back. And, during a long stay on the front Dodgson had given a fine account of his stewardship.

Dodgson was sure of his ceiling. Out of the sky overhead, he knew that nothing would come. Therefore, to right and left, ahead and behind, he studied unbroken white fleece that rolled and piled for miles below, and beyond his far-reaching visibility.

Out of that white billowing ocean, the pursuit leader picked up nothing. Man was never more alone.

Two of the six pilots with whom he had started were new to the front. This was their novitiate, and Dodgson was afraid to think of what might happen to these.

At first, when clouds had rolled in on them, Dodgson made a game try to carry on and lead them through. The going became thicker; and he signaled them to spread, drop back, double-space. For a minute they had flown that way. Then Dodgson could not see his nearest men through the gray. When for another second three ships did come to his view, he had sent back the order that broke formation and put each man on his own.

WITH his men turned loose, and to avoid likely bunching in the thick stuff below, Dodgson had taken his chances and climbed to the top.

Working alone, the leader knew how to win altitude through the blackest, heaviest sky—by flying "on his tachometer" and watching his compass float. Not for a second had he changed the position of his throttle, so when the tachometer showed signs of added motor speed, Dodgson knew that he must be falling into a glide. On the other hand, when that motor-speed indicator showed engine labor, Dodgson was quick to know that his climb was getting too abrupt. And he was light-handed enough to jockey into the safe mean. A devilish way for one to fly! Hell itself, on wings, for a pilot. Watching a tachometer and studying a dizzy-rolling compass float for his lateral balance. Still, after months of it, Dodgson could get away with the thing. But the two new men?—not so good.

SECOND LIEUTENANT JOYCE, in ship No.3, was Dodgson's greatest worry. The leader had known Joyce back in the training area. The second lieutenant had

been afraid of the front. And, being plenty frank, the second lieutenant didn't care who knew it. Joyce had pulled every string in reach in an effort to remain in the S.O.S. But, in the end, found himself among the outgoing. And here he was. Dodgson wondered just where Joyce was.

The other new pilot, 1st Lieutenant Merriam was piloting an unnumbered ship. Merriam's jump from the pan into the fire was proving quick enough for anybody. Out, up and over, all within twenty-four hours. Dodgson had loads of fear in his troubled heart for Merriam.

Twice to Dodgson's knowledge, this man Merriam had crashed in fogs. Once back on Long Island, and a second time at the A.E.F. training center, Issoudun.

He knew well enough what two fog crashes did for a man—they made him expect a third every time he saw a cloud. It's a different kind of fear, but it's fear nevertheless. Game as he might be, almost anything could happen to Merriam now.

Maybe it had already happened. Perhaps Dodgson's man Merriam was even now on the other side of his third crash.

DODGSON studied his wrist watch. He stacked its time against the remaining gas in his tank. As near as he could figure, less than twenty-minutes' grace stood between him, his men, and the end. He had turned his flight just before the sky went altogether too bad. That had headed them for home. Once on top the world, and in the clear, he had kept his sun on the left. He was fairly sure of his position. Time soon for him to cut his gun, pique, and slide down through.

Then he glided into the clouds at 18,000 feet.

He pulled his throttle back till the motor idled and the ship stalled in its flight. He turned the control stick loose, took his feet from the rudder bar, and let 'er spin. On its own, the Spad-220 spun, drifted, recovered, and shifted through the slithering manoeuvres of a falling leaf. Here and there in his fall, Dodgson jazzed in a bit of corrective motor; then the whole works slithered and spun some more. A thousand feet went; and 17,000 showed on the altimeter.

"A fine pair of outa-luck eggs—Joyce and Merriam," Dodgson said to himself. 16,000 feet was on the dial. For a few hundred feet of fall, the-pilot flattened out his ship to slow up the spin. "Those two yannigans all alone in this punk sky," he was thinking. And 15,000 was at hand. "I should be there to take

care of them," he told himself. "After all, that's the whyfore of a flight leader—to lead. It's a transitive verb meaning: to bring or take, to guide or conduct, but I'm not doing any of those things. Future generations of small children will hear of me as the bad bogieman who took the nice young pilots up for a flight and turned them over to the cloud Furies. I'll be a hangar banshee wherever I go."

AT 14,000 FEET, just to see that his ship was all there, and to give his motor a warming run, Dodgson redressed and cruised for a minute. He was in clouds so thick that the reeking vapor trimmed back off struts, wires and surfaces like snow from the share of a plow. Cold. Clammy. No visibility, and no place to be. He cut his gun. Let her spin some more.

13,000 feet; and still black with clouds.

"I hope those boys got through," Dodgson still mooned. "It's a tough detail for a first flight over the lines. Wish one of our older gang was on hand to take care of them. Wish I was there myself. No flight leader—me. Not after this mess."

12,000 feet came. It was enough to make a man wonder if the whole universe had gone black. But the loneliness was less noticeable. Now, whenever his nose swooped high, and the Spad hung almost motionless in a stall, ground sounds came to ear. Heavy guns thundered. Rumbling transport trains on the highways. Far away, an "alert" siren wailed. For Dodgson that was all like good news from home. It spelled life and activity; the life and activity of killing. Nevertheless it was life.

"Hope I'm not behind Hun lines," the leader mused. "And I hope that 'alert' isn't being sounded against any of my gang—against Joyce or Merriam. My gosh! I'd give a good right arm to be in a position to take care of, them. Dam' young saps! what did they ever want to come to war for? Turning a guy like me gray. Showing me up as a punk flightless flight leader. I'll give 'em a rub for this if they ever get back."

At 11,000 he was still spinning, still thinking, and still lamenting the fact that those new kids needed a chaperon.

At 10,000 feet he kicked out of his spinning fall for another look-see. His ship and motor were O.K. He *shot the moon* with his brace of Vickers guns, just to warm them up, and felt satisfied. After that, he spun some more. New sounds came up. More sound. At one time, for a stalling few seconds, he got the hum of motors. More than one motor, and they were not

synchronized. Therefore, there was more than one ship. Those ships could not be far away, nor far below his present position. Dodgson spun flatter, slower, and warily. He was all ears, and all eyes. He shot the moon a few times more, got set for anything.

9,000 came. Another grand of spinning linear feet unravelled. Then, with a suddenness that surprised even Dodgson, his Spad bolted into clear sky. Still and all, a few thousand feet lower, the gray top of another cloud world hid the ground.

The flight leader took stock. Less than a mile to the east, he discovered the ships—two of them—that he'd heard. One of those ships was Joyce's No.3. The other was Merriam's unnumbered Spad. "Well, I'll be—!" the flight leader said to himself as he turned to fly in their direction. It does not matter what Dodgson said he would be for he was red-hot mad, mad as hell, and at those two young saps—they were flying a Lufberry Circle of two ships. Following around on one another's tails. Afraid to go up, and not daring to start down. They were obviously hopelessly lost. Panicky. The clearing between clouds, for the time being, had offered safety, and, with no sun to guide on, they had lost all idea of direction.

DODGSON broke up that circus. The new men fell in on either side of his tail. He flew with the stick between his knees for a minute, held his hands aloft, and pointed to his wrist watch. "See that, you saps?" he bellowed, as though they might hear; "see that? You have less than ten minutes' gas! Flying around in circles! Flying on "perhaps" gasoline! Flying on borrowed time! Lucky for you yaps that I came along."

The flight leader signaled them to come close. They came close. He signaled them to come closer. They felt their way in and almost lapped wings. Dodgson wasn't going to lose them again. He was going to take those three ships through that mess below, as one. It was going to be nasty work. It was going to be the toughest piece of tight flying ever tackled; but this, of all times and places, was the time and place to fly Scotch. Personal safety was to be relegated, given the bums' rush. Maybe he'd bring them through; perhaps he couldn't. But at any rate the world was going to see a try. They were his charges. It was up to him to see them led right. And as for them—well they really had little front-line value. Flying in circles! Lost! By hell!—Dodgson should have quitted them without a second thought.

The clouds took the flight of three. Once more

the mist blurred whitish gray Where three propellers whirled their boring descent. Thicker than ever, vapor flowed back from all entering parts. 7,000 feet showed on Dodgson's dial; and then 6,000. "Where," he wondered, "will this mess end? And can I keep these ships on even keel? Or will the whole darned works get away from me in a spin?"

Out the corners of his eyes, without turning from the instrument board for a single second, the flight leader now and again studied the wingtips which crowded his own wingtips. Joyce and Merriam were flying tight; and never for a single motor beat had they fallen back, or spread wide.

"Thank God for us Yanks!" Dodgson Enthused. "So help me! we're brave guys . . . Look at these kids; see how they stick. Game? I'll tear any gink's shirt that ever says they're not . . . Still and all, I wish I was at home and my brother was here. Taking care of these young saps is all work, all work!"

5,000 had gone up, and 4,000 too. They were still on even keel. And, just a little lower, like a gift from the weather gods who hung out on Olympus, the clouds began to give, to grow less dense, and break. At 3,000, Dodgson saw the ground for the first time in more than an hour. More than that, he spotted a shoeshaped grove of fir that he recognized as being just behind Yank lines.

At 3,000 they flew west. Down on the ground, those tumbling, drifting clouds were right in the treetops. So there present altitude was far better than a lower level. Moreover, the sun was breaking through just ahead. There'd be better going soon. Still at either flank, Joyce and Merriam held position, crowded in close to their leader, happy as chickens under a wing. But with the more open sky, Dodgson knew that such flying was no longer necessary. He waved them to spread a bit and fall back. Then, in the usual spacing of formation work, the three carried on. Just close enough to read the leader's rudder numbers.

What they might be flying on—in the line of gas—Dodgson could not guess. Moreover, he didn't care to guess. But, guess or no guess, he couldn't help giving the matter much thought. When that gas was gone—they'd be gone. Sure nuff!

A few minutes more of tight anxiety rode by. Through clouds, across temporary clearings, the loose formation of three ghosted. Now, Dodgson could see both of his followers. More times, he could only see one. Time and again, for blanked seconds at a stretch, he could locate neither. But in spite of the

drifting tossing sea of clouds, more and more sun was getting through. More sun, and more color, and more shadows, and more life. The three weren't out of the woods, but it wasn't too bad.

THERE was life on the ground. Battery positions belched smoke and fire below. Troop movements filled the woods. Long lines of transport crowded every road. Sheets of smoke, drifting with the clouds, raced with the wind. The smell of a burning town came up to them at 3,000. Yes, there was life below; and death, too. Their troubles were big, but others were in hell.

Dodgson noted the Yank balloon line as they passed above it. He also noticed something else, and it gave him cause for thought: the balloon line was being raided. The Spads on the alert detail—stationed to fly *under the Pin* at less than 2,000 altitude—were having their hands full. Enemy pursuit ships, always plentiful on this work, were getting in their destructive innings. Within a mile of his crossing, Dodgson could see two Yank balloons burning at the same time. Work was being done down there, and there weren't enough Yank airmen to handle it. For a crazy second, Flight Leader Dodgson forgot his own plight, but only for a second.

No use of him jumping into that mess. It would only spell death for him and his two fuelless followers. But insofar as there were so many German balloon-line raiders down below, there must certainly be a covering party up in high defense. That was what Dodgson was worrying about when a shadow crossed his upper wings. He looked up. There, not fifty feet overhead, a Fokker, banking and trying to flatten out of its dive, was cartwheeling for position on his tail.

THE leader witnessed a new flock of sudden fears: how many overhead Fokkers were there? Were Joyce and Merriam going to ride right into this? Or had they seen the Hun and pulled out?

Dodgson, even before he thought of shoving his stick ahead, looked back for the kids. Tailing along, just coming out of a cloud, he caught sight of No.3, Joyce, one hundred feet to his left. A quick glance over the other shoulder showed Merriam in position too. In a flash, the leader realized that these two had not seen the enemy. Also, the lone German—if he was alone—had perhaps not seen them.

During short seconds, oh hardly a finger's snap in

a man's life, that Hun flyer hung above Flight Leader Dodgson's Spad in such a position that he could not bring his Spandou guns to bear upon the Yank. However, seconds would change this.

Dodgson tried to think, tried to guess his way out of this. After all the hell of bringing these kids to comparative safety, this was no time for him to shove down his nose, slap full gun to his 220, and make a save-yourself run for it. That wasn't Dodgson's way. It wasn't the way of any Yank flight leader. And in spite of what Dodgson thought of himself, he was that again—a flight leader—with two men to bring home.

He made up his mind to drop his nose a bit, pile up all the speed a Spad could produce, and zoom. Then take a chance. He dropped his nose, and at that same second the Spandous began to send tracers over his wings, through his wings, and all about him. But he fish-tailed a bit, looked up, and got set.

And at that same tight second when all seemed lost for Dodgson, his two so-helpless wards, Joyce and Merriam, saw the Hun above and ahead.

It's impossible to estimate the magnitude of the decision that each of those Yanks made at that second. With the German directly between their guns and their leader, they had no resort to machine-gun fire. Had either opened up on the Fokker, Dodgson would have been under six muzzles instead of two. No question at all—their cross-fire would have sent their leader down. But they had one more card to play, and they never hesitated for a single thought before playing it—zooming as a single ship, those two so-helpless Yanks rammed that Fokker, propellers buzz-sawing, from either side.

Flight Leader Dodgson, on the top of his wild zoom, and hanging headdown from his belt, watched that awful tangle of three ships fall away from him.

A FEW minutes later, with a "dead stick," Dodgson made a landing on the field of one of the observation squadrons. His report to the C.O. was brief. The ambulance whirled up for service. "Wait," Flight Leader Dodgson called to the driver, "I'll go with you. I know just where they piled up. I said I'd bring those boys home. I will." He climbed aboard with the surgeon, pushed back a tear or two—maybe—and added: "They sent me home."