

a PHINEAS PINKHAM howl

THE GRIN REAPER

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They'd been threatening to transfer Phineas for months, and at last the axe fell. Major Garrity couldn't handle Pinkham, eh? Well, who could?

LIEUTENANT PHINEAS "CARBUNCLE" PINKHAM just had to see Epernay. He had heard so much about the catacombs there. They were no ordinary catacombs, such as those in Rome—big cellars full of grinning skulls and old wishbones of the departed. Rather, they were catacombs of bottles, thousands upon thousands of them, and each and every bottle was filled with mellowed champagne. And it came to pass that Phineas did manage to get to Epernay, which proved to be one of the greatest mistakes of his balmy career.

One blithe day in mid-afternoon Major Garrity of the Ninth Pursuit Squadron sent Phineas out to take an Inventory of a particularly nasty Roche gun battery over towards Apremont, with instructions to make no detours on the way back, if the Germans by any chance happened to leave him in shape to get back.

Phineas made the trip, spotted the battery, pigeonholed the location somewhere in one of his brain cells, then entirely forgot about Sir Rufus' warning and took a jaunt in his Spad, not having to worry about the cost of petrol.

Two Fokkers chased him as far as the lines and gave him a good start. Soon Phineas spotted Marne and the city of Epernay hugging its banks, so he dipped down to sample its fleshpots. On the outskirts of the city he parked his Spad, girded his loins for adventure and headed into things.

Of course Phineas visited the catacombs, sampled a bottle of the old champagne and marvelled that there was so much of the fizzy stuff left with so many Yankee doughs running loose in France. His long, loose-jointed frame a-tingle with the spirits, he emerged from the great cave of Bacchus and headed for the nearest cafe. Into it he barged, and pushed his way up to the bar. The place was well patronized by the officers of three armies and several of them looked at the newcomer with lifted brows, for Phineas was clad in fighting clothes, and a leather helmet was atop his head.

"Bomb sour," Phineas hailed everyone in general, tapping a glass on the surface of the bar. "Just got forced down. Is Pershin' here any place? I have a complaint about the gas the U.S. is makin' for airplanes. A Spad would run better on pea soup. Well, garsong, tip the bottle! A fly couldn't wet its chin with what you poured out. What would Lafayette say if he knew you was short-drinkin' lays Amery-cans, hey?"

"*Pardonnez moi, m'sieu,*" apologized the man behind the bar. "*Je suis—*"

Phineas gulped down his drink, then dropped his glass to the bar and let out a yelp.

"Look at that, ya Frog," he exclaimed indignantly. "A cockroach! I demand satisfaction. I—"

A Limey officer who had just drained his glass squealed and clamped his hand to his stomach. "I—I—just swallowed something," he stammered, his face white as a bowl of rice. "Damme, I'll report this outrage, Frenchie. A c-cock-roach, ugh!" He backed away from the bar and hurried for the exit.

The Frenchman's eyes popped as he gingerly picked up the thing Phineas had found in his glass and dropped it out of sight. He waved his arms around wildly and then held them both out in supplication.

"Ah, *m'sieu,* eet ees ze awful mistake. *Sacre bleu, je ne comprends pas! Non, non,* me I undairstan' not. *M'sieu,* drink for notheeng, *oui.*"

"Sure," agreed Phineas with alacrity, "sure, mistakes'll happen." He downed another drink, smacked his lips and walked away. Outside he bumped into the Englishman, who had his hat off and was fanning a clammy brow with it.

"Don't give way," grinned the Boonetown flyer in passing. "That thing ya swallered was a crouton. Haw-w-w-w! Did I fool that Frog! I am broke so I had to git drinks some way for nothin'. Cheerio—toodle-oo an' all them cock-eyed things! Bum sewer."

"My word!" snorted the Limey. "Y-you—why, you impertinent blighter! I'll jolly well—" But Phineas was swallowed up in the traffic and beyond the reach of bodily injury.

In a comer of the cafe which Phineas had just vacated sat a lieutenant of the American Flying Corps. The man's eyes gleamed with savage delight and both hands on the table before him were doubled into huge fists. He waited for five minutes after the exit of Lieutenant Phineas Pinkham, then got up and sauntered out casually into the dusk, a smile of utter triumph on his face.

AN HOUR later Phineas sat in the corner of another Frog cafe, doing his best to entertain a pair of dark-eyed *femmes* who had been unable to resist his magnetic personality. He made spots disappear from playing cards, changed franc notes to blank paper before their very eyes, performed other feats of magic too numerous to mention, then sat back in his chair, grinning, and waited for the applause.

One of the girls shrugged. "*Oui, m'sieu,* eet ees varee good, *oui, mais* sooner today *l'Americain officier* shows ze wans even more good, *oui,* Maybelle?"

"*Vraiment,*" agreed her companion with a bored gesture.

"Huh?" snapped Phineas. "They ain't no bum in the world can beat me with tricks. Just for that ya git no more van blank fin' ya pay for all you've had yourselves. Bon swar, Frogs!"

As Phineas stalked out of the cafe in high dudgeon, a plane flew over Epernay. It reminded him that he had better get going back to Bar-le-Duc before the Old Man assembled a firing squad. One more drink he decided upon, however, and aimlessly he wandered to another rendezvous. As he looked across the bar at the man serving, his eyes dilated to the size of manhole covers.

"Cripes!" choked out Phineas. "I was in here before. I—"

"Peeg!" yelled the Frenchman. "*Chien!* You put in ze cockcoach. *Gendarmes! Soldats!* Ze *Americain* robber! *Gendarmes!*"

Phineas swore and lined up an open window in the rear of the cafe. In three jumps he was close to it when a hand spun him around.

"Just a minute, lieutenant," ordered a gruff voice. "I demand that you explain—"

Whop! The square-jawed face seemed to rise toward the ceiling as Phineas landed. Then he dived out of the window, picked himself up and took off through a dark alley.

"I bet it was almost a general I slugged," he soliloquized as he hurried through various channels of escape to where he had left his ship—and freedom.

Arriving at the spot, Phineas Pinkham got the worst shock of his turbulent career. There was nothing left of the Spad save the wheel tracks. For fully ten minutes he just stood and stared, wondering if he had picked the wrong place. But no, there was the little house with the crooked chimney, the two trees standing close together like a pair of dames dishing out scandal. There was no use kidding himself further. The Spad was gone, as surely as were his teething days.

"C-r-r-r-ripes!" groaned the stranded flyer, and sat down on a rock to feel sorry for himself. "I might just as well start out walkin'—to Blois. Well, I'll say I was forced down as I've used that before, and I'll just go right up to the old termater an' say that's my story an' if you can prove—"

He sighed, got to his feet, and started out on shanks' mare over the first mile of road leading to the drome of the Ninth Pursuit. After that mile had been completed, he had but fifty-nine or so more to go. The thought did not set him kicking up his heels like a colt in a pasture of clover.

AT DAWN of the next day a footsore, weary man dragged himself onto the field which Major Garrity's Spads called home. Five miles down the road a truck had dumped Phineas out. It had helped him eat up almost ten miles of his long trek. He stumbled to his hut, pushed open the door and almost crawled inside.

Bump Gillis grunted, sat up in his cot and rubbed his eyes. "So ya got back, huh? Why? If ya think ya still work here, you're battier even than I thought, which is impossible. Why don't ya say somethin'?"

"It takes too much outa me," mumbled Phineas. He flopped across his bed and went right to sleep.

He awoke at high noon. An orderly was prodding him in the ribs. The man apologized for the disturbance and went on to say that he was but the mouthpiece of the Old Man, and Major Garrity wanted to see Phineas Pinkham very much.

"Oh, yeah-h-h?" yawned the flyer. "Tell 'im I quit. He can't fire me." He got out of bed, adjusted his clothes and stumbled out into the sunlight. Sooner than he could have wished, he was in the presence of the Old Man. Never before had he noticed the major's close resemblance to an aggravated gorilla.

"Well, what's the story?" cracked Sir Rufus. "Hurry up."

"I was forced down," said Phineas. "Did you think a guy would walk sixty miles to see the scenery?"

"Where?" purred Garrity, his jaws grinding.

"Between Epernay and Apramont. Two squareheads chased me an'—"

"You're a liar," responded the Old Man. "The Spad was found cracked up near Dommartin. And listen to this little nursery tale. You got boiled to the tonsils and went out and had fun shooting at observation balloons. You grazed the heads of a lot of infantry going up to the Front, threw rotten apples at them an'—"

"Wha-a-a-a?" gulped Carbuncle. "I never did. I—"

"That's not the worst of it," continued Garrity. "You flew over the toughest flying outfit on the Front and dumped a whole bouquet of artificial pansies down on their field. And not being satisfied with that, you almost rammed a staff car filled with colonels. Well, that's the last straw. They can bust you wide open, and to hell with you! I'll cheer when they do it and they've got my hearty support. Get out of here now and don't poke your nose off the drome, you half-baked, flap-eared, freckled missing link!"

"B-but I—I—er—somethin' is rotten some place," said Phineas dazedly. "I—I—d-don't—"

"You wouldn't remember," said Garrity. "You were pie-eyed."

Phineas staggered out, his brain spinning around in his head like the little red ball in a roulette wheel. Frantically he tried to piece the puzzle together. Once he stopped and decided to go back into the lion's den and tell the C.O. that he was in Epernay all the time and could prove it by a Frog bartender. In the next instant he was walking away from the place in a hurry. There was little consolation in jumping out of a kettle of boiling oil into an incinerator.

"Well," he said resignedly, "it's been a swell *guerre*. I didn't miss anything. Let 'em git along without me, the bums, and I hope the Germans invent a lot of awful machines to—"

Overhead the sky trembled. The drone of props struck envy into Phineas' heart. A Flight swooped in. He went over to watch them taxi up. Howell got out of his pit and grinned as he spotted Phineas.

"It's too bad you're through with the war, Carbuncle," he said tauntingly. "They've got a swell new Heinie ace upstairs. A new outfit with nice shiny ships to mess up. Ha, maybe you couldn't take it—"

"Go shave a duck!" groaned the pride of the Pinkhams. "I won't shed any tears leavin' you fatheads."

Before the day was over, the die was cast. Brass hats came onto the field and let Major Garrity know that he was not the type to handle an incorrigible like Lieutenant Pinkham. The Wing had a place picked out for the trickster, a place which would dampen his ardor for playing tricks and using Spads for his own personal enjoyment. Major Garrity glared at the visitors, told them in very few words that he would see that each and every one of them got a box of cigars for their next birthday and to please get out and leave him alone.

And it came to pass that the name of Lieutenant Phineas Pinkham was seen on the bulletin board as recommended for transfer. When Phineas was not in sight, the faces of the pilots of the Ninth Pursuit were longer than Eskimo winters. Major Garrity tried his best to look happy about it, but he felt the approach of an aching void in the region of his waistband.

The Ninth gave Phineas a going-away party. When it had reached its end, the pangs of saying good-bye to their famous flying mate were washed away. The Old Man had broken a piece of bridgework by biting down on a chunk of molasses candy which was actually a bit of colored rock. Bump Gillis had a shanty over one eye from having accepted a farewell gift from Phineas. It was in a pretty box. When Bump untied the wrappings, it looked as though there were something well worthwhile in it. Instead, a spring had catapulted a wooden knob into Bump's physiognomy and had knocked him over onto the floor in a heap.

Phineas threw a ball of paper into the fireplace and a sheet of flame leaped out, singeing the seat of Howell's pants. A pilot by the name of Wilson wanted to fight after he had found a deceased garter snake in his soup, and Phineas obliged him. Wilson landed in the Old Man's lap, and his elbow connected with Rufus' ear. After it was over, the verdict was unanimous. They would not miss Phineas Carbuncle Pinkham any more than they would the seven years' itch or the hives.

Our hero went out the next afternoon. The last man to say good-bye to him was Sergeant Casey, and he wished he had punched the flyer in the jaw instead. He had taken Phineas' hand and immediately gone into convulsions. One hundred and ten volts of electricity, generated from a battery in Phineas' pocket, had shot through Casey's frame.

"An' I hope I never see the spalpeen agin," groaned Casey when his vocal cords had begun to function again. "Maybe now we'll live through the war. Good riddance, ya cockeyed hoodlum."

ONTO the drome of the Twenty-Ninth Squadron, south of Lerouville, rode Lieutenant Phineas Pinkham just as the sun was going down. The Twenty-Ninth was a forbidding-looking collection of hangars and huts, an outfit that every pilot who wished to grow old prayed to keep away from. There was a curse on the place. It was known all over France as the Suicide Squadron. There it was that hard-bitten individuals who scoffed at discipline and military regulations eventually found a home.

Four ships swooped down to the field as Phineas got out of his means of locomotion and looked the place over with a biased eye.

"Cripes, what a place!" he commented to himself. Two groundmen went by wheeling petrol. They looked at Phineas and he shivered.

"Huh," he said, "them guys must each have two mother-in-laws. What mugs! Ugh, this place is worse than a morgue."

"You'll git used to it," a voice sounded behind Phineas. It was a mournful voice. A pilot had sneaked up.

"Ya even walk like spooks," retorted Phineas. "Why the grief? Ya look like somebody had come in an' stole your watch."

"You're the great Pinkham, huh?" rasped the man. "Ha! See those four ships comin' in? Well, eight went out. An' those bums who are back look as if they'd flown through a laundry mangle. They went out tryin' to bomb a lot of Gothas they couldn't find. Ha, this place is lively, Pinkham. We git bombed at least three times a week. The place looks as if it had smallpox most of the time. A guy lives about three months here. Think ya'll like it?"

"Sure," grinned Phineas. "Have a cigar?"

The pilot took it without thanks and rammed it between his teeth. Phineas picked up his dunnage and walked toward squadron headquarters. He was at the door of the iron-roofed shack when he heard an explosion. He turned. A man was dancing up and down out on the field waving his hands around at a shower of sparks. Phineas grinned complacently and went inside.

Squadron Commander Slug Gunshore looked at the homely pilot who walked up to his desk. Right away he took a dislike to the face and the grin that warped it. He wasn't used to grins.

"Salute, you mugwump!" he barked. "This is the Suicide Squadron."

"Well, do ya have to salute before ya commit suicide?" retorted Phineas indignantly.

"You're the great Pinkham, huh? Couldn't handle you over at the Ninth? Well, consider yourself handled!" snapped Slug. Never before had Phineas seen a more vicious collection of features on any one man's face, outside of the crime magazines. Gunshore had a face which must have been made to tame bulldogs. He had a squat nose, an undershot jaw, and eyes that would drill holes through the sides of a battleship.

"I'm always ready to take orders," said Phineas. "A Pinkham always—"

The C.O. focussed his hard gaze on a medal pinned to Phineas' chest. "So," he drawled in a very sarcastic voice, "you wear all your medals, huh?" He got up, leaned across the desk and tugged at the piece of metal. It came away at the end of a long wire. Phineas touched his pocket casually. A howl shook the structure and the tin roof rattled. Slug Gunshore writhed and kicked and squealed. Finally Phineas stepped back.

"I'm awful sorry, sir," he said, "but a guy tried to steal them a while back when I was asleep, so I made 'em burglar proof. I risked life an' limb for them an'—"

"Take that stuff of yours an' git out of here!" roared Gunshore. "I'll see you later, and I promise you won't git bored." He barked at an orderly, "Show him to his hut—Monk Flanagan's hut!"

Phineas spun on his heels. Guns boomed in his ears. With sickening suddenness realization whanged against his brain pan. So that was it! Monk Flanagan! He was the one showing those dames tricks in Epernay. He had found that Spad and recognized it That had been the mick's way of settling old scores!

Hardly aware of what he was doing, Phineas groped his way after the orderly and soon stood in a little hut, looking into the delighted countenance of Lieutenant Monk Flanagan, once known as Professor Merlin the Great of the Hippodrome Vaudeville Circuit. Flanagan, you may remember, had once spent a few weeks with the Ninth Pursuit, much to his disadvantage.

"Well, well," said Monk. "You! My prayers are answered. It's a long neck on a goose that ain't got a crook in it. So they finally got you! I didn't think I'd get hunk as good as all this. How'd you like Epernay, huh? Thanks for the lift. I wanted a ride in that Spad of yours. Yep, it was me, funny face, Professor Merlin the—"

"You dirty cootie!" interrupted Phineas vehemently. "Well, I'm goin' to change your mug right now."

"We're even, Pinkham," said Monk. "I thought you was a reg'lar guy. You should give me credit as you reckernize talent, bein' a smart tricky guy an'—"

The Boonetown wonder's eyes narrowed and he undoubled his fist. "Awright, awright, let's shake. Monk. Haw-w-w-w-w!" After the handshake Phineas turned to unpack his duds. His tongue was in his cheek and a baleful gleam shone in his eyes.

"We might's well be friends. A guy don't live long here," opined Monk. "Haw, that was a trick I pulled on ya, Pinkham. I bet the Old Man of the Ninth is cryin' in his shredded wheat over ya. An' the funny part of it is ya can't ever prove it was me." And Monk Flanagan piled it on thick until Phineas' heart was loaded with mayhem.

"Let's go an' have mess," proposed Monk, to change the subject. "I want you should meet the pilots here. If you can find anythin' funny about 'em, you're the Queen of the May." He shook some hair oil in his hand and sleeked back his hair, then announced that he was ready to lead the way.

PHINEAS walked into the mess shack of the grim squadron and was shown a chair.

"The guy that had it," announced a pilot, "got barbecued this afternoon. Hope ya have as good luck."

Monk Flanagan swore softly as a wide grin split the Pinkham visage.

"I've been to a lot of funerals," said the amazing Boonetown flyer, "an' I never seen any worse-lookin' pans than on you bums, not even on the corpses. They looked like laughin' high school girls compared to you. Haw-w-w-w, Suicide Squadron, eh? Well, I ain't scared of no Boche that breathes. A fortune teller said I was goin' to die in bed an'—"

"A fresh mug, huh?" cracked another doleful flyer. "The great Pinkham! Always wanted to take a smack at you."

Phineas leaned over and pulled his chair sideways until one leg of it was just over the spokesman's toe. Then he sat down hard.

"Ow-w-vy-w-w!"

"Oh, I beg your most humblest pardon," apologized Phineas. "I was—" He ducked a fist and lunged out

with an elbow. The pilot just sighed as though he were mooning over a love letter, and his head fell in the Pinkham lap. Phineas lifted him up and sat him back in his chair.

"Now if any other mug wants to commit suicide," he began, "I'm always willin' to oblige. Tomorrow when we go up I'll show you that the squareheads are just pushovers, as I've already got myself four or five Heinie Vons that—"

"Still braggin', huh?" bellowed a voice. Slug Gunshore strode into the mess shack. Phineas pushed back his chair fast and stood up as the man pounded his way to his place. There was an awful crash. A board splintered. Pilots stopped breathing.

"I'm awful sorry," breathed Phineas humbly. "When a C.O. came into the mess shack over at Barley Duck, we always got up an' stood at attention. If my chair got in the way, it was an accident as I was only try in' to be respectful to my superiors an'—"

Slug Gunshore got up, fingering his chin gingerly, and towered above Lieutenant Pinkham. "Accident, huh? If I were only sure! I'd knock your ears off. I'd—"

Phineas settled into his chair. "I saw a C.O. slam a guy once," he said. "They made him go back to flyin', and flyin' must be tough in this place. Haw-w-w-w-w!"

"He ain't human," whispered Monk Flanagan to a messmate.

"Somethin' tells me," purred the C.O., "that a gun is goin' to go off accidentally around here soon. If a certain big-eared ant-eater is in the way—"

"I want witnesses," piped up Phineas. "That's the second time my life's been threatened. Well, I'll report to Pershin' an'—"

"Nuts!" spoke up a pilot. "If anythin' happens, we're tongue-tied and blind in both eyes."

"That won't be hard to act out," retorted the unquenchable Pinkham. "Judgin' by the way you've been goin' against the Boche, you'd have done the Allies a favor "by committin' suicide when you was on the way over the ocean. Haw-w-w-w!"

The mess attendant approached the table and stood at Gunshore's elbow. Before he could speak, Phineas' lips opened a little. His mouth was slightly crooked.

"Well, ya big bum," came a voice from the mess attendant's region, "will you have some arsenic for dessert?"

Gunshore's jaw dropped with a click. He looked at the mess attendant in stark surprise. Words congregated in his throat but could not get out. Phineas got up from his chair.

"Now is that discipline, I ask you?" As he walked away, Gunshore's voice boomed at the mess attendant

"Why, you fresh yap, you talk to me—a major—like that!—I'll kick you right back into the kitchen, you—you—you're goin' back to the trenches!"

Monk Flanagan recovered at last and scratched his head. He looked at Phineas' empty chair and swore under his breath.

THE Suicide Squadron went up at dawn. The leader of C Flight laid down the law to Phineas before the take-off. He was a tall, sourfaced war bird who looked as if he had been sentenced to be hanged before sunset. His name was Samson, Wolf Samson.

"Ya stick with me, see? Leave the formation an' we'll gun ya out ourselves, smart guy. A big ace—wagh-h-h!"

"What a nice feelin' of comradery!" was Phineas' comment.

Monk Flanagan sat in his Spad, looking crookedly at Wolf Samson's ship. A chuckle was smothered deep within him. He was willing to wait until the patrol was over.

In fifteen minutes the Suicide Squadron was mixing it with von Bassermann's Grim Reapers. The Boche had scythes painted on their ships. Phineas sniffed as he saw them first.

"Huh, an' that's supposed to scare us guys! I swung one of them things when I was a kid." Then he saw one too close. It was banging away at his top wing. The exile from Major Garrity's brood got out fast, slammed a burst at another Heinie who was unlucky enough to fly across his path. Phineas grinned as the Boche flip-flopped out. He zoomed and saw another flight of German ships coming in, but Wolf Samson did not pull out.

Phineas felt that he needed a stimulant. Oh, for just one more chance to get his fingers around Monk Flanagan's throat! Bullets piqued at his ship. For every Spad he saw a dozen Germans. He could have sworn the Spads were taking a crack at him, too. How long it lasted Phineas had no way of telling. On the return trip, after being saved from certain slaughter by some Camels, he wondered if old age would be becoming to him.

The Spads landed and rolled to a stop. Monk Flanagan got out of his pit, wiped a smear of oil from his face and waited for the fun. He turned to hide a laugh as mechanics tried to pull Wolf Samson out of the Spad's narrow confines. With difficulty he straightened his face and walked over. Phineas and

several others were tugging at Wolf Samson. The flight leader was swearing and squirming in his seat. Finally he was lifted out—minus the seat of his pants.

"Glue, huh? Where's that fresh mug, Pinkham? I—"

Monk Flanagan caught Phineas' startled gaze and snickered. Ah, revenge was sweet!

"Monk, the dirty double-crosser!" exclaimed Phineas. "He went an'—" He faced Samson. "Look here, you can't blame me as—"

"I ought to slam you, you homely cluck," roared Samson, "but this time I won't. My belt snapped up there and this glue held me right in the seat when I was upside down. Shake, Pinkham. You saved my life. Maybe you aren't such a bad guy—"

Monk Flanagan groaned, slammed his helmet against his thigh and walked away swearing.

"Yeah," he heard Phineas saying, "we lost a flight leader like that once over at Barley Duck an' I didn't want to see another go that way so—"

The Boonetown hero found Monk gnashing his teeth when he got to their hut. "Thanks," he grinned. Then his face clouded with traces of homicidal mania. "So ya can't be trusted, huh? Well, look out now, Monk, as you've riled a Pinkham, an' that's healthy, like bathin' with crocodiles."

After the fighting hours were over Phineas thanked his Maker for having kept his body and soul in hailing distance of each other. He was reading a book on legerdemain when Monk came in to make his toilet. Phineas watched his hutmate pour the hair oil on his head and rub it in.

"Haw-w-w-w!" he burst forth after a few minutes. "After that glue, ya'll have to comb your hair with a chisel. Ya'll fool with me, will ya?"

Pilots all over the place heard the violent disturbance which followed. They saw the elephant-iron hut quiver and jump. Then two men rolled out through the door. One finally separated himself from the maze of arms and legs and stumbled back into the hut. He came out and poured a pail of water over the one still *hors de combat.*

LATER Phineas and Monk entered the mess shack. The former's nose was slightly enlarged and his ear was half-covered with adhesive tape. Monk looked out of one good eye, limped in both legs and was counting his teeth.

"It's just a question," said Wolf Samson, "of who lasts the longest. Ya know, I'm beginnin' to git a laugh out of the *guerre.*"

"Haw-w-w-w!" guffawed the latest addition to the squadron. "Then we got the Boche licked. Ya have to have a sense of humor. Who wants to see a trick? I kin make milk turn into water by just—"

"Oh, yeah?" scoffed Wolf. "We want to see just one thing. We want to see where you got your rep, Pinkham. You didn't look so hot upstairs today. Looks like you're overrated."

"I'm a lone wolf," explained Phineas as he flipped something into a cup of coffee near his left elbow. "Always in history a Pinkham went alone, where he could have lots of room."

"Hooey!" exclaimed the man next to Phineas, and took a deep draught at his java. Ten seconds later he was on the floor, calling for a stomach pump.

"It's a disgrace," complained Phineas, "the kind of coffee officers have to drink. It's worse than wormwood. I hear they make it out of shoe buttons."

Monk Flanagan wiped his brow and got up from his chair. "I'm not hungry," he declared, looking askance at Phineas, then at the food on his plate. "I'd rather eat with the lions in a zoo."

"Lions have got some pride," retorted the Pinkham scion. "Maybe the hyenas'd give ya what they left over."

When he had sated his hunger and arrived at his hut, Monk Flanagan was sitting in the corner, counting his legal tender.

"Huh," said the bane of brass hats, "you been robbin' gas stations?"

"It's not mine, beagle-face," snapped Monk. "It's the mess fund. And that reminds me, fork over yours or you eat with the mules."

"I been in worse company," hinted Phineas. "An' through no fault of my own. Here's your filthy root of all evil, haw-w-w!"

As he returned his wad to his pocket. Monk looked avidly at what was left of the Pinkham opulence. "Say, Carbuncle," he proposed, "I—er—got a swell chance to git in on a poker game tonight, but I ain't got anythin' to use for money. If you'd lend me some. I'd win a couple of frogskins for ya as interest, as that is Monk Flanagan. He always pays double—haw-w-w-w—I should tell you, huh, Pinkham? But bygones is bygones and if you'd—"

Phineas' brain began to palpitate, and both cerebrum and cerebellum hit on all cylinders. He watched Monk put the mess fund in his trunk and lock it up.

"Sure," he agreed hastily, "wait until I see how much I've got." He sat down at the table and pulled

out his wealth. Monk Flanagan did not see the quick movements of Phineas' fingers nor the indelible pencil they clutched; "Here's the dough," he said, handing it to Monk. "I'm a sap to do it, but—"

"I can't lose," grinned Monk. "What I can't do with cards ain't been invented. Well, I'll be seein' ya."

"I wouldn't be surprised," purred the Boonetown miracle worker when Monk had gone. "Haw-w-w-! I think I'll go over an' call on Wolf Samson, as I have three card tricks I'd like to teach him before the poker game gits started."

SKULLDUGGERY was afoot on the drome of the Suicide Squadron that night. The poker game was in full swing in Wolf Samson's cubicle. Phineas was bent over the table in his hut. In one hand he held a small metallic object, and in the other he clutched a file.

The squadron, except for the demon poker addicts, went to bed that night—but not for long. Phineas was dumped out of his bed as the hut seemed to rise in the air, spin around and come down with a thud. He ran out into the night just in time to hear the mocking roar of Mercedes engines and see a great gob of the field go up with a sheet of flame. Men ran wildly to bombproof shelters. Phineas argued the right of way with one brawny figure and had to resort to violence to prove his point. When he got to shelter, Slug Gunshore crawled in behind him, rubbing his jaw.

"I'll bend a gun over your skull for that one," he raged above the din. "I'm out to git you, you fresh bum. Hittin' a superior, huh? Well, that's—"

"You haven't got your uniform on," Phineas reminded him, "an' anyways no court-martial would convict a guy for somethin' he did in a raid. He isn't responsible."

"Those damn Gothas!" spat out Gunshore. "If we could only find where they hide 'em. The dirty rotten squareheads! They're worse than smallpox!"

"Tomorrow," said Phineas, "with your permission I'll show these fatheads around here why I'm famous. I'll go out an'—"

"You're as good as gone," cracked Slug Gunshore. "An' is that a break for me! You're not kiddin' me?"

"It is nice to have such a friend. Ugh! What a wallop that was! Don't they ever run out of bombs? Ugh! They're gittin' close. I hope Monk is out in the open, the cootie!"

After more hairs had turned gray in the Suicide Squadron, the Gothas ran out of eggs and went back to their secret hiding place to hatch some more. Phineas crawled out of the shelter, coughed from the smoke and fumes and staggered across the field, where groundmen were scurrying about like hens with their heads cut off.

A hasty check-up showed that four Spads were washed out. A hangar was completely written off the books and four mechanics, a greaseball and two pilots were rounded up by the ambulance and taken to the emergency hospital shack for first aid. The field looked as if a small army had been digging into it for buried treasure, and out of one of the holes crawled something with four arms and legs and Phineas ran over to lift a G.I. can from his head. It was Monk Flanagan.

"Y-you'll never git me to fire n-no janitor agin," he was mumbling dazedly. "He hit me with a shovel an' tossed me right out the cellar door an' then he dumped a load of coal on me. Wh-where am I? Oh, I know now. I held four queens when the tidal wave hit an' Wolf Samson grabbed the jackpot before I could lay 'em down. I demand satisfac—"

"Haw-w-w-w!" enthused Phineas. "Ya find fun most of any place if ya look for it. Well, here, take my hand, Monk. I'll lead you to the hut an' put you to bed. What fun, huh?"

"I've seen all kinds of goofs in my day," observed Gunshore, sitting down on a petrol tin to hold his head in his hands. "But this Pinkham guy—ah-h!"

Before the sun was up, Phineas was walking across the field to the operations shack. Slug Gunshore, having stayed up for the rest of the night, looked at him with heavy-lidded eyes and wanted to know why in three kinds of hell Pinkham was dressed for flying.

"Well," answered the irrepressible one, "ya see, if I go over early, it'll take 'em by surprise, as they won't expect anybody until after breakfast. I've got a swell idea which is a brand-new one. I want a ship. The Boche gimme the idea by spotting up the field."

"You'll get a ship," promised the C.O. with a growl. "And if you find the Gothas, name anything you want an' you'll get it, see? Ha! Not that I ever expect to see you agin. Glad to have met you, though, Pinkham. Your ship'll be ready in twenty minutes. Say, how d'you spell your name?"

"Why?"

"I want to notify your parents an'—" Gunshore's laugh was full of needles and spikes.

"My parents know my name," said Phineas. "See ya when I git another medal."

"Smart cracker!" snapped Gunshore. "The fresh ape!"

In twenty minutes Phineas was climbing into his ship. A mechanic looked at him closely, scratched his head, shook it and walked away.

"They're right," he said to himself. "He's nuts. Dressed in pajamas an' his face—ugh! I never seen freckles that big before. Well, he joined up to git killed. He should kick."

"Adoo," called the intrepid flyer to those on the field. "So long, major," he called to Gunshore. "Don't fergit to commit suicide if I don't come back an' remind ya." Then he was away, his thoughts concerned with Monk Flanagan as he zoomed toward the lines. That homely mick! He'd fool with a Pinkham, would he? Phineas' reputation was at stake. Monk was one up on him and Phineas' pride had been down three points below par.

LIEUTENANT Phineas Pinkham passed over the trenches at five hundred feet, wondering if Bump Gillis back at the Ninth missed him, hoping that the Old Man had fallen downstairs again. Then he looked overside at the rapidly sliding panorama below. Five minutes later he was well into the Heinies' neighborhood. He felt a pang of homesickness as he slipped down. Monk Flanagan's trick had been an ace. He could not have pulled a better one himself. That thought alone did not help matters.

Phineas looked down and saw several Heinies with coal-scuttle helmets, and then the amazing Boonetown flyer swooped down as a pair of Fokkers sliced down from the roof. He landed the Spad not ten feet from a German officer and jumped to the ground. When he pulled off his helmet, the Heinie officer let out a frightened grunt.

"I have escaped from a Yankee hospital," said Phineas. "They said I have got smallpox an'—"

"Gott!" croaked the German. "Smallpox, iss id? *Ach,* get oud yed! Ged oud of here vunce. *Donnervetter!"*

"They're crazy. I ain't got no smallpox any more than them two pink giraffes over there," said Phineas, pointing to a couple of trees. "They couldn' isolate me like they said they would. I got outa bed an' beat it an'—"

"Gott im Himmel! He iss oud *mit* his head yed! Smallpox! Ged oud or Ishood!"

"If ya do, the horseflies'll git me," said Phineas. "An' then they'll fly away an' bite a lot of the German army, an' a big pestilence will sweep the Fatherland." He almost laughed out loud as he saw the German soldiers running as if they were being chased by the devil. The officer dropped his gun as two Fokker pilots came running up.

"He our prisoner iss," declared one tall Von vociferously.

"Dumkopf!" yelled the infantry officer. "Smallpox he hass. If you take him, the Air Force vill ged wiped oud maybe yed. Keep away from that bummer, chentlemen. Look at his face, yed. *Ach!* Covered *mit* spots. In night shirt only he iss *mit, und* he excapes from the hospital." He turned to Phineas and shooed him away as if he were chasing chickens out of a garden plot *"Donner und Blitzen, Amerikaner!* In your ship ged *und* fly back to your side of the lines. It iss not the rule of var, *Amerikaner!* Go back at vunce, quick. Ve will led you, *ja!"*

"Sure I'll go," said Phineas, after a sweeping view of the panorama spread out in the flats below the point of vantage upon which he had landed. "Sure. But if the Vons start smackin' me when I go up, I'll drop right down here again, an' my carcass'll begin spreadin' germs like I said. Haw-w-w-w!"

The infantry officer turned to the Vons. "Make him go yed, chentlemen," he implored. "Signal your *Kameraden* when you ged oop to hold their fire vunce or *der Voterland* it vill haff shmallpox every-vhere. Think of your sisters *und* brudders, *ja!"*

"An' the little children," supplemented Phineas as he walked toward his Spad. The German pilots covered their faces with their handkerchiefs and ran back to their Fokkers. Phineas struggled to muzzle his mirth, climbed aboard his Spad and waved to the Vons. He slid along the turf, took off and climbed steadily until he was at five thousand. Then he began to circle. Down on the ground, the German infantry were signaling wildly. They seemed in convulsions.

"Pingham!" they were yelling, but the Fokker pilots could not hear.

Then, as Phineas headed for home fast, a German pilot, flying low, looked up and saw the Pinkham trademark on the floor of his Spad. The Fokker climbed up quickly and signaled to his cronies. Mercedes engines seemed to roar with a sudden fury. Phineas sensed that something was wrong. Then he knew it for a fact. He had forgotten that lettering on the bottom of his war bus. They were on his neck and bearing down.

What was that up ahead? A Spad, coming in like the devil was prodding its tail with a red-hot trident Phineas kept on going, and then he recognized the bright green ribbon that Monk Flanagan wore on his

helmet. Fokkers slammed in as Monk's nose flipped up. Phineas saw Monk come down and spill a Tripe before it had even started to get its guard up. Never before had Phineas seen such a crazy fighter in the sky. Monk did three times as much with the Spad as was ever supposed possible by its inventors. And as Phineas battled his way to friendly real estate, he thought he knew why, and a fierce gleam was in his eye.

The Boonetown flyer got over his lines and looked back. Two Fokkers swung around from his tail as Allied archie began to crash, and both Tripes got set to head off Monk before he could jump the gap between German and French ground.

PHINEAS tried not to look, but he finally turned about in his pit. Behind him raced Monk Flanagan. Phineas let out a howl of glee and thundered toward—Bar-le-Duc! As good old mother earth became visible under his trucks, Phineas felt his heart leap. He nosed down, went into a loop, sideslipped a thousand feet, flattened, fish-tailed, zoomed again, then dived down and came onto the field in a long reckless swoop.

Straight for the old stone house went the Spad. Major Rufus Garrity saw it coming and dived under a table. Sergeant Casey leaned against the petrol shed and held his hands over his eyes. The Spad swung around, cut a circular ploughshare in front of squadron headquarters and shuddered to a stop. Out of the ship tumbled Phineas Pinkham as pilots ran from the house.

"Hello, bums!" he yelled. "I had to come an' have a cup of tea. Have ya baked a cake?"

"Carbuncle!" yipped Bump. "Hot do-o-o-o-og! Yip-p-p-e-e-e!"

"You damned fool! You crackpot!" Rufus Garrity stood in the doorway.

"Ah, my master's voice!" grinned Phineas. "Did ya miss me? I—" Another Spad thundered in. Monk Flanagan was out of it before it had even started to stop rolling. Casey and his crew had to chase it a hundred yards before they hauled it to a stop.

"Pinkham, ya crook!" howled the latest arrival. "I want that mess fund."

"H-Huh?" croaked Phineas as pilots stared. "Are ya nuts?"

"Did ya think I come out after ya because I wanted to?" raved Monk. "Did ya think I wanted ya killed before I got back that—"

"Come into the office an' talk it over," grinned Phineas. "I think we can settle this out of court. Haw-w-w-w-w!"

"Monk Flanagan!" gasped Major Garrity. "What in hell—"

"Now it's this way, Monk," began Phineas, "that money I loaned ya was marked. Ya see, I ain't mincin' words. An' I showed Wolf Samson how to draw an ace any time he wanted to an' he cleaned ya in the poker game. Now I'll tell Slug Gunshore that the mess money I give ya was marked as I didn' trust ya not to make me pay the second time. So when we ask the guys to show Slug the money they won from ya, Monk, they'll git the evidence and you'll maybe get Leavensworth for twenty years an'—"

"Ya dirty double-crosser!" roared Monk, flailing the air with clenched fists. "Ya took that money an'—"

"I just don't know what ya mean," interrupted Phineas calmly. "I only know I can make the Suicide Squadron believe you absconded with it an'—"

"H-huh?" stammered Monk. "N-now, Carbuncle, y-ya wouldn't see a guy lose twenty years of his life an'—"

"If you'll sign a paper I've got here with me, Mister Flanagan," Phineas interposed, winking at the Old Man of the Ninth, "I'm sure the mess money will turn up. I want ya to confess about stealin' my Spad in Epernay an' goin' joy-ridin' in it an'—"

"What were you doin' in Epernay, you crackpot?" howled Garrity from force of habit.

"You forget yourself, sir," grinned Phineas. "You are not my commandin' officer—yet!"

"I'll s-sign," mumbled Monk. "They can't do as much to me as if I'd stole dough. Gimme the paper, you fish-face, an' I'll sign it. Why'd I ever meet a mug like you?"

"Well, Bump," said Phineas to his old hutmate, "I want you-to sweep out the hut before I git back. I have to go back an' show the Suicide Squadron where some bad Gothas are at an' git me a medal. When I leave the place, they'll call Slug Gunshore's outfit the Lazy Daisy Squadron, as have I softened 'em up? Haw-w-w-w!"

"There's your damned paper," swore Monk. "Now gimme the money."

"Huh?" laughed Phineas. "It's back at the Suicide Squadron, Monk. Right where you left it. It's all spread out in your socks. So you see the integrity of the Pinkhams is still intact. You'll maybe want this skeleton key I made, Monk, in case ya lose the one ya got. What was it ya said? It's a long goose that don't have a neck? Well—"

"Pinkham," said Garrity, "you'll be back where you belong as soon as the necessary transfer can go

through." He sighed and sat down. "Not that it gives me an appetite, but I have to see that justice is done."

"Don't strain yourself," snorted Phineas. "You fergit your high blood pressure. Ya needn't worry. I'm satisfied where I am. Slug Gunshore is gittin' a sense of humor an' I never seen none here, anyways."

Sir Rufus swore and jumped up. He shook a big finger close to Phineas' face. "Is that so, you woozle? Well, you listen to me. You'll be back here, see? And don't try to cross me or I'll tell 'em who smacked that Brigadier in Epernay, you—you—"

"Cripes!" enthused Phineas. "This sounds natural. Well, adoo, bums, I go—but not for long!"

The Ninth cheered as Phineas walked to his Spad. Monk Flanagan's ship was already out of sight when Pinkham roared away. It was apparent that the Mick wouldn't rest until he got his hands on the precious mess fund.

Major Garrity's face split into a wide grin as he folded up the Irishman's confession. He went into the farmhouse and slapped an orderly on the back, kicked the sergeant-major's chair out from under him and went upstairs to get a bottle. An hour later he was singing "Sweet Adeline!"