

Mark of the Killer

By Arthur J. Burks

CHAPTER I Ash-Filled Apples

MIDDLEWEIGHT champion of the world, in a world mad with war! Before the war, and before he had entered the Air Service, Larry Drago would almost have given his right eye to have held that title. And two nights ago, in a ring set up in the midst of the training areas, he had won it—from the champion, too, whose job in the war so far had been the athletic training of the bodies of members of the A.E.F.

In that capacity the champion had kept himself in top form; yet Drago had beaten him. Nothing could have stopped Drago. Fists scarcely hurt a man who had seen so many wing-mates die, to whom bullets for breakfast, lunch and dinner were commonplace. He had scarcely felt the blows of the champion. He simply wore him down and knocked him out in the fifth round. As early as the third round the champion had known he was beaten.

"Too bad, Drago," he had mumbled in the clinches, through bloody foam on his battered lips, "that you won't really be the champion, even for the little time you may have left to enjoy it!"

"So? What's the idea?"

"Adolf Loeb, Drago. He beat me once in an over-the-weight match. He could do it again. He could beat you, too, if he got a break. You'll always be remembering that—that your title is tarnished."

"Adolf Loeb, the German ace I shot down last week behind our lines?"

"The same! Prisoner of war now. Of course they can let him out. In a manner of speaking, it gives you a chance to draw the line. You couldn't be expected to fight a German prisoner. He's behind the line—and you're behind the eight ball!"

This was not a connected conversation, of course, for it was punctuated by savage rights and

lefts handed out by both men. Willis, the champ, was down three times. Drago himself went down once. Blows were used as commas and periods, but Willis managed to get across his hateful propaganda. Larry Drago would never be middleweight champion of the world until he had beaten Adolf Loeb. Already he had beaten Loeb in the air, but that did not count. Boxing titles were won in the ring.

But how could a fight like that be managed, when the adversary was a prisoner of war? And yet, if a man wanted to be fistic champion of all the world, he must be the best man, in his class, in all the world. And Germany was still a part of the world, enemy or not.

Thinking of all this now, Larry Drago, having a soft drink at an estaminet in Paris, jumped to his feet. Two hours later he was pulling strings with the editor of the Stars and Stripes, explaining. Such a thing was unheard of, but for a famous ace—two famous aces—the editor would do his level best. He had some influence with American newspapers, too. It would be a great yarn.

"Even the Germans will get a bang out of it, for of course Loeb will accept. Might even arrange a truce for the fight, ask the Heinies to attend!"

"Maybe," said Drago, "but I think not. There's still a war. Just get me Loeb!"

"By the way, you shot him down, didn't you? That should go into the story, too!"

"Together with the fact that he's downed twenty-seven Allied flyers," Drago said acidly, "without giving one of them a chance for his life. Grudge? Of course. If the powers that be see nothing in bad taste about matching him with a Yankee, then it's up to me to send him back to where he belongs."

"Take it easy," advised the editor. "After all, he'll be a man without a cheering section. With every man in the audience against him!"

Larry Drago laughed shortly. "If I know the man, that will tickle him pink!"

ONE week later, long after dark, thousands of Yankees, Frenchies and Tommies gathered about a rough ring set up in the middle of a soggy field. Their white faces stretched back and back to infinity almost. As though by common consent, lights over the ring were allowed. They were swell targets for German bombers, but the German High Command had had the cheek to send word that no attack would be made on the boxing show. Also, the message had said, they expected their Adolf Loeb to win the championship—then hurl the honor back into the faces of his enemies.

Feeling ran pretty high. Had it not been for the fine sportsmanship of fight lovers there might have been riots, and things might have happened to German prisoners here and there. For in every concentration camp prisoners jeered at guards, telling them just what their great champion would do to Larry Drago.

Drago, not in the best of condition—Loeb could not well be either, all things considered—had some few doubts. Leaving the war out of it altogether, he knew Loeb to be a dangerous, tricky, brutal fighter. He had to beat the man, and do a good job of it.

A terrific roar went up when a white-skinned, hairy man crawled through the ropes. Larry Drago was already on his stool in his corner. He glanced across at his opponent.

Loeb was a bull of a man for his size and weight. There was a livid, sinister saber cut across his left cheek, mark of some Heidelberg duel perhaps. The man's eyes seemed to glow with ferocity as he stared at Drago. He didn't cross to Drago to shake hands. Drago, understanding the difficult situation of this German prisoner, rose and crossed to him. Loeb grinned thinly.

"Perhaps, man to man, you will not be so lucky, Drago?" he said. "No mechanical deficiencies of a plane can now stand between us and a reckoning."

"Are you hinting that it was only by luck that I shot you down?" Drago shot at him.

Loeb arched his brows. One of them had been cut, too, by the saber that had gashed his cheek.

"It would be poor sportsmanship, wouldn't it," he drawled, "to detract from the glory you had every right to claim when you shot down Adolf Loeb? So, I do not do it. But tonight I prove that it was a fluke! It will be a good thing to hear the moans of your supporters, knowing that among your people there is not one who wishes Adolf Loeb to win."

"If you win, Loeb, no one will begrudge you," said Drago. "But you will not win if I can prevent it."

"Break it up" said the referee. "Come to the center of the ring for instructions!"

As the two fighters moved forward, an announcer told the audience the salient facts behind this bout. It was to be a grudge fight of grudge fights, which had really begun in the skies over No Man's Land. The crowd knew all about it, but watched Loeb now as he heard it over again. Loeb bowed to them. The referee sent both fighters back to their stools.

THE bell clanged. Drago, his belly taut, came warily out of his corner. Loeb was just as fast, with something of the suggestion of the mongoose about him. The scar on his cheek showed redly. His gray eyes were pits of hell. One look at his stance and Drago knew that the German's fistic prowess had not been exaggerated. Fighters know one another at first glimpse.

Loeb shot in, almost too fast for the eye to follow him. His left buried itself to the wrist in Larry Drago's belly. A concerted "A-h-h-h-h" started to rise from the crowd, changing to a cry of dismay when Loeb lifted a right flush to Drago's jaw. Drago was down before he had been able to send a blow at Loeb.

The ring rose and fell like the deck of a boat in a sea. The ring posts teetered to and fro. Larry Drago was on one knee at the count of five, looking around for Loeb. No neutral corners then, and Loeb was standing close, ready to send another to Drago's jaw when his knee left the canvas.

Larry Drago's mouth hung open. His eyes were bleary. He lifted his own right hand and drove his fist against his numbed jaw, hoping to shake the cobwebs out of his head.

It helped a little. He was up at nine, charging at Loeb. The German side-stepped. Drago,

staggering, might have gone on past had he not seen in the German's eyes what the prisoner intended doing. Instead, he whirled, like a bull following the matador instead of the cape, and slammed rights and lefts, with all the power he had, to the German's head, belly and heart.

He didn't cover his jaw. He attacked so fast that the German must protect himself. Loeb's jaw gaped open now, and his knees began to buckle. For a man to come back from what looked like a sure knockout, as Larry Drago had, to smash a man into insensibility before he could crash to the deck, was drama, and throughout that vast audience the thousands rose to their feet and yelled for the kill.

Drago did not pause. Lefts and rights. Lefts and rights. They thudded against the body of the German like blows of fists against a taut drumhead. The German went down, his head almost turning on his shoulders from a savage right, flush to the button.

Larry Drago stepped back, sure that no man alive at the weight could get back up after such a flurry of fists. Loeb had his legs twisted under him oddly, one leg before him, one behind. He sat there, foolishly staring, while the crowd went mad.

Six! seven! eight! nine!

The miracle happened, and Loeb staggered to his feet. Moreover, as one driven mad, and given strength beyond computing, because of the humiliation, he seemed even stronger than when the fight had started. The two men stood toe to toe in the middle of the ring, throwing everything they had at each other.

As they fought savagely, the war faded out. The crowd became a crowd at home—for each of the fighters—every spectator pulling his choice home the winner. The roar for the fighters became the roars of their several adherents, and the battlers were not German and American, but middleweights battling it out for a crown.

The red scar on Loeb's face looked like a slash of blood. His gray eyes still were pits of hell, but they were also the wary, alert eyes of the fighter who watches for every opportunity. Loeb knew that nobody but himself could have risen after that savage series of blows.

Drago suspected as much, yet allowed himself to be trapped by a peculiar, snaky feint of his

adversary. He shifted like light, shot a blow to Loeb's jaw, just as a savage, bitter right cracked against his own jaw.

Both fighters were on the floor, struggling with all their will power to rise, when the bell sounded the end of the first round.

CHAPTER II

Escape!

THE first round! It seemed to Larry Drago that he had been fighting for twenty rounds already. His whole body was sore with the punishment he had taken. There was little consolation in the knowledge that Loeb had taken just as much or more.

Could they keep this up for seven more rounds? Could he keep going, and come out the winner? Loeb looked so much the stronger as they awaited the bell for the second round.

Drago glanced out at the white faces of the crowd, saw them filled with questions as eyes were turned toward him. They, too, were wondering how he could possibly win, and thinking what it would mean to morale if a German prisoner, all alone, with no rooters at his back, should step into an A.E.F. ring and whip their own man—who was also one of their aces.

No! No!

Larry Drago would fight to his limit and beyond, to the very brink of destruction, before he would let that come to pass. The bell rang, and he hurled himself from his corner. The battlers met with a shock in the center of the ring. And toe to toe, taking and handing out the most dreadful punishment, they fought through the three minutes of the second round. They were both bleeding like pigs. Their torsos were red with gore.

They did not clinch in the second round, though even two men whose whole souls were bent on victory realized that human flesh and blood could not stand this through six more rounds.

Both staggered to their corners at the end of the second, and the crowd paid them the high tribute of perfect silence. This primitive battle had touched them all to their depths, German or no

German, Loeb was making a fight to be remembered.

They started clinching in the third. They had to. Flesh had stood all it could. One or the other, as the seconds passed, had to fight for breathing space. And Loeb, his head on Drago's shoulder, said:

"I smash you to bits tonight, Drago. Then I escape in good time, before the war ends, and we meet again in the sky. Only you will remember all this, my enemy, and will be afraid of what I shall do to you with bullets, since I have done so much with my fists—and I shall end by killing you."

"Escape?" repeated Drago. "Impossible. No German escapes our guards."

"That is triumph, eh? Then you have no cause to fear anything—except my fists, which cannot kill, though with all my might I shall try."

It was a grim challenge which Drago could not refuse.

The fourth round was a repetition of the second. So was the fifth.

Neither could stand the grueling pace, yet somehow both did. Their bodies were red, not only with blood from their noses and mouths, but from the drumfire of many fists. The sixth round, and the seventh.

Then the crowd rose as one as the eighth opened, to cheer their hero home. In that eighth round, in three minutes of fighting, rising to superhuman heights, the two men concentrated all the savagery they had scattered through the previous seven rounds. And when the battle ended, with both men on their feet, pandemonium broke loose. Soldiers poured into the ring. Drago was pushed away from Loeb. Officers yelled for order out of chaos and did not get it, until—

THE Germans came! Fokkers, Albatross, Aviatiks, almost everything that flew. Their roaring motors drowned out the cries of the crowd. Officers yelled for the men to duck for cover. With thousands out in the open, perfect targets for machine-guns and bombs, it appeared that the Germans were going to sacrifice one of their own heroes in order to mow down as many of their enemies as they could.

"Take cover!" shrieked the M.P.s. "Break in all directions! Throw yourselves flat!"

But when men stood belly to back over hundreds of acres of ground, how could they flee for cover without a pile-up? Before anybody could think of the answer, the German crates had flown over, no more than a hundred feet above their heads. But no bullets came from guns, no bombs were dropped. The planes vanished into the night sky, and the crowd sighed with relief. Apparently the Germans were simply paying tribute to the fighters.

No decision had been given. There had not been time. Now the ring was cleared, and the referee was looking for the fighters.

Adolf Loeb could not be found. A thousand eyes had seen him. Now none saw him anywhere. Nobody even remembered seeing him after he had dropped his hands at the end of the fight, to stare out of a battered face at the man he had not knocked out. After that, nothing. Adolf Loeb was gone.

Before morning a jeering message came to A.E.F. Headquarters, from Loeb himself—from somewhere in Germany!

Before returning to the Front Larry Drago, bitterness in his heart, blaming himself for it all, went to the editor of the Stars and Stripes.

"Here's a wire story for you," he said, grimly. "Larry Drago does not consider himself champion until Loeb has been killed or is a prisoner again. The title is emptier than it was before. Toss it back home, into the States, for other middleweights to fight over, until they're drafted or make it overseas!"

"But you won it, Larry, fair and square, from Willis! Then you whipped Loeb to make it binding!"

"Did I whip him or was it a trick to work out the escape? Was it an accident that Willis told me about Loeb during our fight? Or did he get some idea from Loeb himself? I understand he visited Loeb a time or two while he was prisoner, to talk over old times! However it was worked, Loeb's escaped, and I've been made the goat! Until I've straightened that out, give the home boys a chance at the title. I've retired from the ring, as of now!"

How had it been brought about, anyhow? It had been easy enough, in the midst of all the excitement, for Loeb to make his break. Once outside the crowd, in the darkness, he must have made for some clearing, by prearrangement,

where a German plane had dropped down and picked him up. So much was explainable.

But how about all that had led up to it? German espionage, perhaps, had somehow planned it all. Maybe the athletic officer had been used as a pawn. Maybe. . .

However, ifs and ands had nothing to do with it as far as Drago was concerned. The fact was, simply, that Adolf Loeb had escaped. Nor was Drago surprised, when he stepped into his hutment, on the tarmac of the Fourteenth Pursuit Group, to find a memo pinned to his pillow. Nor that he could never find out how it got there. Spies creeping through the woods at night, eluding the sentries—it could have been done in any number of ways.

The message said:

We shall fight again, if we both live, Drago. And next time the crowd will be for Adolf Loeb.

Whether Loeb himself had sent the message or not did not matter. That it was authentic Drago felt sure. There was something give-away about English script as done by a German accustomed to his own kind of writing. The hand that had done the job had been a German hand.

Drago got a queer thrill out of the message. Just what did it mean? That Loeb was going to try to make him a prisoner, as he had made a prisoner of Loeb, then fight him somewhere in the heart of Germany?

Somehow that prospect seemed worse to Drago than the prospect of being killed in the air. To be a goldfish in a German bowl—even though Loeb himself had been such a goldfish, in an Allied bowl—troubled him. It was intended to. But Drago, perfectly willing to fight Loeb again, recalled that there was a war, in which the recent fight with Loeb, with harmless—comparatively—gloves, had been forgotten.

The war must come first, even though the thought of meeting Loeb in Germany, with Drago a prisoner, lurked in the back of Drago's mind. If the war ever ended, it would be all right; but as a prisoner—

His lips were a firm line that next morning when he reported to the deadline for combat patrol duty. It didn't help any when the Squadron C.O. came to him on the line and told him that Adolf Loeb, because of distinguished service while a prisoner of the enemy, had been promoted

to the rank of *Hauptmann*, and made a flight commander. Adolf Loeb would lead Germany's aces against Drago's wing-mates, against Drago himself!

DRAGO was a member of A Flight, Captain Josiah Strange commanding. There were five other wingmates, all of whom were known intimately by Drago. They were as close as men who face death, flying wing and wing, can possibly be. Moreover, without being told, they knew something of Drago's queer problems where Loeb was concerned. In line of duty Loeb would shoot Drago down if he could. Preferably he would make him a prisoner.

Drago guessed that his own wingmates would do their best to prevent this no matter what he said or did, and the thought made his blood run cold. Germans needed little enough inspiration to fight like fiends. Now, with an added inducement—

Yes, they would be hellers to combat. And Loeb would be the most savage of the lot. Last night Drago had dreamed of facing Loeb again, and that livid scar on the cheek of the German had hung over his dreams like a bloody sword.

The seven flyers stepped into their crates. Captain Josiah Strange held his hand high, after motors were fully warmed, and flyers had tested their instruments, indicated that all were ready. Drago was to fly to Strange's right rear when they rendezvoused at five thousand feet, just below the high clouds that drifted west from Germany.

The hand of Josiah Strange came down. Seven crates blasted off the apron, gained speed down the field.

At almost the same time seven sticks were pushed forward, seven tail skids left the tarmac. Then seven sticks came back into as many bellies, as Hissos roared wide open and lifted seven crates off the field.

Drago, once off the ground, was possessed by a very fever of impatience. He was eager to get close to Loeb again, to lay the ghost that haunted him. He would down Loeb once more, behind his own lines or wherever the opportunity arose, and the small voice of doubt would be stilled.

The V formed, headed for German-held skies. Josiah Strange was a veteran, phlegmatic, calm in all emergencies, though his keen eyes never missed a thing. He had not said a word to Drago

about the undercurrents involved in a contact now or any time in the future with Adolf Loeb.

Over the lines the German Archies began to blast away. Drago half expected something to happen that almost never did—a piece of shrapnel to smash into his crate, disabling it, forcing him to turn back. Maybe it would have been a relief. But no—it would simply have postponed the inevitable. The Archies did not register, though the sky above the seven speeding crates which rolled and rocked as the air through which they sped was disrupted by spanging explosions, was flowered with their bursts.

All eyes were fixed on the skies ahead, below, above, behind. The Germans might come from anywhere. Loeb was a wily fighter, boiling with indignation because he had been a prisoner, eager to prove himself anew to his country.

They came out of the high clouds, ten planes flying wide open in a power dive, with their Spandaus raging, even before Josiah Strange spotted them and waggled his wings. The seven-plane formation broke apart. It was every man for himself. And Drago, eager to get it over, to come to some decision as soon as possible, pulled back his stick, clutched it with his knees, nosed up to meet the down-crashing Germans while his Vickers raged and ranted and bullets were sped into the thick of the German fighters.

Closer and closer he came to the midst of them. Six of the planes were breaking from the formation, in order to contact the other six planes of A Flight.

Four planes clung together like grim death, converging on Larry Drago. Bullets smashed into his wings. Bullets ripped and snapped all about him. But he gritted his teeth and kept his Spad climbing into the Germans.

Long before he made contact he was reasonably sure of one thing. The Germans would shoot his crate to pieces without killing him, if he did not force them to slay!

Loeb was out to capture Larry Drago! Proof of what he had expected made him go berserk. Maybe that, too, was intended by the wily Loeb!

CHAPTER III The Challenge

DRAGO flung himself into the thick of the four Germans, powered by a motor almost stalled by the steepness of his climb. They spread apart just enough to let him fly into the trap. He didn't realize until then that he had not even thought of his crate, and that it could do just so much and no more. It almost died before he leveled off, easing the strain on the Hisso.

And then the four Germans had him surrounded, were pelting his crate with lead from their chattering Spandaus. Bullets ripped at his wings, tore into his fuselage from below, just before and just behind him. They smashed his instrument panel, throwing glass into his face, causing the blood to spurt as it had spurted just recently under the hammering fists of Adolf Loeb.

He darted, ducked and dived all over the sky, trying to throw off his tormentors, trying to bring one or all of them down. He saw the back of a German in his sights in the midst of his most desperate gyrations, and his Vickers raged without let-up for twenty shots or more. The German's head became a gory mess before the German's body slid down into the pit. Gritting his teeth, coldly furious, scarcely conscious of what he did, Drago sent another burst into the doomed crate, into the motor section. Black smoke and hellish flames burst from it instantly. One of the four was through now.

Swiftly he sought for the other three, sure that one of them must be Loeb. But he did not spot his enemy just then. Instead, one of the other six German crates came in to take the place of the one Drago had downed, and he was boxed again.

Desperately he sought escape, and to give a good account of himself at the same time. Within the next four seconds, every German fuselage was stitched with holes made by bullets from his Vickers. But somehow he could not find vital spots, could not bring his ring-sight into line on another German, nor reach through to another motor section to send an enemy down in flames.

Then he spotted Loeb. The German ace was hovering over the fight between Drago and four Germans, looking over his cockpit coaming. He dropped his left wing as Drago spotted him, giving the Yankee a glimpse of his fuselage, and

the new black insignia on its side. The insignia might have been funny in any other circumstances. As it was it made Drago all the more furious. A pair of boxing gloves! The jeering of Adolf Loeb rang in his ears as he got the hint. And even as he got it, the four Germans were methodically hammering his Spad to pieces. Savagely he fought them off. A split second, and another German was going down. But no sooner had he started, and before Drago could break through the cordon to follow him, another German took his place.

Thus, some of the Germans were fighting off Drago's wingmates, while four of them sought to drive Drago out of the skies—and he was five kilometers behind the German lines! Loeb, taking no part just now, was watching and coordinating every move of his flyers.

Josiah Strange and three Allied flyers broke out of the general dogfight Drago was powerless to join, and flung themselves into the thick of the fight that revolved about Drago.

THEN Adolf Loeb made his move. He came down in a shrieking dive, his Spandaus etching smoke rings about his spinner cap. He wasn't shooting at Drago. In a split second he had shot Lieutenant Morgan of A Flight to hell and gone. He had literally shot the man's crate to bits. And Morgan was like a brother to Drago, as all flyers became when they were comrades in as many fights as Drago and Morgan had gone through together.

Leap-frogging Morgan, Adolf Loeb, smashed into Lieutenant Eric Smith, and Smith went down. By this time Drago had Loeb's strategy down to a fine point, whatever he might be able to do about it. The German was using plenty of men in his effort to get Drago, alive, a prisoner, if possible—and himself fighting off the efforts of Drago's wingmates to protect Drago. While Drago lived and flew, he endangered the lives of all his wingmates. If he had never fought Loeb in the ring, or in the sky, and Loeb had never escaped in the pandemonium following the greatest boxing bout witnessed in the A.E.F., Morgan and Smith would not now be going down in flaming crates, to leave their charred bones on the soil of Germany.

The thought that he was to blame, even though he knew he really was not—except as the object of Loeb's brutal intent—almost drove Larry Drago frantic. But what could he do about it? He had fought his best. It had not been enough. He had slain two Germans. Now two of his wingmates had fallen before the guns of Adolf Loeb.

Savagely intent, Drago turned the nose of his crate straight down. His altitude was nine thousand feet. He gave his crate the gun. He stilled his Vickers. He shrieked down through the dogfight, forcing friend and enemy alike to give way or collide. He was through, looking back.

Would Adolf Loeb follow him? Would he accept the challenge, come down to fight it out with Drago where nobody else could interfere?

A great hope surged in Drago. For streaking down, finally, Loeb in his turn broke through, and even at that distance his Spandaus were connecting muzzles of his guns with Drago's crate by thin pencils of tracer smoke. Drago had downed this man once before. He should be able to do it again in spite of—What was it Loeb had said—"Mechanical deficiencies?" Had sheer luck served him in their previous fight, when Drago had emerged the victor? There was some doubt in Drago's mind about that—but none about his own courage.

Would the other Germans stay out of the fight, if Drago could start one in the trees below? Would the Americans? It scarcely mattered. When the battle was joined, if it were, both Loeb and Drago would forget everybody else.

Drago looked back again. Loeb was streaking down, trailing a streamer of smoke, and for a moment Drago thought that the German had been shot down in flames. Then the smoke streamer was bitten off at the tail of Loeb's Fokker, and the Benz was revving up to the limit as Loeb plunged her down.

His Spandaus never ceased chattering, and Drago pulled out of line of sights, leveling for a split second, then barrel-rolling to escape those telltale pencils of smoke from Spandau cartridges. The world spun and whirled on its axis. The whine of the wind in wires, the roaring of the Hissos, the shrieking of protesting struts were a kind of music in Drago's ears.

He looked back up again, and Loeb was still following. Drago almost headed his crate for home, when it occurred to him that if he showed a disposition to force the fight as close to his own lines as possible, he would also show that he was not sure of winning. He grinned tightly, realizing that Loeb himself would think that.

LEVELLING just above the tree-tops, Drago banked eastward into Germany! Looking back he could almost hear the exclamation of surprise from Loeb, could almost see his amazement in the pause the Fokker made in the air, as though, half-banked toward the Allied lines, it now fumbled in the air, almost crashed—but banked toward Germany instead.

The maneuver had upset Loeb ever so little, for it was a challenge. It advised Loeb that Drago was not afraid—unless Loeb should imagine he had made that maneuver because he was afraid, and out of spirit of sheer bravado.

The faster Fokker was creeping up on the tail of Drago's Spad. The German crates were always faster. But he would not have to pursue Loeb. The German would not run away. He was too bent on redeeming himself in the eyes of his people by this air-fight with Drago which he probably hoped would be the last.

"Okay, Loeb," Drago apostrophized the German, "your people are watching, so let's make it good! If you could stand being a prisoner I can at least take the chance."

He nosed up like a shot, coming over on his back, allowing the motor's weight to snap his nose down again. Looping so close to the tree-tops was suicidal, but a flyer had to be suicidal to compete with Loeb. To give the man credit, he was one of the best flyers on the Western Front, as well as one of the best fighters in the middleweights.

Why not make this fight as they had made their fight in the ring near Paris? Go at it, hammer and tongs, and smash until one or the other—our both—went down?

Drago was firing as he brought his nose over and down, into line with the pursuing Fokker. But Drago was on Loeb's back, his nose coming down fast. The Fokker did not swerve from its course, and for a few split seconds Drago was helpless to maneuver his crate at all. Only his Vickers were

in action, and he kept them going, his eyes glued to his ring-sight.

THE Fokker came steadily on, under him, as Drago held his breath, wondering if Loeb did not realize that Drago had a good chance to plunge his prop squarely through the back of the Fokker. Loeb, if he guessed right, had more cool courage than Drago had believed. If he did not have it, then nothing could keep them from a collision.

When Drago's nose was pointed straight down, and the trees looked to be right under his prop, the Fokker shot below Drago, going hell-bent. He looked down and saw the white face of Loeb, looking up at him, while below were the trees, shell-blasted, skeletal swords upon which either flyer and either crate might be impaled at any moment.

There was blood on Loeb's face. He passed so close, looking up, that Drago could see the bruises on the German's face that Drago's fists had made. He could see the white teeth of the German, as Loeb grinned that tight grin of his. Then the Fokker had vanished!

It all happened too fast for any save a photographic eye to catch all the detail—and Drago was fighting his crate to complete the loop before he struck the trees.

He completed the loop, but his crate hesitated for just long enough for a seasoned flyer to know that something had happened. And he knew that he had left his landing gear in the trees! Now a landing of any kind would be a crash landing!

But losing the wheels added a little to the speed of the Spad. That much he had gained by the near mishap. He was lucky it had been no worse. A foot lower and he would have been torn to shreds, crate and flyer scattered over the acres of the shattered forest.

He could feel a new freedom in the crate, could sense the mile or two per hour he had gained by losing his wheels. Even that much gave him a slightly better chance to defeat Loeb. And heartbeats of time, inches of distance, might be the difference between life and death.

Loeb was going away, straight into Germany. He was not even looking back. He was hedgehopping toward home. Drago gritted his teeth, gave chase. There was a trick in it, of course, but he was not one—not now—to be

cautious. Not when, whatever happened, he faced a crash landing.

Slowly he crept up on Loeb, who did not even look back until Drago, coming within range, set his Vickers to chanting again. Then Loeb looked back, while his Fokker yawed from right to left and back again, like a weight swung on the end of an invisible pendulum, to keep him out of Drago's line of sights.

Drago held just to the right of Loeb, and poured on the bullets. He expected Loeb to swing back into the hosing of lead, and take the bullets in his back.

But Loeb slanted away to the left, shying from the bullets which must have gone into his right wings. Then he vanished, dropped out of sight, beyond a wall of trees. Drago nosed up, not to be caught napping by some trick, and saw Loeb banking to the right, then to the left, over a clearing covered with grass. As he watched, Loeb gestured with his gauntleted hand.

"You can set your crate down on the grass and maybe get away with it!" the gesture said plainly.

CHAPTER IV *Descendu*

SUCH effrontery made Drago more coldly furious than before. Instead of obeying Loeb's contemptuous gesture, he banked to the left himself, set his Vickers going, and cut swiftly for the side of Loeb's fuselage. Loeb instantly leveled, nosed into the sky, fed the juice to his motor, climbed away. Drago rose out of the clearing in turn. He glanced aside and saw his shadow against the trees, and knew his wheels actually were missing. Now, he estimated, he was twelve kilometers behind the German lines, moreover, from the woods below German soldiers were firing Mausers and Maxims at him. It was no part of his plan to die ignominiously by German ground fire.

He rose toward Loeb and when he had risen to a thousand feet, the German nosed over and dived on him again.

Drago nosed toward home. When Loeb got close, he would slide out of the way, let Loeb go past him, then follow. How strangely like battles in the ring was this sky-fighting! The savage feinting out of position, the murderous fist to jaw,

belly or heart. Drago's crate shuddered under the impact of Loeb's bullets, shuddered from spinner cap to rudder. Drago studied the crate carefully. The controls felt a bit loggy, as though a control wire had been shot away. But it still maneuvered well enough—until he looped swiftly, out of Loeb's way, intending to come down on him from above once more.

Then Loeb got in a burst to his motor section.

Black smoke began to curl out. Drago did a strange thing then. He would never live, he vowed, to crash in Germany—if there were the remotest chance that he would be taken prisoner.

He slanted upward to two thousand feet, turned his nose toward home. Then he gave his Hiss the gun. He ducked his head into his pit, intending to sense what the fire in his motor section did. It had not burst into full bloom yet, else Drago would have been dead by now.

It was twelve kilometers to his own lines. Could he possibly make it? Nobody, with his crate in flames, ever had. But as long as the actual fire held off, he had a chance.

Drago, then, slanted slightly toward home and poured on the juice. At the move, bullets hammered and smashed about his head, bit into his already shattered instrument panel. He looked back, just as Loeb ceased firing and moved forward above him, and a little to the right. The black smoke from Drago's motor enveloped both of them for a moment.

Loeb was making frantic gestures with his arms. His gestures said:

"I'll fly low over you. Grab my landing gear and crawl onto the Fokker."

For a brief moment, when he thought of the long, impossible distance back to his own tarmac, Drago was almost tempted. But there was nothing pleasant, friendly or magnanimous about Loeb's offer. Calmly Drago shook his head.

Loeb hesitated. Then he banked swiftly to the right and cut to the rear, traveling with the speed of a bullet. And Drago knew that the German, being certain that Drago could never reach his own lines, was going to give him another burst in the back.

Drago waited. Still the flames did not reach back for him. He nosed up a bit, gaining a few precious feet of altitude. Then, when the bullets of Loeb started stitching designs in his wings once

more, he dropped his left wing, poured all the juice to the Hiss she would take, and sliced toward home like a thrown knife.

How much distance had he gained by the maneuver—when there were twelve kilometers still to go? A few rods perhaps; maybe even as much as two kilometers; or at least one.

His heart almost failed him. Who had ever heard of any flyer bringing a blazing crate home? Still, there was only smoke as yet, no orange flames capable of roasting a man before he could even mention the name of his mother or his sweetheart. While the flames did not come there was a chance, and Drago took it.

COULD he reach the ground, if he tried now, and maybe walk away from the wreck? Of course. But he would not do it. No! Because that's what Loeb had done in their encounter in which Drago had shot the man down. Loeb had not risked burning, had become a prisoner in preference to roasting.

Maybe it had been a wise thing to do, but scarcely one to make a man invaluable to his country. It pleased Drago to think, in what might well be the last few seconds of his life, that he was going to prove himself a better man than Loeb, in that he fought to the last, instead of giving in.

If he could just make the lines! He asked for no more. Bullets from Loeb's guns were probing for him, but Loeb was firing into an almost ebon wall of smoke now, and could not be sure of his target. Drago gasped and coughed with the acrid taste of the smoke in his mouth, pouring down into his lungs.

He leveled, banked the other wing down. No relief there, either. He ducked his head into his pit, leveled, pulled the nose up, got all the altitude he dared, because he could feel the crate becoming hot as a stove ahead of him and under his feet. He leveled again, shot once more for the line.

Were those the lines he had seen, before starting this second long power glide home? Could it be possible he had come so far? Certainly there had been time enough. There had been centuries—centuries during which he had swallowed acrid smoke, while a devil incarnate pumped bullets at him from somewhere outside

the ebon pall. Well, perhaps that was the Front line. He would keep on going, anyhow. And he had better get down to where, when the flames roared forth, he could dive into the ground and take his chances. Only, he would not just dive in, with a prayer on the stick. He would save himself if it were humanly possible.

He got another glimpse of the lines through a sudden break in the pall of smoke. Why, he could make them now in a long glide, without the motor. With this belief firmly fixed in his mind, he nosed down, cut his switch, headed for the parapet of the Allied lines.

But no sooner had his prop become visible than Loeb was in there, all around him, sending in slugs from all angles. He had to fight the German off now by sheer maneuvering—without power! It could not be done, yet he must do it, or be a prisoner if he escaped the crash.

Loeb had gone berserk. Drago fought his leaden crate with all he had, congratulating himself on the black smoke that still was of some benefit, in that Loeb saw his target but dimly through it.

Bullets had torn his crate to shreds. How she remained aloft, even in a glide, was a mystery, a miracle. And that he could glide across the lines now Drago knew. He had done that much, at least. But with no landing gear, no motor, in a plane that had nothing left, how could he possibly walk away from the wreck which even now threatened to fall apart?

He saw the German trenches slide under him, perilously close. Rifles were fired smack in his face. Loeb was like a tormenting imp out of hell, all around him.

He dropped his left wing to cartwheel in. If he landed on his belly and slid, the smoke would become flames and roast him before he could throw himself free. Or suppose the crate did not slide, but turned over, with Drago under it? No, the cartwheel gave him the better chance, and that was the chance he took.

His left wing bit into the far side of a shell-hole behind the *parados*. He saw the earth reach for him with a mighty hand that covered all vision clear to the horizon. A perfect cartwheel. And then he felt himself being hurled somewhere. He felt mud and slime—tasted it, felt it go into his nostrils.

But he felt no fire even though, at the very last, he heard an explosion and the roaring of flames. He had been thrown clear. As he dropped into oblivion he grinned, imagining the face of Loeb, who had been cheated.

IT WAS strange and rather weird to regain consciousness standing on his own feet, supported on either side by soldiers. Larry Drago recovered like that; standing in a shell-hole which had been partially filled, so that the level of his eyes were a bit above the rim of the hole.

He could look back, like Lucifer, and see from whence he had fallen, or been hurled. The Spad had smashed itself to bits in the crash. Gasoline had been hurled widely in all directions, and had struck flame. Fire shot like red serpents along the muddy, watery ground, so that it looked as though the earth behind the Front line trench were itself afire.

It was pretty hazy to Drago, who had taken a terrific shaking up. But things were coming back, and he remembered Loeb. Remembered him first, because the German circled over the burning wreckage of the plane, looking for him and sending bullets into promising shell-holes. Probably that was because Drago had been catapulted from the Spad so fast Loeb had not seen him go.

"Can you walk, sir?" asked one of the two men who supported Larry Drago. "Lord, sir, you brought that crate back with black smoke trailing you for miles, like the tail of a kite. I never saw anything like it. Even the Heinies didn't think to shoot until they saw the German behind you, and knew you were getting away."

Drago stirred, moving his body in his wet uniform, to see whether any of his bones were broken. He tried to say something, but could not think of any words; could not have said them anyhow. His breath had not come back to him since the crash.

LOEB, still probing for him, soared away as the Allies began to shoot at him everything they had. Rifles spat bullets at the roaring Fokker. Tromblon men tried to drop rifle grenades into his raging pit. Machine guns were elevated in an attempt to reach the German. And fire from the trenches brought fire from German soldiers, so

that the whole line, both sides, was awakened, and a major battle seemed imminent. And the sound moved away to the north and south, threatening to reach out of sight in both directions.

And all because he had done the impossible, Drago thought, and brought a burning crate almost home.

His knees were pretty shaky. He found that out when he pushed the soldiers away, and discovered he could not stand up without their help. His breath came back. Strange he had held it so long; but it had only seemed long, really. A split second had passed, probably.

He looked down at himself, trying to get oriented. His flying clothes were plastered to him, and he knew why his life had been saved. He had been thrown into an area of mud and slime. Not straight down into it, but at an angle, as one might skip a rock on the surface of a pond. He had slid. His nose was almost clogged with the mud. His mouth was stuffed with it. The force of his fall had pushed the slime and mud through his clothing until it all but clogged his pores.

"I think I'll be able to manage after a bit, fellows," he said, his voice scarcely sounding like his own. "Keep your heads down—and tell me about where to go to find Fourteenth Pursuit. I've got to get back, or they'll think I was killed in the crash."

"Gee!" said the soldier who had not so far spoken. "If you were sure they'd believe you dead, you could go anywhere, and nobody would be looking for you. You might even go back to God's country."

"Yes," said Drago, "I might, except for one thing—or rather for one person. That one!"

He tilted his head back to look up Loeb who had started back over the lines again, for a last look around for Larry Drago.

"I've got to meet that buzzard again," he said.

"Good grief, sir, isn't once enough? You got away from him by the skin of your teeth as it was. Next time maybe you won't make it!"

"That's what I've got to find out, before I give myself a chance to get scared about him. That's Adolf Loeb."

"Loeb? The middleweight? The chap that fought Larry Drago to a standstill outside Paris, and then escaped in the turmoil?"

"The same!" said Drago, surprised.

“The same guy. He has to be handled, to prove to him that even Adolf Loeb can’t get away with escaping from Yankees.”

“Let him alone. Larry Drago will take care of him when he comes back from leave. I heard the captain say that.”

“I’m Larry Drago, fellows.”

“Whew! If you could see your face you’d know better than to tell one like that! You must have been eating black smoke for miles.”

“Twelve kilometers. But, don’t you see, I was intended to get back, or I wouldn’t have made it. Now show me the communicating trench, so I can start working my way back.”

They peered out. Drago, out of his own element, felt uneasy with all the rifles and machine guns and grenades going off. He had never expected to see any of the war from the ground, and the bullets seemed to smack over his head from all directions. It looked to be sure suicide to stick one’s head out.

And the two soldiers had steel helmets. He had none.

“Those helmets look like peanut shells,” he said.

“You’d be surprised how you can hide behind even that little, when the bullets are flying, sir,” one of the soldiers observed. “Come on, right behind us, when we start cranking, and just hope that bullets don’t begin spitting into your back.”

He waited below them as they slid up the incline of the shell-hole. Then suddenly they were gone and he was climbing in his turn, climbing fast to get behind them before they could get away from him entirely.

CHAPTER V A Rule for Crashes

BULLETS kicked up dirt all around them as they went. German bullets. That meant that the Germans were watching closely. They probably had orders from the rear, Drago decided, to keep a close look out and see whether he escaped from the Spad or not.

Now that they knew, they would telephone the rear, and in an hour Loeb would know that he had not killed his enemy. Loeb had gone home, though, because there was nothing else he could do—unless he chose this very moment to come

back. If he did, and showered Spandau lead on the three men from above, he would get them all—and that would be Drago’s fault, too.

A queer thucking sound interrupted his scattered thoughts. The man to his right sprawled out, not moving.

“They got Mike,” the man to his left whispered softly. “Nothing we can do, except get shot ourselves, unless we move fast.”

They moved fast enough after that, faster than Drago had ever thought a man could move on his hands and knees, or on his belly. The bullets kept coming, and missed them only because they were so flat the Germans did not have a target.

At last they rolled into a broad trench, and the soldier stood up, grinning. His face was dirty, and white through the dirt, and Drago knew that he was feeling like hell about Mike, left dead out there between this communicating trench and the shell-hole. There would be a lull some time, and the burial detail could do something about Mike. Just now, however, bullets could not hurt him anymore. That was a comforting thought, except to this buddy of Mike’s.

“Keep going, along this trench, sir,” said the soldier. “People will think you belong to a Negro regiment when you meet them, but you can explain, and somebody will pass you along, show you where to go. Good-by, sir!”

Drago thanked his rescuer. He was badly shaken and knew he was going to feel progressively worse as time passed, and he kept living over the facts of the crash. Then he staggered along the trench to the rear, while bullets whistled above his head. Just a few inches above, but all too close. He ducked low, and ducked again every time he heard something that he was sure was a bullet. But all the time, through the sounds of them he could still hear the roaring of the flames that had devoured his Spad, and could actually smell the gasoline that had started the mud and slime to burning.

Officers passed him on—officers who were coming up with their men to relieve other men in the trenches over which Drago had just flown his black-smoking crate. Finally he was far enough to the rear that rifle and machine-gun bullets were no longer a menace.

But then he was in a back area where big projectiles were probing for soldiers coming in to

relieve the men at the front. The H.E. shells sounded like express trains, shrieking along rails that were invisible. They landed with terrific wallops and exploded, filling the air with all sorts of things—tearing into graves that had been dug yesterday or last week, and scattering the shattered dead to the four winds of heaven.

Dirt and slime from near bursts spilled into the trench sometimes, and Larry Drago walked through a veritable wall of mud-rain. And once, when he saw a file of men coming and an H.E. dropped in the midst of the men, when he reached where they had been there was nothing but a hole, with reddish stuff sticking to the edges of it, and pieces of equipment scattered all over the sides of the trench.

This was war, seen close at hand. Not his kind of war and fighting, in the wide blue expanse of the skies, but a dreadful, deadly kind. It was bigger, more terrible than any other fighting on earth could possibly be. It made him ashamed of his grudge fight with Loeb, as if it were the silly blood-letting street battling of two children.

He sobbed as he pushed on. His numbness was leaving him, but now his whole body felt like one vast toothache.

He crawled out of the trench when somebody told him where, and started for the flying field.

THE tarmac at last. Headquarters building, where he staggered across the threshold to report to the squadron commander. Word of his safety had already reached the commanding officer, who handed him a combat report blank without a word. He tried to write something on it, but his hand shook so that he could not hold the pen.

“Get out to the deadline, Drago!” snapped the commanding officer. “Take off a Spad right away. Fly into German skies. Attack anything you see, and win—or you’re a gone gosling. Understand?”

“Yes, sir. If I don’t fly again, right after my crash, it’ll be twice as hard to fly tomorrow.”

“Right! And practically impossible the day after that, except in a strait-jacket.”

Larry Drago, hating himself for a weakling, even though he knew his weakness to be that of any brave man after the shock of a crash, dashed out to the deadline, yelling to his grease-balls.

“Break out a Spad, right away! Service it fast. Get it ready!”

The greaseballs knew he had to get off at once and fly, and fight, or his nerve would shatter like a thin glass tumbler dropped on a hearthstone. Every second he waited made things worse. His nerves would be like the screaming wires of a ship in a prolonged power dive, if he delayed a moment longer than was necessary.

Then the Spad was ready. It seemed to waver before his eyes, like heat waves under a blazing sun. It was a monster that mocked him, dared him. His body shook with an ague he could not control. He put his foot on the step, preparatory to climbing into the pit, when a hand on his shoulder pulled him back, turned him around. A voice shouted to the greaseball to cut the spad’s motor.

He looked into the angry eyes of Captain Josiah Strange.

“This war isn’t a personal matter, Drago!” snapped Strange. “Two men were killed today because you and Loeb carried on in the air the battle you started outside of Paris. Our flying team hasn’t any individual stars, Drago. It’s a team, must work as a team. When you fight with us you forget your own petty grudges, understand?”

“I didn’t pick the fight. Captain!” Drago said wearily.

“You dived out of it, knowing Loeb would follow you!” accused Strange. “You should have stuck with us. There were ten German planes against seven of us.”

“I’m sorry, sir. Maybe I was wrong, but—listen. Captain I’ve got the screaming meemees. I’ve got to get off right now, or—”

“You’re grounded for two days, Drago! Give you a chance to think. And if it’s any comfort to you, Loeb—according to our intelligence—has been grounded, too! Want to hear something else?”

“Yes, sir. I want to hear you give me permission to fly. Don’t ground me, sir!”

“I don’t mean that. The C.O. told me to handle you as I saw fit. What I meant to tell you was that you were taken seriously when you said what you did about dropping your title. It was won in New York last night in a fight put on in a hurry, to cash in on your publicity!”

Drago did not mind that—not now. There were too many grave things to be thought about now.

Of what importance was any championship ring battle in war time? Vaguely Drago felt that it was of no importance even to himself now.

"I'll even up for the men we've lost, sir," he promised grimly.

"I said you were grounded. *Champ!*"

Larry Drago turned from his crate, wordlessly, and walked away.

There was only one thought in his mind now, as he dragged his sore body to his hutment. He must spend two days on the ground—enough to drive a man mad.

DRAGO never before thought of disobeying orders, but when the boys came in and he heard that Loeb was back in the fighting, he decided to risk court-martial, anything, to get back in the fray. Tight-lipped and determined, just before dusk, he had his crate rolled out—to check it over, he told the greaseballs.

But when he was in, and the prop ticking over, he yelled a warning at the greaseballs, who jumped free. The crate started rolling. Something seemed to be driving Drago; something outside himself. He jumped his crate off the field, circled it once, looked down.

He saw Captain Josiah Strange standing on the tarmac, watching him. But the captain did not signal him down. It was disobedience, of course, to have lifted even a foot off the field—but he might as well go on with it, now that he had gone so far.

Forget Loeb and fight a man's big war, he had been told, and he would do it! But he would carry flame and the sword behind German lines. There was no way he could salve his conscience. He had been responsible for many things that had happened. It was up to him to even some of them up—if he could. But still try as he might, he could not get Loeb from his mind, or the hatred of the German from his soul or consciousness.

He roared across the lines. When the Archies began to probe him he dived straight into their hosing of lead, with his Vickers flaming. Past them, he banked back, dropped a wing into the German trenches, shot along above it like a thrown knife spraying the trenches with lead.

He saw a steady stream of orange flames from his own lines, knew that he had started pandemonium on both sides of the lines. A battle

was in progress when he swerved away, and he did not know how many enemies he had killed.

He shot away east, watching for lights below which might indicate concentrations of troops on the German side of the line. He dived on them, spitting lead from his Vickers at top speed. He saw men go down.

He had forgotten his own fear that he might be afraid after his crash. He was a slayer now—as Loeb was a slayer. Court-martial, firing squad, imprisonment, meant nothing. Only to balance the ledger of the war as far as it affected him—that alone counted.

Yet the thought came that the Jerries were certainly remembering that men were cheaper than machines—and no Germans came out to fight this madman who flew at night, attacking everything east of the Front. He gritted his teeth, understanding why. Word had got to the Germans, of course, that he was the lone madman, and Loeb had asked that Drago be left for him! That a feud between two men could so affect a segment of the war might have been strange except for one thing. The war itself was of men's savage passions and Drago and Loeb were men.

Ground fire greeted Drago as he ran out the gas in his motor, flashing back and forth behind the lines, firing at lights, diving on a *Staffel*, trying to work the hate for Loeb out of his system. Finally spent, washed clean of his unbearable ache, he turned for his home tarmac, ready to take his medicine.

He landed. Nothing happened. Nobody came out to say anything. He met brother officers on the field, and none paid him the slightest heed. He understood why. Strange was not going to court-martial a flyer he needed badly. Drago was being given a taste of Coventry, though—sometimes far worse to many sensitive men than any court-martial could be.

He went into his hutment, sorry he had come back. He could have serviced his crate at other fields, kept on flying and fighting until something broke. Next moment, defiance in his soul, his face hard, he presented himself at the deadline when his flight was set to go.

JOSIAH STRANGE looked at him expressionless. To Drago's amazement he made

no mention of Drago's flagrant disobedience of orders.

"Okay, Drago," was all he said. "I'm taking you out from under the hack today—releasing you from arrest. Grab yourself a crate and get up there."

"You mean alone?"

"Yes. Until you're so sick of your own company you can't stand it. If you won't play ball with us, all right. Play ball alone! None of us want to have our lives depend on you!"

"Why don't you court-martial me?" Drago asked bitterly. "I disobeyed orders."

"Did you? I didn't notice anything!" Strange arched his brows. "Sorry, but you can't get out of flying alone by pulling something like that!"

"Why you—Then you—"

"Get going, Drago!" snapped Strange. "Before I forget what you did do!"

Crawling into his pit Drago wondered. What had he done? Strange must mean that he, Drago, had wrought havoc in Germany, greater even than he had any right to expect—else nothing would have saved him. Something of warmth, a tiny glow, came back into his heart. He glanced quickly at Strange.

"You'll be glad to play with your wingmates before I'm through with you!" said Strange. "Glory or no glory!"

"I'll be glad of it now," said Drago, with what humility he could muster. He was raging inside, but he knew it was not at Strange, but at himself and the turmoil he had caused.

"You'll fly south or north, Drago, out of our regular sky lanes," Captain Strange ordered. "That'll keep you from mixing with Loeb!"

"But why? Why?"

"You may remember," the captain said coldly, "that Loeb himself is getting a few lessons in the same."

Drago held himself rigid to listen to his superior. His one blind desire was to slug Strange in the jaw, though reason told him that his captain might be right in his methods. And right or wrong his Flight commander still had military law on his side.

CHAPTER VI

Penance

IT TOOK all of Drago's will power to go calmly to the deadline, to the new Spad that had been assigned him. His face paled a little when the greaseballs avoided looking at him, and he saw that some wag had painted certain insignia on the sides of his fuselage. Two boxing gloves! Loeb's flaunted insignia. His rage seemed puerile, even to Drago, but that insignia reminded him of so much that still must be balanced.

Lips grim, face white, brain seething, he clambered into his crate. Then the motor was roaring full out, holding the wheels hard against the chocks, before he realized he had moved at all. Teeth gritted, he idled the motor, yelled for the chocks to be yanked. He gave her the juice.

He tried to take her off the field in the shortest run he had ever undertaken. He got off too, and took her almost straight up. If Strange were watching, now, he certainly would see how Drago felt about things.

Up there alone then heading southeast, Drago leveled off at seven thousand and smashed, slanting, toward the lines. When he crossed them he would be miles south of Loeb's stamping grounds. He hated that. He wanted to mix with Loeb again, but orders were orders.

Just the same, he would make some other Germans wish they had never been born. He was a killer this morning, eager to show his teeth, to set his Vickers yammering, to drive as many jibing enemies as possible down from the skies.

He paid no heed to the Archies. Over the lines he tripped his guns, and nodded with satisfaction when the sound of them came through the roaring of his motor. He was ready.

Or was he? He could easily have turned tail, gone back to camp, given it up. For the first time since he had been a cadet he was conscious of every rise and fall of his wings, especially of the tips. He found himself doing the rookie stunt of trying to balance the plane with his body. He over-controlled terribly. He was out of gear, emotionally and physically—and he knew it.

The fact maddened him. Seized by an imp of the perverse, he decided to slant into German-held skies until some enemy attacked him. It did not matter how many, either. Let them all come! As

he felt now he could and would take on anything that flew!

Fifteen kilometers behind the lines, and far to the south of his usual patrol area, he snapped out of his daze—and with plenty of reason. The sky had suddenly started to rain Fokkers. They came from everywhere. Not that the Germans felt that it took so many to down one American flyer, but each of them, after hunting a sky for hours without sighting an Allied crate, wanted to beat the others to the cold meat.

Drago had scarcely noticed which way he was going, had not consciously been scouring the skies for enemy aircraft. So they surprised him, dropping on him from above. He saw a vast wall, a curtain of them, between himself and his own lines. The chances of getting back, plainly enough, were one in a hundred. And not one of the Germans who surrounded him was Adolf Loeb. His quick mind had already discovered that when he had instantly sought for—and had not found—the hated insignia.

Settling into his pit, before the Spandaus of the Germans began to speak, Larry Drago set himself an impossible task. He meant not only to get back behind his own lines, but to down more Germans in one shoot than any Allied or German flyer ever had.

He could not himself understand it—why he felt so strangely calm. And the next moment there was no further time for thought or wonder, because they were firing at him from all angles ; because none of them would give way to the other.

ONE man, Larry Drago, against more Germans than he had time to count. But their very numbers were against them, he saw immediately. By smashing right into their midst he made it difficult for most of them to open fire at all, without endangering their fellows.

His Vickers started chattering. He kept his thumbs on the trips, his eyes glued to his ring-sight, his stick between his knees. He saw the broad fuselage, beside a German flyer, of a Fokker in his sights. He let the burst go. The Fokker all but fell apart, even before Drago shifted to the motor section for another burst, and set the wreckage aflame.

All the strain of the last few days, all the pent-up fury of a man who has been repeatedly thwarted, came to Larry Drago. He forgot what seemed the impossible odds against him. They could fire thousands of bullets at him while he was firing scores, but he flung himself into their midst, with his Vickers flaming, knowing they would have to endanger one another to kill him.

Was he important enough to them for that? Yes! He had shot down one of their number, and they would seek revenge. Often lives, many lives, were not too much to sacrifice for vengeance. They had ganged up on him, but their Roman holiday was not working out as they had probably intended. But how could a dozen German crates afford to run away from just one Yankee Spad?

The Germans were between Scylla and Charybdis. They made their choice. They formed a vast box of wings around him. They chanced the lives of their fellows to smash him down.

Sometimes great aces “shot a triple.” Sometimes a man had been known to accomplish four *descendus* in a single day—if he hunted Germans all over the sky, and was lucky. Now, into Drago’s hands a possibility had been given—for him to kill Germans as long as he himself was conscious.

Bullets hammered and smashed at his crate. He heard them crash into the motor section, ricochet off, whining, ripping great holes in the fabric. He heard bullets snap past his left ear, and past his right, and was certain that the next one must surely hit him where it would kill him.

But as the seconds passed and nothing happened, he turned himself into a pinwheel of action. He made no attempt to avoid collision with the Germans; let them look out for themselves. Two of them crashed, head on, to escape Drago. That meant three crates down in this wild German attack on one Yankee. The Germans must be wild with consternation. Their field day was bringing horror into their winged ranks. They must bring this man down, or—

On his back, with his nose down, Drago shot bullets into every crate that whirled past him, streaked across his prop—at any crate that for a split second showed itself moving into his ring-sight. He felt like a man being whirled in a barrel, the spinning changing in all directions with each split second of time.

For one instant the ground would be above him, then it would be below; then to right or left. And always there were Germans between him and the ground, between him and the sky, between him and any part of the far surrounding horizon.

Germans everywhere, and other Germans joining, if for no other reason than to satisfy their curiosity about this dog-fight which appeared to be composed entirely of Germans. Even in the midst of it, a thought flashed to Drago to wonder how newcomers felt when they found but one Spad, and saw the blazing wrecks on the ground far below.

He laughed savagely, and the wind of his wild, crazy gyrations blew the laughter back down his throat. He was having a grand time while it lasted. How it could last much longer he could not guess. He only knew that he kept his Vickers going, while his feet kept kicking the Spad around the sky. He put a free hand to the stick when he could, and at other times pushed it around as much as he could with his knees. And he kept right on flying, far beyond the time when he should have gone down.

How his crate held together he could not see. Long strips of fabric were sticking out behind the wings. He could feel cold wind through the peppered holes in the camelback, in the fuselage on either side of him. Those holes could have been made by big projectiles. Miracles alone had saved him.

He got one more, knew it when he saw the German's skull turn red, and crimson splash out into the Fokker's slipstream, to vanish redly into the air. Then the German was gone, in a crate out of control, that endangered everything below it that flew. But still, back and forth through the demoralized formation, up and down in it, through it and back, shot and darted the Spad flown by Larry Drago.

The Germans were stubborn though. Bad enough to be held even by one man, or tricked into killing one another by him, but to go away and leave him in undisputed possession of the sky was the worst thing that could happen. They had to kill the Yankee!

Drago knew that, knew there would be no relief while he flew. If he could break through the cordon, could get back to his own lines! But the second he tried that they would let him through,

and come after him. Then they would shoot him to ribbons at their leisure, without endangering each other. Larry Drago knew he was set to go West; no doubt about that.

MAYBE he could get a few more of them out of the fight before they got him. If he had lasted this long, he might last to the finish at that, and still walk away from his crate wherever it might land. At least that was one last vague, forlorn hope to cling to.

He nosed down in a shrieking dive, intending to pull some of the Germans after him, crash them into the trees below. But they opened to let him through, and he knew they would be on his back—so he did not go through.

Instead he pulled savagely out, and his Vickers went into action again, because a German was caught napping by his maneuver, and in position to collide. So Drago got him through the side of the fuselage as he banked away, and the German kept on banking.

A body fell from the pit and beat the wrecked Fokker to the ground. Drago saw the body strike, headforemost, saw the legs snap down, knees touching the ground. The German would stay like that, half buried by the might of his fall, until someone came to bury him.

Would there never be an end? He had only gasoline enough for four hours, and he had been flying for centuries already, fighting every second, experiencing more sky-fighting in this one dogfight than he had known during all the rest of his flying career put together. Flesh and blood could not stand it, he told himself.

Then somehow through the red mist came remembrance of the fight outside Paris, with Adolf Loeb, and he took a leaf from the book of memory. That night both men had fought on, round after round, when flesh and blood could not possibly have stood it—yet somehow did. Keep on, that was the answer, until something broke, something happened, and he was killed or broke through the winged cordon and got away.

Wing-turns, reversements, Immelmanns, wing-overs, chandelles—he used them all, without thinking of them by name, simply giving his legs and arms free play to kick the Spad around the sky as they would. It was a dizzy experience, but

he remembered to keep his wings and his wheels out of the trees, and let it go at that.

But how much longer could a crate with almost no airfoils left, stay aloft?

CHAPTER VII Decision Reserved

NO TELLING what the answer would have been, for Loeb came hunting Larry Drago. Or maybe Loeb, missing him from Strange's formation, had cut away from his flying mates, to see what he could do for himself. For whatever reason it was, Loeb suddenly dived out of the sky, plunging savagely into the thick of this battle, while his wing-mates, knowing the insignia of the boxing gloves, relievedly gave way to right and left for the famous ace.

Loeb and Drago had the sky to themselves. Loeb flew wing and wing with Drago, to study his insignia, and his face. He grinned his tight grin. He knew that Drago had just given a whole squadron of Germans a lesson in sky-fighting. The blazing wrecks on the ground proved that. If he, Loeb, could down Drago now, he would be Germany's greatest hero. Loeb's crate was in good condition; Drago's was a wreck. But when Loeb signaled him that he intended attacking, Drago signaled back that he was ready. Loeb gestured down, offering him the chance to surrender. Drago refused.

More than that, he signaled for Loeb to send his wing-mates home, to get them out of the fray. Loeb refused. Then Drago, with clear space between himself and the lines for the first time, started for his home tarmac, looking back to see just how the Germans would take it.

They took it well enough. They climbed into the sky to watch the show, while Loeb flashed swift on Drago's tail to take up the fight where they had left it.

Drago had been rescued by his greatest enemy, in order that that enemy might have the honor of killing him or making him a prisoner!

Drago wasted no time. He dared waste none. Nor was he disobeying Strange's commands. Loeb was forcing the fight. If he, Drago, kept running, Loeb would send him down to destruction.

Having pulled Loeb away from his fellows, Drago looped swiftly, swung back to meet his enemy. He had mapped out a simple plan of battle—to stick to Loeb like a leech, never run away, always attack, until something broke, and the decision went to one or the other. Over on his back he half rolled out, brought his prop down, aimed straight at the prop of Loeb. As he brought it into line in his ring-sight he set his Vickers going again.

His bullets ended their flight at the motor section of the German, who came straight on, disdaining to roll out of line of sights, bound now, in sight of his wing-mates, to fight the brave, spectacular fight they had every right to expect of him. There would be no quarter now, no time for repairs. Jammed guns would spell the end for either. At the same time, Drago made one reservation—he meant to get back as close to his own side of the lines as he could, win or lose—for the idea of imprisonment in Germany was still worse than death.

Loeb's Spandaus chattered and ranted. A master flyer, Loeb was now forced to pull out of his bag all the flying and fighting tricks that he knew, for Drago had thrown caution and good skymanship to the winds. Obviously he didn't care whether or not he collided with Loeb.

BULLETS sped back and forth. The Spad shook. The Fokker shuddered under the impact of bullets. Drago had a vague idea that he must long since have shot away all his ammo, yet his guns kept going. He must have failed to do a lot of firing, back there with the others, that he had thought he was actually doing.

The two swung into a tight circle, with their left wings down. Loeb tried to pull up on Drago's tail. When his bullets actually began feathering Drago's tail surfaces, Drago cut out of the suicidal circle, broke away, looped—to look back and find Loeb broken out, and looping with him. Loeb was back on his tail again, and Drago had lost by his maneuver, because one needed airfoils in loops, and he did not have seventy percent of his left.

But he kept on looping until Loeb's guns again threatened. Then he shot straight away at the bottom of the loop, rolling over and over on the axis of his own fuselage, with Loeb right after him again. He slanted down. He looked left, to see

the other Germans far enough away not to be a threat. He looked right to see the lines not too far away.

He looked down to see the trees, reaching up for his wheels. He remembered how close he had come to them before, when he had emerged the loser in the fight with Loeb. He would vindicate himself in that, too, he decided. So deliberately he felt for the trees with his wheels, and then he came up and over in a wing-buckling zoom, brought his nose clear over while he looked about for Loeb, and then came down and around and sat on the tail of the German.

His Vickers lead blasted the tail surfaces of the Fokker apart. Loeb, desperately fighting for control of his crate, did not have enough sky-room. Drago kept on hammering away at him. He reached for the body of the German with his bursts, but somehow just failed to reach him. Loeb looked back at him, despair in his face.

Drago shot him into the ground, and saw the crate become a smear of wreckage that burst into flame. He saw Loeb's body go catapulting out but did not see it strike. He saw it vanish under a tree. He saw a smear of oily water down there.

But for Drago the fight was over, and he had won. Drago had crashed like this, had come forth alive.

Loeb had crashed, too, and must have smashed, at terrific speed and head-on, into the trunk of a tree. So when Larry Drago slanted away from his latest kill, he was going top speed for the lines when he rose out of the trees.

He was within sight of the lines before the stunned Germans who were watching him got wise. Then it was too late.

He landed his crate, got out of it on the home field, looked at it. It was fit for the museum to which it ultimately went, though not on its own power.

Strangely, the world seemed empty. There was still a war, of course, but something had gone out of it with the death of Adolf Loeb. Larry Drago had the feeling that there would be little left to interest him. He felt as if everything had somehow come to an end. He was almost sorry that Loeb was dead. . . .

TWO years later a restless, nervous man walked into a great fighting emporium in the

United States. Nothing he had found after the war had suited, contented him. The war had done queer things to him and to all his fellows.

"I'd like a fight," he said to the matchmaker. "I'm Larry Drago. I used to be a pretty good middleweight."

"Fight game's on the rocks, Drago," he was crisply assured. "Nothing to it. What do people just finished with a war care about wars fought with soft gloves?" And then a sudden memory seemed to strike him. "Hey, what did you say? Drago? Larry Drago? The one that fought Adolf Loeb in the A.E.F., for the championship?"

"Forget Loeb!" said Drago sharply. "And if I fight again, for God's sake don't keep hashing up the past to the newspapers."

"Not even if I got Loeb back for you, Drago? Why, it would give boxing a new lease on life!"

"Loeb's dead, sir. Forget him, I said!"

"Dead, you say—when he was in here only last week, looking for a fight?"

"Last week? You're sure?"

"Yeah. How about a month from tonight, Drago?"

Drago grinned happily. The world seemed to be reasonably all right again. The feud had been resumed, or soon would be. Excitement was still in the world for people who knew how to find it. He agreed, then and there, to the match. Turning away from the matchmaker, he hesitated, spoke over his shoulder.

"How about giving me his address? I'd like to cut a few touches with him for old time's sake—before we start killing each other again."

The matchmaker guessed, somewhat dubiously, that it was all right. The two met again, in Loeb's room, and everything was warming, and friendly—until they mentioned the fight to come, a month hence. Then the scar on Loeb's cheek became livid, along with several other scars that had not been there the first time they met—and Larry Drago's heart began to pound with excitement, remembering.