

Today We Die

A Squadron of the Dead Tale by Frederick C. Painton

The names of the men in that strange, ill-assorted squadron were listed only in the most secret annals of Allied Intelligence. To everyone else they were known merely as the Squadron of the Dead. Americans, British, Russians—even Germans—made up their ranks, and only one bond held them together. They had all been condemned to die! An unusual story of an unusual squadron.

CHAPTER I SCREAMING GUNS

THEY were all together up there at fourteen thousand feet, seven roaring Spads, flying wing to fuselage in tight formation. It should have been good to know you were together, that you had somebody to watch your tail, especially when you've been drunk the night before, and when the cumulus cloud just above you was full of holes through which some Boche could peek for white meat.

But First Lieutenant Roger Aldington Blake, third, did not find it good. He wished the patrol was over. Anxiously his gaze went past the crashpad edge to where his lifelong friend, Ted Starr, was flying. Ted had said, when they took off to rise and meet the sun, that he was perfectly able to patrol, but Blake knew better. Ted Starr had been drunk at four a.m. and he hadn't been able to shake it off.

Blake saw Ted Starr's head move, saw sun glint on his goggles. His own hand waved encouragement, as if to point out that the high-offensive patrol would be over in twenty more minutes. Ted Starr grinned, put thumb to his nose and turned his head so that the extended four fingers of his mitten pointed toward the lead Spad with the ribbons of command streaming from the tail assembly.

But Blake did not answer the grin. The look he sent toward the Spad at point was surcharged with hatred. He eased his stick to keep his wing clear

of Dunlap, and took a nip from his cognac flask. Up here where the rarefied air made you gasp, it was colder than a pawnbroker's smile. But Blake's fury with the squadron skipper, "Dinglebells" Hedges, would have kept him warm even without the liquor.

He rolled his head like a ball on a pivot to scan the tricky ceiling below which Hedges persisted in flying. Seeing nothing, he let his mind rehearse the events of the past thirty days. They were not pleasant to remember.

Even the first day he and Ted had arrived at the 92nd's tarmac near Le Charmel had foreboded no good. They had gone into the squadron recreation room. There they found pilots sitting glumly around. Things had been different in the British 102nd Pursuit, from which Blake and Ted Starr had been transferred as a consequence of General Pershing's request for experienced flyers. There men laughed, drank at their own bar, told stories and played crazy tricks. You went to town and got moderately boiled and forgot for the while that Death was out there behind a cloud, waiting to tap you on the shoulder.

This crew of the 92nd was positively dour. Gloomy sadness pervaded them.

"This place," said Ted, "smells like a morgue. Something's haywire."

Blake, rich and used to having his own way, called out cheerily, "How about you birds going to Meaux for a hoist of cognac?"

Then a pilot named Cochran explained, "Don't mention booze around here. Old Dinglebells Hedges would have you up on charges. He's duty-struck."

Blake knew what that meant, and his face fell at realizing that on his first tour of duty with an American squadron, he had drawn for a skipper a ramrod who had swallowed the rules of war and was hell on discipline. Cochran explained at length.

"He even uses discipline in the air," he muttered. "We can fight only when and how he

tells us to.” Almost under his breath he muttered, “Our casualties are the biggest in this sector.”

“Tell us more,” insisted Ted Starr, who was gayly careless.

“Don’t let me spoil the joy of your meeting.”

A FEW minutes later, someone cried, “Attention!” Men sprang to their feet; heels clicked, and hands fell rigidly to their sides.

“As you were,” spoke a voice from the door, and Blake first saw Dinglebells Hedges, captain by virtue of Act of Congress. He was a tall, thin man with narrowed shoulders, dressed in the thin, short blouse of regulation issue. He had long legs so spindly that his boots hung loosely on them, a high-browed, narrow face in which ascetic eyes blazed, and beneath that, a petulant, arrogant mouth.

“You are the new pilots?” He spoke to Blake more than to Starr.

Blake said they were. He felt Hedges’ eyes taking in the swank greenish-brown uniform blouse that Blake wore, with huge bellows pockets and roll collar, the creamy bedford cord breeches pegged like the sides of a champagne glass, the eighty-dollar boots, rich and warmly polished. Hedges’ gaze expressed disgust.

“You are experienced pilots from the British, I’m told.” And the way he said it told Blake the man was jealous of his job. Blake smiled; he was just a kid of nineteen, and not used to duty-struck commanders.

He heard Hedges saying acidly, “It makes no difference here what your past record is. You’ll have to learn over again on Spads, and learn our ways. I know you are used to the lax British ways of discipline. Here you will find us strict. And the first thing you will do is wear a regulation uniform.”

Blake covered his smile.

“You were probably allowed to drink with the British,” Hedges was saying, “but you can’t drink here except on leave. A man with a drunken brain is not an efficient pilot, and he is an easy victim to the skilled German. A man who has been up all night is not a vigilant pilot. So at taps at ten you will go to bed, and you will not bring liquor on this airdrome.”

Blake listened and marveled how such a tyrant had lasted so long as skipper.

“Furthermore,” Hedges was droning on, “we do not fight individually here, as you did with the British. Von Richthofen introduced the mass fighting of the air. It is the right thing. We have our signals, our formations, our systems of combat. You will learn them and abide by them. Infractions of rules of combat or of the airdrome will be severely punished. I welcome you to the squadron.”

Later Ten Starr grinned and said, “I wonder if that last was sarcasm.”

The next morning, Blake went on his first patrol and found out just how Dinglebells Hedges fought the war. At the take-off Hedges said, “There will be no breaking of formation without orders.” A half-hour later, in the golden dawn of a perfect sky, Blake saw how Hedges “infantry system” of sky-fighting worked.

Hedges rode about five hundred feet above the squadron with four crates around him. This was his reserve. When the dogfight began, he threw himself and these planes into the press, and put over the killing punch.

The only trouble, as Blake now saw it, was that it didn’t work. They met the Krauts over the Vesle near Fismettes. Hedges detached two planes to jump down on a Halberstadt two-seater peacefully going about its mission of photography. The men in the two Spads dived well, their guns screamed, and after the initial burst they went on down, munched and came zooming up for a second thrust at the Hal’s underside.

Just at that moment the sky rained Fokkers. Even now, recalling that scrap, Blake fidgeted uneasily. The two Spads were caught. One burst into flames just as Blake and the rest of the squadron crashed down on the Germans. From the top Hedges watched, then dived with his four Spads. He knocked off two Germans in the surprise.

The only trouble was that ten more Fokkers lay up above, and they pounced down like falcons on the roaring turmoil.

After that, it was hell. Blake had been afraid of just such a contingency, and after his first dive, he zoomed on a Fokker which faded from under his gun burst, and the two played leapfrog and follow-your-leader on the outside edge of the swirling confusion of howling planes until the fight, due to lack of gasoline, was broken off.

Blake was thinking, "I'm a dead man," when his flight leader shot in front of him, waggled his wings and ordered the retreat. Blake sighed with relief after the barbed wire had been crossed, and the Le Charmel tarmac lay below.

He remembered, too, the scene after they landed, three men short. Hedges was bawling out a pale-faced kid named Marsh.

"You sheered off from the attack," he accused, "and caused Brandon's death."

"Machines," the kid kept mumbling, "We're just machines. To bed by clock, fight by clock, die by clock. God, why can't we have a leader, if we must die?"

It appeared that Brandon had been Marsh's friend, for the kid burst into tears. "When I came here," he screamed sobbingly, "I wanted to fight, but you and your rules have made me afraid. Bill Brandon died because I lost my nerve."

"And you'll face a trial for it," thundered Hedges.

Blake had felt called upon to protest. "That's no way to handle the lad."

Hedges told him to keep his mouth shut. "And, also, the next time," he warned Blake, "don't hang on the outer fringe. Obey your flight commander."

Well, that was that. There was more of it, only worse. The squadron morale went down, and Blake knew that men hanging under this cloud were just inviting death to go out there against a cocky Hun. Blake himself felt hatred for Hedges—hatred for the bars that gave the man his superiority. He came to believe that there was no leadership; that the whole command was just there to get better men killed.

Always a little arrogant, impatient of discipline, wild and reckless, he became more so. He broke orders, went to Meaux and got drunk. He was warned.

"I know your uncle, Jeremiah Blake, is a United States senator," said Hedges, "and rather than embarrass him, I'll give you one more chance."

Now Blake aroused himself from the slumped position in the cockpit and looked over with a glance of affection at Ted Starr. Starr's Spad was flying jerkily, and Blake cursed again and glanced at his watch. Fifteen minutes more, and Hedges was making Ted fly when the lad could hardly see.

Blake felt partly to blame. It had been he who invited Ted to break rules again and go to Meaux. They did, and came home ten minutes before flying time, well-oiled. Hedges hit the roof.

"You will not put him to bed," he yelled, referring to Ted Starr. "My orders are for a high offensive patrol with every ship, and by the living God, you both go, or face charges for cowardice in the face of the enemy, and refusal to obey orders."

So, Blake reflected, here they were, and he prayed that the Krauts would stay on their own side of the fence.

He came out of his reflections with a start. Below the trailing edge of his lower right wing he saw an Albatross two-seater winging swiftly south. Blake grunted. "Just a neat Jerry trap. I'll bet the ceiling is loaded with Fokkers."

Hedges apparently thought so, too, for there came no order to attack or change course. Blake looked over at Ted Starr's Spad.

It wasn't there!

Swiftly his glance fell downward and back. In a long, graceful, vertical dive, with red-hot flames spurting from his exhaust pipes, Ted Starr was diving to the attack. Already the warming burst was shooting from his twin Vickers, shooting yellow tracer fire across the gap.

"Come back, Ted, you fool!" screamed Blake. "You can't—the Krauts—"

But it was too late. Ted Starr was half a mile below, and from the clouds above, black shadows leaped out and hurtled down to the kill.

BLAKE'S frantic gaze passed over his two blue-black Vickers, sinister and ready, bolted to the cowling; on through his prop whirl to the tail assembly of Hedges' ship, where the streamers of command flew. The lead Spad had veered slightly. Now, the wings waggled abruptly the signal: "Hold formation. No attack!"

Dinglebells Hedges was leaving Ted Starr to his fate.

Blake moaned in utter agony. Ted Starr, the cunning, clever fighter, had gone down on German bait because he was too drunk to think.

Blake's teeth suddenly clicked. He whipped suddenly out of formation. Standing on the rudder bar of his crate he pressed the throttle to the last

notch. The tachometer needle climbed the disc; the altimeter tumbled.

“Hang on, Ted!” muttered Blake. “We’ll go together.”

Blake slid down the sky at nearly two hundred and fifty miles an hour. Straight on his nose, he watched Ted’s gallant efforts through the white of his prop disc, saw the wings sag to the strain, heard the struts scream, the overheated Hisso howl with an almost human note. The wind made his goggle-cloth stand out from his neck like a stick.

“Stick it, kid,” Blake muttered. “Papa’s coming.”

A black-checked Fokker wheeled around to fall on Ted’s tail as the half-drunken lad zoomed up and over in a renversement. With a screaming rush, Blake struck the German. His guns trembled on their mountings, hammered. out a ten-shot burst. The German took one backward look and faded out of the tracer stream.

“Run for it, Ted!” Blake spoke only in his own brain; the slipstream drowned the words before his lips spoke them.

He wangled into two Fokkers that were trying to form a box to force Ted into an opening for a looping Boche. Blake hurled his Spad at the one, trying to kill the man and then cover Ted’s tail. Into his own crate at that second came the gray skeins of smoke tracer. Padding flew out of the crash pad. Bullets whipped around his feet. He held his course; then suddenly his Spad fell off in a bad wing slip.

He knew what had happened. A slug had cut a control cable. The slip jerked him out of the tracer stream, but his flippers were acting badly. He thrust over the stick to bank back to the fight, but it was too late. He saw Ted Starr chandelling up in a last try to tear himself free. The nose of his ship poked into a sustained burst of machine-gun fire.

The smoke tracer laid gray threads across the sky, leading into the Hisso engine. Blake saw the prop break, the Spad tremble. And then came the first trickle of smoke that grew to a cloud that hung black against a half-mile of sky, fanning out like the loosened hair from a woman’s head.

Blake sucked in his breath. He watched ignoring the fact that his own crate was falling off in another slip. Maybe it was just slug trouble in the Hisso. Maybe Ted could pique and do a slow

spin for a fade-away and a landing. Anxiously, Blake’s eyes searched the pan of that Spad that was coming down the sky for the moment on her tail.

There was a tiny orange flicker, a yellow flame—many yellow flames. Then came a suddenly furious burst of fire that enveloped the Hispano-Suiza in a cloak of flames?

Blake’s breath, held these horrible seconds, escaped in a sound that was almost a scream; A flamer! Ted Starr in a flamer!

He caught his own Spad, nosed it up in a howling zoom. “Slip her, Ted,” he yelled, as if the lad could hear. “Sideslip her. You can make it standing on your head.”

But even as he spoke, he knew it wasn’t so. The flames enveloped the whole nose of Ted Starr’s ship. They were eating at the wing pins. Blake hurled his crate at a German who would have put in a final burst. Then he banked around and around Ted, yelled for the lad to slip the crate. The swirling fire that made a base for the black trail of smoke suddenly grew bigger. Blake could no longer see Ted’s knobbed head. The plane had dipped over, the sheet of fire blowing straight back. Blake cried out in agony, knowing the horror that Ted was enduring. He was less than fifty yards away, but helpless even to speak to the lad he had grown up with and loved like a brother.

“Side—slip—” His voiced died away; his eyes widened, and he shrank as if a physical blow had been administered. Out of the flaming crate a sprawling black figure, looking oddly like a forked stick, had tumbled.

“No!” yelled Blake. “My God, Ted—”

The figure fell clear of the sliding Spad, and to Blake, paralyzed with horror, it seemed to fall with incredible slowness. Then the body blended with the gray mass of colors below, and was gone. And slowly, almost with dignity, the flaming Spad fell after its master.

Blake never knew how he got home. Actually, the Germans suspected that he was a decoy to pull them down on him so that the rest of the Spads circling above could make a crash dive. But Blake neither knew nor cared. He was heading south, his mouth working, his body icy cold, his face gray. He pancaked on the tarmac, did a ground-loop, stove in a wing and broke a propeller. He sat in the midst of the wreckage, staring unseeingly at

the wheel-rutted grass ahead. The greaseballs looked, whispered. "Somebody's knocked off!" And they left him alone.

Only when Hedges and the rest of the patrol fish-tailed in did Blake climb stiffly from the cockpit. He took off his goggles and threw them on the ground. He wrenched off his helmet and flung it savagely at his ship. He walked with a sort of stiff gait to where Hedges was plucking at an interstrut brace wire.

"You let Ted down," Blake said thickly. "You let those Jerrie gang him. You dirty swine, you killed Ted Starr!"

Captain Hedges' face flushed, then went pale. "He broke formation," he cried shrilly, "as you did, too. God knows what saved your silly life. There were more Germans up there. Starr broke formation and he got only what he deserved."

"You killed him," Blake went on, as if he hadn't heard, "You let him die in a flamer. Then he jumped—two miles up. You killed him!"

"Here, now," yelled Hedges. "I won't have you talking like that."

"Ted's dead," Blake went on. "What have you got to say to that?"

"That you're under arrest for breaking formation—" began Hedges.

Blake's body contracted, seemed to spread out. His right fist went flashing out faster than the eye could follow it. Hedges tried to dodge, but he never had a chance. Driven by Blake's powerful shoulders, with all the force of a pivoting body behind it, the blow sped home. Flush on Hedges' jaw it struck, with a small explosion like a pistol crack. Those who saw gasped at the terrific power of the blow.

Hedges' head snapped backward, and his body followed. He was knocked off his feet. Going back, his head struck, just at the base of the neck, on the red-hot exhaust stack of his plane. Everyone except Blake heard the dull, ominous crack. The body bounced off sideways, hit against the leading edge of the lower wing and sprawled limply on the ground, the head at a peculiar angle.

Someone cried, "You shouldn't have done that."

"He was a swine," said Blake, looking down. "He murdered men because he wasn't a leader. There are no leaders, just butchers."

He started to walk away. Two of the men bent over Hedges. Their hands groped inside the flying coat. One's watch went to Hedges lips.

"You've killed him," one muttered. "He's dead."

Blake paused, seemed to trip, then recovered himself and walked on toward the galvanized iron shacks....

Exactly one month and two days later, a court-martial convened in Chalons-sur-Marne to try Roger Addington Blake, Third, on the charges of drunkenness, disobedience of orders in the face of the enemy, assault on a superior officer and murder. Because of his uncle, Senator Blake, the court-martial was secret and its proceedings held in confidence. Nevertheless, it found Blake guilty on all specifications and in accordance with the rules of war, sentenced the prisoner to be put to death by musketry. Pending review by G.H.Q., Roger Addington Blake was confined in the military prison at Sante.

CHAPTER II WE ARE THE DEAD

THE one guard climbed down, opened the door of the Cadillac limousine, and reached in with one hand to grab Roger Addington Blake, Third, by the handcuffs.

"Come on," he said gruffly. "This is where you're goin'."

Blake moved in response to the tug. He stepped down to the ground, took a big breath of the sweet spring air. Although he was shaved and his hair combed, he was rather dissolute-looking. That was the court-martial's fault. They had torn his shoulder insignia away; they had cut the bronze buttons loose from his tunic, had deprived him of his commission. He was Prisoner Number 439832. The other guard climbed down and said, "All right, Jack, let's get a receipt for this guy and go back to Bar-le-Duc. I got a date with a girl that knows everything."

Blake breathed deep again and permitted himself to be led. He saw before him a hill that must have been nearly three hundred feet high. He was being led directly towards the foot of it, and he saw, to his surprise, a camouflage screen, about a hundred yards or so long and fifty feet high. It was made of chicken wire netting, but cleverly

intertwined with gaudy little cloth threads that gave, from a distance, the appearance of melting into the hill, becoming a part of it.

“A camouflage screen to hide dugouts in the hillside!” He appraised it.

“Where are you taking me?” he asked the guard. “What’s this?”

“You’ll find out soon enough,” grunted the doughboy. “Keep moving.”

Blake smiled mirthlessly. The air smelled good after the chlorine stink of the prison. And as he walked into the camouflage setting, a bird, perched on top of it, sang a sweet trill. Blake stopped. The little creature that flew the skies as he had flown them sang its throbbing note, ecstasy in its soul.

“Come on,” rapped the guard roughly, and dragged Blake. The bird still sang, but the spell was gone. Blake’s face hardened defiantly, sneeringly. He squared his shoulders and entered through a door into a concrete cave that was dug in the side of the hill. Dimly Blake heard the sounds of hammering, the muffled confusion of voices speaking, yelling.

His feet tramped on damp concrete. The guard rapped at another door revealed by the saffron electric light. Then he entered and the second guard shoved Blake within.

“Reporting with Prisoner 439832, sir,” said the guard. “Please sign the receipt.”

“Sign his receipt, Willie,” spoke a mild, patient voice.

Blake looked defiantly at the last speaker. He saw a man on whom ordinarily he would not have cast a second glance—a man of medium height, with medium build, and a medium face. Only a second glance showed fine gray eyes. The mouth was pleasant, the face tanned. That was all. He was just another soldier.

“Right, skipper,” said an even smaller, man, a veritable midget, who sat at a desk. He had cheerful eyes. He took the paper and signed it, singing, “*Oh, Lulu had a baby; she called him Sunny Jim. She threw him in the bathtub to see if he could swim. Oh, bang away at Lulu, bang away good and strong. What you gonna do for bangin’ when Lulu’s dead and gone-e-e-e?*”

“There you are, corporal,” he grinned. “Give my regards to Bar-le-Duc and kiss one for me.”

The door slammed, and for the first time Blake saw that these men did not wear the habitual olive drab. Their uniforms were jet black with red piping at shoulder straps and sleeve, and a red stripe down the side of their flared breeches. They wore black polished boots. On their right breast instead of their left, they wore brightly polished copper wings. Between the two wings, so that they seemed to sprout out of it, was a round skull with the eye sockets, the nose cavity and the grinning teeth cleverly picked out with red thread.

The mild man called the skipper said, “Hop out, Willie, and see how McKenna’s coming along with that *Monosoupape*.”

The tiny young man got up, giving Blake a glance of cheerful curiosity as he passed. A door slammed.

Blake drew himself up. “And you, I suppose, are the executioner,” he sneered.

“I’ve been called that,” admitted the mild man patiently. “But my name is Barry Dale. Although we have no rank around here, I’m the commander, and I’m addressed as Skipper. That’ll do for the present. Sit down.”

“I’ll take it standing up,” retorted Blake.

“I said sit down!” Blake felt himself almost wafted into a seat.

“That’s better,” said Barry Dale in his patient way. “I know all about you, Blake. You’re the unlicked spoiled cub of Daniel Blake, and you killed a man with a blow. You’ve been sentenced to death.”

“I thought I’d get it from a better man than you,” growled Blake.

Dale apparently ignored the remark. He picked up a cutting from a newspaper and handed it to Blake. “Read that.”

Blake’s eyes focused on the print, and it suddenly leaped out at him with letters of fire.

“The hell!” he exclaimed.

The words were: “Killed in action, Roger Addington Blake, Third, First Lieutenant, Ninety-Second Aero Pursuit Squadron, May 11, 1918, in the Aisne-Marne Offensive. Lieutenant Blake died gallantly, trying to save the life of a comrade when attacked by six enemy airplanes.”

Blake read it again and then laughed harshly. “I get it,” he said. “They don’t want to offend Uncle Jerry, so they print this and then get me killed off by you.”

He flung back the cutting. "A cheap way of doing murder," he said bitterly, "but that's the High Command for you. No leadership, no gallantry, just a bunch of butchers carving up human lives to no good end!"

THE slim, brown fingers of Barry Dale manufactured a cigarette, twisted the end, then drew a fingernail across a match end and, when it flared, applied it to the spill. He inhaled deeply, held the smoke for a space, and finally expelled it in a long cone of pale gray.

"Get this through your head, Blake," he said quietly. "You're officially dead as hell. And now that you're in the Squadron of the Dead, it's likely that a fortnight will find you actually so."

Blake said, "The Squadron of the Dead?"

"Exactly. A place where lives are cheaper than this cigarette, and as quickly consumed."

Blake laughed cynically. "Tell me more," he murmured. "You interest me strangely."

He noticed as he spoke that the eyes of Barry Dale glittered and somehow transformed the face—gave it vividness, made it alight, grim, and commanding. Yet when the Skipper spoke, his voice remained mild.

"You're entitled to know what you're in. The Squadron of the Dead is actively employed by G-2A, the Air Intelligence of the Supreme Allied War Council, and orders reach us through the American Wing. As for the orders—" he shrugged slightly— "you can take it that we are sent on what are called forlorn hopes. By that I mean dangerous missions for which no man having the slightest regard for his life would volunteer, missions far too desperate in their hazards for men to be ordered to execute them. We carry out freak ideas. We drop spies. We bomb the farthest points, where bombers have the least chance to return. We do the hazardous ground-strafting. We are actively in espionage work."

He paused, as if expecting an interpolation. Blake merely stared.

"As for our personnel," he resumed quietly, "it is composed of men like you, who have earned death by military offenses. There are also men who seek death for reasons of their own—and find it quickly enough. We receive men from the Poles, the Czechs, the British, the French, a Belgian or so, and on occasion a Rumanian. We

have even had Russian and Germans and one Austrian."

"The hell!" this astounded Blake. "You admit traitors."

"No." Barry Dale ground out his cigarette in a biscuit tin cover. "These men cannot be traitors, you see, because the Squadron of the Dead belongs to no army." He shrugged again. "The Germans call us outlaws. They kill us in the air, if they can. They like better to capture us and hang us as *franc-tireurs*." He smiled dryly. "So far they haven't hanged any one, but they have high hopes."

"I see," commented Blake. "A living death instead of a quick one."

"Perhaps quicker than you think. Our casualties are twenty men out of thirty every month—all dead."

Blake suddenly stood up. "By God," he muttered, "I thought Hedges was a swine, getting people killed. But you— hell, you're almost chief butcher." He flung back his head, chin thrust out. "I won't play. I've been sentenced to death. Take a slug and drive it through me. I'm entitled to that, not to a lingering death of climbing the treadmill of the days, waiting, hoping to God my nerve doesn't break. Like poor Marsh for instance."

"The men around here usually do my bidding." Barry Dale's voice was indeed patient.

"They may, but I'm no damned sheep."

Dale sighed. "Well," he began, and stopped speaking as the tiny kiwi, Willie the Web, came hustling in.

"Skipper, Pot-belly Warburton just drove up and—here he comes now."

Blake heard voices outside. Then Barry Dale pinned him with a glance.

"I'll be busy for a while," said Dale evenly. "But we'll take this matter up again later. In the meantime, Willie, here, will show you around and get you billeted."

Blake's glance as he went out the door after the small kiwi was still angry and defiant.

Into the room barged an enormously fat, beefy officer with jowls like a rooster's, and a round moon face in which two small eyes sat like currents in dough. On his shoulder straps were the oak leaves of a major.

"Hah, Slam," he puffed. "How are you?"

“Not any the better for seeing you,” rejoined Barry Dale. “You bring a graveyard smell.”

He reached into a drawer, brought out two glasses and a bottle of cognac. Major Gryson Warburton’s little eyes glowed like sparks. He licked his lips.

“Napoleon brandy,” he sighed ecstatically. “Slam, besides your genius as a molder of men, I admire your taste in liquor.”

HE filled the glass, wet his lips with the liquid and smacked them loudly. “Man, oh, man,” he murmured, “it’s distilled of pure love.” He flung back his head, poured the liquor into his mouth and rinsed it under his tongue. He patted a huge stomach, hooked two fat thumbs in his Sam Browne belt and said, “How are your whelps coming?”

“We’re fighting the war,” rejoined Dale.

“No trouble?”

“Why should I have?”

“Yeah,” nodded Warburton. “That’s a thought. Why should you have? Five years in the Legion and two more changing governments in Honduras. Well, I asked because the higher-ups want to know how the grand experiment is coming, and I have to hand them some bush-wah besides the record.”

“The record should speak for itself,” snapped Dale. His face grew a little pensive. “They’re fine men, Warburton, men that life has hurt terribly, men who want to die, to forget. But by God, there isn’t a disloyal, cowardly spot in them.”

“Yeah. Shame we have to shovel them into hell by the truckload. And that reminds me—up to strength?”

“Almost. Short six men on bombers, but we double up and manage.”

“Good,” said Warburton. “I’ve a job for you.”

“I thought so,” grunted Dale. “You’re always around tipping the hourglass on someone.”

“We’re anxious to get the working drawings of the German long-range gun that’s been bombarding Paris,” Warburton said.

“Where do we fit in?”

Warburton grinned. “You haven’t got to get them. They’ve been got. Remember Paul Lukeit?”

Barry Dale thought for a moment. At one time, when he had been doing Air Intelligence work, he had been privy to most of the inner espionage

secrets; but since he had been assigned to command the Squadron of the Dead, he had lost touch.

“No,” he rejoined. “The only one I remember was Vandenberg, the Dutchman—and I never trusted him.”

“Oh, Vandenberg’s okay,” snorted Warburton. “Just because he fancies the women and you had to sock him doesn’t detract from his ability as a spy.”

He paused. “Anyway, Lukeit is the bird. He’s a double spy. The Germans think he’s their ace *espion* and we know he’s ours. We sent Lukeit back to Germany ostensibly to carry some plans of an obsolete tank and told him to get the specifications of the long-range gun. We got a pigeon from him yesterday, the last one he had. He says he has the specifications, but he can’t get out of Germany now. They want to send him to England—which suits us—and he wants a plane, or maybe a squadron, to bring them back.”

“How?” asked Dale.

“Lukeit said he had been at Courcelles—was there when the pigeon was released. He wants us to send over a man. We’re sending Vandenberg. Van will see Lukeit and carry a pigeon and send word back where you and your gang drop down. You can do it under pretense of bombing and strafing some place.”

Dale thought a while. “It’s jake, except for Vandenberg. I hate that man’s guts.”

“Forget him.” Warburton got up, and his glance strayed wistfully to the cognac bottle. Dale poured a drink for both. “Lord!” Warburton exhaled. “That makes a war livable. Well, it’s settled then. Take over Van tonight, or have him sent. No parachute because it might not open, and we want those plans.”

“All right,” Dale nodded.

Near the door, Warburton paused. “By the way, how’s young Roger Addington Blake, Third, coming along?”

“He needs trimming,” rejoined Dale curtly.

“He’ll get it,” chuckled Warburton. “At that, I feel sorry for the kid. Give a lad all the dough in the world but ten dollars and he ought to be spoiled. And he’s engaged to a swell girl, Janice Brock. I know her family well. Give the kid a chance, Slam.”

“Why,” demanded Dale, “are they going to turn him loose?”

“Ten million dollars and an uncle as United States Senator swings plenty of weight,” replied Warburton evasively. “What I mean is, don’t murder the lad right off. If he lives through—they’d probably quash the charges. Get me?”

“He takes his chances with the rest,” snapped Dale. “When I took this job, it was understood no interference. That’s the way I play it.”

“Yeah,” said Warburton. “You’re right. Well, give me a memo of your plan.”

CHAPTER III FIGHT OF FURY

OBERST Nicola, chief of the Imperial German *Nachrichtendienst*, looked up from the memorandum and stared obliquely from under thick bushy brows at his assistant, Schulkopf, head of Air Intelligence.

“You’re sure you can trust Vandenberg?” he quizzed.

Schulkopf nodded. “Without question, *Excellenz*. And I do not myself see how he can fail. The pigeon was sent, telling of the gun specifications being in Lukeit’s hands. The enemy wants them badly.”

“Yes, I suppose so,” *Oberst* Nicolai said slowly. “In any case, it’s worth the risk of some machine guns and troops. But chiefly I want this leader, Barry Dale.

By hanging him and taking photographs of the operation, I fancy we’ll end this Squadron of the Dead once and for all. Destroying the men in it does no good. More merely come.”

“It will work,” repeated Schulkopf. “When Vandenberg arrives at Courcelles, he will send back a message saying that Dale is to come.”

Nicolai scrawled his initials on the several orders necessary to carry out the plan.

“It stands approved,” he said. “When Vandenberg comes, bring him to me. I want to ask him about some other matters.”

Schulkopf picked up the papers and placed them in a black dispatch case.

“You know, *Excellenz*,” he said, “that Vandenberg’s usefulness to us ceases when he carries out this affair. The enemy will surely suspect him.”

“Yes, I understand, but it is worth it. *Bei Gott*, this Squadron of the Dead is more annoying than a division of troops.” Nicolai smiled. “Odd isn’t it, that a man who does not value his life has such an advantage over a really brave and gallant pilot? It shows, after all, that even the bravest of us love life and do not believe we shall die. That is why these outlaws are so dangerous.”

IN the great dome-shaped caverns that had once housed German reserves against enemy fire, Blake walked beside Willie the Web and studied the machine shop the place had become. There were Nieuports and Spads, Breguets and two mammoth Handley-Page bombers. Talking cheerfully, Willie the Web said that all this material was supplied through the Allied Supreme Command.

“They use us on long bombing missions,” he said. “We’ve been to Zeebrugge and Metz, Cologne and Trier. And one of these days we’ll go to Berlin.”

He talked about the Camels and their Clergets, the Nieuports and the Monosoupapes.

“The crummiest collection of crates in existence,” he admitted.

“About like the men who fly them.”

Blake was looking past the ships to where men were moving about.

Willie the Web said sharply, “They’re the best pilots in the world—and the best fellows. Take Black Baklinov over there, that Russian with the beard. He killed his sweetheart in a jealous fight. Why, that man looks for death—and death passes him by. He alone has killed nearly fifty German pilots.”

He pointed to two red-haired men moving the tractors that pulled the planes out to daylight. “O’Flaherty and his brother, Mike. They hate the Germans, but they hate the British worse. So they fight with us.”

Blake’s lips curled. Suddenly the place roared to howling voices. Words, obscene, terrible words in French and English echoed harshly. Out into the electric light glow sprang five men. Two leaped at the other three. The sudden smash of angry voices gave way to the dull, horrible pound of driving fists. They fought silently, fiercely, like wild animals. Two more men rushed out, looked at the fight, and fell to punching at each other.

Still another leaped into the fray, and almost immediately they were in a confusion of legs and arms and bodies. The fighting was deadly, killer lust burning at a white fury.

Willie the Web started forward. Blake watched, saw thumbs go for eyes.

“Beasts,” he said. “Why don’t they fight like gentlemen?”

Before Willie the Webb could reply or make an attempt to stop the ferocity of the struggle, Skipper Barry Dale came out of the operations room. He saw the fight, but he did not unduly increase his gait.

By now there were a medley of terrible sounds—squeals, grunts, the savage slam of blows thudding into flesh and bone.

Suddenly, over the savage turmoil of sound Dale’s voice rose.

“Stop it,” he cried.

Blake, looking at his nondescript figure, smiled. “A fat chance of your stopping that,” he muttered.

But at the sound of Dale’s clear, melodious call, the men got themselves out of the tangle. They stood up, brushing at themselves, examining ripped clothing, bloody scratches and swollen faces.

“Ashton,” called Dale quietly, “what was it all about?”

A man with snow-white hair and a youthful face said, “I told O’Flaherty that the Irish were traitorous scum—and I still say so.”

“You dirty British!” called a red-haired youth. “I’ll—”

“You’ll both fight it out tonight after mess,” interjected Dale. “Get on with your work.”

The twenty-odd men, who had suddenly appeared, scattered. Ashton turned, and returned to an examination of the Handley-Page’s starboard Rolls-Royce motor.

Dale proceeded toward Blake. “You’ve had night-flying?” he asked.

Blake set his mouth grimly. “Yes, what of it?”

“There’s a trip to be made tonight—to Courcelles—carrying a spy. You’ll take it.”

Blake’s fingers instinctively went to his neck. There flashed across his mind a picture of being captured by the Germans. Hanged! A Blake could be shot in action—after all, Blakes had been

soldiers for three hundred years—but to be hanged like a dog. . . .

“I wouldn’t go, anyway,” he rejoined, “and even if I didn’t object on general principles, I’d refuse because I don’t care about being hanged. The court-martial ordered death by musketry.”

“I gave you an order,” said Dale.

“You can’t order me. I’m a convicted prisoner,” flared Blake furiously.

Dale unbuckled his Sam Browne belt of polished black leather. “You second him, Willie,” he said. “Get your clothes off, Blake. We’ll settle this here and now.”

BLAKE stared at the strange skipper of a stranger squadron. Suddenly he laughed. “Do you mean it?” he cried.

Barry Dale stripped to his undershirt. Now that his torso was partly revealed, you could see he was a man whom clothes disfigured. There were muscles there, good ones. His face became set, granite.

“Put up your hands,” he said briefly.

Again Blake laughed. He ripped off his buttonless tunic. “It’ll be a pleasure to sock a butcher,” he grinned.

He stepped forward, crouched, arms up and made a quick feint. The man called Barry Dale exploded. The body was like a lithe rapier that foiled and riposted; and out of the maze of defense a fist shot out and snapped Blake’s head back with the crushing force of its smash.

Roger Addington Blake, Third, stepped back, shook his head. His lips skinned away from his teeth; his eyes became suddenly bloodshot and blazing with unleashed fury.

“Let’s go,” he muttered, and weaved in.

Work in that place ceased then. Men came quietly, yet quickly, and gathered around the two half-naked men in a tight, silent circle, resembling, it seemed, the thick-coated huskies beyond the Arctic Circle who watch their leader tame a rebel. They spoke no word; they took no hand. They watched. Their own bodies quivered as a blow thudded home. Their eyes flashed in unison as a quick feint or rally brought a ruthless, hurting punch. Their mouths worked. But even when an overhand right from Blake’s pivoting body smashed into Dale’s ear and ripped it nearly

loose and knocked him down, they made no movement. Just a sigh escaped them.

Blake, too, fought in silence, body crouched, head down, chin buried in the in the protection of a raised shoulder, eyes staring up from under knit brows. Tirelessly he weaved in and out, more cautious now. A glorious fury of rage warmed him. It seemed now, at last, that he was striking back at “them,” the silly fools who ran this war and got better men killed. Every blow was a blow for Ted Starr.

He took two blows to get in one. He struck with an exhaled grunt and tried to bury his fist to the wrist in soft flesh. He took blows that jolted him to the marrow.

It was a terrible battle to watch. Unleashed fury stabbed with the speed of lightning. Driving blows made men wince at the thought of the pain. Savage ferocity with killing lust behind it.

Barry Dale feinted with a left, stepped in with a right hook. Too late he saw what Blake was doing. He ducked—into a smashing right upper cut that started near the floor and tore into his chin with a drive that literally pulled his feet from the floor. He came down dully on his heels. His rubber knees buckled, and he went down.

Blake, panting, skin red, stood over him. “That’s for you, butcher,” he husked. “Now I’m going out of here, and I’ll kill the man who tries to stop me.”

He turned away, took a step. A voice halted him. “Are you flying that night trip?” The voice panted, but it was steady and calm.

Blake turned, amazement written on his face. Dale stood there, pale but ready.

“I didn’t think you’d get up,” he cried.

“Are you obeying that order?” rapped Dale.

“Never.”

Dale came forward, feinted for the jaw and drove a left hook to stomach. “I’ve bounced farther than you hit me, punk,” he said through clenched teeth.

Blake yelled with fury and rushed. Thinking he had a groggy man to deal with, he threw punches recklessly. They didn’t hit home. Fists began to pound at his eyes, pound at his stomach.

“Let’s take him, Skipper,” came Willie’s quiet voice.

And suddenly Blake was on the receiving end of an unleashed attack that had him nearly

helpless. Blows to the chin straightened him up. Smashes to the stomach bent him over. He gave all he had, but it wasn’t enough. At first Dale’s blows apparently had no sting behind them, but with no rest, the savage punches to the stomach tired Blake. He began to be slower.

And suddenly he didn’t duck, and a short hooking right that crunched with a dull sickening, hollow sound against his jaws sent him down, mind a blur, motions foggy. Somehow he got up, traded two punches, took another to the jaw and went down. He sat there, his breath screaming between his lips.

“Had enough?” Dale’s voice struck through the fog.

Blake got up. The circle was a blur of faces, and in it moving like a ghost was the taut body of Dale. Blake went for it. His head snapped back cruelly at the driving power of the punch. He went down. He was hurt, badly hurt.

“Quitting?” came the remorseless voice.

An insensate fury flushed through Blake. He pounded his chest as if hoping to get more air to stop this agonized feeling within. He got up. He drove in. Thereafter it was slaughter. The attack on the stomach had ripped his resistance out of him. He toppled over at a punch that slid off his chin and glanced off his cheek. He got up, bringing a fist from the floor that somehow, in a wild, roundhouse sweep, smashed Dale’s lips. The man went down, bobbed up, and rights and lefts rained on Blake. Men’s eyes glittered; voices sighed in ecstasy. It was a battle of the gods. Never had they seen one like it. Blake down, up, hammering with arms that felt like lead. Dale down, coming up with an endurance that astounded Blake.

What seemed eons later, when Blake was down for an uncounted time, the remorseless voice asked him if he had quit. Murderous fury which flooded Blake got him up. This little bland beast, this butcher, this murderer—he couldn’t win.

“You’ll—have—to—kill me,” he croaked.

Slam! A hooked left measured him, and out of nowhere flashed a blur of white as the deadly right of Barry Dale smashed home. Something exploded in Blake’s head, and the lights went out.

When he saw them again, there was the raw taste of cognac in his mouth, and Willie the Web was holding his head. “Just a button blow, me

lad," he said, cheerfully. "You're not cut up at all."

Blake struggled and finally sat up. The men were all there staring at him. Nearer, wrapped in an olive drab blanket, was Barry Dale. Seeing Blake's eyes open, the squadron skipper came forward.

"Are you making that night flight?" he asked quietly.

"And what happens if I don't?" growled Blake.

"We go on with the training," rejoined Dale. "Make up your mind."

Blake sat there a long time. His eyes on Dale blazed with fury. He shrugged.

"I make the trip," he said.

Dale's face scarcely changed expression. "Good enough. Willie, introduce him to the gang." Dale went away from there.

Dully, Blake permitted himself to be aided to his feet. He cursed himself for not fighting on. He told himself he had just begun to fight. He hated Barry Dale, and to end this Squadron of the Dead he'd kill the man.

As they led him off to the mess-hall, he croaked, "I haven't changed my mind. By God, Dale's a butcher. Instead of letting men die quickly, he has it dragged out until a man goes out screaming like a stuck pig."

He cursed. "I'm not through yet."

CHAPTER IV FOKKER SHADOWS

THERE was some little delay at Wing, At eight o'clock, when Blake was seated by himself, smoking, trying to bring sense into a confused, bewildered mind, he looked up to see Dale quietly standing there.

"The trip's off tonight," said Dale briefly. "We'll make a patrol tomorrow to draw up a sketch map, and you'll take the spy over tomorrow night. In the meantime, if you want to go to town with the men, you can."

"No," said Blake.

"Suit yourself," Dale shrugged. Save for some bruises, he was unmarked. He started to walk away, stopped. "We may run into the Krauts tomorrow, and you might as well know now that this outfit sticks together. I'm not making any pep talk, but the rule in the air is all for one and one

for all. You can drink, fight, moon around, hate me as much as you like, but don't let anybody down who's in a tough spot."

Blake simply looked past Dale and spat.

Dale shrugged. "Have it your own way. I appreciate the fact that you've had bad leadership. You remind me of a horse I once owned that had been brutally treated by a former master."

He looked at his nails and added gruffly, "I'm not promising you that you'll have any better leadership around here, but one thing is certain. I never ask my men to do anything I wouldn't do. For us all, even me, the squadron comes first. So remember it."

That was all. Baklinov, the tall, pale Russian with the enormous beard came by, accompanied by Ashton and O'Flaherty. They might not have been fighting earlier in the day, so far as their demeanor now went.

"Better come along to town, my son," said the Russian. "God has not meant for us to live within ourselves."

A craving for liquor suddenly assailed Blake. Anything to wash away and forget what had happened. At the bar of the *Cafe des Etats Unis*, he drank two enormous hookers of cognac. The rest got drunk quicker than that.

Baklinov was sobbing in his kummel, telling how he was meant for priesthood. Blake listened, lips curled. Ashton had shot it out with a Frenchman over a girl. He could never go back to England. He was more restrained in his telling.

Blake drank his fourth glass, and suddenly smashed the empty receptacle onto the floor.

"You're a bunch of swine," he snarled. "No, worse. You're sheep. You let that little sap lead you around by the ring in your nose. Why don't you revolt? Why don't you join me? Why don't you smash him and the Squadron of the Dead, which is living death and worse?"

Baklinov whirled on him, gigantic, enormous. Ashton paled around the mouth. Suddenly he slapped Blake hard.

"You filth!" cried the Englishman. "Grouse as much as you like, but if you say another word against Barry Dale, I'll jam it down your throat."

Baklinov saved the situation. "Easy does it," he muttered. "The lad meant no harm to Dale. You remember how it was for you, Ashton, when you came. Only for Blake here, it is worse. He has

youth, lust for life, perhaps a beautiful girl in whose eyes he can lose his soul. He had everything—he has thrown it away. Ah, Ashton, it is a terrible thing to have no future.” He sighed gustily and poured the colorless kummel into the glass. “If I had no past, I would sacrifice the tomorrows for today.”

That was all then. An hour later, the Englishman edged close to Blake.

“Sorry, lad,” he said, “but keep your bit in your teeth.” He hesitated, then went on shyly, “I’d forgotten my own beginnings, as Baklinov said. Let me give you a word of advice. You’ve lost the love of a good woman. It can’t be yours because you’re a dead man. You’ve lost a future, too. You’ve lost all the affection a world can give you, but for one thing.”

“And that?” asked Blake sullenly.

“The friendship of men for men.” Ashton lifted his cognac glass to the light, looked through the amber fluid.

“I loved a woman once—that’s why I’m here, though I don’t blame her. I had ambition to reach high places. When I came here, I wanted to shoot myself. That takes either more or less courage than I possess. So I gradually substituted for all the loves I had lost the love for the squadron, for Barry Dale, who looks as big as Christ to me sometimes. O’Flaherty—” he gestured toward the red-headed Irishman—“he and I fight and hurt. Yet if I get in trouble on the patrol tomorrow, O’Flaherty would kill himself to save me. That’s the way we are here. And once you get that love in your soul, it’s not so bad here. You can climb the ladder of the days and not be surprised when a rung breaks and drops you—drops you where you’re going.”

He looked at Blake’s hard face and stiffened. “Sorry if I’ve annoyed you with sentimental drivel,” he said coldly.

He moved away. Blake drank enormous quantities of liquor, but he was merely dumb and stupid when the Dodge car left for the tarmac. He tumbled into bed and lay there, staring at the ceiling.

“They’re wrong,” he said finally. “Dale’s tricked them, the way all of us have been tricked.” Finally he slept.

THICK-HEADED, nerves jangled, he came up blinking in the flashlight that Willie the Web turned on him.

“All on the deadline in ten minutes,” said the kiwi. “We’re going over, and maybe have a Kraut for breakfast.”

“We?” said Blake. “Do you fly?”

Willie the Web looked down at his hands. “No,” he said dully. “I can’t fly. No sense of balance. My ears, I guess.” He brightened. “Come on and get some coffee. You’ll feel jake.”

Everyone was gummy-eyed at breakfast, and the talk was in monosyllables. As they crossed the meadow to where the white Spads and Nieuports were drawn up like ghost ships, the wind whistled chill and cold, and the dull thunder of the hot guns baying up north drifted down like echoes of a brooding storm.

Barry Dale stood there by his Spad, drumming with fingers on the black skull-and-crossbones insignia which marked all squadron crates.

“Rendezvous at four thousand,” he said. “We’re making a special reconnaissance about Warburton’s job, but we’ll pick a fight if we find one. Ashton, you take Blake in your flight and put him at two.”

Just before the take-off, he came over to Blake’s cockpit. “You’ve got a lot of physical courage,” he said. “I think your moral fortitude is as high. We’ll soon know. Good luck.”

He made no motion to shake hands, and a few seconds later, his Hiss roared, goosed out of line, blipped into the wind off an angled rudder. His arm rose and fell, and he was gone like a bat out of hell. With a whining moan, his Spad curled up the sky in a beautiful climbing turn. One by one the crates followed. Trim and smart, they zoomed. In all his experience Blake had never seen such magnificent handling. He lifted his own ship and put it in a right spiral for altitude.

For a moment he felt better. He was back in a ship. The slipstream was rushing past his ears; exhaust flames flickered in his eyes; the sweet purr of a good motor droned and lulled him peacefully. He was back in the sky, where he belonged.

They met a rosy dawn at eight thousand feet, with the vast mass of the dark Argonne off their left wings, the Meuse curling like molten quicksilver below. The cold air cleared Blake’s

head; the rarefied air quickened his pulses. Against the sky far ahead swayed the great German *Drachens*. Electric flashes down there marked the detonation of hot guns. A German AA battery put up a string of twelve shells that blossomed like black roses and made the crates ride like ships in a heavy gale.

After that it was a compass course to Courcelles, and the three-Fokker flight they encountered east of Mont Sec took one look at the skull-and-crossbones insignia and went away from there. Blake had plenty of time to think, and his inward rebellion became a fury unleashed. Nobody, he swore, could make him go on.

He scarcely paid attention when the planes followed Dale down to take a look-see at the possible landing fields near Courcelles. The wave of fury that swept him was suicidal, and his mind was ready when he saw the two Pfalzes. He laughed silently. "Killed in action," he muttered. "Well, that isn't any lie."

His right wing went under. He rolled on over and came out in a fast power dive. The throttle went out; the stick went forward under the instrument board. His twin Vickers spat a short burst to warm the oil, clear the gun for action. The Spad screamed down the sky.

Two hundred miles an hour, dropping on a couple of hot Pfalzes! Good-bye, Blake, old kid, you went out and took a Jerry with you. Head-on, that's the way to hit them. The linen drummed. The struts shrieked. The Hisso pounded, and Blake stood on his rudder bar and rode her to hell down.

"Laugh this off, Dale, you butcher!" he howled, and tripped the guns.

His Spad was a moaning whine that became a roar, a howl, a shrieking hurricane that screamed onto the German ship. The very rattle of his guns was lost in the uproar of his coming.

The Pfalz pilot never knew what hit him. He was going away, and Blake's attack was timed perfectly to sweep down on the tail. He watched with a chill, cold grin the tracer stream stitch up the empennage. He saw the pilot's face turn pale, frightened, mouth opened. And then a fistful of slugs hit the German. Blake, watching the ruin, was reminded of when, as a child, he had seen a magician reach into a white beaver hat and pull out a huge bouquet of paper roses—red roses.

Well, Blake was the magician now. His bullets hit that white face and out came a crimson glory of roses that sprayed their red dye along the Pfalz's fuselage.

THE ship heeled over as Blake went screaming by, and it was breaking up in pieces when he droned up the sky like a rocket and took a long shot at the other Pfalz, frantically turning away from him. He made a half-roll. He felt like yelling to tell that blasted crew of flying dead men above to come and see how a Blake, a Roger Addington Blake, Third, passed out.

Suddenly he saw shadows whipping across the sky. Black shadows—one, two, and three, wheeling at him like the evil shadows of sharks' bellies on a sandy bottom. Four more. They were whirling around with him in the merry whirl of the dead—black sharks drawn by the blood of the kill. Fokker shadows!

Blake saw them, felt the first smash of their gun fire, and roared in herculean laughter. He had dived on Pfalz decoys. He had done the same thing as Ted Starr. He jerked back on the stick and sent the Spad howling upward, kicking his rudder, spraying slugs right and left. He was mad, he knew it, and laughed loudly.

No clear recollection remained after that first hurtling attempt to zoom over the Fokkers. He did the dancing dervish act; he whirled, and he rolled, and chased somebody's tail until a strip of tracer fire made him fade down. He dodged one box, got caught in the next and told himself that at last death was here.

He nosed over in a power dive to outrun the Fokkers. They'd shed their wings in vertical dives, somebody said, but these two, less than sixty yards away on each side of him, raced him down and held him from curving away from the slamming gun fire that was creeping up on his tail,

"All right," he yelled. "Let's have it."

Back came the stick, and the Spad stuck her tail down. The wings sagged at the strain as she mushed. Then the crate howled up. The pursuer hung to him, came closer, tracer stream, pecking at his wings, cutting loose little ribbons of fabric. Bullets came closer, slamming by his head, leaving thin smoke trails.

Blake laughed uproariously. This was the end. He turned so as to take the burst in the chest and not the back.

It was then that he saw a white Spad slip in front of the German on his tail. The German left Blake to follow the new prey.

“Barry Dale!” Blake roared. “What the hell?”

He dived, cursing, on the German who blocked him on the left, and then anchored a wing for a fast pivot turn. He came back, cursing anew. But Dale had faded away, taking the Kraut with him, and from his advantage the German was making sure of victory. His guns hammered without let up. And he was skillful enough not to let Dale escape from the hole into which he had put himself.

Blake leap-frogged a German, felt his ship tilt as if he'd lost his landing gear. He dived. He'd hit that Kraut, hit him...

Past him, going like a white streak, roared a Nieuport—a strange Nieuport, because it had no fabric on its wings. All the doped cloth had stripped off, hung back like the fringe on an Indian's costume. The Nieuport was making better than two hundred. It could never flatten out. It didn't have anything to flatten on.

“God!” muttered Blake.

He saw the red ball on the Nieuport toward the tail assembly. He didn't need the red head of O'Flaherty peering above the cockpit edge to know who was flying that doomed crate. It went down faster than any ship Blake had ever seen.

The German felt the tracer storm lash him, and glanced back and tried to throw himself out of the way. He never had a chance. The only difference his maneuver made was that the Nieuport's propeller hit the Fokker just abaft the pilot's seat, instead of square on the motor assembly.

The Fokker broke in two; the engine exploded, and the pilot came leaping ludicrously upward like a jumping frog. The Nieuport's wings folded back; the landing wheels smashed up and broke the fuselage away from the stripped wings like a bent stick. O'Flaherty was jerked out of the seat by the terrific impact, and hit the broken Fokker a blow with his body that must have broken his back, because he bounced off and went hurtling down with no movement.

Blake went numb. He had no memory of what followed. He must have flown absolutely by

instinct, for the next thing he knew, Willie the Web called, “Hey, come on down out of there.”

Blake got down. He saw Barry Dale walking toward him, the rest of the pilots trailing behind. Dale's face was pale, taut.

“I thought you were an experienced pilot,” snapped Dale. “Dropping down on a decoy. Damn it, you've knocked off two better men.”

“I didn't think you'd come down,” said Blake dully. “I went down to have myself a final fight.”

“Ah!” Dale's voice grew in volume and harshness. He stepped close, face blazing.

“And I thought you had the goods in you,” he muttered. “I sent O'Flaherty, whose shoes you weren't fit to tie, to his death by ordering an attack to save your hide. Pojaz, as swell a Polack as ever took a stick, dropped out of a flamer to save a swine.”

He stiffened. “God!” His hand came out, and the palm laid squarely across Blake's cheek with a sound like a pistol shot.

“You rat!” Dale spat.

CHAPTER V THE DOUBLE SPY

SIXTEEN thousand feet up, where the cold air cut like the blade of a knife, and frost rime whitened the leading edges of the dark wings, a Breguet droned against the copper disc of the moon. Nearly four miles below, the earth hung suspended in darkness; and, above, the stars pulsed like naked hearts, and the plane seemed droning into nothingness.

Roger Addington Blake, Third, sat steady in the pit, his left hand holding the stick to keep the Breguet's nose fighting for the altitude, his right hand working on the map board, checking wind drift, air speed and tachometer revs. Far below, German tin ears might strain to catch the faint hum of this ship, but they could never locate it.

In the rear seat, Vandenberg, the double spy, huddled down into his ragged peasant's costume, his cunning eyes alertly watching for the first signs of Courcelles.

Blake fought to keep his mind on the navigation problems before him. He did not want to remember the events of the afternoon—the

angry eyes of the pilots, the supreme contempt of Barry Dale, the final slap.

He tried to forget Barry Dale's final words. Yet he had to remember them. "You haven't got the class to stay here, Blake. I'm sending you back in two days, and the court-martial sentence can be carried out. It isn't likely that they'll shoot you. Old Horse-face at Washington won't approve of shooting for military offenses. So you can sit in a prison for a few years and try to get onto yourself." He had paused, added, "You'll fly Vandenberg because it's a question of discipline now."

A resounding thump between the shoulder blades caused Blake to glance at his calculations. Instantly he closed the throttle, and the exhaust flames ceased to shoot from the pipes. He piqued over in a gentle glide, cocked a wing and began to wind down toward the earth below.

Slowly, almost silently, save for the soft shrill of the night wind against the brace wires, the ship dropped down to a thousand feet. Blake fished for the magnesium flare.

Vandenberg's voice came harshly to his ears. "Never mind the flare. With the moon, can't you make it?"

"No," said Blake. "I can't take any chance on a crack-up. I've got to get your message back."

Vandenberg grunted. Blake circled the group of meadows, heaved his flare which dropped, struck and burst into blazing light. He caught the wind direction from the white smoke of it, banked around, and fish-tailed down for a three-point. He leaped out, ran to the flare and extinguished it.

When he came back, Vandenberg stood there, rubbing his cold arms. "You wait," said Vandenberg. "Lukeit will have left a message in the farmhouse." He gestured toward the battered white skeleton of a French home. "We want to settle this as quickly as possible."

Blake eyed the man with distaste, he had a congenital dislike for a man with a long nose and a rat like mouth. Vandenberg scuttled into the darkness. Blake lit a cigarette, shielded the glow with his hand and waited. The danger here was not great; he was nearly forty miles behind the enemy lines, and there were no enemy troop concentrations near.

Fifteen minutes later, Vandenberg came trotting back, his face screwed up in a frown.

"Listen," he jerked, "Lukeit's in trouble. He's suspect. Could Dale get back here within—what time is it?"

Blake glanced at the luminously green dial of his watch. "Quarter after twelve."

"Half-past two," said Vandenberg eagerly. "Could Dale make it by then? He'll have to come himself. Lukeit's got other things to explain to him. He'll have to fly Lukeit back, so have him bring a two-seater."

"Where's Lukeit now?"

"Hiding out. I'll get in touch with him. He expects me."

Blake climbed into the cockpit. "I'll tell Dale," he said. "He'll come, because Wing is anxious for this information."

"Good! I'll tell Lukeit. Remember, the poor devil's life hangs on it."

Blake gave the spy a flare to set off at the far end of the field. He wheeled, nosed into the wind and poured in the gun. It was a short runway, at best, and he barely cleared the trees, and banked sharply to avoid rising ground ahead. This sent him over the farmhouse at less than fifty feet of altitude. Sharply tilted, he was looking down in the yard when he saw a horse apparently break from a stall to go madly kicking and stamping, and finally to leap the ruins of the old stone fence and gallop into the night.

BLAKE fought the Breguet into a tight spiral that would let him cross the German lines too high to cause suspicion. Once again at sixteen thousand, he leaned back, the stick gripped between his knees.

For no cause that he could discern, the memory of the horse leaped vividly across his mind. For a while he didn't understand why; then it suddenly struck him with a shock. That was an abandoned farmhouse, shot up in the early days of the German advance! There should be no horse there. Nobody should be there. That was why it had been picked as a rendezvous.

"Hell!" He started straight up. Another picture struck him. "By God, that horse was saddled."

"A *Uhlan* cavalry horse," he told himself.

German troops were hiding there. But why? Why hadn't they come out and captured him?

All during the forty-minute trip until he picked up the lights limning the home tarmac, his mind

worked carefully, coolly, over the problem. He was still abstracted, pondering, when he set down, climbed out and watched the greaseballs hurry the crate out of sight.

Presently he strode to the operations room. Barry Dale was still up. His eyes lifted as Blake came in.

“Well?” he asked.

“Landing was all right. Vandenberg went for a message from Lukeit and found it. Lukeit is suspect. He has other information. He wants you to come with a two-place job and bring him back.”

Dale listened, rolled a cigarette. “Lukeit knows me,” he said, “and trusts me. That’s probably the reason.”

“Probably,” said Blake.

“All right,” Dale lit the cigarette. “You can go to bed now.”

He paused, inhaled, blew a cone of gray smoke. “On your way out, tell McKenna to get the fifty-six-ninety out, put magnesium flares in the cockpit and see that the Lewis is well-greased.”

“Very good, sir,” Blake went out, stopped at McKenna’s quarters, gave the order and went on to his own diggings.

Dale lifted his brow, as Blake used the conventional assent of an inferior to a superior officer.

“A little sarcasm,” he grunted. “Too bad, that kid. I thought I could bring him around.”

He went on with his work, which consisted of figuring weights, gasoline consumption and mileage on the projected trip to Berlin. Willie the Web came in at quarter to two, told him it was time to go.

Dale got his flying coat, helmet and goggle.

“I’ll be back in—” he began, and stopped short.

From the night outside came the sudden burst of a gunned motor. Instead of dying away, it grew louder, moved. He heard the sound of it as it strained to lift; then it gradually grew less loud.

Dale jerked his gun belt, holster and weapon from the mail. “By God,” he muttered, “that was someone taking off.”

He turned toward the door, but before he could reach it, the wood crashed open and McKenna, the chief greaseball, rushed in.

“ ‘Twas Blake, sor, the new mon,” he panted, “I had the fifty-six-ninety warmin’ up, an’ he just got in her and went afore I could do anything about it.”

“Running out!” Dale’s lips curled contemptuously. “He never had what it takes. Which way did he head?”

“Straight fer Garminy, I ken.”

“Germany!” repeated Dale. “Hell, the fool will get hanged if he lands there— unless he’s copped a uniform. And even so, the plane would betray him.” Dale started for the door. “Get the Spads and Nieuports on the line, Mac. I don’t understand this. I hope the fool won’t buy his life by betraying our location.”

He raced to Blake’s quarters. They were empty, but on the table was a folded bit of paper. Dale snatched it, jerked it open and read:

“To whomever it may concern: A man can throw away his life once and perhaps be forgiven; to do it twice is to show him a fool. So this is the end.

To Barry Dale: Vandenberg is a traitor. I saw a Uhlan cavalry horse at Courcelles farm. It was a trap to catch you. That’s why he insisted on you coming. I hope I won’t make too poor a substitute. Ashton was right, you are right, and the Squadron of the Dead is right. Forgive my poor fool errors. Blake.”

Barry Dale crumpled the note in his hand. “For God’s sake!” he muttered.

THE tarmac of the Squadron of the Dead sprang to life. Flashlights glowed; tractors growled, hauling the planes to the line. The cold motors stuttered and coughed. Men came racing half-dressed from the dugouts in the side of the hill.

Near the deadline Dale stood, and summoned the men into a group.

“Blake’s gone over to take my place in a German trap,” he said. “I want him back, dead or alive. He went to Courcelles farm. No orders except to go down and get him.”

The compact group of men nodded, and turned and ran to their ships. No time to wait for motors to warm. Dale took the lead ship. The greaseball yelled, “Take her away.”

Exhaust flames flickered. Motor drone rose to human howls. Down the field the ships ran, one by one, and whined into the sky, fighting out of each other’s wash, clawing for altitude. They

settled into a ragged formation at five hundred feet, with Dale in the lead. One ship faltered, motor dead, and slipped down into the darkness. The rest kept on. The planes revved faster, and hedge-hopped toward the German front.

Barry Dale's face, peering at his instruments, was gray and grim. Twenty miles ahead, Roger Addington Blake's face was also gray and grim, yet there was no conflict within him anymore. Having arrived at a great decision, he thought of nothing but how to make sure that Vandenberg died with him. He was still climbing at thirteen thousand feet because Dale, going over would have chosen the higher sphere. This was costing him time, but he had plenty—an eternity.

This time, the German front was alarmed by his coming. Searchlights cut the night with the rapier of their brilliance, sweeping across the heavens, searching like white ghost fingers for him. White battalions of bayonets, they marched. The dull red eyes of exploding shells laid a curtain of death just ahead, but he went over it, rocking to the air concussions. Very lights rose from the trench systems below. Looking down, Blake thought of an enormously wide boulevard lit with regularly spaced lamps. Only these lamps glowed and went out, and others took their places.

Presently this was behind him, and he was alone, high up where a man could reach out and pluck the stars. He thought about a lot of things then, chiefly the thoughts of a man who is outward bound on a journey that has no ending.

Yet meticulously he checked his navigation figures and finally cut his gun and let the great ship wheel downward in graceful spirals. Once again he saw the moon bathing the shell-fractured farmhouse. He dropped two flares, and made one single sweep over the farmhouse to come into the wind. No horse ran out frightened, this time. He fishtailed to kill his forward speed, hauled back on the stick and let the Breguet sit. He took a big breath. "Here goes," he whispered.

His neck muffler hid the lower part of his face. The goggles and helmet did the rest. He rounded his shoulders so that his extra height over Dale would not be noticed. And he walked toward the farmhouse.

"Dale!" called a voice.

"Lukeit," Blake muttered the word hoarsely. "I'm ready."

His hands hung at his sides. Out of the shadows of the house a man came in a crouching run. Carrying out his role, Blake said, "Hurry up, Lukeit. The Front's aroused."

The white-hot glow of the magnesium flares revealed Vandenberg now. "Lukeit's delayed," he called, sidling to one side. "But—"

Something made Blake turn his head. From the left, five German soldiers, their accoutrements rattling, were getting between him and his plane.

Blake smiled. "Right, Vandenberg," His hands come up, and two heavy automatic pistols weighed them down.

Vandenberg saw now. "You!" he yelled and flung himself to one side in a frantic leap.

Blake pulled the triggers. The snapping flashes leaped redly from the snouts. "No, no!" screamed Vandenberg. "It wasn't—ah—"

The streaking slugs hit him once, and he rolled over, grabbing at his stomach. Two more bullets bit into his flesh, and he gradually straightened out, spread-eagled, hands and arms extended. The bullets struck his corpse with a soft, sickening thud, and the body leaped and quivered to the impact.

Shouts came from several sources on the meadowland. Blake, still smiling, turned and aimed his big guns at the Germans who had cut off his retreat. He fired twice and they flopped like infantry. Their rifles extended, and the sharp roar of Mausers added to the lighter crack of the automatics. Blake did not lie prone. Feet apart, firing as coolly as if at a target, he started to shoot it out.

From somewhere a voice yelled in German, "Take him alive."

Blake laughed shortly. But he had not reckoned on so many soldiers. Behind him came the heavy thud of pounding boots. He turned. A squad of Germans, coming at the dead run, bore down swiftly upon him.

Blake gave a yell. His guns whirled, and as the hammers rose and fell, the yellow flames shot from the snouts like the licking fury of a snake's illuminated tongue.

Four of the Germans stumbled. A scream rose, a moan, but the rest came on. Blake braced himself. The gun hammers fell with a sickening, empty click. He crouched. The first German went down with a face smashed flat by the driving

impact of a gun snout. The second staggered to one side as the blow glanced. The third cursed furiously. His rifle swung, and the stock crashed down on Blake's head. It was not a full blow or it would have killed him, but the strength went out of his legs, the will out of his body.

He crumpled where he stood, tried to brace himself on his knees and fell forward. As he pressed his hands against the ground, trying to the last to rise, he heard the multi-roar of many planes, the rattle of machine-gun fire. Men around him yelled. Blinding lights lit the field. Two men seized him, and he was being dragged across the ground....

CHAPTER VI SQUADRON OF THE DEAD

LOOKING down from his fast-diving Spad, Barry Dale saw the two soldiers dragging the body toward the protection of the farmhouse. He saw, too, the German infantrymen and *Uhlans* streaming toward the plane. His Spad kicked over on one wing; he came around sharply, and his guns snarled above the howl of the Hisso. Twin streams of golden tracer marched along the ground with military precision, tore into the group of men dashing toward the plane. The men below tumbled over like ninepins before a fast-thrown ball.

Behind Dale came the others, and their fire lashed the ground until it dimpled as if under the beat of a torrential rain. The Germans broke and ran. The two carrying Blake angled off toward the woods.

Dale never set a ship down so fast before. The wheels struck and bounced. One wing went down, and he threw over the stick. The Spad held her run then and tore like a race horse for the two Germans.

Before the plane had entirely stopped, Dale vaulted from the cockpit and jerked a gun. Behind him streamed the others, but they needed no instructions from him. The planes came up almost on a neat line, facing the German resistance. Every second pilot leaped out, ran to the neighboring plane and lifted the tail so that the machine guns in the nose would bear. Instantly

the edge of the woods and the farmhouse were subjected to a steady torrent of fire that sent the Germans screaming for cover.

Behind Dale, Ashton and Baklinov ran to his assistance. Another pilot cranked the Breguet and set it at the idle, in readiness for the escape.

Dale dared not shoot, for fear of hitting Blake. He ran as he had never run before. Behind him thudded the huge, bearded Baklinov. From the woods, five more Germans were advancing cautiously to help the two carrying Blake.

"Keep 'em back, Petrov," yelled Dale.

The huge Russian's gun slammed almost in Dale's ear. The two Germans ceased to drag the body, and knelt and leveled their rifles. One suddenly yelled something that Dale did not understand. The German stepped back, shortened his rifle and started to drive his bayonet into the collapsed body at his feet.

Dale cursed, and hurled himself over the last few yards. He fired twice, aiming for the head. The upraised bayonet jerked, hesitated. The second German fired his rifle—almost, it seemed, in Dale's face. Dale felt the iron go into him even as the impact of the high-velocity rifle bullet half-turned him. He tripped over his own feet then, and plunged like a baseball player sliding into a base. The slide saved his life, for the other German fired where he had been, then jabbed the bayonet down so that it was three inches buried in Blake's side.

Before he could strike again, Baklinov uttered a roar and thrust his gun muzzle in the man's face and pulled the trigger. The dead body went back and down, and it had no face.

Dale raised his pistol, and as the one surviving German tried to shoot again, Dale let him have it squarely in the neck. The man screamed and his hand went to his throat as if the fingers would staunch the gout of blood that leaped nearly a foot from the body. The German died, still with crimson squirting through his fingers.

"Blake!" yelled Dale.

His own side was numb, the leg utterly without feeling. He walked stiffly, bent over. "Blake!" he called.

Blake stirred. "Yes," His senses, fogged by the sideswipe, shocked by the bayonet stab, jerked into rhythm at the sound of that voice.

“Get up,” Dale called sharply. “I’m hit in the leg. You’ll have to help yourself.” Hands fumbled at Blake, and he came up, half-supported by Barry Dale. His befuddled mind still didn’t grasp the situation. The Squadron of the Dead here! What did this mean?

He straightened up, and together with Dale he went backward, sidling like a crab. Baklinov had not accounted for all the Germans who had debouched from the edge of the woods, and these were firing rapidly. Blake knew it when a hot iron creased his thigh. He heard Dale grunt, and suddenly they both fell to the ground.

Blake moved again, but Dale did not. Blood streamed down the side of his face.

Blake staggered to his feet. “Baklinov!” His breath sobbed in his throat. “Dale’s hit—dead. Help me.”

The slugs whipped the air around him. He did not see, thinking dully, how they could miss. But he got Dale upright, onto his back, so that his own body acted as a shield. He tried to move back, and cursed and sobbed as his strength ran from him like water.

Two more Germans joined those from the woods. They began to advance three at a time, in the rush-and-flop system, while their rifles blazed incessantly. The leading three aimed squarely at Blake. Baklinov saw the peril and sprang forward with a gigantic leap that brought him squarely in front of Blake.

As distinctly as if there had been no bedlam of terrible sound, Blake heard the slugs thud into the Russian’s body.

Ashton came running with Armand Laval, a Frenchman. “Give Dale to me,” yelled Ashton, “and come on. My God, the whole German army is around.”

Blake fell down from sheer weakness when the load of Dale’s body was removed. He got to his knees.

“Baklinov,” he called.

The huge form of the Russian, which even now blocked bullets meant for Blake, half-turned. The face dragged through the sod and the eyes looked at Blake.

“Go on,” came a feeble voice. “Get—into—plane. I’m finished.”

“I’ll take you,” cried Blake.

“Go—I say,” Baklinov’s mouth wretched in a grin. “You bring me luck, lad. This is the first time I’ve found the bullet I was looking for.”

That was all. The man died between two breaths. Blake started to back up, and a slug ripped into his side and toppled him. Blindly he reached his feet and took four steps. He tried to run toward the Breguet, but he couldn’t make it. In the uproar of shots and shouts and the rattle of machine guns his final moan went unheard. He reached the wing edge and toppled. This time he couldn’t get up.

Yet he was not insensible, and could hear with that amazing clarity that sometimes sharpens the senses after a shock. Men’s feet pounded around him; arms tugged at his body and an awkward wrench made him cry out with pain, but the sound was only heard in his own brain.

“Fasten him to the *tourelle*,” cried someone. “We’ve got to go.”

Hands fumbled with him. Then there was no sound but the maddening roar of a high-speed motor. His body rocked for a while, and then rested, as if floating in water. The world went past his staring eyes in a blur.

The wind whipped at his exposed face, and such was the gale of it that it peeled back his eyelids and made him suffer. He jerked with all his strength and got his head turned, and it rested against another head and the crash pad. He saw that his own face was bloody from resting against Barry Dale’s.

Blake muttered, “He can’t die. They won’t let him die.”

The words existed only in his brain. He forced himself to move so that Dale could rest comfortably, while the wind whipped at his own exposed head.

After that, all was confusion. Bullets whipped like darting fireflies around him. He heard the chatter of the guns ahead of the front cockpit. Lights raked them with dazzling intensity. The plane rocked to the crack of high-explosive shells, and after that he saw black bats darting out of the night, to swoop with red eyes blinking and tracer fire spurting. Once a puffing flash of fire lit the air close to him, and it was a plane in a tornado of flame.

“Must be some fight,” he said in his own brain. “But they’ll get through. They’ve got to.”

Then the plane did a loop and shot up in what he thought was a renversement. It rolled out of it with such a jerk that his head hit the *tourelle* of the Lewis gun. At the same instant a fistful of slugs whipped the cockpit edge. Hair from the crash-pad stuffing blew in his face. The plane jerked, rose and fell. His head slammed again against the steel bar and knocked him cold.

ROGER ADDINGTON BLAKE, Third, opened his eyes and saw dazzling whiteness. He felt sick to his stomach, and he reeked outside and in with the nauseating odor of ether.

"They've been whittling on me," he muttered.

"They took enough iron out of us to start a steel factory," said a voice nearby.

Blake flattened his lips and managed to get his head turned. There, propped up in bed, with a peculiar brace and a set of pulleys on his leg, was Barry Dale—just as quiet, as impassive as ever.

"I kiew you'd come through," cried Blake impulsively.

"Hell, I'm too tough to die," smiled Dale. "We'll both be out of here in a fortnight. I took a slug near the knee cap, so they want to make sure my leg sets right."

They were silent for a while.

"I killed that swine Vandenberg," Blake remarked at last.

"Much obliged," said Dale. "I always took him with reservations. Now maybe Warburton will listen."

He was quiet for a space. Then he said, "Blake!"

"Yes, sir," rejoined Blake.

"Listen. A lot of Brass Hats have been swotting up and using their influence on your case. You'll be glad to know that the court-martial records are going to be destroyed, and you're going back to a front-line squadron."

"My uncle, I suppose," grated Blake.

"Maybe. I don't know. Anyway, you've got a new chance. You can have fame, and your girl, and everything that goes with it." Dale paused. "And I'm glad, too, kid, because you showed the stuff finally."

Blake thought about it for a while. His face didn't light up or bubble with joy.

"Do I have to go back?" he asked.

Dale's head jerked quickly to look at him, and he grunted in pain. "Hell, no! You don't have to do anything. Why?"

"I'd like to stay," said Blake simply. "I was an overgrown kid when I came, and I got my ears beaten down. I've found out things about men and—and, well, things, and I'd like to stay. May I, sir?"

"Cut out the sir," snapped Dale. He paused, and his face was more gentle than usual.

"Kid, if you want to stay, I'd like to have you. Ashton's dead—they crashed him on the way home. I'd like to have somebody who's been tested as second-in-command. If you really want to stay," he added, "the job's yours."

Blake groaned and swore at the effort, but he turned to the edge of the bed, and held out his hand. "Shake on it," he said.

Dale smiled and they gripped hands. "The Old Man doesn't pick 'em wrong, after all," said Dale contentedly, and Blake took the words as the accolade. He belonged.