



THE HAUNTED HELMET

by O.B. MYERS

*Death Handed Her Calling Card to Every Man Who Wore That Hun Helmet—
Then Came the Day When Shrieking Spandau Steel Told the Secret!*

TOD HAD BEEN WATCHING those Fokkers for fully fifteen minutes. They were slightly lower than his three thousand meter level; they kept edging over into allied territory, and there were only four of them to his six. Still he held off his attack. In numbers the patrol was unusually small; that very fact, perhaps,

added to his wariness. He had a sense of something strange this morning; a sheerly instinctive feeling that something out of the ordinary was in the air.

But now, suddenly, his caution changed swiftly to action. He had purposely swung back, and up into the west; the Fokkers had taken advantage of his distance to venture far across the lines, hoping, possibly, for

an opportunity to strike at a balloon. No other planes were in sight, with the exception of three specks on the northern horizon which, appearing a few moments earlier, now showed themselves to be Fokkers, headed straight for the small patrol.

Late starters, perhaps, delayed getting off the ground with the others, now hurrying to join the four. Tod jerked his stick back and forth sideways, to waggle his wings. The slight advantage in numbers which would now rest with the enemy was of little account; if he was going to attack at all, now was the time to strike. With deft precision he struck.

His Spad came about in an abrupt wing-over, the five others at his heels. With quickly opened throttle he rushed across the sky, on a course shrewdly calculated to intercept the retreat of the venturesome Fokkers. A dozen seconds at top speed were enough; before they saw his maneuver and grasped its significance, they were cut off. They started a turn; Tod sharpened his angle of dive, and hurtled upon them. His fingers were curled about his trigger-grips in readiness, his eyes narrowed behind his sights. During one long, breathless moment the distance shrank. Then Tod, alert for the initial advantage, saw that one Boche was not turning with the rest, but was still heading, alone, toward the south. In the twinkling of an eye he altered his course and charged upon this one with blazing guns.

The Fokker dodged; Tod wheeled and fired again. An Immelmann, a brief spiral, and a renversement followed each other in rapid succession. Hotly Tod clung to the pursuit, firing when the opportunity offered, but never relaxing his aggressiveness long enough to let the enemy deliver a burst in return. But the first fury of his rush was spent; the German had eluded his opening attack, and the struggle resolved itself into a duel of skill and endurance. Over and around each other the two planes whirled and roared, each a stone-wall on defense, each searching keenly for the chance to strike the fatal blow.

Like the veteran flight leader that he was, Tod was fighting with one eye on his own antagonist and the other watching the battle around him. He saw one Fokker lurch into a spin and disappear downward; then he saw that the three, coming full speed from the north, were plunging in to the aid of their comrades.

"Come on," he muttered. "Six to six—we'll get you all, now!"

One late arrival ran into a withering burst of steel, and turned aside. But another, deftly dodging a thrust

from above, lanced straight through the center of the melee toward Tod himself.

"Red nose, eh?" said Tod's alert brain. "Might be Von Staag himself. Come ahead—I'll take you both on."

THE duel of two became now a three-cornered affair. Tod's grip tightened on the stick as he made his calculations to a nicety. He could not afford the slightest miscalculation now; he had two pairs of belching Spandaus to dodge instead of one. Still in a spiral, he allowed his nose to sink lower and lower, broadening his turns until the Spad had gained maximum speed. Then, with a swift kick and a tug at the stick, he was shooting up in a powerful zoom. His wide open throttle gained him a hundred meters altitude in a leap; for a moment both his enemies were below him. It was then that he got the shock that turned his muscles to stone.

The second Fokker—the one with the red nose—was firing, but not at him. Its Spandaus was blasting a sizzling stream of tracer, straight for the cockpit of the other Boche! The first jerry, taken by surprise by Tod's sudden zoom, had made no effort to follow, but had curved off to the left instead of the right. This gave the red-nosed one a position full on his tail—and the red-nosed one was shooting to kill!

Automatically Tod's hand finished the maneuver he had started, and his own guns came into position to fire. But he did not press the triggers. His brain reeled with astonishment; he could only sit and stare. Was he seeing things, or was that German crazy? He had heard of men going punch-drunk after a long struggle, and not knowing friend from foe; but that red-nosed Fokker had only just joined the fight. Did he really mean to attack that other Fokker? Or was he merely making a momentary mistake in his excitement? There was never time to discover which was the truth.

Recovering from his stupefaction, Tod whirled into a dive. But before he could regain a position of attack, he saw the first Fokker jump, reel drunkenly, and then slip into a slow spin. The red-nosed one pulled up, knifed through a lightning turn, and was careening back into the center of the dog-fight. Tod sprang in pursuit, but a Spad sliced in between and only a quick swerve averted a collision. Then for an instant he was plunging through a cloud of oily black smoke, which stung his nostrils and brought tears to his eyes. Whether from Spad or Fokker he did not know, but its presence threw him momentarily off the track. When

he rushed out into clear air again, he could not find the red-nosed one anywhere.

He saw another Boche burst into flames and fall before the vomiting Vickers of a Spad; then, as if at an unseen signal, the remaining Germans abandoned the struggle. Diving all at the same moment, they spread fan-wise and fled for the north. A flare from Tod's Very pistol recalled the Spads from the futile chase.

As his comrades circled up and back to rejoin the formation, Tod counted; one, two, three, four—five. One missing. He peered downward, but saw only the spinning Fokker, far below now. As he watched, it lurched out of its sickening gyrations, appeared for a few moments to glide under control. But then it was spinning again, faster and faster. Suddenly the whirling speck vanished in a cloud of dirt and smoke, and there was nothing but a mangled blotch to mark its grave.

Tod glanced at his watch, and straightened out toward the south. The other four took up a serried V behind his flanks; for nearly a minute he led them steadily homeward. His eyes turned constantly downward, toward that blurred speck on the landscape that had once been a Fokker. The manner of its destruction aroused his most intense curiosity; he still could hardly believe what he had seen. Might there not be some explanation to be found among those splintered spars and crumpled wings? He saw that it lay on the edge of an oblong stretch of meadow; it would not be difficult to land and see.

A DIP of his right wing signalled to Flip Sanderson to take the lead; in the next moment he was spiralling down with throttled motor. The combat had taken place on the allied side of the lines; the angled fall of the Fokker had carried it still farther south. As Tod neared the earth he was nearly two miles behind the front, and there were no trenches or barbed wire, to bother him. He side-slipped in to a cautious landing, and jumped out, leaving his motor idling softly.

“Score one for you, aviator.”

Artillerymen from a nearby battery of seventy-fives stood about in an awed group; it was their sergeant who spoke.

“Let's see if the poor devil is dead,” was Tod's only reply.

With a doughboy helping him, he tore aside the folds of fabric and pried at the crushed framework of the cockpit. The pilot was huddled in a heap, face down, but long before they got him out on the grass Tod knew that he was touching a corpse. The jerry

must have been dead even before he began to fall; blood oozed from several holes in his chest where bullets had done their work. German bullets!

Tod removed the helmet, but glanced hastily away. The fellow's face was young and unscarred, but was already taking on the pasty, hollow look of death. With quick fingers, Tod searched the pockets. A few trinkets, some German coins, a watch, and a cardboard folder holding papers; nothing else. These last Tod examined closely. A card identifying the bearer as Rolfe Loder, *Unter-Leutnant*, native of Marienburg, Prussia; a printed sheet of instructions covering travel by railroad; and a copy of orders, officially stamped, assigning this same Rolfe Loder to Staffel 82, Fifth Army, as of August 17th, 1918.

August 17th—why, that was only yesterday! Then he was—or had been—a green recruit; killed, probably on his first patrol. And, unless Tod had been dreaming, shot down by a member of his own staffel! Tod shook his head in deepening bewilderment.

Now he noticed that the dead pilot's left hand was thrust inside his tunic, and tightly clenched on something there. He drew it out against the reaction of the fast-stiffening muscles and pried open the rigid fingers. They were closed on a metal disc, which the fellow wore tied by a string round his neck, under his clothing. Tod snapped the string, and held the coin in his palm.

It seemed to be not a coin in the sense of money, but some kind of token. It was of silver, six-sided, having stamped on one side a replica of an eagle with wings spread, and on the other, indistinctly, one letter and a number. Poor devil, he must have been superstitious, muttered Tod to himself. Must have instinctively, reached for his lucky piece at the impact of the first bullet, hoping that it might save him from death even then.

He rose to his feet, slipping the coin in his pocket. Then he bent over and picked up the helmet which he had previously removed. This now drew his interest, for it was not the regulation black leather at all, but might have been a home-made affair, though very well put together at that. It was lined with deep, rich fur, but the outer covering, instead of leather, was of some light but close-woven fabric, a delicate bluish-gray in color. The material had the gloss and smoothness of silk, yet seemed close-knit enough to be wind and water proof. The buckle on the chin-strap was almost shiny enough to be of silver; an unusual piece of equipment for a recruit to be wearing, thought Tod wonderingly. He was still examining it when the sergeant spoke.

“What shall we do with him, sir?”

“See that he gets a proper burial,” said Tod, folding the helmet under his arm. “His name and number is on the card; mark the grave in the usual way. The plane is smashed too badly to salvage anything; collect any souvenirs you want, and then set fire to it. That’s all.”

HE TURNED away toward his Spad, while the artillerymen began to delve eagerly in the wreckage. A few moments later he was taking off, and in another ten minutes side-slipped down toward the tarmac of the 59th Pursuit. A group awaited him in front of headquarters.

“That you, Bonder? You all right? Good. I thought for a while you might have been in trouble. We’ve heard from Hoyt already; a bullet cut his intake manifold in half, but he landed safely near Broux. That’s three of them down, and no casualties. Great stuff. I hear you knocked off one of the three yourself?”

“Well—I don’t know whether I did or not,” faltered Tod.

“You don’t know! What do you mean by that?”

Tod explained what he thought he had seen.

“Well, I’ll be damned!” exclaimed the major. “You mean to tell me that one German shot the other one down?”

“Well—if you asked me to swear to it, I’d hesitate,” admitted Tod. “I thought he did. But it was in the middle of a mix-up—perhaps I was excited—I don’t know. It sure seems impossible, doesn’t it? Anyway, I landed by the wreck, to see what I could find. The jerry was dead, and his identity card proved him a jerry, all right. Here’s his helmet, and a lucky piece he was wearing round his neck.”

Major Fisher and the rest examined the souvenirs.

“A lot of good his lucky coin did him!” commented the C.O. “But you can’t tell; it may bring you just the opposite kind. Bad for the boches, good for the Yanks!”

“Maybe,” agreed Tod. “I think I’ll keep it, anyway.”

“Say, that’s a swell helmet,” commented Jigger Martin, fingering the fabric admiringly. “Light as a feather, but I’ll bet it’s warm. Looks as if it would fit your head perfectly, Tod.”

“What!” cried Johnny Goff in horrorstricken tones. “You’re not going to wear it, Tod—a dead man’s helmet?”

“Apple-sauce!” intervened Flip Sanderson. “Are you still superstitious, Johnny? Grow up, will you; you’re in long pants now.”

Tod grinned. “Well, I’ve got a good one of my own already. Otherwise, I wouldn’t hesitate to use this one.”

“Good-night—not for me!” insisted Johnny, seriously. “I wouldn’t put on a dead man’s helmet for a million francs!”

Half of the group nodded in agreement, but the other half laughed openly, and Jigger Martin spoke up hastily.

“You’re not going to use it, Tod? Well, look here; how about letting me wear it, then? I’m not superstitious.”

“Go ahead,” responded Tod cheerfully. “I guess it’s the squadron’s souvenir, as much as it is mine.”

Jigger lost no time in trying the helmet on.

“Say, it’s almost the color of the sky,” remarked Flip, staring at him. “I’ll bet in the air, from the side, you can hardly see it. Make your plane look like a headless horseman, or something.”

“Well, the headless horseman got his man, didn’t he?” grinned Jigger, and the group broke up in a roar of laughter.

AT THREE that afternoon there was another B flight patrol; Jigger Martin wore the pale blue helmet. Before they were two-thirds of the way to the lines, Tod saw Jigger’s ship drop out of formation and spiral steeply down to land in a field, but it was not until his return, two hours later, that he discovered the cause;

“Martin phoned in from a dressing-station,” announced the major. “A water pipe burst in his motor. Not only conked the ship, but sprayed the cockpit with boiling water. He’s pretty badly scalded, I guess, from what the medico told me.”

They sent a truck up to haul back Jigger’s plane, and with it brought his Sidcot suit, Colt, goggles and the gray-blue helmet. Tod was standing with Flip Sanderson when they unloaded.

“Say, Jigger won’t be needing this for a while,” remarked Flip, casually. “What if I try it out?”

Tod regarded him searchingly. The stocky, light-haired pilot was the closest friend he had, and if there was such a thing as a jinx attached to wearing a dead German’s helmet, Flip was the last man in the world he would want to see downed by Fate.

“You’re not—that is, you don’t mind it being—you know—”

“Pooh, pooh,” scoffed Flip. “What d’you think I am, somebody’s grandmother? My old one is soaked with oil, and this one is a dandy.”

He slipped it on; it fitted him perfectly.

“Now, jerries! Come and get back your helmet, if you can!”

Almost as if his words had been heard across the intervening thirty miles of war-torn earth, the enemy, on the first patrol next morning, very nearly met his challenge. That was the time when B flight ran into five of Von Staag’s red-nosed Fokkers and took them on, only to have six more appear from nowhere and join the scrap. Two of the Spads went down in flames, and one more to a forced landing; only the grim courage and skill at fighting in pairs of Tod and Flip saved them from destruction.

They escaped finally from the inferno, with one other; but when Flip got back to the drome his Spad was literally in ribbons. So badly so, in fact, that it could not be patched up in time to fly the afternoon patrols, giving Flip a few hours’ much-needed rest.

It was late that evening that the C.O. entered the pilots’ barracks and spoke to them as a group. Quietly, but seriously.

“I have here a confidential memo from G.H.Q., that concerns us all,” he announced, in tones fraught with worry. “As you know, the enemy have been very quiet lately, not only in this sector but all along the front. Headquarters is convinced they have something up their sleeve; what, nobody knows. All the signs point to some surprise being sprung on us. Prisoners captured recently have almost without exception been boastful and confident in their attitude, though it’s been impossible to get anything definite out of them.

“Whether a sudden drive is to be launched, or some new engine of war, like the Paris gun, is to be uncovered, or whether they’re building a fleet of new-model ships or something, we don’t know. Intelligence agents have tried their best to discover the secret, but without success. Now all we can do is to be on the watch. I want you all to keep your eyes open. At the slightest sign of anything strange, any change, any movement of troops, or such, report it immediately. Even the merest suspicion may mean something, and be important. That’s all.”

He left them to a muttered, puzzled discussion.

“Can’t say as I’ve noticed anything different lately,” said Flip. “Except that the jerries seem to have taken an injection of fish-hooks, to make ‘em fight. Man, they sure tore into me this morning!”

“They’ll get you yet, if you stick to that helmet.”

“Bah!” Flip regarded the speaker contemptuously. “Another one of these heroes, who believes in ghosts and boogie-boos! Why should one helmet be worse

luck than another? Of course the jerries may recognize it, and remember it once belonged to them, and that may make ‘em sore on the guy who wears it now. But as for there being a jinx tied up in it—dishwater! What do you say, Tod?”

“Hope you’re right,” answered Tod quickly. “Though I must say those Fokkers were thick as flies around your tail this morning.”

“Well, they can’t scare me,” affirmed Flip. “I’m wearing that helmet until they shoot it off my head!”

TRUE to his word, Flip Sanderson donned the pale gray helmet before starting on the first patrol the following morning. But it was the last time he buckled a strap under his chin for a long, long while.

They met the Fokkers near Calciennes, and battled them all the way to the eastern end of the sector. They were five against five, but the boches fought like fiends. Tod swore Von Staag was among them.

“I’m sure that’s who it was. The Germans couldn’t have two who fly like that. He was a devil, and no mistake. He got on Flip’s tail, and it seemed that nothing I could do would drive him off. I finally put a burst right in his motor, before he quit. He went down with a dead stick, but just managed to make his side of the lines. Damn him!”

They lifted poor Flip from his riddled cockpit. How he had ever flown back to the field was a mystery. His left hand, where it rested on the throttle, had been shredded by bullets; there was a neat round hole in his shoulder; one leg was ripped wide open from hip to knee by an explosive bullet. His clothes were saturated with blood, but the indomitable spirit of the man was unbroken.

“Hi, Major,” he said weakly, grinning. “They didn’t get me.”

“So I see,” said the major, trying to smile, and beckoning to the medico to hurry up. “Take it easy now, son.” He bent over the stretcher, unbuttoned Flip’s tunic, and took off his helmet, very gently.

“Be careful of that, Major. I’ll be wanting it again—soon.”

The C.O. looked at Flip, then at the light gray head-piece in his hand. “You bet you will, Flip,” he lied. Then he looked away.

C FLIGHT was just about to leave the ground on the second patrol; their ships were idling on the dead-line, and the pilots stood about, watching.

“Come on, now, C flight,” said the major. “You’ll hear all about this later. Off the ground with you!”

"O.K., Major. Right away. Where the devil did I put my helmet, anyway?"

That was Johnny Goff's voice; Flip turned his head.

"Here you are, Johnny. Use this one."

Johnny recoiled as if at the sight of a snake.

"No, no! Not that! I want my own—"

"Don't be a fool, Johnny. Don't you see? It carries good luck with it, not bad. It brought me back alive, didn't it? Wearing my own, maybe I wouldn't be here. Try it, Johnny . . ."

Johnny stiffened queerly. Perhaps a sudden belief in Flip's words seized him, or perhaps he only decided that his superstitious fears were groundless, and must be conquered. With a jerky gesture he snatched the helmet from the C.O.'s hand and pulled it on.

"Maybe you're right . . . Here goes."

Without a backward glance he strode to his cockpit. Thirty seconds later the Spads of C flight were roaring off the ground, while the medico spread his gleaming tools and went to work on Flip.

Nearly two hours had passed, and Tod was fidgeting in front of headquarters. He had seen Flip into the ambulance which was to carry him to base hospital, and felt now as if the bottom had dropped out of his life. Eventually, the doctor had promised, Flip would recover; but for the time being Tod was inconsolable.

Was it his fault, for letting his buddy wear that helmet? Did it really carry a curse, because its original owner had been murdered by one of his own comrades? Did the Germans actually concentrate their most vicious attack on the Spad in which they saw that pale blue head-piece, or did it only seem that way? The whole affair was a mystery, reeking of the supernatural.

C flight appeared, straggling in from the north. One by one the Spads circled, dipped, and rolled their wheels. Not six—five. Tod's throat tightened, and he knew even before his eyes checked up on the numbers. Johnny Goff was not there. The major emerged from the door, and crossed the tarmac hastily. Tod followed in silence. He saw that the last pilot to land carried something in his hand.

"They got Johnny, sir," he reported, in shaking tones. "Near Faulette. They came two miles over to jump us, nine of them. We held them even for a bit, and sent one down. But they were too many; three of them ganged Johnny. He didn't have a chance. Then some French Nieuports showed up, and then the jerries beat it."

"What's that you've got there?"

"Afterward I landed by Johnny's ship, to make sure.

Drilled through and through. I brought his things. Here's his papers, his money and watch . . . And his—helmet."

Tod felt a cold prickling in his scalp. The major took the helmet, holding it gingerly away from him as if it were dangerous.

"I'll keep this," he said. He went inside at once.

The following afternoon Tod's motor refused to start. After holding up the patrol five minutes, the major sent the others off without him, and the mechanics proceeded to change the carburetor. Half an hour later the job was done, and the motor running smoothly against the chocks, but the C.O. restrained him.

"No use trying to find them now, Bonder. Take a little time off; you need it. Plenty more patrols coming."

Tod wandered down to the barracks and chucked helmet and goggles on his bunk. But the place was deserted, everyone being out on patrol, and the very sight of Flip's trunk, packed and shut, drove him back to the field. As he strolled past headquarters he heard the insistent jangle of a telephone; and a moment later the C.O.'s shout.

"Bonder! Quick—where are you, Bonder?"

Tod sprang through the door, to meet the major just inside.

"A boche heading for Balloon 68, at Sachevin! Your ship's ready—hustle out there. Where's your helmet?"

"Down in the barracks, sir. But I'll get—"

The major wrung his hands. "No, damn it—there's no time to lose! He's over the lines already. Haven't we got one here—"

Tod's darting glance fell on something which hung from a peg, high on the wall behind the C.O.'s desk. He had it in his hand before he realized what it was. Light blue fabric, fur lining, shiny buckle—

"Wait a minute!" cried the major. He seemed torn between two conflicting emotions. "You're going to wear that? There have been two men killed in that helmet already. I wouldn't ask you—"

But Tod was already drawing it on. "What the hell," he muttered. If by some miracle it led him to the same devils who had gotten Flip, he'd show them a thing or two. Haunted, my eye!

Plunging through the door, the major was on his heels.

"Sachevin—68!" he repeated. "If he's gone, or you can't find him, come back. Don't cross the lines!"

Tod's reply was a shrug of the shoulders. As he

vaulted to the cockpit the mechanic sprang to the prop. The motor, run for test hardly five minutes before, was warm; Tod waved at the man who held the chockropes as soon as the exhausts bellowed. At his gentle pull on the throttle the plane began to roll; in another moment he lifted the wheels from the ground and chandelled over the far trees. He careened back over the hangars with the drone of an angry wasp.

THE checkered country fled backwards beneath him; he fastened his eyes to a vague splotch on the horizon which his sense of direction told him was Sachevin. For the first few minutes he tried, but without success, to forget the helmet which he now wore for the first time. It was, as Jigger Martin had once remarked, a dandy helmet, light as a feather in weight, and yet warm and close-fitting. Did it really carry in its very seams the curse of evil, the fatal taint of death, irrevocably attached to it by the dread fate of its first owner? A cold shiver ran down his spine, and his hand wavered. Then suddenly, without effort, he forgot it entirely.

For straight ahead through his center section he saw a flash of crimson flame, swallowed up at once in a cloud of billowing smoke. The jerry had gotten there first—the balloon was down! In the next instant his eye caught a speck, which moved rapidly to the left. That was the German and he was heading west, evidently to carry his attack to the next balloon, over at Suarges. But Tod guessed his intentions, and with a flick of the wrist changed his own course.

At breakneck speed the two planes approached each other at an angle. Did the jerry see him? Probably not. The Fokker, which now was close enough for him to see its markings, made no attempt to swerve. One of the red-noses, eh? Tod snarled like an animal, till his lips drew back to expose his teeth. Those were the devils who had gotten Flip, only yesterday. Well, today one of them would pay the price.

His fingers tightened upon the stick. His eye, glinting dangerously, watched the distance shrink. His moment came. A jerk, a kick, and the Spad came up and over. Sliding off its back, it roared full upon the tail of the German plane. Yet not a sign did the jerry give to betray that he knew his peril, until Tod's Vickers spat an angry burst which flayed ribbons from the other's rudder. Then, with a movement like lightning, the Fokker banked—toward the south!

Tod, immune by now to all surprises, followed like a hawk. Tighter wheeled the Fokker; tighter Tod

pulled his vertical turn. He fired again, and stopped; then cut loose another blast of hissing tracers, as his ring sight caught up for an instant with a blackcrossed empennage. His bullets ripped canvas, but touched no vital spot; the Boche was, by a supreme effort, keeping just out of reach. But not for long, grated Tod between his teeth. He was grimly resolved to get that jerry and return alive, if only to prove that the helmet—

A chill of horror gripped him. A crescendo crackling broke upon his amazed ears, a hammering as of a thousand drums. A shadow flicked between him and the sun—and another, and another. Whitish streaks were lacing the air on all sides, creeping nearer and nearer to the cockpit in which he crouched. The fumes of tracer smoke stung his nostrils, though his own guns were at the moment silent. In one terrible instant he saw death staring him in the face. His scalp crawled, and a bitter curse croaked in his throat.

So intent had he been on attacking that lone balloon-straffer, that he had never once looked up. Up above, where lurked the protecting patrol, six or eight in number, alert, ready. Now they were upon him, diving from overhead, circling his flanks, driving him ever lower and lower, relentlessly, viciously. Whichever way he turned, he met a sizzling blast of steel. The Spandaus hemmed him in, sewing him in, sewing him up in his own shroud with long, slender threads of tracer smoke. He was one against many—too many; and he was fighting a lost cause.

WITH frantic fingers he threw his ship through one mad maneuver after another. Hungrily the tracers pursued him. Whether he banked, zoomed, dove, or careened dizzily downward on his back, it made no difference. Never a moment's respite did they allow him. He was being driven closer and closer to the ground with every passing second, and farther and farther toward the unfriendly north.

His own guns were pounding harshly, almost without a pause. But he might as well have saved the bullets. It was impossible for him to take a position on one enemy's tail without exposing himself to the concentrated fire of all the rest. His only chance lay in defensive tactics, and the grim determination of the foes left him no loop-hole.

Ping! With a sharp, metallic sound a wire parted somewhere. His left aileron no longer moved when he swung the stick; after that he turned only to the right. *R-r-rip!* A blast of steel cut a wide swath the length of his fuselage. The slip-stream, getting under

the edges of the fabric, tore it wider still. He could almost feel his speed decrease, as if he were suddenly flying through molasses instead of air. A red-nosed Fokker lunged close to his right elbow, guns spitting venomously. His instrument board vanished in a spray of splinters. Before he could shift his controls another enemy struck from the left. Came a stab of pain in his calf; his muscles stiffened convulsively. Damn you! He wrenched his sagging plane into a turn.

There was a Fokker ahead of him. He charged, but the last of his ammunition was running through the belts. His guns spat once, briefly—and stopped. But the German's reply was long and deadly. Tracers poured at him in a vicious stream, to slam into the motor behind which he sat. An eerie screech, a cough; a loose-jointed racket. Then his exhausts were vomiting black smoke, and his prop was spinning lazily, like a child's windmill in a September breeze.

The horizon reeled about him as his shattered Spad lurched into a spin. His stomach seemed to be trying to get out of his mouth. He forced it back, and by a tremendous effort of will caught himself. He thrust the controls into neutral; with a shudder the ship stopped spinning, to stagger drunkenly downward.

The hammering guns followed him still; more tracers clawed at his cockpit. He tried to turn, but only spun again; his controls were well-nigh useless. With a desperate tug he brought her out; the pain ran up his leg like a tongue of fire.

He slammed the switches off, and stared overside. The earth was almost under his wheels; his altitude had vanished. There was neither time nor opportunity to search for a landing-spot. He was already on the verge of a crash. Instinctively he drew the stick into his lap; a staccato pounding came from behind. His fingers felt the twitch as the elevator wires parted, and he choked on a groan. The Spad, leveling out for an instant, nosed over again. His frenzied yank at the stick availed him nothing. The ground rushed up. He struck with a crash.

With his head still reeling and his muscles numb, he was instinctively clawing at the wreckage which imprisoned him. Blindly he tore a path through scrambled wires and crumpled canvas; the hiss of gasoline pouring over hot metal urged him on. He half fell to the hard ground, to hear a crescendo roar punctuated by the cold chatter of a machine gun.

HIS glance turned upward; a Fokker zoomed overhead, its guns spitting long, looping threads of

gray. Damn them—couldn't they even let a man alone after he was down! A surge of impotent wrath swept over him; he crouched on his bloody knee, shaking his fist at the sky. But in the next moment another sound stabbed his senses.

This was a machine gun, too, but with a hollow, throaty throb which told that it fired from on the ground. The thrum of its missiles was like a plucked guitar string close to his ear; instinctively he ducked, turning his head. He saw that he was in the middle of a bleak expanse of churned earth and tangled barbed wire; not a tree, nor a blade of grass, nor a sign of human occupation to be seen. But near him gaped a ragged crater; with an awkward leap he flung himself into it.

Sprawled in mud and water at the bottom of the hole, he lay gasping, while the pain in his leg throbbed mercilessly. His situation was plain to him; he was marooned in the middle of no-man's-land, where neither friend nor foe could reach him. Machine guns and rifles were whanging away from both sides now; to desert his hole for the open meant certain death. The enemy knew where he lay hidden; their Maxims were doubtless filling the air above his head with a curtain of bullets. There was nothing to do but wait.

After half an hour the firing subsided somewhat. Perhaps their vigilance had relaxed. It would be easy to find out. At the bottom of the hole lay a broken rifle; he picked it up, and on the end of the barrel hung his helmet. Then he slowly pushed it up over the edge of the shell-hole. Instantly the din redoubled. That blue headpiece seemed to draw the bullets as a magnet draws iron. He could see them flicking at the fabric, chewing it to pieces. With a shudder he drew it back, and crouched lower.

Not a chance in daylight. They were watching that spot like hawks. He'd have to wait till dark. But would he be able to hold out? His leg was stiffening rapidly; with every movement it became more difficult to handle. And the blood kept oozing out through his puttee. He was getting weaker by the minute. What if he fainted before dark and the doughboys couldn't find him? His teeth gritted desperately. Let's see; the sun set at about eight. He looked at his watch. Four-fifteen. God—four hours to wait. He gripped the torn gray helmet in his fingers, stared at it resentfully.

ON THE tarmac in front of headquarters, Major Fisher looked at his watch. Four-fifteen. He shook his head doubtfully.

“More than half an hour since the balloon observers reported seeing him go down,” he said to the adjutant. “If he landed on this side, we should have had a phone call by now.”

He turned and entered headquarters. A little later C flight came in and landed; later still B flight returned. Had they seen anything of Tod Bonder’s plane? No, nothing. They had patrolled the eastern end of the sector, following his orders. It looked bad.

The sun went down in a blood-red blaze; darkness descended on the field. At the major’s orders, his meal was brought up to his office. He sat at his desk to eat, his hand within a foot of the telephone instrument. It did not ring.

Nine o’clock, ten o’clock . . . eleven o’clock. That cursed helmet! He had never been superstitious before. But there was something more than coincidence to this. Its first wearer murdered by his own companions. Its second scalded in a forced landing. The next shot to pieces in combat. The next killed outright. And now the last, driven down, undoubtedly to his death. Oh, why hadn’t he seen the handwriting on the wall, and burned it before it was too late! He’d rather see a dozen balloons go down than lose a man like Tod Bonder.

For the hundredth time he looked at his watch. He groaned softly. It was no use waiting any longer. Hopeless. Might as well go to bed, and tomorrow send in a request for a replacement. He rose wearily, and reached out a hand for the candle. His arm stiffened. A drone on the distant road grew to a roar, and ceased suddenly in a grinding clatter, just outside the door. A motorcycle!

He sprang for the door, flung it open. Two figures staggered in, one supporting the other from behind. The first was plastered with mud, wore a leather coat but no head-gear; from the knee down his clothing had been hacked away and replaced with bandages, now stiff with blood. But his face, gaunt, smeared, ghastly—it was Tod Bonder!

“Good God! You! It’s impossible—where in hell—”

“All right, Major.” Tod slumped into a chair. For a moment he was too weak to move. Then, “Look at this!”

He flung something to the desk. The major’s eyes widened. It was the blue helmet. Torn to shreds by bullets, but still unmistakable.

“That! . . . Damn that thing. Give it to me; I’ll—”

“No, no!” cried Tod anxiously. “Here, where it’s ripped—look!”

The major snapped it up, and looked where Tod was pointing. Where the lining had been torn loose from the fabric, in front, he now saw a kind of label, of silk, sewn into place.

“Read it!” commanded Tod. The major obeyed.

“This helmet presented, August 12th, 1918, to the Herr Kapitan Wolfgang von Staag, with the compliments of its inventor and maker, Gustave Volk. Manufactured of Flieg-fabrik, the new wing-fabric material, latest example of German skill and perseverance; lighter, stronger, waterproof, needing neither dope nor varnish. May it carry the Fatherland to victory in the skies!”

THE C.O.’s hand dropped; he gazed at Tod in stupefaction. “New wing-fabric material . . . But—I don’t understand.” He raised the object in his hand, to stare at it stupidly. “How did this—I can’t dope it out . . . It could be analyzed,” he muttered.

“Listen,” said Tod eagerly. “I figured it all out, while I lay in that shell-hole. After the bullets ripped it open, and I found the label. What if an American intelligence agent, working in Germany, found out that the boches were bringing out a new wing covering, better than anything yet discovered? What if he heard about a sample being made into a helmet, and presented to Von Staag, a leading ace? He’d try to steal it, wouldn’t he? And bring it across the lines?”

“Forged orders would get him into Von Staag’s squadron; then, after he grabbed the helmet, he would join the first patrol and watch for his chance to leave them and land. But what if, after he left the ground, they discovered the theft, and suspected his motive? They’d chase after him, and shoot him down if they could, wouldn’t they? And as long as that helmet was still in existence, they would make every effort to destroy it, and its wearer lest we discover what it was made of. Right?”

The major was following every word, with eyes alight.

“You mean that the German you saw shot down—what was his name, Loder?—wasn’t a German at all, but a Yank agent? By God, maybe . . . But our intelligence operatives must carry some identification—”

“Could this be it?” interrupted Tod. He drew from his pocket and tossed onto the desk a six-sided coin of silver.

“By Jove, I’d forgotten that! Perhaps, I don’t know. The intelligence doesn’t broadcast their means of

identification, even in their own army. But I'll find out." His hand reached for the phone.

"Give me underground, Souilly—and make it fast." There was a pause, while the phone clicked and hummed. Both Tod and the major fidgeted impatiently, but neither spoke.

"Colonel Meachin? This is Major Fisher, at the 59th Pursuit. Maybe I'm crazy, Colonel, but tell me if this means anything. I'm looking at a six-sided coin, or pocket-piece, made of silver. On one side is something that looks like a three-winged eagle; on the other simply the letters, M-41. It came from—"

"Yes, it does," came the reply sharp, anxious. "Give him any assistance he needs, and see that he reaches me quickly."

"I'm sorry, sir. The man who carried this is dead." A muffled ejaculation of disappointment could be heard over the wire. "But we have something here that he gave his life to bring across the lines, a week ago. I think you'd better come and look at it, sir."