



SYNTHETIC ACE

by WILLIAM E. BARRETT

*Memphis Mason never had a chance to throw Vickers lead or cross his wings with the black cross
—yet he was an Ace with five confirmed victories.*

MEMPHIS' MASON is a synthetic ace, probably the only one of his kind in existence. Accidental aces there were aplenty in that big he war, but there was nothing accidental about Memphis

Mason's accomplishment. It was planned with an attention to detail that would do credit to a brigadier and it was attested by five of the finest fighters in the R.A.F.

Those signatures are at the root of Mason's secret

sorrow to-day. At the foot of a square sheet of note-paper they bear flourishing witness to the fact that the signers witnessed the bringing down of five German planes by one Memphis Mason. Not one of those signers would have lied for anyone. They were officers and gentlemen and they saw what they said they saw. Yet, strangely enough, Memphis Mason never reached France.

Therein lies a tale; one of the oddest tales to come out of the war and one that has never been told until this telling.

Memphis Mason was a flyer and a corking good flyer when most of the famous aces of the war were still wearing silly Eton hats and chirping their "cheerios" across the cricket grounds. He was one of those hardy souls who learned to fly with Curtiss and it made no difference to him whether the prop was in front of him or in back of him. He had air feel.

For that reason he had a silly idea that he would be sent right to the Front if he joined up when the war was young. He might have at that, if he had never met Colonel Goddard Gade.

The colonel was one of those men who are born to wear uniforms while other men fight wars. A cheerful, bluff and disarming goldbricker, Colonel Goddard Gade was a sure bet for a soft job. He had not been responsible for the war and he disclaimed all responsibility for its effects. The blinkin' patriots and the blasted civilians could flock to France if they would, but the colonel preferred London.

"Nobody to keep the country sate and the old traditions alive if the good men go ballet hunting," he said cheerfully. "And what of the ladies, God bless 'em?"

So the colonel learned to fly after a fashion, got a new set of uniforms and had himself put in charge of the training field at Ballynod. A nice, berth where he could have his hot rum and his hot ladies and his cold feet in comfort.

To this spot came Mason. With Long Island only a few weeks behind him and the flat vowels and clipped consonants of the South in his speech, he reported for training on ships that he could have flown two years before the war. A red-cheeked, eager youth with long legs and an embarrassed smile, he would have passed for just another of many recruits if it had not been for his own blunder. In his youthful simplicity, he believed that he would get ahead faster by making a full report of his previous experience.

Within an hour, Colonel Gade had heard of him.

The official arm stopped half way to the spreading mustache and the hand of destiny set a spot of rum back on the table top.

"Been flying three years? The hell you say! Send him in to me at once." Colonel Gade relaxed. Fate had been kind, too kind. The only cloud on his horizon seemed about to be dispelled. If he could have a flyer now, a real flyer, on his staff, that triple-distilled rule about the C.O. getting in flying time would not be so bad. Thus far he had not met a man in the whole half baked crew he had that he'd trust at the stick as far as he'd trust himself. And he didn't place many bets on his own ability when his cautious eye roamed over the battered Avros and cumbersome B.E.s that were Ballynod's equipment.

WITH his face shining eagerly despite his effort to be mature and grave, Memphis Mason presented himself. Colonel Gade's eyes measured him speculatively.

"I understand, young man, that you are a flyer of experience?"

"Yes, sir."

"This information you filed is approximately accurate, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir. Absolutely accurate."

The colonel rose. "Then I congratulate you, my boy. You've got yourself a nice billet here if you can—er, live up to your claims. We need men of skill and experience. Even our so-called instructors, confidentially, you understand, are more than a bit thick and—er, ratty—on this flying business. You will be invaluable."

Mason's face changed. He swallowed convulsively. "But, sir, I want to fight, to go to France. I thought that my flying—"

"Tut, tut, lad. Nonsense. At the present time, France is in terrible shape. People rushing hither and yon, blowing up this and that and raising a terrible row. Nothing there for a young man. Some fool would send you up and forget to order you down. While here—"

Mason was new to the army and the goodness of colonels was not yet in his creed. He raised his voice protestingly.

"But I had a flying field job in the States. I came here to get in the war. I—"

The colonel smiled tolerantly. "I know. I know. Good you did. You'll learn, my boy, you'll learn. Show me you can really fly and I'll have you a commission in a jiffy. Those things can be done. Wings to wear, lad,

and a uniform that will turn the head of any pretty baggage from here to Dover. Nothing like it in France at all.”

“But, sir, I—”

“Perfectly all right. I know you’re grateful. See you later, Mason. I must watch you fly. Trot along now, lad, and remember that I’ll always have your interests at heart.”

That started it. From then on, Mason flew in a general way for the R.F.C. but in a more particular way for Colonel Gade. With Mason’s aid, the colonel became big hell on wheels as a flyer and earned many a tribute for the way he put morale into the cadets who trained at Ballynod.

Morale was his strong point. Every rime a cadet flew the wings off of something or did a spin into the ground, Colonel Goddard Gade was right out to fly the morale back. If he took a dual control ship and took Memphis Mason along, there was nothing strange about that. He liked Mason, you see, and felt toward him as does a father.

Only two other things did Mason do. He spent hour after hour taking students up in the air and allowing them to risk his life for him—and he wrote letters home to Betty Woods.

Those letters were hard to write, especially in the face of the fact that Betty of the brown eyes had her heart set on his becoming an ace. His ingenuity was hard put to it for new explanations of the long delay. No woman could be expected to understand a situation in which a man who wanted war couldn’t have any, since the papers were full of tales about men who didn’t want war having to take it.

Then the name of Kirby Corbin kept coming into the letters from home and that was tough. He took up flying and that was tougher. He decided to join the war and that was horrible.

MEMPHIS had visions of that utter ass, Corbin, coming over and getting sent to Oxford or some place where they sent them out fast, getting and becoming an ace. He groaned and went back at the colonel with his jaw set and his eyes hard.

The colonel was annoyed. Sending Memphis Mason to France would be one of the most foolish things he had ever done, if he did it. He had not an idea in the world of doing it. He was hell on morale; morale, like charity, began at home. He shuddered to think of where his morale would be without Mason’s broad shoulders in the front cockpit. His face froze.

“Mason, you are ungrateful. After all I have done for you, you still keep ding-donging away about France. Dammit all. It’s just as if I didn’t have a million things to bother me without having to worry about people wanting to go to France.”

“But, sir, it’s important. I—”

“Enough. I had you made a first lieutenant when you don’t know enough to drill a bunch of Welshmen in a shovel drill. I’ve given you the run of the field and the best of the ships and—— No. I won’t hear another word. I’m busy and I don’t want to hear about the matter again.”

For a second, Mason had a wild idea that it would do some good to stay and fight it out. For one off moment, he even considered telling the colonel about Betty Woods. That hunch died in the burning as he recalled the colonel’s philosophy on the fair sex. It would be sacrilege even to have the name of the fair Betty on those ribald lips.

“Well, what are you waiting for? Clear out, I say. I’m busy—and, oh, yes, Mason. Wait a minute, will you?”

As though the matter of France had never been discussed, Colonel Gade leaned forward and tapped his desk top with a long pencil.

“Sir Oliver Glendennis Aboone, Brigadier General Tennyson DeMett and Major Abingale Darce of the embassy staff will be here for a while this afternoon. Rather a good hunch for us to be aloft a bit. Impresses a civilian, y’know. Hustle and bustle and going hither and yon in the clouds. Things doing and whatnot. Hold yourself in readiness. I’ll let you know.”

Mason nodded and went out. While he was waiting, he wrote a long letter to Miss Betty Woods in which he explained carefully that he was waiting eagerly to go to France but that there wasn’t a flying ship in all England that wasn’t used up. Factories working night and day and all that. He hoped that it sounded reasonable and that Kirby Corbin would break a leg and that there wasn’t too much rot about flying in the American papers.

At two fifteen, the morale of Ballynod got another treatment. Complete with two honorary medals and shined up like a gold sovereign, Major Goddard Gade hoisted his bulky person into the rear cockpit of a sober-looking Avro trainer and snorted like a bull. Colonel Gade did a lot of snorting. It distracted attention usually from his shortage of breath.

Quietly and with the air of a young man who is being butchered to make a fatted calf, Memphis Mason slid behind the stick in the front office. The Avro

coughed apologetically, swallowed the gas, roared and grabbed air. They were off.

For a while, Memphis kept the controls; then he waggled them as a signal and surrendered them to his superior. Free of the actual flying job, he relaxed and tried to imagine that this was France and that the fat, chubby, middle-class English-looking clouds held dangerous Germans. Ugh.

THE plane lurched and his heart leaped. Archy fire. He sat straight with a start. Day dreaming too much. That shudder in the plane was the major's idea of a bank. It wasn't concussion or anything else. Mason relaxed with a sigh.

He was still relaxed when the next shudder took place, followed immediately by a convulsion. Too late did he wake to the fact that this was more than official flying. His straining eyes ran down the nose of the plane to where the prop should be and the prop was missing. His hand leaped frantically to the switch and then recoiled. Too slow. Already, the engine had jarred loose from the vibration. Mason's lean length uncoiled and he prayed.

With his whole soul, he prayed to the gods of his fathers to give Colonel Gade one modicum of flying instinct.

"Make him what he isn't, Lord. Just for a little while," he said softly.

His body was already out on the nose of the ship; the nose that was lifting rapidly to the stalling point as the tail weight dragged it. Far out into the bulkhead, he thrust his body, gripping on with teeth, toenails and imagination to as precarious a hold as any man ever took.

Behind him, Colonel Goddard Gade, the bony fingers of death already fixing themselves on his throat, suddenly found flying lore he didn't know he had. With a flash of comprehension strange to him, he divined the fact that this chap was substituting his weight for the weight of the missing engine and that it was up to him to keep level keel and land the pesky thing somehow.

With the sweat pouring from every inch of his body and his eyes popping from his head, Colonel Gade flew. He flew as he had never flown before and as he was never destined to fly again. Like a man on the tight rope, he suddenly found balance and hung to it, playing his controls and shivering at the long look down his glide to the ultimate landing.

He didn't try to bank although the field lay to

the right of him. The goose-flesh started out at the thought of a bank with that delicately poised thing beneath him and an easily lost man on the nose.

He just let her go and as they settled, he stared fascinated at the big yellow barn ahead of him and the rolling field beyond and the trees.

A big important-looking car was speeding out from the airdrome behind him, under him. He took no heed. That barn shouldn't be there. If he lived through this he'd have the blasted thing condemned. The muscles in his arms ached, but he hung to the stick with both hands. They were going to clear the ruddy barn, but—

With a groan, he saw the meadow pass beneath him and the trees loomed. Then they hit.

Like a rabbit darting from the nearest hole, the Avro picked its spot. Smack through the alley between two stately trees, it went, a weary ship that sought rest. No amputation in a surgery was ever neater.

With a crack like the crack of doom, the two wings sheared off clean and the fuselage skidded along in the nude. Memphis Mason felt himself arching through the air in a death defying dive and then he was sitting with his back to a tree with his eyes staring back at the Avro; a sadly punished Avro which was useful now only as a thing in which a colonel might sit.

Colonel Gade was sitting in it. He was sitting there in hot debate with the pessimistic side of his nature which was insisting that he was dead and that the fellow against the tree was a red-faced devil and not a Yank flyer with a bloody nose.

COLONEL GADE was still there when the horribly official car roared up and the cream of British diplomatic talent piled out in unseemly haste, Brigadier General Tennyson DeMett in the lead.

At that moment, inspiration descended upon Memphis Mason and he forsook the tree. With a muffled groan, he sprang to his feet and saluted the startled general, stepping in ahead of him and repeating the salute for the benefit of the still dazed colonel.

"Colonel Gade, sir. Lieutenant Mason wishes to extend his thanks to you for saving his life."

It was an all wrong thing to do from the standpoint of army etiquette, but it was top hole politics. Colonel Gade snorted and shook himself, suddenly aware that he was handicapped in a theatrical sense by his wrecked and disreputable surroundings. Gingerly he struggled from the cockpit and Memphis Mason

created a distraction. Wheeling toward the still gaping brigadier and the de luxe civilians behind him, Mason distributed another salute.

"Finest flying I ever saw," he said. "We lost our prop at three thousand and not a man in a thousand could have landed that ship. The colonel brought it down and—"

"Hmph, hmph. Nothing at all. Nothing at all." Colonel Gade was on his feet now and better able to cope with things. "A man who commands flyers and cannot out-fly them is a gross pretender in my estimation. But enough. I must apologize for—"

With great detail, the colonel apologized for everything; for flying and losing his prop and for landing and for hitting the trees and for the poor appearance of the plane and for his own lack of that freshness and smartness associated with commanding officers. Devoutly he assured his guests that had he expected them so soon, the thing would not have happened to mar their visit.

Then, for the rest of the day, just by way of showing that he considered the flying feat nothing at all, he spoke little of anything else.

Memphis Mason spat two teeth, washed the blood off his face, used a yard of court plaster and two yards of gauze—and wrote a letter to Betty Woods.

Next morning he went into the colonel's sanctum with a happy heart. His eyes gleamed and the light of anticipation was in his face. Colonel Gade waved him to a chair and sent an orderly for a couple of brandies.

"I must, er, thank you for your presence of mind yesterday." The colonel cleared his throat. "A nervy thing, that, getting out in front. Very. Took a good man. Proved my faith in you justified." He leaned forward. "Quite the right thing, too, to be so prompt in thanking me for saving your life. Due, of course, but a duller man would have waited. As it was, it fixed responsibility for the flying. Being a modest man, I—er—of course, couldn't mention it myself. I—"

Mason nodded. "I understand," he said. "I wanted your guests to know that you did one of the finest flying jobs of the war and—"

"Right." Colonel Gade beamed. "I'm grateful for the thought and I called you in here to thank you."

MASON'S heart leaped. Gratitude was what he wanted. The colonel had always played up the fact that Mason was in his debt for favors every time that he mentioned France. This altered things; rather squared the debt. He had foreseen that. His lips parted, but the colonel's voice went right through his speech.

"You are quick witted and loyal to your officers and that is the kind of young man who goes ahead in the army. You have been anxious to leave here and I—"

Mason half started from his chair. Happy day! It was to be France at last. The voice flowed on.

"They are transferring me to a more important post. I am to be in charge of tests and equipment at the Blankwith Aviation Works and—"

The ruddy face was creased by the well known fatherly smile. "I am taking you with me. Such faithful service should be rewarded."

The rest was a blur until Mason had read Betty's latest letter for the third time back in his quarters. Then shock cleared the fog. Kirby Corbin was in France and had already shot down two German planes. Mason got up and, without the formality of a pass, took his heartbroken and groggy way to town.

He was warming up to his third drink and wondering what would happen if he stole a plane and flew to France on his own when he was slapped on the shoulder. He looked up belligerently.

Looking like the Prince of Wales in his better photographs, Norry Cline was beaming down on him; Norry, who had been one of his dumbest students in the long ago. Across the manly chest was England's salute to a brave pilot, the D.S.O. Mason gulped.

Nor did he cease gulping. It was too horrible. Cline had eleven planes. Not only that, but Thimbub, a perfect sap of a man, had eight. Tarrance had nine and Montgomery was on his way to being a new idol for the air force—twenty-three already. Larry Majors, who had been out only three weeks, had four.

Cline, Thimbub, Tarrance, Montgomery and Majors! Five raw, green, stupid, clumsy and heavy-footed students that he had taught to fly, aces all. Kirby Corbin over there with a lot of Germans and a lot of war ahead of him.

Mason found life too hard to be true and proceeded to take a strong man's antidote for trouble. He got roaring, outrageously, gloriously drunk.

Next morning he sobbed because some damned, fool had taken care of him and kept him from creating a scandal.

After that life became a network of lies. He went up to the Blankwith works and he flew the colonel. He wrote long letters to Betty and sent them to France to be mailed. He lied and he lied and he prayed desperately for a break that would make the lies come true. And in the meantime, he fought a grimmer war than his ace friends.

His job was testing new designs and he found that engineers could think of more ways of killing a flyer than German flyers could. It aged him.

Then Blankwith brought out a new design, and he alone of all flying men understood the thing and how to keep it in the air and make it act like the ship it was. Like a man clutching at the last hold of life, he grabbed hold of that model and made it his.

Not even the colonel could block him now and he was given still another promotion. As Captain Mason, he organized a squadron to fly the new model over and introduce it at the Front. His it was to train and organize with the promise that he would be squadron commander and that he would carry the rank of acting-major. Virtue, at last, brought its own reward.

WITH unsparing energy Mason drove the men and himself until no finer group took the sky anywhere. He got his orders and his heart flip-flopped. Soon now, any day, he would be freed from the deceit of those letters written in England and mailed in France. He would be there himself and he would make his fiction truth. He would battle to acehood faster than any man ever did and then—ah then, there was Betty.

The day dawned and a mysterious message came. They were being held. Something in the wind. He heard dread rumors and his face blanched. He drank and hoped and drank some more. Waiting was deadly sport.

On November 11, they signed the armistice and he was still in England. That was the end of everything.

For more days than he ever liked to remember, Memphis Mason wallowed in alcohol. He lived in a high haze and he did his utmost to drown his soul and his memories and everything else in the stuff that came from bottles; then he came out of it.

He came out of it with the realization that Betty was gone to him. She could forgive his not being an ace, but never those lying letters that claimed a glory that wasn't his.

Flying men gathered in London and he met them all; boys he had taught to fly, heroes now and a little condescending. Five, only, seemed truly comrades—Cline, Thimbub, Tarrance, Montgomery and Majors. They rallied round him and, sensing a secret sorrow, they drank with him and won his confidence. Finally he told them.

"Now I'm done in," he said. "She'll marry that blighter, Kirby Corbin, and what's the use?"

The five looked shocked. Eyes met eyes and

Thimbub cleared his throat. "Not Corbin? Surely, old chap?"

Mason nodded and the eyes traveled the circle again. Tarrance stroked his mustache.

"The girl, old son, is she a nice girl? That is—" He caught Mason's murderous glare and raised his hand. "I mean pretty, witty, intelligent and all that?"

"Pretty?" Mason went into a reverie and talked in a poetic vein for fifteen minutes. The others listened patiently; then they nodded their heads.

"That settles it. It isn't to be thought of. She can't marry this Corbin. Impossible."

Suggestions flowed freely; then they became tense and excited. Even Mason sat up. His breath came hard. Montgomery assumed leadership and his voice cracked like a whip.

"Perfectly truthful, too, old chap. We can give honest testimony. The kind of a thing that a gentleman can put his name to." He hesitated. "You can handle it rather diplomatically. Tell her official credit was rare and this is quite the thing. Easy does it. But tell me, does this Corbin blighter know about you?"

Mason shook his head. "No. Never saw the man since he's been over."

"Good. That settles it."

IN A solemn and decorous group they went over to the Blankwith factory. Mason stiffened into captainlike dignity and walked to the great hangars. His eyes passed thoughtfully over the line of captured German ships waiting for flying tests; then he selected a Fokker D-7 and had it wheeled out.

With great deliberation he climbed into the cockpit and took off, circling the field and coming in with a burst of speed. As the wheels were about to touch, he kicked rudder and landed turning. There was a crack and a roar and a cloud of dust in which the Fokker somersaulted. Out of the wreck crawled Memphis Mason, a gleam of satisfaction in his eyes.

On the sidelines, five stalwart aces stood and nodded approval. Thimbub raised his eyebrows. "See him, everybody?"

"Righto."

Mason disappeared and then there was an Aviatik on the line. A roar and he was off. A cloud of dust and he was climbing out of the wreck.

For two hours, he cracked ships. Fokker, Pfalz, Aviatik, Hanoveranner and Albatross. Five ships took off and landed and each landing was a crash. They had to lift him out of the last, a bloody, bruised and

triumphantly grinning pilot who'd just won a private war.

Then, with great solemnity, five unquestioned aces signed a bit of paper. It told the world in terse and precise terms that they, the undersigned, had seen Captain Mason bring down five German planes and that every one of them was destroyed.

"Well, I brought 'em down all right." Mason weaved on his feet and tucked the paper in his pocket. "Much obliged." He pitched forward and passed out.

That paper is framed now and hanging in the parlor of the Mason home down south. Betty Mason is very proud of it and everybody who enters the Mason household sees it and hears her version of the world war and her opinion of the man who won it.

Memphis is old enough now to know better, but there isn't anything he can do about it. His picture has been in the paper three times and every Armistice Day he is asked to talk over the radio.

He finds it very embarrassing.