



ACES BACK to BACK

by E.W. CHESS

A gambler, was Major Arthur Lem, C.O. of the 25th Yank Pursuit Squadron. All his life he'd gambled—and won, for he bet only when the odds were in his favor. But now, in those flaming skies over the Western Front, the game was different. Young Philip Mayson and those seven hotheaded replacements were gamblers of another breed—and to bet with them. Major Lem had to learn a new way to play his cards! The most unusual air story of the year!

CHAPTER I THE MESSAGE FROM GERMANY

THE RAIN FELL upon the half-darkened field of the 25th. A drizzling wet night had passed. All was still, as still as death. A kilometer away was the dripping village of Vicker, six miles within the bloody lines, and there, in a farmer's hut, lay Major Arthur Lem.

He had slept a troubled, fitful sleep. His eyes opened with a start, and the vague light of the dull gray morning seeped through the window to cast a shadow upon the strangely perplexed face of the major.

He could hear feet, feet running over the cobblestones of the wet street. *Thump . . . thump . . . thump . . .* then still. Then came a knocking at his door. The major pulled himself quickly to a half-crouched position.

"Yes?" he called.

Step after step Major Lem walked forward toward the Germans, a gun in each hand.

A soldier entered. Drops of rain ran down his thin face.

"Well?" asked the major.

"Boche came over, sir. He dropped this." From under his tunic the soldier drew a tube the size of two thumbs. Some eight inches long it was, and attached to a small parachute.

Such was the manner that Private Jones, bookkeeper by profession and soldier by fate, told the commander of the 25th of the dropping of a message upon an American field by a German. The major

accepted the tube without comment, read a portion of one of two messages which it contained. He was more awake by then, and he turned his gray eyes upon the strip of a man before him.

"I was on my post, sir, when I heard the motor. Then the next thing I saw was the chute, sir."

"Rather a gamble on a day like this," said the major. "A Fokker?"

"Yes, sir."

"Positive?"

"Yes, sir," Jones hesitated. "Seen so many I kinda think I can almost smell them by now."

Outside the rain fell, and what might have been a rising sun was obscured by thick folds of clouds. It was still again, more so than before, if such could be. Only the rubbing of the major's hands broke the quiet.

"Jones, you're about the office a lot. Do you know anything about the replacements who came in last night?"

"Three of them, sir."

"You know their names?"

"Yes sir, two of them. Caffery, I think, was the name of one. The other is a youngster. Queer fellow. Mayson was his name."

"Philip Mayson?"

"I think so, sir."

"Sure?"

"Yes, sir."

The fingers of Major Lem's right hand closed tightly. His eyes sought the floor. A full minute passed before he spoke again.

"There can't be any mistake?"

"No, sir."

"Strange," mumbled the major. "Strange. Have Mayson report to me at ten."

"Yes, sir."

"That's all, Jones."

"Yes, sir." Jones hesitated, turned on his heel, and passed out, closing the door behind him. One by one he retraced his steps. *Thud . . . thud*, went his boots over the slippery cobble-stones. And all the while the rain ran in little rivulets over his sunken cheeks.

THE office of the 25th was an extra room tagged onto the mess. It was barer than most, and cold and dark. Not enough light ever came through the four-square glass window. But no one cared. The office was moved too often to make any difference. Up and back—up and back. The only change that was ever made was in the quantity of black crosses plastered

upon its walls. Each cross was for a dead man, crosses of linen torn from planes that were down, down and out, and so were their pilots. They were the prizes of the men of the 25th.

Major Lem sat with his back to the wall. The dim light played hard; upon the lines of his face. His arms were crossed as he gazed at the man before him. For the first time in his life Lem hesitated to speak. It was not through lack of courage, but something which he himself did not understand. It was an inner filing, half of fear, over which he had no power. Twice his mouth opened, then closed. His eyes sought the floor, trailed over the cracks, and again out through the window at the drizzling rain.

Lem felt something was wrong. He was perplexed and confused, yet his face offered no evidence of it. The one before him continued to smile gently, almost childishly, as if he were taking part in a game.

"Your name?" demanded the major quickly.

"Mayson, sir. Philip Mayson."

"Where are you from?"

"New York."

"Seems to me, lieutenant, that I've seen you some place before."

After a pause Mayson said slowly, "I don't think so. I don't remember it."

"You don't remember?"

"No, sir."

"Mayson, do you know any member of the German Air Force?"

Mayson paled a bit. "I don't think so. Well, I knew a fellow who joined the Germans just before we got into the war. We went to school together."

"Were you a good friend of his?"

"No."

"Did he join the German Air Force?"

"Somebody told me he did."

"Listen. This morning a German plane hopped over the field and the beggar got away before anyone could get him. But he didn't come over without any reason. He had something to do and he did it. He picked out the best time, of course. Early morning, bad weather, and all of the rest of it. I guess he had about an even break to get back, but even then it's poor gambling. The gambling side of it doesn't make any difference to me, now.

There's something else. The fellow dropped a couple of messages, see. Now I've heard about messages being dropped, but I never believed it before. There's damned little use of it. But listen, Mayson, this one floors me."

"Yes, it's funny, a German dropping over the field."

"Yes, but there is something funnier."

Major Lem passed a paper over to Mayson. Mayson didn't look at it just then. He paused before he read it.

"I suppose that you'll think it strange that I know that a man by the name of Philip Mayson is, or will soon be, in your outfit. It isn't. The German Intelligence Service knows everything. They were kind enough to give me the information. I've been waiting patiently to get this letter to the man I asked about. And he'll be glad to get it. —Orro Stine, Lieutenant, Jdstaffel 11."

BEFORE Mayson had finished reading the brief note, Lem continued speaking.

"I opened the letter, Mayson. The whole thing was too damned strange to me not to see what it was all about. There are a hell of a lot of youngsters on this front who don't seem to know that this is a hell of a war, and they can't play in it. It isn't a game, and a devil of a long way from it, you understand, Mayson?"

"Yes, sir," said Mayson.

"No, they can't play by a hell of a sight. I don't know who this German is, nor where he got the idea you were to act as a postman for him, but he's wrong, see. No gambles like that. Why, damn it, you fools don't know what a gamble is. You'll get knocked off soon enough without that. I've gambled all my life. I know what it is, and I'm just telling you the same story I tell most of them. A little different with you, that's all. I've gotten everything I wanted in this world through gambling. I know when the odds are in my favor, and I know when to take advantage of them. Won my first thousand on aces back to back, and by God, I knew the odds were in my favor when I did it! Do you understand me?"

"Yes, sir," said Mayson.

"Won something else, too. Won it just as I've won everything else, and I'm not giving it up until I meet a man who is a better gambler than I am!"

Mayson didn't understand what Lem was talking about. He was forced to listen, and listen to every word. Lem was different from him, strangely different.

"Here, read that," said Lem. Mayson slowly picked up the letter.

"Mayson: This is a long chance, but I'm taking it. You might think our last time is forgotten, but it isn't by a hell of a lot. Something told me we'd see each other some time when things were different and if you get this, you'll know that time has come. It's a small Front, and if you're there, we can't be so far apart. Just tell me the time, and where.

I've been waiting since that time the three of us were together. She made you promise one thing, then, you remember. You were to drop letters to me if you got to the zone. I would never forgive you if you didn't do what you said you would. If you've got enough guts, you'll drop the letters on Map 3, Square D, Section 28-32. That's all your way of mapping over there, and that is the point of our outfit. We aren't afraid to let you know.

And you can tell J that I took a gambler's chance to see if you were over there.

Best wishes from your old friend and comrade until death. —Otto Stine, Lieutenant, Jdstaffel 11."

Mayson glanced up quickly. The major was staring at Mayson's right wrist. He had an identification tag there, as soldiers were forced to have. But that wasn't all. Through a link in the silver chain, there was an earring.

"What's that on your wrist, Mayson?" asked Lem.

Mayson reached forward, slightly baring his right arm. The earring glittered even in the half darkness. Mayson saw Lem finger it between his thumb and forefinger, turning it over and over. Suddenly Lem arose, half crouched. There was rage in his eyes.

"Who is J?" he demanded.

"I'd rather not tell," answered Mayson.

"Look at me again, Mayson. You've seen me before. You know damned well that you've seen me before."

"I don't remember."

"Mayson, you can go."

The major dropped back into his chair.

CHAPTER II LEM THE GAMBLER

MAJOR ARTHUR LEM THOUGHT he was a gambler, and there was reason. Ever since he'd made his first thousand in a card game, he'd gambled for everything he ever had. It was the way he lived. It gave zest to carry on. And there was no time in his life that he wouldn't have gambled his soul with the devil, had the cards been right.

Lem got his first thousand one night, twelve years before, when he dropped into a game on a westbound train. There were a lot of oil men in the smoker that night, and Lem sat in to fill up a five at stud. Within

ten minutes he saw more money on the table than he'd ever seen in his life. It made his own pitiful fifty look small, and when he lost twenty of that, it looked still smaller. Every dollar he had was on the board, but he'd taken it out of his pocket like he had a lot more. He knew that he should have got out. That game wasn't any place for him. But he kept playing. Got down to twenty when that big pot came. And just before it came, he saw his chance. Maybe it wasn't so much of a chance, for it was aces back to back, but it was something.

Kings across the board were betting. Lem was hanging on, drawing down after his twenty was gone. No one knew he didn't have enough to pay if he lost.

But Lem was a gambler, and he knew it that night he played his aces to the amount of a thousand, and the four men looked sober-eyed as he turned over the pair.

Lem walked out of that game with a new faith in himself. He'd learned what gambling was in the scheme of things, and he was playing it for all there was. That was the way Lem got his stake, and at twenty-five he was the possessor of fifty thousand. He had found out a safe way of gambling, and he never ceased to use it.

Lem simply couldn't be beaten. When the war came, he got into the thing as a matter of course. The war was a gamble. It simply couldn't go on without him, that was all. But it took four months of preliminary service to find out that the artillery wasn't any place for a gambler of the like of Lem.

Lem was on leave just before being sent to France when he saw his first air unit, at Cruthers outside of Hunston. He had been visiting Hemple, an officer on the field just an hour when he knew his destiny was not on the ground. It was in the air.

"Doesn't look so hard to learn that stuff to me," said Lem.

"No?"

"No," said Lem, puffing at a cigarette. "Tell you what I'll do, Hemple. I'll take one of those damned things off the ground, and I'll get it down. And I've never been up in one."

"You're crazy," said Hemple.

"Crazy, huh? Listen, Hemple, I'll just bet you a cool thousand!"

And Hemple took the bet.

The initial flight of Arthur Lem was remembered by Hemple until he got his in a two-seater over the Argonne. It was a flight of flights, that solo. Hemple

landed a Jenny on the near-by field where Lem was waiting and crawled out.

"There she is," Hemple said.

Lem crawled in without more ado. "Show me what the hell these things are."

Hemple told him, and Lem played with the stick and the rudder for ten minutes. Then he pulled a pen out of his pocket and wrote out a check for a thousand dollars, payable to Alfred Hemple. "Here," said Lem, "in case I lose my right arm."

And with that he drew back the throttle. The ship eased forward, got faster and faster. The tail jumped up, dropped, then rose, slowly.

Arthur Lem was up!

And down below, Hemple watched toward the west until the plane became a bare speck upon the cloud-flecked horizon. It was the last he thought he would ever see of Lem, until five hours later Hemple was called to the phone.

"What the hell is the matter with that phone?" The voice of Lem! "Yes, that's what I said . . . Down? Sure, I'm down. Busted up? . . . Oh, the plane! Well, it seems as if there is something wrong with it . . . Oh, not so much."

And there was something wrong with it—neither plane nor motor were worth anything much when they were found in a tree twenty-five miles from the field.

ARTHUR LEM won a thousand dollars on that flight, and a right to ask for a transfer to the Air Service. It was that stunt, more than his ability as a pilot, that got him through and to the Front. That was the last bit of big gambling he did before he got there, but for one single exception. But that exception was the most singular thing in the life of Arthur Lem. It was the only winning at a card table that he was never quite certain about.

It was at the Waldorf, in New York City, a month before Lem was sent overseas. The Seventy-first Regiment was giving its last ball upon this side of the water, and Lem, who had been taking the last of his training at Roosevelt Field, went, as a matter of course.

Then there was a girl, whose name was Jean Barnit, a lovely creature of seventeen, the daughter of General Astus Barnit. It was always a mystery how Astus Barnit ever became a general of the Forces of America. Everyone attributed it to money, for it was said he had plenty. But whatever the reason, Astus Barnit was a rotter, and men knew it.

Lem had gambled at Barnit's house often before he met Jean and from that moment Lem knew he had met his destiny. Just another gamble, that was all, and he played it. She was the reason Lem went to the ball of the Seventy-first that fated night.

It was a rather dull ball. Barnit loathed dancing, anyway, and suggested a game in one of the hotel rooms. When Lem got there, there were five sitting in.

The game went along smoothly for an hour or so. Bets were small. Then things broke. Lem saw his chance, and bet aces back to back against kings showing for Barnit. A pair of tens stayed in, but dropped out before it got too high. Then the bets went to the sky, and from down below came the sounds of people dancing, of laughter and of jazz music.

How much Lem won that night he didn't remember. It was more than he'd ever won in his life. Barnit had gone crazy.

Long after every one left, Barnit and Lem sat in that room in the Waldorf. Barnit had his head between his hands. Lem watching him over at the side.

"I haven't got that much money, Lem. I never did have that much."

"I know it," said Lem quietly.

"What'll I do?"

"Listen, Barnit, I want Jean." Lem expected difficulty, but it didn't come.

"You'll get her."

And the bargain was sealed without another word.

Whatever means Barnit employed to place Lem's affections in the proper light, it was seemingly successful. He must have told Jean of the great debt, and she could see no other way out at the moment. She said nothing about another debt, far greater and more real to her—a debt which was branded upon her heart.

Jean Barnit had strange memories of her own, and presents from Tiffany's had little effect upon them. Her letters to Lem were rare, even after he got to the Front. Finally none came at all, and the only explanation for her conduct came from her father to the effect that Jean was playing around with two silly boys of about her own age. One, an arrogant German, who had saved her life once.

In the days that followed, Lem found momentary oblivion in a war that made everyone forget. Death flew too close to his tail to do other than forget. And so things rested for the man, who, by the grace of God, had become the commander of the 25th. He did his job as well as most of them, and no better. Just a class

at school, that was all. He sent them up so they could draw their cards with their God. But he always knew their odds when he did it, and win or not win, that was the way it was with Major Arthur Lem, the gambler, until the night before when God must have cut himself an ace, when a German flew over his field, and out of the hundreds of men who came up as replacements was a silly boy by the name of Philip Mayson.

God was playing his own odds then, and not Arthur Lem.

CHAPTER III THE GREEN EARRINGS

ALL THAT DAY IT RAINED; all of the next. Not a plane of the 25th left the field. Not a motor turned. It was quiet, all but the rain, and the relentless stillness settled upon the lonely soul of Philip Mayson. He sat upon a bunk in his quarters, his head between his hands, his eyes gazing blankly at the floor.

After a while he bent down, pulled out his trunk and slowly lifted the lid.

In the right hand side was a bundle of letters tied with a single cord. There were two letters beneath the bundle. He picked them up. Across each, in a feminine hand was the name, "Otto Stine."

There was no other direction. Nothing. Just Otto Stine. Mayson closed the trunk again, walked to the table and wrote a letter.

Mayson folded the letter slowly, placed it in an envelope and in a hurried, flowing hand he wrote the address :

Miss Jean Barnit
27 East 57th St.,
New York, N.Y., U.S.A.

That afternoon a letter came from Jean.

PARIS

"Dearest:

Just landed. Only a moment, now. Send all of my mail to the American Red Cross.

Father is on the Front in command of the 36th Division. I think he goes into action, soon. If it is possible he will meet me in Paris.

I think of that last day, again, when the three of us were together. Oh, it's so silly, all of it. But what does it all matter? You'll never see Otto. It's foolish to think that you ever would. I wonder now why I sent the letters to you at all. It would take an army to get them to the other side of the lines, anyway.

I haven't any more time, now. I'll write again, as soon as I can tell you what I'm doing.

Best to you,

JEAN."

Mayson's heart beat a little faster after he read that. There was a kind of cold sympathy in the letter which he didn't understand. And he wondered what Jean would think of an army acting as postman for two letters. The thought amused him, but his amusement was cut short. Some one had walked to his door. A knock.

Mayson arose. "Come in," he said. The door opened, and Major Lem came in.

"I meant to see you before," said Lem gravely.

"Sit down," said Mayson. He didn't know what else to say. Lem paused, then lowered himself in a chair. He took a cigarette from a pack on the table. After a couple of puffs he looked up from the floor. Mayson knew there was something on the mind of Arthur Lem.

"Do you know Jean Barnit?" Lem suddenly asked.

That startled Mayson. It had come so suddenly he didn't know what to answer.

"Yes," he said finally.

"When did she give you that earring?"

Mayson watched Lem for a moment. There was another awkward pause.

"I'd rather not answer that."

"I'd rather you would," said Lem. "I bought that earring for Jean Barnit. I bought it at Tiffany's, and I know there isn't but one more like it in the world. Only one other one, Mayson. Where is the other one? She's got it, I guess. Damned funny, her giving it away."

"No, she hasn't got it. It's on the other side of the lines."

Lem looked up again. "What do you mean?" he demanded.

"A man on the other side of the lines has got it, that's all, and I don't see anything funny about her giving them away."

LEM snubbed the cigarette he had in his hand, and lighted another one. His voice had been rather low, doing his best to keep control of it. He was using his poker face, the face he used when he had won every

big pot in his life. But he was having trouble, now. His mouth wouldn't stay the same, and his eyes were narrowed. Dead give-away, that was, in a big game.

"A man on the other side? She gave it to a German?"

"I'll tell you, major. You want to know, and I'll tell you. There isn't any reason why I shouldn't. Jean Barnit gave an earring to each of us. She gave one to each of us because each of us wanted her. Sounds funny to you, maybe. But it didn't sound funny then, and it doesn't sound funny to me now."

"This fellow Stine, eh? Damned fools!"

Mayson turned quickly. "I don't like the way you said that," he said.

Lem didn't move, his eyes clung to the floor, and he repeated, "Stine."

"Yes, Stine. He's got the other earring. And I'm getting it," said Mayson.

"Hell of a chance you have!"

"It's a gamble."

"I can't wish you luck."

"I don't need it."

Then Lem, the gambler, lost his poker face. "Listen," he said, "If you're fighting me, then we'll fight. I'd just as soon as not. This is a hell of a front, and I could get rid of you as easily as anything in the world. There are some jobs on this sector that no man could come back from. Just an order and you wouldn't have a chance."

"I'll take any of them—all of them! I'm willing to gamble."

"A real gambler, huh?"

"I'll show you."

Lem forced a smile. "You know," he said, "I'd like to see you gamble, just to see what would happen."

Mayson took a step forward. "Listen, what do you know about Jean Barnit, anyway?"

"I gambled for her, and I won her. I'm going to marry Jean Barnit."

Mayson paled. He drew away, threw his cigarette to the floor. "You are like hell. I'm fighting for her. She's the thing I want and I'm going to get her."

"That's what I think. And so does Stine."

"I'll get him. I'll get that earring if I have to get it from a dead man."

Lem smiled cynically. "Go ahead, Mayson. The air is free to you."

"Is that a promise?" asked Mayson.

"That's a promise."

Mayson reflected for a moment. Then a slight smile came over his face. "You're not so bad after all."

"You think so? Listen, this is a rotten Front."

"Oh, that's the way it is?"

"That's the way."

"Fine," snapped Mayson. His feet were far apart. His hands were clenched tight, and his lower lip was trembling. "Fine," he repeated.

"You're free, Mayson," said Major Lem. "Put on your tunic. We're going as far as the hangars."

"Fine!" snapped Mayson. He threw his tunic over his shoulders, and walked out. They walked by the first hangar. When they got to the second, Lem called the sergeant.

"This is Lieutenant Mayson. His ship is to be ready at all times. Have the gunnery sergeant go over his guns and see they're lined up properly. Get the number of his ship from the office. Mayson is on special service."

"Yes, sir," said the sergeant as he saluted, and walked away.

Lem said one more thing before he, too, left. "The air is yours. Remember, this is a hell of a Front." His fingers shook and pointed toward the bloody lines. "They kill men out there."

MAYSON turned away without answering, and walked towards his quarters. Once inside, he tried to sleep, but something troubled him, some ghost of a thing he didn't understand. He didn't know that men went crazy at the Front. He didn't know they went batty, mad, killed themselves and others. He'd see that later. He'd see men fall far down beneath him, and it'd all look like a game of some kind, and after it was all over, they'd get up. They'd move away. Yes, they'd move away, but they'd move away with the help of some one else, because they were dead.

Once in a while a stray shell whined its way over, and burst a long distance away. It was just a little noise to him. It turned his thoughts to other things, even to the strange case of Jean Barnit. A boy had saved Jean Barnit from death one night, three years before. There were three in the canoe, and Jean was the only one who was saved. They found the "bodies of the others a week later, when the lake gave up her dead. Jean Barnit looked at the dreadful sight, and something snapped in her heart. Otto Stine had saved her from a death like that. He had been alone in another boat, and had jumped after her. He had struggled with her, and brought her to shore.

Otto had saved her from a horrible death. He boasted that he'd saved her. He told everyone about it. He even said she belonged to him, and Jean began to believe it.

It had been a strange meeting, that night Jean Barnit had seen Otto Stine and Philip Mayson together for the last time. The next day they were leaving, each to fight for his own country—each to fight against the other. Jean had not understood the fire she saw in their eyes when they looked at each other.

As she watched them, her hands had slowly loosened her earrings—little, frail emerald earrings upon which the destinies of two men were to hang—and had given one to each of them. Then Otto Stine had shrieked out, "I'll get that earring from you, Mayson! I'll get it back if it's from your dead body."

"You'll never be the man who will kill me!" Mayson had said.

And even then, Jean hadn't understood. It wasn't the earring itself that counted. It was that for either of them to have both earrings would mean that the other was dead. But Otto Stine understood, and so did Philip Mayson.

How strange all of that was about the earrings—and how long ago. It didn't seem possible, then. None of the things seemed possible. Far out over No-Man's-Land shells burst. It was all a game. And men were out there—thousands, hundreds of thousands. Trucks were moving through the mud. Men were shouting, breaking the stark silence. Shouting at the stinking mules that were pulling the food to the living. Officers were watching second hands. Men were going over the top.

And up above them were planes with tons upon tons of bombs—winging to a destination. They were the gods of the moment.

KNOCKING. Knocking. There was some one knocking on the door. Mayson opened his eyes. "Who? Oh, it's you, Jones. I don't know. I must have been asleep. Not asleep. Dozing, I think. What?"

"Your ship is ready, lieutenant."

"Ship?"

"Yes, sir."

Mayson was in a daze when he got up and walked to the table where he had left two letters. The letters for Otto Stine. He sat down there, unrolled the map. His eyes ran along the little squares. Somehow, he couldn't believe that men were fighting in those squares. But they were. There was the line, the battleline. On this side it was safe, and on the other it was death. Death! What meaning it seemed to have to Mayson, now!

Jones' thin finger was moving, pointing, and he was speaking. "See that place there? The British took that

yesterday. They've been trying to get that place for six months. There must have been a lot of them killed." Mayson interrupted him. "I don't want to hear any more about those places. I'm looking for another. It's over here. There's a German out there that I'm going to get. I've got to get him."

Jones became silent. He was looking strangely at Mayson. "A German? You're going out to get a German?"

"Jones, he has an earring like this one I've got on my wrist. I'm going out to get that earring." He smiled strangely. "But I'm only taking it from a dead man. He knows a girl I know, and that girl thinks she should belong to him because he saved her life, once. A girl can't belong to a dead man, you understand."

Jones nodded. He didn't understand.

Mayson hardly knew what he was saying. His eyes ran over the rivers, railroads. On and on, past the lines where men fought. His gaze ran down a road. Farther on it came to a stop. "What's that place there? Square D. Yes, that's it. Section 28-32. German field there?"

"No," said Jones. "That place there must be on the other side of the road. This side has trees. See."

"Yes. That's the place I'm going. That's the place."

"You'll never get out alive, sir."

"I'll get out alive. I've got something to do there, and I must get out alive. The ship is ready?"

"Yes, sir."

Jones followed Mayson out of his quarters to the second hangar. The sunlight had come through, and there were planes along the deadline.

Some had their props turning over. Men were bending over some, tinkering. They'd leave nothing to chance.

Mayson walked to his ship and climbed in. Felt like home, that ship, even though he'd had but eight hours in her.

Jones was coming over. He was holding his hat down with his hands as he walked. Poor Jones. How thin his face looked, and his pipe-stem legs.

"Be careful, lieutenant. Remember this is a bad sector."

Mayson smiled. "Oh, I will. Don't worry, Jones."

He turned then, gave the gun to his ship, and started moving forward. The wind was forcing itself against his face. The smell of burnt gas came to his sensitive nostrils. No other smell in the world like that. It was like burnt grease and the smell of almonds—but sickening, at first. The earth was falling away—slowly away.

And then, in one straight soar, he passed over the top of the tree, and far over the squares of green earth, and brown. He was above the men below. And the nose of his plane pointed toward the lines.

CHAPTER IV SECTOR 28-32

THE SUN FLASHED THROUGH the clouds for a second. Then it grew darker and grayer than ever. And down below, still—more still and quiet than Mayson had ever seen any land beneath him. That was the bad sector. Mayson smiled to himself. He'd been in tight places before. And this wasn't bad. It was just the opposite from that.

How alone he was. Over to the right by the trees he saw horses. Tiny little things they were. And those dots were men. Germans! The first Germans he'd seen on that side of the lines. And as he looked, something caught his eye. A forest. It was the same as the one on the map. On further was the German field. Mayson thought he could see it through the mist. He dropped the nose a little, drew back his throttle. There! Those three little hangars looked like tents. That was the place he had come to find.

He threw over his stick, slipped down. A rush of air forced the right of his face against the bone, and he dropped like lead. Hours, hours it seemed, dropping like lead until the earth came up like a flash. His ship settled, bounced, and settled again.

As the wheels stopped, Mayson jumped to the ground. He was walking forward. His automatic was in his right hand, and before him stood men, silent and still. They had strange uniforms, and strained awestricken faces. One came suddenly from the side of a hangar, uttered some strange word, and stood like the rest.

How crazy it all seemed to him now as he watched them. Idiots, standing there before him, looking out at him through their narrow eyes. And they didn't move. He kept walking, step after step, and gripped to a white tightness within his right hand, was the automatic. The thing he'd been given to kill with was pointed at them, and they didn't move as he walked forward.

Some of those strange figures before him had stepped away from the others. They were coming to

meet him when he stopped. He was crouched lower, now waiting, before he said, "Otto Stine. I come here to see you."

Mayson waited. Then came a call. It was as if it were an answer in some strange tongue. It came sudden, sharp. The men before him stopped. They seemed confused, and they waited as one who was behind pushed himself in front of the rest.

"Mayson," he called, and nothing more.

Relief came then for Mayson. He'd found his man. He could see him come forward—thinner now, and strange in the gray-green of his uniform. His hat was tilted over to one side. But that right ear—there was something green in the lobe of his right ear. The green earring! Stine was wearing it! He was flaunting the thing Jean had given him. He had probably boasted that the one who had given it to him was his.

Mayson could see the green earring plainly, now. Only ten paces away. He could see it as he heard himself say, "Don't come any closer. If you do, I'll put a bullet through you."

"You fool!" Stine said, but he stopped.

"Think so? You played safe when you came over. Dropped, then you went away. When I came, I came to talk to you."

"You'll never get away," said Stine—and all around him the men were closing in. They'd get him. From the corner of Mayson's eyes he could see them get closer and closer.

"Tell them to stop or I'll shoot. I'll put a bullet through you if they make another step."

STINE paled a little. A kind of frightened look came into his eyes. Then he smiled, but the smile didn't ring true. He turned around. His back was toward Mayson, and Mayson could hear him speak. He didn't know what Stine was saying. He didn't know that Stine was telling them to leave Mayson alone, telling them that it would be easier to get the American after he was in the air. They'd get the Yank when he tried to get back to the lines.

Then Stine turned around. "They won't touch you while you're on this field," he said.

Mayson watched them. His courage came back, courage that had left him for a few fleeting moments. When he spoke again, he was quite cool.

"I came to bring you two letters. They're from Jean. She asked me to send them on to you some way." Stine's face lighted. He started to step forward, but Mayson stopped him.

"I told you not to take another step. I'll get you if you do." His left hand reached into his pocket. When it came out, it held the two letters. "I'll drop them. You can get them after I leave." His fingers opened then, and the letters fell to the earth.

Then came a strange silence. Mayson's eyes were fastened upon the earring that clung to Stine's ear. "I came over to get that earring, Stine. I don't know how I was going to get it, but that was the reason I came."

"You think you'll get it?"

"I'm not going to make a try, now. Nothing is right to get it. But I will. You heard me, Stine! And I'll get it from your dead body."

There was a pause.

Then Mayson backed away, slowly, defiantly, step after step. "If any of them move, I'll shoot." But they didn't move then. They watched Mayson back to his plane. They saw him leap suddenly in the pit, and heard the roar of the motor, before some one shot. A hundred followed, illy aimed, and uncertain.

The plane lifted quickly from the earth, sluggish, at first, then with the speed of a shot. Its two guns were going for the time of a dozen pulse beats. Then the plane turned upon its side, and was jerked into the air. And as it did, every man upon the field of the Eleventh hurried to place her planes and men into the air.

CHAPTER V THE DEATH TRAIL

MAYSON COULD SEE them coming in a drove. One by one they pulled away from the earth. He didn't know how many followed him.

And as they followed, the land he had thought so silent took on life. It had waited with an ill-foreboding silence until then. He had to come back, and all was ready—each gun ready, each man at his post.

No silence, now. The half-heard noise below filtered through the drumming of the motor. Flashes, and men came out of nowhere. Little flickering lights of red.

Machine guns! Hell had blossomed forth from the earth, and there was all hell behind. Not a chance in a thousand. Behind or below would get him. He had the feeling that comes before death.

And all the time he was running the gauntlet of the

guns below. How quickly all had changed. Life, pure and sweet, but a few hours before, had become a thing not worth the flip of a coin. His heart was pounding the blood through his body. He could feel the strange frenzy and madness that comes with the approaching end.

He uttered a few half-forgotten lines of a prayer his mother taught him, and then grew silent, grim, wondering, and flying through damp space.

The planes behind were gaining. They'd get him! A piece ripped from his lower wing, and fell out behind. He could feel the new resistance of the air against the gaping hole. It cut down his speed. They'd get him, now—sure as hell.

But what was that now—that strange moaning that came from the hole in the right wing? Like the wings of death, they were flapping, flapping and coming nearer and nearer.

Then he looked up. Half a dozen black things dropped out of a cloud, and more came. Spads!

He felt like shouting at the top of his voice, telling himself that help had come. He was not one against a nation, now. He had friends. God, the sky seemed filled with them! They were up above, but they were diving through the clouds like mad. They had come to help him. And Mayson knew it as he turned, and whipped around. He was going to meet the ones who had trailed him.

Already everything in the sky was whirling around, as if some one had taken a great spoon and was turning and turning it. Shapes flashed by. Smoke over there, and something going down. Red fluttering, a little spot from the nose of a plane. He could see that one. He knew its kind—a Spad—and he watched. Then a white line passed on in front of him.

Mayson banked. He was going around. The big spoon was turning, turning, turning. More shapes flashed by. Then all became strangely still. It was calm. The spoon was still. They were going back, now. And not far ahead were the lines. The fight was over.

Crazy it was. Mayson couldn't understand it all. All that he could tell himself was that he'd been through a fight. He'd been through a fight and now it was calm. Death hadn't quite got him that time. It had come damned near, and a miss was as good as a mile.

Crazy how things happened out there. And just because he, Philip Mayson, had come over after an earring.

THEY landed not long after that. It was not until they landed that Mayson knew that the men who had

saved him were the men of his own outfit. He saw them looking at him queerly as he got out of his ship and walked over to the hangar where he sat down. He knew they were looking at him as he smoked his cigarette. It was strange they didn't talk to him. He was glad when Jones came by.

"Hello, Jones."

"Glad you got back, sir. Heard some one say you landed on a German field. Heard some one say, too, that they'd been in the worst fight they'd ever had on the Front. It must have been bad, sir. Never seen them look like this before when they came in."

"It wasn't so bad, Jones. It only lasted a minute or so. Then it was all over."

"That's all they ever last, they tell me."

"It wasn't bad," said Mayson.

"It's the worst day we've ever had. We lost five men."

Mayson felt as if he'd been struck.

"Not five, Jones! There couldn't have been."

"Yes, sir. That young fellow, Caffery, went down. And the leader of C flight. You remember Caffery, don't you? He came in when you did." No, Jones wasn't just talking. There was a graveness in his voice. It was kind of sad, too, like someone who is talking about the dead.

"And they asked credit for six Germans, sir."

Crazy—that's what it was. He'd been there, eleven men had gone down, but he hadn't seen one of them. Mayson still couldn't understand it all. The whole thing hadn't lasted over five minutes, and there were eleven dead.

A soldier came up then to tell him that the major wanted to talk to him. Mayson found him sitting up in a chair, his right arm in a bandage with a spot of red upon it.

"Just a hole. Flesh wound, that's all."

When the medical officer went out, Lem turned to Mayson. "You're damned lucky, Mayson. You couldn't do a stunt like that twice in a thousand years and get away with it. The odds were a million to one, and if there ever was a man who was cold meat, you were the man. Why, you've gone crazy, Mayson!"

"I told you I was going to get that earring."

"But you didn't."

"No," said Mayson. "I didn't that time, but if I had some real gamblers along with me, I'd do it."

"Gamblers!" shouted Lem.

"Yes, men like me."

"That thing you call a gamble cost the outfit five men."

"And you got six Germans."

Lem grew silent, thoughtful. Mayson waited for him to say something more. But Lem said nothing, and Mayson walked out. He wanted to rest, to think. Eleven men dead—because he had flown over to get an earring.

CHAPTER VI SEVEN UP!

THE NEXT MORNING seven replacements came into the field of the 25th. And no more cocksure a lot ever filled a gap than the seven who flew in that morning of March the seventeenth. They'd come in from the Yank pool at Orley through a heaven that had been no wetter for a year. And when they landed at the field of the Twenty-fifth, they landed as if they were veterans. Show-offs, that's what they were, and they left nothing out of the bag. They were tip to tip when they fell through the fog, and they were that way when they taxied up to the line.

The first of the lot to climb out of his plane was a little taller than the rest. He had a wealth of blond hair, and little blue eyes that sparkled when he laughed. He crawled out of his ship as if he had crawled out of a million, and with a confidence that would have caused the best of them to sit up and look. The first man who came to his attention was Jones, who was always around the hangars.

"Howdy, ol' timer. Where's the boss of this outfit and what's his name?"

"Lem, sir. Major Lem, commander of the 25th."

He turned around to the rest. "This is the dump, all right." Then he turned back to Jones. "They tell me this is a hot outfit. Kinda knocked the boys off?"

"Five yesterday," said Jones gravely.

"Five? Not so bad, these Jerries. And they tell me they've got a boy here by the name of Philip Mayson."

"Yes, sir. He was in the fight yesterday. Rather think, sir, he's the one that started it."

"That's the boy. He starts 'em, and we finish 'em."

Such was the introduction of the strangest seven that ever roamed the lines. Hotheaded, young, vindictive, and they dropped down on the Front as if it were a game. Just a game, the kind of game Mayson had thought to

find, but alone, he was not enough. He needed others who understood what he represented in a war as bloody and ruthless as the black days of early '18.

Jones watched them through his little gray eyes. Their smiles, and the way they talked. Their laughter. He shook his head mournfully. They'd go, those seven, like the five yesterday had gone. And a sadness fell upon him as he turned and walked to the quarters of Mayson, his spindle legs barely able to drag his great hobnailed boots through the mud.

His knock was soft, and repeated. Slowly he opened the door. Mayson was sitting at his table. He never turned as Jones came in. He knew it was Jones. After a while he stirred. "What is it, Jones?" he asked.

"Replacements came in today. Seven."

"Poor devils."

"One of them asked about you. Seemed to know you, sir."

OUTSIDE, Mayson's name was shouted, and the noise of men tumbling through the hall. Some one pounded upon the door. It was thrown open, and all of the seven crowded into the room.

"There he is. That's him. Look at the runt."

"My God! Robinson," said Mayson. "Yep. Robinson, Drake and Kinsel."

"My God!" said Mayson.

"And the rest there—not worth a damn, but we couldn't get rid of them. Hansen, there. And Miller, there. He's a Swede. And that fellow there calls himself Clark, but I don't know why the hell he does."

"I swear to God that was my father's name before he left Jerusalem."

"And what about me?" Mayson turned. A little fellow who had been standing just outside the door spoke, "My name's White."

"Drake, Kinsel and I picked up these boys at Orley. And they're not bad, except White. White never landed a plane whole, yet. Good God, but I'm glad to see you!" shouted Robinson. "We heard you had a run-in with the boys yesterday. Nice party."

"Came damned near getting me."

"Seems to me they didn't."

"Only by the grace of God they didn't. There was twenty of them and only one of me when the thing started."

"Should have been enough," said Robinson.

"Should have been just exactly enough."

Mayson hesitated. "I landed on a German field," he said. "A man's there who's got something I want.

Landed there, but I couldn't get it. But by God, I will."

Silence came. They could hear the rain, and once in a while a shell broke in the distance.

"Swell!" said Robinson. "And he gets sore because they shoot at him. Mayson, you can't really get sore because the boys shoot at you. It's not right!"

Jones was listening from the corner of the room. Boys, talking about war and death. Boys talking about killing just as if it were a game that was a lot of fun.

"What did you really want, Mayson," Robinson said, "that you had to go to a German flying field to get?"

Mayson hesitated again.

"Don't be bashful."

"Earrings," said Mayson dully. Silence, again. A long undignified silence. Robinson looked closer. A grim look had come into his eyes. He knew the mind of a man like Mayson, because he, Jimmie Robinson, had a mind that was just the same. This was war to him. There had to be something personal, and he understood. So did Drake and Kinsel, and so did the rest of them.

All Robinson's play had gone. His eyes seemed a little older, and there were wrinkles at their corners. The rest of theqi were the same way.

"You want that earring?" asked Robinson.

"Yes. But I want to get the man, first. Funny, isn't it?"

"Yeah, kinda." Robinson was watching the floor.

Jones watched them all.

Mayson went over to the window, stood looking out at the rain that was falling. Soon the silence was again interrupted by Robinson. "But if you really want the earring, I suppose we'd all better help you get it."

Jones felt that Robinson was passing a death sentence upon himself. Just those few words, "We'd better help you," was enough. The rest? They knew, too. But that was their game. It was the kind of game they understood.

Robinson's eyes wandered over to Jones. "Well, if it isn't ol' timer!"

Jones grinned in a frail sort of way. The strained moment was over. It was finished, yet the men who stood in Mayson's room that morning knew the shadow of destiny had fallen upon them.

Long after the seven had gone, Mayson sat at his table, nor had Jones made an effort to leave with the others. He sat watching Mayson, who was writing to tell Jean that Robinson, Kinsel, and Drake had come to his outfit. She remembered them, didn't she? Yes, she would remember.

After Mayson sealed the letter, Jones came over to him.

"I'll mail it for you, lieutenant." He took the letter. At the door he hesitated. "Great boys, those fellows. Never saw any like those. And I can't understand them."

Then Jones walked out into the wet night. And the rain ran in rivulets over his sunken cheeks.

CHAPTER VII THE GAME THAT COUNTS

THERE WAS ANOTHER MAN upon the field of the 25th who didn't quite understand the seven who had come as replacements. That was Major Lem, gambler. Gambler or not, he knew but one kind of gambling. His game called for aces back to back, and when they weren't back to back, he never bet. There was no chance in his gambling—none.

But with the coming of the seven, there came a change. Robinson and the rest of them were a different kind of gamblers. They didn't care whether they won or lost. It was the game that counted, and Lem didn't understand that. It wasn't human for a man not to care whether he won or lost, or didn't seem to. And when Lem started thinking about the thing, it left him troubled, confused and wondering. Lem knew that he had really never taken a big chance in his life. He had gambled, yes. He'd gambled high, but at every high gamble he had known that the chances were in his favor, and plenty. That had never occurred to him before—and the effect was deadening.

That first night on the train when he drew aces back to back wasn't gambling, and Lem knew it. And the big haul he'd made at Cal's place in Frisco, was that gambling? It was like hell! Minny-F was an English horse with a record three pages long. Gambling? Hell! Lem knew what he was doing when he laid his thousand on Minny-F.

And so, one by one Lem went down the list of his wins, and the more he thought about it, the more certain he became he was never a gambler at all. Even that night when he played in the hotel with General Barnit, for stakes that he could never forget, he had the hand won on the fourth card, and that was before the real betting was done.

That sudden realization of the truth had a devastating effect upon the soul of Lem. It drew some of his confidence out of him, and a worried look came into his face, but it didn't come until the night after the coming of the seven.

Lem met Mayson in the mess that night. Neither said anything to the other. Just looked, that was all. Lem couldn't understand why the character of the mess had changed. There was more life, that night, more laughter; not like the old days, when everyone felt the shadow of the end upon him.

Lem sat watching from his center of the table. His head was sunk a little forward, and between the lean fingers was a half-burnt cigarette. There had been a din of harsh talking since the beginning of the meal. Now it grew quiet, and Lem watched them. For the first time since he'd taken command of the 25th, he felt as if he were an outsider. The seven were different, unlike anything he had ever been in his life, and Major Lem was trying to understand them.

As he watched, their eyes sought his. Mayson stood up, walked around the table to where Lem sat, and pulled up a chair.

"We lost five men in that show against the Eleventh. Robinson and the rest of us want to see what we can do against them," said Mayson. But he wasn't telling the real reason.

Lem smiled. "You wouldn't have a chance."

"The boys are willing to gamble." Mayson was looking into Lem's eyes. "They're willing to gamble that they come out whole. They know how to gamble."

Lem felt an emptiness around his stomach. He didn't try to answer. He couldn't, then.

"So they asked me to ask you."

Something was being torn out of the heart of Major Arthur Lem. He was beginning to feel that he was a fake who'd never taken a real chance in his life. And now he was fighting to make himself believe that he had.

"Listen, Mayson, I've always gambled. I got my first stake gambling, and I never lost a big pot in my life."

"Then you weren't a real gambler, major. A man who has never lost has never been a real gambler."

Lem felt a strange discomfort. "Yes, I was a real gambler, Mayson. Before I got into the service, I soloed the first time I'd ever been in the air."

"They don't think that's a gamble in Russia. All of their pilots do that, and they kill fewer men than we do in the States."

Major Lem closed his eyes.

THERE was something tearing the heart out of Major Lem. He was losing confidence in himself. He was wondering, confused. The thing which had always seemed so much a part of himself had never been there. And he opened his eyes because he heard Mayson speaking.

"And what we want to do is to go over again. There'll be plenty of us, and I know how to do it, now. And they want to go—Robinson and the rest of them."

"I shouldn't let you. I shouldn't let you!" said Lem. "No, I shouldn't let you go after that earring. It's war, now. It's not a game, Mayson—not now."

Mayson drew back. He didn't know he wasn't talking to the same Major Lem he'd talked to before. He was a different one.

"We wanted to go tomorrow, early. If the sun doesn't come up, it doesn't make any difference. Maybe it'll be better. The boys do pretty well in the fog."

Lem lifted himself from his chair. He wanted to answer, but the words wouldn't come. He stood grasping the edge of the table, looking vacantly through the window at the falling rain. Then he straightened himself, and walked slowly out the door.

Mayson followed, calling after him, until Lem faltered and turned back. They were standing face to face.

"You didn't answer my question, major."

"I can't, Mayson. I can't."

Lem turned away and walked quickly toward his quarters, and Mayson retraced his steps to the mess and joined the others.

"Can't understand Major Lem, Robinson. I thought he was against me, at first. I don't know what it is now. There's something wrong."

"What the hell!" shouted Robinson.

A man came in with some mail then. The first upon the top of a small bunch was for Philip Mayson. His fingers ripped open the envelope, and his eyes read the first line.

DEAREST:

Father was killed here, at Pasce, yesterday, and I'm alone"

Mayson crushed the letter in the palm of his hand. He didn't read any more. His lips were set, his eyes staring out before him.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" demanded Robinson.

"Tomorrow morning, Robinson. We'll go tomorrow morning?"

"All right."

They knew the whole thing was crazy. It was as mad to do a stunt like that as anything could be. But it was a gamble, and they had to have something to gamble for.

Everyone else had left the mess. Only the seven and Mayson were there. They talked about the thing like it were just a game. Just a game. None of them seemed to think they were gambling with their lives.

"Crazy as hell, all of this," said Mayson. He stood up. Slowly he walked toward the door. In the corridor he met Jones, and told him to go to Pasce and get Jean. Jean must be there when he came back—he and those seven men who were gambling with him. He had forgotten that he might not come back—that men were killed on the Front. He had forgotten that the stinking mules which were bringing rations might be dead when they got there. He had forgotten that shells were dropping one by one over the lines, and God pity the men who were near their destination. He had forgotten that steel-jacketed shells bore holes into living flesh that would rot in the sun that never seemed to come.

Mayson had forgotten everything but Jean—and Jones would bring her back early the next morning, through the rain.

CHAPTER VIII COME SEVEN

VAGUE BLACK FIGURES MOVED over the field of the 25th. It was still night at its darkest, and a drizzling rain fell. From a single hangar, a prism of light battled feebly against the darkness, but only far enough to fall upon a row of planes crouching upon the deadline.

At the corner of the hangar stood Mayson. His damp hand had buttoned the last button of his combination. A cigarette clung to the right of his mouth.

"Nine planes," he whispered.

"Yes, I counted them, kid. I guess they got an extra if one doesn't turn over right."

"Funny," said Mayson.

"What did you say?" asked Robinson.

"Oh, nothing."

They walked down the line and back again. White had just come out. He was the last of them to come. "God, it's cold," he said.

"Cold? Hell!" said Robinson.

White was shaking. Robinson could see his hand shake as he lighted a cigarette. Robinson wished he hadn't said anything, then.

"Dark, isn't it?" said White.

In the shadows a sentry walked his post. At times he stopped, dropped the butt of his rifle to the earth and rubbed his hands. He was watching, seeking some one with his eyes. After a while he moved forward toward the crowd that had gathered.

"Lieutenant," he said.

"Is that you, Jones?"

"Yes, sir. I wish you luck, sir."

"Oh, we'll get back. Don't worry if we're late. And don't forget to do what I asked you."

"I'll do it, lieutenant."

"Good God! But it's cold!" said White, and Robinson said nothing.

All of the planes were turning over by then. They all smoked another cigarette apiece. They didn't speak. A wail of motors resounded down the dead line. Dark figures still hurried back and forth. Men called, and answers came. Over in the east the first traces of a vague frantic light had come. Unseen black clouds hung low over the field and a few drops of rain fell. Then more, and it grew dark again.

"Good God, but it's cold," said White.

And before he spoke the last word, the sergeant came up again.

"Okay, sir," he said.

They threw away their cigarettes, and walked toward their planes. There were none that hesitated. There was not a single lingering good-bye. Not a motor but seemed to like its job that night as the rain fell.

A plane shot across the field, and seven followed, tip to tip. They looked like angels on parade. When the last wheel lifted itself from the earth, a single dark figure rounded the corner of hangar Number Two. He shouted a few hasty commands at the sergeant. Again men scurried about. Then came the roar of a lone motor, wild and highly pitched. Then the chocks were pulled, and it went forward, bouncing sluggishly over the wet earth.

Then came a screech of its motor, and men looked out into the darkness at a plane they could no longer see.

FAR out ahead the seven, tip to tip, flew. One was in advance, but close. As they crossed the lines, the men below, like rats in trenches, soaked and double-soaked with rain, quivered with fear of the noise. They knew what comes with that sound. Death! That's what comes, and they listened to the mournful wail of the seven and one who passed.

But the seven and one sailed on. The lines passed behind. They were in the land of death, now. Just a slip, that's all that was needed, and it would be all over for them.

But they knew, they knew all along what it was. They knew what it was to gamble. They wanted to gamble. Not because it was war, but because it was something greater. It was something they didn't understand. Just an urge to take chances, and a desire to win even though the winged gods were against them.

Mayson was a bare fifty feet to the fore. Every few moments he'd look back. He could only see the few who were near to him at first, but now he saw from right to left. One on the right was a little behind. That was White there, poor little White. Mayson had seen his shaking hand when all of them stood in a circle around the hangar.

Again Mayson turned his head. His eyes tried to penetrate the half-dark. The same railroad below. Soon the place where he had seen the train. There would be a turn to the right, then. Oh, it was easy to see it all. Mayson could guess at almost anything from his perch a thousand feet high.

Five to six minutes more and then down. That was the way they had said. Down. They'd get out, all of them. They'd move forward, each with a gun in his hand. And step after step they'd moved forward, just as Mayson had moved forward.

They all wanted to do that. They were envious of Mayson, even when they first heard he'd landed on a German field. They wanted to do that and more. Gamble! Hell, yes, it was a gamble, and the odds were against them, against them a thousand to one!

Mayson turned. He wanted to see if White was there. Yes, just tagging along. Poor devil, he didn't want to come. Everyone knew he didn't want to come. But he came on just like the rest of them. Mayson could see the outline of his head, a head that was almost out of sight in the dark. It seemed rather strange out there, just a strip of red flaming out of the exhaust, and the black form all around.

But there was something else. Another strip of red,

and another black form. One, two . . . seven, eight! There were eight out in back of him. Mayson counted again. Robinson on the left and poor White on the right. But out beyond him there was another plane. Mayson couldn't believe his eyes.

Hell! It couldn't be. But it was—an extra plane trailed out to the right of White. There was no mistake. One couldn't make a mistake about seeing the bright red flame of an exhaust in the dark.

They were over the woods, now, and just on the other side was the fated field of the Eleventh. Mayson scanned the radial dial of his wrist-watch. Fifty-two. The rain had suddenly doubled its effort, and almost as suddenly they passed into a cloud bank. Everything up and below was a black-gray, a thick jellylike darkness. The trees below were obscured. After a moment it cleared. The light grew quickly, and beneath him the field of the Eleventh broke into view.

Otto Stine was there some place. Mayson felt his pulse-beat quicken, and his hand tighten upon the stick, he counted the men behind. Eight, again. One . . . two . . . eight!

DOWN and down. Slowly, softly, as softly as it was possible with a muffled motor. But the Germans would hear. Their ears were trained to know when another plane is coming. They had to know—or die. And there was something more than just hearing the half-silent hum of a motor. There was the feeling that a plane is in the air. Real pilots do more than hear. They feel.

And they knew, the Germans down there below, that planes were in the air. They awakened from their fitful sleep and listened. But they didn't listen long. They were already up, waiting and looking anxiously. The posts stopped dead still in their tracks. Fear possessed them as they waited and looked. They still remembered, those men who were drenched with rain and wet, that a man and plane had come before. They hadn't thought it were possible then. They knew it was possible now. And so they waited and watched until they heard a guttural command. The sleeping sprang to life.

But they'd been taken unawares.. They didn't have time, those Germans. They couldn't have time, because they didn't believe their ears. They depended too much upon their reason, and their reason had told them that no plane would come over—not at the end of a night like that. It was too mad to think about, too impossible for such a thing to happen in the rain, the

wet and the dark. No one would be that mad, they thought—and all because they didn't know they were playing a game with gamblers. Men who took a long chance and hoped to win, even through the first firing of a machine gun whose shots were wild. The cold cramped the gunner's fingers and he couldn't handle the belt with the other. But he'd sent his message that the Germans were ready, some of them—and the rest would be there soon.

Then his gun jammed. And so did his brain, for he sat there looking out at the dark figures that had come suddenly, strangely, like phantoms out of the night. They'd come to land on a German field. And they landed on a German field. Nothing this side of death could stop them, and it was too late now to change. Death might stop them after they got there, but not before. Their wheels were passing over the soggy earth. Slowly they settled, wings tip to tip, until they dropped and bumped along until they came to a halt.

The gamblers were there, and they'd come like madmen, upon a mission as mad as they.

CHAPTER IX GAMBLERS ALL!

HUTS AND THE HANGARS BELCHED out their men. Gray-green uniforms through the thick wet light. A few frantic shots broke the silence that played above the idling motors. Surprised, awed, the Germans scrambled out of their beds. A freakish thing had happened and was happening, and they ran out, shouting in their confusion. Some swore as they stumbled toward the field, running to the first of their three hangars. There they stopped dead still and faltered, wondering in that cold dampness and wet. There was no word, no cry then. They looked—watched—waited. Through the murky light, and the falling rain they could see nine planes on their field, and nine men leap from their cockpits and come walking forward, step by step, each clutching his Colt and staring at the face of death.

Suddenly came a challenge, "Halt!" But no sound came from the nine who walked forward other than the sound of feet slushing over the rain-soaked field.

Again the sharp challenge, "Stop!"

And Mayson knew the voice. "I came back for something," he shouted.

They were walking forward again. Again the slush of feet over the field.

"You won't get away!"

Mayson stopped still. So did the men behind. A sudden confusion enveloped him. He could see the gray-green uniforms before him, men ready, waiting. Over at the side of one of the hangars, two crouched at the back of a machine gun.

Robinson was behind Mayson, now. Mayson could hear him as he took his last few faltering steps. "What the hell happens now?" whispered Robinson hoarsely.

"I don't know. They should do something."

And they did. The two men at the gun crouched lower. Pellets of steel struck the field. Then came a strained calm. No one acted. None moved. From the hangars a lone man walked. He was safe. He knew he was safe. Within ten paces of Mayson he stopped dead still. Stine had come!

They stood staring at each other, he and Mayson, their features hardly discernible through the fog and wet. Yet Mayson knew who it was, and so did the rest.

"Are you crazy?" said Stine.

"I may be. I don't know. But I came here to get something."

"You think you'll get it?"

"You'd save a lot of killing."

"Throw down your guns," said Stine.

"We aren't throwing down any guns. When they drop, it will be because we can't hold them."

Then the man who had followed on the right came forward. He was two paces back of Mayson before anyone knew that it was Arthur Lem. He had a Colt in each hand, as he stood waiting for what might come, for what might come to Lem, who had called himself a gambler. His head was bent a little forward, his clasped hands still and tense. His face was a mask.

It was Arthur Lem's poker face that looked out at that German field that day. It looked out upon the field as it had over aces back to back. His face was his poker face, but his heart wasn't the same, nor was his soul. They, too, had aces back to back, and they were making their bets against Arthur Lem. He was trying to play a game that wasn't his.

But he couldn't forget the odds. He had wanted to throw all that aside. He had thought he could, but when the time came, he wavered. Even his first words showed how he stood.

"The odds are against you, Mayson. You'd better take off. I'll hold them."

Odds! Always odds! Even then!

The voice of Lem came like a blow. A blankness came to Mayson's mind for a moment. Arthur Lem! Crazy as hell! Lem, the gambler was helping!

"That you, Lem?" he asked.

"Yes."

Mayson was still watching Stine, and Stine was quiet. Stine was waiting. Stine knew he had the lot of them. "I'm not giving much more time," said Stine.

But Lem had to talk. Even there in the middle of that German flying field he had to talk.

Even in the face of the German guns at the hangar, he had to talk, because his heart and soul were betting aces against his poker face.

"I thought I was a gambler, once. Maybe it was yesterday, or the time you landed here before."

"You saw me?"

"Followed you over, Mayson. Lousy to have waited until the numbers were right, maybe. Better tell the boys to take off, now. Better tell them Lem is holding the Germans back until they get away, because he wants to make things square with himself."

"I'm telling my men to open up on you," said Stine.

MAYSON leaped forward, Stine fell, and as he fell, he screeched. The two who crouched over their machine gun fired. White crumpled up, drew himself to his knees, and fell again. But in a moment he was up. He ran forward to where Mayson and Stine lay struggling upon the ground. Robinson was at his side, standing. He had shot once. Again a red flame played from the end of his Colt.

A man fell. Then everything went mad. Men raced, screamed and shouted. A plane took off like a shot. It held the air at fifty feet, and circled maddeningly, its guns going on and on.

"I wanted to gamble once. I wanted to really gamble once."

Mayson could hear. He knew Lem was shouting to himself. But Mayson couldn't see Lem. He could only see the face, stark upon the wet earth before him.

"Earring! Earring! Take it out!" Mayson's hands clutched at Stine's throat. He could see the rigid muscles move, and he could feel the pounding of his heart.

Three of the nine stood behind, not far from the planes. They had paused there, not ten feet apart. They didn't know what was happening, nor did they care. They were shooting craps with their God, and that was all that seemed to matter to them. White was standing

out in front. His hand held his Colt, but not a shot had been fired. There was red on the right of his chest, and his hand was cupped over a red hole. His face was white, whiter than ever his face had been.

"Mayson, I think they got me," he called.

Major Arthur Lem was holding his own. He was down on the ground and every few moments he'd shoot. He was taking the least of chances even then. Gambler—never, not Arthur Lem. Even when he dropped down, he had it figured out that his chances were five times better lying down than when he was standing.

The Germans who were around the edge of the hangar were firing shots, but the shots didn't help. The rain, damp and drizzling, still fell. The dark was passing. There was just a little light in the heavens. Stine could see the light as he twisted and squirmed under the weight of Mayson, who'd come there to get the thing he wanted, who'd come to gamble with his life for the thing he wanted. Stine knew the men at the hangars would come soon, he only had to wait, that was all. Then they'd get Mayson and the rest.

Out in front, Lem called out, "They're bunching to come. You fellows go back. Go back!"

"Fast!" shouted Robinson. He'd backed away with the rest of the men. In front the Germans were running forward, fast steps over the wet earth.

"Good God, make it fast!" he shouted again. He ran back, grasped Mayson's belt and pulled him to his feet. Lem was up, too, but standing still, waiting.

Then the confusion of the field reached its utmost. Mayson again realized the futility of his gamble. He was up. Stine was up, too. His face was white. His mouth sagged, limply; his eyes were staring, and he was shouting madly, insanely.

Mayson turned, raced toward the planes. The Germans followed. Two machine guns rattled their steel out into the damp air.

Halfway back, Mayson passed White, still lying on the earth, his face up, hand clutched at his side.

"Come on, White. They're coming!"

White stumbled up. They got to the side of his plane and he jumped in. He never knew he had the power, but it came from some place.

Mayson watched him for a fraction of a second. Then he turned toward his own ship. Not until then did he see the other men. Robinson was standing at the side of his own plane. He was waving frantically to some one, and when Mayson turned again, he saw that the Germans had stopped.

OUT in front stood Major Lem. He was crouched down, and he had a Colt in each hand. He was holding them off. But they'd get him, the Germans would. They'd get him like they might have gotten the rest. But Major Lem was holding his own.

For a brief moment Mayson watched him, and in the space between, planes flashed over the earth. They were taking off. The gamblers were taking off. In the confusion of it all, the Germans seemed incapable to get a single man. Their shots were wild, illy aimed at the planes that sailed off their field, one after another. Next to the last was Mayson. He took off in the space that was held open by Lem, the gambler.

And Lem was holding them off. He was waiting for the last of the eight to get clear of the field before he, too, made a break for his plane. Poor Major Lem! They'd get him. He didn't have a chance. He couldn't even gamble then, and he knew the end was coming. He stood facing them, a gun in each hand, but he'd shot his last round, and all he could do was wait. Wait for the end of Major Lem, who was trying to prove to himself that he could be a gambler, even though he lost his life trying.

He started to turn when the last plane had taken to the air, but something came into his mind then. He'd be a gambler, yet. He'd take a chance in a million. He'd play a game that wasn't his, and he'd try to get away with it.

And then, in that strained moment when all was confusion, when the air seemed filled with missiles that would sever the line of destiny of Major Lem, he walked forward. He walked forward with the premeditated ease of a man who bets everything he ever wanted or ever got in this world. And every step he took forward was the wagering of another bet, a bet that was higher than his highest, and his odds were a million to one.

Step by step he took forward, forward into the awkward lines of the Germans, who didn't know or understand. Back of him his lone plane stood. Slowly, so slowly, the propeller turned over. It seemed to know that its master was betting all he had, aces that were back to back.

Step after step Lem walked forward. He never hesitated. His empty guns were clutched in his clammy hands. His eyes were set, but coolly so. His heart beat as a man's who knows what he does, and somehow understands.

Long since, the last of the planes had taken off. Two of them still hovered over the field. Mayson was there,

and so was Robinson. They were watching, but neither of them knew what was passing through the mind of Arthur Lem. They knew he had followed, and now they saw him as he walked forward until he seemed swallowed up by the men on the field.

Needless to wait after that—needless to see Lem killed. But Mayson waited. He saw Robinson circle away, and make for height, and then his eyes again sought the field, watched the struggle of the man who had something to prove to himself, who was taking his first great chance when he found it, who'd suddenly forgotten the odds that make a man win, and only remembered the gambler's chance.

Not until a Fokker pulled away from the field did Mayson know it was time to go. And then he knew it, knew it by heart. It was a bare hundred meters behind him when he headed for the field of the 25th.

HE DIDN'T know how long it had been, not White, when he landed upon the field of the Twenty-fifth, but he knew he'd been through hell. By the grace of God he'd cleared the trees, and by the grace of God he'd sailed over the trenches.

The men in the trenches had done their best to help. They didn't know why the flyers were dropping back over the lines, one by one. All they knew was that help was needed and they were doing their best.

They'd seen the running fight. They'd seen the Germans trail Yank planes to the lines, and from there the men on the ground took up the fight.

Guns blazed, machine guns chattered and wiggled until a Fokker went down, and then half of the men on the lines shouted their lungs out.

"Got him, by God, some one got him!"

They threw their caps into the drizzling rain that fell from the heavens. Their guns fired with a new fury. And God save the plane, Yank or German, that passed the line of their sights!

There was a crowd around White at Hangar Number Two. But his eyes were not on them. He was looking up at the sky, watching for the sky to give up her half-dead, until two specks came out from nowhere.

"Look! Who are they?"

They waited until some one said, "Miller and Hansen."

The two flyers sneaked in with a fear of hell in their eyes.

Another spot in the east—Drake. And another—Robinson. White was pale and watching. The men around him were watching, too, and his hand that

lay across his chest was red with blood. Robinson was watching him, and White heard him say, "They got you?" And he heard himself answer, "Nothing much." But Robinson knew how much it was. He could tell. But he couldn't do anything more than stare—and talk.

"We left Lem," he said,

"He shot some one there. I saw the man fall. They must have killed him for it."

Strange voice of Robinson—didn't sound like Robinson.

"He hid back of the hangar until you left. Then took off."

Another buzzing came from the east.

"Maybe—maybe— Robinson's voice trailed off, swallowed up by the mighty roar of motors. "One—there's another. Two! Hell, two of them there!" he shouted like a child. "Kinsell!" he cried. "And Clark. Yes, Clark—"

He watched them get out of their planes. Clark, holding his hands over his ears, eyes limpid like those that have seen some one die. He walked to where White lay on the ground.

"What the hell?" Robinson asked him.

"Saw a man go down," Clark said. "Hell of a distance away. But I could see him."

"Mayson," said Robinson dully. "Mayson." He felt it.

"Not far from here. God, how I hate it!"

"A bunch of Fokkers there at the lines. How the hell did they get there? Always thought Spads were faster than Fokkers." Robinson didn't know what else to say. There was a single thought in his mind. Mayson—down!

They stood there, the seven who had flown out tip to tip. They were pitifully looking up at the darkened sky to the east, waiting for two men who had gone across, but hadn't come back—looking up at the sky to the east, where men were killed, where holes came into them like holes in the chest of little White.

CHAPTER X THE LAST CHANCE

AND SEVEN THAT HAD GONE through hell had come back. They'd come back by the grace of God, and their eyes still looked vacantly at the sky—because the sky still had two to give up.

"Raining again," said Robinson. But his heart was pounding in his chest.

No one answered.

"It's five minutes past eight. No, only three."

They knew what that meant; there were two men who wouldn't fly back to the field. They knew that, anyway. And they were suffering—suffering out there at the yawning mouth of Hangar Number Two.

As they suffered, the moanful sound of a klaxon swept over the field. A sentry challenged, and brakes ground. Then a voice. The car passed on. It swept by the corner of Hangar Number One, and came to a sudden halt as the driver turned to one of its two occupants.

"The 25th, Miss," he said. She nodded, and turned to the soldier who sat by her side.

"Yes, Miss Barnit."

Jones turned away from her, turned to the men who stood just a few paces away. Robinson came forward hesitantly, watching the sadness in her eyes, and the faint, forced smile upon her lips.

"Mayson asked me to come." She didn't know what else to say. She felt strange. The men before her had somehow changed. They looked at her queerly, childishly, as if they'd just made a great discovery.

"Where is—" Her hand brushed her lips. Her intuition wrestled with her heart. "Why do you look at me like that?"

Robinson didn't want to answer. He stood looking calmly at her.

"Where is Philip Mayson?" she asked.

"We went across the lines." Robinson wanted to lie. He wanted to lie better than he had ever lied in his life. But he couldn't. His heart wouldn't let him. "We landed across the lines, and Mayson hasn't come back."

"Lem—did Lem send him?"

"No. He went across with us. Lem hasn't come back, either. He must be down, too."

"Why did they go?"

Jean Barnit waited expectantly for an answer, but only by looking at the face of Jimmie Robinson did she learn the truth. Mayson had gone over for an earring. He had gone over for the thing he wanted, and he had gone down instead.

The rain still fell, and the clouds hovered low. From far away came the sound of falling shells—as regular as the moving of a minute hand.

"Did he go down—far away?"

"No."

"We can go?"

"Yes."

She got back into the car. Robinson followed her in and Drake and Kinsel and Jones. They drove like mad over fields and roads. At intervals, posts that had once held barbed wire spoke mutely of the men who had died that others might pass on. On and on, endless, those few miles which brought them nearer and nearer the Front. At times shell holes blocked their path. Once a sentry challenged, looking inquiringly at the garb of an American Red Cross woman, who was looking for a man who was "down." But his challenge was answered, and they passed on.

After a while Drake raised his hand. "Stop here. It's over back of those trees."

Brakes ground again. The car jerked to a halt. Robinson was pointing. Out beyond those trees. It wasn't very far. Just a little way.

They walked through the things that had once been green trees in the spring time—green and lovely trees that only God could have made. And as they moved forward, two shapes of things came suddenly to their eyes—a plane that was twisted and tortured and lay upon the ground, and by it was another plane that was whole.

JUST a few feet in front, Philip Mayson was kneeling at the side of Arthur Lem. Mayson's head was raised; his eyes were upon Jean Barnit. She clutched her white hands, and uttered a single gasp.

"It's he," she said. "He's alive."

"Yes, alive."

Jean Barnit moved closer. "We thought you were dead! We waited—" And the tears kept coming, until her eyes fell upon the bloody face of Arthur Lem. His eyes were half-open, but there was a deadly glare in them. He was trying to breathe, and with every breath the torture of a soul played upon his thin lips. His right hand was clutched like the fist of a fighter.

Then his eyes opened. "White? Did White get back?" Lem was thinking about poor little White. Yes. White got back, and alive, and so did the rest. Only Lem and Mayson hadn't. Lem smiled a ghostlike smile. He knew, and so did the rest, that Lem, the gambler, was going to die.

Mayson was looking at Jean Barnit, across the form of Arthur Lem.

"Otto is dead, isn't he?" she suddenly asked.

Mayson paused, confused. He didn't want to answer. He felt he shouldn't but everybody was waiting for an answer.

"I think he's dead. I went back. I couldn't leave Lem there. And I saw him shoot. I was in the air. Lem was down below, and I saw him fighting. God, I don't know how he did what he did. He shot, then ran. There was a plane there, a Fokker. I don't know why they couldn't get him. He went crazy, and God must take care of a crazy man, at times. Lem was there on the ground. There were plenty of them around him. He fought as if he were crazy. They cornered him, but he got away in a Fokker. God knows how he did it. He got away when there was only a chance in a million. Not a chance in a million, do you hear me?"

Mayson was talking as fast as his voice would allow him. He was talking like a crazy man, now. Not like the old Mayson, but some one different. He was a fighter now, and he was telling about something he'd just seen. His eyes were flashing, and his hands were moving.

"Not a chance in a million, and he got away. Must have been crazy to do that. I don't know what got into him. But he got away, all right, and up into the air. I was near him when we ran into the Germans at the lines. Hundreds of them there under the clouds. We dived down low, just over the top of the lines. We were getting back. Nothing could stop us. And then—then—"

Lem moved a fraction of an inch. His tongue passed over his dry lips. He was listening to a far-off voice which told of the thing he had just done. And all of the time his fist clutched at his side.

"Then, after Lem got away, our soldiers got him. His own men got him from the ground. They didn't know in the trenches that Lem had just taken a chance in a million, and won!"

Mayson paused for a second. Jean Barnit stared at him, and breathing became more difficult for Arthur Lem.

"And that was the reason I didn't come back with

the rest. I had to get a man to make up for Lem—and I got him. But it would take a dozen to make up for Arthur Lem. A dozen of them down as Lem went down.” Mayson wasn’t himself, nor could he have been as he talked that day in the clearing, two miles back of the lines. And the rain still fell, fell softly, even upon the clutching fist of Arthur Lem. His head still leaned against the left knee of Philip Mayson. His eyes still had a starky stare, and his tongue passed over his lips again.

“Listen,” he said hoarsely, yet so softly it scarcely could be heard. It somehow sounded like the voice of a child. “I was a fake, until now. That’s the reason I went. I had something to prove to myself—that I could be a gambler—different kind of gambler, and win. And I won—”

They didn’t understand the meaning of what he said. They only watched the eyes of Arthur Lem close, open—and close again.

“Jean,” he whispered, “good luck. I got your last letter.”

“I sent the same one to Otto Stine. You both knew it was the end, didn’t you?” Jean moved a little closer. She took the clutching fist in her hands.

“Yes, we both knew. Good luck, Mayson. . . . Good luck, men. . . .”

He closed his eyes, then. The eyes of Arthur Lem, the gambler, were closed forever. Never again would he bet his aces that were back to back. He’d made his last bet, and he’d said he’d won. No one knew what he meant. But they somehow knew that a great gambler was dead. They somehow knew that with him passed the last of a great tribe who would have bet his soul, had the odds been right.

Lem was dead. Second after second passed. No one moved. Nothing, only the soul of Arthur Lem, which left his body, and passed on to a gamblers’ Heaven, where aces are ever back to back.

With his last breath, the fingers of his clutching white hand opened slowly. Within the palm of his hand, saved until the last—the death sentence of a dozen men—was the second green earring!

The green earring!

And Private Jones’ eyes rested for a moment upon the thing. Then he looked up at the sky, where men go crazy, crazy as hell; and he looked down at the earth where women walk, and men love them for it. And all of the time the rain ran in rivulets over his sunken cheeks.