



THE RODNEYS

by F.E. RECHNITZER

*Luke Was the Crack Flyer of His Squadron—And His Dad Was Just an Ack Emma,
But Nobody Knew It Until—*

AIR MECHANIC HOBAN'S feet dragged a bit as he lumbered across the tarmac toward the line of trim Spads. His spidery body seemed to stick out in knobs through his greasy overalls, and his drooping shoulders shook, now and then, under the impulse of a racking cough. He tried to hide the cough in a bit of waste as he trudged along.

Hoban looked neither right nor left.

He had all the appearances of a tired man. A man tired to death. Everything about him cried "tired," except his eyes. They gleamed with an almost fanatical light as he headed straight for the oil smeared ship on the end of the line.

His bony fingers seemed to caress Spad 2473 as he walked along its tapered fuselage. He paused to look into the cockpit before he crawled up on the left hand wing and commenced to wipe off the Hisso.

A smile of satisfaction crossed his seamed face as he tenderly drew the wad of waste along the cowling and flecked a drop of oil from a tappet. He paused in his work a moment and patted the stocky Vickers, on his side of the motor, with gnarled fingers. Fingers calloused and weatherbeaten. Fingers which indicated that Private Hoban had always been a hard-working man.

HIS face wrinkled into a smile as he glanced down at the gun. His keen gray eyes took in the length and breadth of the fighting ship. His thin lips moved. "I'm here at last," they muttered slowly. "In the same outfit with him. I got a lucky break for sure."

The wad of waste dropped softly on an oil spot and it was gone. He was enjoying his work. His lips puckered and a few bars of the latest popular ditty, a bit off key, drifted out on the sunny air.

Gripping the exhaust stack with his right hand, he started to lean forward. There was a smudge of smoke on the muzzle cup of the left hand Vickers he wanted to get. He didn't see the tall figure of Captain Rodney hurrying across the sod toward his ship.

The first inkling of Rodney's presence came to Hoban when he heard the captain's cutting voice.

"What the devil are you doing up there?" Rodney stood with feet outspread and hand on hips, as he stared up at the stooped figure on the wing. "I've told you mechanics a hundred times that I don't want you messing around my ship. That's Sergeant Tillings' job. Now get down."

HOBAN backed down the wing. A smile creased his face as he recognized the voice below him. He wanted to turn at once and face the speaker, but he kept himself in hand. His right foot hit the oily sod. His face was wreathed in smiles. His shoulders almost creaked as he squared them and came to a snappy salute.

Rodney's hands dropped from his hips as he stared into the oil smeared face of the man in front of him. His lips moved faintly as he looked into the smiling eyes.

"Father!" he exclaimed as he glanced over his shoulder toward the hangars. "What in thunder are you doing here?" There was a tinge of disappointment in the young captain's voice as he asked the question.

"I'm doing my bit, son." The mechanic wiped his greasy hands on the waste and then held one of them out to the man in front of him.

Rodney looked down at the hand and then across the tarmac to where a group of his fellow pilots were basking in the sun. His hands stayed at his side and the out-stretched fingers dropped.

"I'm sorry, son. Forgot that officers don't shake hands with privates. Kinda forgot that this is war." The mechanic stifled another coughing spell and then looked up into the eyes of the captain. "I just had to get into it, son. Tried everything an' they just went an' turned me down, they did."

"So you dyed your hair black, lied about your age and enlisted under an assumed name. Suppose you asked to be sent to this outfit, too?"

"Why, no, I didn't do that, son." The mechanic grinned. "I was right glad to find that they was sending me here, though. Got in this morning with the new draft of mechanics. I'll take right smart care of your ship for you. I'm proud of you."

"Forget that mush, father," growled the captain. "And you don't have to bother with my bus. I've got a man taking care of it."

Disappointment clouded the face of the old man. For a moment, the bit of oily waste dabbed at his nose. "You—you don't want your own dad takin' care of your airplane? Why, son, I was one of the best auto mechanics in the county, back home. You ain't blamin' me because I wanted to get into the war, are you?"

"Yes," retorted Rodney, "I am. You should have stayed at home, with your garage business. This certainly won't be good for you."

"I sold out to Hank Robins, before I left home. Figured I won't be needin' it any more. No Rodney ever shirks his duty when his country is at war. I went to Cuba with Roosevelt, you know."

"YES, I know," snorted the captain. "I've heard that story before. You're always telling some wild yarn of how you licked the Spaniards single handed. Always bragging about your shooting. If you want to do me a big favor, father, you'll keep quiet around here about how you won that tin medal of yours."

A look of bewilderment dimmed the old-timer's eyes. "Why, I'm a good shot an' you know it, Luke. I knocked a Spaniard off at—"

"Yes, yes," growled Rodney, "I know all about it. I've heard it a hundred times or more. But forget it. This is a real war."

The old man's shoulders squared themselves as he looked up into his son's eyes. "That was a real war, too, Luke. Men got killed just like they do in this one. Maybe not so fast, but we killed plenty. Why, one day I caught—"

"I told you to forget it, didn't I?" The narrow shoulders drooped lower than ever. A hurt look crept into the old fellow's eyes. "You're kinda different, son. You was always kinda uppish, but never like this. What's got into you?"

RODNEY glanced up at a flock of Nieuports heading for the front before he spoke. "Father," he said, "you've got to realize that I've got a reputation to uphold around here. Now don't take it the wrong way when I ask you to forget that your name is Rodney."

"You don't want them to know that I'm your dad, is that it?" There was resentment in the old man's tone.

"Not exactly that," replied Rodney slowly. "But being's you've already enlisted under the name of Hoban, you had better keep your mouth shut about being any relation to me. Might cause a lot of trouble. You understand, don't you?"

"Yes, I understand, son," murmured the old man. "You don't want them to know that I'm your dad; might disgrace you in their eyes. Want me to be just one of the help around here, like the hired hands at home."

Rodney fumbled in his pocket for a cigarette. Found one. Tapped it on the side of the fuselage and then lit it. "Don't be surprised if I snap an order at you now an' then. I can't play any favorites around here," he muttered.

"I see, Luke," nodded the old man. Suddenly his eyes brightened. His head came back. "I almost forgot to tell you, son. Tim is coming to the front in a few days. Just got a letter from England. He says he's all through with his trainin' and will be out here, somewhere, in a few days."

"Yeah, an' he'll be sent back in a couple of days," grumbled Rodney, flicking the ash from his cigarette with his little finger. "He hasn't got either the nerve or the spunk for this game. Couldn't get into our air service. Had to go up to Canada and join the Royal Air Force. Suppose he'll be coming around here trying to give me advice on how to fly. If he does, I'll send him packing."

"Don't you worry," grinned the old man. "Tim's got plenty of nerve. Kinda reminds me of a kid we had down in Cuba—"

"You better go back to the hangars, Dad," said Rodney evenly. "They'll be wondering what's kept us talking so long."

The old man looked searchingly into his son's face, and then turned away to hide his tear dimmed eyes. He walked a few paces and then tossed the bit of greasy waste to the ground.

"Private Hoban!" came his son's brisk voice. "Pick that trash up. We don't go throwing things on the ground around here. The trash cans in the hangars are meant for that stuff."

PRIVATE HOBAN walked slowly back and picked up the waste. His feet dragged more than ever as he lumbered toward the hangars.

"Bawl you out for messing around that bus of his?" asked one of the mechanics as the old man walked into "A" flight hangar.

The stoop-shouldered air mechanic hesitated a moment and then nodded. "Seems like he don't want anybody but Sergeant Tillings working around his airplane. Thinks the sergeant's a perty good mechanic."

"Yeah," muttered the younger man, "an' he thinks he's a pretty good pilot. The skipper was a decent sort of egg when he first joined up with this outfit, but now he's got a swelled head, ever since he got his fifth Hun and that captaincy."

"I HEAR he's been put in for a tin medal. Won't be any living around the same field with him, then. Some day some sharp shootin' Hun's gonna knock some of that conceit out of him, and then he'll be all right again."

"There ain't any Hun that—" the old man stopped. A sheepish grin spread across his face as he turned out and tossed the waste into the trash bin. He walked over to a Hiss which was resting on the blocks, waiting for a mechanic to operate on its pistons.

A week passed and in that time the old man had

received no more than a nod from his son, who now sported a bright new ribbon under his silver wings. He had wanted to tell Luke that Tim was flying Bristol Fighters somewhere along the British front.

Once he had approached Luke to tell him the news, but before he could open his mouth, he had been sent hurrying back to the hangars for a socket wrench.

When he returned, Luke had disappeared.

When the squadron took off, the old man was always somewhere around to watch his son hit the air. When they came back, he was always on the job to grasp Rodney's wing tip and hold it steady while he taxied into the line, even if the exertion of running beside the ship did bring on a spasm of coughing.

One day he watched Luke take off on a special mission. His heart fluttered under his bony ribs as his eldest crawled confidently into the narrow cockpit of Spad 2473. He saw the C.O. walk up and talk earnestly into the pilot's ear for a moment, clasp his hand and then step away.

The old man steadied himself against one of the supports while he watched the stubby little fighting ship fade into the blue over the trees down the field.

"Hear what he's going after?" asked one of the mechanics, as he came to the doorway and stood beside the old man.

"Special mission, they call it," muttered Private Hoban. "Sent over to locate a concentration point. G.H.Q. is expectin' the Huns to attack soon. They want him to find it."

The mechanic whistled softly through his teeth before he spoke. "He'll get another cross for sure, this afternoon."

"A cross?" asked the old man, half turning.

"Yeah," grinned the mechanic. "Either another tin one or a nice shiny wooden one."

An hour went by. Then another. Luke had not returned.

Every opportunity to get away from his work inside the hangar found the old man staring into the blue. Soon the whole airdrome was helping in the watch.

A STRANGE ship landed. The old man, at the first sound of the motor, had rushed to the door. A look of bitter disappointment registered on his grease-smudged features as he watched a dull green two-seater taxi swiftly up to the line. He turned to go back into the hangar but paused when he heard someone call his name.

Over on the line, he saw a sergeant point his way and then say something to the man at his side. Hoban

stared a moment and then walked swiftly out of the hangar toward the slight figure on the line. His lips were tightly compressed as he advanced on the man in the Sidcot suit.

"Dad!" he heard the figure cry, as it trotted toward him with outstretched hand. "Dad, I'm glad to see you, awfully glad."

The old man gulped once and then met the hand. "Tim, lad, I'm glad to see you, too."

The youngster in the Sidcot suit smiled and threw his arm across the narrow shoulders. "Come on over and take a peek at my Bristol—" He paused and looked back toward the hangars. "Where's Luke?" he asked.

THE old man shook his head. "I don't know, son," he said slowly. "He went off on a special mission a couple of hours ago, an' hasn't come back."

"Missing, you think?" asked Tim, pressing the thin shoulder under his hand.

"I'm afraid he is, Tim. They said it would be a dangerous job. They would come to a Rodney for a hard task, wouldn't they?" There was a gleam of pride in the old fellow's voice.

The two men walked toward the two-seater. A mechanic passed them, halted and then called back. "Hear about Rodney, Hoban?" he asked.

Father and son whirled in their tracks.

"No, what is it?" asked the old man, a bit breathlessly.

"He's down, just back of the German lines." The mechanic walked back to where they stood. "Crashed in a field outside of Birtrancourt. Flock of Fokkers ganged him, just as he was about to cross the lines." "Do they know whether he's alive?" demanded Luke's father, clutching at the mechanic's arm.

"Yeah, he's alive. One of the balloon guys saw him crawl away from the crash. They're laying a box barrage around the field, while they figure out some way of gettin' him. He's in a tough spot. He always bragged that the Huns would never trap him. They got him, though. Bet his head ain't so swelled right now."

Tim and his father stood in silence as the mechanic walked on toward the hangars with the news he had just picked up in the office.

"So they got Luke at last," murmured the old man, staring off toward the east.

"Don't worry, dad," grinned Tim, slapping his father on the back. "He's not dead yet."

"What do you mean?" asked the old man, turning to his son.

"I'M GOING to get him. If there's any chance of landing on that field, I'll set down an' pick him up. You said they need that information, didn't you?"

"But you can't go alone," gasped the old man, looking toward the Bristol which stood with its motor still ticking over.

"I'll have to."

"You will not," snapped the old man striding toward the ship. "My name might not be Rodney right now, but I'm a fighting Rodney just the same. Come on, lad, we'll show them."

"But you've never been in the air." Tim reached out and grabbed at his father's thin arm. "And besides, you don't know how to handle a Lewis gun."

"Don't I know, now." The old man had the light of battle in his eyes. "We had a machine-gun school next to us, in the States. One of the instructors was a friend of mine. I can shoot one well enough to keep a few Huns off. Remember, I'm one of the best shots in the county. Only thing is, I won't know a Hun plane when I see one—Never mind. I'll pepper anything that comes near us."

"You really mean that you're game. Dad?" Tim studied his father's face.

"Of course I am," smiled the old man. "Come on, we're wastin' precious time."

The sand bags in the rear cockpit were dumped hurriedly on the ground. Tim strapped his father into the observer's harness and then slipped into his own seat.

The throttle went forward and the Bristol hit the air and clawed for the blue.

The altimeter needle read three thousand when Tim turned around to see how his father was taking it. The old boy was smiling, game to the core. He smelled battle.

The Rolls Royce in the nose of the Bristol purred steadily as they crossed the lines. Archie started to break in crashing black clusters around them. The stink of powder made the old man's nostrils quiver. The old war horse was feeling his oats.

Tim pointed to where a cloud of dust hedged a green field and the old man nodded understandingly. They were nearing their objective.

The throttle came back. The Rolls stopped its roar and the prop cut the air with a swish-swish. The barrage lifted from one end of the field as the man in the balloon basket shouted his orders through the phones while he watched the Bristol gliding in for a landing.

The trucks clumped down on the dirt, at the side of a wrecked Spad. Tim was out on the wing in a second and leaning over the cowling towards his father.

"You stay here," he shouted. "Keep your eyes open for troops. Give 'em hell with that pea shooter, if you see any."

The old man nodded and grinned as he pointed to where Luke lay behind a clump of brush.

With the two Lewis guns covering him, Tim ran over to where Luke lay groaning. "Come on, we'll get you out. Here, throw your arm over my shoulder." It seemed years to Tim before he got his brother up to the side of the Bristol. The old man reached down, grabbed his unconscious son by the shoulders and, with Tim pushing from below, hoisted him into the rear cockpit.

While the Bristol bumped across the uneven ground for the take-off, Luke's bleeding head was held steady by his father's toil-worn hands. The rattle of the trucks stopped. The ship was in the air again. The old man stood up and reached for the Lewis guns, resting his calloused hands tenderly on the trips.

THE old man saw them first. He pounded on the cowling and pointed into the skies as Tim turned his head. Tim nodded, and the old man smiled as he lined up his sights on the advancing specks. There they came. Ten of them. Ten Pfalzes ready for the kill! Twisting lines of gray smoke wove around the two-seater as the man who went by the name of Hoban raised his scarf mounting a trifle, glanced between the twin barrels and then pressed the trigger. The guns bucked and jumped, shaking his narrow shoulders. His chin rested on the spade grips and his eyes gleamed, while tracer poured from his guns into the black blob of a Hun motor.

Fabric shredded along the sides of the Bristol as Tim sat hunched over the stick. Splinters flashed from struts, showing gleaming white scars on the varnished struts. The *rat-tat-tat-tat* of the Lewis guns mingled with the *clack-clack-clack* of Spandaus, as Tim threw the stick over just in time to escape a withering fire from the side.

A tight turn brought him around again, behind a Pfalz which had overshot its mark. His thumbs pressed the Bowden control. Twin streams of glowing slugs zig-zagged through the air and into the Jerry ship. The Pfalz was halfway around a turn when Tim's bullets ate their way into the cockpit. The Boche ship quivered a moment and then the nose went down.

Tim turned to call his father's attention to his victory just in time to see the old man jump gleefully up and down in the cockpit and point to where a thin plume of smoke trailed through the air, headed for the ground.

Spandau slugs started to tear into the twisting Bristol again, as Tim brought the bus around in a turn which made the old man hang on for dear life and forget about his guns for the moment.

The odds had lessened, and Tim was slowly edging his way west. Each turn brought him closer to the lines and Luke's home field.

Across the splendor of the evening sky, the battle raged. A thin streamer of black drifted earthward as the front sights of the Bristol picked up another black-crossed hulk. Tim heard a burst of bronze-sheathed hate rip into his ship. He listened and then smiled, as the answer came from the chattering Lewis guns in back. Then he saw the Fokkers.

THE Bristol lay over on a wing and the old man, knees braced against the side, poured a withering fire into a ship sliding by underneath. His guns chattered and bucked. His head bobbed under the impulse of the snarling guns. Then there was silence.

The old man looked at his guns in amazement. He had never dreamed of their stopping. For a moment he shook them in rage, while smoking slugs bounced off the fuselage.

The ship whirled. Earth seemed to trade places with sky.

Then the two guns up front began to yammer their song of hate. A Fokker limped away from the fight.

As the Bristol came back on an even keel, the old man threw back his head and laughed. In his hand he held an empty ammunition drum. He knew the reason why the guns had decided to quit, just when he had a Fokker dead in his sights.

He snickered softly to himself as he reached down for the extra drums. He slipped them over the posts, gave them a whirl, pressed the trigger. They spewed fire. A Fokker roared down the chute behind the Bristol's tail. Slugs embroidered a pattern from the elevators to the cockpit. A whining bullet plucked at the old man's sleeve and buried itself in the cowling.

A BLOOD crusted hand crept over the edge of the longeron, its long fingers clutching the padded rim of the cockpit. The old fellow smiled, disengaged the fingers and let the hand slip toward the floor after giving it a reassuring squeeze.

"It's all right, Luke," he yelled. "We're going to get you out. They ain't gonna stop the Rodneys. Hey, let go my leg, I got work to do." He swung the guns around on the scarf mounting and poured a lethal burst into a Hun. The Fokker stalled and fell off on a wing.

"Got another, Tim, I got another." He reached over and slapped the pilot on the back, and laughed as he pointed to the Fokker which was tumbling earthward.

Tim was dodging Fokkers and Pfalzes right and left, as he struggled to bring the now riddled Bristol closer to the lines. Every now and then he had to break off his twisting flight, while his father drove a Hun ship off their tail.

THE lines were in sight now. But the Huns, seeing their quarry slipping from their grasp, increased the fury of their attack. One green nosed Fokker came barging and tried to come up under the two-seater. Tim saw him coming and banked. The old man had him at point-blank range and opened up with both guns.

For a second, two streams of tracer blazed from the muzzles of the Lewis guns in the hands of the old scrapper. Then one of the guns stopped. Not because it was out of ammunition or because it was jammed, but because the old man had been hit. A slug had ripped its way through his left arm.

Tim looked over his shoulder. His face blanched as he saw his father, with blood welling from his shattered arm, pouring lead into the Fokker with his right hand gun. Tim could see the old man struggling to get his thumb over the other trip so as to fire both guns.

The Huns, seeing the observer waver, tore in to finish off the Bristol. Guns blazed and the two-seater struggled through a web of tracer.

A streaking slug tore at Tim's cheek as he dodged the onslaught. Another found a haven in one of the old man's shoulder blades. It knocked the old fellow to his knees but, kneeling partly on the prostrate Luke and partly on the blood smeared floorboards, he continued to pour lead into the attackers until the firing pin clicked on an empty chamber.

The old battler grinned faintly as he struggled to shift his thumb over on the other trip. He knew that there were a few more rounds in the left hand gun. His hands fumbled around the grip. The smile grew fainter. The hand slipped slowly away from the gun. His head dropped below the edge of the cock-pit.

When Tim turned, the old man was out of sight. He couldn't see him as he slid to the bottom of the cockpit. He couldn't see the smile that came over the

old fellow's wrinkled face as he heard the halfconscious Luke murmur, "Dad."

Spads began to shower down on the attacking Hun ships. Help was at hand. Tim put his nose down and dove for the lines, leaving the new arrivals to finish the game. He was going back with two wounded men, one of whom carried important information, and the other who was his dad.

The Bristol roared across the lines and headed into the setting sun. Tim sat tense at the stick, fearful lest one of the wounded men roll over on a control wire. He was afraid to bank and flew a straight course.

As the shadows lengthened across the field, the riddled Bristol set down and lumbered up to the line. Willing hands helped unload the wounded men from the back office. The C.O. caught Luke's whispered information before the two men were shipped off to the hospital, with Tim riding at their sides.

THREE mornings later, the old man lay propped up on his cot in the base hospital. He hadn't seen Luke since he had passed out in the cockpit, and he was worried.

The door swung open, and the old man's eyes popped.

Seated in a wheel chair, propelled by Tim, was Luke.

"Hello, Dad, old boy," was Luke's cheery greeting the minute he was inside the room. "How ya feeling?"

"Great," snorted the man on the cot. "Wish they'd let me outta here. How are you boys feelin' today?"

"Fine, Dad," smiled Tim, slipping around the chair and sitting on the edge of the bed. "They said we could come in an' see you for a coupla minutes. Kinda nice for all of us to be together again. We may be together for good, you know."

"How come?" queried the old man looking over at Luke, who seemed a bit embarrassed.

"I'M GOING to try an' have Tim transferred to our outfit, Dad," Luke grinned. "We need scrappers like him in our outfit. Don't think it'll take him long to get on to flyin' a Spad. Too bad you're so old, or maybe we could make a pilot out of you. You're going to be a sergeant; C.O. told me so yesterday.

"You'll be known as Sergeant Rodney—no more of this Hoban stuff. He gave me a good dressing down for not letting him know that you were my dad. I deserved it, too, Dad."

The old man plucked at the corner of the sheet for a moment, and then looked across at the two boys with a shy smile. "We kinda had fun the other day, didn't we?"

"I'll say we did," laughed Tim, leaning back on the cot. "Say, Dad, how do you like this business of fighting in the air?"

The old fellow grinned. "Fine an' dandy. Why, do you know, when those bullets started to smack around me, it reminded me of that day at San Juan—" He paused and flushed as he looked into Luke's eyes.

"What about it, Dad?" the flyer said, looking steadily at his father. "I'd like to hear it, wouldn't you, Tim?"

Tim nodded.

The old man settled himself on the pillows, smiled as he recalled the story, and told it to the boys for the hundred and first time.

Both listened to the tale as if they had never heard it before.

