



SPY DROME

by H.P.S. GREENE

Cornered by a fat little spy, a conspiring squadron commander and an M.S.E. who rigged the Spad for a crash, what could Von Blon do? His last landing was on a German field, hands in the air.

TEN STURDY LITTLE SPADS swept along the Front on their evening patrol, looking for trouble. Their powerful Hisso motors roared, and their wires sang the challenge that the American markings on their wings mutely proclaimed to all ships bearing the black cross of Germany.

In one of the hindmost Spads sat Lieutenant Hugo Von Blon, tingling with the love of adventure and battle which he had inherited from the ancestor who had crossed the Atlantic almost a century and a half before to join Washington's Army. Von Blon had been with the squadron for a week, and engine trouble had kept him out of every fight since he joined. But now his motor was hitting strong.

It looked as if he would get into the next scrap all right. He grinned joyfully across at his former schoolmate, and lifelong pal, Pat Thompson, and Pat grinned back, and shook his fist toward Germany.

Suddenly the nerves of the Spad pilots tingled. There was no radio connection between the ships, but to keyed-up nervous systems a kind of telepathy often served as well. The leader of the patrol pointed northward, and upward.

Following the direction of his finger, Von Blon saw a flight of planes a mile or two away, and perhaps two thousand feet above them. Germans they must be—they were well inside the German lines, and the enemy anti-aircraft guns weren't shooting at them.

The Americans jerked their throttles wide, and

pulled the Spads' noses up as they started after their foes, in spite of the advantage that the Germans had of altitude, and position inside their own lines. Von Blon jiggled around in his seat with joyful anticipation at the prospect of a real combat. But only for a moment.

As he gave her the gun, the motor roared full out for a moment—then something went wrong. It coughed and sputtered. It was missing badly. The needle on the tachometer dropped back below fourteen hundred revolutions a minute.

The other Spads drew rapidly away. Pat Thompson alone hung back for an instant with his friend, then, realizing that there was nothing he could do, he gave his own ship the gun again, and tore away after the others, eager to get into the fight.

Von Blon cursed with rage. Again the jinx was riding with him—keeping him out of the scrap. He jockeyed his throttle, and turned on his other tank. He pounded on the fuselage, and raved into the onrushing air until his hand and his throat were sore. No use—his engine had gone back on him again.

He watched his comrades catch and engage the Germans, who didn't seem eager to fight, but kept withdrawing farther into Germany. From afar Von Blon saw them careen and gyrate in the sky, and he saw four ships go tearing down, one by one, wrapped in the black pall of smoke which served so many flyers for a shroud, without knowing whether the victims were friend or foe.

Sadly, he turned his crippled ship and limped for home, with bitterness in his soul. He arrived at the field at the same time as the rest of the flight, and his heart sank when he saw that there were only eight ships left, including his own. He had a premonition of disaster which proved to be justified when they had all landed, and he found that his friend—the only friend that he had in the squadron, Pat Thompson—was one of the pilots who had gone down in flames.

Tears of sorrow for his friend, and of anger that luck had kept him from being in the fight where he might have helped him, surged into his eyes, but he fought them back. He swore that he would avenge Pat the next day.

AS HE sat at his desk in his office, a one-roomed building among the trees on the edge of the flying field, the face of Major Trompett, the commanding officer of the squadron, was set in cold, inflexible lines. The major had not changed an opinion in twenty years, which was one of the reasons why he still

remained a major. He did not stir from his seat as the Spads of his squadron returned from their patrol.

It was part of the major's code to show no undue interest in the flyers under his command, and he sat motionless waiting for the operations officer to come in and make his report. He did not even attempt to count the ships, as they straggled in one by one to land.

"Well?" he demanded, harshly, when the operations officer came in at last, panting a little.

"We had a big fight, sir," the young lieutenant said. "We lost Wilson, and that new kid, Thompson, both in flames. We got two Fokkers before they got away, though, and want confirmations. Von Blon didn't get over," he added.

"Send him to me," ordered Major Trompett. "Tomorrow," he went on, "the dawn patrol will attack and destroy an enemy balloon which will be found near Domcourt. The observations made from this balloon are a source of great damage and annoyance to our Army."

"Very good, sir," the boy replied. He saluted, executed the perfect about-face demanded by Major Trompett, and went out.

The major was still sitting at his desk when Von Blon came in a few minutes later. The commander's lean, lined face was set.

"This is your last chance, Von Blon," he said, in hard, cold tones. "You have been with the squadron a week. It is my rule that if a pilot fails to get across the lines and give a good account of himself in that length of time, he is sent back to the depot as an inefficient officer."

"It isn't my fault, sir," cried Von Blon, desperately. "It—"

"In the United States Army, we demand results, not excuses," said Major Trompett, coldly. "Excuses are useless, and I never even listen to them, let alone accept them. You will have your last chance on the early patrol tomorrow. See that you take advantage of it, if you wish to remain with this squadron. That is all."

Von Blon felt crushed under the weight of his troubles as he saluted and left the major's office. The squadron commander's threat to send him back to the depot in disgrace was the last straw.

Many of the officers and men in the squadron seemed to look at him with suspicion and dislike because of his German name, and he was too proud to tell them that the men of his family had been citizens

of the United States, and had served honorably in every war the country had fought since its beginning. He was becoming conspicuous because of his repeated failures to get across the lines, although it was no fault of his.

That afternoon he had seen his best friend killed, and had been powerless to help him. Now, he was not only alone and friendless in the squadron, but threatened with the disgrace of being sent away.

He went and sat alone on his folding cot at one end of the barrack which housed the flying lieutenants.

At the other end, the rest of the pilots of the squadron were emptying a bottle. Apparently it was not the first.

"Poor old Bill Wilson gone," said a voice. "There was a bird for you. Been with the outfit from the beginning."

"Yeah, an' look what they send up to take the place of men like that!" said another. "Kids still damp behind the ears, and bozos with German names who never get across the lines at all!"

No one paid any attention to Von Blon. He sat consumed by bitter hate, cursing everyone, above all the major who threatened to send him back before he could even avenge his friend, and prove that he had stuff in him as good, if not better, than the rest of them.

But at that very moment the squadron commander was having troubles of his own.

CHAPTER II THE TRAP

MAJOR TROMPETT was sitting in his office, his hands gripping the arms of his chair, and his legs drawn under it, like a man at bay, as he stared at a visitor who was standing before him. The major's lean, brown face was drawn, the nostrils of his high-bridged nose were pinched white, and his hard blue eyes glared like those of a man who saw a ghost.

Without waiting for an invitation, the visitor took a chair.

He was a portly little man in the uniform of a French quartermaster lieutenant. His shape was

somewhat similar to that of a bowling pin, for his circumference was greatest just below the waist. His short, tightly fitting tunic of horizon blue did not conceal the fact that his paunch sagged between his spread legs, and rested on the front of the seat of his chair. He had a fleshy nose, moist brown eyes, and his face was clean shaved, but he gave an impression of oiliness. His hair was black and slick.

Major Trompett forced himself to speak calmly, but his voice was strident and rough.

"Well," he said, "what can I do for you? I don't believe I've ever met you before."

"Lieutenant Politzkey of the French Army," the caller introduced himself.

"You'll have to excuse my brushness, Lieutenant," said the major, controlling himself with an effort.

"The war, you know. And then I'm sorry to say you reminded me of an unpleasant episode. Pardon me. What can I do for you?"

"No doubt it is of my cousin, Felix Haussmann, that I reminded you," said the French lieutenant, politely. "You had a transaction with him at Monte Carlo, I believe."

"Yes, to be sure," said the American, who by this time had recovered his usual iron self-control. "A regrettable occurrence, but all finished some time ago."

"On the contrary, *Monsieur le Commandant*—just beginning."

"What do you mean?" demanded Major Trompett.

"You may remember signing a certain document?" inquired the French officer, in polite tones, but with an evil smile.

Major Trompett remembered only too well. The happenings of that disastrous evening at the gambling Casino at Monte Carlo flashed before his unseeing eyes like a horrid nightmare.

On a brief leave, he had been intrusted with a squadron mess fund of three thousand dollars, to deposit in a Paris bank, and, arriving in Paris to find the banks closed, he'd carried the money along with him, rather than wait over Sunday and lose his trip to the Riviera.

For eighteen years the major had never gambled, since he had discovered that he was temperamentally hopeless when it came to games of chance. He simply couldn't quit while he had any money left. But the artificially gay and hectic atmosphere of Monte Carlo had been too much for him.

In a baggy suit of civilian clothes which he secured from a waiter who made a business of bootlegging such

outfits to Allied officers who were not allowed in the Casino in uniform, he had lost all his own money, and the three thousand dollars of the mess fund besides.

When he came outside into the bright night of the Mediterranean shore, and realization of what he had done almost unconsciously under the spell of the whirling ivory pellet swept over him, the major was in despair. He knew that he was ruined, his career blighted, his honor gone.

His hand went to his hip, where he had carried a heavy pistol most of the time for so many years, but it came away empty. However, a greasy little fat man who had been following him unobserved saw the gesture, and he knew what it meant—that the American officer was a broken man. It was his cue, and he acted upon it.

He accosted Major Trompett, and, with some little difficulty, persuaded him to accept reimbursement for his losses, claiming that the Casino was so patriotic that it would not allow an Allied officer to ruin himself there. And, naturally enough, he had requested and received a receipt for the money.

“Allow me to show you a photograph of a document bearing your signature,” an oily voice was saying. It brought Major Trompett back from his vision of the night at Monte Carlo, the happenings of which had passed through his mind in a few seconds.

As he stared at the paper the man in French uniform was holding in his hand, the iron jaw of the major dropped, and his face turned as sallow as that of a dead man.

“Wha—what’s this?” he gasped.

There was the writing of the supposed agent of the Casino:

Received of Felix Haussmann, agent, the sum of twenty thousand francs (fr. 20,000).

And there was his own signature, just as he had written it:

Wilbert Trompett, Major, U.S.A.

But the heading at the top of the receipt was changed. Instead of something in French about an “anonymous society of sea bathers,” which was how the major translated the name of the company which ran the Casino—*Societe Anonyme des Bains de Mer*—there was a reproduction of the German eagle, and words in German—apparently an address in Berlin.

“The thing I signed wasn’t like that,” the major gasped at last. “Why—the heading’s changed. What kind of trick is this?”

“The skill of German chemists is well known,” sneered the man in French uniform. “Ink disappears. Words are printed. It is childishly simple.”

THE major was half way across his big desk when the unwavering muzzle of a small pistol in the other’s hand halted him.

“A natural reaction, but altogether useless, *Monsieur le Commandant*,” remarked Politzkey. “As I have stated, this is only a photograph, and the original is safe in a strategic place. I have no fear of you. I only drew my pistol to get time to remind you that killing me would do you no good.”

Major Trompett sat back in his chair. He was as cold as a block of ice. A premonition of misfortune had swept over him when he first saw his visitor, but now that the cat was out of the bag, and he knew what he was up against, he met the issue as an officer should, calm and collected, as if he were on the parade ground where he had spent so many years.

“You don’t object to my smoking, I hope?” he asked, coldly.

“Not at all,” said Politzkey, after a slight pause during which he sized the American up closely. “I see that you are going to take the matter in the right spirit, and acknowledge your debt.”

The major opened the middle drawer of his desk. In it were two objects—a long-barreled, forty-five caliber revolver, and a box half full of cigars. After a slight hesitation, he flipped open the box, took out a big, black perfecto, and shut the drawer again.

Politzkey, who had been watching him closely, smiled, and put away his gun.

“Well, you overfed little trench rat, what is it you want?” asked the major, as he lit his weed, and exhaled a cloud of rank smoke in the other’s face.

Politzkey winced, both at the epithet, and the smoke.

“You understand, of course. Major, that you are completely in my power?” he remarked, in nasty tones.

“What tommyrot is that?” Major Trompett asked, harshly. “Because you have a receipt, which you say I signed, made out to some rat named Felix Haussmann, on a piece of paper with some German words on it, what gives you the idea that you have any hold on me?”

Politzkey smiled pityingly, as one might at a stupid child, and explained.

“What do you think would happen to you if the original receipt, with your signature, was to reach your headquarters, with a full explanation—an explanation perhaps a little different from the one which I might

admit here just between us two is the true one? A receipt for money which you received from Felix Haussmann, who is now known to the French to have been a German spy, and who has fled from Monte Carlo through Switzerland to Berlin, where he now is? A receipt on stationery bearing the address of the German Intelligence Section?"

"No one would ever believe that I signed such a thing," asserted the major, with more confidence than he felt.

"No? You know as well as I do, that if that paper came into the hands of your superiors, you might very likely be shot, you would probably be tried by court-martial, and you would most certainly be removed from duty and held for investigation."

"And how about you? You would most certainly be shot!"

"Don't worry about me," returned the spy, confidently. "Today I am honored as a Polish volunteer in the French Army. Tomorrow I shall be honored and rewarded in Germany for my work here, which is almost done."

"So you are a Pole?" the major asked, curiously.

"Partly, I believe," replied Politzkey, with a greasy grin. "I might add," he went on, "that your case has been gone into with true German thoroughness. If you should be thinking of suicide as a way out, let me remind you of the effect it would have on your wife and daughter, who are so very religious, and on your aged father, who thinks so much of the honor of his family. The disgrace might very well kill all of them."

MAJOR TROMPETT knew that the spy was not exaggerating. His mind was whirling as scheme after scheme presented itself to him, only to be discarded as some flaw fatal to the success of each immediately presented itself. The German agents seemed to have thought of everything when they set their trap.

"Well, what do you want me to do?" the major asked at last, dully, as if he was surrendering to the force of circumstances.

Politzkey cleared his throat importantly.

"The German High Command is well aware that your transportation in the Argonne has broken down," he said, "and that your communications are getting into a mess there. They also know that preparations for a drive against Metz are being made.

"They must have positive information, within a day or two, whether your Argonne attack is going to be pressed, or if it is to be abandoned for the present, and

the weight of your Army thrown against Metz. In your position as commanding officer of an aero squadron, you either know that already, or can find out by a little inquiry among friends we know you have on Pershing's staff.

"You must take a plane, fly over and land inside the German lines, and personally give them that information, and any other that they may require. Furthermore, that information must be true. If it proves false in any particular, you will not only be shot for a spy, but the receipt you signed will be sent to your headquarters, and the story of your betrayal of your country will be widely published—we will see to that.

"On the other hand, if your information is true, you will be treated as an honorable prisoner of war. You have your choice. On the one hand, an easy imprisonment for a few months until Germany conquers, as she must and will. On the other, death—and disgrace for your family, as well as yourself."

"It is impossible," said the major. Politzkey shrugged.

"Very well," he said, rising. "I regret—"

"You do not understand. It is impossible—not because I refuse, but because I cannot fly."

The major scarcely did himself justice. He could fly, after a fashion, once he got into the air. What he couldn't do was to land.

The man in French uniform was incredulous.

"You wear the wings of a pilot on your tunic," he objected.

"So I do," the major assented. "I passed my flying tests in America on old, slow machines. But my eyesight is not so good, and I cannot fly a Spad. I broke up three trying."

"You mean to say, then, that in your American Army, they place men who cannot fly in immediate command of flyers?"

The major nodded.

"That is so," he said.

The man called Politzkey considered. "Very well, then," he said, after a pause. "You must send one of your lieutenants."

"But how can I do that?" the squadron commander cried in agonized tones.

"That is your affair," shrugged Politzkey. "Order him, persuade him, bribe him—it is nothing to me. But—you have just three days to make him arrive, or your receipt will be sent to your headquarters. *Adieu, Monsieur le Commandant.*"

He walked backward to the door, and then slipped out through it sideways, with a sinuous, eel-like movement remarkable in one of his bulk.

THE major put aside the idea which had been struggling its way toward the forefront of his mind ever since the spy had declared himself—that of shooting the man down.

Officers do not shoot officers of Allied Armies with impunity. The report of the pistol would be heard, men would come on the run. Choking the spy to death would be little better, even if he could accomplish it in the face of the fellow's pistol. He would have the body on his hands, and the woods around were full of men. It would be next to impossible to get rid of it undetected.

Furthermore, the original receipt was undoubtedly in the hands of a confederate, who would certainly turn in the evidence if Politzkey disappeared. The major could see no way out. But he was determined to get clear some way.

He thought for a long time, sitting motionless. Then an idea flashed across his mind like a rocket across a black sky.

"Von Blon!" he muttered.

He took another cigar out of the box in his desk drawer, and lighted it. By the time it was finished, the office was quite dark. He went to the door, opened it, threw the stub of the cigar outside, and blew a blast on the whistle that he always carried on a chain hitched to his uniform.

In a few moments an orderly came stumbling through the dark woods.

"Light the candles, and blanket the windows," Major Trompett ordered. When the boy had obeyed, the major said:

"Send M.S.E. Deviney here."

"Yes, sir," said the orderly, as he saluted, and left the room.

Five minutes later a man entered. He looked every inch a bowlegged cavalryman. If he lived another fifty years, he would never be able to lose his horsey look. His face was leathery, and he was black—and low-browed. But since he had followed the major he loved from the Cavalry into the Air Service, everyone had to admit that he had become one of the best mechanics there.

He saluted like a soldier of the Old Army.

"Did you ever question an order, Sergeant?" the major asked.

"No, sor!" exclaimed Deviney, with the same air of pained surprise he might have worn if he had been asked if it was true that he had murdered his aged grandmother for two bits.

"Would you question one—no matter how peculiar it might appear to you?"

"Certainly not, sor!"

"Very well. For excellent reasons, I do not wish Lieutenant Von Blon to get across the lines tomorrow."

"Very good, sor. He will not. Anything else, sor?"

"Don't injure him. That's all, Sergeant."

CHAPTER III THE WIRE-PULLER

UNABLE TO BEAR THE CHATTER of the other flyers, Von Blon left the barrack and went to the hangars as dusk was falling over the field. A dark suspicion was gnawing into his mind that there was a plot against him, that someone was working to keep him from getting into action. He thought he could trust his two mechanics. If not, he could at least hold them responsible, and prevent anyone else from monkeying with his ship.

As he came to the wide doorway of the canvas hangar, he saw that the last ship was just being trundled inside for the night, and that it was his own.

"Have you got her fixed up, Corporal?" he asked his crew chief. "How's she go?"

"We found the trouble. She revs over eighteen hundred now, Lieutenant. Couldn't do better. One of the best Hissos ever I see."

"I hope she'll do as well tomorrow," said Von Blon, grimly. "Stay here, Corporal, while I snatch a bite to eat. I'll be back in a few minutes, and I'll see that no one tampers with her from then on." He turned on his heel and strode away.

"What's got into him, Jack?" the corporal asked his partner, the Spad's rigger, in wondering tones.

"I'll bite, Corp," the rigger returned. "Got some kind of a bug. All pilots are nutty, you know that. If they weren't, they wouldn't be pilots."

"Well, I'm just nutty enough to change places with any one of them right now," the corporal proclaimed. "I joined the Army to fly, and now look at me! Well,

sein's he told us to stay here, I s'pose we'll have to. Only hope we don't miss out on chow."

"*We!*" screeched the rigger. "Where do you get that 'we' stuff? You're just nutty enough to be a pilot, all right. He never said nothin' to me."

"He *meant* you, just the same, though," answered the corporal, warmly. "*I'm* the mechanic. All *I* got anythin' to do with's the engine. The rest of the ship's yours. I got nothin' to do with *that*."

"What's all this bellyache you recruits are makin'?" came a rough voice. "Never mind howlin' around here, or I'll give you somethin' to howl for." Both mechanic and rigger knew only too well that the voice could come from only one throat—that of Master Signal Electrician Deviney. And they knew furthermore that they would do well to pay attention to his words.

"Lieutenant Von Blon told us to stay here and watch his ship till he came back, Sarge," announced the corporal.

"Watch it!" exclaimed the M.S.E. "Watch it! What does he think it's goin' to do—run off in the woods and hide behind a tree?"

"I told him I had it revvin' up over eighteen hundred, an' he says he's goin' to watch her, an' see she stays that way," the corporal replied.

"Revs up over eighteen hundred, does she? That's good—if true," remarked Deviney thoughtfully. "What's the matter with him—is he worryin' because he don't get over the lines—or pretendin' to?"

The corporal, like most of the Air Service mechanics in the A.E.F., was intensely loyal to his pilot.

"Of course he's worryin' because he can't get across," he cried. "He's crazy to fight!"

"Humph!" remarked Deviney, doubtfully. "Maybe so. Well, let's have a look at her. Everybody gone but you birds?"

"Yeah, it's almost time for chow."

The master signal electrician took a powerful flashlight from a pocket in his coveralls, and sent its beam darting over the little Spad.

"She's sure turnin' up, if what you say is true," he muttered. "He ought to be able to go anywhere he wants, as far as his motor goes. But the riggin'—I don't think much of the riggin'. I'll just trim her up a bit."

HE SHIFTED the flashlight to his left hand, and, producing a pair of pliers, he went swiftly over the ship's wires, deftly tightening a turnbuckle here, and loosening one there, whistling softly between his teeth as if he were currying a restive horse.

"But look here, Sarge," the rigger objected weakly. "I thought she was rigged right. She's rigged according to directions."

"Directions, bah!" snorted Deviney. "I can rig a ship by feel better than you can do by directions. Many a ship rigged by directions that wouldn't fly, I fixed her in five minutes."

The rigger was silent, for he knew that the M.S.E. spoke no more than the truth.

"An' there she is," announced Deviney, a moment later, switching off his light, and leaving them in black darkness. "If she won't get across the lines, or anywhere else, with the motor turning up, an' the riggin' right—why, it ain't the ship's fault, that's all, an' you can tell young Mr. Pilot so for me. But if you change her now, an' she won't fly, after all my work, why then I'll have your hide, that's all!"

He faded out of hearing without further words.

"I thought she was rigged right," the rigger persisted, after the M.S.E. had gone. "The Lieutenant, he didn't say nothin' about the riggin'—only the motor."

"Oh, is that so?" inquired the mechanic, nettled by this aspersion on his share of the work. "I suppose you know more about riggin' than M.S.E. Deviney, eh?"

Before the other had time to dig up a suitable answer, Von Blon returned, a roll of blankets under his arm.

"You guarantee she's O.K. now?" he asked.

"Yes, sir, Lieutenant," the corporal said, confidently.

"You boys can run along to chow, then," returned Von Blon. "If she's O.K. now, I'm going to see that no one bothers her. Good-night."

"Good-night, Lieutenant." The two men departed wondering. They had never in their weird careers in France experienced such a manifestation on a pilot's part before.

Von Blon slept little that night. The dirt floor of the hangar was hard and rough, and the place reeked of gasoline. Two sentries met periodically outside, and exchanged rough and ready badinage before they parted again to walk their respective posts.

Von Blon went outside and smoked a cigarette. Clouds were sweeping in from the west, and in a few minutes the sky was overcast.

The pilot shivered as a wave of chill dampness swept across the field, and went inside and rolled up in his blankets under the wing of his ship. After midnight he fell asleep from sheer nervous exhaustion, but before long the patter of rain on the canvas roof

roused him. He dozed off and on uneasily until the dull gray of dawn came creeping into the big tent.

MECHANICS began to arrive, rubbing the sleep from their eyes, and looking at the pilot curiously. When his own two men appeared, Von Blon left them in charge of the ship, with instructions not to leave it unguarded, and took his blankets back to the barrack and made his bed.

Then, after a solitary breakfast in the pilot's mess, the celebrants of the night before taking advantage of the still drizzling rain to continue their recuperation, he wandered back to the hangar.

In the full light of the dull morning, the Spad looked rather lumpy and lopsided.

"Anybody touched her?" Von Blon asked, suspiciously.

"Not since you left, and, as far as we know, not a soul since M.S.E. Deviney went over the rigging last night," replied the corporal, offended by the nervous pilot's sharp tone.

Von Blon walked up and down, smoking cigarettes, then, feeling the necessity of doing something, he took the cartridge belts out of his two Vickers guns, and went over each cartridge for the fifth time since the ship had been assigned to him, searching for flaws which might cause a stoppage. He reflected bitterly that he had never had occasion yet to fire more than a testing burst. He wondered if he ever would.

The mechanics stared at him, and nudged each other behind his back.

Toward ten o'clock the rain stopped, and the pilots began to appear—to look casually over their ships, and glance doubtfully at the sky. The ceiling of low, dripping clouds barely cleared the tops of the trees, and occasionally gusts of fog would separate themselves from the clouds and dance across the field. There could be no flying yet, but the sky seemed to be getting lighter.

At noon the clouds broke, and the sun shot through to the steaming ground.

The Spads were rolled out to the line, and mechanics whirled their props. The motors roared.

The pilots hurried out to the ships, dragging their flying clothes. As the operations officer appeared at a trot, coming from the major's office, they began to shuffle into their suits.

"The balloon at Domcourt," the operations officer panted as he came up. "Got to get it!"

The first Spad started taxiing out, and four minutes later the squadron was taking off the field.

At first, Von Blon, from sheer nervous resolve, clutched his stick so hard that his knuckles ached. Soon he was clutching it for another reason.

The left side of the ship was growing heavier and heavier under the stresses of the air—rushing by and around the curving surfaces of the wings at a hundred and twenty miles an hour. The pilot had to exert his strength to hold his stick to the right, and keep his left wing up.

He saw little of the ground or the surrounding sky, and scarcely knew where he was. All his faculties were occupied by his efforts to keep the ship flying with the rest, and watch for the flight leader's signals.

After what seemed an interminable period of struggling to Von Blon, the left arm of the leader of the patrol shot up, then down—pointing. He shoved his ship into a howling, forty-five degree dive, and the others piqued with him.

All except Von Blon.

He had only a glimpse of the sausage-shaped quarry before his lopsided ship went into a lurching spin.

THE rest of the squadron charged down into the sinister black bursts of the high explosive anti-aircraft, the phosphorescent strings of flaming onions and the fast, heavily armed Fokkers which came up to meet them.

But Von Blon saw nothing of that. If he hadn't been a good pilot, his troubles would have been over then and there. The Spad spun like a corkscrew—straight toward the ground.

There are those who maintain that all the good pilots are dead. Many good pilots have died, to be sure, but it seems more logical to take the position that only good—or supremely lucky—pilots remain alive for any great length of time. And Lady Luck has limits beyond which she may not be forced.

Luckily Von Blon had plenty of altitude, and he went through a number of strange and unorthodox maneuvers, including flying on his back, before he had his ship level again. Then he headed back in the direction of the field.

As he did so, fighting with all his might to keep the Spad on a gingerly uneven keel, he wondered if it wouldn't have been better for him if he'd spun into the ground.

He'd failed again! He'd be sent back to the depot—a washout pilot! But he had all of a healthy young man's distaste for death.

He'd fight them all!

He'd tell Major Trompett to his face that his crates weren't fit to fly. He'd demand one more chance, and get it, too. His conscience, at least, was clear.

He found the field, and fought his way down to a safe landing. Then he taxied to the hangars.

As he climbed out and looked at the Spad, he wondered how it had ever flown at all. It had a resemblance to the corkscrew it flew like, with wings twisted up and down.

His angry eyes rested on M.S.E. Deviney, who was standing by, and he could have sworn that there was a mocking light in the chief mechanic's glance.

"Did you rig this ship, Sergeant?" he asked, harshly.

The other mechanics, who were waiting on the field, and betting as to which pilot would return, and which would not, pricked up their ears. Excitement promised. An argument between a lieutenant and a master signal electrician with the reputation and experience of Deviney.

"Yes, sor, I rigged the ship, but afterwards, the Lieutenant spent the night alone in the hangar with her," replied the M.S.E., meaningly.

The old mechanic's standing was so high that it could hardly have been assailed by any flying lieutenant in the Army, let alone an unsuccessful newcomer like Von Blon.

The pilot looked around at the circle of faces. Some were derisive, some pitying, some skeptical. With a feeling that there was a huge conspiracy against him, the flyer turned silently away.

An orderly approached, saluting so carelessly that it appeared as though he were merely waving his hand.

"Sir, Lieutenant Von Blon will report to the Commanding Officer."

CHAPTER IV MISSION

SO YOU DIDN'T GET OVER the lines today," remarked Major Trompett, with an icy glare.

"No, I didn't," retorted Von Blon, his self control breaking. "And, what's more, I defy any man to get anywhere with that crate you gave me to fly. She's rigged all wrong. She spun. Give me something that'll fly, for once, and I'll show you what I can do!"

"Ah, yes," said the major coldly. "I've heard that from washouts before. I'm sorry, but you don't seem to me to be very valuable as a fighting pilot on this Front!"

Von Blon growled angrily, and it seemed as if he might strike his commanding officer. But the major cut him off sharply.

"I have a very dangerous, important mission for someone," he said. "Perhaps, if you had the nerve, you might be the man for it."

Von Blon stared in surprise, scarcely believing his ears.

"We can judge only by results in the Army," the major went on. "I have a special mission for a pilot. The other pilots in this squadron have proved themselves efficient as fighters. You have not. It is only logical, if you have the guts to accept it, and carry it through, to give this job to you.

"I warn you right now that it will be hard. For a time, perhaps until the end of the War, if you live that long, you may be branded a traitor to your country. But you will, in reality, be doing your country a supreme service. You will enjoy a privilege which in this particular instance may be granted to only one man.

"On the other hand, on the record you have made here, I am justified in sending you back to the depot to be reclassified as something other than a fighting pilot. Which do you choose?"

Von Blon's eager patriotism carried him directly into the trap the major had laid.

"In spite of my German name, my forefathers served with Washington and Grant," he said. "Call on me for anything—anything at all."

The major unbent from his habitual rigid, unbending dignity for a moment.

"My ancestors were with Washington and Lee," he said. "I take it, then, that you accept?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very good. You will report here immediately after dinner. I will coach you on a false report of our plans and movements which you, posing as a deserter, will give to the German Intelligence, after you have landed voluntarily in the enemy lines. I give you fair warning. If the Germans find out that you deliberately gave them false information, you will probably be shot. You will have to keep your mouth shut, whatever happens, as to the purpose of your mission, very likely until the war is over. Do you still agree?"

"Yes, Major."

“Very well, then. Be here at seven o’clock,” commanded Major Trompett.

THE remains of the squadron came limping in, with four more ships missing in action, and with the report that they had failed to get the balloon. It was a vital observation point for the Germans, and they were protecting it with all the resources at their command, including two flights of about ten Fokkers each.

The squadron had had a bitter, bloody, blazing fight to hold their own, a fight in which one more competent pilot might have made all the difference. And one pilot, Von Blon, had spun out of the battle before it began. But Von Blon hardly noticed the black looks which the surviving pilots gave him. He believed implicitly what the major had told him, and he was exalted at the thought that he had been chosen for a specially difficult and exacting mission.

Hour after hour, that night, the major drilled Von Blon on the information that he was to give to the intelligence officers of the enemy, making him memorize the facts and figures which he gave him orally from closely written notes, until he could repeat every word verbatim.

“But—that’s true!” Von Blon objected once. “Lots of the things you’ve told me to tell them are true.”

The major looked at him with pitying contempt.

“Of course they’re true,” he said. “They are details which the Germans could not possibly help knowing. If you were to contradict such perfectly obvious facts as these, the enemy would know that you were lying, and then you would never be able to deceive him about the big, important things.”

Von Blon made no further objections. At two o’clock in the morning, Major Trompett tore his penciled notes into tiny pieces, and fed them to the glowing coals in the small tin stove.

“You’ll do, my boy,” he said, in approving tones. “Now I’ll give you your final instructions, and then you can try to get a little rest.”

He went to the door and looked out, studying the weather, then shut the door again, and walked over to the large map which was hanging on the wall.

“If the weather remains as it is now in the morning,” he said, “with low clouds just above the tree tops, you will take off, and hop hedges, crossing the lines here”—pointing to a spot on the map—“and landing on the field which houses the Fokkers protecting the Domcourt balloon which this squadron unsuccessfully attacked this afternoon. I hardly suppose it is necessary

to tell you to make no hostile demonstration of any kind against the Germans. You must study your map carefully before taking off, so that you are familiar with every peculiarity of the terrain, because, flying low, you will have no chance to pore over a map during the flight.

“If it should dawn clear, we shall have to make other plans, which will, on the whole, be even more dangerous.

“But let me impress upon you that the hardest part of your mission is this. Never forget that if anybody—even your closest friend—should suspect that you are not what you purport to be, a voluntary deserter, you will not only stand an excellent chance of being shot, but it will nullify the entire effect of your enterprise. I will see that your record is cleared, however, and cleared with honor, at the first possible moment, which will, at the latest, be the end of the war. Good-bye, and good luck.”

He held out his hand. As he took it, Von Blon looked into his commander’s eyes, and what it was that he saw lurking there.

CHAPTER V TO THE ENEMY

THERE WAS BUSTLE AND ACTIVITY early the next morning at the nest of German war birds near Domcourt, not far from the lines, in spite of the fact that heavy, foggy clouds hung close to the ground.

The attendants of the enormous rubber pig of an observation balloon were scurrying around it, preparing it for its trip aloft as soon as the weather broke.

Mechanics were grooming a flight of graceful Fokker pursuit planes to readiness to take the air to protect it. Artillerymen were oiling and polishing two big anti-aircraft guns, whose ugly snouts were thrust menacingly toward the dull sky. At various points around the field, mounted on tripods, were objects which were obviously machine guns, still covered with canvas to protect their delicate mechanism from the moisture which impregnated the air.

Two figures in disheveled khaki stood apart from all the rest of the men on the field except a dumpy, grayclad soldier with a rifle, who seemed

to be guarding them. They were evidently captured members of the British Royal Air Force.

One of them, both of whose bandaged arms were in slings, and whose weakness and pallor denoted a recent loss of a large part of his blood, could have been nothing but a young Englishman of the better class.

The other, a freckled, pug-nosed man with a bulldog jaw, with dried blood streaking his face and tunic from a head bound up where a bullet had creased it, spoke to his comrade with an accent commonly associated with Sir Harry Lauder.

"Eh, laddie, and how much longer will they keep us here in this chill place, with never a drink to warm our bones?"

"Couldn't say, Sandy," replied the Englishman in a weak voice. "Not too long, I hope."

Suddenly he stiffened, and whispered.

"Listen! A ship! Sounds like a Spad—Yank, or Froggie, maybe, coming after that brute of a balloon. Nerve, eh?" He looked around, careful to reveal no trace of his excitement.

The Germans, working under the guttural, shouted orders of their non-commissioned officers, had not yet heard the sound. The prisoners' guard stood still, with no sign of intelligence in his piggy eyes. He was either deaf or stupid.

Nearer and nearer the drone of the motor came. At a startled shout, the Germans froze for an instant.

Then some sprang to the covered machine guns, and strained to get them free and into action. Others whirled the propellers of the Fokkers. The noses of the big, gray cannon wavered, then began to lower.

But they were too late.

A SPAD hurtled out of the mist.

Even as it appeared, the roar of the motor cut out, and the ship angled sharply down to a landing. No one could have mistaken the pilot's purpose, and the Germans held their fire.

The Spad hit the ground on three points, and rolled to a stop. As it did so, the pilot sprang out, and stood with upraised hands. A moment later, under the rifles of a squad of German soldiers, he was led away.

It was an hour later before he was shepherded back to the field, and placed under guard with the two Britishers. By that time, the clouds were breaking away.

The big winch which controlled the balloon was turning slowly, as it paid out its cable, and the rubber pig tentatively felt its way upward, "for to admire, and for to see."

The Britishers regarded their new companion with hard, suspicious glares. They saw a healthy young man in the choke-collared blouse which distinguished the American uniform.

"Didn't you come down here in full control, with motor going?" asked the Englishman. In spite of its weakness, his voice held a steely tone.

The American gulped painfully. He knew what was coming. But he also knew what he had to do.

"Yes, I did," he stammered.

"Swine!" remarked the Englishman. The Scotchman was more loquacious. He applied to the American a number of epithets.

As he finished, his red-haired hand shot out with the speed of an anteater's tongue, and grasped the American's wrist. He held it firmly while he read the name which was engraved on a small, silver disk which was chained there.

"Von Blon, eh?" he said. "One of your damned Jerry-Americans, eh? If I live, I'll see you shot for that!"

When his hand was released, Von Blon turned silently away. Not only was there nothing he could say, but he couldn't even blame those two gallant men, whose wounds eloquently proclaimed the fight that they had put up before they were brought down. No wonder, after seeing his voluntary, ignominious landing on an enemy field, that they despised him.

The clouds were breaking away. Directly overhead, the sky was blue and bright. The big observation balloon was going up, to be on the job with its observers of American movements, the moment they could see.

Already it was almost a thousand feet from the ground, but there were still clouds between it and the American line.

The ground men leaped to hysterical action, as another plane came diving out of those clouds. The engine working the cable which controlled the big bag of hydrogen reversed the drum, and the steel rope came rattling in. But it was far too slow. The attacking Spad was tearing toward the balloon at frightful speed.

Two streams of glowing, phosphorescent bullets were coming from the airplane's nose, and sinking into the black body of the gas bag. But it was still damp from the fog, and did not ignite easily.

The German guns on the ground roared as they hurled volleys of lead at the attacker. Some fragments floating away from the diving ship showed that it had been hit, but it came on, and its streams of tracers never ceased. The American cocardes on its wings

could be plainly seen from the ground, where the Fokker pilots were jazzing their ships to take off and avenge, if they couldn't protect, the gas bag intrusted to their care.

"I say!" muttered the Englishman, as the little raider, daring certain death, kept on its way. Already it was almost too late for the Spad's pilot to turn aside when the balloon burst into sudden flames.

But the American didn't even make an effort to turn. The brave little ship hurled itself onward, and disappeared with a crash of exploding gasoline into the mass of thick, black smoke, and dull, red flame.

The three prisoners looked at each other, aghast.

"Well," the Scotty remarked, after a pause, during which he spat carefully on the ground, "that takes part of the bad taste out of my mouth."

With a look of hate and contempt at Von Blon, he remarked, "I see there's Yanks—and Yanks!"

CHAPTER VI THE TEST

VON BLON'S LOT WAS A HARD ONE from the very start of his mission. When he swept out of the cloud above the German flying field, his struggle with himself began. In one swoop he might have destroyed the balloon which had defied his entire squadron the day before, and returned in triumph and honor to his home field. That is, he might if he had not been bound by his agreement with Major Trompett. But, as it was, he had to cut his motor and land, and he marched away to face *Herr Oberst* Schlegel, of the German Intelligence.

The German colonel was, in appearance, very much like an angry Muscovy drake.

His face was corrugated, and astoundingly red. His eyes were very small, and very pale blue, and his brush of hair, which extended along the top of his head between two red, bald spaces, was of such a shade that it was hard to say whether it was gray or ashy blond.

His speech heightened his resemblance to the redheaded bird, for his voice hissed and crackled when he spoke.

"Z-z-z-o-o-o-o!" he said to Von Blon. "Oo are you, and why haf you come here —vot?"

Von Blon swallowed, and nerved himself to his repulsive task. He couldn't back out at that stage of the game, revolting as the whole business was to him. He looked around nervously.

"It must be in confidence, upon your honor as a German officer. No one must hear what I have to tell you."

Schlegel stared at the prisoner keenly. He must have been satisfied with what he saw, for he uttered a harsh syllable, and made a brusque gesture, and the guards who had been standing behind Von Blon turned on their heels and went out.

The prisoner began his carefully rehearsed tale.

"Sir, I am a German-American, named Von Blon. The other pilots in my squadron hated me, because of my German blood. I was treated unfairly, and thought of deserting. My commanding officer, Major Trompett, must have guessed my intention, for he called me to his office. He told me that if I was sick of the American Army, and wanted to desert, to go ahead, and he'd give me some really valuable information to take with me."

"Z-z-o-o-o!" the *Oberst* Schlegel breathed hoarsely to himself. "He hass done it then!" Aloud, he made a cunning attempt to trap the prisoner, if he were not in reality the traitor he purported to be.

"Of course you understand your Major Trompett's part in this affair? We hold evidence of his dealings with a German agent which would cause him to be executed, if it fell into the hands of American headquarters. It is on condition that we suppress this evidence that he is sending you to betray the plans of the American hogs. You know that?"

With a supreme effort, Von Blon held every nerve and muscle steady. The German's statement was a frightful shock to the prisoner, because it might be true. There were certain features of the affair which had never been clear to the flying lieutenant. However, he resolved to keep his faith with Major Trompett, trust him, and go through.

"I didn't understand all that," he said, with hardly a pause. "But his purpose and motives are nothing to me." But from that time, a horrid fear that Trompett might really be a traitor, and he his tool, was always with the pilot.

The German Intelligence Officer was almost satisfied, as he put the prisoner to one more test.

"Speak, then," snarled Schlegel, rising out of his chair with a frightful scowl. "But understand this. If what you tell me is false, you will be shot! I, Schlegel, will see to it personally!"

Eagerly, Von Blon told him a story which he hoped was largely a tissue of ingenious lies. And, in reward for his daring, he was plunged into a veritable hell.

IN THE prison camp, after the Britishers had told their tale about his voluntary surrender, only one man ever spoke to him, and that man only once. It was Dizzy Smith, who had known him at school.

“Come on, Von!” his one-time friend said, with real anxiety in his voice. “Come clean, now. Tell me the truth. I’ve always believed you were a white man. Tell me you didn’t actually land on that German field full out, and spill your guts on purpose to the Boche Intelligence.”

Von Blon’s burden was almost more than he could bear, but he managed to choke out the words which damned him.

“But that’s just what I did do, Dizzy.”

None of the Allied prisoners ever spoke to him again.

He walked among them like a ghost. There was talk about giving him a coat of tar and feathers, but some difficulty was experienced in getting hold of the tar, and before anything was done, the German authorities removed him to solitary confinement for safekeeping. But even his warders treated him with undisguised contempt.

In his lonely cell Von Blon brooded, and hoped that he would not go insane. He prayed for the war to end, so that he might be vindicated in the eyes of men.

Yet, all the time terrible doubt was eating into his mind. Had the major been on the square? Would he really clear him, or had the whole affair been a dirty plot from the beginning? The business of his Spad’s being rigged so that it spun out of the fight had never been explained. Was the major a rotten traitor, after all? If so—but his tortured brain shrank from such contemplation.

And then the words of the German colonel would ring in his brain.

“Speak, then. But understand this. If what you tell me is false, you will be shot! I, Schlegel, will see to it personally!”

Von Blon’s life was hell on earth.

He didn’t notice how conditions were changing. In his dismal solitude, he didn’t see that the prisoners were more restless, and given to bursts of riotous enthusiasm, or that the guards were losing the last vestiges of their former arrogance.

He was surprised when *Vise Feldwebel* Frickart,

who had direct charge of the prisoners, came one evening and told him that he must come and report to the *Oberst* Schlegel at once.

The German colonel’s face was so red that it seemed to exude sparks, and his tiny eyes were bloodshot and congested.

“Z-z-z-o-o-o! You lied to me! I staked my career, and the fate of the Imperial German Army, on the falsehoods you told me, and I lost. You thought you were clever. Perhaps you were, but your cleverness will not save you now. Take him out and shoot him!” he snorted in German to Frickart.

THE man stepped forward hesitantly, but one of the soldiers shoved him aside, stepped up, and spoke insolently.

“No. The Republic has been declared. There will be no more shooting.”

Schlegel grabbed at the pistol on his hip, but he was too slow. Von Blon did something of which he had dreamed ever since he first saw the German colonel weeks before. He leaped forward and crashed his fist against the red jaw, and the Intelligence officer collapsed.

The other Germans did not attempt to interfere, but stood jabbering excitedly among themselves.

That same night the prisoners began to leave, and no one hindered them.

Most of them went in groups, but Von Blon made the long trek to the French town of Nancy alone. His mind was in torment all the way. What did they believe of him back at the squadron?

When he came into Nancy, he was still in doubt as to what he should do next. He did not remain in that condition long.

As he was passing a captain of American Military Police, a harsh voice with a strong Scotch burr said:

“Arrest that man, Captain. I know him for a deserter and a spy. I saw him land in a good ship with full motor on a German aerodrome. I want to testify against him. And I have another witness who will testify, as soon as he is able to get here. He hasn’t recovered from his wounds.

“Damn you!” the Scotchman shouted, shaking his fist in Von Blon’s face, “I told you I’d get you, and I have. Followed you all the way from Karlsruhe, I did. Ah for one good poke at you now—”

The American M.P.’s took Von Blon away, and locked him up, in spite of his protests.

“I demand to be sent to my commanding officer, Major Trompett,” he cried.

"Perhaps you may be," returned the M.P. captain with cold and threatening significance. "I happen to know that Major Trompett is dead!"

Von Blon's heart went out of him.

HE WAS sent to Tours under arrest.

After three days of mental agony, he was surprised when he was taken before a general, and he was astounded when the general shook his hand warmly, and slapped him on the back.

"I've been on the lookout for you, Von Blon," the great man said. "I want to congratulate you personally."

"Then—then—you don't think I'm a yellow spy?" gulped Von Blon

"Of course not, my boy," the general laughed. "If the word hadn't been overworked, I'd call you a hero—more of a hero than if you'd become a fighting ace. Major Trompett sent me a letter explaining everything that morning before he got himself killed bringing down that balloon at Domcourt."

"Did I really do any good?" Von Blon asked gently.

"That German Intelligence colonel seemed to think so."

"Your work was splendid!" exclaimed the general. "I believe that your report was the final factor which enabled us to deceive the enemy and make him believe that we were going to abandon our Argonne drive and attack Metz. They removed certain troops, leaving various portions of the Argonne defended only by the difficulties of the terrain, and by machine-gun nests. I

have no doubt that your report to the Germans helped to save thousands of American lives.

"Furthermore, Major Trompett recommended that your work be given the greatest possible publicity, and that you be awarded the D.S.C. I shall take pleasure in following his recommendations in both respects."

"The German colonel said something about Major Trompett's having had dealings with German agents. Was that true, General?" asked Von Blon, hesitantly. "It worried me a lot."

The general frowned. Then he spoke slowly.

"You have proved that you can keep your mouth shut, and you have earned the right to know. The major had committed an indiscretion which served to put him in a bad light. The German spy, who was masquerading as a French officer, and threatening him, was caught and executed by us—rather summarily, I fear. However, the circumstances played directly into our hands, and everything turned out for the best. Major Trompett is dead, and we shall let him be remembered as the gallant officer who was killed while bringing down the Domcourt balloon."

Von Blon was still dazed by his unexpected salvation as he made his way out to the street. The general's remarks about Major Trompett and the balloon flashed back across his mind, and with them, the scene the morning he had surrendered—the diving Spad, which was enveloped in the flaming gas bag which it had destroyed.

"So that was the Major," he thought. "Well, he found a way to fly without having to land!"