



THE DRAGON'S BREATH

by O.B. MYERS

With one foot on the rail of death, Pete mixed a crash cocktail, chilled it with the ice of his own nerve and served it in a washed-out cylinder of a Fokker mercedes!

PETE HENNABURY LEANED indolently against the wing-tip of his Spad. In the cockpit sat a mechanic, watching the gauges, while the motor idled to warmth. Its vibration traveled along the wing, and thus into the base of Pete's spine, causing a pleasant, soothing sensation, something like a massage. He smothered a prodigious yawn with the back of a gloved hand, and then glanced at the watch on that same wrist.

"How much time we got, Pete?" asked the shorter man, also wearing helmet and goggles, who stood before him. "Three o'clock yet?"

"Coupla minutes yet, Lefty. I wish to hell it was enough for me to knock off a few winks of sleep."

"Man, you and me both," agreed Lefty Morse vehemently. "I sure do crave a little shut-eye. What with flying patrols all day, and sitting up losing my francs to you at poker all night, I'm way behind. If things don't slack off some, I'm quittin' one or the other—"

At his point a gust of wind blew a few specks of dust into Lefty's open mouth; he stopped speaking, perforce, to cough, and cleared his throat violently, but without turning his head aside. Pete regarded him with some distaste.

"Listen, Lefty," said Pete. "You're a nice guy, and a pal of mine, and all that. But honestly, you ought to be more careful. I'm tellin' you right out; you've got a breath today like a dragon."

"Oh, yeah? And why wouldn't I!" retorted Lefty hotly. "Didn't I drink enough cognac last night to float a division of doughboys to France? Boy, my mouth tastes like a family of Chinamen just moved out. There's fur enough on my tongue to make an ermine wrap for the Queen of Spain. That cognac is sure terrible the day after the night before!"

"Not that cognac," corrected Pete. "My cognac. Just the same, you oughta do something about it, Lefty. If the major ever smelled you like that, he'd nail you to the ground for a week."

"*Do something!*" snorted Lefty. "Such as what? Boy, if I knew anything that would kill the flavor of a hangover, I'd not only use it myself, but be a millionaire selling it to the air service alone."

Again he coughed, and spat what looked like a little ball of cotton. For several moments Pete said nothing; but far, far down in the depths of his light blue eyes appeared the merest beginnings of a mischievous twinkle. Yet before Lefty, who knew him so well, could catch it, the twinkle was gone.

"Say," he drawled, squinting at the sky, "I'm just tryin' to think. Now what was that, anyway?"

"I bite, what was it? Don't bust a gut," cautioned Lefty.

"Some guy in Paris," mused Pete, ignoring the thrust. "He had something to use for that; he told me the formula. As I remember, you just take a big mouthful, hold it as long as you can, and when you spit it out—*zowie!* The dark brown taste is gone. Now what was his name. Began with a B, seems to me."

"Never mind what his name begins with. What was the stuff?"

"Gee, that's the trouble. I can't remember off-hand."

"Well, goose that so-called brain of yours, will yuh? Boy, I could use some of that tongue-polish right now."

Pete frowned, scratched his head, bit his lips, and went through all the motions of a man zealously searching his memory.

"Seems to me—no—yes, it had two or three different things in it. You mixed them together, and then—"

He stopped abruptly, and straightened his back, for he had caught sight of Major Simms emerging from headquarters, and now he saw that the C.O. was hurrying toward him, wearing a scowl.

"Well, what is this, what is this?" demanded the major petulantly as soon as he came within earshot. "Don't you men know it's three o'clock and after? You're supposed to be in the air. What are you hanging around here for—waiting for tea to be served?"

"No, sir," replied Pete promptly. "We were waiting to see if there were any special instructions for this patrol."

"Oh—ah—ahem! Yes, that's right, Hennabury," stammered the major, reddening slightly. "I hadn't told you, had I? You two pilots are to reconnoiter the Saulnes valley, on the other side of the river, and report any enemy activities you see. You probably won't run into any Boche patrols in that area, so you ought to be able to penetrate pretty deep. But watch out for trouble, boys," he added earnestly.

"The Saulnes valley," said Lefty blankly. "Why, there's never a damned thing going on there, sir. What does Wing expect to find?"

The major, remembering the retort of the colonel at Wing to the same question, cracked it out importantly.

"The unexpected! That's what! We all know that the Saulnes area is open country, but has no roads running north and south, so that the Boches never use it for troop movements. But that's just it. They aren't moving troops anywhere else, yet it's hard to believe that they're completely idle. They may be trying to slip over a fast one in that valley, somehow or other. So take a good look, men, especially for infantry bivouacs. Always expect the unexpected!"

PETE buckled the chin-strap of his helmet, and walked along the trailing edge of his wing toward the cockpit. He jerked his head, and the mechanic, nodding briefly, vaulted to the ground. Pete threw a leg over the fairing, and eased his angular form down into the narrow quarters. He was met by a strong smell of dope, varnished wood, hot oil, and clean, gleaming metal. Nauseating, perhaps, to one who was a stranger to it, yet to Pete it was like the breath of life. He drew a deep breath, and pulled the throttle with his thumb.

The plane quivered mightily against its chocks as the exhausts roared. He closed the throttle again quickly, for the thermometer needle was already close to the heavy black line, and looked over toward the Spad on his left. From its cockpit Lefty was thumbing his nose; that meant that he was ready. Pete waved, mechanics jerked the chock-ropes, and with a blast from the motor the Spad moved forward. He chandelled off the far corner of the field, with Lefty on his heels.

On the ground it was hot and sultry, but by the time he had climbed to four thousand feet the air became pleasantly cool. Here he considered carefully the matter of altitude. If he went too high, it would

be impossible to distinguish details on the earth; if he flew too low, they would be in a precarious position if attacked from above. At length he decided on a compromise; he added another thousand feet to the reading of the altimeter, and leveled off above the river.

AT THE lines, he circled for a moment, and took a good look around. There were numbers of scattered specks in the sky, but none dangerously close. So he swung boldly across the forward positions, and for a time bored straight into German territory, pointing up the narrow, ridge-locked valley which led toward the town of Saulnes. As it broadened out beneath him, he began to ess, so that his progress was a series of great zizzags, each one carrying him half a mile or more farther to the north.

He studied the ground below intently, but the harder he looked the less he saw. A few artillery positions along the crest of the eastern ridge, a small group of tents at the edge of a wood, a dozen horses grazing in a field; that was all. This country looked as it might have looked in times of peace. The Saulnes valley was ill suited to the art of war; it narrowed to a bottle-neck at the lower end, like a trap, and no main road ran through it. Through all the four years of conflict there had been scant activity there; now there was none.

He found himself above the town; a mere huddle of houses, empty, crooked streets, a single church steeple, as yet undamaged by artillery. Should he go farther? He looked up, but his sweeping glance disclosed an empty sky; even the air seemed to be at peace in this quiet sector. And the guarded secret of an enemy *putsch* might, he considered, lie just beyond those next rolling plains. He glanced toward the other Spad. Lefty, he saw, was also peering steadily at the ground. He wished uneasily that he had planned some arrangement before leaving the field, whereby Lefty would be looking up while he was looking down, and vice versa. But it was too late to think of that now; and besides, he hadn't sighted an enemy plane since crossing the lines. With a shrug he swung into another zigzag toward the north.

The minutes passed, as the two ships droned deeper and deeper into Germany. Fully fifteen miles lay between them and the lines now, but still Pete could see nothing below him but calm and vacant fields, wooded hillsides, and deserted lanes. He was about to turn back in disgust, when a triangular wood drew his attention. A narrow road ran along its edge; was that

an automobile which stood there? It was, and where there was one car, there might be more; concealed, perhaps, in under the trees. He banked up a little steeper, the better to see downward; and suddenly a brilliant scarlet comet flashed across his path.

His head jerked up. Lefty had fired a red flare from his Very pistol. That meant danger. Lefty, he saw instantly, was pointing up. He looked, and the breath caught in his throat. Eight or nine of them, at the very least, and coming fast. Diving from the south, too, which meant that they cut off escape. A scrap was inevitable. He and Lefty were caught like rats in a trap with only five thousand feet between them and the earth. There was no room for a long drawn out dive. They must fight their way through at odds of nine to two!

He swung quickly away from the oncoming Fokkers, and jerked his throttle wide. He had time for one quick zoom; then his calculating eye told him that the moment had come. Like a flash he spun on a wing-tip, and met his attackers head-on. Lefty was at his side; together their guns spoke, spewing forth a double stream of smoking tracers and invisible but deadly solid steel. The hand which gripped Pete's stick was steady as a rock, but his heart was pounding like a triphammer, and his lips emitted a wild yell.

"Right through 'em, Lefty—and then beat it!"

His words were wasted; first, because they were lost in the infernal din of motors and hammering machine guns; and second, because Lefty Morse needed no such advice. Being a pilot of experience, he well knew that two do not remain to fight nine, unless they are intent on suicide. The only hope of salvation for the two Spads must be to break through with as short a struggle as possible, and run for the lines. Every second of combat against such overwhelming numbers was courting death. To fight such odds was a forlorn hope.

BUT these things were, unfortunately, equally plain to the Boche. As Pete and Lefty rushed to close quarters, the Fokkers split up. Some drove home an immediate attack with blazing guns; some circled back toward the south to block the road in that direction. Still others pulled up sharply, to save their altitude for a second assault. Pete and Lefty found themselves at once the center of a mad melee, with enemies before, behind, and on all sides, raking them with a fierce, intersecting fire. In that crowded sky there was no possibility of concerted strategy; it became immediately each man for himself.

Pete pulled up into a wing-over, which was changing into a renversement even before the bullets began to flay his left wing. He came out diving, but dared not hold it, for a Fokker was hard upon his tail. He curved up into a chandelle, and saw the lower surface of banking wings before him. Even as his eye told him that they carried the square, black cross of Germany, his fingers were contracting upon his trigger grips. He had but an instant to aim, fire, and correct; he saw his tracer stream vanishing into black fabric. Then the arc of the Fokker's curve carried it out of reach of his sights.

He had no opportunity to follow up his attack, nor even time to see if his fire had taken effect, for a blast of steel whistled at him from above. He shot aside, careful to turn toward the south, but was met by a point-blank volley from two at once. A yank and a kick put him into a side-slip, but he was literally pounded out of it by a hail of bullets that tore the whole length of his wing. In desperation he went into a vertical spiral; this made him, at least temporarily, a difficult target, and gave him a moment to think.

It looked bad. The Fokkers were too many. Whether his tactics were offensive or defensive seemed to make no difference. If he gave his attention to one, another struck from an unprotected angle. To out-manuever them all was humanly impossible, and to run, in straight flight before all those guns, was to sign his own death warrant. Perhaps if he could succeed in shooting one down, it would distract the attention of the others, unman them somewhat, and give him a moment's opportunity to escape. It was like putting one's head in the lion's mouth, but it was his only hope.

He lifted his Spad out of the top of that spiral with a jerk. Fokkers swam on all sides of him. He chose one, and fastened his attention to it, and it alone. With guns spitting, he rushed to cut off its course. It swerved sharply; he followed. Tracers zipped by his head, but he resolutely refused to look back. The Boche ahead of him ducked into a dive. Pete slammed his stick forward, and belched a long burst which plucked streamers from a black-crossed rudder. The Fokker swooped upward, trusting to the superior zooming power of its thick wings to carry it out of range. With gun full out, Pete rose in pursuit.

He stood the Spad upon its tail, and his propeller clawed the air. The Fokker was ahead and above, seemed to be drawing away. But his sights circled its cockpit; carefully he steadied his grip upon the stick,

and squinted along the gun-barrels. If his aim was perfect, one burst would do it, even at this distance. His eyes narrowed; his fingers twined round the trigger grips, tighter and tighter.

A splinter a foot long leaped from his instrument board into his startled face. Where it came from was a ragged hole, and a severed copper pipe, bleeding oil in spurts. A bullet whined so close to his car that he could hear it, a blood-curdling twang. Yet his hand did not change the position of his stick; his fingers only squeezed the Bowden triggers the tighter. But now came the muffled sound of a sharper impact from before him. Somewhere underneath his cowl metal had met metal. From his motor he heard a swift *clack-clack-clack*, which diminished almost at once to a slow *clunk-clunk—clunk*, and stopped entirely. He knew without looking at his prop that the motor was dead.

His belching guns were flaying empty air, as the foe ahead of him zoomed out of reach. He cursed feelingly, but the Spad, with no power to lift it, was already falling into a stall. The stall became a spin while he was relaxing his fingers on the triggers. He let her spin two or three complete turns, then came out with stick in neutral. He was lower than he thought; barely a thousand feet separated him from the ground. There was that three-sided wood he had seen before; and there, on the other side, was a field, smooth and clear. Half stunned by the suddenness of the calamity which had overtaken him, he pulled around in a wide curve, and glided toward that open meadow.

He had altitude to spare; one quick ess, and he was redressing with the tree-tops on his left. The field was grassy, and perfectly level. He set her down in a neat three-point, and rolled to a stop in an eerie silence. His first glance was at the sky above, and he let out a gasp of relief. For he saw that Lefty had made it. Somehow his comrade had broken through that cordon of foes, and was streaking toward the south. Two or three Fokkers pursued, but now, as he looked, they turned back in despair, to rejoin the rest. The group reformed, and flew off swiftly into the northwest. Pete's eye, running over the V, saw that there were now but eight; he grinned stiffly.

He dropped his eyes, and the first thing he saw was a lone figure approaching at a trot from the woods on his left hand. This figure wore the gray-green of a German officer's uniform. Pete saw at once that the jig was up. A holstered Luger was at his waist, and there were undoubtedly others at his heels. Being careful to keep his hands in plain sight, Pete jumped from the

cockpit to the ground and waited. When he was still a dozen paces away, the German began to speak in very good English.

"A good show, Lieutenant!" he said cheerfully. "Your defeat would have fooled the Kaiser himself. I could have sworn you were hit."

Pete glowered, too taken aback to make reply.

"Only a single-seater, I see," went on the other rapidly. "But that's better than nothing. God—I thought you'd never come! Three days I've been waiting. When did Colonel Boker tell you?"

CHAPTER II BROKEN WINGS

HE REALIZED SUDDENLY that this man was speaking English, not with the stilted, halting accents of a foreigner, but with the flowing ease of a born Yank. Yet his words, as far as meaning anything to Pete, might as well have been in Greek.

"Colonel Boker?" he stammered. "Who is he?"

The man before him suddenly stiffened into a crouch. His black eyes glittered dangerously, and his hand dropped to the butt of the Luger at his waist. His tone changed to one of chilled steel.

"Who are you?" he snapped.

"P.J. Hennabury, 1st Lieutenant, 44th Spads," replied Pete quickly.

"How do you happen to be here? You had instructions to land on this field? To meet someone?"

"Why, no." Pete told briefly of the directions given him by Major Simms before leaving. "That was all."

"Your identity card." Pete handed it over. The other inspected it closely, compared the photograph with Pete's face, and then handed it back. He straightened slowly, and muttered a heartfelt curse.

"I—I don't understand," said the bewildered Pete. "What is it all about? You are dressed like a German officer but you talk like a Yank. Who are you, anyway?"

The other subjected Pete to a keen scrutiny for several moments. Then he shrugged his broad shoulders and began speaking rapidly.

"I might as well tell you the rest, now. You'd probably guess it soon, anyway. I'm an American intelligence man, a spy. To Colonel Boker, the head of

army intelligence, I'm known simply as Zed, which is French for the last letter of the alphabet. I do my work in Germany, where I use various names from time to time. Just now I am the *Kapitan* von Zeddbart, on detached duty." He paused and Pete nodded.

"This field we're standing on, being in a deserted sector, is the one used by intelligence for dropping and picking up our operatives who have to get back and forth across the lines. I've been waiting here for a plane to come for me. Three days ago I sent the agreed signal, by underground channels, to Colonel Boker. So when you came down and landed, I thought, of course, you were my man. You see?"

Again Pete nodded. "But I'm not. Perhaps I'd better disappear. Your man may be along any time."

But the man who was known as Zed shook his head emphatically.

"No. It's too late to hope for that. It's three days since I sent word; the colonel couldn't have gotten my message. It must have miscarried, and there isn't time to send it again. Besides, this field is now too dangerous to use. Your plane in it will attract the Boches like flies. They'll be on us now any minute. We've got to think of some other way, and think of it quick."

"But how can you—Do you have to get back across the lines yourself, in person?" asked Pete.

Again the other regarded him sharply for a moment, as if trying to make a mental estimate of his character and abilities.

"No," he admitted finally. "I only have to send over a certain message in writing, to the proper hands. Listen." He drew closer, after looking about him carefully in all directions. There was not a soul within sight or hearing.

"The Boches, as you can guess, operate a net work of spies in France. In each city they have a headquarters, a place for meeting and reporting the information they have gathered. I have been lucky enough to get hold of a list of those addresses. It is in my pocket now!"

Pete stared as the importance of the spy's words struck him. "You see? That list must reach Colonel Boker, and reach him quickly. Raids, pulled simultaneously on those addresses, will cripple the German espionage with untold results. But time cannot be lost, for the Boches take the precaution of changing those addresses frequently. In a week, or even a few days, it will be too late."

"My God," exclaimed Pete. "I'll help. What can I

do?"

"You can fly back with it, which I can not do, because I am not a pilot." His hand went inside his tunic, half drew forth a folded sheet of paper, then paused. "But the danger. Do you understand it? If by any mischance the Boches catch you with this in your possession, there will be no question of capture. You will be shot instantly."

"I understand," said Pete impatiently. "The risk is yours, then. Here it is."

PETE took the single sheet of white paper. Before thrusting it in his pocket, some impulse made him unfold it and glance at its contents. His eyes widened.

"What the hell!" he cried. "There's nothing on it. It's blank!"

"Of course," snapped the other. "Do you think we're fools? It's written in invisible ink."

"But how can it be read, then?"

"Any mild acid will bring out the writing," explained Zed. "Acetic, citric, or tartaric acid; vinegar, but Colonel Boker will know all about that, don't worry. Come, we're wasting time. Into your plane, now, and get going as fast as—"

"My plane!" cried Pete. "But my plane is useless. It's got a bullet through the motor; that's why I had to come down!"

Zed grated a bitter curse. "Dam it. I'd forgotten! I kept thinking that your combat had been faked, and you landed on purpose."

"We might be able to fix it," suggested Pete, shoving the paper carefully into an inside pocket. But his very tone betrayed no hope.

"No, no, there's not time," muttered the spy. "They will be on our necks here any minute. Let me see—"

For a moment he stood deep in thought. Then he seized Pete by the arm, and dragged him rapidly toward the woods.

"Come. I have it! There's a German aerodrome a few miles to the northwest; that's where those Fokkers you fought were from, no doubt. We'll go there. By yourself, you wouldn't have a chance of even crossing the edge of the field. But I'll manage to get you in somehow; I'll tell them some story. And once on the field, you may be able to seize a plane, and get away. Come, hurry!"

"But you're not walking northwest!" protested Pete.

"We're not walking. I've got a car here.

THEY plunged into the woods, and in a few moments were emerging from the other edge onto a road. Here stood a gray-painted touring car, with the top up, and German army insignia on its doors. This, Pete realized now, was the automobile he had seen from above before the scrap started, the very car which had aroused his curiosity.

"Turn the crank," ordered Zed. "I'll drive."

Pete obeyed; the motor started with a powerful purr. As he leaped to the front seat, Zed let in the clutch, and the car moved with increasing pace down the narrow lane. Zed changed into high, and began speaking rapidly out of the corner of his mouth.

"I'll tell them I was driving along this road, and saw your plane come down. So I captured you and you are my prisoner, I'll say that I want to turn you over to Imperial intelligence in person, as I think you ought to be questioned. I'll be stopping at their field only to let them fill my gas tank. Then I'll express some curiosity about their planes, or something, to get us onto the field itself. Then after that, it will be up to you to make a break."

"I'll get you," said Pete grimly. "I'll make it, somehow."

The car took a corner on two wheels, turning onto a new road. This was wide and straight, but carried no traffic whatsoever. The driver's foot was hard down on the accelerator pedal, and the speedometer needle began to climb the dial. Zed was speaking again.

"Don't, for God's sake, speak to me in English. And if I get rough, point a gun at you or something, pay no attention. Even if I should strike you, just act scared, see?"

"Don't worry. I'll play the part, as if—" He paused, drawing in his breath sharply. "What's that?" he cried.

Above the drone of their own motor he was suddenly aware of another sound. A deep, menacing roar, which seemed to come from all sides at once. This was now punctuated by a staccato crackling, which lasted for several seconds, and then stopped. Pete leaned far out, until his head was beyond the edge of the top, but did not see anything until he looked straight up. Then he gasped.

"Wait a minute! There's a plane up there. He's shooting at us! Look out!" Even as he spoke the hovering shadow against the sky swung up into a bank, and Pete caught a flash of the number painted on its side. It was Lefty's Spad. The explanation hit him at once. Lefty, after his escape, had missed Pete, and had come back to try to discover what had happened to him; to find out, at least, whether his comrade was

dead or alive. And had now found a choice target in what he undoubtedly took for a staff car, and was exacting a little personal revenge. Pete groaned, and kicked open the door.

"Stop the car!" he shouted. "It's Lefty! He'll shoot us up, unless he sees me! Slow down, so I can show him who I am!"

But Zed was shaking his head. "Some one else may see. We're coming near a town. Can't risk it! Have to out-run him!"

Pete again leaned out from under the top. The Spad overhead, having overshot its target, had circled back, but was now coming up on them once more from the rear. Its nose was down, its motor thundered ominously as it plunged nearer and nearer. Pete imagined that he could see Lefty glaring angrily through the sights.

"Stop for God's sake! You can't outrun him! It's Lefty, I tell you—Lefty! He's sure death on a ground target. Stop!"

But Zed only crouched the lower over the wheel, and jammed his foot down against the floorboards. His slitted eyes were fastened to the road ahead, which was boiling under the wheels at close to sixty miles an hour. The car leaped a rut, and swayed from side to side, so that Pete had to cling to the seat to keep from being thrown out. For a moment he considered jumping, but gave it up. The speed was too great, he would be killed.

The Hisso roared louder and louder from the sky above. Lefty was coming very low, to make sure of his aim. Now, once more, the pound of machine guns broke through the lesser din, a long, relentless burst. Pete, ducking involuntarily with his head on one side, caught an instantaneous flash of gray right at his elbow. The figure of Zed, bent over the wheel stiffened suddenly, to sit bolt upright. Pete saw his knuckles, white where they gripped the wheel; then saw his face suddenly go whiter still. His eyes, still looking straight ahead, were round and staring. He began to shake violently, coughing up blood.

"Zed—what's the matter! Are you hit! Look out!"

The car gave a terrible swoop. With one motion Pete struck Zed's hands from the wheel, and seized it himself. He found the center of the road, and tried to hold it, but it kept eluding him. Either the motor had been hit, or he had struck his knee against the switch, for the car was slowing down. But it was still lunging ahead at better than forty, and a sharp turn loomed

ahead. In his strained, grotesque position Pete could not get control of it. The rear skidded drunkenly; he tugged at the wheel, but tugged too hard. The whole machine slewed at right angles to its path, and with a terrific lurch and a bound went off into the ditch. Pete rose until his head struck the top, then felt himself driven forward. His shoulder shattered the windshield. Amid the crash and tinkle of falling glass he came at last to a stop.

He untangled himself from the dash, and stared dazedly about. The body of his companion was draped over the wheel, dripping blood upon the floor. There were four small holes in a straight line across the back of his gray-green tunic.

"Zed!" cried Pete in anguish. "Arc you done for?"

He lifted the other gently, until the rolling head rested upon the back of the seat. His eyes half opened, his lips moved.

"Be sure—you get it—Colonel—Boker—"

"Yes, yes!" promised Pete. "I swear it! But first I'll fix up—"

The words died on his lips even as he uttered them. There would be no need to fix up anything for that limp figure. Zed was dead.

CHAPTER III A SCRAP OF PAPER

PETE LET HIMSELF SLIDE through the twisted door to the ground. His knee had struck something a sharp blow, probably the gear shift lever; for a moment it would not bear his weight. He stood rubbing it, and peering into the south, where a speck faded against the sky.

"Damn you, Lefty!" he muttered. "You thought you were shooting the Boches. But now look what you've done!"

He saw immediately the desperate predicament which faced him. In his pocket was a paper bearing a dozen addresses, which, once in the proper hands, might very well decide the outcome of the war. He must somehow get it into those hands, and quickly, too. But how? With Zed in German uniform to help, his chances of stealing a plane had been at least fair. Now, with the spy dead, they were nil. But what other possibility was left? He thought of donning Zed's

uniform himself, but remembered that he did not speak a word of German. His masquerade would be discovered at the first encounter. What then?

But before he could evolve the merest germ of an idea, his next step was thrust upon him. Around the curve from the north came a car, bursting into sight at high speed. He crouched instinctively, but its brakes shrieked, and before he could move a step it had stopped by his very elbow. A second car followed the first, and ground to a halt; Pete was immediately surrounded by half a dozen figures.

They seized him, searched him for weapons, and then assailed him with a flood of questions. But these Germans, although they wore the same uniform as Zed, spoke only their mother tongue. Pete shook his head dumbly in reply, but, seeing the fliers' insignia on their breasts, he guessed shrewdly at their purpose. They were no doubt the same pilots against whom he had fought less than half an hour before, and had come back by automobile to capture him in person, as well as to look for their one comrade who had gone down in the scrap.

Finding him inarticulate in the only language they spoke, they shortly bundled him into one of the cars, which then turned around. Three of the pilots took their places by his side, and the car started at a rapid pace back in the direction from which it had come. Pete guessed without difficulty that he was being driven to their field, and within ten minutes knew a throb of hope when he saw ahead the rounded tops of canvas hangars against the sky-line. The car whirled through a gate in a barbed wire fence, where a sentry saluted, rolled past the first hangar, and came to a stop before a large, square tent.

Pete, as he descended, was surprised to see that this tent served as squadron headquarters. The side toward the field was wide open, the flap being rolled entirely to one side, so that he could see the interior as he approached. There were several small tables at the sides, where worked men who were evidently sergeants or field clerks; in the middle a tall, well-groomed officer sat at a larger table, with his back toward the field. This was obviously the *Kommandant*, and it was apparent that in such sultry weather he set more store by keeping cool than he did by his privacy.

His three captors accompanied him inside, where they saluted smartly as the *Kommandant* looked up. Then one of them began to explain, in German, where and how they had found him; Pete used the time to study the man at the table. His tunic and shirt were

open at the throat, disclosing a rather skinny neck, surmounted by a bullet-shaped head. His sandy hair was closely cropped, and came down in a V quite low on his forehead, close to the beady brown eyes. His jaw was long and prominent, but the skin hung loosely upon it, spoiling the effect of strength. His nose was large, and a faint scar showed where a blow had bent it. It gave the impression of wandering around on his face. It was beaded with sweat.

SUDDENLY the flow of German ceased, and Pete found that the *Kommandant* was speaking to him in harsh and guttural English.

"You are the *Amerikamshier* who fought some of my men, over the three-sided wood, thirty minutes ago?"

There was, Pete decided, no object in concealing information which they could easily find out for themselves; his plane, with its squadron insignia, would give him away. "Yes," he said frankly.

Then, instead of another question, the *Kommandant* barked something in German. Immediately two of the pilots began going through his pockets, emptying their contents onto the table. Everything; cigarettes, matches, identity card, a soiled handkerchief, a couple of letters, a key-chain. When they came to the upper pocket of his tunic, and drew forth the blank paper which Zed had given him, Pete ground his teeth to repress a groan of dismay. He dared offer no objection, however; but he noted carefully where it was laid on the table.

The task finished, the C.O. spoke again, and the three pilots departed. Then, looking over Pete's effects one by one, the German began to ask many questions, in a friendly, persuasive manner. His name, rank, squadron, length of time on the front, where was his home, and many others. To most Pete answered truthfully, lulled to a sense of security by the other's manner and tone. Yet when they smacked of military matters, his replies were cautiously vague. He told of the combat, of how he had been forced to land with a dead stick, and of his capture by the officer who had later been killed from the air. The German, listening intently, reached over as Pete finished and picked up the blank piece of white paper. His long, slim fingers unfolded it casually; Pete felt his heart pounding like a trip-hammer.

The German grunted. Pete held his breath. Then the *Kommandant* turned in his chair, and held the empty sheet of paper up to the light. Pete's heart was trying to get out of his throat now; he peered as hard

as did the other. To his relief no sign of writing was visible. Then suddenly his blood ran cold. Against the light the water-mark in the paper was clearly to be seen. It was a German water-mark!

"How do you happen to be carrying this?" asked the *Kommandant*, still in the same calm and friendly tone.

His face was utterly impassive, giving no clue to his thoughts. What did he suspect? Had he seen the tell-tale mark of manufacturer, and grasped its significance? It was impossible for Pete to be sure. His arm had dropped, and he had turned back to the table. Perhaps he had not even noticed it. But the risk of a lie was too great. If he once caught Pete in an untruth, his suspicion would be aroused, and there was no telling what action he might take next. Pete's brain was working at top speed, although he spoke hesitantly.

"I took it from the officer who captured me. After he was shot and the car crashed in the ditch. I had thoughts of escape. Putting on his uniform, getting across the lines. So I had started looking through his pockets. I had that paper in my hand, when your men appeared very suddenly. I must have thrust it in my own pocket, without knowing. They surprised me. I hadn't even looked at it."

The *Kommandant* laid the paper carefully on the corner of the table, and shrugged. Pete heaved an inward sigh of relief.

"You saw it was your own comrade who attacked that car?"

"Yes, it was. He came back, I suppose, to find out if I was alive or dead."

"He took considerable risk to get that information. Although I cannot blame him for trying."

FOR a time the German seemed to be finished with his questions. He busied himself with certain matters on his desk, while Pete stood there, outwardly calm but inwardly seething. Just outside, on the tarmac, a single Fokker was turning over idly. Then the mutter of its exhausts ceased as the switch was cut. At the same moment another plane, which had been circling overhead, came in to land, taxied up to the hangars, and cut off. Its pilot entered the tent, reported briefly to one of the sergeants, and disappeared.

Pete saw these things without especial interest; his thoughts were all revolving around that square of blank paper which reposed so innocently on the table. There lay hidden information of almost inestimable value to the Allied cause. In someway he must get that

sheet of foolscap across the lines. It seemed humanly impossible. Yet somehow it must be done, and quickly, too; in another few moments they would be marching him off to prison camp, and the chance would be lost. He racked his brain for an idea. And suddenly it came to him. He recalled that *Kommandant's* last words. A wild, crazy idea but it might work. He tried to keep his voice cool and casual.

"Sir, do you mind if I ask a favor?"

The German grunted, looked up. "A favor?"

"Not for myself, but for my comrades. Only that you drop a message on my field, saying that I am alive and well. So that they know."

The German stared at him in some surprise. Trying to hide his eagerness, Pete pointed out several instances where this courtesy had been practiced, by both sides. The risk was slight, especially if a single plane went at dusk. It cost no military advantage, was but an act of human kindness, to relieve the minds of his friends.

"Furthermore," added Pete, "my fellow fliers would then be less inclined to raid, in retaliation, your own field here."

The *Kommandant* appeared to hesitate. Perhaps it was the hint of a threat in the last words which decided him.

"You seem to be a decent, truthful man," he said slowly. "And it happens that one of our pilots is going on a mission, very soon. I hardly know—but yes. He shall do as you ask."

The words were scarcely out of his mouth before Pete acted. Without waiting for permission, he stepped forward, picked up the sheet of blank white paper from the corner of the table, and snatched a pencil from under the German's hand. He scribbled a few lines hastily, signed his name, and handed it across the table.

"There! In my own handwriting, they will know it to be authentic."

The *Kommandant* peered curiously at the scrawled sentences, reading them over half to himself. "'O.K.—unhurt—being treated well—tell Lefty Boker to try'—but wait! What does this mean?"

Pete laughed, as if in amused embarrassment, but his pulse was pounding madly. Would the German recognize that name?

"Lefty—that's my buddy, you know. He and I were—" and he went on to explain the talk about the morning-after taste in the mouth, and his own inability to remember the formula for the cure. The

very basis of truth behind his words made them ring true. When he finished the German was chuckling.

"You Americans. To you this war is a joke. But tell me, this is truly a cure for the—what do you call it—the hang-above?" Pete nodded enthusiastically, grinning. "I shall try it myself, then." He licked his dry lips thoughtfully. "Right now, perhaps."

He turned and barked something at one of the sergeants, who rose and dashed out. Pete's blood ran cold. Was that German, taking him at his word, going to test the recipe on the spot? What if he actually filled his mouth with that mixture? Pete shuddered.

When the sergeant returned, he was accompanied by a pilot wearing helmet and goggles. To this one the *Kommandant* spoke at some length; Pete thought he caught the word "*Amerikanischer*" and "*Staffel Vier-und-vierzig*." The pilot took the paper which the commanding officer handed him, thrust it in his outer pocket, saluted, and left the tent. A sharp question, to which the sergeant replied, and then the *Kommandant* turned again to Pete.

"Unfortunately we have in our stores no lemons. So I shall have to postpone trying your cure. But you saw that pilot to whom I gave your message? He will drop it on your field within half an hour. If you will step outside, you will have the pleasure of seeing him take off to execute your wish, so that you will know you are not deceived."

PETE murmured his thanks, and stepped out onto the tarmac, somewhat surprised at the freedom of movement allowed him. But before he had more than passed beyond the corner of the tent, toward the hangars, an armed sentry appeared in front of him, and indicated by a movement of his rifle that the American was to go no farther. Pete halted and looked about him. He noticed, first, that the sun was already low in the west; in another ten minutes or so it would be growing dark. On the field before him stood three or four Fokkers; the one which had but recently landed, and the other which had a short time before been warming up. By this last stood the helmeted pilot who was to carry his message across the lines.

Suddenly the squadron commander emerged from the tent. Without a glance toward Pete, he walked toward the waiting plane, where he and the pilot engaged in a short conversation. Pete could not hear the words, and would not have understood them if he had, but he observed that they both laughed heartily several times. Then the *Kommandant* returned to his

tent, and the pilot climbed into his ship.

No mechanic touched the prop, yet suddenly it was turning over and the exhausts were sputtering fire. After a moment of astonishment Pete grasped the explanation. These six cylinder Mercedes motors, with which the Fokkers were equipped, were capable of starting on the spark, when warm. Unlike the Hisso eights, they retained compression for ten or fifteen minutes, and within that time needed no priming. He stored the fact away in his memory for future use. He watched the pilot settle himself in the cockpit, fasten his safety belt, and finally wave a hand to the men who held the chock ropes.

The men jerked the ropes, and at that very instant a horrible conjecture leaped into Pete's brain. From a conjecture it grew at once to a certainty, and he almost cried aloud at his own stupidity. That pilot, and his commanding officer, had been laughing quietly together—and at what? Why, it was obvious! The pilot was not going to drop his message at all; the *Kommandant* had never had the slightest intention of complying with Pete's request. It had all been a piece of by-play, staged to make him the laughing-stock of the staffel.

Had not that pilot thrust the paper carelessly in his outer pocket? If he had really meant to drop it, it would have been placed in a message-tube, rigged to a chute, such as the Germans always used for such a purpose. That pilot was going out on some other mission—the *Kommandant* had said as much—and upon his return would probably destroy that paper at his leisure, after having a good laugh at Pete's expense. And with it would be destroying, albeit unwittingly, the information which was capable of wrecking the German cause.

The Fokker was taking off. Pete watched it roll swiftly across the field, and curve gracefully into the air. It climbed toward the south, and with it went his last forlorn chance. Long before that plane returned, he would be marched off on the way to a war prison, and the whole affair would be hopeless. He ground his teeth in despair, and dropped his eyes. They came to rest on the other Fokker, that one which had landed while he had been still talking to the *Kommandant* in the tent.

How long since that motor had been running? Ten minutes—fifteen? He did not know. Was it warm enough still to start on the spark? There was no way of telling, short of trying. Trying? Under the very noses of a field full of Boches? To think of success was

incredible. And if it failed, he would be riddled by a hundred bullets. He glanced once toward the plane above, now fading into the dusk toward the south; then back at the field. The mechanics, he saw, were walking back toward the hangars on his left. He was as near to that standing ship as any of them. But the guard at his elbow—

Without moving his head, Pete looked sideways out of the tail of his eye. The sentry leaned indolently on his rifle, watching the departing ship. His head was tilted slightly back, so that his chin made a fair target. He hummed softly to himself. Still without moving, Pete gathered himself. His muscles all tensed like steel bands. When his arm struck, it was with the swiftness of light.

The German soldier's song ended in a soft gasp; he went down like a log. His rifle, luckily, fell across his body, so that there was no clatter. Pete's first bound carried him a dozen feet. He ran as if the devil himself were at his heels. He was half way there and a shout rang out. Pete ran the faster. The shout became a chorus; from the corner of his eye he saw other figures begin to run. He glued his gaze to the cockpit ahead of him. Another bound—another. As he crashed against the side of the fuselage with his momentum, the first shot cracked the stillness. He flung himself in headlong.

He found the switch by the instinct which guides men in times of great danger. He jerked it, as a volley crashed behind him. A splinter jumped from the trailing edge of the wing into his face—but he heard a pop—a sputter—the motor was running. He remembered, as he seized the throttle, to draw it back slowly, lest the half-cooled engine choke and stall. Then it took hold with a full-throated roar, and the plane shivered beneath him, and began to move.

Not until the wheels had left the ground did he look back. He saw figures running madly about the field, dragging-planes from the hangars, tugging at the props. But he prayed for only one break of luck, and his prayer was answered. None of those other ships were warm enough to start on the spark; their motors had to be turned over by hand before they would run. By that small margin of time did he make good his escape. The field itself was dissolving in the distance before a single pursuer left the ground, and by that token he knew that his own plane must be utterly invisible to them.

Anxiously he turned his eyes to the front. The sun was down behind the hills, and the dusk was rapidly

deepening to darkness. On the ground it was already almost night, but there was still a streak of gray across the upper reaches of the sky. Against this he saw, far ahead of him, a single speck. Grimly he set his course, saw that his throttle was jammed wide open, and roared in pursuit.

As the miles reeled beneath his wings, the gap closed up. The Fokker ahead was flying at normal cruising speed. With full throttle Pete was gaining nearly twenty miles an hour. The gathering darkness was making it a mere blur against the sky, but as the distance lessened the blur grew larger. He could plainly recognize it for a Fokker now, and shouted aloud in his eagerness. But at the same moment he saw the lines below, marked by an irregular lane of straggling flares, and knew that they were crossing into Allied territory.

CHAPTER IV DEAD MAN'S SECRET

THE FOKKER AHEAD ploughed straight on. Pete, hanging to its trail, closed the gap now to less than half a mile. It was quite dark, but they were flying not higher than a thousand feet. Could they be seen from the ground? Most certainly they could be heard, and no doubt the archie gunners— *Woof!* Pete's left wing jerked violently, then settled back as he corrected with his stick. Yes, they could be seen. Or else the A.A. guns were directing their fire by sound, and making damned accurate work of it. He could barely discern the puffballs of white which blossomed around him, but the instantaneous flashes of crimson as the shells exploded were like fireflies in the dark.

Not for an instant did he swerve, however, nor for a fleeting second remove his eyes from that dim blur ahead of him. Now he saw it curve slowly off to the right; he banked quickly, and gained distance by cutting across the arc of its turn. He was within a few hundred yards when it made its next turn, this time to the left. He followed like a shadow, and now shot a quick look in advance of the other's path. What was the Boche looking for, anyway?

Almost at once he found it, a dark blob against the lesser darkness of the evening sky. The one thing in the air big enough to find in this faint light; of course, he

should have guessed it before now. An Allied balloon, swinging at the end of its short cable. A dusk balloon strafe—that was the mission on which that pilot had been sent. Even as Pete grasped this fact, the other Fokker nosed down slightly, and a glowing stream of incendiaries poured from its nose.

Pete set himself, and pulled off a trifle, waiting for that other to pull up from his dive. He saw that his own actions must be swift and conclusive. That German pilot did not as yet suspect his identity, had not, perhaps; even seen his presence. But as soon as Pete opened his attack, it would not be difficult for the Boche to guess. The insignia on the side of the plane would betray the field from which it came, and the German pilot, knowing of the American's presence there, could put two and two together. Would he run or fight?

The Fokker curved upward from its first attack. Pete waited until the precise instant, then pushed forward on his stick. Down he plunged, toward the other's flank. Closer and closer he rushed, his eyes fastening on that shadowy shape before him. It veered into a bank; his hand moved the stick just enough to keep it centered in his sights. An archie burst in between; he lost the ship for an instant. Then he shot through the small cloud of acrid smoke, and found it again, very close. Without waiting for command from his brain, his fingers closed upon the triggers, and his tracers seared the night in a hissing arc.

PERHAPS that Boche had been watching him all the way across the lines. Or perhaps he was a man whose mind leaped to conclusions. Possibly he did not know, in the hazy light, that it was a Fokker which was attacking him. But he knew instantly, with Pete's first burst, that he was being attacked, and he lost no time in retaliating. His plane leaped like a cat from Pete's line of fire, and swept over in a lifting wing-over. His own guns chattered harshly.

The movements of the other plane were difficult to follow in the gloom, and Pete lost a moment in hesitation. That moment cost him dear, for suddenly he saw a stream of incendiary bullets which gleamed maliciously, as they sliced across his very path. A frantic jerk at the stick saved him, but some of his precious altitude was gone. The other plunged close. Pete zoomed, but one Fokker cannot out-zoom another; the Boche was rising under his tail, and Pete heard the song of Spandaus. He flipped through a renversement, and as he came out immediately

went into a turn. For a moment the Boche lost him completely. Pete came clean around, and found the other before him. A perfect shot. He flattened out, steadied his hand upon the stick. His fingers curled round the triggers and then a horrible thought smote him between the eyes. What if he shot that plane down in flames?

The ship would burn, the pilot, too; and with it the very paper, in the pilot's pocket, which must be saved at all costs! He groaned aloud in horror and dismay. What, then, could he do? Attempt to force a dead stick landing by putting a bullet in the other's motor? Even in daylight this would call for uncanny accuracy in marksmanship; in darkness such as this it was more impossible than a miracle. The Boche, seeing him again, was whirling out of range, but Pete made no attempt to fire. Only one of his tracers through that gas tank and his whole object would be defeated at once. He was faced with a dilemma to which there was but one solution. Grimly he took it.

He looked back, until he saw that dim shape complete its quick circle, and plunge for his tail. Then he nosed over gently. A burst of greenish, stabbing streaks brushed the air above his head; the Boche was on his track. He nosed over a little more. The next burst was closer; some of those burning bullets bit at his upper wing. The very sight of them curdled the blood in his veins, but his hand refused to swerve. Steeper and steeper he dove.

He was plunging into a froth of archie bursts; the bitter smoke stung his nostrils as he rushed through. Another vicious blast from the enemy behind flayed his cockpit. Something jerked at his leg, whether a Boche bullet or a fragment of Yank shrapnel he did not know. The pain surged through his whole body. Stiff and tense, he stared fixedly ahead and down. Somewhere before him the earth was rushing up to meet him. But he could not see it; everything below was one solid carpet of black. Fifty feet or five hundred? He did not know.

The tearing speed of his dive was making the whole plane quiver like an animal in mortal fear. The Boche was hot upon his tail, vomiting burst after burst in rapid succession. The hissing missiles tore through Pete's wings, ripped the length of his fuselage, made a sieve out of the cockpit wherein he sat. He felt a red-hot iron laid upon his skull, as a bullet grooved his scalp. He swayed for an instant on the verge of unconsciousness, but recovered with a jerk. He must not go out yet—not yet—not yet!

HIS gaze was riveted to the square of blackness bounded by his center section struts. There he would first see the ground. Either in time, or too late. A trickle of blood crept under his goggles, to sting one eye. Resolutely he kept it open. There were no morearchie bursts now—he was too low. But a sheaf of steel from behind tore the longeron away from under his left elbow. His arm dropped to his side, and because he could not raise it again he knew that it, too, had been hit. Where—oh, God, where was the ground!

A snarling cry of terror burst from his lips. There—right in front of him—trees! His muscles contracted automatically, to slam the stick into his belly. The Fokker groaned in every strut and spar; its giddy swoop drove his chin down upon his breast. Faintly he heard a swish, as of leaves against his under-carriage. Then he jerked himself erect, and peered over his shoulder. He saw nothing. He was looking back and down, now, at the smudgy surface of what must be the near earth. Nothing moved there, nor in between. But now, faintly through his exhausts, there came to his ears the echo of a frightful crash, and he knew that his stratagem had succeeded.

Strangely enough, he had given no thought until now to getting down himself. And now he found it difficult, even to think. The blood was running freely into both eyes, blinding him. When he tried to raise his arm to lift his goggles, the arm would not move. Oh, yes, he remembered. That arm was hit. He dared not let go of the stick with the other. He tilted his head, so that the blood ran out of his left eye into the right, and managed to find the horizon.

But it seemed to waver and tip grotesquely; he could not follow it. Was he upside down? The sky was a void of blackness; the earth was blacker still. His head throbbed with pain; his one leg was utterly numb. No, he was right side up. But how could he find a field, and how make a landing in it after it was found? He had no idea in which direction he was flying; he did not know whether he was flying a straight line, or around in aimless circles. And how high was he? He found that out abruptly.

Ahead of him loomed suddenly a forbidding bulk, darker than the sky. The side of a hill! He tried to chandelle upward to the left. The stick put the plane into a bank, but his left leg refused to obey the command of his brain, and the rudder did not move. He was at once slipping into the center of his turn. In desperate haste he hooked his good right foot under that end of the rudder bar, and jerked upward. The

plane answered, rose in a climbing turn. But it was a forlorn hope from the beginning, although he never knew it. He was in a shallow valley, with hills on all sides. The one ahead of him he missed by inches, only to run headlong into the one on his left. For an instant of horror he saw what was coming. Then the world exploded in one rending, thunderous crash, and everything in Pete's brain went very, very still.

It was some thirty minutes later that voices were heard in that valley, and the crackle of brush under many feet.

"It was more over this way, I think. Lieutenant!"

"Watch those lights, men! Here, what's this?"

The searching party crowded round, their cautiously uncovered flashlights picking out the tangled skeleton of the wreck.

"A Boche! See the cross? Here, rip off this canvas, and let's see if— Yes, there he is."

Careful hands drew a limp and quiet figure out onto the damp grass; a head bent over the blood-soaked chest.

"Alive, by God! What do you know. Say—look here!"

The officer's flash had glinted on a pair of silver wings. He shifted the light, and saw on the shoulders first lieutenant's bars, unmistakably American. The fabric of the uniform, though blotched with blood, was plainly khaki. The officer gasped with amazement.

"A Yank in a Jerry plane! How come?" Swiftly his fingers ran through the pockets. Empty. Not a scrap of paper; not even a dog-tag there. The officer rose to his feet.

"There's something phoney about this," he averred decisively. "He comes over in a Boche plane, but with an American uniform on, and without a speck of identification in his pockets. If you ask me, he's probably a spy. But he's alive, and I suppose it's our duty to keep him that way until we find out for sure. Here, a couple of you men hoist him on your shoulders and cart him down to the road. See that he's shoved in an ambulance and go with him to the hospital yourselves, understand? When he comes to—if he ever does—he's not to be allowed to send any messages to anyone, not even J.J. Pershing himself, until his story is checked up. Get that?"

They got it; they were, in fact, already lifting the sodden form to their shoulders, none too gently, and picking their way down the stony hillside toward the distant road where traffic rumbled.

It was after nine o'clock when a motorcycle roared

along the darkness of the winding lane, and sputtered to a stop before headquarters of the 44th Spads. The rider dismounted stiffly, took something from the leather case like a saddle-bag which was strapped over the rear wheel, and entered the door without knocking. "Major Simms?" he said questioningly. Sergeant Doane looked up from a mass of papers.

"He's inside. Why, whatta vuh got?"

"A piece o' weddin' cake; whatta yuh think?" retorted the courier tartly. "Is he busy?"

"Say, you despatch riders think you're the nuts, don't you? Some day you'll let one too many of them cracks ooze through your teeth, and a real soldier will push those same teeth out through the back of your empty skull."

The courier, who was about to invite the other to try his skill at teeth-pushing, stiffened as a voice spoke from a far door.

"Come, come, what's this all about? You got something for me?"

"Major Simms," stated the rider in a brand new tone, as he clicked his heels and saluted smartly. "A despatch for you, sir, from the anti-aircraft P.C. at Boreilles."

"Well, give it here," demanded the major. "Don't stand there chewing the fat all night. How do you know; it might be something important."

CHAPTER V COFFIN COCKTAIL

THE RIDER HANDED OVER an envelope, and when the major had signed the usual formal receipt turned on his heel, gave the sergeant a dirty look, and disappeared into the night. The major retreated into his private cubicle, sat down, and ripped the flap from the envelope with a pudgy forefinger. From it he drew two sheets of paper; to the one which was typewritten he gave his attention first.

Captive balloon position southwest of Boreilles was attacked shortly after twilight by two enemy planes, Fokkers, which appeared to act strangely.

In spite of visibility being almost nil, our fire brought one down. It crashed near our gun position; the pilot was killed. On his person we

found the enclosed note, addressed to you. He probably intended to drop it, but never got the chance. Since its contents seem to be entirely personal, we are forwarding it direct to you without consulting intelligence. The other Fokker escaped, but seemed to be badly crippled.

C. B. Holden,

1st Lieut., Commanding.

The major turned quickly to the second communication. This was scrawled in pencil across a sheet of plain white paper.

Major Simms, 44th—Am all O.K. and unhurt. Being treated well. Tell Lefty Boker to try lemon juice, milk and pepper. Pete.

The major gazed at it for a moment in frowning silence. Then tossed it carelessly to the table, and snorted.

"If that bird Hennabury isn't a nut," he muttered, "then I never saw one. Lemon juice, pepper—bah! A new cocktail recipe, probably. He gets a chance to send a message across the lines and then uses it to write that nonsense! Why didn't he try to slip us some information about the enemy? Must have been drunk. His best pal is Lefty Morse, yet he refers to him as Lefty Boker. *Huh!*"

He gazed morosely at the flickering candle, tapping the table restlessly with his finger-tips. The infinitesimal vibration thus produced dislodged the paper which he had just dropped near the corner. It trembled for a moment on the edge, and then slipped off to waft gently to the floor, he glanced after it, but made no move to pick it up. Why should he trouble himself? To him that sheet of foolscap bore the news that Pilot Pete Hennabury was alive and uninjured; and, as well, a dozen words of gibberish. That, and nothing more. Had he been aware of its vital import, had he but guessed the half of the secret hidden beneath those scrawled phrases, he would have retrieved it with trembling fingers, pinned it securely in his innermost pocket, and surrounded himself with guards armed to the teeth until such time as he could place it in safe hands. But Major Simms guessed nothing.

"Sergeant!" he called, after a time. A listless figure appeared in the door. "When you go down by pilots' barracks, you might ask Lieutenant Morse to step up here."

"Yes, sir. Shall I go tell him now, Major?"

"Any time; no hurry," grunted the C.O.

Down in the barracks, however, Lefty Morse had heard the sound of the motorcycle, and wondered if it brought special flying orders for the morrow. There being no poker game in progress, he started up toward headquarters to find out, and in the intense darkness ran full into Sergeant Doane where the path curved through the trees.

"Oh—excuse me! Is that you, Lieutenant Morse?"

"That's my foot, you mean! Yes, why?"

"The major wants you to stop by for a minute, sir."

Lefty quickened his steps, and was shortly knocking at the C.O.'s door. A gruff voice bade him enter.

"Here's something that came in a while ago, Morse. See if you can make anything of it. I can't."

He hunted through the upper layer of papers on his desk, then remembered, and retrieved the one for which he sought from the floor. He handed it to Lefty, who stared at it eagerly.

"Yea! Hot dog!" cried the pilot, as soon as he had read the first two sentences. "Hot diggedy damn! He's O.K.—unhurt, he says!"

"Yes, but read the rest of it. What does he mean by that twaddle? Trying to tell us a new kind of drink, or what?"

Lefty frowned at the paper, and his eyes widened in perplexity. Then suddenly his brow cleared, and he gave an embarrassed laugh.

"Oh, I know what that is, Major. You see it was like this—"

He explained the import of his conversation with Pete, just before taking off that afternoon, on the subject of hangovers.

"This is probably just one of his crazy jokes," added Lefty. "Make a hell of a mouth-wash, that mixture would."

"Well, he must be balmy to send such a message as that," snorted the C.O. in disgust. "You'd think he'd be serious, show some dignity before the enemy, at least. Why, he didn't even know your right name!"

"Hm-m, Boker," mused Lefty. "That's funny. Never even heard the name myself. But hell, he's all right, and that's that. Mind if I keep this note to remember him by, sir?"

"What, that? Keep it, by all means." Lefty departed, and strolled down the path a happier man than he had climbed it. He imparted the good news to the rest of the gang, and then sat down on the edge of his bunk. His thoughts were pleasant, for his buddy, instead of being a dead hero, was at worst a live prisoner, and

therefore he might some day see his homely face again.

After all, was it possible that Pete meant what he had written for him, Lefty, to use as a mouth wash? He pondered this a long time. Pete was the squadron jester and yet it was hardly conceivable that he would go to all the trouble to send that dope all the way from Germany to no purpose whatsoever, except to make Lefty laugh. Maybe there was something in it, after all. It wouldn't cost anything to try.

HE ROSE, and made his way to the kitchens behind the mess. Here, after some argument, he got what he wanted, and returned to the barracks bearing half a tumbler of lemon juice in one hand, half a tumbler of milk in the other, and a pepper shaker in his pocket. He stood these carefully on the windowsill, and regarded them thoughtfully.

"Now I wonder what proportions," he muttered. "Did he say anything about that? Let's see."

He drew Pete's note from his pocket, unfolded it, and spread it out flat on the edge of his bunk. Again he read it through.

"Hm-m. Fifty-fifty, I suppose. Well, here goes."

He poured the lemon juice into the milk somewhat cautiously, almost as if he expected them to explode on contact. Then, taking the pepper shaker from his pocket, he stepped to the bunk to make sure that the recipe said nothing about the quantity of pepper. No, nothing. So he sprinkled a liberal amount on the top of the liquid in the glass, until it looked like the nutmeg on a sherry flip.

"Well, Pete, old scout. Here's to your hangover cure!"

He tilted it to his lips, filling his mouth until his cheeks bulged. Then he lowered his arm, and stood staring wide-eyed at the opposite wall. An indescribably vile taste grew stronger and stronger upon his tongue, began to trickle, in spite of his best efforts, down his throat. The pepper began to work up into his nose; he was trying so hard not to sneeze that his eyes watered with the strain.

"Pflah-h-h!"

He sneezed and coughed and spat, all at once. The stinging contents of his mouth sprayed forth like a geyser, spattering the bunk, the floor, and even the wall. He choked and gagged, and caught his breath; his tongue tasted like old shoe-leather. He flung the pepper shaker into the corner, and burst into unrestrained profanity.

"Damn me for a blithering idiot! I might have

known it! Pete Hennabury, you so-and-so, and this-and-that, and a few more. If I ever get my hooks on you, I'll mouth-wash you for a fare-thee-well, you—"

But suddenly his stream of invective halted. The words seemed to catch in his throat, and his eyes started from his head with amazement. He was looking at the piece of paper which lay before him on the edge of his bunk; Pete's note. Like everything else in the vicinity, it was plentifully bespattered with the mixture which he had ejected from his protesting mouth. He leaned forward, glass still poised in hand, the better to see. A dozen or more damp spots showed on its smoothly glazed surface, and in these spots lines and marks were beginning to appear before his very eyes. They grew stronger and plainer as he stared.

"Well, I'll be damned!"

He looked from the paper to the glass, still three-quarters full, and back to the paper again. The scratches were plainer now; he recognized a figure eight, and a letter R. He was no fool, was Lefty Morse. He wasted no more time. Snatching up the spotted sheet, he started out the door, and up the path toward headquarters, still clutching the glass of magic liquid in his other hand. And as he ran, his brain was going to work on the possible significance of the name Boker.

IT WAS weeks later that Pete Hannabury walked into the mess of the 44th. A bandage still swathed his head, his arm was in a sling, and he walked with a pronounced limp, but his face was one broad grin. The yell that met him shook the rafters. Lefty and the major had heard his story at the hospital, but when the din subsided they made him tell it again for the benefit of the others.

"I knew that lemon juice was acid enough to bring out the writing," he explained, for the second time. "But of course I didn't dare write full directions, with that Jerry waiting to read what I wrote. So I had to think of some scheme that would make someone spill lemon juice on that paper accidentally. And I knew if Lefty, here, got a mouthful of that mixture, the pepper in it would make him spew the whole works all over the lot. Only then, when German C.O. proposed to try it on the spot himself, I like to died."

He grinned at the memory of a moment which, at the time of its happening, had made his blood run cold with dismay.

"Here, you're not too crippled to have a drink, are you?"

Pete demonstrated that he was not; Lefty promptly refilled the glass with a generous portion of straight cognac.

"Here, hold everything!" protested Pete. "I dassent go and get cock-eyed with you birds tonight?"

"And why not? Haven't you got a right to a celebration?"

"But I've got to go and see that Colonel Boker at nine o'clock tomorrow morning," explained Pete. "They tell me he's got a medal up his sleeve, or some such foolishness. And how would I look, appearing before a colonel with a bleary eye and a dark brown breath?"

"A breath!" cried Lefty hilariously. "Why, don't you worry about your breath, Pete Hennabury! I know the best little remedy for that you ever heard of; and it's your own invention, too! Here, get rid of what's in that glass, so I can open a fresh bottle!"

So Pete made no further objections.