



NO MAN'S SKY

by O.B. MYERS

*The order was filled out and ready—to send one flyer of the 66th to Blois in disgrace.
And the only thing that could keep Lieutenant Linkener's name from that order
was to bring back a letter that lay in the middle of No-Man's-Land!*

BEFORE THE CROUCHING HANGARS of the 66th Pursuit Squadron stood the dim shapes of seven Spads. From each came the impatient sputter of warming motor, and against the grayness of the dawn was etched the bluish flicker of the exhausts. Mechanics hurried their last-minute adjustments, or stood waiting with chock-ropes in hand. This patrol was due to leave the ground in less than five minutes. Of the pilots of those seven Spads, five were already present, smoking their final cigarettes with varying degrees of coolness, and the remaining two were at that moment hurrying up the path which led from the barracks to the field.

The taller of these two stood fully six feet two in his stocking feet; his frame was thin to sparseness, but his hands and feet were large, giving him a certain ranginess and awkwardness of appearance. This man, you would have guessed, could both make and take a joke; but withal, once aroused to anger, would become a most dangerous enemy. Officially he passed as J.W. Linkener, 1st lieutenant, and was, besides leader of A flight, the best liked and most respected member of the squadron.

His companion was a study in contrasts. Fully a foot shorter, he was likewise nearly a foot larger around the waist, yet without being actually fat. On the squadron roster his full name was inscribed as Donald

McDonald McGlinch, but by none of these was he ever addressed. He was universally known as "Scotty."

Side by side these two rounded the corner of headquarters building; here the shorter pilot spoke quickly.

"Better take a peek at the bulletin board. Link. Might be some change in orders posted since we went to sleep last night."

"Right you are, Scotty," replied the other, changing his course toward the door. Together they entered the main room of the shack, which was the operations office, and moved toward the farther wall. They tiptoed past the door on their right, for behind that door slept the C.O., Captain Stroat, who did not care to be awakened for the take-off of the dawn patrol. Link pulled out his bricquet, snapped it with a thumb, and held the flame aloft.

"No; nothing new," he said softly.

They turned away; Scotty, in front now, was almost to the outer door when he felt Link seize him by the arm.

"Look!" said a sharp whisper in Scotty's ear.

Link was pointing, on his face an expression of supreme disgust and scorn. Just outside the C.O.'s door, carefully placed on a hanger, hung the captain's newest uniform, evidently awaiting a pressing at the hands of the orderly. This uniform was of gabardine, a paler and more expensive material than the regulation khaki, and was cut to the very snappiest lines. Its sartorial splendor was quite evidently the product of a Paris tailor, whence the captain had brought it the week before, and by contrast with the dirty and oil-soaked garb of the flying personnel in the outfit, it stood out, when the captain wore it into mess, like the shoes on a pall-bearer. Scotty regarded it obediently, and thus missed the twinkle which suddenly appeared in Link's eyes.

"Hold everything, MacDuff!" whispered Link. "I've an idea."

In a trice Link had stepped across, picked the uniform, both tunic and breeches, from the hanger, and started for the outer door. He was outside before Scotty could catch up and speak.

"What—what are you going to do. Link?"

"I'm tired of looking at this beautiful Paris model," replied Link with a grin, closing the door softly behind him. "I'm going to take it along, and chuck it in Germany."

He crossed the muddy ground toward his Spad, while he waved the uniform above his head that all

might see. A chorus of delighted laughs went up from the cockpits of the waiting ships, half-drowned in the mutter of the motors. Link hurled the tunic, then the breeches, into his own cockpit with exaggerated vehemence, then climbed in after them and adjusted his belt. Two minutes later he led the way into the air.

WITH the six Spads behind him, Link winged his way to the lines, and across them. For an hour and three quarters he patrolled the squadron sector scrupulously, apparently forgetting the bundle at his feet; for Link was not one to allow his duty to be obscured by a contemplated jest. As the end of his gas limit approached, however, a grin cracked his lips, and he swung his ship into a glide in the general direction of Vervelles farm.

Here was a spot where the frontline trenches separated to run at some distance from each other; what used to be a wheat field was now No-Man's-Land, some two hundred yards of gently rolling ground dividing Yank from Jerry. The wheat had long since been blown to oblivion by hissing steel, leaving the stretch of disputed territory clear and open to the sight of both sides, its torn and muddy contours sprinkled with gaping shell-holes.

Lower and lower Link dropped, followed by his formation, toward this open space, until finally he roared over it at less than a hundred feet altitude, midway between the trenches of friend and foe. Now he reached down, seized the handsome breeches of gabardine, and tossed them over the side. Another movement, and the tunic followed. He leaned over his cockpit rim, to see them tumbling and fluttering to earth, and shouted into the wind, "So long, Beau Brummel!"

A quarter of a mile further on, he wheeled in a wing-over, and careened back over the spot. The snappiest breeches in the 66th Squadron, he saw, had dropped into a shell-hole half full of slimy water, and were already partly immersed in the muck. The tunic, falling outspread, had chanced upon better luck, for it had caught on a post, one of those wrought-iron, corkscrew affairs used to uphold strands of barbed wire. There it hung, in all its well-tailored glory, looking for all the world like a military scarecrow.

Then Link swung off in a gentle zoom toward the south, and led the formation quickly in the direction of the field.

One by one the Spads settled to the ground and taxied noisily to the hangars. The seven pilots were no

sooner out of their cockpits than an orderly circulated among them with an announcement.

"All officers report at headquarters in five minutes!"

IN THE main room of headquarters the dozen or so pilots of B and C flights were already assembled; Link's group squeezed their way in with difficulty, crowding the tiny space to the limit. They quickly mixed with the rest, and a low, murmured undertone, interspersed with occasional chuckles, told that they were passing on the news of the morning's coup. Within thirty seconds every man in the room knew why they were there.

The murmur of voices ceased abruptly, as if a blanket had been dropped over the room, at the sound of a door opening. The door was the one on the right of the entrance, and led to the C.O.'s private quarters; in the opening stood the short but rigid figure of Captain Stoa himself, and none failed to note that he was this morning clad in regulation khaki. This captain was a youngish man, but his face wore a hard, stony expression, which melted only when he was roused to anger. Yet there was no strength in the line of his jaw, only cruelty.

Some would have read him for the type of officer who, failing to win the respect of his subordinates, achieves discipline in his command by brute force of authority alone. A military martinet of the old army school, he was not himself a pilot, and during his two weeks as C.O. of the 66th had failed dismally to gain the confidence of his flying officers. They had at first listened to his commands and obeyed them half-heartedly; of late they had taken to ignoring him. While the captain signed the orders and sat stiffly at the head of the mess, the real leader of the outfit was Link, oldest in point of Front experience.

"Who took my uniform, and where is it?" Stoa was wasting no time in preliminary explanations. His barely repressed wrath glittered in his black eyes, and his thin lips were drawn into a straight line. Absolute silence reigned.

"I want to know," repeated the captain in a dangerous voice, "who took that uniform, and where it has been put."

It hardly seemed possible that a score of men could be so quiet. Not a foot shifted on the floor; not even their breathing was audible. The captain glared from side to side. Finally a voice spoke from the rear of the crowd.

"I guess nobody here knows—sir."

"Bah! That's a lie!" The captain almost shouted; he was beginning to lose control of himself. He sensed the impossibility of prying an answer from these men by direct attack, without disclosing the ace up his sleeve. "You bunch of damned smart-alecks—just because you're flyers, you think you can get away with anything. Well, you can't, do you hear?" The captain paused for a moment, and regained some of his rigid manner. "Don't think that I don't know what you've done. You probably think it's a huge joke, to make off with my uniform, and hide it God knows where, like a lot of schoolboys. But this time you've overstepped yourselves."

Again he paused, like an orator just before his climax. There was a slight shuffling of nervous feet, as if some of those present guessed what was coming. Link, however, did not budge; his long face was an absolute blank, only the tiniest gleam of scornful amusement being perceptible in his calm gray eyes.

"In the pocket of that tunic," went on the captain, pronouncing his words with studied emphasis, "was a letter—a confidential communication from the Chief of Staff. Its contents were intended for the eyes of squadron commanders only—above all, not for the eyes of the enemy. That letter must be returned."

INSTANTLY an invisible change seemed to pass over the room. Those men perceived at once that the affair had become a serious matter. Confidential information from the Chief of Staff—in the pocket of the captain's tunic—and that tunic now within a hundred yards of Boche eyes! They looked at one another in sudden consternation, and several involuntarily glanced at Link. The uneasy silence lasted until broken by the anxious voice of Scotty McGlinch.

"I—I never touched your uniform myself, captain," he said truthfully. "But I can tell you this—you don't have to worry about the Boche reading that letter—not yet. Where that tunic is now, nobody could get within a hundred yards of it without being killed."

"Aha!" snorted the captain angrily. "Who is that—McGlinch? Come here." He waited while Scotty pushed his way to the front of the group. "So you're one who knows about this affair, eh? Come on, out with it. Where is my uniform?"

But Scotty stuck to his guns. To all the captain's questions and threats he offered the same reply. He knew absolutely nothing except what he had stated in the beginning; that, he said, he had gleaned from overhearing a chance remark, uttered by he knew not whom.

"Very well," the C.O. said, "If that is the attitude you stubborn fools wish to take, you can suffer for it. We'll see who is in Command of this quadron. Do you all see this paper?"

He flourished a folded, typewritten sheet.

"This is an order directing the bearer to report to Blois for reclassification, in disgrace. Now I'll give you practical jokers one choice. Either my uniform is returned to me within twelve hours, complete and intact, without that letter's having been so much as touched—or else I want the man who pulled this dastardly jest to come forward and write his name on this order. Do you understand?" He glared balefully at the scowling faces before him. "Failing that, I shall myself fill in the name of Lieutenant McGlinch on this paper. He seems to know too much about this matter for his own good, and will make just as good a goat as the next man. That's all—get to your quarters!"

He spat the last words like the crack of a whip, turned on a heel, and entered his room, slamming the door behind him with unnecessary ferocity. The sober-faced pilots filed in silence out onto the tarmac, and betook themselves at once to barracks. Here their silence dissolved in loud conversation, everyone trying to talk at once.

"Serves him right, the damned stuffed shirt—"

"But that letter—we'll have to get that back somehow—"

"Yeah—and how? In the middle of No-Man's-Land?"

"But the Boche. They can't get at it now, but they will as soon as it's dark—"

"No right to make Scotty the goat. He didn't—"

"Wait a minute, you birds!" said Link, holding up his hand. "I'm the one that got the crowd in this jam. And it's up to me to get you out of it. And I've got an idea."

"What is it?" cried a dozen voices at once.

"You'll all have to help, so you might as well all hear what it is. Gather round."

FOR some twenty minutes the pilots of the 66th put their heads together, listened to Link's idea, and offered their suggestions. Finally satisfied that the scheme was as perfect as it could be made, they broke up and scattered to their bunks.

"All right; eleven o'clock then," was Link's admonition. "Each man tell his own mechanic about having the ship ready. You, Scotty, come on; we're going up to the machine-shop trailer."

Among the shop supplies Link found a quarter-inch

steel rod about eight feet long. One end of this he bent upon itself to form a crude hook, and filed the tip to a sharp point. Then crawling under the landing gear of his own Spad, he bent the other end of the rod about the axle, loosely, so that it could turn freely. The hooked end thus extended back as far as the cockpit, the hook facing forward; to this link tied a piece of cord, the other end of which he led up into the cockpit itself through a small hole in the floor, and fastened to the brace which supported his instrument panel. All was now ready.

At eleven o'clock a patrol was scheduled for C flight only, but a score of planes squatted before the hangars, idling, and by ones and twos every pilot in the outfit appealed, ready to take to the air. There was no gathering in groups to discuss route, sector, or formation; the plans for this flight were already familiar to all. Each man went direct to his cockpit, and shortly signaled readiness by a gesture over his cowl.

Link sent a look up and down the line, then moved his left hand above his head in a rotating motion. Motors began to roar, and exhausts spat angry flame. Link jerked his throttle wide, and shot forward. The six of A flight followed him off the ground; then B flight, and finally C flight took to the air.

Once aloft, Link turned north toward the lines; the three formations, however, held themselves separate. One, led by Link, went no higher than two hundred meters; the second climbed to a thousand, and the third took up a position at two thousand meters.

Link steadied his Spad upon its course, and while his eyes watched the familiar terrain roll underneath his wings, his mind for the tenth time ran over the scheme on which he was embarked. It was really simple—if it worked. But would it work? Was his eye accurate enough, and his hand steady enough, to accomplish so delicate a feat? And if it didn't work—what then? For a moment the good-humored twinkle left his eye, and genuine worry lined his countenance. If that letter, containing confidential secrets of the American staff, fell into the hands of the enemy, it would be a disgrace to the whole squadron.

THE neighborhood of Vervelles farm was drawing nearer now; Link directed a look over his right shoulder. First on his flank flew Scotty; from that nearest cockpit Link saw a hand wave in encouragement. A great little guy, Scotty. Whatever happened, he wouldn't let Scotty be made the scapegoat of this affair.

His returning glance picked up the irregular polygon of open ground ahead of him, the sector of No-Man's-Land where he had jettisoned a certain uniform a few hours earlier. He headed straight for its center, and leaned far over the side of his cockpit to search the mottled earth with anxious gaze. Ah, there it was, still draped on its post, just as he had hoped. The first break, at least was in his favor.

He swung off in a wide, slow circle, so that his next approach to that spot should be in a direction parallel to the lines of the trenches. He eased his stick forward, but did not throttle his motor; the plane slanted downward, gaining speed with every turn of the prop.

On his right Scotty had drawn up even with him, and was duplicating his every move. Side by side the two planes rushed ahead in full-motored glide; closer and closer to the raw earth their fleeting wings whistled. Link, keeping his eyes to the front, now leaned forward in his cockpit, and with a jerk of a finger untied a knotted string. He then let the slack slip through his fingers until he had paid out through the hole in the floor perhaps five feet.

Then he again twisted the cord about a brace and knotted it tightly. This maneuver on his part allowed the rear end of the rod below his fuselage to drop some five feet below; its former position, thus lowering the hook, still pointing forward, until it was several feet lower than any other part of the undercarriage. This hook, therefore, could by skilful maneuvering be brought flown to the level of an object below, while the wheels were still in the clear—which was exactly what Link hoped to accomplish. But none knew better than Link the ticklish nature of the job.

He fastened his eyes on a tiny blur of brown which was bisected by his center section wires, and watched it grow as it hurtled toward him. That was the fish which he must hook, and it looked discouragingly small. He steadied his feet upon the rudder bar, and drew a bead with his sights to check his direction. Perfect. But now he must flatten out, to keep from plunging nose first into the ground. Turning his calculating gaze to the mottled surface which rushed past the trailing edge of his wings, he put a gentle pressure upon the stick. His nose came up, immediately cutting off his view of the speck at which he was aiming, and his ship was flying level with the ground, at tremendous speed.

He kept his eyes down to the side, and tried to calculate his distance as if he were making a landing. His height above that rolling, uneven surface must be estimated to a matter of inches, he knew, and it

was doubly difficult because the feel of the ship with motor wide open was quite different from the feel when landing with motor cut. The Spad kept trying to climb, seemed determined to lift away from the perilous proximity of the earth; he had to keep a firm pressure on the stick to hold it forward, knowing as he did so that a trifle too much would plunge him to destruction.

THE hook being under the fuselage, he could not see it, even by leaning far out, but had to guess its position from the amount of string he had passed out through the floor. Neither could he see the tunic on its post after the moment of leveling off; he therefore did not know the exact moment when he passed beyond it. But a glance to the side showed him Scotty, a scant fifty feet away, motioning upward with a gloved hand. By that sign Link knew that he had overshot his mark without hitting it, and immediately went into a zoom.

He looked to Scotty for the prearranged signal, and saw the pilot in the other Spad hold out his hand, palm down. That meant that he must go lower; and Scotty, flying alongside, was able to see and judge the distance by which the target was missed, and then to transmit instructions to Link for his next try. Link nodded to say that he had read the signal; but now Scotty was holding the same hand with palm toward the left. That meant that Link also must correct his line of flight toward the left.

He circled sharply to the left; Scotty did the same to the right. From a quarter of a mile distant he again dipped toward the spot where the all-important tunic decorated that wrought iron post. This time he got it lined up exactly with a distant tree before leveling off. Thus, by keeping his nose on the tree, he could be sure of his right and left direction, and would have to think of nothing but altitude. With Scotty's ship at his elbow, he again swooped low over that broad and deserted expanse.

He heard no sound above the steady thunder of his motor, but suddenly saw out of the tail of his eye, a tiny fragment of fabric flutter from the trailing edge of his upper wing, and whip off into space. The Boche on the ground were shooting at him. What disturbed him still more was the thought that if they were shooting at him, they were shooting at Scotty, too. Scotty was just as low as he was, and just as easy a target; what if the tripe were to hit Scotty? A panicky coldness gripped him for an instant, and his fingers quivered on the stick.

Damn! Scotty was giving him the signal once more. Too high this time, too, eh? Well, at least his line had been straight; that tree business took care of that. Lower, a little lower, that was all he needed to do. By God, this time he'd make it!

He swung swiftly in a circle, and jockeyed into line with that tree.

Down went his nose, and he didn't pull it up until the earth fairly scraped at his wing tips. Carefully he flattened out. His slitted eyes were glued to the surface that seemed so close as to be almost within reach of his outstretched hand. He gritted his teeth and forced himself to hold that stick where it was. His sights cut the very center of that distant tree-trunk.

The uneven, shell-pocked ground tore past, seeming to Jeer at him evilly. Surely his hook must be barely skimming the clods this time! Surely he would make it now! He must make it this time—he must! He felt a sudden and instantaneous quiver pass through the ship. His muscles contracted to jerk on the stick, but before his fingers could move, the universe exploded about his ears in one long, rending crash, and he was blinded by a dazzling flash of light.

HIS next sensation was one of dizziness, and a heavy throbbing in his ears. He gathered his faculties, and discovered that he was hanging upside down in his belt, the blood roaring in his head. Even before he was fully himself, his hand automatically struck the release button, and the jar of striking the ground head first brought him completely around.

He had crashed in the center of No-Man's-Land, in full view of the trenches of both sides. The thunder of his motor was gone, but in its place he now heard the metallic clatter of machine guns from several distant points, and a faint thrumming just over his head, as of the vibration of an invisible guitar string. Bullets! With a bound he threw himself to the bottom of the nearest shell-hole.

Cautiously he peered forth, studying the situation; a few seconds sufficed to tell him what had happened. The Spad lay on its back before him, a wreck. On top of the crumpled mass he saw his bent rod, and entangled in it was the captain's tunic—and something else. His improvised sky-hook had done its work—done it too well, in truth. On his last trip it had caught, not only the tunic, but one, of the whorls in the iron post as well. The post had been ripped bodily out of the ground, but the reaction of its tug against the axle had been enough to deflect his line of flight

downward, and his ship had slammed into the ground. At top speed, with motor wide open—that he was still alive was a miracle.

What now? Bruised and shaken, he hugged the side of the crater and tried to think. His eyes were on that tunic, suspended like an ensign above his dashed hopes. His chances of getting back to the field with it were now reduced to nothing; his hope, in truth, of getting out of his present predicament alive was slim. But that letter—at least it was now within his reach. He could destroy it. Thus would his paramount purpose be achieved.

On hands and knees he crawled from the shell-hole, and approached the side of the inverted fuselage. The tunic, caught on the hook, was some five feet off the ground. He paused, and stretched a hand upward. Somewhere in the near distance the clamor of machine guns redoubled, and the blood-curdling patter of steel sleet broke out all around him. The Boche could see him move, then. To expose himself by reaching, for that coat would be courting instant death.

He flattened himself on the ground, and waited. The excited chatter died away, slowly, became an ominous growl. But still an occasional missile flicked at the tunic up there; he could see it jerk spasmodically as tiny rents appeared in its smooth fabric. His muscles tensed from head to foot; like a tiger sighting its prey he gathered himself for a spring. His eye fastened itself on a fold of cloth; his jaw clenched. *Now!*

His whole body unsheathed itself like a claw. In a flash he was on his feet, arm outstretched. A handful of coat-tail was in his grasp. He threw himself backward, tugging. There was a foolish little ripping sound, followed by a hard click as a bullet struck the metal of the post under his very fingers. The tunic jumped in his fingers, as if alive; something plucked at his upper arm. He twisted on a heel, and seemed to take an endless time to fall. Panting as if he had just run a mile, he crashed to the bottom of the shell-hole, and lay still.

A STICKY warmth bathed his arm just below the shoulder, but there seemed strangely to be no pain. His arm moved without any trouble; he forgot it. Crouching, he spread the tunic on his knees, and began to unbutton the flaps over the military pockets. He would tear the letter to shreds—no, that wouldn't do. It might be pieced together again. He would burn it. One hand reached for his bricquet, snapped it alight. The little flame seemed ridiculously calm; why

didn't it quiver, as he did? His other hand was going through the pockets, one by one.

He looked up. Scotty! Oh, the fool—the crazy fool! You couldn't land here—the ground was covered with shell-holes. Not to mention the raking cross-fire of the machine guns. Oh, it was certain disaster—he mustn't try it. "Go on away, Scotty!" he cried aloud in anguished warning, rising to his knees.

But Scotty's Spad was already skimming the far end of the open space, floating toward him with motor throttled. He was going to crash, sure as hell. Why did he have to try it? Link mouthed a fervent curse, then held his breath in despair. The shell-holes were thick as rain-drops upon a pavement; to pick a level path among them looked impossible. Even if he got down, the bullets of the Boche would make a sieve out of him the moment he stopped moving. Link gasped. Scotty's Spad was on the ground, set down as lightly as a feather. It rolled forward, bumping; Link heard the blurr of the motor, as the pilot thumbed his throttle to taxi.

Careening in and out of shallow depressions, the ship wallowed toward him. The motor was half open, keeping the plane in motion. Link suddenly grasped Scotty's tactics. To defeat the aim of the machine gunners, he meant never to come to a full stop at all. Link estimated his distance, meanwhile bunching up the tunic in his hands and thrusting it up under his jacket. For a moment he crouched like a sprinter at the starting blocks, then leaped into a run.

The uneven ground seemed to undulate beneath, his flying feet; angry bullets buzzed about his ears. Nearer and nearer he pounded; Scotty's Spad was still moving forward. Link slanted in behind the right wing tip, and heard the exhausts break forth in louder tone. Scotty was losing no time opening up. With a last desperate sprint Link caught up with the trailing edge of the lower wing. He threw himself forward, face down on the wing itself, close to the fuselage. The vibration of the surface went through his body like a pang; he gripped a wire blindly to keep from being thrown off.

Bump, wrack, bump! Would they make it? He twisted his head over his shoulder to look back at the pilot. He saw that Scotty, the better to see his path across the vile ground, had raised himself off the seat until his head was a foot above the windshield. Scotty's eyes were fixed ahead; the plane rushed forward. *Bump!* Their progress suddenly became smooth; the surface to which Link clung lifted strongly beneath him. They were in the air!

SCOTTY let himself drop back to normal position in the cockpit. But Link, watching him, was aware that there was something strange about the way he settled down into the seat. A looseness, as of collapse; a giving way after superhuman effort. In Scotty's eyes he saw an odd look of shocked surprise appear; Scotty stared straight ahead of him as if momentarily in a trance. The plane, still hardly a score of feet up, dipped dangerously, recovered.

Immediately Link knew. Scotty was hit. At the last minute a bullet had found its mark—perhaps more than one. Scotty was wounded—but he was still flying. Growling a terrible curse, Link kept his eyes glued to Scotty's immobile face. But Scotty would not look at him. The pilot kept his gaze fastened straight to the front, as if afraid that once he glanced aside, his will to hold out would waver. Headed to the south, the plane droned slowly on.

Years seemed to pass. Link died a thousand deaths of grief and despair. To crash now—after such a noble rescue—oh, the gods could not be so cruel to Scotty now! Strangely, perhaps, he never thought of himself, that a crash meant his own destruction as well as Scotty's. His eyes never left Scotty's face. Once he pulled the tunic from beneath his leather coat, held it up for Scotty to see. An ounce of encouragement, perhaps, might give the strength which would defeat the mists of unconsciousness. But he could not tell if Scotty saw or not, and shoved the tunic back out of sight.

Scotty's head rolled weakly to one side; the plane nosed forward, and skidded perilously. Link shot a momentary glance ahead—the field! Did Scotty see it?

"Hang on, Scotty, old-timer! Hang on another minute!"

The skid corrected itself to a glide; the expanse of the drome slid upward. Scotty's eyes had taken on a strange glaze under his goggles now, but still were riveted to his center-section wires. Link thought he felt the plane tremble, as the pilot's hand quivered on the stick. But then the staccato blast of the exhaust died abruptly to silence; Scotty had cut the switch.

A fearful lurch almost threw Link from his precarious perch. But once more the ship steadied itself, sank slowly. Link, could almost feel the iron of Scotty's will, clinging to the last moment of control. The whistle of the wind in the wires died to a tired hiss; the shock absorbers chuckled as the wheels bounced on solid earth. Scotty's head fell forward against the cowl.

Link was on the ground and at the side of the cockpit before the plane stopped rolling. Without a word he slipped strong arms under the limp figure on the seat, and lifted Scotty clear. The sight of the clotted blood on the chest hurt him like a knife; he turned his head aside, and strode grimly for headquarters. The medico's room was next to the C.O.'s; he laid Scotty tenderly on the crude table, and pointed wordlessly. With a grunt the medico went quickly to work.

MOTORS blurred overhead, and pilots began to crowd about the open doorway. The surgeon worked silently, giving no sign; Link stood frowning darkly, like a man in a trance. Suddenly a figure pushed through the door, and spoke loudly.

"Well—what has happened?" It was Captain Stoa.

Link turned at the sound of the voice, and a look of cold steel came into his eyes.

"Your tunic," he said briefly, holding it out.

"Ah," murmured the captain, taking it, but without joy.

"You'd better look in the pocket," said Link steadily, "to see if the letter is still there."

"It's—it's all right," said the captain hesitantly.

"Look!" said Link in a terrible voice.

The captain fumbled with the torn and dirty tunic, but then without looking balled it under his arm. He regarded Link with a stare of fear, and shook his head. Link's eyes blazed. A feeble, half-conscious cry of pain came from the table; the medico reached for a clean scalpel. Some one whispered in the doorway.

"You dog!" said Link, with a calmness which was more terrible than anger. "You filthy beast! There never was a letter in that tunic, was there? You only said that, to make us do what you wanted—to get your uniform back, and your pride. To satisfy your sense of vanity—

to show us who is commanding officer here—you send good men out on a false mission which ends like this." He pointed to the table. "While you sit back here in safety, and nurse your petty grievances, and call yourself an officer." The captain cringed, and seemed to shrink upon himself.

Link gave no quarter; he told that captain what the squadron had thought of him from the beginning, and what a despicable snake they knew him to be now. Not a word in reply did the captain attempt until Link ended with a direct question. "Where is that order to Blois?"

"On—on my desk," whispered the captain weakly.

"Bring it here," commanded Link to the doorway.

One of the pilots was heard to step into the next room, and returned shortly to hand Link a folded paper.

"Here," said Link, in a tone that brooked no denial.

"Fill in your own name on this order, Captain Stoa. Be off this field inside of an hour, do you understand?"

"Y-yes." The captain slunk toward the door.

The captain was gone; Link turned on his heel.

"He'll be all right," said the surgeon, wiping his hands on a piece of gauze which turned crimson at the contact. "Right through the lower chest, but missed his lung. Lost a lot of blood, that's all. He's coming around now."

Link leaned over the prostrate form, to see the head roll feebly, and the eyelids part. Dazedly Scotty looked upward; then his eyes cleared, but his first murmur was very weak.

"Link—you got—the—letter?"

Link shot a quick glance toward the crowded doorway. Every man there understood, and in that moment swore himself to eternal silence. Link bent over to look into Scotty's anxious eyes.

"Yes," he said softly. "I got it."