

THE CLOUD BUSTERS

by FRED DENTON MOON

Hades had spewed up and was spreading all over the map of France. Count von Stratton's flying circus was the worst bunch of hornets that had ever stung to death the group of able flyers under the disliked Commandant Legarrin—but the Commandant was an old devil who knew his viewpoint so well he tried to stop the war all by himself.

NOW DON'T GET THE IDEA that the little scrimmage called Belany wasn't any more exciting than a charity boxing bout. It was one of the toughest drives the Germans made on the Western Front that winter. I saw most of it from the air, and believe me, it sure looked like hell had spewed up and was spreading all over the map of France, the atmosphere included.

We birds at that little camouflaged field back of Ourches caught our usual share of the dirty work. More than our share. A flying circus under Count von Stratton sure had it in for us. They never passed up a chance to pick a scrap. And to make it worse, it rained for a solid week in that hectic, crimson November.

But worse than all that, or so we believed at the time, we were under the command of old Commandant Legarrin. And Legarrin was the devil of the F.A.C.

For that whole week we'd stayed in the air, fighting morning, noon, and most of the night. It was easier to stay up, once we got up, than it was to come down. Our field looked like a harrowed rice swamp. We'd lost six planes in action, with five more "unaccounted for," which amounted to the same thing. And we'd smashed five other ships trying to get off and on that field.

We were all on a raw edge. Most of us quit speaking. Several of us got so we couldn't sleep, and nobody paid any attention to meal times. It wasn't the danger nor the hard fighting that bothered us so much. We were all seasoned men, and had grown accustomed to the idea that it was just a matter of time, before every man of us would punch in his checks. It was Legarrin himself who had torn our nerve to pieces. We soon found out that he wasn't called the devil of

the F.A.C. for nothing. He had reduced the iron men of our squadron to masses of raw nerves. That week it rained, he'd nagged us until we were about as steady as a mould of week-old gelatin.

Legarrin didn't pick on any individual. He just gave the whole bunch of us hell. He was criticising us, taunting us, insulting us from morning until night. He'd call us cowards if we lived to come in from a patrol. When a man didn't come in, he'd curse him for being a quitter who'd been afraid to put up a scrap. It didn't seem to make any difference to Legarrin that we were bringing the enemy planes down two to one.

We had the shabbiest equipment in the service, but he never gave us any credit for what we were doing with it.

We couldn't help letting his eternal nagging seep under our skins. Slowly but surely his taunting undermined the morale of the entire squadron. And the enemy were right in the midst of that drive to get through upon Paris!

Late one afternoon, five of our ships were returning from patrol when a flock of Fokkers swooped down upon them about a mile from the home field. There were eight of the enemy, and the scrap was hopeless from the first. The Boche had the altitude, and at best our light Nieuports hadn't much more than an even break with the heavier, swifter Fokkers. Three of our ships went down in as many minutes, but they carried three of the enemy planes down with them. Then the two remaining Nieuports dodged the scrap and scuttled for home, the five Boches hanging on their tails. One of our ships crashed trying to land on the treacherous field, and the two men in her were killed.

The other plane got safely down, but the observer

was dead, and the pilot, an Englishman named Tarpington, had two bullets in the fleshy part of his face.

"My gun's to pieces," Tarp groaned when we boosted him out over his cockpit. "Went all smash the first shot. Didn't have a chance to fight them off!"

All of us understood. Our scarred little planes were tricky pieces of junk, and we'd all got used to the fact that we could never depend upon the guns.

"If Legarrin wasn't a damn fool, he'd condemn these death-traps and refuse to fly us until we had better ships!" growled Terry Roberts, the only other American in the squadron. "It's cold blooded murder! Just wait," he added bitterly, "He'll have something to curse about tonight!"

Terry was right. When we were all in the mess-hall for supper, Legarrin gave us hell. He talked for three solid hours. He mocked us because we were always complaining about our guns and planes. Said the equipment was all O.K., that it was just our lack of guts that made us afraid of them!

When he was through, we were about as cheerful as a tombstone in a well of drinking water. Tarpington, the pilot who had survived the afternoon's scrap, was crying like a baby. Legarrin had called him a coward to his face, while the poor chap sat there pale and shaky in his bandages. And yet, Legarrin had examined the smashed plane and the gun, and he knew that Tarp had made a run for it only because he couldn't fire a shot to defend himself against the enemy's odds!

WHEN I walked out of the mess-hall, Terry Roberts fell into step with me.

"Macy," he said, taking my arm, "there's something behind all this talk Legarrin's making! Somehow or other, I've got the idea that the old man isn't exactly on the level!" Terry's sudden outburst startled me. He was putting into words the same thought that had been running through my mind all week.

"What do you mean?" I demanded.

"Of course I don't know anything," he answered, lowering his voice. "It's rotten business for me to speak of it, I suppose. But it looks to me as if Legarrin's doing his best to wipe out the Stork Squadron!"

"God! You can't mean that!" I groaned. "Legarrin may be hard-boiled, but I can't believe he'd deliberately send us up if he thought we didn't have a chance of coming back!"

"Oh, I'll admit that it sounds wild," Terry said. "But you know we haven't got a plane here that's A-1, and

the guns are worse than the no guns at all. Legarrin knows that too, but still he taunts us into going up, and it looks like he's furious when we come down again!"

I tried to shake myself out of the mood by arguing against Terry Roberts.

"We can't put the blame for the guns going bad on Legarrin," I said. "Guns are never safe, machine-guns especially. I've had one tuned up on the ground, and it would jam five minutes later in the air."

"Well, the gun on Tarpington's plane didn't jam this afternoon," growled Terry. "I looked at it before I went in to supper. The feed pin had been snapped off as smooth as a whistle."

"But that doesn't prove anything on Legarrin," I reminded. "A stray bullet from one of the Fokkers might have broken the feed pin."

Terry shook his head. In the half-light of the open field I could see the grim flash in his angry eyes.

"Listen, Macy," he said, clutching my arm still tighter. "Last night I saw Legarrin looking over Tarp's ship after every-body at the hangar had gone in to supper. I believe that the old devil broke the feed pin off that gun!"

I halted and searched his face in the-dim light. I wanted to tell him I didn't believe what he was saying. But deep down in me I was wondering, too, if Terry Roberts wasn't right!

Before I could say anything, a dark figure detached itself from the shadow of our dinty. It was Armell, in charge of mechanics.

"Can I speak with you, Sergeant?" he asked in French.

I threw open the door and motioned to him inside. He hesitated, then doffed his dripping cap and followed Terry and me into the room.

"What's worrying you, Armell?" I asked.

The mechanic was plainly ill at ease. I noticed that he glanced sideways at Terry.

"You needn't mind Corporal Roberts," I said. "He flies with me most of the time, you know. What's the trouble?"

The man fumbled his hat nervously. He was a simple soul, but a good mechanic.

"It's just that your gun's out of order, sir."

Terry Roberts laughed.

"That's nothing unusual, Armell!" he said. "We've got used to the guns around this field being out of commission!"

"It's rather unusual in this case, Terry," I snapped.

"You see, Armell and I went over the plane this afternoon, and the gun worked perfectly then."

The mechanic nodded.

"Right, sir. But it won't work now. Somebody's taken the pin out of the cartridge feed. It would shoot one time, and then go as dead as Hector!"

"Has Legarrin been in the hangar since you went over the plane with Sergeant Macy?" demanded Terry Roberts.

The mechanic faced me with a hopeless gesture. I read the anxiety in his eyes. Then I repeated Corporal Roberts' question.

"Has the Commandant been in the hangar since I left, Armell?"

"That's just it, sir," the fellow replied. "I saw Major Legarrin examining your plane. Everyone was at supper except me, and I'm sure the major didn't know I was watching. I heard him snapping your machine-gun, and thought he was inspecting it. After he'd gone, I went over and tried the gun myself. It didn't snap, and I found the feed-pin had been pulled out. It was there on the ground beside the trucks."

"What did I tell you—" began Terry Roberts, coming to his feet. I cut him short with a quick nudge.

"Thanks, Armell," I said, facing the mechanic. "No doubt the pin dropped out. The Commandant told me about it at supper."

"What made you tell that lie?" Terry demanded, as soon as the mechanic had gone.

"I don't know," I answered truthfully.

Terry glared at me as if he was going to say something else. Then he turned to his cot and commenced to undress. I heard him cursing softly in his pillows after the light was out, and I don't think either of us got to sleep until long after the fire in the little stove was dead.

ABOUT an hour before dawn, Terry and I were routed out of bed by an explosion. Another blast followed, then another. The pilot in the next dinty shouted that a German Heavy somewhere across the front was dropping shells into the field about a quarter-mile behind us.

When Terry and I ran out in the rain, we found the entire squadron at the hangars. Legarrin was out, cursing like a fiend. He looked like one, too, in his long black slicker, with his gray mustaches bristling close up to the brim of his tilted hat. One of our Brequet bombers was mired in the mud, her landing gear smashed. Legarrin was giving hell to the two men who'd wrecked her.

"You damn ducks can't fly!" he bawled. "You've busted a machine, and now you try to lay the blame on the mud! By God! if that damn gun didn't have to be quieted, I'd strip off my braid and smash your dirty faces in the bog!"

He turned from the cringing pair and ordered another bomber wheeled out. It had been pouring rain all night, and the ground was as sticky and treacherous as a mixture of boiled glue and axle-grease. The second bomber started bravely, but skidded and crashed in a ground loop inside the first fifty feet!

The shells from the heavy were still spouting mud in the field behind us. We all knew that when daylight came the enemy observers would report our range, and then it would be good-bye Stork Squadron! Legarrin realized this too. After he had given them a hearty cursing, he dismissed the two mud-besmirched flyers and ordered out the third and last of our precious Brequets.

The big ship started slowly down the dangerous field. The pilot gave her the gun at the fifty-yard line, and it looked for a moment as if she would pry herself out of the oozy mud. But at the end of the tarmac she dipped to the left, bounded up again, and skidded into a complete somersault on her right wing. The pilot and gunner went sailing out like rockets to land in the mud fifty feet away, one with a broken shoulder, the other with a badly bruised head.

Legarrin rushed at them like a mad bull, waving his swagger stick and cursing. I have never heard filth pour from a human mouth in such a continuous stream. We gathered around him and held our breath in tense silence. I believe that at the word from a man who dared lead them the squadron would have leaped upon the old devil and torn him to shreds!

Then Legarrin turned from the two wounded men and glared at us.

"Listen, you rookies!" he bawled, flourishing his heavy stick. "That damn gun's got to be silenced! We're going into the air this morning, mud or no mud! If any of you fools think different about it, step right up here and I'll change your minds for you!"

NOT a man stirred. The tense silence that gripped us all was broken only by the splash of the rain in the mud. We hated Legarrin in that moment as we'd never hated him.

"We aren't a bombing squadron," went on the old commandant. "And the three bombers we had are gone to rut because six of you—don't know the difference

between a ground loop and a take-off! We've still got a few Nieuports, and we're going to get them up if it breaks every one of your damn necks! And we're going to get them into the air with bombs in them, too!"

"I'd like to see him take off this damn slime," hissed Terry Roberts in my ear. "Maybe Legarrin don't know that it'll take web-feet and a balloon to rise off this slush. And if he puts a load of bombs in one of those wobbly Nieuports—the Lord help us get out of the way"

I was of the same opinion, but before I could agree with Terry, old Legarrin whirled around and pointed his swagger-stick at me.

"All right, Sergeant Macy!" he bawled. "You have the reputation of being the best flyer in the squadron. Corporal Roberts will go with you. I want you to get up right now!"

Orders were orders, and I couldn't do anything else but obey. God! how I hated him! I knew he must realize that he was sending Terry and me to sure death, for with a load of bombs we were almost certain to smash trying to get off that muddy field!

I motioned to Terry, and we started back to the dinty for our coats and goggles. As we turned away, Terry caught my arm. Legarrin was ordering Tarpington to go up with us.

"All right, Sergeant Tarpington! You said your gun jammed yesterday and you had to run for it. Today you won't have to worry about a gun. You'll just have a couple of bombs to keep your mind on! When you drop them, it won't make any difference how fast you skit for home!"

Legarrin's insult was thinly veiled. We all expected a crash, and the crowd surged closer. Tarpington, erect and very pale in his bandages, faced Legarrin with a grim smile.

"Do you mean you're ordering me up, Commandant?" he asked quietly.

Legarrin glared.

"Damn it! You heard me, didn't you?"

Tarpington laughed.

"You are my superior, Commandant—but I'll see you in hell before I get into another plane on your orders!"

Legarrin stepped back, amazed. Then his amazement changed to purple rage. He raised his swagger-stick and cut loose a biting string of oaths. We thought he was going to spring upon Tarpington and beat him into mud.

The wounded Englishman faced him unflinchingly.

"You can report me for insubordination, Commandant," he told Legarrin quietly. "But I'll warn you right here that if you strike me—I'll kill you! I've taken more from you than any army regulation calls for. If you want to make trouble, just go ahead. Every man at Ourches is against you, and if it comes to a courts-martial—you'll be surprised!"

We were too tense to applaud. It is a dangerous thing to defy an officer. But we were with Tarpington to a man, and Legarrin knew it.

For one moment the old devil's face was a blue mask of rage. Then, with an oath, he seemed to shake himself out of the mood. Turning swiftly, he left Tarpington and started bawling orders to the ground crew that was trundling out the planes.

"Let's not show yellow!" I hissed to Terry when I found him already waiting beside the little Nieuport in which the crew was loading the bombs.

Terry grinned. "Who's showing yellow?" he demanded, winking when Legarrin wasn't looking. "It'll be worth trying, because we may be able to blow the old devil up along with us!"

"What's the idea of another plane?" somebody whispered. "Tarp isn't going!"

I LOOKED and saw the ground crew wheeling a second ship out of the hanger. It, too, had been equipped with bombs.

"Commandant Legarrin is going up in this, sir," answered Armell, who was adjusting the oil on the second plane.

"Legarrin!"

A ripple of amazement went around the crowd. Then the amazement changed to doubt. None of us had ever seen Legarrin fly. It was rumored that he won his commission because he was a famous stunt flyer before the war. But we at Ourches had grown to discredit that rumor. None of us had ever seen him ride as a passenger in a plane.

"Legarrin can't fly," growled Tom Maddock, in charge of operations, "He's just going to pull a colossal bluff!"

"Well, thank the Lord he's going to try," whispered someone else. "We'll be rid of him all right if he does attempt to take up that T.N.T. with him!"

"He'll bust and blow up the whole field if he gets into that boat and can't handle her," said Terry Roberts hopefully.

"If we don't blow the field up first," I cut in. "Remember, we've got orders to get off first!"

"That's so," nodded Terry. "I'd like to wait and see him bang first, though!"

Then Legarrin himself appeared, looking like a gray-faced thunder cloud in his leather coat and goggles. He still lashed his boot with the swagger stick, and the men fell back and dazed at him wonderingly. None of them believed he was going to attempt the flight.

Legarrin came straight to the side of our plane.

"Your gun is out of commission, Sergeant Macy," he said. "The feed-pin is out of the cylinder. I noticed it last night. You'd better have it fixed before you get off!" Terry and I exchanged a glance. Then I told Legarrin that Armell had already gone over my gun.

"All right, Macy," he growled. "You get off first. Climb for altitude and wait for me to come up."

When Armell spun our prop, Terry turned in the front seat and implored me with his eyes to be careful. I knew that the only reason he was anxious about our load of bombs was that he wanted to live long enough to see the old spit-fire smash himself to smithereens. I think I had a sneaking desire to witness old Legarrin's break, too!

WHEN our prop was humming, I gave the engine a minute to get warmed up. Then I pulled on the throttle, and we went roaring over the mud and into the wind, and when I say that I had her open as far as she would go, I don't mean perhaps. Speed was our one chance to beat that slush, and I was taking that chance at the risk of our necks. The tail of the Nieuport came out of the mud within fifty feet, but she commenced to skid and roll, and it looked as if Terry and I were going to do a side-flip, a nose-dive and a tail-spin all in the same breath!

First our left wing dipped into a puddle of water, and I thought I'd smashed her sideways. I slacked off the throttle, opened her wide again, and we straightened up with a roar, flipped to the right, wobbled and beat it back against the wind at a forty-five degree angle.

But what was the use? We were within twenty yards of a barbed wire fence, and waddling like a drunk on his tenth pint!

I didn't have time to kiss myself good-bye. I just closed my eyes, flipped back on the stick, and felt sorry for Terry in the rear seat with the bombs. Then I got the surprise of my life. First the tail lifted as calmly as you please, then the wheels of that darn little flirt came out of the mud with a sucking sound that was sweeter

than any pay-day bugle I'd ever listened to. The gear dripped and raised without a quiver, and we went over the fence, bombs and all I missed it by a safety-razor blade's thickness, but we missed it!

It was as near a straight-up-takeoff as I've ever heard about, much less experienced. I sure felt like patting myself on the back, only I was so busy I didn't have time. Getting up and staying up were jobs that looked about alike that murky morning.

For a minute it seemed as if we were going to slide back down, but I jammed forward and held her in the teeth of the wind. At a hundred feet the air was smoother, and I whipped her around, circled in a climb, then started to zoom up at a steep angle. Inside three minutes we were almost fifteen hundred feet above the slush. Then I straightened out, cut back over the field, and looked over to see how Legarrin was making out.

His ship had been held back until they were sure we were up to stay, and she was just starting down the cut-up runway. Legarrin was following my example, and giving his boat all she would stand. I saw the mud streaming out behind him, showering the ground crew who were trying to guide him.

I saw her lift and settle, lift and settle, then wheel around in the face of the wind and go over. She didn't smash, and I knew just how Legarrin was feeling when she came up in a long skid and headed back the way she'd just come. She flopped up the runway, then took a side-detour and went straight for Bessoncau hangar and all that remained of our little fleet of Nieuports. I held my breath and circled to watch it explode. If he didn't slow down, didn't lift inside the next fifty feet, he'd go through that canvass hangar like a bat through Hades.

Terry was leaning over, watching too. I darted a glance at him, expecting to find him grinning his devilish grin of amusement as he waited for the Commandant's ship to crash. But Terry wasn't grinning. His face was tense and pale. I knew by the way his eyes clung to every jolt and jump of Legarrin's plane that he, like myself, understood what a scrap the old devil was putting up for his life.

But it was a day of miracles, and Legarrin didn't crash. His ship lifted and topped the hangar by a thread. Once in the air, the old man made me wonder. He started climbing with all his plane had, I despised the old devil as much as anyone else in the squadron, but I had to admit that he had guts and that he certainly knew how to handle a ship. In a few minutes

he'd climbed up to our level and waved for me to drop back and give him the lead.

At five thousand feet we headed across the lines. Clouds were billowing up from the south and west, and a fog hid the ground. It had stopped raining, but the sun was still hidden. We could not have chosen a better morning to run into Count von Stratten's Fokkers.

I trailed Legarrin by about two lengths, keeping a little above his right wing. Terry was leaning over the side, trying to locate the trenches, and about twenty minutes after we'd started, he turned and motioned me to look down. Smoke was mingling with the fog, and I realized that we were above our own trenches. A minute later we saw more smoke, and at the top of a ridge of hills above the mist. I knew that we were behind the enemy lines, and somewhere near the gun that was spraying Ourches Field.

"There's that damn gun!" shouted Terry, pointing down to the right.

I looked and saw a streak of flame cut the mist. The Heinies were still pot-shotting toward our hangars. Legarrin saw the explosion too for he rocked his wings to signal me, banked, and commenced to give altitude. We followed him, still a little above and to his right. It was our job to protect him should the Fokkers suddenly swoop down upon us.

We were at three thousand now, and still following Legarrin down. Twice I caught flashes of the gun piercing the fog, and I knew by the way the old man was banking and rebanking that he was trying to get its exact range before he plunged into the mist to cut loose his bombs.

At two thousand, I saw the gun itself, half-concealed in a copse of trees, camouflaged and almost hidden by the mist.

I glanced upward—and got a flashing glimpse of a plane streaking down to cut us off from Legarrin's ship!

The Fokker was then so close I could see the grinning skull and cross-bones painted in white upon its somber fuselage. Terry turned in his seat and jerked his hand in the opposite direction. Another of the ominous planes was almost upon our right wing! Then came two more from behind the clouds a mile to the left, great stiff-winged dragon flies that droned up to meet us on a sharp slant!

Legarrin was a thousand feet below us, still dropping steadily upon the half-hidden gun. A fleecy ribbon of cloud was floating between his ship and

ours, and I prayed that he would look up in time to help us in our four-to-one fight!

The first Fokker was coming toward us in a straight line. He was still below, and out of range of Terry's gun. I dove the ship to his level, got her around in an up-and-down bank, and Terry raked the Boche with a long burst from his twin Lewis. Then we rose quickly to meet the rush of the plane on our right. Whether we had damaged the first plane, I didn't know. I didn't take time to notice that it was spinning earthward.

The second Fokker was in range when we straightened out, and Terry cut loose with a *rat-tat-tat* that crashed above the zoom of the two speeding motors. We didn't score a hit, but neither did the German. I barely had time to redress and dive before the plane wheeled in a vertical bank and rushed straight for our tail.

The other two planes were now close enough to rake us with their guns. It was a case of three on one! Three diving, spitting Fokkers with their guns spewing tracer-bullets and hot lead. I heard a snap on my right, and spun the little Nieuport over in time for the nearest Boche to stitch a neat little line of holes in our lower wing.

As we came out of the dive, one of the planes was in front of us for a split second. I jimmied my stick and pressed the Bowdens that sent out two streams of fire from the Vickers, saw the pilot in the Fokker lurch forward and slump in his seat. But going out he took one long crack at our tilting wings. His bullets missed our prop by a hair, streaked through the rudder wires, and hissed high over my head. Out of the corner of my eye I saw the Fokker tilt, lurch, and then go wobbling down nose first like a winged, flying duck.

The other two planes had disappeared. Far below and to the right I had a flash of one of them streaking close to Legarrin. I circled quickly, motioned for Terry to be ready, and dived to help the old devil out. I didn't know whether he had cut loose his bombs or not, but I did know that ours were of no earthly use in this scrap. As we kited earthward, I tossed out two long cylinders of explosives.

For a moment the clouds hid us from Legarrin and his assailants. Then, as we plunged into the open again, we almost crashed into a wounded Fokker that was careening earthward, its graceful tail wrapped in licking, yellow flames. We dodged the derelict, banked out of our dive, and straightened to tackle the other Boche, who was giving the commandant hell.

Both Legarrin's Nieuport and the Fokker were

striving for altitude as they raked each other's wings. They were in the mists, and so were we. Then, suddenly, a flash of sunlight glinted on our prop, and the fog lifted as if by magic. Directly below us, rising like a flock of hungry hawks, were five more enemy planes! Not Fokkers, but Pfalzs, the smaller, deadlier combat ships of the German air squadrons!

For a moment I went deathly sick. But it was no time for getting sick! I snapped all of my nerve back into place, gripped the stick, and whipped up to bring Terry's guns into range of the Boche who was on Legarrin. Three times our guns cracked. Then Terry turned to me with his eyes blazing in his gaunt, white face. By the gesture of his hands, I understood that his guns had jammed.

Close, now, were the rising Pfalzs. Without Terry's gun, we were almost as helpless to meet them as a butterfly is to combat a flock of swallows. I circled the fight and commenced to climb.

Terry was working over the gun, hammering with a pair of pliers at the breech. I knew he could not get the thing to working before we had to have it. And there below us was old Legarrin, alone in his spitting, diving Nieuport, fighting blindly with the great black Fokker while the other five deaths whirled up almost on him.

THERE was nothing for Terry and I to do except beat it for home. Legarrin's ship reared up almost within reach of us, and I saw that it was nothing more than a gaunt skeleton of tattered linen and wood. I wondered how he kept it in the air.

Terry waved his arms to catch the major's eye as the ragged ship dipped into a dive. I knew that he, too, wanted to warn Legarrin to make a dash for it before the other odds were upon us. But Legarrin seemed to be living only for the plane that was raking his fuselage to riddles. As we circled frantically above him, I saw the old man straighten in his seat and give his ship all she had. The Nieuport plunged up and scraped the black Fokker's tail as the Boche banked out of a dive. For a moment I thought the two had crashed. Then Legarrin's plane lifted; his gun blazed a long, seemingly endless burst of flame, and the Fokker went down in a straight tumble to explode before the frenzied pilot in the cockpit had a chance to say his last prayers.

I banked quickly and brought our ship almost within speaking distance of the major. Terry stood up, caught Legarrin's eye, and pointed to the rising Pfalzs. Legarrin leaned out of his cockpit, grinned, and waved his hand toward home. Thinking that he, too, meant

to run for it, I opened the throttle and we straightened out for Ourches with all the Nieuport had.

As we went, I told myself that Legarrin was the best air fighter I'd ever seen in a plane. And we had resented the things he had said to make us fight like that! My own record had been equalled by the two Fokkers Terry had sent to earth—but Legarrin! I made up my mind to shake hands with the old devil when we got back home. I'd tell the boys how he could fight and fly! I'd mop out the resentment that had always made them feel bitter toward the old man.

WHEN we were about three miles nearer the field, Terry suddenly motioned that Legarrin was not trailing us. I glanced back and saw a circling, swooping swarm of planes against the dark, sunlit clouds. Legarrin had turned back, even when we were miles ahead of the enemy. That was sheer grit! Five Pfalzs against one Nieuport! A single man against a dozen! That was the man we had said could not fly or fight! That was the man whose bluff we thought Tarpington had called an hour before!

Damaged as we were, I knew we could do little to aid Legarrin in the scrap he'd gone back to pick. I cringed from the thought of running safely home with the news that we'd left a man like that in the middle of a fight. That was what we'd always done—run from odds! That was what Legarrin had cursed us for doing!

Terry turned in his seat and I caught his eye. I understood what he was saying, although I could not hear his voice above the whirl of our blade.

"That's the man we thought was crooked! That's the man we called a bully and a coward!"

I banked the ship and headed back. We were over our own lines now. What I thought we could do to help the commandant, I don't know. But Terry grinned encouragingly as we went toward the fight.

When we were still a mile from them, one of the Pfalzs burst into flame and crumbled earthward. Then another commenced to plunge down in that hopeless, rocking fashion that means a snapped control wire.

We were dangerously close by now, so I banked to the right and commenced to patrol the scrap at a safe distance. Terry was still hammering frantically to get his gun into shape, and I kept one eye open for a squadron to flock upon us. It seemed, however, that every German ship in that part of the sector was busy with the old devil from Ourches. And Legarrin was certainly giving them hell—single-handed!

For about two minutes I held my breath and

watched him fight. The three Pfalzs were pouring lead into his fuselage, riddling his already tattered wings, and sending long streaks through his fuselage. But Legarrin was giving them back with his sheer recklessness. He lunged first at one, then at another of the darting trio. They were fighting at close quarters, too close!

I looked for a smash. But the Germans were anxious to live, and it looked like the old man didn't care whether he lived or not. He made the Pfalzs give back, twisting and diving, to keep out of the path of the lunging Nieuport.

But every lunge and dive was taking them closer to the ground. When they were less than five hundred feet from the mud, Legarrin's fuselage went into flames. For a second his Nieuport hung suspended in the air. The three Pfalzs, in the act of closing in, darted out of the way.

AS THE enemy ships zipped away from his blazing gasoline, a streak from the old man's gun followed them. One of the Pfalzs went down like a rock falling into a well. It was the most marvelous coup I've ever heard of! And Legarrin, still holding his dead, blazing ship level, continued to pour lead after his tormentors while the flames licked up almost into his face!

"Jump! Jump! Jump!"

It was Terry. His shout sounded faintly in my ears

above the hum of our throttled engine. Of course, Legarrin couldn't hear him. I wanted to shout, too.

The two remaining Pfalzs had banked sharply at the fall of their mate. They came roaring back toward the blazing Nieuport, their guns streaking lead as they closed in. But their shots were useless. When they were almost upon him, Legarrin's ship shuddered, tilted nose-downward, and plunged in a long arc. The linen was gone from the blackened wings and framework, and I knew the old devil was dead.

The two Pfalzs circled after the smoking wreck, like triumphant hawks who have killed a sparrow in play. It was time for us to go home, for I knew that in another moment the two enemy planes would be streaking upon our own defenseless tail.

As I opened the throttle and turned, the whole eastern sky sprang into a blinding light. A dull rumble like a bolt of thunder split open the clouds that hung close to the ground. The bombs in Legarrin's plane had exploded, and in that instantaneous flash of flame, I saw that three ships, instead of one, were crashing into the mud.

For a moment I held my breath in silent awe. Then I looked up and found tears in Terry Roberts' eyes. I knew that he, like myself, was thinking how great it would be if we could take another cussing-out from the old devil we had thought knew nothing about flying!