

A FINE MAN—THE COLONEL

by ANDREW A. GAFFREY

*Corporal Fox didn't think that one camp would hold HIM, Sg't Beervat and Adjutant Lowpockets
—and it didn't. But the Colonel was a fine man.*

ALL DAY LONG, south out of Jacksonville, the train had snailed its lazy way. Here and there—anywhere—the snail had stopped, time and again, for no good reason at all. Two hundred Air Service troops—flying officers and enlisted men—were fed-up on Florida before they had really arrived. The troop train, four tourist sleepers, hitched to the regular Ft. Myers local, was going no place, slowly. Too slowly for the habitual travelers being carried.

I speak of the wet-and-dry state before the dawn, back in November of '19, when it was yet merely the haunt of smugglers and pirates, and a few flying camps of Yanks known to the military world as the new A.E.F.—Americans Exiled in Florida. That, in view of the titanic operations of the past few years, seems to have been only slightly after Juan Ponce de Leon and company. At least, it was somewhat before the time when the remaining descendants of the great Seminole Osceola were driven neck-deep into the Everglades. And, then, we could have bought the whole works for a song . . . without singing the last two of the three stanzas.

Florida, on that occasion, was a Hobson's choice for me. A few days before, at Mitchel Field, Long Island, they were gathering a rabid collection of wild casualties for shipment south. After passing the gang—ex-A.E.F. men and raw recruits—through the sheep-dip, locking them in a barrack, and making a count, it was discovered that there were still a few open places on the outgoing list I should have known better, but I made a bid to go with them.

"Recruit," Dad Benton, acting sergeant-major of the casualties, had so many years of Army life behind him that he'd call you recruit even after you had cut wisdom teeth on a third or fourth enlistment. I had been A.W.O.L. from civil life for more than two years, and felt grown up—"Recruit" he repeated, "why in the

name of all that's official and unholy do you want to go down into Florida? You're just back from seventeen wet months in France, and now you want to go into exile in a place where there's nothing to do but sit in the top of a palm tree and watch the buzzards and clouds drift by."

"Anything to get away from Mitchel, dad?"

"What's wrong with this dump?"

"Remember the winter of '17 here, dad. Cold barracks. Rotten grub. Carrying good boys out feet first. A regular Siberia within thirty miles of America's richest city. Well right now, two years after, she doesn't look any better to me. I'll not put in another winter . . . If I can't make the shift with this movement, then, it's over-the-hill for one nearly-good soldier gone wrong. Come on, dad old cock, put my name among the slaves. I'll take a chance where the sun hits on both sides of the fence all year round."

"Roughneck, I feel kind of responsible for you. During more than two years now, I've been keeping you instep and out of the guard-house."

The old man came to his feet and fell to pacing the orderly-room. We had been in the same air outfit overseas. He had been an unyieldingly good dad for one-hundred-fifty men, and we—now scattered to the forty-eight states—still know it. He seemed to be gazing down the colorful vista of wasted Army years when he faced to the blank wall and spoke again, in a low monotone:

"I don't like to see you go. You're not the man for the jungle—you don't bend easily. You know . . . the only thing that keeps the Army in line at all is public opinion. When they get you away from the place where you can yell "help," then, just for something to do, they'll put the screws on you.

"It never fails. Never! I don't know anything about this Florida post, but it is a long way from Jacksonville. If you don't like it, you can't walk out in an hour and

tell the world what's gone wrong. Once in a place like that, the only hope you have is the end of an enlistment. But, you are not the kind to grin, bite down hard, and bear it. Forget the thing. You've got less than a year to go now on this hitch. And you're sitting pretty."

"Dad, you old calamity-howler, you're talking to a warrior. Now, put my army-name on that list or I'll tear your heart out. I'll have the buglers jazz taps at your funeral. And I'll see to it that the garbage-gathering details always rest up on your grave. Come on be a sport. If I don't like their gait down in Florida, leave it to me to guess my way out and north again. I'm over twenty-one, dad, and fly flying officers are my meat."

"I've warned you. You're going to a hot workshop."

"They can't make me do a thing that isn't in the book."

"No," the old man agreed. "The Army can't make—" "You bet!"

"No, but they'll make you damned sorry that you didn't do lots of things." And he put my name among the victims.

About at sundown, in Bartow, the train lurched to a series of deliberate stops, wheezed a few times, and died right there in the main street where everybody could see what we were riding in, and, being train-time, all Bartow was there.

"Why," Sergeant Bill Smith wanted to know, "do they always kill a troop train out at the stock-yards?"

"Stock-yards be damned," Corporal Fox who came from the South drawled. "Y'all's right intown, an' don't show enough intelligence to 'preeciate it. Smif, y'all's dumb as they come You' mammy musta found y'all way back in the high growth where hoot-owls make love to mawkin'birds . . . Give me a cawd, Lo'tenant, hit me again!"

Lieutenant Sherman, dealing blackjack to a group of non-coms and two or three flying officers, looked up and ducked to one side as, just for a moment, a young girl gazed down the aisle and turned into a day-coach ahead.

"Did she see me?" Sherman asked. "If she did, it's the Old Man's carpet for yours truly, and you, Mosher, and Oaks," he said to his fellow-lieutenants.

"Who's the fair watch-dog?" Smith asked, off-hand.

"The C.O.'s—Colonel Dean's niece," Sherman went on. "If we're caught gambling with you enlisted stiff, it'll go hard on us. It's the Old Man's adjutant, "Lowpockets" Norman that you want to look out for

down here. Mosher, Oaks and I have been stationed at Carlstrom Field before and we know. Eh, Mosher?"

"We live and learn," Mosher growled.

"We wouldn't live if Lowpockets had his say," added Oaks.

"The girl runs around with Lowpockets. If she tells him anything, the hound of Baskerville is right on the job."

"Camp bell, is she?" Smith asked.

"Dumb-bell," Sherman said—"That girl is the original sun-dried fruit."

"A right smart 'pearing gal," Fox put out with the shuffling. "Reckon all'll have to brush up on ma manners."

"Fox," I reminded him: "she's one of our royal family, a colonel's niece, and not a main-gate hinge You'll not find her squeaking for oil at retreat."

"Ah'm not proud," Fox went on with little attention. "A colonel's gal should get a chance with the rest. Now, once down at San Antone—"

"It's too early for bedtime stories, soldier," Smith cut in—"keep your mind on the game, and your money on the blanket. If somebody whistles Boots and Saddles, you're gone and we're out just so much jack."

A few hours later, after a brutal supper of warm, dirty water and iron-rations, the train sneaked into Arcadia by the back way and blocked the main street. On the platform of the depot were many men long-gone from Mitchel and showing it. There to meet us, were some familiar faces. Fellows we had once known either in the North or overseas.

"I'm going to give the old dogs a walk on the platform." Smith said and quit the game.

"Right with you," I hurried to add.

Smith was before me when we arrived at the steps and started to descend from the car. Nothing out of the way was expected, so I was literally and actually carried off my feet when he came back into my stomach and sat in my lap. At the same time, somebody was urging, "You birds get the hell back where you belong. Who told you to get out? When it's time to walk all over Florida, we'll let you know."

The speaker, and heavy handed gentleman, wore an M.P. band on his arm. Behind, and plainly backing him up, was a captain who added, "You might just as well find out who's who now . . . Get to hell in there where you belong."

It was a good lesson well placed. Few of the new men had failed to see it. Smith and I felt slightly smaller than regulation Army bedbugs.

“That’s Lowpockets and his provost sergeant. You birds are going to like that sergeant.” Sherman told us. “He’s very popular with the enlisted men. His name is Beervat, a strange name . . . And a strange man.”

“Don’t begin to think too hard of Carlstrom Field,” Oaks advised. Lowpockets and Beervat make it a hell for all concerned, but the C.O.’s different. The colonel’s a fine man.”

“Ah’ll tell the cockeyed world he must be. If a man will be in chawge of a post and tol’rate a pair of howns such as these, well, he must be some man.” Corporal Fox usually said what he thought. “A fine man—the colonel,” he mused as one who spoke to self.

Cutting off its tail, the front end of the local pulled out for Ft. Myers and abandoned our cars where they were. An hour later, a yard goat picked us up and we started for Carlstrom Field. Eight miles of neglected, twisting spur lead to the field. That hellish, after-sundown, Everglades chill was filling the night. Smudge-pots were fighting off the near-frost as we passed through the grove country, and Florida certainly had arrived out-of-step.

At Arcadia the Old Man’s niece, having been picked up by some women of the post, had whirled away in a loud car. Then, when we had started on our rough way once more, Lowpockets and his sergeant. Beervat, had swung aboard for the trip back to camp.

Cramped with the night’s cold and pretty well down-in-the-mouth, Smith, Fox and I were slouched in bitter repose on the south ends of our spines. Thinking hard. Saying harder things. It looked like a big war ahead.

Swaggering down the aisle, hesitating at every seat to eye and awe the occupants, Captain Lowpockets Norman and his ugly shadow were doing their stuff. For no reason at all, looking for trouble among the tired troops.

“Hey, you patriotic stiffs,” Smith growled at Fox and me, “could you birds believe that this thing could happen in the U.S.A.?”

“Anything can happen in the U.S.A., Smif,” Fox chewed off from behind an unbuttoned collar—“but, the colonel’s a fine man.”

“They use to say that Pontius Pilate was a fine emperor.”

“What squadron did ’at ol’ boy fly with?”

“You!” Fox looked up and Lowpockets looked down.

“Evening, Captain,” Fox smiled. “Button that collar,” Lowpockets snapped, “and button that lip.”

Fox fought hard to subdue a devastating barrage of acrid southern repartee. The kid lived by and on that stuff, and, now, Smith and I prayed he’d be struck dumb. It’d be dynamite if he turned it loose . . . The captain and Beervat crowded in toward the Southerner’s half-smile.

“Y’all’s shore nice people down here, Captain. How soon befo’ we-all get to camp?”

“Who wants to know?” Beervat cut in.

“Ah wants to write a letter to ma people—tell ’em about it, eaw’gent . . . When do we-all get off?”

“Pipe down! . . . Or I’ll tell you where you get off!”

“Off.” Fox repeated the word a few times. “Off-off, sawgent, y’all’s a busy soldier, but, now-then, y’all must get a day off. The first day y’all have off, the law’ll be off too . . . Ah’ll meet you outside the reservation. Ah’ve heard geese quack befo’. Now that ‘are’s a gentlemen’s agreement, and ah don’t want either of you boy a-runnin’ to the Old Man with yore troubles.”

“We’ll take care of you,” Lowpockets threatened.

“Captain,”—Fox halted Lowpockets as the latter and Beervat started to move on—“once down San Antone, a major and myse’f don’t get along nohow. Then, after retreat one night, the major takes off his leaves . . . well, he and me’s understandin’ friends after that. Yore bars ain’t nailed to that ’are blouse, Captain.”

There was a heavy moment then. As old as the Army, is that situation. Always have ambitious enlisted men asked comissioned officers to strip off their insignia and go outside. Nearly always the gauntlet is taken up; enlisted men have mauled products of the Point; cocky officers have trounced hard enlisted men; and it seems to be the finest way out. It, at least, is American. Lowpockets and his sergeant were not. They played strongly and safely into strength and power.

“You report to me in the morning,” Lowpockets ordered. “Sergeant, you see to it that he does.”

“Ah’ll be on yore front stoop with the milk,” Fox promised, and the Cossacks rode down the line.

“You’re in for a burning now, Fox,” I said after the terrible twain had gone.

“Maybe yes—p’raps no,” he mused. “This Lowpockets pawty and the colonel are pilots . . . A fine man—the colonel. And y-all know that, seeing as how they’s pilots, they needs must do jus’ so much aviatin’. Well, they fly the planes. And we-all takes care of same. If they’s not gentlemen on the ground, then a sawed turnbuckle-shank or a gas-line leaking over a magneto will sho’ make quick angels out’a bad men. If they’s any sufferin’ to be done here at Carlstrom Field, ah’s not the one as

is goin' to do it. The war ended fo' me when we-all took that transpo't boat out'a France. In this here Air Service branch, officers must learn to salute enlisted men."

"Fox, your idea is big," Smith said. "I came back on the same transport and with the same idea. I'll never again go through what we went through at Issoudun. There was a war on then and some incentive to grin and bear. Now it's all different, and they're not going to make a Siberia out of Florida for me. If skunks such as this captain and sergeant can call upon a whole army to back them up, then I'm for using what we can reach. And I'm not averse to your plan, Fox. Cut them down to our own size; make them over under the same formula that produces good Indians. At Issoudun, buck privates made fine officers of majors and colonels. Of course it took time, but they did it. We'll do it here."

It was after taps when we unloaded at Carlstrom Field. A pale, cold moon bleached the run-down once white buildings, and threw keen shadows where misplaced lumber piles and huge airplane crates littered the railroad frontage. Weeds grew high and rank, ditches crossed neglected company streets, and small pieces of once-were window panes reflected the moon's glare. It was a hard looking camp.

As we fell out and fell in, along the track. I hear Fox remark. "Man, if a cyclone ever hit this camp, they'd have no way of telling if any damage had been done . . . by the cyclone."

Lined up, with teeth chattering and pep low, we waited there in the cold moonlight until someone could find somebody who knew what to do with us. During that wait, a raw-recruit, in his first suit of burlap, struck a match and lighted a smoke. Lowpockets came from someplace.

"Hey, you," he bellowed—"who gave you permission to light that cigarette?"

The boy dropped and stepped upon his cigarette, stared for a time, then dared: "I thought it was all right, sir. We were not at attention."

"Step out!"

The recruit took the pace.

"Attention!"

A badly-scared kid's chest swelled in the moonlight and he stood there rigid. Lowpockets strolled away, back to where he had been before, leaving the boy at attention. At my side, studying the recruit, Smith and Fox glowered. "I'll be damned," the former said softly. "Just a raw-john recruit still wet behind the ears . . . What kind of a hell is this?"

Five minutes at rigid attention, in the cold and with all eyes upon you, is a long time. Ten minutes is longer. When you've stood there for fifteen, well, it amounts to ordeal. But the kid wasn't alone; it was a warning: the way had been pointed out.

After a long time, over the statue's shoulder, coming through the moonlight we could see somebody with Beervat good-dogging at heels. It was the Old Man, Colonel Dean. Lowpockets called the outfit to attention, and the C.O.—a suave, gone-gray-young gentleman in the pale light—said a few words and smoothly welcomed us to Carlstrom. Then he apologized for not being prepared for our arrival, said that there'd be no blankets in the barracks that night, but, being soldiers, we wouldn't mind a thing like that.

"The hell we don't," Smith said under his breath, "why didn't the old stiff stay in bed if that's all he has to offer—no blankets on a night like this!"

"A fine man—the colonel," said Fox.

A few more words, and before going, the colonel said, "Down here at Carlstrom, we all get along. Captain Norman will have you assigned to quarters now. When you have troubles, men . . . Bring them to me. Good-night."

"Just a minute, sir." Two voices said that.

The Old Man turned back. Fox stepped out. Smith, too.

"Colonel, this statue here in the moonlight, is an American soldier." Smith was pointing at the posed recruit.

"Twenty minutes ago, Captain Norman put him at attention for lighting a cigarette in ranks. We were "at ease." Half a dozen of us non-coms were smoking at the time. This kid's at the end of two days' travel on iron-rations and with little sleep—"

"Captain Norman is in charge," the colonel smiled sweetly. "He'll handle details." Then the Old Man was on his way.

The recruit sagged at the knees, made a try to stay, then went down with a thud.

"A fine man—the colonel," Fox was saying.

NEXT morning, bright and early after breakfast. Fox was camped on headquarters steps, and ready to report to the post adjutant, Lowpockets. His wait was short. Army men such as Lowpockets always get up early and stay out late, in order that they might get in a longer day of devilment. It's a very constant characteristic of the breed.

Fox's tour of the carpet was brief. And when

he came out into the sunshine again, a month's confinement to the post was listed against him. In addition to that, he was assigned to the fire-guard.

Fire-guard at Carlstrom was always a permanent, monotonous graft. But not desirable. Across the palmetto and bunchgrass covered savannas, surrounding camp for miles, fires were always sweeping. Friction, among the wind-blown palmetto fans, caused these conflagrations. And at times the camp was very much in danger. Night and day, a certain few out-of-lucks stood guard.

"As ah understand guard, it's an honorable assignment, an' of cose this yer white-trash can't really make me serve, but, some way, ah thinks it's goin' to fit into ma plans fine," Fox told the gang. "Ah needs lots o' time to meditate."

As luck would have it, Fox's first trick at fireguard placed him on the east fence boundary. At one end of that fence was the colonel's house. Living on the post, enjoying one of those indeterminate Army visits which keeps whole families, and even the many ramifications thereof, sheltered at Uncle Sam's expense, was the lady of the train. That same morning, near the colonel's house, Fox, without introduction, made the acquaintance. At noon mess he told us about it.

"Sweet mommer! She loves her corporal a'ready. Eloise is the name, same as the Old Man's—Dean, Eloise Dean. This mawnin' she was tryin' to shoo a billy-goat out her little gawdin'. Ah quits ma fire-gawd an' boots that 'are goat so hawd it hasn't landed yet. Then Eloise whispers sweet nawthin' in ma shell-pink ea' fo' a hour . . . Dumb! . . . Anybody says that 'are little pal's dumb ain't payin' atten'shun . . . No, she's daid—not dumb.

"But ah can utilize Miss Elorse, 'cause Lowpockets likes her."

Before Fox's two weeks of fire-guard had expired, Lowpockets had relieved him from that detail. Fox had had too much time for meditation; he had accomplished far too much in the line of conquest, and his favor in Eloise's eyes was the talk of the camp. The laugh of the camp, too.

This Fox, in the making, had not been slighted when and where good-looks were considered. He was hair-trigger on the subtle repartee, smiled when the going was hard, and laughed where others might cry. Women just came his way. Went out of their way to come his way, to be exact. So this army brat, Eloise Dean, walked Chinese willingly.

Corporal Fox was assigned to hangar duty in the first hangar near the main gate, and just about one

mile from his late stamping-grounds near the colonel's house and Eloise.

Moreover, whenever truck details were sent out to bring in wrecks, Fox was sure to be sent. Lowpockets took care that it should be so. Anything, you know, to get Fox out of camp. When an enlisted man comes into prominence like that, it's dangerous. Rotten for the morale. And they've got to be subdued, at all cost.

At all points, during the week that dragged by, Lowpockets and Beervat beset the colorless way and took of life whatever of joy we might have managed to inject. On week-end trips to Tampa, Bartow, Dade City, somehow or other, they'd manage to show up. Then, finding an ex-overseas man wearing the headgear of the A.E.F. instead of the service hat, one or the other of them would single him out and bellow, "Hey, you—grab the next train back to Carlstrom and report tomorrow."

They'd haunt the cheap, shindig joints. Of course, warmed up to the night's work, some of the gang would be running wild with blouse collars unfastened. These were meat for the two imbeciles of imbitterment, and back to camp the offenders would go. Some of the officers, never out of Florida service, showed an A.E.F. complex and craved the salute at all times. Among these, as to be expected, were the lowest of the low: taxi drivers, come into commissioned power; delivery-wagon boys, wearing whip-cord; war-time mistakes of '17 and '18 staging a hangover of imposition well into nineteen-nineteen and twenty.

But such as these were men of Captain Norman's own cut. And when an enlisted man offended—the ax fell, in that little high-hummock, called Arcadia, Paris lived again, and Brest came back, and Nantes and Bordeaux, and all those places where our organized M.P. chased Yank enlisted men into corners and clubbed them loose from obedient, regulation salutes.

The majority of young-oldtimers were finishing the last slow months of a year-enlistment. Coming back from overseas with some knowledge of flying, at Mitchel Field they had promised us a finishing course in air-work. We bit. Just one year, they said, and you'll go right onto flying tomorrow. After our names had gone down and our good right hands shot up for another "I do, so help me God" it was too late. They had us, and all the flying we saw was either from the ground or what we were able to mooch from a few good-john officers.

Now, with the coming of spring, came hope anew. Soon, in March, April or May, for the most of us, the

year of hate would end. When you met a pal on the company street he never said, "Hello, soldier" in that camp. No. He'd hold up a hand and show a certain few fingers and say, "A month and a bit" or "Two months and a meal" or "They're writing it out next week." Some armies perhaps do live and move on their bellies, but that small vertebrae of our national snake lived and moved, oh very slowly, on expectation.

When a man got the final paper, he went and was gone. There were so few reenlistments that, but for Lowpockets and Beervat, we might have been lonesome. Barracks, some of them, were empty and abandoned to the cockroaches. And work, for the plane mechanics, had more than doubled.

Toward the end of March, Beervat's time ran out. A spirit of carnival and carnality filled the camp. His out-day was to be Thursday. For a week ahead, the gang had been putting in bids for that day off. They wanted to be at the train when Beervat stood in Arcadia, a citizen. It was going to be a tremendous day in many young lives. A gala day. A Roman holiday. A day of rejoicing and bloodletting. Wednesday came, and sometime during that day, the lowlifer who was no man's friend reenlisted and started, unseen, on a month's furlough. You can't imagine how that gloomed the camp, how it bowed heads, and aged those who had learned to hope. And beyond that hour of bitter knowledge there seemed to be no light.

With Simon Legree and all the other mean men of history either dead or beyond the army's age-limit it was out of the question to replace Beervat even temporarily. For the time of his leave-absence life seemed better. Of course, old Lowpockets stepped on it and tried to shove his nose into more places per day, but a man can cover just so much territory, and a divine providence, foreseeing Norman, had ordained that sleep should cut him down every so often.

Early in April, one fine morning, a flying cadet, on his first crosscountry flight alone, took-off for Ft. Myers and landed on the front page of every newspaper in America. You recall the case. Everybody did; because the cadet was the son of old T. N. Ten Eyck, one of the first men to advocate dry land for Florida. Though a New Yorker, his company was among the first to sell land which was really above the mean-high-tide line. Carlstrom Field, because of the boy's presence there, had seen much of the old man. And "T.N.T." was a man who, in personal appearance, fairly exemplified big business. At the time, I believe, the father was living near Daytona.

When Cadet Ten Eyck failed to reach Ft. Myers that day nothing much was thought of it. Perhaps the kid had found somebody worth visiting between Carlstrom and the Gulf coast. Now and then, a flyer had certain Social obligations which justified a forced-landing. And, as a rule, missing birds came back to camp on the following morning with an alibi and a big head. The sunshine in Florida is bad; but the moonshine has always been lethal.

On the second day he failed to show. All during that second day, headquarters waited for telephone communications. But Ten Eyck did not get in touch with the field. We began to think that the kid was really lost.

They always gave a flyer three days in which to get honest-and-truly lost. On the third day, all field operations were suspended and an organized flying-search instituted. By noon of the third day, one band of five planes—with two-hour gas tanks—had set out in the least likely direction of discovery, eastward to the Atlantic. South over the Everglades, five De Haviland planes—with five-hour tanks—had also gotten under way. Then, shortly after noon, to cover the most-likely stretch of country, we had twelve, two-hour Curtiss planes lined up for the takeoff.

This wing of twelve, under Lowpockets, was to fly west toward the Gulf, fan out over as much country as possible and fly south to Ft. Myers. After a short, acrid instruction from Captain Norman, we got under way, cut out west of the field, fanned out over the cypress barrens, and, on a company-front of twelve slowly-moving planes, the search was on in earnest.

Riding as mechanic, I was with Lieutenant Sherman. Somewhere in the flight, in similar capacities, were Smith and Fox. The personnel was divided that way, a flying officer on the controls in each ship, and an enlisted man in each rear cockpit.

The bee-line distance between Carlstrom and Ft. Myers is about forty-five miles; and that, as a rule, should take about as many minutes of flight, that is, in the type of plane we were using. But our course was in a swinging arc out and toward the north-west, almost to Sarasota Key, then south. It's a nasty country to be forced down in; mostly cypress barrens, traversed in all directions by inlets and creeks, rank savannas of tule, water oak, magnolia and dogwood; small clearings of plane-wrecking palmetto hummock, and, everywhere, lagoons of five or six-foot depth. A jungle in its own right; and not an easy place to explore from a passing plane. So, an hour and a half later, when we landed at

Ft. Myers, nobody had seen anything that resembled a plane. If young Ten Eyck was anywhere back in the territory we had covered, well—you couldn't prove it by us.

It was shortly after two o'clock when we landed. Within two hours, we had refilled all gas and oil-tanks and were ready for the word to resume the hunt. To a man, the gang was anxious to push on, split up, and going free-lance, fly every minute of the remaining daylight. Then, if caught out in the lagoon country west of the glades, we could drop down any place, start a fire, and spend the night. For, while we were servicing our planes, the five De Havilands, after flying south over the Everglades, had arrived and reported no luck.

Then, after calling all hands together. Lowpockets said, "I've made arrangements for all hands to spend the night at the Franklin Arms. Mooch rides into town as best you can. And everybody be here at eight o'clock in the morning. Now—no partying, get that? Cover your motors, stake down your planes, and . . . No partying, remember that!"

Twenty-three mouths dropped, and as many chins rested on as many chests. Why, the thing was murder! Knocking off in the middle of the afternoon with several good hours of daylight left. And, as we thought likely, perhaps, somewhere out there in the jungle a kid was wrecked, smashed up in his crash, and, reasonable to suppose, dying. Nobody started for town. Groups of officers talked in subdued voices. Groups of enlisted men said hard things that the whole world might hear. And none dared take command and go on, for the Army has its Leavenworth for those who dare.

"To hell with Lowpockets," the five De Haviland pilots said; "we'll look at everything between here and Miami before dark . . . He's not in charge of us." And they took-off. Five dots grew small in the east. And that is and always has been the true spirit of air. The rest of us, that day, were outcasts.

A noisy honking, and a dust-covered touring car turning from the highway onto the flying field, attracted our attention.

"Here comes your dumb-bell, Fox," Smith said, looking toward the newcomers.

"Ah've got y-old dumb-bell right chere, Smif," Fox growled in return. "What's these loud babies a-doin' round chere when they's work to be done?"

Eloise Dean, Major Speaker's daughter Helen, and Captain Saymore's wife were in the car. To be with the ships, and make a holiday of the hunt, these ladies of

the post had driven a hard afternoon's travel. They were loudly elated with their arrival; but the thing was all one-sided, neither Speaker nor Saymore were with the flight, and there was none to throw a hat in the air and bid them welcome.

But when the loud ladies learned what Lowpockets had ordered, it began to look like a formal protest to Washington. It's a common thing—in the Army—for the shes to say something that the hes must later repent. The ladies said things, then, about Lowpockets and Air Service, that might have jailed half a dozen men for a long stay.

"I know where we'll find Captain Norman," Eloise declared. "Step on it, Helen! The afternoon has been wasted, but I'll give him a piece of my mind—that poor Ten Eyck boy-dying, perhaps!"

"Lady," Smith laughed as they drove away, "the very biggest piece of your mind, packed in an iron crate, wouldn't be a fair load for a lazy gnat."

Breaking away, jumping rides to town, the gang had thinned out and resigned to a day's failure. Doing the little things that keep planes in the air—setting-up magneto points, draining gasoline sediment-bowls, etc.—Fox, Smith, some of the other mechanics, and I were still on the field when a strange plane barked in from the northeast. It was a commercial ship from the east coast. After circling the clearing, the pilot cut his power and landed. Far down-field, the strange plane taxied to a position beyond the last of our twelve. The rear cockpit passenger slowly unhinged cramped limbs, sat atop the fuselage for a moment, then slid to earth. Their motor, still running, idled.

"Old man Ten Eyck," somebody said. "Old T.N.T. himself—in person. There'll be hell a-poppin' now!" "Any luck, boys?" The old man had walked to where we worked.

"Not a thing reported, sir," Smith informed him.

"O, I thought—" His gaze ran down the line of idle planes to the south, and swept westward and up to the still-high sun.

"Yes, you'd think so, sir . . . This doesn't look very much like a real search. It's beyond us, but it's orders. Don't think for a minute that we're not willing. When we quit for the day it was twenty-three to one . . . But that one was in command. That's the Army of it, sir."

"That—that's all right, boys." An old man moved nervously and said much without speaking. "If you'll tell my pilot just what hasn't been covered, we'll shove off again. There are still a few hours of daylight left." "It would take a long time to tell what hasn't been

covered,” Smith said as he and Mr. Ten Eyck moved away—“so I’ll tell him what has been done, and that won’t take long.”

“Thanks, boys,” the old man waved back. “We’ll return at dark; please make reservations wherever the party is quartered.”

“At the Franklin Arms, Mr. Ten Eyck. You’ll find us all there, except the commander,” I told him.

In the next few hours nothing new developed. An auto party, that had spent the day driving down along the almost-impossible trail which ran south returned at dark. They reported that squatters in the Big Cypress Swamp had seen a plane a few days before. Whether it was the lost plane, a searching plane, or a commercial plane was hard to tell. After dinner, in the dark, Mr. Ten Eyck’s ship returned. Half an hour later he arrived at the hotel.

“Thought we found him,” the father smiled. “In the Big Sawgrass, southwest of Okeechobee, we found a wrecked plane. We couldn’t land in there. And couldn’t see anybody in the wreck. But, half-dozen miles north, we located two of your boys walking out the swamp . . . That’s a fine spirit. I hope my boy is able to walk. If he is . . . that kid will walk, till hell freezes over. He knows that you can walk out of any place in Florida, but if he’s badly smashed, dying—”

“Where is the officer in charge, boys?”

“We haven’t seen him since he quit the field at four o’clock.” we had to tell him.

For a long time, head low and swinging to the carpet’s design, T.N.T. paced the lobby. It was going to be a long night for him, a night of tight suspense and weakening hope. And, worst of all, those twelve planes, idle for several hours, might have combed every mile of Big Cypress Swamp, and it hadn’t been done.

“Let’s call Carlstrom,” Oaks suggested, “and see if the other wings found anything.”

He stepped to the desk and put in his call. Fifteen minutes later, Colonel Dean was on the wire. We crowded around Oaks. Mr. Ten Eyck stopped pacing.

“That’s a damned lie, sir,” Oaks was saying to the man at Carlstrom. “Yes, sir . . . We did fill our tanks with commercial gas, but nobody complained of it being full of water. After the tanks were filled, not a motor was started, and every man and officer in the outfit was anxious to carry-on. All the commercial planes in this Gulf country are using the same gasoline, and swear by it. Any news from the other searching parties, sir? Crashed at Indian Mound? . . . Drake and White?”

“Neither hurt—that’s good, sir. Yes, we heard that one had piled up in the Big Sawgrass—King and Pierce? Walked out? Good! Mr. Ten Eyck told us about seeing them and the wrecked plane. Yes, sir; he’s right here. In a moment, sir.

“Mr. Ten Eyck, the colonel would like to speak with you.”

“Lowpockets,” Oaks whispered, “has been in touch with the Old Man.”

“Rank negligence, sir,” T.N.T. was barking at Colonel Dean in a voice that he had never used while speaking to us. “No matter when, where, or in what condition my boy is found, this situation will never be repeated in Air Service. I promise you that, sir! And if it takes a million, I’ll make it stick!

“What? No. I don’t know where Captain Norman is, nobody does. Yes—I’ll call Oaks to the phone—goodbye, sir.”

Oaks spoke to the colonel again for a few minutes, then turned to us:

“Think any of you birds could locate Lowpockets?” he asked. “The Old Man would like to get in touch with him as soon as possible.”

“Ah thinks that Miss Eloise might give y-all some aid,” Fox advanced. “That gal pawties hereabouts quite a good bit. Ah’ll go ‘round to the Royal Palms an’ look her up.”

Fifteen minutes later, with a girl who liked Fox but was just a little bit jealous over Lowpockets, Fox and Eloise, driving Helen Speaker’s car, came back to the Franklin. She knew where Lowpockets was likely to be found. Fox said that she was sure, and sore, and very anxious to help. Because she had left Lowpockets in the arms of another shortly after seven. It was then past eleven.

“Perhaps you’d like to come along, Mr. Ten Eyck,” Sherman suggested.

“Thanks—I will.” the father accepted.

With Fox and the girl, Sherman, T.N.T., Oaks, Smith and myself crowded into the waiting car. Eloise drove toward the dark water-front.

“We’ll find Captain Norman on that redhead’s yacht,” Eloise said bitterly. “That’s where he’s been spending his week-ends of late.”

The “redhead” in question was the wild daughter of one of America’s foremost wagon-builders. The redhead had taken a great liking to uniforms, and her yacht was beginning to give Ft. Myers a hard name. Always, on Saturday mornings, a flock of planes would rise and fly from Carlstrom, with that yacht as

an ultimate destination. Dumb we were, not to have thought of it; but jealousy is a great mover.

The yacht, drawn up to its own shore-side float, lazied white, but not entirely quiet, in the moonlight. Along the street, afront the bay, many fine cars were parked. Chauffeurs dozed and waited. A good-sized party was under way. On deck, one quiet-water sailor stood guard. From within the lighted cabin came much noise and traces of suggested ribaldry.

As we unloaded, quit Eloise and her borrowed car, and walked to the float, the deckhand eyed us. Sherman halted; we stepped upon his heels. He had a line of action in mind.

"Fellows, I've waited two years to get this chance," he said. Lowpockets' drunken voice was loud within the cabin. "This breach of Norman's is a court-martial offense. I've brought you fellows for witnesses and Mr. Ten Eyck for weight. But we're not going to give him a chance to alibi out; the Army would turn him loose because it takes care of its own . . . So let me handle this polecat."

"Come with us, Captain," Sherman invited when the deckhand summoned Lowpockets from his revels.

"Who you talking to, Sherman?" Lowpockets demanded.

"An ex-Army officer, Norman—come with us."

Lowpockets tried to stiffen. His gaze found old T.N.T. and died there. One by one, he tried to place the others, and sneered at us enlisted men. "What you doing here?" he hurled at Fox . . . *Bop-bam!* . . . There was a fast second and Lowpockets hit the deck . . . "You-all saw him start to hit me," Fox said—"Ah just simply had t' let him have it."

"On your feet, Norman!" Sherman brought him to a stand. "Come over here in the dark . . . I'm going to tell you where you get off, for all time. Your reign of terror has ended."

Crossing the street, we again came to a stand under a thicket of palm and entwined ivy.

"Now stand up and listen!" As Sherman's hand came up to emphasize that order it was closed and rapped sickeningly against Lowpockets' chin. "Norman, for two years, you've been the lowest white in this man's army. That's pretty low because there's always lots of competition and rivalry along those lines in this army. But you won . . . You were the most despicable cur in the whole rotten pack. I've brought enough witnesses to strip you in any court . . . Mr. Ten Eyck's position, alone, will do that. But you'll never come to trial. With this moon, I can fly you into

Tampa in an hour. From there, early in the morning, you grab yourself a train north, and—keep going.

"And if, in the next issue of Army Orders, we don't find your bid for resignation, then I'll prefer charges."

"And my name will be on the charges, too," Oaks promised.

"And wherever y-all go," Fox put in, "there, also, must ah go, Captain, an' lean on y-all, for in a few weeks now, ah'm to be a free man once mo'."

"On the way to the flying field," Sherman continued, "we'll take Miss Dean home, then either Fox or Smith have the enlisted men's debt to defray, Norman. And if Oaks doesn't claim it. I'll proxy for all the officers who ever passed through Carlstrom. You're going to get the beating of your life."

"Ah'm elected!" Fox urged. "Smif only has two hands; while ah has a French trick with bofe feet."

At twelve-thirty a throttle was oozed ahead. A plane took-off and cleared the pines. The pilot swung north, set a course for Tampa, and the word was fulfilled. A laughing moon swung low across the Gulf. It's strange what brings happiness out of deepest gloom.

For the following two or three days, all ships combed southern Florida. The Service, beyond one night's lodging had provided no way of obtaining sustenance, so, one by one, the pilots turned for home. On the sixth or seventh day, young Ten Eyck wearied of being lost, deserted his overturned plane somewhere in the Big Cypress Swamp and either swam or hoofed it into Naples. He told a story of having missed Ft. Myers; then, having exhausted his gasoline supply, the plane was forced to land. In landing the plane had turned over in a lagoon. Except for general fatigue, a week's stubble, and a mess of bug-bites, the cadet was as good as ever and a-rarin' to go.

On the afternoon of April twenty-fifth, at retreat, Smith said to Fox and me: "Let's get drunk."

"Save that gran' idea till tomorra', Smif," Fox begged. "Us three's free men at noon tomorra'. An' we're-all long gone from here."

At noon, next day, we three chartered a jitney and rolled on our way toward Arcadia. The important paper was in each pocket. If you've known that minute of release, you'll rejoice with us. If you haven't—then all the words in the world can't make you see it.

"In leaving Carlstrom," Smith said. "I have only one regret. I don't mind not having the Old Man's name on my official dsicharge, but I had always counted on saying a few well-placed words, the minute of release . . . And the colonel wasn't there."

For some reason or other, official no doubt, Colonel Dean had been absent from camp.

“Do you see what I see?” Smith asked when we were about half way to town.

“Ah’ll take blindness from now out jus’ to be right this time.” Fox answered. “This ’er boy’s sent from heaven.”

We were bumping through a detour. Just ahead, stuck in the loose bottomless sand, was an army truck. Alone on the seat of that truck, while the driver busily placed palmetto under his wheels, sat Beervat returning from furlough. We could easily have passed to either side, but Smith said stop to our man of color at the wheel.

“You just talk to the truck driver,” Smith said to me, “while Fox and I say a few words to Beervat—it won’t be long now!”

“With Lowpockets and the colonel away nobody in camp will believe that Beervat hasn’t been in a railroad wreck,” I told them—“so make it good.”

They made it better. We were very happy as we went on into Arcadia.

“Let’s buy those civies right here in Arcadia,” I suggested.

“How about waiting till we get to Jax?” Smith asked.

“Not-a-chance,” Fox dissented.

“Right chere in this little ol’ town ah sheds ma drab plomage. An’ if ah meets any hooligan in uniform—buck to gen’ral—they’s gona be war, more bloodshed than on the Western Front, what ah mean.”

It couldn’t have been me because I don’t know the words of the thing, but somebody was singing *Sweet Adeline* when we pulled out of Arcadia on the evening train. And we were civilians: for by their cloth ye shall know them.

Early next morning the train-crew got together and agreed to quit stalling. We were in Jacksonville before noon. For some unknown reason we missed an early afternoon train north, then had several additional hours to kill before midnight and the next “through” chance out.

Shortly after eleven—adventure was beginning to ravel and leave its old-sock taste—Fox, walking between Smith and me, shot out both arms, stopped us and yelled.

“Smif, y-all was firs’ a-spottin’ Beervat; do y-all see what ah sees now?”

Half-jagged, coming toward us and each in civilian clothing, were Lowpockets and Colonel Dean. Their’s was not a happy drunk; too much bitterness showed in Lowpockets’ face. The Old Man, all hands, was explaining the ways of the world to his ex-captain. They had not seen us.

“Into this alley!” Smith said and pulled us after him. It was a very dark alley. We waited. Crossing the alley, the colonel and Lowpockets slowed up to fee! their way. Two, four, or was it six arms came out of the dark to help them?

Well, I’ve called the colonel the Old Man because that’s merely Army argot. I’ve also said that he was gray-young, and that’s the truth. Fact is, the colonel, at that time was not more than thirty-six or seven. That’s not too old. And almost anything can happen to a man of thirty-six or seven in a dark alley at, or close to, midnight.

“Ah’m as happy as a fool,” Fox was saying as we walked from the other end of that alley, and toward the depot. “How that ol’ boy begged an’ begged . . . A fine man—the colonel.”