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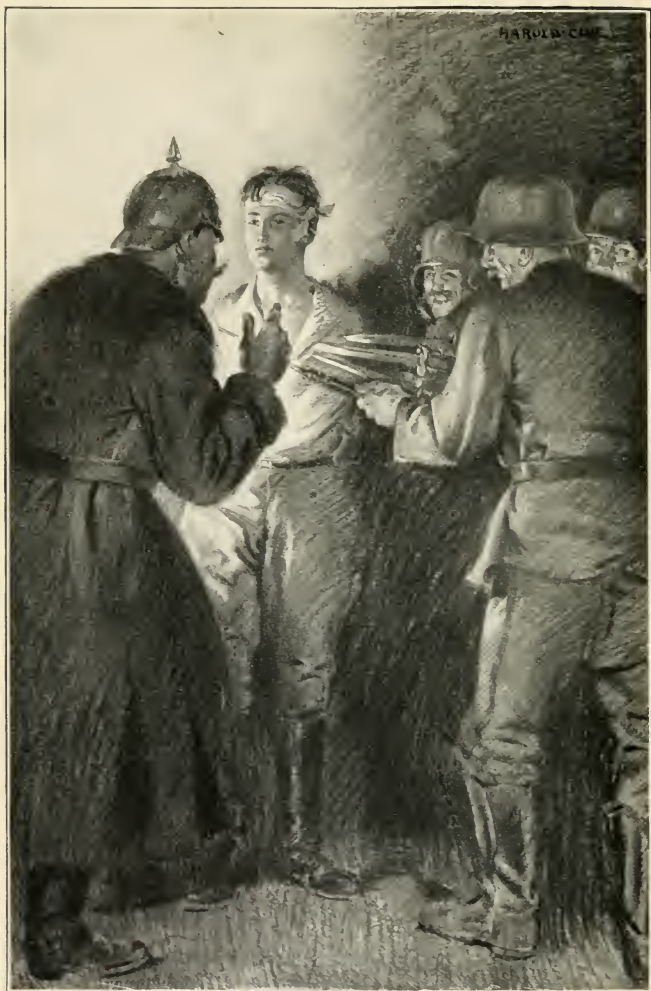
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THE DRAGON-FLIES
A TALE OF THE FLYING SERVICE



“I will ask a question,” he explained, “and you will have fifteen seconds in which to answer it” (page 208)

THE DRAGON-FLIES

A Tale of the Flying Service

BY

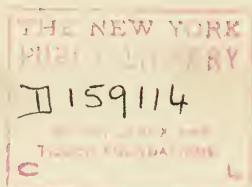
DONAL HAMILTON HAINES

With Illustrations



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Drawn by Harold Cue

THE DRAGON-FLIES

CHAPTER I

THE WINNING POINTS

FROM the starting-point, two hundred and twenty yards up the smooth stretch of black cinder path which lay in front of the crowded stands, six white figures leaped forward like one as the puff of smoke drifted up into the summer air from the muzzle of the starter's pistol, and still like one they rose into the air and topped the first hurdle.

Instantly the big crowd appeared to go mad. From different parts of the towering stands men and women shouted and shrieked the names of one or the other of the six contestants. Soon one name, evidently borne by the entry of the university on whose field the race was being contested, dominated all others.

“Allen! Allen! Allen!”

Over three of the hurdles the field remained so closely bunched that a horse-blanket could have been thrown over the six bobbing heads,

then two men began to draw away from the rest. One of them, a slim, sunburnt young fellow, with carrotty red hair, and a blue letter showing against his white shirt, was on the inside of the track, while his opponent, a stocky, dark-skinned man, with a black, close-cropped, bullet head, and a pair of legs that showed knots of muscle, was digging his spikes into the cinders on the extreme outside.

It seemed now that almost everybody was yelling for Allen, but from one corner of the stands, where fluttered banners of the same crimson shade as the ribbon which crossed the stocky hurdler's breast, came now frantic cries of "Turner!" and "Nig!"

Yard after yard the pair ran side by side, each apparently traveling at top speed, and one after another they topped the white hurdles in the same stride. Then, when they were perhaps halfway down the course, the superior strength of the man called Turner began to tell. While the little knot of rooters waved their crimson banners and shouted themselves hoarse, the black head of their champion forged a little to the front, and he was seen to leap from the ground a bit ahead of his red-haired opponent.

The cries of "Allen!" took on a new note. They had been triumphant, now they were des-

perate, and it was evident that the crowd believed their man beaten. But the few inches of lead that Turner had gained seemed all that he could do. Strain as he would he could not increase the gap. Allen, his face twisted with the effort, but his legs still striding and leaping in perfect form with never a break, held to his place a scant yard behind.

Had the crowd possessed one bit of knowledge that was shared by no more than three or four people who watched the struggle, they would have been even more certain that the race was as good as over and "Nig" Turner famous for one more victory. Fogarty, the coach who had trained Dick Allen, knew it; Clemmons, the Crimson coach, knew it;—more important still, both the straining hurdlers knew it.

As Dick Allen realized that Turner was a bit ahead of him, this bit of knowledge flashed through his mind with painful force. If he did not regain the lost ground before they reached that stretch of level track which lay between the last hurdle and the tape, he was a beaten man, for on level ground, Turner was faster than he. His victory—if victory he was to have—must be won in the air above the hurdles!

Spurred by this knowledge, Dick made an effort which was destined to live long in the

annals of the field. It seemed to him that already his muscles and tendons were doing all that they could, yet by sheer will power he forced them to greater endeavors. He *made* his feet shoot him from the ground over the hurdles with a trifle more force, *made* the hungry spikes reach for the ground a fraction of a second quicker as he came down, *made* his swinging arms pull his body more swiftly forward toward the next hurdle.

He had no time to glance sideways at Turner to see whether or not his effort was succeeding, but he had no need to look: the great roar which welled up from the stands told him that he was doing the impossible.

“Dunno what the bye did,” Coach Fogarty said afterwards. “He didn’t exactly hurdle: he *flew!*”

When finally Dick’s slim legs slid over the last hurdle, he knew that Turner was a full two strides behind him, and that Turner’s greater speed on “the flat” could hardly cut down the lead in those last few yards. He flung himself forward, knew that Turner was almost upon him, and then, just as the tape broke against the blue letter on his breast and he knew he had won, a twinge of pain such as he had never felt in all his races, seemed to tear through the muscles

on the under side of his right foot and rip its way up the calf of his leg. He stumbled, sprawled, and fell in a heap.

A dozen men caught him up, slapped him on the back, shouted at him.

“Bully for you, Dick!”

“That turned the trick, old horse!”

“Those five points give us the meet sure as shooting!”

Dick grinned at them faintly. He was glad he had won another race, glad that those five points which his winning had brought meant another triumph for the college. But that demon of pain which had suddenly bitten at his foot was still gnawing, tearing at the overtaxed flesh, and in the back of his mind was a dull fear that he had really hurt himself, that perhaps he had sailed over the white hurdles for the last time!

CHAPTER II

THE PRICE OF A VICTORY

IF "Dick" Allen had won his spectacular hurdle race in the late spring of 1912 instead of 1917, it would have been quite another matter. For in May, 1912, the results of the Intercollegiate would have been spread over many columns of Sunday's metropolitan dailies, and on Monday and Tuesday there would have been further comments, with pictures of the famous hurdler—one breasting the tape a few inches ahead of the redoubtable Turner, the other grinning consciously into the eye of the camera; and experts would have united in declaring that "Dick" Allen was practically sure of a place on the American team for the next Olympics.

But in May, 1917, there were other matters of greater import to be set before the eyes of the reading public. Even on the campus the Sunday following, the result of the race was by no means the sole, or even the leading, topic of conversation. The meet seemed already nearly

forgotten, and men were talking of training-camps, submarines, and the real significance of the German retreat.

Dick sat in his room that sultry afternoon trying to figure out just what his real feelings were. Scattered on the floor about his chair were all the Sunday papers he had been able to buy, for he was human and normal enough to enjoy thoroughly reading the accounts of his own prowess. But he had to confess that the performance did not afford him the satisfaction he had anticipated.

He was sitting with one foot on the floor and the other, clad in an old bed-slipper, cocked up on a chair, while against his knee stood a stout cane which he had borrowed from his landlady. The pain which had shot through his right foot was not what it had been, but it was still there. And the mere thought of running or leaping made him wince.

Nor could he forget the expression on Fogarty's face when the coach had looked at his foot in the dressing-room afterwards. The veteran had not said much.

"Good thing it's the last race of the year!" he had muttered; then, "Better keep your weight off it a couple of days, Dick, then I'll have another look."

And Dick was shivering with dread at the thought of Fogarty's "other look."

About two o'clock other men began to drift into his room, until every chair and other "sit-able" article of furniture in the room was occupied.

For a time the talk kept to the meet and Dick's injury, but gradually it drifted to the one absorbing topic of the war. And once there it stayed. Such unimportant trifles as hurdle races and injured feet were entirely forgotten.

Of the ten men in the room, six were already planning to go to the Officers' Training Camp at Fort Sheridan. Two others, owing to circumstances at home, felt that they simply would have to wait until the draft called them to the colors. Only two men in the room, Dick and a slim, dark-haired fellow curled up on a corner of the study table, had not told their plans.

"What you going to do, Bob?" somebody asked finally.

The man on the table looked up.

"Me?" he asked. "Well, what do you think I *can* do? I'd stand a fat chance getting into an O. T. C., wouldn't I? If I were to appear for the physical 'exam' they'd reject me without even making me take off my necktie! I'm three inches under height and twenty

pounds under weight. I can't see across the room without my glasses. I'd make a swell soldier, I would!"

He tried to speak in a jesting tone, but it was evident to the others that his physical handicaps were a bitter burden. No other questions were asked him, and the man who had spoken turned quickly to Dick.

"How about you, Dick?"

Dick's glance traveled to the open window, carefully avoiding the slippered foot and the cane.

"I think I'll go to Sheridan if they'll take me," he said.

"Take you!"

Little Bob Hurlburt spoke sharply from his seat on the table.

"You fellows make me tired with that sort of talk," he went on. "What earthly reason is there for their turning down a man like Dick?"

"Never can tell," insisted Blake, a towering fellow who had played right-tackle for two years. "They turn 'em down for all sorts of queer things."

"They sure do!" observed another voice from the corner of the room. "Poor teeth or crooked legs, or some disease with a name a foot long that you never knew you had!"

"I knew a chap at Pittsburgh," Blake went on, "that couldn't get into the first camp. You ought to have seen him. You'd have said, to see him stripped, that he was just about perfect. But he'd got flat feet from too much tennis on asphalt courts, and they would n't have him."

"For all he'd probably have made enough sight better officer than seventy per cent of the men they did take!" little Hurlburt said with sympathetic bitterness.

Blake shook his head slowly.

"Don't know about that, Bobbie," he said. "I'll admit that some of these rejections do look like foolish work on the part of the army officials. Offhand you'd say this Jack Heath—the fellow I was talking about—would have made about as good an officer as you could find. He had the build and the staying power and the intelligence. And he was a whale of a shot with rifle or revolver. And maybe those flat feet of his would never have caused any trouble.

"But, you see, the army can't afford to take any chance. It is n't like a football game. There you can shove a man into the game, knowing that he'll only last the first quarter or maybe the first half, and then you can put a fresh man in his place. In war you don't always have the fresh men. Suppose Heath had gone through,

got clear to France, and been in some mighty important position when his feet went back on him and there wasn't any substitute to take over his job!

"See the idea? It isn't just that a chap's willing and full of pep and all that. He's got to be absolutely fit. If he isn't they don't want him."

There was a little pause after Blake finished speaking; then Dick asked, "How'd you say this man Heath got his flat feet, Walt? Tennis?"

"Too much tennis on hard asphalt courts," Blake said. "Made 'em just as flat as a pair of paddles."

"Did it happen suddenly or gradually?"

"Don't remember. All of a sudden, I think. —Sling over that front page of the 'Herald,' will you, Ed? I haven't half seen it."

During the rest of the time that his guests were there, Richard Allen took little part in the conversation. He could think of nothing but the tennis-player of whom Blake had told, and of his own foot—bandaged with adhesive tape and throbbing cruelly—which stretched out in front of him.

"Coming out to lunch with us, aren't you, Dick?" Tom Watson said finally as the group began hunting for hats and caps.

"Guess not to-night," answered Dick. "Strained my foot a bit yesterday and walking's no particular fun."

"Nothing serious, sprain or anything, is it?"

"Oh, no," Dick answered carelessly; "just strained it a little. I'll be spry as ever in a day or so."

When the others had gone he sat for a little while staring thoughtfully out of the window, then took the slipper from his injured foot and started to unwind the tape. But he stopped before he had gone far and shook his head.

"No," he decided, "I won't look at it. I'll only scare myself. Probably it will look bad, but really is n't as bad as it looks. Anyhow, I'm not going to waste time worrying. I'm going to find out the truth in a hurry."

He rummaged around his closet, found an old tennis-slipper, and got his foot into it with no more than a grimace or two of pain, then took his cane and hobbled out into the street. He did not go to see the track coach. Fogarty's judgment was sound enough, but Dick felt that he wanted a diagnosis which would carry more authority, and walked toward the unpretentious house of Dr. Lanyard. Lanyard was dean of the medical school and a surgeon of national reputation. He could, as Bob Hurlburt said,

“tell by one look into your face just how much it would cost to cut out your appendix!”

With a beating heart Dick climbed the steps and obeyed the sign on the glass door which said “Walk In.” An electric bell rang as he entered the room, but for a moment no one came. Dick waited, the smells and furnishings of the office helping to increase his fears. Finally the door opened and Dr. Lanyard, a handsome, genial man with a bushy white beard, came into the room.

“Well, young man!” he said cheerfully; “I never expected to have you as a patient. If it isn’t too late let me congratulate you on a mighty plucky race.”

“Thank you, doctor.”

The physician settled his glasses in place and beamed.

“And now what’s the matter?—Aha!” he added as he caught sight of the old tennis-slipper, “paying for your speed, eh?”

“I’m afraid I am,” admitted Dick, “and I want to know just how much I’ll have to pay.”

With a few deft movements the doctor had the bare foot between his hands. He didn’t seem to look at it at all (though any of his students could have told you that those keen blue eyes saw everything without seeming to see anything!), but glanced up into Dick’s face.

"Your senior year, is n't it, Allen?"

"Yes, sir."

"Not planning on doing any hurdling for athletic clubs or anything of that sort, were you?"

A cold feeling gripped Dick's heart, and he knew that all the color had left his face.

"I was n't," he answered, "but—do you mean it's as bad as that?"

"You've broken the arch," the doctor told him. "Of course it is n't serious. Thousands of people have broken arches. But to an athlete it is mighty serious."

"You mean that I'm—through?"

"I'm afraid so. It won't give you any particular trouble after a few days of discomfort. Won't bother you walking. After a time you can play tennis, perhaps. But that foot will never again stand the sort of strain you put on it yesterday."

Dick made no immediate answer. He drew the foot toward him and looked at it.

"I suppose this will show?" he asked.

"Show?"

"I mean anybody looking at it—a doctor or anything like that—would know what was the matter?"

Dr. Lanyard's mind went straight to the thought behind Dick's question. His face soft-

ened a little, but he did not betray his knowledge.

"Well, yes; I'm afraid it will show," he said. "Not one foot in ten thousand is subjected to the strain you've put on yours. You've pretty well smashed the structure, and you won't be able to hide the fact."

Dick replaced his slipper, the doctor talking in the meanwhile about different matters. Then Dick drew out his purse, a little uncertainly, for he had heard tales of the size of Dr. Lanyard's fees—even for five-minute consultations. But the great physician put both hands in his trousers-pockets and frowned.

"Put away your money, my dear fellow," he commanded. "It was the merest trifle; besides which I should be a poor sort if I took a fee for the rotten truth I've just had to tell you!"

As he watched Dick limp off down the tree-lined walk, the frown was still on Dr. Lanyard's face, and he tapped his teeth with the tip of a pencil.

"Poor boy!" he muttered. "It took a fine spirit to win that race yesterday after he was apparently a beaten man—and yet, just because he *did* win it, Uncle Sam has probably lost a mighty good first lieutenant!"

CHAPTER III

A FRIEND IN NEED

IN almost every college community there is to be found on the faculty of the institution at least one man of a particular type. He may be a brilliant instructor: he is just as likely to be a rather inconspicuous figure as far as classroom work is concerned, but he is above all other things the friend and adviser of the young men with whom he comes in contact. Usually he is young—not more than five or six years older than the seniors—and he knows to a nicety just what degree of intimacy to establish with his friends among the students. He knows that there are men who will be helped if they feel that they may call him by his first name, and that there are other men who would simply take advantage of this privilege.

When he left Dr. Lanyard's office, Dick Allen walked straight toward the rooms of exactly this sort of a man. He felt that just at the moment Eric Hamilton was the one man on earth to whom he could talk freely, and from

whom he might get the sort of advice which he sorely needed.

Never in his life had Dick been so completely and wretchedly unhappy. It seemed to him that the blunt truth the doctor had just given him had spoiled everything which might lie in the future. The fact that his career as an athlete was abruptly ended was a small matter in comparison with the fact that he could probably never wear his country's uniform on active service.

When he reached the unpretentious rooming-house where Hamilton lived, the big room was full. He was half minded to turn back: yet his desire to talk to Hamilton was sufficiently strong so that he climbed the steps and rang the bell.

Fortunately for Dick's peace of mind, most of Hamilton's guests were young under-classmen. Few of them knew Allen, and the presence among them of the latest athletic hero was enough to reduce them to embarrassed silence and early leave-taking. Hamilton, after a single glance at Dick's face, knew that his visitor had come for serious conversation, and made it easy for the others to go.

As soon as the last freshman had found his hat and departed, Hamilton lighted a big pipe, stretched himself out in a huge easy-chair and

glanced searchingly at Dick through the first cloud of smoke.

"Well," he demanded cheerfully, "what's the matter? Money? That is n't your usual difficulty, Dick."

"It's a whole lot worse than that, Eric," Dick answered dolefully, and plunged into his story without further waste of time.

Hamilton let Dick talk himself out without interrupting or making a single comment beyond nodding from time to time. When Dick had finished he laid his pipe on a corner of the mantel, and stood with his back to the fireplace and his hands clasped behind him.

"I think I understand," he said. "It means rather more to you than to most fellows, does n't it, because you've thought a great deal about this sort of thing?"

"Have I!" echoed Dick. "Why, I've dreamed and played and thought war since I was a kid. There was almost a row in our family when Dad would n't let me try for a West Point appointment. And this Training Camp looked like the chance of a lifetime. I don't see any reason why I should n't have pulled down a good commission. I knew some fellows in the first camp who got captaincies, and I *know* I could have made good if they did!"

"I don't doubt that for a minute," Hamilton assured him, "but the best thing for you to do is to forget all about those things without loss of time. Blake was right in what he said to you this afternoon. An officer with a broken arch would be just as much a source of danger to his own troops as a shell with a faulty fuse or a rifle with a loose firing-pin. Army regulations are army regulations, and there's no dodging them. Apparently you're shut out of the service just as completely by what most people would call a ridiculously minor defect as you would be if you'd lost an arm or a leg. All right, then drop it. There's no use crying over spilt milk."

"But I can't drop it!" protested Dick bitterly. "I've talked no end about what I was going to do. Now what will people think when I don't do anything?"

"If you're the sort of a yellow pup who is thinking about what people are going to say, I'm done with you!" Hamilton said sharply.

"Well, of course that wasn't just what I meant," Dick said hastily, turning red; "but this thing has come so suddenly it's sort of—well—got my goat! I'd wanted to do so much, and now I can do nothing at all!"

"H'm!" observed Hamilton, fingering his

long nose. "Nothing at all, eh? That's a pretty broad statement. That broken arch must have affected so much of you that you'd better trot straight back to Lanyard and ask him to take another look at you. Nothing at all! You make me rather ill, Dick. Since you can't command a field battery, or lead a company of infantry into a Hun trench, you're sore on the world and ready to say you're useless! We'd be a fine fighting race and a lot of use to France and England and the rest of them if we were all made of that sort of stuff, would n't we?"

"You know what I mean, Eric," persisted Dick. "I want to fight! Of course I can get some kind of a job and do something that'll help, but that is n't what I want."

Hamilton laughed as he dropped back into his big chair.

"I might give you a long lecture on the value of real service," he said, "which consists in doing not the thing you want to do, but the thing that needs to be done and that nobody else wants to do. But I'm not going to give you that lecture—which would bore both of us. And I guess it would be useless into the bargain. It's hard to make a barnyard fowl out of a fighting-cock, and I'm afraid that's what you are!—What's the matter with the air?"

"The air?" repeated Dick, blankly.

"Yes. To the best of my knowledge an aviator with a broken arch is exactly as valuable as one with two good arches. Furthermore, flat-foot is just about the only physical disability you could possess and still get into the air service."

Dick took a long breath.

"Never thought of it!" he confessed.

"I'll bet you didn't!" laughed the instructor. "You've acted more like a hysterical woman than I've ever seen you in the four years I've known you!"

Dick had risen from his seat as Hamilton spoke and walked toward the window. When he turned back he astonished his companion by showing him a face on which something like absolute horror was written.

"It's no great wonder that I never thought of it," he said soberly; then paused, and added after an instant, "Eric, is there anything on earth of which you have a peculiar and deadly fear?"

The older man looked at him in quick surprise, hesitated, then laughed a little.

"Well, yes," he confessed, "I don't suppose there's any schoolgirl who possesses a greater fear of snakes than I do."

"You wouldn't be very likely to go after the

job of keeper of the snakes at some zoo, then, would you?"

"I certainly would not."

"What I'm going to say is bound to sound queer," Dick began. "I've just been complaining because I seem to have lost my chance to do any real fighting. You remind me of the air service, and I confess that I'd never thought of it. I hadn't. There was no more likelihood of my thinking of it than of your thinking about that snake-tending job!"

"I don't know just how vivid and terrible your fear of snakes really is, but if it's as bad as my terror of awful heights, then, by George, Eric, I'm sorry for you!"

"I believe I was born with that fear inside me. As a kid I used to have one particular nightmare, night after night. In it I was tied to the end of a rope about a hundred feet long and set to swinging. There wasn't any real danger. I knew that I wouldn't fall. It was just the horror of height, of that swift rush through empty air that used to wake me up sweating and screaming with fear.

"Of course I've outgrown that dream, but I haven't rid myself of the fear of high places. I don't believe I could force myself to climb to the top of a tall windmill or scaffolding. I

can't drive myself to go to the edge of a roof or a high bank. If I'm on top of a tall building I want to sit down right in the middle of the roof. I can't even swing in a kid's swing. I can't even climb to the top of a step-ladder without queer feelings!"

"I'm not sure," Hamilton said with a slight smile, "that I shan't deliver that little sermon on service after all. Your case is peculiar, Dick. You come of fighting stock. The desire to handle weapons, to lead men into battle, is in your blood. Now this accident leaves you apparently just one chance of fighting, and that's in the way which fairly curdles your blood with fear.

"I said a while back that real service consisted in doing the thing which had to be done and which nobody else wanted to do. I might add that it also consists in doing the thing that is hard for you. I dislike preaching sermons as much as you dislike listening to them, and as you know I'm no believer in heroics or anything of the sort. But it does look to me as though right here you have a chance to do a pretty big thing.

"Fear of height is a deadly, cold sort of terror. It just happens, Dick, that I sat close enough to the track yesterday so that I saw

every detail of that race of yours. I think I saw the moment when you realized that only a superhuman effort could save you from defeat and forced yourself to that superhuman effort. All right! Here's a chance for a bigger effort and in a vastly bigger cause. It's something more now than just winning a hurdle race. Get the idea?"

"Yes," answered Dick, "I get it."

He sat silent for a minute, then rose and held out his hand.

"Thanks, Eric," he said. "You sure can hit the nail on the head."

"You'll try for the air service, then?"

"Of course!"

"Good boy!" exclaimed Hamilton as he gripped the other's hand. "And you can promise yourself right now that I'll be at the training field to watch your first flight if it's in Honolulu — and they'll let me in!"

CHAPTER IV

DOUBTS AND FEARS

THERE is no better place than the seat of a railroad car for long, hard thinking. Dick Allen had nearly a four-hour ride, and during the entire length of it he had the seat wholly to himself.

He was honest enough to admit to himself that he faced the ordeal which lay before him with a good deal of actual dread. And this dread was really of two sorts. He was afraid that he would pass the tests—and then again he was afraid that he wouldn't! The train was carrying him swiftly toward Chicago, where applicants for the flying branch of the service were being given the physical examinations and tests designed to determine their fitness for the work. Within a couple of days he would probably know whether he was to be a cadet aviator, or whether his bit would have to be done in something like Red Cross work.

Aside from the injury to his foot, Dick knew that there was nothing wrong with his body. But

he also knew that prospective bird-men were given far different tests from those to which army and navy candidates were subjected. It was the thought of these which made him shiver.

“My only chance,” he said to himself again and again, “is to cover up the fact that I’m afraid to get up in the air. And I don’t see how in blazes I’m going to do that if they ask me to climb or balance myself or anything of that sort.”

He was aroused from his unpleasant thoughts by a hand laid on his shoulder. He looked up into a lean, pleasant face and a pair of sharp, brown eyes that now were smiling.

“I always believe in hunches,” explained the man who was standing beside Dick’s seat, “and I’ve got a hunch that you and I are bound for the same place. If I’m wrong I’ll apologize and clear out.”

Dick confessed his own destination, and the other nodded brightly and dropped into the empty seat beside him.

“I don’t very often go wrong,” he said, smiling. “I’m nervous enough to want to talk, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” confessed Dick. “But I’d like to know what made you guess I was going to take the tests.”

“Don’t really know,” answered his companion. “I’ve always been able to do that—not every time, you know, or anything spooky like that, but occasionally. Every once in a while I know that I’m going to meet somebody around a corner, and once for no apparent reason I let one train go and took a later one, and the first train went through an open drawbridge! And I get those hunches on little things. I’m twice the tennis-player I ought to be because so many times I can guess where the other fellow is going to put the ball and be there to meet it.”

Dick glanced at his seat-mate with interest. He was considerably older,—somewhere, Dick guessed, between twenty-five and thirty; he was of medium height, quite thin, but with a suggestion of wiry strength. His face had the dark, even color of a man who has spent much time outdoors in all sorts of weather. He wore an obviously old suit with the air of a man who has much better clothes, but does n’t care to put them on. He had black hair and a small black mustache.

“My name’s Whitmore,” he said. “And yours?”

Dick told him.

“Ever flown?” Whitmore asked.

“No,” answered Dick. “Have you?”

Whitmore laughed. "Well, I have and I haven't!" he said. "When I was a kid I was crazy about balloons, just naturally crazy about 'em. I ran away and went up in one at a county fair when I was eleven years old, and got probably the worst thrashing for it that any youngster ever got. If I hadn't had to hustle for a living, I suppose I might have gone in for aerial experimenting like Bell and Santos-Dumont, but just about the time I was ready to tackle the thing seriously, I had to begin earning the money to feed myself. So outside two or three balloon trips and one ride in an old-fashioned army dirigible, I've never flown."

Dick hurried to ask another question lest Whitmore begin questioning him.

"But you know you really can fly, don't you?"

"Yes, I do," answered the older man. "I believe I could get into a plane this minute and make the thing go. You see, I've been fooling with engines and machinery all my life. My job's engineering."

"Here in the West?" Dick asked.

"Well, no," answered Whitmore; "I've knocked about a good bit."

And without further urging he set forth upon a tale of wanderings and adventures that fairly took Dick's breath. There was hardly a corner

of the world that he had not seen and learned to know. He had had a hand in the building of railroads, docks, bridges, towns, had seen wildernesses turned into farming countries, deserts into grazing lands. There seemed to be no mechanical device, from a towering crane to a hand-lathe, which he had not used. And he was just as familiar with all sorts of men as he was with all sorts of machines. Many of the expeditions on which he had been engaged had been little less than armed invasions of wild lands; some of the exploring expeditions had turned out to be little wars.

Whitmore's talk was so engrossing that Dick paid no attention to the passage of time or the whereabouts of the train, and it was with surprise that he suddenly discovered that they were running into the train-shed in Chicago. The engineer rose, pulled down a battered traveling-bag from the rack and held out his hand.

"Well," he said, "we're bound to meet again before many hours. Know the Windy City?"

"Not very well," answered Dick.

"Wish I had time to take you about a bit," Whitmore said as he moved toward the door. "But to tell the truth I'm going to be as busy as a pup with the fleas between now and the time I go before the examiners."

"Then you haven't given up your business yet?" Dick asked in surprise.

"Oh, bless you, yes!" answered Whitmore. "But there's always a chance that they'll turn me down, and I believe in preparing the ground in advance. I think I'll make a good air-pilot, but the board may not. And I've a few friends in the Engineers who happen to be here in Chicago. I want a word with them in case this other business falls through."

"I shouldn't think there was much chance of their turning you down," Dick said as they descended the steps of the car.

"No more should I," answered the engineer. "But the African climate may have done things to my insides that the board won't like. They're a particular lot, you know. So-long!"

Dick stood watching the slim figure until it was swallowed up in the crowd, then set out for a hotel with a heavy heart.

"If there's a chance that they'll reject a man like that," he muttered, "what ghost of a show is there for a fellow like me?"

There is, Dick discovered within a few hours of the time he registered at a Chicago hotel, a good deal of truth in the old saying that "birds of a feather flock together." He was sitting

in the lobby of the hotel when he noticed a young fellow walking toward him.

"Your name Allen?" asked the new comer.

"Yes," replied Dick.

"Mine's Anson," announced the other, "and I'm another of us! I saw Dave Whitmore half an hour ago and he told me about meeting you on the train. Said you'd probably be here. Say, you are n't by any chance the Allen who won the hurdles for Western last June, are you?"

Dick admitted that he was that particular Allen, and for half an hour they had a fruitful subject of conversation. Anson proved to be a likable young chap from Evanston, a junior at Northwestern, who had quit college to go into the air-service, and who was cheerfully sceptical about his own chances.

"I'm pretty thin," he admitted, "and my hearing's never been just right. Guess I could scrape through the army tests, but I'd so much rather do this."

"How do you happen to know Whitmore?" Dick asked.

"Known him since I was a kid," answered Anson. "Everybody knows Dave, at least everybody in Chicago."

"How many of us do you suppose are going to take the examinations?"

"As near as I can find out there are six," Anson surprised him by saying. "Oh, I've nosed around a little to see what the prospects were," he explained, seeing Dick's expression.

"Any idea who the others are?"

"I've been told that we three are the only civilians," Anson replied. "Besides us there are two soldiers and a sailor. Suppose we see if we can find 'em."

They failed in their search for the other members of the sextette of candidates, and when they came back to Dick's hotel they found David Whitmore standing in the lobby staring mournfully at an empty cigarette-case.

"Thought I might run into you chaps," he greeted them.

"Why the emptiness and the gloomy expression?" asked Anson, pointing at Whitmore's case.

The engineer laughed.

"Haven't smoked for four days," he confessed, "and I'm not going to until after the exams. What you been doing?"

They told him, and as Dick had half expected, Whitmore had discovered what they had failed to find.

"Chap I used to pal with in college, medical fellow; has been on the board here," explained

Whitmore. "Just my luck; he's packing his grip now; transferred somewhere East. But he happened to have seen our prospective companions-in-arms who came prowling around looking for information. Seems there are four of them. A sailor, — Dixon says he's big enough to pick up an aeroplane and carry it off, — two soldiers, National Guardsmen from one of those crack New England regiments, he thought, and a civilian."

CHAPTER V

MANY CALLED — FEW CHOSEN

THE seven young men who gathered the next morning in the bare offices of the examining board represented a wide variety of types. With the exception of Whitmore, they were all young, their ages probably varying from twenty to twenty-three.

Alsop, the sailor, was a veritable young Hercules, well over six feet, with a tremendous pair of shoulders and a face of a twelve-year-old. Of the two soldiers, one called Norton was short, heavy-set, heavy-featured; the other, Heatherly, was tall and slim.

Of the four civilians, Anson was by far the frailest-looking; Dick the best-proportioned and well-set-up; Whitmore certainly appeared made of the toughest fibre and best fitted for hard service.

Beecher, the last of the seven, differed from all the others. He was a man of medium height and build with a rather pale skin, deep blue eyes, and very fair hair cut close to his head.

His eyebrows and eyelashes were of such a pale yellow as to be invisible at a distance of a few feet, and his mouth was thin-lipped and hard.

No time was wasted in preliminaries. The examining officers (who were in reality merely a set of hard-worked, deadly serious men, but who were destined to seem so many ogres to Dick before the ordeal was finished) got to work without delay.

The first test was of the heart and blood pressure, both before and after running up the stiff flight of stairs which led to the office. At the conclusion of it, one of the officers, after putting his stethoscope over Anson's heart, shook his head.

"No use going farther with you," he said crisply. "You won't do."

Anson turned white as a sheet.

"You mean—" he stammered.

"Oh, don't worry!" the officer said kindly, moved to pity by the white face. "You'll probably live to be seventy and die peacefully in your bed, but you won't do for air service."

There was no time for farewells. Anson gave Dick and Whitmore a nod, a wave of the hand, and a curt "See you later!" and was gone.

He was the only one of the candidates eliminated on the first test, nor did any of the others

go out on the "first round," which included tests of the lungs, eyes, ears, nose, and throat. After these had been finished, Whitmore whispered to Dick:

"That's the end of my worries! They can do their worst now. My throat and lungs were all that made me uneasy!"

By the time these various tests had been completed on the six men, the first day's business was finished. Whitmore and Dick left the rooms together.

"We'd better not try to look up Anson," Whitmore said. "He'll probably be pretty sick and sore and won't feel like talking to anybody. But I think I'll get my things and move over to your hotel. It's quieter, and I intend to sleep nine hours to-night."

"How about the rest; do you think they'll all pass?" Dick asked.

"I don't think so," answered the engineer thoughtfully. "My guess is that the sailor and one or both of the Guardsmen will fail. I think you and I will come through. And I believe Beecher will."

"I don't like that fellow Beecher!" exclaimed Dick.

"Can't say I like him myself," Whitmore replied. "But he's exactly the type most likely to

pass if there's nothing organically unsound about him. He looks to me just about normal, and I understand that's the great thing for this particular work."

The next morning the ordeal was resumed, and if Dick had known precisely what was in store for him he might not have slept so soundly.

Having examined the organs of the candidates, the medical officers now turned their attention to their legs, arms, and bone-structure. Everything from toes to fingers was subjected to the most rigid and thorough examination.

Norton, one of the soldiers, was thrown out at this point because of an old break in his upper arm, which had evidently not been sufficient to keep him out of the army.

Dick spent an unpleasant ten minutes when they found his injured foot, and felt mighty glad that he had paid Dr. Lanyard a second visit and taken the physician's advice. Since the day of the race he had kept off the foot as much as possible, subjecting it to no unusual strain, yet using no artificial support to hold it up, with the result that it was in much better shape than it would have been had he not taken such good care of it. Nevertheless there was a great deal of head-shaking and muttering on the part of the examiners, and Dick felt sure that had the

rest of his body not been so exceedingly fit they might have held him out. He drew a huge sigh of relief when they finally left it and passed to another part of his body.

It was the next part of the examination that Dick had dreaded most of all, and his fear was increased because he had little or no idea what sort of things he would be made to do.

The first test, however, seemed absurdly easy. The five men were made to stand in a line, then told to shut their eyes and stand on their tip-toes until ordered to lower themselves to their heels.

He closed his eyes and balanced himself on his toes, prepared for any sort of sensations. Nothing happened. He could hear the breathing of the other men and the ticking of the watch in the officer's hand. He was conscious of nothing except a slight tendency to sway back and forth, and an increasing protest from the muscles of his calves and thighs.

"Steady, number four!" the officer's voice said sharply, and at the same instant there was the sound of scuffling feet as though one of the men had lost his balance and was trying to recover it.

A moment later the officer spoke again. "All right, at ease!" he said, and five pairs of heels thudded down onto the bare floor.

Before Dick could wonder whether or not he had done what was expected of him, or guess the identity of the luckless number four who had incurred the officer's warning, they were subjected to the test of the middle-ear.

Again the ordeal proved queer rather than hard or painful. A long rubber tube was put into a man's ear, then water poured into the other end of the tube. He was then asked to fix his eyes on a white spot on the wall. When it came Dick's turn he experienced no great trouble in doing what he was told. His head felt very heavy, there was a most troublesome roaring going on, and his eyes seemed slow to answer the command of his brain, but he managed to focus them on the white spot.

The famous whirling-chair test, designed simply to test the general sense of equilibrium, came next. The candidates were put in the chair and spun around with their eyes closed, then told to open them and made to fix objects with their eyes or touch them with the extended finger.

No sooner was Dick seated in the chair and spinning dizzily around than all his courage deserted him. He lost all his sense of balance. He had no idea which way he was facing, or whether the chair had been spun ten times or a hundred. And when the sickening motion finally

ceased and he heard the officer telling him to open his eyes, he pitched forward and would have fallen to the floor had the surgeon not steadied him with his arm.

Dick's heart went down into his boots. He had been afraid of just this thing. He had made the most tremendous effort of his will to keep himself erect in the chair, but it had been physically impossible. He pulled himself upright with an effort, rubbed one hand across his eyes and said unsteadily:

"Can't I have one more chance at that, sir? I believe I could keep from falling now that I know what it's like."

"Who in blazes said anything about not falling?" the officer demanded irritably. "Close your eyes again."

Dick obeyed, and once more the dizzy spinning of the hated chair commenced. This time when the motion stopped and Dick opened his eyes, the officer held out his finger and told Dick to try and touch it. He gathered all his faculties for a great effort, only to realize with a sickening sensation that he had missed the extended finger by many inches. He tried a second time with the same result.

"All right. That's enough! Next!" said the officer.

Dick left his seat (knowing that in the future an ordinary swivel-chair would strike more terror into him than any dentist's chair!) and fairly staggered against the wall, from where he watched the testing of Beecher and the sailor and the soldier, Whitmore having finished before Dick.

The spinning of the chair had no effect whatsoever upon the huge sailor. He remained perfectly erect when told to open his eyes, and experienced not the slightest difficulty in touching the extended hand of the officer. Heatherly pitched nearly out of his seat as Dick had done, but Dick noticed one difference. Sometimes the soldier swayed one way and sometimes the other.

When it came Beecher's turn, Dick was interested in the expression of the blond man's face. Hitherto it had been expressionless as a mask, and he had gone through all the tests without giving evidence of any emotion whatsoever. Now, however, he had a tense, strained look as though he was making a great effort. And when he opened his eyes at the examiner's command, he too pitched sideways in his chair.

"H'm!" muttered the officer; "that's funny! Close your eyes again."

Beecher did so, and the process was repeated with the same result. The surgeon stood finger-

ing his mustache and eying the man in the chair as though perplexed.

"Once more!" he ordered, and again the chair was spun, and again Beecher swayed to the left and his groping finger prodded to the left as it sought to reach the officer's hand.

Frowning a little, the officer repeated the test with the rubber tube, and the results of this seemed to perplex him even more. Finally, however, the frown left his face and he smiled grimly.

"Either you're upsetting some well-established medical laws, young man, or you've got the most stubborn will I ever heard of!" he said non-committally. "You men can get on your street clothes, and then I'll talk to you a minute in the outer office.

"Only three of you—Whitmore, Beecher, and Allen—have successfully passed all the tests for the aviation service," he told them later. "That is nothing to the discredit of you men who have failed to pass. It is simply that you are n't fitted physically for this particular branch of war work. But there is no reason why you should n't do well in the branches whose uniforms you already wear."

A few minutes later Dick and Whitmore were walking side by side through the street.

They had walked several blocks from the building where they had taken the examinations, when somebody behind them said:

“I say, you fellows!”

Both turned to see Beecher overtaking them from behind with long strides.

“I owe you my thanks, Allen!” he exclaimed as soon as he caught up with them.

“What for?” Dick asked in surprise.

“What you said when they spun you in the chair.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Why, it’s like this,” explained Beecher. “I knew from the look in that examiner’s eye that I’d been a little off on that water-test, and that I was hanging on by a hair. Then, when Whitmore tipped out of the chair I was surprised, because I thought of course that the thing to do was to sit up straight, and I figured Whitmore would do it.

“Then when you tipped, I was still more surprised, because you’d come through everything else the best of all of us. You could tell that from the way those surgeons watched you. And, you see, I *knew* I wouldn’t tip out of the chair, because I’d heard about the test and I’d tried it. So I thought I was going to succeed where you two had failed. Then you begged him for

another chance, and he wanted to know who'd said anything about sitting up straight. See?

"I knew then that the thing for me to do was to tip, and I had to work mighty hard to do it convincingly. I fooled him, too. That's why he made me take the water test again. He didn't expect me to wobble. So, you see, if it hadn't been for what you made him say, I'd have sat straight as a ramrod, and they'd have thrown me out. I surely am grateful!"

"Glad I happened to help you," Dick answered without much enthusiasm. He hadn't liked Beecher from the start, and the man's confession only served to increase his dislike.

Beecher waited an instant, then turned away with a wave of the hand.

"Good-bye!" he said. "We're pretty sure to meet again now."

The other two nodded casually, turned away, and walked back toward their hotel.

CHAPTER VI

THE SHADOWING OF BEECHER

DAVID WHITMORE stood in front of the mirror in his room, shaving, while Dick, who had been an earlier riser, sat curled up on the bed watching him.

"You remember the other day when I spoke to you on the train," David said, pushing the end of his mustache out of the way and screwing up the side of his face, "I told you that I sometimes had hunches and that I always made a practice of following them?"

"Yes."

"Well, I've had another of those hunches!"

"What is it?"

Whitmore laid down his razor and turned around, presenting a grotesque appearance with one side of his face still covered with lather.

"Beecher!" he announced.

"What about him?" Dick asked.

"None of us liked him from the first time we laid eyes on him," Whitmore answered. "Our

dislike was instinctive. The fellow didn't really do anything out of the way at all. He was always quiet, well behaved, respectful. I suppose if it hadn't been for that business yesterday I should just have put the whole thing down to one of those dislikes that can't be explained and thought no more about it.

"And that's the funniest part of it. His confession to us that he passed the final tests through sheer nerve and such smart guessing that it fooled those army doctors isn't really anything that ought to count against him very heavily in your mind or mine. If you had told me you'd done that thing, I'd slap you on the back and tell you you were great. I'd think it was nothing except your keenness to get in, and I'd admire you for it. And you'd feel the same way about me.

"But in Beecher I don't like it."

"Neither do I," Dick told him. "I've felt that way ever since he spoke to us on the street."

"You have, eh? I'm glad to hear it. That makes me feel surer that it is n't just my imagination playing tricks with me. Now we haven't a single reason to suppose that Beecher has any other motives in taking these examinations than we have. If that fellow Norton had been as sharp as Beecher, he'd have slipped through and

we'd have admired him for it. You in any particular hurry to get out of Chicago?"

"No," answered Dick.

"Then what do you say if we spend two or three days finding out all we can about this chap?"

"I'm willing," answered Dick. "And we might get Anson to help. His car might come in handy."

"Good idea!" applauded the engineer. "We'll get him on the 'phone in a jiffy and get to work right after breakfast. Of course this may be a wild-goose chase of the worst sort. We'll probably find that Beecher's the son of a Methodist minister in Iowa with a record like pure gold. But if I don't follow this hunch of mine I'll be miserable, and it'll be a pleasant let-down after what we've just been through."

Shortly after breakfast the pair were in consultation with Stephen Anson, and, as they had expected, they found him more than willing to lend a hand in anything they had on foot.

They began by pooling their information concerning Beecher, and found that it amounted to almost nothing. All of them had talked with him a little, but when they reviewed these conversations they discovered that they had consisted mostly of answering Beecher's questions.

He had told them nothing about himself. They did not know where he had come from, how long he had been in Chicago, what had induced him to try for the service, and what he had been doing with himself previously. Fortunately Whitmore remembered the name of the hotel at which he was staying.

It was finally decided that Whitmore should go to Beecher's hotel, see him, and try to draw him into conversation without arousing his suspicions. Dick and Anson were to go back to the hotel, where Whitmore was to rejoin them. Afterwards they would meet, talk over what the engineer had learned, and then see if this information justified any further prosecution of their self-appointed investigations.

Accordingly Dick and Anson went back to the hotel shortly before ten o'clock in the morning, Whitmore promising to be with them in time for lunch, perhaps earlier. The prospect of sitting around the hotel for a couple of hours did not seem inviting, so they drove along the Lake Shore Drive until after eleven, then returned to the hotel and inquired at the desk if there had been any telephone calls. The clerk told them no, and added, in answer to Anson's second question, that Whitmore had not returned.

They went up to Dick's room and waited

until half-past one. Anson began to grow uneasy, but Dick would not listen to him.

“We can trust Whitmore to take care of himself,” he insisted. “He’s staying for some good purpose, and he’ll be able to explain it when he comes back.”

At two o’clock the engineer was still absent, and the others went down to the hotel dining-room for lunch, leaving word at the desk where they were to be found. It was nearly three when they came back into the lobby. Still no sign of Whitmore—and now Dick began to feel something of Anson’s anxiety.

“We might go down there and see what’s up,” proposed the latter.

Dick held out for more time.

“Merely make Beecher suspicious if anything is wrong,” he pointed out. “And I don’t see that we could do any good if we did get there.”

At half-past four, however, Dick was ready to admit that Whitmore’s continued absence had a mighty queer look, and acceded to Anson’s proposal that they go at once to the hotel which Beecher had given as his address.

They found the building without difficulty, a modest hotel on a side street, and went into the lobby. For a few minutes they strolled about

through the lobby, writing-room, and billiard-room without seeing either Beecher or the engineer, then went to the desk and asked if a man named Beecher was registered there.

"Mr. Beecher was here," answered the clerk, "but he left this morning."

"When will he be back?" Dick asked.

"Did he go out alone?" Anson added in the same breath.

"Mr. Beecher checked out," explained the clerk carelessly. "As far as I know he has left the city."

The two stared at each other in blank astonishment; and Anson turned again to the clerk.

"Would you mind looking again at your register to make sure?" he asked. "I don't like to be troublesome, but it seems impossible that Mr. Beecher could have left the city when we had — an appointment to meet him."

The clerk glanced up, evidently on the point of being very short, but Stephen Anson was one of those good-natured men who can be persistent and inquisitive without getting disliked for it. The clerk obligingly spun the register around so that Dick and Anson could read it and pointed with his pen.

"You can see for yourselves," he said. "Had

room 413, checked out at eleven-thirty this morning."

"Thanks," answered Anson. "Sorry to have troubled you."

He led Dick out of the lobby and then made a bee line for a side corridor and hurried down that till he came to a stairway.

"Come on!" he called. "We're going to have a look at 413. The chambermaids probably haven't been in it since it was vacated."

They had no trouble finding the room, which was an outside room in a side hall of the fourth floor. They passed no one on the way up except a servant on the third floor, and the corridor onto which room 413 opened was empty. Anson walked swiftly forward, Dick a few paces behind him, and tapped at the door. There was no response, and he tapped again.

Dick had stopped a few paces away, and was suddenly startled to see Anson turn toward him a frightened face.

"Come here!" Anson said.

Dick came up quickly.

"Put your ear to the door!" begged Anson, "and see if you hear anything."

Dick did so and gave vent to a startled exclamation. He could not tell precisely what it was he heard, but he knew that there was some-

thing alive inside the room, something which had failed to respond to two knocks on the door which must have been perfectly audible!

It required very few seconds for the two men to get back to the desk.

"There's something wrong in room 413," Anson said, breathless but quiet. "I don't ask you to take my word for it. Just get one of your men and come find out for yourself."

An elevator carrying the two men, the clerk, and a burly hotel detective whisked them back to the fourth floor. The detective knocked at the locked door, bent his head to listen, then nodded significantly to the frightened clerk. Then he crossed the hall, hurled himself forward, and sent his full weight crashing against the door, which splintered and gave way.

The four men rushed into the room, and the first thing that met their eyes was David Whitmore, lying on the bed bound, gagged, and struggling manfully against the ropes which held him!

CHAPTER VII

WHITMORE'S STORY

A FEW seconds later Whitmore was stretching his arms to restore the circulation, and feeling gingerly of the corners of his mouth which had been cruelly stretched by the gag, while the four men who had found him fired questions at him more rapidly than he could possibly answer them.

As soon as he had recovered, the engineer began to laugh and at the same time reached into his pocket and drew out his purse.

"What's the damage?" he asked the clerk. "I'll settle."

The four men looked at him in astonishment. The question seemed a strange one to come from a man who had just been the victim of an assault. But Whitmore continued to laugh, drew out several bills, and acted like a man thoroughly ashamed of what he had just done.

"I'm old enough to know better than to do such things," he confessed in a shamefaced man-

ner that Dick and Anson were at a loss to understand, "but I couldn't resist the temptation. It looked like too easy a chance. What time is it, by the way?"

"A little after five," the clerk told him.

Whitmore shook his head dolefully.

"There goes ten dollars more!" he mourned. "You see, Beecher and I had an argument. He bet me ten dollars that he could leave me tied and gagged here in the room and that I couldn't get out inside three hours. I've lost my bet!"

The big detective glared at him.

"I've a darned good notion to turn you over to the police for disorderly conduct," he growled.

"You can do that, of course," Whitmore admitted. "But you don't look like the sort of a chap who would."

Then for five minutes the engineer set about proving that his tongue was as skillful as his brain. At the end of that time the clerk and the house detective were laughing and stuffing crumpled bills into their pockets, while the three young men were on their way to the street.

Whitmore maintained his air of shamefaced amusement until Anson's car had whisked them several blocks from the hotel, then he drew a long breath and said:

"Well, I'm glad to see that I can still tell a

fairly convincing lie when one has to be told. My recent experience with our friend Beecher made me fear that I'd forgotten how!"

"There was n't a word of truth in that rigmarole you told just now, was there?" Dick asked.

"Not a word!" admitted Whitmore. "Wait till we get to a place where we can talk and I'll tell you about it."

In their room at the hotel he told them the tale from start to finish, and they found the story so absorbing that there were no interruptions.

"I found Beecher easily enough," he said, "but I must have gone about the business of pumping him clumsily, for I think I aroused his suspicions from the first. And anyhow, at that sort of game I was a child in his hands. Our friend Beecher isn't the simple sort he seems!

"We hadn't been talking more than a few minutes when he suggested that we go up to his room. That suited my plans well enough, so we went up. There was n't a scrap of luggage in the room, and he explained that he'd had it sent down, as he was going to leave the city to-day. We hadn't been in the room more than a few minutes when the telephone rang and he answered it.

“‘I’ve got to step down to the office a minute,’ he said to me. ‘Don’t mind waiting, do you?’”

“So out he went, and that’s about the last I know until a little while before you chaps came hammering at the door. I will just add that if Beecher ever offers you a cigar, don’t take it. I was smoking one of his cigars when he left the room. Apparently it was a mighty powerful weed, and by the time he came back into the room I was in such a state that he could do as he pleased with me—as you saw for yourselves.”

“Where’s that cigar?” Anson demanded quickly.

“Oh, he saw to it that there was no trace of that,” Whitmore said. He cleaned up the traces absolutely, and there’s nothing but my story against his—and his sounds a whole lot more convincing.”

“Then why,” Dick asked, “did you tell that whopper about a silly bet to the clerk and the detective?”

“Because,” explained Whitmore, “it didn’t strike me that this business was anything to get into the hands of the city police. I hadn’t enough on this man Beecher to succeed in doing anything but make myself ridiculous if I tried to get him. Any story I could tell would look mighty queer alongside the perfectly straight-

forward story he could put up, and he knew it. So it seemed to me the best plan to let him get clear."

"Then you are n't going to try to do anything more?" Anson asked in a disappointed tone.

Whitmore smiled grimly.

"Have another guess!" he suggested.

"It looks to me," Dick said, "as though this is a matter for the secret service."

Whitmore laughed.

"It's in their hands," he said.

The other two looked at him uncertainly. Dick knew that there had not been an instant since they had unbound him in room 413 when Whitmore could possibly have communicated with anybody.

"You'll understand now," Whitmore went on, "why I feel pretty sore over having Beecher, who is probably something much more dangerous than he seems, put one over on me. You'll understand now, Allen, why I was so sure you were coming to Chicago to take the aviation tests, and why I seemed to know a little more than was natural about what was going on."

"You're a secret service man yourself?"

"Exactly."

"Then I don't see how this fellow Beecher can get away from you or do any harm."

"As far as that goes," answered Whitmore, "we can probably consider Beecher a scotched snake. He's a marked man, of no further use to his employers. Sooner or later, of course, we'll get our hands on him. That's why, as you see, I'm getting my things together and preparing to shake the dust of Chicago from my heels."

He snapped shut the fastenings of a suitcase as he spoke, then turned to Dick.

"You might let this be a lesson to you," he said soberly. "This particular occurrence is n't so serious in itself. Probably the only damage done is that the Imperial Government of Germany will know the details of our aviation tests. But the point is right here: Their spy system is everywhere. Their spies are picking up every scrap of information that can possibly be of the smallest service. Every man in America who possesses any bit of special information, or who has any small part in our armed forces, is a possible target for their efforts. And the German spy is n't a man with a furtive manner, a slouch hat, and an upturned mustache; he's just as inconspicuous and harmless-looking as this Beecher. What's more, he may not have a drop of German blood in his veins! The thing for you to do is to be on your guard. In a few weeks now you'll be taking your ground-school

training. Keep your mouth shut and your eyes peeled for more of them!"

"Do you suppose Beecher would have gone on if you had n't spotted him?" Anson asked.

"To be sure he would," answered Whitmore. "He'd have taken the whole course of training; probably gone to France if he could have done it.—And now, Stephen," he went on, turning to Anson, "if that car of yours can get me to the Twelfth Street Station in ten minutes, I'll be grateful!"

CHAPTER VIII

SCHOOL-DAYS AGAIN

DICK ALLEN was striding energetically along one of the shaded streets of the little college town of Lakeville. A notebook and a couple of textbooks were under his arm, and but for the fact that he wore a uniform instead of the ordinary clothes of civilian life, the clock might have been turned back a few months and his college days resumed.

As a matter of fact nearly three months had passed since the last day in Chicago with Stephen Anson after the sudden departure of Whitmore. They had been in many ways the strangest months of Dick's life. He had been busy every instant. His family—consisting of his father, mother, and two younger brothers—had naturally been jealous of his time and had tried to keep him to themselves.

But Dick had had certain things which he wanted to accomplish during the summer. In regard to two of them he had been open enough. He had spent many hours every week in a local

automobile factory, making himself as familiar as possible with the construction and operation of the ordinary gasoline engine. At first the workmen had somewhat resented his presence, as he was unpaid and had no actual duties, but once they learned the purpose of his frequent visits they had been only too willing to help him.

In addition to the hours in the shop, Dick had given some time each day to keeping himself fit. He knew that passing the first examinations did not end his responsibility in this direction; that he had to keep in the best possible shape physically and had to do everything possible to strengthen the injured foot. He had heard of men who had "slipped through" the first tests (much after the fashion Beecher had employed) only to be thrown out on subsequent examinations, and when he thought of how near the broken arch had come to spoiling his chances, he shivered. So he spent a good deal of time walking and playing golf, but left his tennis-racket in its case, although the sight of white figures scampering about the courts was a constant temptation.

But the third phase of his course of "self-training," as he called it, was something which he kept secret even from the members of his household, and was practiced where nobody could see him.

Not for one instant had he forgotten the black fact that his fear of heights and his tendency to vertigo had not left him. Indeed — due probably to the amount of time he spent thinking about such things — the old boyhood dream had returned, and on more than one night he had swung above a chasm at the end of a long rope.

Two or three miles outside the little Middle-Western town which had been home to the Allen family for three generations, lay the rails and ties of an abandoned railroad. At one point the road crossed a ravine by a trestle, perhaps a hundred and fifty feet long and forty or fifty feet above the ground at its highest point. It had not been used for years, the woodwork was badly rotted, and cautious people avoided crossing it.

Dick did not score over his giddiness the stubborn triumph he had expected. At the end of the long weeks he had to confess to himself that it was about as unpleasant a task to cross the trestle as it had been the first time, and he was as far as ever from his secret hope of walking across the very ends of the ties outside the rails.

A few days later had come his summons to the ground-school. But although Dick had been

a pretty conscientious student in college, he found that he really had no idea what hard work in classroom was like. Everything at Lakeville was so entirely different.

The attitude of the classes differed from what Dick had known as much as did their appearance. The uniformed men on the benches were terribly intent upon their tasks. Each day consisted of only so many hours, and in those hours they *had* to perform the tasks that were set them. There was no thought of shirking. Let a man shirk one day, and he began to fall behind. And once a man lagged there was no mercy for him. No loafing, no hanging on the slender thread of "probation" now.

Save for the fact that classes were held in the same rooms which had been doing duty for ordinary scholastic work, there was very little school flavor about the life: it was much closer to army life. The day began at five-thirty in the morning, the students went to "mess" instead of supper or dinner, and everybody was more than ready to tumble into bed when "taps" sounded at half-past nine.

The first few weeks were devoted to what were known as "junior wing" studies, which consisted largely in giving the men a thorough grounding in the main principles of army dis-

cipline and organization. They were given the same sort of drills, setting-up exercises, etc., that would have been the lot of recruits at any of the great army training-camps.

During the twelve weeks which the course was to last the men had to be given instruction in construction and operation of engines, airplane construction, machine-gun, wireless, bombing, reconnaissance, aerial photography, theory of flight, night-flying, and the use of flares. Some of this was theoretical, much of it practical. And in addition to all these studies there was drill, drill, drill, some work on the machine-gun range, trap-shooting, and, as Dick began to think, inspections every other fifteen minutes.

Only once in the course of the busy weeks did he particularly distinguish himself, and that was at the trap-shooting. The aviator must, of course, learn to shoot at moving objects while he himself is in motion, and the best possible preliminary practice for such work is shooting at fast-flying clay-pigeons with an ordinary shotgun.

It happened that on the days when Dick went to the traps, he was almost the only man who had done much shooting. For any one new at the game, it is no simple matter to break with a charge of shot a clay saucer whirling off through the air at a swift rate. But Dick had broken

hundreds of them, to say nothing of shooting ducks and snipe, which were far more difficult targets, and after a few minutes' shooting he was told off by the instructor to assist in the training of the less experienced men.

It was not until the long, hot weeks of the ground-school course were nearly completed, that the men were given work which had about it an air of grim reality, and gave them a real foretaste of what some of their work in the future would be like. This was the spotting-practice.

In one of the large lecture-rooms a wooden scaffolding twelve or fifteen feet high had been erected in the center of the floor. Beneath it was a huge map on a large scale, showing woods, roads, towns, water-courses, and all the features of a landscape. Viewed from the seats on the top of the scaffolding, this map looked as an actual country-side would look to an aviator skimming above it at a height of about six thousand feet.

One day when Dick took this work for the first time, he and some eight or ten other men seated themselves on benches at the top of the scaffolding, each man being provided with a wireless apparatus and a small-scale map of the stretch of country spread out beneath him. Dick

and the others were to play the parts of aviators, while another group of students grouped around the maps on the floor, and holding the receivers of the wireless outfits, were to impersonate artillery officers.

By means of an electric apparatus worked by one of the instructors, tiny flashes of light were made to appear on the maps. These were supposed to represent the bursting of shells, and the duty of the "aviators" on their lofty perch was to spot these flashes upon the map, and send their information to the artillery officers below by means of the radios.

Offhand it looked to Dick like an absurdly easy task, but within a very few minutes he became aware that it was anything but simple. He had to think of so many things at once, and to perform certain operations without fumbling or uncertainty. The flashes on the map were likely to show in any quarter and at any time; one section of the map looked confusingly like any other section, and you had to move and think quickly to identify positively the spot on which the miniature shell-burst had taken place, and send the information to the waiting officer of artillery on the floor below.

"Great Scott!" exclaimed the man next Dick during a momentary pause, "the messages I've

sent to my poor battery commander must look like a Chinese puzzle, and if he's followed my tips he must have sprayed the entire landscape with shells without hitting a single enemy gun!"

"Same here!" confessed Dick, glad to find that somebody else felt as thoroughly confused as he did.

In those last few days Dick formed his first real intimacies. Four men were drawn close together in one of those sudden companionships destined to endure. Besides Dick there were Bob Holmquist, a tall, lank Texan with drawling speech and a general air of laziness not at all in keeping with his record in class and on the drill-ground; Dan Ericsson, a burly Minnesotan; and Ted Lane, a slim young fellow who had never before believed that much of the country was worth anything except New York City.

There seemed little to draw the four men together. They had led lives as different from each other as possible. Holmquist had spent his days on a ranch, Ericsson had been the son of a country storekeeper, Lane had led the care-free life of a wealthy New Yorker, and Dick the uneventful existence of a small Middle-Western city.

An incident which had occurred a few days before the session closed helped to cement this

comradeship and to give the quartette a name which was destined to stay with them on both sides of the Atlantic.

All the men in the school had been taken out for a final round with the shotguns over the traps, and the officer who had been totaling the score-sheets looked up from his computations with a good-natured smile.

“Holmquist is high gun with forty-eight out of fifty,” he said, “with Lane, Ericsson, and Allen bunched for second with forty-six. A distinct triumph for the ‘Four Musketeers’!”

And from that moment the “Four Musketeers” they became. The other men shouted it to them on the campus, and finally they adopted it for themselves, and even went to the length of assuming the names of Dumas’s famous four — Holmquist’s long legs branding him Porthos, Ericsson’s broad shoulders and slow speech making him a perfect Athos, Lane being very obviously Aramis, while Dick, in his own words, “had to be d’Artagnan, not because he was any great shakes at anything, but because there were n’t any other names left.”

A few days later, along with the rest of the men who had gone through the arduous work of the ground-school and satisfied their instructors that they would do, the Four Musketeers

stood about the station platform at Lakesville, waiting for the train that was to start them homeward for the brief leave which intervened between ground-school and the far more exciting beginning of actual flying-school.

All of them were just beginning to realize what a splendid experience they had passed through. The work had been so hard and constant, the strain of responsibility so heavy, the chances for sitting back and taking a general survey of their own activities so few and far between, that none of them had really appreciated before what they had actually accomplished.

Ted Lane voiced the sentiments of all four as he leaned against a pile of baggage and spoke his mind.

“You know,” he said with more earnestness than he usually exhibited in talking about anything, “all this has been great, really great! Why, I’ve really *done* more in these twelve weeks than in all the rest of my life! When I stop and think of the amount of time I’ve wasted and the number of useless things I’ve done since I was a kid, I’m ashamed of myself.

“And that does n’t mean just what I did before I took the air-tests either. Even after that I was something of a pup. I know after I passed the

tests I strutted around New York like a prize bull-pup! I must have made an awful spectacle of myself! I think I had an idea that after the officers had had one look at wonderful me, they'd stick me right into a plane, and that in three months' time I'd be back on Broadway, jingling with medals, covered with wounds that did n't really bother me, but were very becoming, and with about a million dead Germans to my credit! You can laugh, but that is n't as much exaggeration as it sounds. I was about that big a fool, and there are a whole lot more like me.

“But I want to go on record right here and now as saying that these twelve weeks have taught me just how big a thing the United States Army is, and what a miserable little worm is Theodore B. Lane, late of New York City! And yet I'm whole lot more of a man than I was fourteen weeks ago. I insist on that point, because I know now my real unimportance. And what's more, I'm really of some use. I have given up all my ideas of being a brilliant 'ace' and all that sort of thing. Probably I won't be good enough to fly. But at least I know enough about engines so that they can ship me to some place where they're patching up old planes, and I can get in and work with any steam-fitter or mechanic on earth! That's what gives me a new

sort of cockiness that's a whole lot better than the kind I've lost!"

"Good talk, that!" approved the lanky Holmquist, "and I want to add a word. The Four Musketeers must stick together. What?"

"Right!" agreed Ericsson.

"Right!" echoed Ted and Dick in the same breath.

"Then it's agreed," Holmquist said as they shook hands all around. "Chances are we'll have to go to different flying-schools. We aren't quite important enough yet to tell the War Department just where to send us and when to do it. It'll be some time yet before our wings are sprouted. But when they do, we fly together, eh?"

A chorus of hearty approval greeted him, cut short by the hoarse whistle of the approaching train, which was to take Holmquist and Dick away, while Lane and Ericsson waited for a later one bound north. There was another round of hearty hand-grips, then the tall Texan swung himself up the steps of a Pullman and waved his hand.

"The Four Musketeers separate," he shouted, "to reassemble somewhere in France!"

CHAPTER IX

SPROUTING WINGS

IN front of the steel hangars of the aviation field stood a row of waiting planes. All were of the "tractor" type used at the different training camps—that is, the wooden propeller was at the front of the craft instead of at the rear; all of them had just come, trued and tightened, from the competent hands of the mechanics, and had been inspected by the officers.

Groups of men, distinguished by close-fitting helmets and padded coats, began to cross the wide field toward the string of waiting aircraft. Other men stepped in front of the planes, seized and spun the big, two-bladed propellers, and instantly the powerful motors began to buzz and roar.

One of these helmeted figures, following close at the heels of an instructor, was Dick Allen.

It would be impossible to describe accurately his feelings as he strode across the dried grass of the field toward the line of waiting planes.

He knew that finally he was face to face with the supreme test for which he had been waiting all these months, which had hardly left his mind since the evening in Hamilton's rooms at college — he was actually going into the air!

Lieutenant Sidmore, the instructor who was to take Dick into the air for the first time, approached one of the machines, swept over it one glance that seemed to take in every detail, and turned to Dick.

“All right,” he said; “get in!”

At Sidmore's command Dick clambered swiftly to the front seat, settled himself in place, and buckled the life-belt which is as important to the aviator as the air-tube to the diver. The instructor delayed a few moments, talking to one of the soldier-mechanics, then climbed to his place and signaled. The propeller was spun, the motor burst into life, and the airplane began slowly to trundle its way across the field.

Now that the actual moment had come, it was not quite so bad as Dick had feared it would be. It was no longer a question of surrendering himself to unknown terrors. He knew pretty much what to expect. Day after day he had watched other planes in flight, he had talked with men who had been up, had heard them discuss their sensations, had even heard one man con-

fess that he too had always known a fear of high places.

But—and this thought tended to decrease the slight feeling of relief—he knew that Sidmore had a reputation for being merciless to beginners. It was the Lieutenant's belief that if a man couldn't stand all the dizzy tricks of an aeroplane on his first flight, he'd never do for a flyer, and that the thing might as well be proved on the first attempt.

The plane bumped across the rough ground, acting very much like an automobile, nosing this way and that as Sidmore sought and finally found the direction of the wind. This maneuvering along the ground was known, in the slang of the camp, as "taxi-ing," being designed as a final test of the motor and other parts before leaving the earth.

A bare minute of this (Sidmore always cut the preliminaries to a minimum), then the speed of the plane increased, it nosed up into the wind, the pilot pulled the "joy-stick" as the lever which operates the elevating-planes is called, and the machine took the air.

For the space of several seconds—which seemed a much longer time—Allen was a very sick man. He did not feel as though he were flying, but that the aeroplane hung stationary in

the air and that the earth was falling swiftly away from him. The first sensation was not one of nausea, but the old, blind, helpless terror of his nightmares, the feeling that he was at the mercy of empty space and that nothing on earth could save him. He sat limp in the seat, incapable of motion, but kept his wits sufficiently to realize that it was futile to call out, that Sidmore could hear nothing above the steady roar of the motor.

Like all the newer planes, Number Eight could climb without much loss of time, and the instructor went boring straight up at a sharp angle. Dick waited for fresh and worse sensations as their height increased, only to find that they did not come, and that the first horrible fear was diminishing. Being as yet no judge of altitude, he had no idea how high they were, but he could see that Number Eight was still climbing.

Sidmore climbed until he was well above three thousand feet—the altitude which is considered safe; that is, if anything goes wrong with the machine at such a height and it begins to fall, the chances are that the aviator will be able to regain control and make some sort of a landing instead of crashing helplessly down like a falling bird, as would probably happen if the trouble came at a lower level.

Once he had struck this safe level, he first put the plane on an even keel, then began coasting down a long, invisible slope through the air and shut off his motor. The sudden silence was as startling as an explosion would have been.

"How do you feel?" demanded Sidmore.

"All right," Dick answered faintly.

"Sick?"

"No, sir."

"Don't want to get out or go down or anything?"

"No, sir."

"All right. See how you like this!"

Number Eight's motor commenced again; the craft began to climb, straightened out, swung around in a long, sweeping turn, one wing rising, the other lowering as the pilot "banked," precisely as a cyclist or a skater leans his body in rounding a sharp turn, then suddenly lurched and shot sideways through the air.

But for his life-belt Dick was sure that he would have been flung out of his seat, even though he had been expecting exactly this move. Sidmore had gone into a "side-slip" by tipping the plane up so sharply that it was now slipping edgewise through the air.

Before Dick had more than caught his breath, they were skimming again on a level, then once

more climbing. Up, up, up, pointed the nose of the plane, then suddenly the visible world went quite crazy, the earth below shot overhead, vanished — and they were dropping! Sidmore had given him his second degree by whirling through one of the dreaded “loops.”

For the next few minutes, Lieutenant Philip Sidmore thoroughly lived up to the reputation which he enjoyed among the student-aviators of the great camp. There was absolutely nothing in the way of an aerial stunt which he did not make the whirring, twisting Number Eight perform. Loops, straight nose-dives, “tail spins,” “side-slips” — the whole bag of aviator’s tricks. He gave his passenger no chance to regain his self-control, but plunged him from one dizzy, breath-taking situation into another.

When Sidmore thought he had set Number Eight through its fanciest paces for a sufficient length of time, he coasted again, shutting off his engine.

“Had enough?” he demanded in a tone that carried no trace of pity.

It was a few seconds before the dizzy, half-unnerved figure in the other seat could answer, but finally the victim of these twentieth-century tortures found his voice.

“Not if you think I ought to stand more,” he

answered, summoning what shreds of spirit he had left.

“Oh, you haven’t had anywhere near enough,” Sidmore answered. “Been sick?”

Dick could see no point in lessening the truth.

“Sickest I ever was—or want to be!” he answered.

He thought he heard the Lieutenant chuckle. The next moment the motor was again in motion and they were boring to greater heights. Dick rallied his badly mauled nerves for another ordeal, but nothing happened for a time. The plane crept up for more than a thousand feet; then once more came that clear, intense silence. To Dick’s ears came very faintly the drone of another motor, and he caught a glimpse of another plane, lower down and a couple of miles away.

“Take the controls and run her,” ordered Sidmore.

For an instant Dick could not believe that he had understood aright. Of course he was perfectly familiar with the theory of controlling and driving a plane, but he had expected that he would fly many times with an instructor before being allowed to handle “the stick” himself.

As Dick’s fingers closed on the lever he felt as he had on the day when he fired his father’s

heavy shotgun for the first time. There was a thrill in it, a delight in doing the thing which hitherto he had always watched somebody else do.

Within a few seconds of the time Dick Allen took the controls of Number Eight, Sidmore knew that his pupil had passed the acid test which he had given. Dick's tendency was to do the right thing instead of the wrong one with rudder and elevators.

"Now you start taking her down," Sidmore called, shutting the motor off so that he could speak. "When I jerk the stick, you let me have her."

Dick began coming down in long, slow spirals. As he started, he began searching the earth for signs of the aviation-field. Since they had started into the air, he had hardly looked down, being altogether too completely occupied with his own bodily sensations. What he saw now as he looked down was a meaningless expanse of brown and green, slashed in places by the yellow-brown streaks of roads, the wriggling, silver lines of water-courses and the darker masses which he knew were towns. There was nothing to give him his bearings. He glanced at the compass, then at the altitude-gauge, and started down in what he guessed to be the right direction.

Never in his life had he tasted such a sense of complete mastery. He had driven motorcycles, autos, ice-boats, but never anything like this. He felt that he could send Number Eight anywhere, make it do anything; that the guiding force of the machine was not the roaring motor behind him, but his own will. His recent fears, the deadly sickness he had experienced during Sidmore's wild tumblings, were past and forgotten. It was with a distinct regret and unspoken protest that he felt the Lieutenant's commanding jerk on the stick and relinquished the controls.

In no time at all they were circling over the field, and under Sidmore's skillful hand they sloped down, swung along just above the earth, and finally came down as lightly and easily as a bird.

It happened that Number Eight finally stopped not many yards from a group of officers and cadets who were standing about another plane. Dick, still glowing from his recent experience, unbuckled his life-belt, climbed out of his seat, dropped to the ground—and then it happened!

No sooner was the solid earth under his feet than he became deadly sick. No unhappy voyager on his first passage of the English Channel was ever worse off! And even while he suffered,

Dick felt sure that he was completing his own ruin, that after such an exhibition his career as a flyer would be cut short.

When he finally recovered, he turned to see Sidmore grinning at him without much sympathy.

"Feel better now?" inquired the officer.

Dick could only stare at him with a woe-begone and despairing face, and the instructor was moved to pity.

"Oh, don't let a little thing like that worry you," he advised curtly. "Done it myself time and again. Anybody's likely to any time. I'll make a flyer out of you sure as spark-plugs!"

And Dick fairly staggered off toward his quarters, still rather shaky in the legs, but buoyed up by the most complete feeling of happiness that he had experienced in many months. The terrors of the old nightmares, of the long hours he had spent trying to walk the abandoned railroad trestle, were forgotten—he had learned to fly!

CHAPTER X

THE HOVERING SHADOW

IF the work at the ground-school had been exhausting, that at the flying-field was trying in another way. The cadets were kept at the same high tension: there was always a chance that flaws might appear in a man's work which meant the end of his service. They were subjected to even more rigorous drill and discipline. And there was now added the element of danger. From the instant a man buckled himself into his seat until he climbed out of the machine upon descending from the air, he was what insurance companies would call "a poor risk."

Hardly a day passed without accidents of some sort, most of them of a minor nature. The "boneyard," where were kept the smashed and injured planes, was always well stocked, the hospital always had a generous quota of injured men. And these accidents could not help having an effect upon the other men.

There were three of the "Four Musketeers" in the camp, Dick, Lane, and Ericsson, Holm-

quist having been stationed elsewhere, and the three were together a good deal of the time when off duty.

From the very first the burly Northerner and the slim product of Broadway had given promise of making two of the best flyers in camp. As different from each other as day and night, they had already attracted the attention of the other cadets and won the favorable comments of the officers. As might have been expected, Lane was daring, almost reckless, afraid of nothing, seemingly leaving everything to blind chance, and yet always coming through undamaged where other men might have crashed to a fall. Ericsson had been much slower to learn, never seemed to take chances of any sort, attempted nothing showy in his flying, and always got results. He could be depended upon to carry out orders.

"Our friend Athos," Ted said to Dick, "is going to win fame, you see if he does n't!"

The two men were returning, greasy and dusty, from the machine-gun range, and a plane which they recognized as Ericsson's had just taken the air.

"Athos," Ted went on, making use of the nickname Holmquist had conferred upon the Minnesotan, "is going to be a whale on recon-

naissance work. He always plays with a wide margin of safety, and he's got a mind like tracing-paper! Let him fly over a section of the front and he'd come back with a clear picture of it in his brain and never a shot fired at him."

They separated, Dick going to his quarters, while Ted turned toward the hangars where he was to go up. Dick had some free time and was loitering about, writing letters. After a time he went out to mail them at the nearest "Y" hut. On the way he met Ericsson. He was standing still in the middle of the road watching the evolutions of a plane which was a mere speck in the afternoon sky.

"He'll get one awful panning when he comes down!" Ericsson said.

"Who is it, Ted?" Dick asked.

"Of course! He's been doing stunts for the last ten minutes. He's crazy. The C. O. won't stand for all these stunts without orders. He'll get thirty days 'C. B,' if he doesn't get something worse!"

"You mean a fall?"

"Just that."

Dick shook his head.

"Ted's too lucky and too sure of himself," he said. "He'll be the last man in the world to fall."

“He may be lucky,” Ericsson answered soberly, “and he may have all the skill in the world, but you can’t defy the laws of nature and get away with it.”

Something made them stand and watch instead of going on, although there was nothing at all unusual about the sight of a plane looping and diving in the skies. While they watched, the plane went into a “tail-spin.”

“Bit low for that stuff,” muttered Ericsson.

An aeroplane, diving nose foremost toward the earth, frequently begins that strange motion which the airmen have dubbed “tail-spin.” In it the nose of the craft, being much the heavier end, swings in quite a circle, while the tail spins about in smaller circles. Owing to the position of the machine, the elevating-planes cease to exert their usual effect and become the rudder, so that the plane is temporarily out of control. If left to itself it will ordinarily straighten out into a direct “nose-dive,” and the pilot can then regain complete control. So a tail-spin, if it happens at a sufficient height, is nothing very serious, but if it starts at an altitude so low that the falling machine has no chance to straighten out, a crash is sure to follow.

Ericsson’s quick eye had noted the fact that Lane’s machine, Number Seventeen, was dan-

gerously low when the spin commenced. Their interest changed to concern as the spin continued and the craft shot earthward; then Ericsson turned to Dick with a face gone suddenly white.

“My Lord, Dick!” he exclaimed, “Ted’s falling! It’s got away from him!”

Without another word both men started running full speed for the field. Already automobiles filled with officers and men and a lumbering ambulance had started toward the point at which the tumbling plane had vanished. The two were in time to swing up on the rear end of a big truck, whose sinister business was to bring back the wreckage of the fallen plane—for nothing can be allowed to go to waste. Men on motor-cycles (every plane is, of course, watched while in the air for exactly this sort of accident) had already gone on ahead.

A swift drive of a couple of miles—which passed in complete silence—brought them to the edge of a field of corn on the side of a hill. Knots of khaki figures were moving about, and at the far side of the field there was a big huddle of them about a spot where one wing of the fallen plane stuck up into the air. The big ambulance was already bumping across the field toward them.

At the gate they met a cadet named Holmes

out of their own squadron. He was crying and made no attempt to hide the fact. He nodded when they put the dreaded question.

“Engine fell square on him,” he said shortly.

Dick and Ericsson went no farther, but turned around and started slowly back toward the field. Finally Ericsson broke the hard silence.

“Ted’s gone!” he said. “It’s hard to realize: you don’t think of his kind as going over. The ‘Four Musketeers’ are only three now, and he was the best of us. He would have done things, that man! Well, it just means that we three who are left have got to do that much more!”

CHAPTER XI

THE CLAWS OF THE EAGLES

HAD Ted Lane met his tragic fate under the ordinary conditions of civilian life, the occurrence would have continued for days the one topic of conversation; the men who had known him intimately would have been able to talk and think of little else. But the conditions were far from ordinary. The officers and men in the great aviation camp were just as much engrossed by the work which held them from dawn till dark every day as their companions in arms who were actually at the front. Danger, injuries, the sudden snuffing-out of men whom they had seen and talked with a few hours before—these things had become almost familiar happenings. They literally had no time to think about them.

With the passing of every day the work became more exacting, more important. The brood of war-eagles which had been hatched out under the watchful eyes of the officers, had learned to fly with help, were fast learning to

fly alone. The time had come for them to be taught the other matters which they would have to know before they were entirely ready for the work overseas. Merely keeping an aeroplane right side up in flight was by no means all that the cadets had to learn.

They had, first, to be just as thorough and efficient mechanics as the enlisted men who did not actually fly, and whose business it was to keep the machines in perfect running order.

Secondly, they had to learn the trick of picking out swiftly and unerringly significant details in the landscape hundreds or thousands of feet beneath them, identifying these landmarks on maps and so establishing their own positions. And closely coupled with this work was further and more detailed practice in aerial photography.

As the days passed and this man or that developed aptitude in any particular direction, his training became intensified along special lines. Some men were evidently fitted for handling the small, swift battle-planes; others showed marked ability in the way of reconnaissance work; still others seemed best adapted for duty in the huge, slower-moving planes designed for bombing. Some men were at their best (clear-headed, untroubled by nerves, untouched by "air sickness"), when the controls of the plane were actually in

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their hands, while others were uneasy when actually handling "the stick," but keen, observant, steady, when relieved of this responsibility. Very evidently the first class would make the best pilots, while the others would serve better as observers.

On more than one occasion Dick had accidents. Once, returning at night from a trial flight, his engine overheated. Glancing back over his shoulder he could see the glow of red-hot metal. For an instant fear gripped him, and his hand fairly stiffened on the controls. There was the danger that the engine might "freeze" — that is, become so thoroughly overheated as to stop running, leaving him helpless hundreds of feet in the air, with no choice but to make a landing in the darkness, where he might just as well land on the spire of a church as in an open field! On the other hand, he knew that much depended upon the success of the trial-trip. A certain task had been set him: he had been told to fly to a certain town, land, take the air again, and fly back, the round trip to be completed within a certain number of hours. If he landed now — even supposing that he could land safely on the black earth beneath him — it meant that he could not possibly get back to camp within his time allowance.

His hesitation was only momentary. He set his teeth grimly and flew for camp.

He kept his back to the red-hot metal, glowing sinister and threatening behind him, and bored his way through the darkness toward camp. And nothing had ever looked as good to him as the lights of the aviation field!

Later Dick had a rather unpleasant few minutes with the Commanding Officer. He had made his trip on schedule time, but he had brought back a motor that was worth little but a trip to the scrap-heap. Dick stood in front of the sharp-eyed, hard-faced, but eminently just Major and answered questions—questions which ten months earlier would have sounded like so much Greek.

There were just two possible explanations of the engine-trouble. Either Dick had made a mistake or the mechanic who had certified to the perfect running condition of the motor had made one.

“One or the other of you has made a mistake, a costly mistake,” the Major said crisply. “Fortunately, Allen, your record is peculiarly free from mistakes of this sort. That’s all. You may go.”

Dick saluted, then hesitated.

“Well, what is it?”

“If you please, sir,” Dick asked, “could I be relieved from duty to-morrow and put in the day overhauling that motor?”

He received the necessary permission, and the next day was grimy, greasy, but ultimately crowned with success. The trouble appeared to have been a cracked bearing. This might have been due to a flaw in the metal, might have been due to hasty and careless inspection on the part of a mechanic anxious to get through with a job. Dick happened to know the mechanic who was responsible—a man named Doughty who seemed a hard-working, conscientious chap. So Dick, little guessing how much hung on the decision, merely reported a flawed bearing, and the mechanic Doughty did not go “up on the carpet.” Neither, by the way, did Dick’s record lose anything through the occurrence.

He had other adventures, some of them amusing, some of them quite the opposite. But not until the eagles had commenced to use their claws, and the cadets had really entered upon the last stage of their training, did he have the adventure which was near to costing him his life, and which was destined to have strange connection with events which had gone before and others which were to follow.

CHAPTER XII

THE LONG ARM

By the spring following Dick's entrance as a cadet at the flying-school, the status of the men still in the various squadrons was pretty thoroughly established. At that late date there was little or no chance that a man would be thrown out. Not only were the men pretty well proved along general lines, but their skill for special work was well established.

Ericsson, for example, would be wasted if he were not put in a Spad or Nieuport battle-plane and set to dueling with the Fokkers above the fields of France. The big man from Minnesota was not a particularly daring or skillful flyer, though, as has been said, he was sure and steady, but he was a deadly shot. He had proved himself just as good with a Lewis machine-gun as with rifle, revolver, or shotgun.

In the ground-school the men had been given plenty of work on the machine-gun range, and there had been more of this in the flying-school.

Then they had been given work with the guns mounted on the planes. Instead of being mounted close to the seat of the pilot, the gun is mounted on the top of the plane. Moreover, it is lashed fast. When the aviator wants to shoot at anything he aims not his gun, but the plane itself!

At first this seems a most difficult performance, but experience has proved that much more rapid and accurate shooting can be done this way than from a gun mounted on an ordinary carriage, and capable of being elevated, depressed, and trained from side to side.

In all machines of the battle-plane order, the "tractor" type—that is, the plane having the propeller in front—prevails. Obviously if the machine-gun is back of the propeller, the stream of steel-jacketed bullets will have to pass through the whirling blades, and if their passage were not adjusted somehow, the wooden blades would soon be splintered, and the plane wrecked by its own gun-fire.

This danger has been done away with by what is known as "synchronizing the guns." This means that the whirling of the propeller and the fire of the gun are timed and mechanically controlled so that the stream of bullets passes through the whirling propeller without touching

a blade. The airman does n't have to give this matter a thought: it takes care of itself.

The first aerial target-shooting was done in a manner at once spectacular and effective. A number of toy balloons, similiar to those sold at fairs and circuses, but considerably larger, were released from the ground, and the cadets had gone after them with their rattling Lewises.

At first there had been a good deal of wild work, and a vast majority of the balloons had escaped undamaged. Indeed, some of the best flyers, and even men who had done well with the guns on the ground, had found it almost impossible to repeat their good work at this new game.

Not so Ericsson. Of course he did not hit every balloon, but his percentage of hits was much higher than that of any of the others, and sufficiently high to bring smiles of satisfaction to the faces of the older officers—and expressions of envy to those of some of the younger ones.

Following the balloon work came further practice of a far more exciting nature. In this work two planes were sent into the air at once. One of them carried the marksman; the other had attached to its tail paper streamers some two hundred feet in length. The target-carrying machine was the faster, and as it passed the other the pilot ripped off as many shots as he

could at the paper streamers before they were out of range.

Dick, who had proved a fair but by no means unusual shot, had been called upon for frequent service in the target machines. He rather liked the excitement and hazard of it when he knew who the man in the other plane was and had confidence in his shooting, but when some of the wild ones were at work it was anything but pleasant. Time after time he had heard the whine of their bullets above the roar of his motor, and on two or three occasions the wings of his plane had been struck.

It was on one of these flights that he had his first fall, followed by the strange events already mentioned.

He had gone up in a plane with another cadet named Clark, a somewhat erratic but pretty dependable flyer, who usually was most to be trusted when there was risky business afoot. The machine had dual controls, but Clark was doing the piloting, Dick's job being to keep an eye to the streamer-target, otherwise to be merely a passenger. And when two cadet-flyers are in the same machine, the rigid rule is that one man is to handle the controls, while the other is to keep his hands off them entirely.

The actual practice had been finished and

Clark had just announced that they'd go for a "bit of a joy-ride" before heading down to the field. There was nothing out of the way about this, and Dick settled back in his seat thoroughly to enjoy himself.

Presently, as Clark banked a little too sharply on a turn, Dick felt the peculiar slurring, dropping motion that told of a side-slip. He made an instinctive reach for the controls, then remembered that Clark was responsible, that his own interference would only make matters worse, and let them alone.

But it was very soon evident that it was n't a mere side-slip. Clark didn't recover control as soon or as completely as he should have done, and it was evident that he was n't going to. His attempts to pull up the plunging plane were futile. They weren't falling straight, but were zig-zagging down—and Dick saw that they were now a scant four hundred feet in the air!

The same glance, however, showed him that one thing was in their favor. They were going to fall: that was certain. But at least they were going to fall into water instead of onto land, for Dick saw beneath them the broad, shallow waters of a bayou over which he had flown many times, and whose brackish waters he had explored on a couple of swimming parties.

Clark kept his head, stuck to the controls, managed to keep the plane on its veering course and away from the deadly straight plunge, and finally slid it into the water at an angle, as one might slide the blade of a knife into a roll of butter.

There was a tremendous splash, a huge hissing of steam as the hot engine plunged into the water, a tearing, cracking, and snapping from the damaged wing, and a shock which gave both men a savage wrench, but, thanks to their lifebelts and the nature of the tumble, did nothing more serious. Within a few seconds both men were free and splashing about in the muddy water.

"Hurt?" called Clark.

"No," answered Dick. "Are you?"

"Not a scratch!" Clark said almost ruefully. "But, holy smoke, haven't I made junk of her?"

"You've pretty well done that," admitted Dick. "What happened?"

"You can search me!" Clark said soberly. "I've driven this boat no end of times, and never had her play this sort of trick on me before!"

He looked at the wreck thoughtfully.

"Can't we push her ashore?" he asked.



“ There was a tremendous splash ”



"Have a try," answered Dick; and they set to work.

It proved a fairly easy but rather lengthy task, as the plane was some hundreds of feet from shore, but in the course of time they ran it out on the beach. Then Clark began going over it inch by inch, strut by strut, screw by screw, Dick watching him.

"See here, Allen," he said finally. "The stick jams."

"It's the way she rests, is n't it?" Dick asked.

"No, the elevators are free enough. Of course that spill might have jammed it—might have done anything, for that matter—but I'll take my oath that the stick jammed just now when I tried to pull her up after she side-slipped!"

"Bothered you any before?"

"Never before to-day. I noticed a while back that it seemed sort of logy, but did n't think anything of it."

"Happen to know who had the last look at her—among the mechanics, I mean?"

"Doughty," answered Clark. "Why?"

"Well, that's queer," explained Dick, and related the affair of the cracked bearing.

"Queer business," admitted Clark when Dick had finished, "but Doughty's a harmless, in-offensive-looking fellow."

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“So was the chap named Beecher that I ran foul of in Chicago,” answered Dick, and told that story as well. “No use talking, Clark, those chaps have a mighty long arm, and they hide it mighty well!”

Clark sat for a time lost in thought while Dick waited. It was Clark’s affair: it was up to him to handle it.

“I hate to get laughed at worse than anything on earth,” Clark said finally, “and we stand a mighty good chance of getting just that if we go nosing into things. If we take this story—which may be just coincidence and guesswork—to Captain Blake or the Major—I wouldn’t consider any of the others—it’s likely to get out. What do you say if we do our own nosing?”

“And tell nobody?”

“Just that.”

“It’s up to you, Clark.”

“Then I say we’ll do it. Of course, if we take to prowling, some fool sentry may go crazy and blow a hole in us, but things are awful dull anyhow lately. What do you say?”

Dick hesitated an instant, then yielded.

“I’ll go you—in moderation,” he agreed, and they started on a hike for the nearest telephone.

At Dick's suggestion they did nothing at all rash, put themselves in no positions which they could not explain. Dick felt a little foolish about the whole business, a little inclined to wish that they had gone straight to the Major or Captain Blake with the tale of their suspicions. He knew how rigidly the planes were inspected, and how these inspections were checked, cross-checked, and carded. He knew, too, how well the machines were guarded in their hangars. It seemed impossible that any one could have tampered with one of them.

Then he remembered the affair of Beecher and Whitmore's warning speech afterward.

He was tempted to take Ericsson into his confidence, having great faith in his sober judgment, but he obeyed Clark literally and kept still.

At first they limited themselves to watching the mechanic Doughty, asking questions among the other men, finding nothing for their pains. There appeared to have been no other suspicious affairs, and it was impossible to find anything against Doughty. He was a skillful workman, and had been a good soldier before his transfer to aviation.

Dick was for giving up their efforts and forgetting their suspicions, but Clark was stubborn.

"Let's wait two or three days," he begged;

“If we don’t uncover anything by that time, I’m willing to admit we were wrong. I happen to know there’s a fresh shipment of machines coming in to-morrow or next day. If anything’s going to happen, there’s a chance for it. I’ve watched for three nights now.”

“The deuce you have!” exclaimed Dick. “Where?”

“Down by the hangars. It’s no trick to slip out of barracks and get back in. But I’m getting mighty short of sleep. Take the trick to-night, will you?”

Against his better judgment, Dick agreed, and about eleven o’clock that night he climbed out of bed, picked up his shoes, and slipped out of barracks without any trouble. Long experience had made him thoroughly familiar with the arrangement of posting the sentries and the times of relieving them. He had no trouble in making his way to the new steel hangars in which the partially unpacked parts of the new planes had been stored, and in concealing himself in a pile of packing-cases.

Then he spent nearly four hours in alternately calling himself a fool, starting at every shadow, and shivering in the chill night air. He made up his mind in advance to quit his useless vigil at three o’clock. At a quarter of three he decided

that the extra fifteen minutes were better spent in bed.

Before leaving he took one more look along the row of hangars, dim and ghostly in the faint light. He was just about to turn away and begin his cautious course back to the barracks, when he bit his lips to check an exclamation, and froze to immobility.

From the hangar nearest him—where no sentry should have been at that particular hour—a blacker shadow had for an instant detached itself, moved cautiously forward, and then vanished in the deep shadow thrown by the hangar!

CHAPTER XIII

THE MAN IN THE HANGAR

DICK's first impulse was to leave his place of concealment and rush forward, but he checked this instinctive movement and hesitated. He was unarmed, and would not have dared use weapons had he possessed them. He was without authority—indeed, until the case against the shadowy figure he had seen was proved, he was just as much an object of suspicion as Doughty—if the prowler was Doughty. He was out of barracks without permission, lurking about a part of the camp where he had no business without orders. A sentry would have been as much justified in firing upon him as he would upon the other man.

While these thoughts were tormenting him, Dick kept his eye upon the hangar, watching for the reappearance of the dark figure. He saw nothing, and the place continued so silent that he began to think that his eyes had played a trick on him and that he had really seen nothing. The chain of sentries was so close to him that

he could hear the tramping feet of two of them, and the clank of metal as one of the pacing figures shifted his rifle from one shoulder to the other.

At this moment there reached his ears the sound of a faint tapping inside the hangar, and he thought he saw the flash of an electric torch. At the same moment he decided upon his own course of action.

The faint tapping meant that the man was doing something to injure the planes, and Doughty was clever enough mechanic so that he could injure them seriously without leaving traces which would betray the fact. If it was n't Doughty, but some other man who had every right to be there, he could find out by edging closer, then waste no time in getting back to barracks.

Once his mind was made up he lost no time in putting his plan into execution. Keeping as much in the shadow as possible he began working his way forward toward the shadowy outlines of the hangar, pausing from time to time to assure himself that the man inside was still working, and that none of the sentries were close enough to be attracted by the slight sounds he was making.

The entire distance he had to cover was hardly

more than seventy-five feet, and he was already more than halfway across, keeping himself in the shadows and bending almost double, when his ear caught a new sound. He listened an instant, then muttered an exclamation of thankfulness that he had stopped frequently to listen instead of crossing the space between his hiding-place and the hangar in one rush.

Somewhere near him, invisible as yet in the darkness, but evidently coming nearer every second, a group of several men was moving toward him! The sound of their boots on the hard ground was distinctly audible, so distinct, in fact, that Dick had no difficulty in determining the direction from which they were approaching.

Flight, and that without waste of time, seemed to be the one course open to him, but, as he still hesitated and the sound of approaching footsteps was drawing steadily nearer, matters were taken out of his hands in startling fashion.

Either the sounds had reached the ears of the man in the hangar, or he had interrupted his own work at frequent intervals to listen. Now, almost without warning, a figure suddenly appeared, paused for an instant, then came straight toward him, breaking at once into a long-striding, noiseless run.

This time Dick did not take the time to weigh his own chances against the necessity of the moment. The fact that the man in the hangar was running away was a sufficient confession of guilt, and as the dark figure bore down on him, Dick dived for his legs as the defensive full-back plunges for the man with the ball in the open field.

Taken absolutely by surprise and unprepared for such an attack, the flying figure went down under the force of Dick's tackle as though he had been struck by a six-inch shell, and both of them fell so heavily that for a moment they lay without moving. But the captive, his nerves on edge from the dangerous business on which he had just been employed and the fear under which he had been working, let out a wild yell as Dick's arms closed round him — a yell that must have carried to every part of the camp in the stillness of the night.

Still somewhat dazed by his fall, Dick was conscious of being jerked to his feet, of the blinding flash of a light in his face, then sharp orders, and rough hands were pushing him off through the darkness.

His captors had assumed that both their prisoners were of the same stripe — they had seized both Doughty and himself!

"I say," he burst out, "what are you doing with me? It's the other man you want!"

"Always is," answered the man at his side. "If I were you I'd keep still. I guess you'll get plenty of chance to talk before long!"

Dick started to protest further, then stopped. At the moment the best thing for him to do was to take the soldier's advice and hold his tongue. He had the prospect of a night in the guard-house, no pleasant thing in itself, and to-morrow he would have to make explanations. But that would be easy enough. Clark would support his statements readily enough. And yet, a night in the guard-house — !

"Can't I speak to the Major or Captain Blake?" he asked eagerly.

"More 'n you'll want, to-morrow!" the man at his side promised grimly.

A walk of a few minutes brought them to the square building behind the high, closely strung, barbed-wire fence, above whose doorway burned a small light and in front of which, night and day, two sentries were always on guard.

As the little party — four soldiers, a sergeant, and the two prisoners — passed through the gate in the barbed wire and came into the circle of light cast by the single incandescent over the door, Dick glanced for the first time at his fel-

low prisoner, who had so far not made a sound. He could not repress an exclamation of mingled astonishment and horror.

For in the uncertain light he found himself staring, not at Doughty, the suspected mechanic, but at Clark!

CHAPTER XIV

UNDER SUSPICION

IT would be easier to imagine than to describe Dick Allen's sensations as he saw Clark's white, set face in the light at the door of the guard-house. He was thunderstruck at the discovery that it was Clark and not Doughty who had been at some black business in the dark interior of the hangar, but it was not this thought which drove the color from his own face and set in his heart a feeling of cold terror such as he had never before experienced.

Clark was the one person in camp who knew the real explanation of Dick's presence outside the hangar! It was on the perfect dovetailing of his own story with the one Clark would tell that he had depended for clearing himself. And now here was Clark with a spy's noose literally around his neck, and any story he might tell worse than worthless so far as any value it might have in clearing another man's actions of the suspicion of guilt!

Not for an instant could he doubt the deadly

seriousness of his predicament. His previous record, of course, would count in his favor. But, as far as that went, Clark's record was as good as his own! And yet, even in his own mind, there was no doubt of Clark's guilt. How, then, could he hope for belief in his innocence on the part of officers who knew little or nothing about him, and who would have as little pity for a spy as they would for a mad dog or a deadly snake?

To his great relief, he was left wholly to himself. He had feared that he and Clark might be put in the same room, and he had no wish to be forced to talk. He wanted first to do all the thinking possible. He realized that he was still very much in Clark's hands; that his plight would depend very largely on the story that Clark told when he was examined. He wished that he knew Clark better, knew him well enough to be more or less sure of the sort of part he would play, — whether he would be likely to try to drag an innocent man down with him, or go to the other extreme and take the whole burden of guilt upon himself.

He thought that previously he had known some pretty long hours, but never had any passed with such leaden slowness as those which dragged themselves along between the moment when the door of the narrow room was closed

behind him and that when the first streak of morning light showed itself through the tiny window above his head.

So it was with unspeakable relief that, before it was really broad daylight, he heard steps outside his door and the rattling of the lock. A moment later the door was flung wide, and a sergeant stood in the opening. Back of him Dick caught a glimpse of two soldiers with fixed bayonets.

"Come on!" the sergeant said shortly.

He was led out of the building, and into a closed motor-ambulance which stood just outside the wire. A single glance showed him that the street was almost empty; there were no observers of his shame. As he had expected, the ambulance drove directly and rapidly to Headquarters, and he was curtly ordered to get out.

Dick strode quickly across the few feet of plank sidewalk and into the familiar outer corridor of the Headquarters building. A door opened in front of him, and he passed through; the door closed behind him, and he stood stiffly at attention.

As he brought his heels sharply together and straightened his arms at his sides, Dick had just time for a hurried glance at the men in the room. There were only five: the burly Major

behind his flat-topped desk, Captain Blake's tall figure near one of the windows, the Judge Advocate, the Major's orderly, and in a camp-chair near the window, sitting so that Dick could not see his face, a slender man in civilian's clothes.

The Major's first question came like the lash of a whip.

"Why were you outside barracks last night, Allen?"

"I was watching the hangars, sir."

Dick's eyes never left the Major's face. He did not see the civilian near the window look up with a start of surprise at the sound of his voice.

"You weren't detailed to that duty?"

"No, sir."

The Major paused, moved an ink-bottle from one side of the desk to the other, then moved it back.

"This is not a court-martial," he said slowly. "That will come later. For reasons of my own, I am giving you, before witnesses, a chance to answer certain questions. You are not obliged to answer them. If you please, you may stand mute and face the regular court-martial which will be summoned later in the day."

He paused and looked up.

"I should prefer to answer your questions now, sir," Dick said quickly.

The Major looked at him sharply from under his bushy eyebrows. The keen gray eyes seemed to go through Dick's body and reach the wall behind him.

"Did Clark tell you to go to the hangars last night?" he asked suddenly.

The question took Dick by surprise, but fortunately he answered without that second's hesitation which would have been heavily against him.

"Yes, sir."

He was conscious that three of the men whose eyes were fixed on him betrayed their astonishment at his answer by slight starts of surprise, and he took a little courage from this fact. Evidently they had believed him innocent.

"You knew, then, that Clark was inside the hangars?"

"No, sir."

The Major rose from his seat.

"Do you realize, Allen, that you have contradicted yourself on the second question put you?"

"I know it sounds like one, sir, but it's exactly the truth."

Major Cameron, his hands clasped behind his back, walked the length of the room. The others waited.

"Are you aware of the charge under which you and Clark have been arrested?"

"I think so, sir."

The Major made a brusque movement with one hand, as though unable to understand Dick's answers.

"Would you like to give us your own version of last night's events?" he demanded.

"Very much, sir."

"Go ahead."

Dick began with the facts of the overheated motor, and went on until the moment when he crashed to the ground with his arms around Clark's legs, still supposing that it was Doughty he had captured.

Somehow he expected to be instantly believed, and it was with something of a shock that he finished and found Major Cameron and the others apparently unmoved by his narration. The other officers had not altered their positions, the man in civilian's clothes still sat by the window with one hand covering his face.

Major Cameron put a single question when he had finished.

"Have you talked with Clark since you were arrested?"

"No, sir."

"That's all!"

Major Cameron opened another door at the far end of the room and motioned Dick toward it. He stepped through and found himself in a small storeroom, having only the single door and a small window. The door was closed and locked behind him. He sat down on a stool, wondering why he had been put in there and not taken back to the guard-house.

Almost at once he heard the tramp of feet in the hall beyond the wall of the closet, and the thud of rifles being grounded. Then from the room he had just left came the sound of an opening and closing door. An instant later the Major resumed speaking, and another voice answered. Dick jumped. They had left him where he could overhear the questioning of Clark!

The Major asked only a couple of questions, then stopped speaking and another voice took up the examination. At the sound of this voice Dick had a feeling that it was wholly familiar, and yet he couldn't quite place it. It wasn't Captain Blake's, wasn't the Judge Advocate's; it must belong to the man in citizen's clothes. Dick felt that if he could have had a close look at the man he would surely have recognized him. He was certain that this was not the first time he had heard the voice.

From his uncomfortable seat in the little room,

he could hear a good deal of what went on. Not every word was distinct, but he caught enough to catch the general trend of the ordeal through which Clark was being put, and at first he could not make head or tail of it.

Clark seemed much less terrified and unsteady than might have been expected. His voice sounded firm and he answered the questions which were put to him without the slightest hesitation.

It was the nature of these questions which completely puzzled Dick. They did not seem to have anything to do with the events of the night before, or with anything which seemed connected with Clark's recent activities. They seemed peculiarly innocent, dealing with names, dates, and places which were so much Greek to Dick, indicating merely that the man who was asking the questions possessed a surprising familiarity with the details of Clark's past life. Finally the effects of this system made themselves apparent, for Clark broke out sharply:

"It's no good your going over all the ground! I'm not going to pretend I didn't do the thing!"

There succeeded that heavy, painful silence. Then suddenly the nature of the questions changed with an abruptness that must have

startled the man under fire even more completely than it did Dick.

"How did you and your companion happen to fall in such a peculiar way when trying to make your escape last night?" demanded the steady voice.

There was an instant's pause, and it seemed to Dick that his heart stopped beating, so much hung upon Clark's answer.

"The other man was n't my companion," Clark replied.

"You know who he was?"

"Yes, sir. I saw his face at the guard-house."

"Then how did it happen you were together?"

"He was watching the hangars."

"Watching them? Why?"

"Because I told him to."

"And yet you say he knew nothing?"

"I don't want to implicate Allen. I was making use of him to cover up my own tracks. It just happened that he suspected one of the mechanics. I pretended to agree with him."

"That's all!" said the other voice suddenly.

Again came the opening and closing of the door, the tramp of feet along the corridor, then the key was turned in the door of the storeroom, and an orderly motioned Dick to come out. He

walked out and stopped at attention in front of the Major's desk.

"You are a very fortunate man, Allen," the Major said gravely. "You are relieved from arrest, but will remain confined to your barracks until further orders."

He inclined his head slightly in dismissal. Dick saluted, turned on his heel, and started for the door. As he did so, his eyes encountered the face of the man in civilian's clothes. It was David Whitmore!

CHAPTER XV

SOUND ADVICE

DICK ALLEN and David Whitmore were seated on a pile of lumber in a far corner of the camp. In the air overhead half a dozen planes were soaring this way and that; a little distance away a company of men were at squad-drill, and across the dusty field lumbered and chugged one of the long trains of big motor-trucks which were forever coming and going.

Several days had passed since the black business by the hangars. The trial and conviction by court-martial of Cadet Clark had been finished with a speed and silence that would have been impossible under any but the rigid discipline of a military community. Most of the men in camp were entirely ignorant of exactly what Clark had done. They knew that he had committed some offense; that he had been expelled from the service; there was talk that he had gone to a federal prison. Dick, the only man in the camp who could have helped them, held his tongue.

David Whitmore had not left the camp immediately on the conclusion of the Clark case, but had remained for several days. This was the first time, however, that Dick had had a real chance to talk to him. Their intercourse, up to this point, had been limited to a brief hand-shake and a few curt words from Whitmore, more or less in the line of duty. Now, however, the former engineer was in a relaxed mood.

“This Clark business,” he said thoughtfully, knocking the ash from his cigar, “is the sort of thing that is hardest for us to combat. And it’s also the sort of thing that fills you with breathless wonder at the completeness of the German system of espionage. When you realize what they can do in this country now, with their attention so occupied on the other side, you can’t wonder that they knew everything that was going on in Europe for years before the war broke out.

“Now this young Clark, which is n’t his real name, but which will do, was a thoroughly fine chap,—good education, good instincts, all that sort of thing. And I don’t believe that when he first went into the service he was rotten at the core. But his people were Germans, and up to the time we went into the war, I suppose his sympathies were German.

“And when the pinch came, he couldn’t hold out. The grip of that military caste system was too strong for him. I don’t know exactly how or when those devils got hold of him, or just what promises they held out. But they poisoned his mind. They got behind his real intelligence and made him believe that he was doing the right thing. Think of that! He actually thought he was *right!*”

“Funny part of it is that the Beecher business, ’way back months ago, helped me with this case. When I was digging up the record and activities of this fellow Beecher, I discovered a little nest in Chicago. Fellow pretended to be a drawing-teacher—guess he could draw too. Chap himself slipped through our fingers and got into Mexico, but he left traces. We managed to run down seven of the men who had been in this drawing-class. They were everywhere. Evidently Beecher and Clark were the two told off for aviation service. Good thing it was Clark and not Beecher who got as far as he did.”

“Why?” Dick asked.

“Because,” explained Whitmore, “Beecher was a dangerous man and Clark wasn’t. He was poor timber for the sort of work he was trying to do. Too straight. Had a conscience and scruples. Beecher was n’t troubled that way.

I haven't forgiven him yet for that drugged cigar!

"If it had been Beecher instead of poor Clark down here in this camp, he'd have got results. Can't say just what they'd have been, but they wouldn't have been pretty, — dynamite under a barracks building or something of that sort. But Clark — ! His work was pitiful. He had no instinct for wrongdoing, no creative ability in the way of German devilishness. What few things he did to the new planes that night were perfectly harmless, and would have been discovered when the planes were set up. Any sort of a mechanic could have undone all his damage in an hour's time!"

He stopped and flung away the end of his cigar.

"You know," he said, "you're pretty lucky, Allen."

"I guess I am," agreed Dick.

"You bet you are! If any other agent than myself had been sent down here, there's a good chance you might be in a federal prison yet, and a long ways from clear of the charges against you. I knew you: another man wouldn't. In his eyes you and Clark would have been two of a kind. And we don't stop to ask questions. Can't. And on the surface this other chap's

record is as good as yours. It just happened I knew he was smirched with the Boche stain, and I'd have bet any money you were n't."

"I suppose," Dick said after a pause, "that all this business means I'll be gray-haired before I get a commission."

Whitmore grunted non-committally.

"May, may not," he answered tersely. "My advice to you is to forget anything and everything but your job. You're here to fly. All right, fly! If somebody else wants to get up in the middle of the night and hang posters of the Kaiser on all the buildings, you let 'em do it. Or if you happen to look out the window and see 'em doing it, you call the corporal of the guard, but don't try to stop the show yourself!

"Remember back in your hurdling days, each man ran between strings, didn't he? And if he switched over into the other man's string-marked path, there was a spill, and the fellow who got out of his own rut was disqualified, eh?"

"Yes," agreed Dick.

"That's your case. You keep between your own strings."

He stopped with the abruptness which Dick had learned to expect in him, glanced at his watch, and announced that he had to catch a train.

“You might drop me a line from Paris when you get across,” he said. “Some years since I’ve been there and I like the place.”

Dick laughed. “I guess I won’t need to brush up on my French for some time to come — after this,” he said.

Whitmore considered. “I’ve given you considerable advice,” he said. “First I told you to keep your eyes open, and you made the mistake of not telling the right people what you saw—or thought you saw. Now I’ve just told you to keep your own part of the track. Now I’ll add that if I were in your place I’d brush up my French. You never can tell!”

And before Dick realized it, his hand had been wrung and Whitmore’s slight figure was hurrying away.

CHAPTER XVI

THE SUMMONS

NOTHING could have been more uneventful than the two or three weeks following Whitmore's departure. Dick Allen lived up to both the letter and the spirit of the advice which had been given him. He gave himself wholly and completely to the work. Not that he had ever been at all inclined to shirk, but his recent experience had made him simply close his mind to all other considerations.

He did not do this because he believed that Whitmore had spoken truthfully about the chances of an early departure for France, but because he realized that he had made a mistake and was anxious to try to make up for it.

And then, out of a clear sky, the thing came! Late one afternoon five of the cadets were summoned to Headquarters. Besides Dick there were Dan Ericsson, Grayson, Long, and Thompson. They were told nothing except to pack their kits and be prepared to leave the camp on an instant's notice.

"What do you suppose it means?" Dick asked Dan after they had returned to barracks.

"France," Ericsson said shortly.

"Wish I could think so," Dick said. "What makes you so sure?"

"Several things. They've been shooting a lot of the fellows across to complete their training; been doing it ever since the first of the war. That's one thing. The other is the men they've chosen."

"Meaning what?"

"I'm not the man to blow my own horn," Ericsson said, "but why pretend not to know that I happen to be a better shot with a Lewis than anybody else? And if I'd been asked to pick four of the best men here, I'd have taken you and Grayson and Long and Thompson."

"All three of them can fly circles around me," Dick said.

"I know they can," agreed Dan with not very flattering readiness, "just as they can fly circles around me. But flying is n't everything. I can shoot and you can 'spot,' and we're neither of us bad flyers. So I say France."

"May be just a transfer to some other camp," Dick suggested.

"Sure it may! But I say France, and I'm willing to bet I'm right!"

Not twenty-four hours later the five men were again summoned, provided with railway transportation, and told to be ready in an hour's time when an ambulance would take them to the nearest city. And in the dim gray of an early spring twilight they found themselves packed into the big motor, coat-collars turned up against the chill wind, whirring over the still frozen roads toward the lights of the city which had twinkled in front of them.

The ambulance brought them into the station just in time to let them stretch their legs before climbing into the train, and a few minutes later they were flying eastward.

Dick and his companions experienced on board the train the same difficulty in traveling with comfort that he had already encountered. Passengers considered all men in uniform as fair game for unlimited conversation, and those whose insignia betrayed the fact that they were in the Aviation Corps seemed to excite even more the curiosity and interest of the traveling public.

Unfortunately, not all the passengers were alike. There were two or three of the unpleasant type, one man in particular. He was a short, florid man with a rather loud voice and a pair of protruding blue eyes. He had talked to first

one and then another of the men, but ended by approaching Dan Ericsson instead of Dick after having made life rather uncomfortable for the other three.

"Going to New York?" he began with that species of smile which men of his type seem to think makes friends without further effort.

"That direction," answered Dan, eying the other with a steadiness which should have warned him.

"Oh, what's the use of all this mystery?" demanded the man. "I guess there aren't any Germans in the car. When do you sail?"

"I don't know. Are we to sail?"

"Of course you are. You—"

"What business are you in?" Dan interrupted suddenly.

The man hesitated an instant.

"I sell boots and shoes," he answered in evident surprise.

"Whose?"

He named a little-known brand.

Then in quick succession Dan asked him what territory he covered, how he found business conditions, whether or not his firm had war-contracts, what house gave him the most competition. The man was not enjoying himself at all and showed it. Moreover, the other pas-

sengers were beginning to see Dan's game, and all other conversation had stopped while they listened.

"Just let me see your orders, will you?" Dan asked finally.

"My orders!" the man's fat cheeks fairly puffed out with surprise and anger. "Well, I guess not! You've got your nerve right with you, young man!"

"Good!" exclaimed Dan; "now I guess that we ought to understand each other. Your business is selling boots and shoes. Mine is serving the Government. I've no right whatever to see your order-sheets, and you, considering the fact that the country happens to be at war, have a whole lot less business trying to see mine. Do you get me?"

Dan disappeared immediately behind an open newspaper, while the fat traveling salesman, very red of face, went hastily into the smoking compartment and was no more seen that night.

Early the next morning the train rolled into the Grand Central Station at New York City, and the five cadets lost no time in reporting their arrival. All of them had expected a few days in which to "play about" New York, but they were told to hold themselves in readiness for departure at any moment.

Within twelve hours of their arrival in the metropolis, their orders came, and the quintette were on their way to a designated pier along the great water-front.

CHAPTER XVII

GOING OVER

TO the eye of a landsman, unused to the things of the sea, there is always something rather overwhelming about the appearance of a big ship. It looks big and majestic enough in the full light of day. At night, when outlines are dim and actual dimensions difficult to determine, a mere river steamer can take on the appearance of the hugest liner that ever floated. Add to this an almost complete absence of lights, a huge, moving mass of men in uniform, and a general air of rush and confusion, and the effect can be easily imagined.

Dick and the others were not required to go on board at once, and he had plenty of time to watch the operation of loading men and supplies. He found that a good many of his ideas of the transporting of troops had to be hastily revised.

A few blocks away from the slip, nobody would have guessed that a small army was being got aboard for the trip to Europe. Everything seemed to work with perfect smoothness. There

was inevitable crowding on the docks, some rushing about by anxious subalterns and orderlies with orders and lists, but even these things did not seem to interrupt the steady flow of brown-clad columns through the huge gates of the pier and up the inclines to the ship.

“You can talk all you please about German efficiency,” Herman Long said at Dick’s shoulder. “I wish von Hindenburg and some of his pets could have a look at this! Maybe they’d change their ideas about the American army being a joke.”

“They sure would!” Dick agreed heartily. “But, Herman, are these transports like the cars on the subway? Isn’t there any limit to the number of men you can get into one?”

“Not much limit with this boat,” Long answered, smiling, “except the number of men you want to get into her.”

“What ship is it — any idea? I didn’t know we had transports of such size.”

“We wouldn’t have, but for our good friend the Kaiser,” replied Long. “If I’m not mistaken, this is a present to Uncle Sam from Brother Bill!”

Seeing Dick’s look of amazement he went on to explain.

“It’s one of those big transatlantic German

liners that were interned in this country and later seized by the Government. And if this is the one I think it is, I'd rather cross in her than fly over in a captured Zeppelin. Had a real close look at her?"

"No," admitted Dick. "There was too much to see to hunt for details."

"Come over here and take a good squint," urged Herman. "It's worth seeing, and you can get a better look now than after we're on board."

Moving here and there about the crowded dock, they were able to get closer and clearer views of the great leviathan which was to take them through the submarine zone. Never until he began a close inspection under Long's direction had Dick realized what "camouflage" really meant.

As the vessel lay at the dock only a few yards away, it was difficult to tell where her outlines stopped and the gray night sky commenced. Her disguise did not stop with the mist-colored paint which would render her hard to see against a background of tumbling, changing water on any but a bright day. She had been provided with a false prow, so that both ends of the vessel looked much alike, and it was that much more difficult to determine the direction of her course

and the speed of her progress when viewing her from a distant shore or passing vessel. One of her four great stacks had been painted dead black, so that it loomed above her superstructure sharp and conspicuous, while the other three had been covered with daubs and streaks of neutral-tinted paint. In any but an excellent light, she would appear to have only a single funnel.

Often enough Dick had imagined what the departure of a shipload of American troops looked like. He had pictured a huge vessel, her rails lined with brown figures waving campaign hats, the docks jammed with a vast crowd of cheering people, flags flying, bands playing.

He had been on board the transport half an hour or so, getting acquainted with his surroundings, keeping himself out of the way of the hundreds of men who evidently were much busier than himself, and wishing that he were attached to some unit so that he would really have something to do. He had been conscious that for some minutes two or three sturdy sea-going tugs had been puffing steadily, but he had not thought what this meant, and he had set down to the steady tramp of feet the vibration of the decks. Not until Dan Ericsson laid a hand on his shoulder did he understand what had happened.

“Well, Dick, we’re off!” Dan said.

Dick started and glanced over the rail. Already the sky-line buildings of the great city had begun to move. Under the steady hauling of the tugs the ship had been warped out from the slip into the stream, and now her own great engines were in motion, and the huge propellers under her stern were churning the water.

There had been no crowd, no blaring bands, no waving flags. Few people in the sleeping city knew that nearly twenty thousand American troops had left the shores, and yet with that silence and swiftness which means real effectiveness almost an entire division had embarked and sailed. The voyage overseas had actually begun.

CHAPTER XVIII

“VIVENT LES AMÉRICAINS!”

THE progress of the great gray transport which carried the cadets to France was so swift, so sure, so silent, she had the ocean so entirely to herself, that after a day and a night on board, everybody stopped wondering about the possibility of attack from one of von Tirpitz's steel-sheathed sharks.

Even to men like Dick, who knew little of the ways of the sea and had no experience in gauging the speed of ships, it was evident that the transport was tearing through the water at a prodigious rate. It seemed that sheer speed alone was her surest defense.

But the speed was n't all. Here and there about the decks, placed where they could command the greatest possible sweep of waters, were slim, long-barreled, businesslike-looking naval guns, and night and day their blue-clad, white-hatted crews were near at hand. And every second, day and night, keen-eyed men perched in the lookouts were sweeping the waves in every direction for a sign of possible danger.

Dick and his companions were perhaps the idlest on board. The cadet flyer is a sort of hybrid—something between an officer and an enlisted man: he hasn't actually received his commission, but he is going to get it soon. Moreover, the five cadets were n't attached to any of the different units on board, so that there was no one in immediate authority over them to say do this, that, or the other thing.

This holiday atmosphere, however, was not destined to continue long. The five were marked down by the eagle eye of a colonel who knew that there were on board any number of regimental adjutants who could do with an extra clerk or two.

So, before they were many hours out of port, Dick found himself attached to a very pleasant but extremely busy Captain Norton, adjutant of an infantry regiment, who was doing an enormous amount of work in quarters which a civilian clerk would have thought too cramped for his waste-basket.

"Can't promise you much in the way of excitement, Mr. Allen," the Captain said pleasantly, looking up from a desk extemporized from a plank and a cask, "but I'll guarantee to keep your mind off your other troubles!"

And he was as good as his word for the day

and a half that he had Dick under his orders. After this, however, another commander, known as "Father Neptune," decided to take immediate charge of Dick and many hundreds of other landsmen on board. He did a thorough job of it by beating up a ripping, snorting storm that apparently tried to see if it could make the ocean stand up on edge. On a sea like this even the great transport began to imitate a bobbing cork, and Dick Allen was one of thousands who lost interest in everything but the state of their stomachs and the first sight of land.

Grayson and Dan Ericsson were the only two of the five cadets who were good sailors. They enjoyed the storm—or pretended to enjoy it—and took a vast amount of pleasure in watching the condition of their three unhappy companions, and of making fun of them—the seasick voyager having been the target for ridicule rather than sympathy since the beginning of the world.

"Did you know, Dan," Grayson asked in a tone loud enough so that the three victims would be sure to hear, "that there's a new test for aviators?"

"No," answered Dan. "What is it?"

"They call it the 'sea-test.' If a man misses more than two meals on the way across they make him a 'keewee'!"

Grayson made use of the slang word of the aviation camps, the keewee being an Australian bird which has wings, but doesn't fly, and the term being one of good-natured scorn applied by the flyers to the men in the non-flying branches of the service.

Herman Long raised his head at Grayson's speech.

"You can make all the fun of me you like," he announced, "but if you so much as mention anything to eat, I'm going to throw the nearest thing at you, even if it's a hand-grenade!"

Still rather pallid and wobbly when the storm finally ended, Dick took his unwilling way back to the crowded corner where Captain Norton toiled. The harassed adjutant took one look at his face and waved him aside.

"You get out on deck and fill yourself with air and any sunshine that may be lying around loose!" he ordered cheerfully. "I need help fast enough, but I want a man and not a ghost. Plenty of chaps who are fit to help out. You trot along."

So it happened that Dick was on deck instead of inside, literally obeying Norton's orders and filling himself with air and sunshine, when the one exciting incident of the voyage took place.

According to brief reports published about a

week later in the American papers, the great transport was attacked by one or more submarines while still some distance from the English coast. Some men on board claimed to have seen the submarine, but Dick was inclined to accept these claims with a large grain of salt.

The first intimation of anything amiss came with a sharp call from the lookout. Following this there had been some scurrying about of the figures on the bridge, and without haste, but with that easy swiftness born of long practice and a complete absence of waste motions, the various gun-crews had gone to their posts.

Some little excitement had attended the alarm as a matter of course. For there did exist the possibility that there actually was a U-boat in sight, and that it would manage to hit the transport with a torpedo.

Word of the threatening danger was passed swiftly to all parts of the ship, even as the monster engines far down in the giant craft were speeded up to their top notch. There were bugle-calls sounding everywhere, men off duty hurrying to their places, the crew going to "collision quarters" as on a warship, officers and N.C.O.'s looking to the passing out of the life belts that were always within reach at specified points.

There was not the slightest suggestion of panic, very little real excitement. An hour after the first alarm the entire incident was over, and the transport's wireless was sending out reassuring messages on the heels of the first announcements that she was attacked which had been sent broadcast over the seas, and flashing out in code to any friendly ships which might pick up her radios the location in which the "sub" had been sighted, and the direction in which it had been traveling when last seen.

Had Dick been awake during the night which followed, he would not have said afterwards that the shadowy submarine attack was the one exciting incident of the voyage, for near midnight the transport reached those waters which are combed and watched every hour of the day and night by the vessels of three navies.

From midnight until dawn the waters about the rushing gray mass were incessantly dotted with other swift-moving shapes, destroyers, trawlers, patrol-boats, cruisers, two or three grim dreadnaughts farther shoreward. There was a constant interchange of signals, lights winked out and vanished.

Yet all this went on in silence and with no diminishing of the gray ship's steady speed. She was being made welcome, assured that the last

miles of her long journey had been made safe as might be.

Of all this spectacle, however, Dick Allen saw nothing. He was making up arrears of sleep, lost during the storm, and knew nothing until roused by the blowing bugles and orderly confusion of swift preparations.

Here was a crowd of soldiers as large as a small city, packed into the compass of a single ship, yet now being prepared for disembarkation with little more confusion than as though two instead of twenty thousand men were to be taken ashore.

On such occasions every man had to have his place. The five cadets, even though attached to none of the units on board the vessel, were now under orders and given their definite place just as though they had been privates in a company of infantry or a battery of artillery, and were fortunate enough to be ordered ashore with the orderlies of the Headquarters staff. This brought them early on deck, and gave them an excellent chance to see the whole process of landing the troops.

When Dick first reached the deck he gave a sharp exclamation of surprise and delight. The transport had come in out of a gray and smoky dawn and come to anchor perhaps half a mile

from the shore. The morning mists had begun to rise and vanish, and in the clear light Dick looked across the rippling water at a stone quay and a quaint, unreal-looking coast town such as he had seen illustrating fairy tales, but never expected to see in real life. In the offing, seaward from the transport, several destroyers, a single swift cruiser, and a host of smaller craft moved about, while over the water between the transport and the shore launches and lighters, some empty, some packed with men in olive-drab uniforms, were already plying back and forth. It was a picture which stamped itself upon Dick's brain.

A few minutes later he had taken his place along with Dan and the others in one of the lighters, and was moving swiftly shoreward. As he looked back at the motionless transport he saw even more clearly than had been possible in the darkness of the docks in New York how much the great ship had been disguised. The mist-colored paint, the false bow, the queer coloring of the funnels, made her look like a ghost-ship, a phantom. Some of the smaller vessels beyond her, even though much farther away, looked far more distinct and real.

As the lighter drew in toward the stone quay, Dick saw that the latter was crowded with peo-

ple, for the most part women, children, and old men, and there was a steady chatter of shrill voices. Two gendarmes, in queer, old-fashioned uniforms that looked very strange alongside the businesslike brown of the Americans, were keeping the people from crowding too close to the edge.

It was all very pretty and amusing until the lighter came alongside the stone pier, then, as Dick and the others climbed up the worn steps, he realized that there was another and a different side to the scene.

The moment the brown-clad, steel-helmeted figures of the Americans began to move shoreward along the quay, the crowd rushed forward in spite of the efforts of the fussy little gendarmes to hold them back.

“Vivent les américains!” shouted the people.
“Vivent les américains!”

And then Dick realized that it was n't just excitement; that even the children were moved by something deeper and more serious than the thrill of a parade or spectacle. He saw women and girls run forward merely to touch the big soldiers from across the sea; old men, hats in hand, hobble out to put their shaking hands on the broad shoulders of the newcomers. Everywhere he saw the good people of the little sea-

port crying, and a closer look showed him that many of these weeping women wore the black which showed that they had lost sons or husbands or brothers in the war.

Here were these brave, patient, long-suffering people of France, who for four years had borne the heaviest burdens of the greatest war of all times. Their courage was unshaken, but their strength was passing; so many of their young men had fallen. And here from across the sea came these strong young men of another race, to take the places of the sons and fathers and brothers who had gone, to make sure of victory, the cause for which these people had fought so long.

A lump came into Dick's throat and he turned back toward the sea. Now the water was thickly dotted with the moving lighters, and from every one of them came the full-throated, heartening shouts of the packed brown figures.

"Dan," begged Dick, turning to Ericsson, "say something funny or punch me on the nose and make me mad or I'll be crying like a baby in another minute!"

The big Minnesotan turned, and immediately blew his nose with a huge racket, although Dick knew that Dan had n't the sign of a cold.

"I'd have done it myself in another minute!"

confessed Dan. "And just think of it, Dick, if we had n't happened to do the right thing when we were spun round in a swivel-chair, we 'd have missed all this!"

Dick nodded, glanced down at his feet, and smiled a little to himself. It was hard to realize, and yet that good brown earth under the soles of his army shoes was actually the soil of France!

CHAPTER XIX

CLIPPED WINGS

"THAT back," declared Dan Ericsson, nodding toward a far corner of the room, "looks mighty familiar to me, even if the uniform is strange!"

Dick Allen followed the direction of his companion's gesture. They had been sitting for nearly three hours in an inconspicuous corner of a big Parisian café, perfectly content to use their eyes and watch the absorbing sight.

They had been granted four days' leave and thrown pretty much on their own resources for spending it, for Grayson had gone to England while Long and Thompson had been sent to Italy. And while Dick and Dan both possessed some French, they found that the French of their college classrooms and that spoken by the inhabitants of Paris seemed to be two distinct languages.

They never tired of watching the uniforms, whose number and variety were endless. There were dozens of different French uniforms, all of them with the light blue predominating, the greenish uniforms of Italian officers, British

khaki, the olive-drab of Americans, here and there the khaki of the new Belgian service uniforms, or the rare sight of a lonely Serbian in a sort of olive-brown with a soft-crowned, brimless cap.

But it was to an even more conspicuous uniform which Dan had just called attention, one in which the protective color of modern warfare was wholly lacking. The uniform was dead black with scarlet trimmings, and a scarlet crown to the forage cap—the dress uniform of the French air service.

And as Dan had said, the back of the man who wore it did look familiar. The two Americans stared at him for an instant, then with one accord rose from their seats and sent a shout of "Bob!" across the intervening tables.

People at the surrounding tables turned to stare good-naturedly, and at the same time Bob Holmquist came striding toward them. A moment later he was seated between them, while they stared at the splendor of his garb with undisguised awe and envy. Bob observed this and grinned complacently.

"Gay bird, ain't I?" he demanded. "They let me look this way when I'm on leave in Paris, but on work days I'm a dirtier-looking specimen than ever any of us were back in the States."

"Tell us about it," insisted Dick.

"It's all told in one word — work," answered Holmquist. "These French, my sons, are all from Missouri. They've got to be shown! They haven't told me in so many words that they don't think I know any more about flying than any French baby you might pick out of a perambulator on the boulevards, but their actions indicate it. I have begun all over from the ground up."

"Then you haven't been doing any real flying?"

"A little, — just about one per cent of what I expected to have done by this time. But let me tell you, flying at the front and flying over the training-field are two mighty different things. Wait till you see some of the stunts these French flyers do.

"A while back the Government wanted some new planes tested. Two of the big French 'aces' were recuperating at a hospital back of the lines. One of them was asked to try out the new planes. He did, and took the other man up with him. They flew back over Paris, and then began to do stunts. The first thing they did was to dive at the taxis on the streets and scare the drivers and people along the streets into fits. I saw a man who witnessed the performance, and he swears

they did n't miss some of the machines by more than a few feet.

"Then they flew down to the Place de la Concorde, dropped down close to the ground and commenced turning 'figure eights' among the circle of statues.

"You'd have thought that was enough, but not for this pair! They flew on down to the Arc de Triomphe. It is n't wide enough to let a plane through, so what did these lunatics do but fly through it *edgewise!*"

"And what happened to 'em?" Dan asked.

"Oh, they were arrested and got a month's imprisonment," answered Bob, "but that just goes to show the sort these French flyers are.— Got your assignment yet?"

Dick answered that they had and named the city. Holmquist whistled.

"Then our real reunion is postponed for a while yet," he said. "In that case we're due to see all we can of Paris in three days' time, which is some order! Come on, let's get started!"

Under Bob's leadership they made the most of the three days which remained to them, and saw about as much of the war-time capital as it is possible to see in the time which they had at their disposal. Neither of the two newcomers, however, had eyes for famous buildings, streets,

or bridges. They were interested solely in the evidences and signs of war. French, English, and Belgian uniforms were not to them the old story which they had become to Holmquist, and they were as eager and full of questions as two small boys at a circus. Finally the Texan gave up trying to play guide.

"See here," he objected, "if you think I'm going to run my legs off showing you places while you follow me with your heads over your shoulders, you've got another guess! All you want to see is soldiers. You can do that just as well sitting down on any street-corner."

"What's that uniform, Bob?" Dick asked quickly, paying no attention to the other's outburst.

"French Colonials," Bob answered wearily, with a gesture of resignation.

"If it weren't that you had 'Yankee' written all over you," he added, laughing, "your curiosity would have had you arrested as German spies forty-eight hours ago!"

At noon of the fourth day they separated, Bob to return to his post at one of the Flying Corps posts along the front line, the others to go to one of the great schools in the south of France, far removed from the actual zone of hostilities.

They arrived late at night, and in the midst

of a cold, dismal rain, at a sleepy little station which seemed to be wholly military. A dripping sentry led them over a cobble-paved street to a long, low building where they were received by a young French lieutenant, who managed to be polite even though he was evidently half dead with fatigue.

“In the morning,” he promised, “you shall see Captain Poiret. Now it is too late for anything but bed.”

Captain Poiret, who was to be their commander for some weeks to come, proved to be anything but French in appearance when they came before him the next morning. He was short, square-built, slightly bald, and smooth-shaven, with a pale skin and blue eyes. He was courteous but brief, and finished the interview with the efficient haste of a busy man. Within an hour they had been assigned to their quarters, provided with uniforms, and had actually begun their work.

And for long, dreary weeks they knew nothing but work. The weather changed from the last fringe of winter to the beginnings of summer, yet they continued to spend their time at the monotonous grind of training. They found that Holmquist had not exaggerated: they were made to begin at the very beginning of flying training,

actually doing their first work in "grass-cutters," machines which were unable to lift themselves into the air, and following this with "taxi" and "hop" practice.

But even though they were actually being put to the same work which they had already done, they realized that this was really post-graduate training. For one thing, the men with whom they were working were a different class from the youngsters in the training-camps on the other side of the ocean. These men, about thirty in all, represented almost every one of the Allied nations. The majority of them were Frenchmen, but there were also English, Americans, Belgians, a couple of Russians, and one lone Montenegrin. Most of them were over twenty-five, had done considerable actual flying, and had seen service at some part or other of the front.

Late one April afternoon they returned to their quarters, grimy and oil-splashed from a long siege of repair work on planes which had been damaged in actual service, to find an orderly from Headquarters waiting for them.

"You are to report to Captain Poiret at once," he announced.

Dick looked at his grimy hands and uniform, then looked dubiously at Dan.

"How about it?" he asked.

"With Poiret 'at once' means just that and not five minutes later," answered Dan. "If we can beat that orderly back to Headquarters, it's that much in our favor."

So they started at once and reached Headquarters (the former residence of the village mayor) almost on the heels of the orderly who had summoned them. Captain Poiret, seated behind his desk, observed their appearance with a grim smile of satisfaction, and they knew at once that following Dan's "hunch" had not harmed them.

"I am glad to say," Poiret began with his usual directness, "that your work here has been wholly satisfactory, and that my reports to that effect, coupled with your records forwarded from the United States, have hastened your commissions. You will prepare to leave by the seven o'clock train this evening, and will report to Colonel Toussaud in Paris immediately after arriving."

Then he rose from the desk and, to the astonishment of the two men, cast aside his usual manner and talked to them in a most kindly and informal manner for several minutes before he dismissed them.

Once outside the door and on their way back

to their quarters Dan looked at his companion and grinned.

“Well, Lieutenant!” he said.

“Old top,” answered Dick, “we’re actually going to get into it!”

And, to the open-eyed amazement of the villagers who saw them, the pair proceeded to sprint all the way back to quarters.

CHAPTER XX

THE NIGHT-RAIDER

HAD Dick Allen gone straight to the front after landing in France, he would have been disappointed at not getting into action within a few hours. But the long weeks at the French training-school had prepared him for further delays. Even though he had now been commissioned, and received the salutes of men who a few days before had been his equals, he was still a good deal of a novice in the eyes of the veteran flyers of the squadron.

Their quarters lay in territory which had been fought over. Headquarters was located in a country house whose walls bore marks of battle, and whose grounds were still pock-marked with shell-craters; the flying-field had across its center the line of an old trench, and the quarters of the men were in a village a third of which had been shattered by Krupp shells.

The proximity to the front made Dick feel for the first time that he had an actual part in the war. He had become so thoroughly accustomed

to the sight of planes that he was much more likely to glance at a motor-cycle whizzing along one of the white roads than at an aircraft buzzing overhead. Now, however, he glanced up at the first sound of a motor, to see whether the plane were a friend or a foe. The planes which he saw rise from the field at all hours of the day were not merely going out for trial spins, but for real collision with the enemy, and the men with whom he was thrown in daily contact brought back tales of thrilling duels hundreds of feet above ground, swift forays into the heart of hostile territory, precious bits of information as to new dispositions of the enemy's forces, which, translated by the busy minds at Headquarters, warned the Allies where the next blow might fall.

It was little more than ten miles (only a few minutes' rush for a plane) from the ruined village to the nearest point in the trench-area. Artillery fire, and sometimes, when the wind was right, rifle fire as well, was nearly always audible. The road running through the village was one of the main arteries for traffic, and over it, day and night, moved a varied stream. Now it was fresh regiments (mostly French, sometimes British) moving up to take over a section of trenches; now regiments relieved from duty, dog-tired, covered

with mud, coming back for the welcome period in rest-billets; now batteries of guns; occasionally long strings of ambulances with their grisly burdens; and with welcome and increasing frequency batches and swarms of German prisoners convoyed by blue-clad French cavalymen, carbine on hip.

The last few days had been peculiarly quiet, both in the air and on the ground. Just before he and Dan reached the village, matters had been lively enough, and there had been raids and counter-raids; the squadron had lost heavily in men and machines, and its strength had had to be recruited. Since then, however, there had been deadly quiet. The German Fokkers kept pretty well to their own lines, contenting themselves with defensive tactics, and on the ground the same conditions held good. Either Brother Boche was preparing something and keeping it thoroughly under cover, or his inactivity was real and he was busy at some other point in the long line.

Nevertheless Dick could not keep away from Headquarters. Even with time to spend as he pleased, he went back to the very spot where duty would have called him. Headquarters was the very center of the nervous-system which watched the German lines. If anything should

happen, word of it would come in through one of the various channels of information almost as soon as it occurred, and Dick could not bear the thought of missing anything.

In the outer room at Headquarters (once the music-room, and still distinguished by a grand piano which certainly saw more service and was more completely out of tune than ever it had been in the days before the war) he found three or four of his brother flyers gathered about a chessboard on which two of them were battling as though nothing but the struggle of the wooden pieces was of the slightest importance.

One of the players had just called "check" in a tone of triumph which indicated that he expected to follow it ere long with the cry of "mate," when the door of the inner office opened and Colonel Farle, commander of the squadron, appeared. Instantly every man was on his feet, standing stiffly at attention.

"Merton," snapped the Colonel, "order all the planes run out. Every man is to hold himself in readiness for instant duty. Lassel, see to it that every man in quarters is in readiness, whether on duty or not. Allen, you will accompany Captain Godard in Number Twelve!"

Dick caught his breath sharply. Godard! He was to fly with Godard, the "ace" who wore

no fewer than three medals on his tunic, who had once brought down four German planes within twenty-five minutes, who had destroyed a supply-train single-handed, whose name was a byword for the most intrepid daring!

The American glanced at Godard and saw a slight frown cross his face at the words of the Colonel, but Godard's face cleared instantly, and he turned to Dick with a pleasant smile.

"Suppose we have a look at Number Twelve," he suggested, when they had left the room. "I have n't flown her much, but I believe she has the reputation of being a rather cranky beast."

Like every other man in the squadron, Dick was already thoroughly familiar with the history of Number Twelve. The machine was something of a freak — and incidentally the apple of Colonel Farle's warlike eye.

The machine itself was half battle-plane, half reconnaissance machine, neither as fast as the one nor as heavy as the other. She was considerably larger than a Nieuport with a greater spread of wing, carrying an unusual armament and special engines. She had dual controls and carried two guns instead of one. One of these guns was a Lewis of the ordinary type, the second a heavier gun which did not fire so rapidly, but which could strike a heavier blow.

“And that,” declared Godard, who had been talking of the plane as he and Dick walked toward the hangars, “makes me pretty sure what we’re in for.”

“And that is — ?” Dick asked.

“Zepps!”

“It’s the Colonel’s theory,” the Frenchman continued as they approached the flying-field, “that in fighting Zeppelins one heavy blow is worth a dozen sharp taps. Personally, I’m not sure. Those big dirigibles have been brought down by the ordinary aircraft guns, and a machine carrying a heavier one must be slower, and handicapped just that much in consequence.”

They found the flying-field a scene of lively activity. Fourteen planes had been wheeled out and stood in a line in front of the hangars as though on dress-parade. Many of the motors were running, and groups of mechanics and flyers were about all the machines.

Godard spent a few minutes talking to the mechanics, then went over himself every strut, spar, and rod of the machine, bent his head to listen to the steady roar of the powerful motor, tested the feeds, looked at the various gauges and instruments on the dash, glanced at the two guns, tested the wing-lights, and nodded shortly.

“Fit,” he said briefly.

“Best shape she’s ever been in, *mon capitaine*,” the soldier-mechanic answered confidently.

After a moment more spent in sharp-eyed inspection of his mount, Godard turned away.

“Best dress for the air,” he suggested, “then drop back to Headquarters as soon as you can. I’ve an idea the Colonel may have something to say about what to-night holds in store for us.”

Half an hour later, clad in his flying-togs, Dick Allen was again in the outer room at Headquarters. The place presented an altered appearance. The chessboard and men had vanished, all of the flyers in the room were dressed for the air, and the laughter and good-natured chaffing of the earlier afternoon had given place to serious faces and low-voiced speculation on the night’s work.

As Godard had predicted, Colonel Farle had a few words to say to his men. It was Zeppelins! Scouting-planes at another point in the line had observed several of the great dirigibles ready for flight and apparently waiting for the darkness which was their greatest protection. There was no telling exactly where they would strike, although Paris was the probable objective. It was the duty of the squadron—as well as that of all the other posts along the front—to patrol

the air all night, watching for the raiders' appearance and ready to strike.

"And now," Godard said as they left the room, "for a few hours' sleep!"

"Sleep!" exclaimed Dick, staring at his companion in amazement.

Godard smiled. "You'll get used to it," he prophesied, "even though now it probably seems to you that sleep is the one thing in the world perfectly impossible. I've learned to curl up like a dog and sleep whenever I've nothing else to do. It's the best way in the world to keep fit. Well, go and rest, anyhow. Tell your orderly to call you in plenty of time. We shan't take the air before seven at the earliest."

Dick went back to his quarters, flung himself on his cot, and tried to sleep. Useless! He would have been glad of Dan's presence, but the big Minnesotan was on duty elsewhere. He tried to read, tried to write letters, tried to think of everything on earth except what lay before him, and finally succeeded in so tiring his brain that he actually fell asleep from sheer mental weariness, in spite of the tightness of his nerves.

The next thing he knew his orderly was shaking him by the shoulder.

"Half-past six, *mon lieutenant*," he announced cheerfully.

CHAPTER XXI

NUMBER TWELVE

DICK found Godard already at the hangar, joking with his companions while he adjusted the straps of his leather helmet. It was rapidly growing dark and there was no time to be lost. As Dick arrived, two of the wasp-like battle-planes roared up into the air, and three more sailed off while he and Godard were seating themselves in Number Twelve.

Godard took the front seat and the controls and would handle the heavy gun which fired through the propeller. Dick's weapon, an ordinary Lewis, was so mounted that it could be fired laterally, but not straight ahead, as the stream of bullets would infallibly hit the whirling blades of the propeller, to say nothing of flying dangerously close to the head of the man in the front seat.

The two-seater was fitted with two devices for communication between the two members of its crew, so that they could talk to each other even while the motor was running. A light cord,

which could be broken in case of need, was tied to each man's wrist, and a flexible speaking-tube, the openings close to the men's heads, stretched between them.

It was a few minutes before eight o'clock when Godard raised his hand above his head, the mechanics stepped back, and the two-seater sped across the field and up into the air.

The Captain began reaching for a high altitude before getting any distance at all. Even before they were actually over the front he had put Number Twelve up five thousand feet, and was still climbing. This was to be expected, as it was highly probable that cruising Zeppelins would stay up somewhere around eight or nine thousand feet, at least until reaching the neighborhood of their objective.

"Ever seen a Zepp in the air?" Godard called back through the tube.

"No."

"Then don't be looking for anything very big. Unless we're pretty close, they'll look small enough."

For the time being, Dick had no duties except to use his eyes. As soon as they reached the front, Godard began flying along the line of the trenches, occasionally winking a signal earthward so that no French batteries of anti-aircraft

guns should start firing at the sound of his motor.

An hour passed, during which they covered thirty or forty miles of front without seeing anything suspicious. They passed over some areas where night operations were in progress, and the spectacle was wonderful. They could see the red glare of the guns, the fiery blasts of the exploding shells, the flaring light of rockets and star-shells. Whenever they passed over one of these areas, Godard shot up to still loftier altitudes and switched off all his lights.

"Looks as though the information is good," he said, "and that Zepps are coming across. All these little rows at different points are probably just designed to confuse us as to their real course."

It was nearly ten o'clock, and Godard had been working north for several minutes, when he swung around sharply and headed southwest.

"We'll edge in toward Paris," he called. "Never find anything here in the dark, and the searchlights will be in full play over the capital."

Even in a machine as comparatively slow as was Number Twelve, they could make nothing of the distance in a straight line which lay between them and Paris. Not more than twenty minutes had passed when they saw the first

flickerings of a spectacle even more awesome than the artillery actions they had flown over earlier in the night. Paris, warned of the approaching danger, was on guard. From every part of the great city batteries of huge searchlights were sweeping the skies. It was of course impossible to keep so huge a target hidden from the eyes of the raiders, and the city's best defense was to keep all the sky overhead brightly lighted that the Zeppelins might be illuminated as soon as they appeared, and the gunners of the anti-aircraft batteries given a fair mark for their shells. Great fingers of light were raking the dark skies in every direction, and aeroplanes were darting this way and that like so many fireflies.

Godard did not fly directly over the city, but swung wide in a half-circle and then came spinning in toward Paris from the southwest. Dick was a little surprised at such a maneuver: the obvious thing seemed to be to place themselves between the city and the German lines. A moment later the Captain's voice reached him in explanation.

"I've an idea they may swing in from this side. If they should strike from the rear, they'd probably go undiscovered for longer, and it would give them that much more time to drop bombs."

For some time they cruised this way and that, but all to no avail. The searchlights and the darting French planes seemed to have the air to themselves: there were no signs of the raiders. Then, far off in the general direction of Rheims, they saw the sky suddenly lighted up, evidently by the combined effects of artillery fire, flares, and searchlights. Godard shut off the motor and coasted. A faint, steady thunder of firing reached their ears. Number Twelve's engines at once resumed their steady beat, and she began to climb.

"That looks like business!" cried the pilot.

Driving straight toward this scene of activity, both men searched the darkness and the faintly lighted, drifting clouds of smoke for a sign of the raiders. Now indeed they had to climb, for the curving arcs and bursting shells showed that all over the country-side batteries of French guns were firing into the air, and a friendly shell was just as fatal as one from a hostile gun!

"They're certainly shooting *at* something!" Dick called through the tube.

"Probably sighted one and lost it again," answered the Captain.

Then, much closer to them, they saw a swarm of twinkling lights, almost at their own level. It looked precisely, Dick thought, like fireflies

moving over a marsh, but he knew at once what the sight meant. One of the raiders had evidently been seen. French planes had darted upon it from all sides, the German had eluded them—being always able to rise much more rapidly than the heavier-than-air machines could follow—and the airmen were now hunting around for the vanished foe like eager hounds which have temporarily lost the scent of the fox.

Dick expected his pilot to bore straight in and join this feverish hunt, but Godard, as always, preferred to play a lone hand. He evidently reasoned that the Zeppelin, if it had been attacked and had escaped, had got clear by rising and then driving straight on toward its goal, so he set his engines to their greatest speed, simultaneously climbing and heading back toward Paris.

Godard had now extinguished all his lights, even the ordinary red and green lights carried on the wings. This greatly increased the chance of possible collision with other planes, but at the same time it made Number Twelve's course through the air much more nearly invisible to the crew of the Zeppelin, which might be anywhere. Only the exhaust from her motor would betray her presence. Once or twice the motor was shut off and both men strained their ears, but in vain. The Zeppelin was undoubtedly moving

with engines muffled, in which case the only sound she made would be the hum of her propellers, and this would hardly be audible above the dull roar of distant firing and the sound of airplane motors on all sides of them. Obviously, they would have to trust to their eyes.

And yet, when the thing came, it was rather through an inexplicable sixth sense. Dick did not actually see the vast shape, and yet, just at the instant that Godard tugged swiftly on the wristcord, Dick felt that the thing was there! He even realized more than this: he understood Godard's purpose. The Zeppelin was so close, so completely at their mercy, that the "ace" was not trusting to the heavy gun mounted behind Number Twelve's spinning propeller; he was going to make sure of his antagonist by ramming her, deliberately plunging to destruction to bring down the huge foe with him!

There was hardly time for Dick's brain to record the impression of what was coming, no time at all for fright or horror, nothing but a swift, choking catch of the breath, then silence as the motor stopped and Number Twelve, lowering her nose, swooped down precisely as a hawk folds its wings and strikes.

In the few seconds of silence Dick caught the hum of vast spinning propellers, felt rather

than saw a huge shape that seemed no more than a solid section of the surrounding darkness. It was in front of them, then suddenly vanished. A huge gust of air made the plane heel over and slur off to the side, then out of the darkness one of the Zeppelin's guns spat at them spitefully.

Godard had missed his stroke! The raider had risen just in time, so that the darting plane had flashed underneath, a scant few feet beneath the tail of the towering monster!

Godard did not lose an instant. He wrenched at his controls with a violence which threatened destruction to the plane. His next move was again more like the instinctive action of a fighting bird than a human being. He knew that the great dirigible was above him, that he could not regain the advantage of the upper position. The Zeppelin had evaded his ramming thrust, but was not yet beyond the reach of the wicked weapon whose breech was under his hand.

Even while Number Twelve was still quivering from the strain which her sudden shift from a side-slip to a straight climb had put upon her, Godard began to shoot.

Never before or afterward was Dick Allen to witness such shooting. It was not like the deadly, calculating accuracy he had seen Dan

Ericsson exhibit in the tests. Godard's target was invisible, the range unknown, the luminous sights of the gun of no use whatsoever. Again it was a case of instinct. The Frenchman's mind, working like lightning, grasped instantly several different factors—the probable speed with which the Zeppelin had climbed, the question of whether she had continued to climb straight up or had struck off at a tangent, his own speed, the distance ahead of his flying mark that he would have to shoot.

“Bang! bang! bang! bang!” the reports of the heavy gun ripped out steadily, far slower than the swift Lewis, yet sending their shells almost on each other's heels.

The American found himself almost unconsciously counting the sharp reports,—

“— nine — ten — eleven — twel —”

Then out of the blackness above and ahead of them came a single sharp flash, a pause, and then a bursting, roaring mass of flame that seemed to engulf them as thousands of cubic feet of gas were ignited.

Dick saw for an instant the vast bulk of the wounded Zeppelin—the torn envelope, the flaming gas, the tilting cars, even the flashing guns as the men of the crew stuck to their posts to the end; then Number Twelve, struck by the

force of the explosion as by a sudden gust of wind, heeled over, and fell off to one side in a prodigious side-slip.

They must have fallen some hundreds of feet before Godard regained control. Once he had done so, however, he turned back to the night's work as coolly as though the destruction of a great Zeppelin was the merest trifle.

"One!" he called back through the tube to Dick, and turned Number Twelve's nose once more toward Paris.

CHAPTER XXII

THE SAUSAGES

“ACCORDING to reports just brought in,” explained Colonel Farle, putting the point of his pencil on a section of large-scale map which he had just spread out on the top of his desk, “the Germans have established, at some distance behind their lines, a recently arrived battery of guns of large caliber. These guns have been located. At the moment, however, there are not available at this point any guns sufficiently heavy to meet these German pieces on even terms. Temporarily, we shall have to content ourselves with making these guns as nearly harmless as possible.

“Somewhere between these two points”—his pencil indicated a village and a wood perhaps four or five miles apart—“are located the captive balloons from which the spotting and range-correcting for these guns is done. There is no telling the hour of the day at which these guns will be in action and their observation-balloons in the air. This makes any attempt to destroy the balloons that much more difficult—and yet

they must be destroyed within twenty-four hours!"

He paused and glanced up. Lieutenants Allen and Ericsson, standing before the desk, their eyes following his finger upon the map, met his glance and nodded.

"Yes, sir," they said together.

"I need hardly add," continued the Colonel, "that while they are in the air these balloons are heavily guarded by the enemy's combat-planes. The obvious method of destroying them is an attack in force, which is almost certain to fail, because the enemy would have ample time in which to draw down the balloons. A surprise attack seems the one method likely to succeed.

"Beginning to-day, we shall attack those 'sausages' every day until they are destroyed. The plan will be this: between certain hours the entire force of the squadron will be held in readiness for this work. Upon the receipt of information that the balloons are in sight, the entire strength of the squadron, with the exception of your two planes, will make a demonstration in force, designed to draw off the combat-planes guarding the balloons. Immediately following the departure of the rest of the squadron, you will endeavor, by following some indirect course, to reach and destroy the balloons."

Again the Colonel paused and stared thoughtfully at his map.

“The first attempt, I think,” he continued, “will be more likely to succeed than subsequent attempts, because the enemy’s suspicions will not yet be aroused. I have said that the balloons should be destroyed within twenty-four hours. I wish to repeat this statement, and to urge you to the greatest possible efforts upon your first attempt. Furthermore, please remember that the object of your expedition is the destruction of the balloons, and not the fighting of air-duels with hostile planes. These may be necessary, but they are not to be sought, and to be avoided if possible.

“And finally, I need not remind you that in the eyes of the army the destruction of your two planes is of infinitely less consequence than the continued presence in the air of those observation-balloons! I have no suggestions as to the details of your attempt. You will see to it at once that your planes are in readiness. That is all!”

Allen and Ericsson walked slowly down toward the hangars, discussing their plans. This was the first case in which the two Americans had been given absolutely independent commands, and they were correspondingly

elated. Dan made no bones of putting the devising of a scheme of attack wholly in Dick's hands.

"Your head's worth two of mine for such a job," he admitted frankly. "Got it thought out yet?"

"Only along general lines," answered Dick. "As the Colonel said just now, a surprise attack is the only one which has the slightest chance of succeeding. There's a chance that we might be able to just rush through and put the balloons out of business, but I don't think it's better than a one-to-five shot. So I say go in as low as possible."

"Just how low do you mean?" he asked.

Dan blinked with surprise.

"Right down over the tops of the trees and the heads of the men in the trenches!" Dick said eagerly. "We'll be gone before the men who have a shot at us realize that they've had it, and if we can spot those balloons well enough so we can fly to them on a straight line, I believe we can turn the trick through sheer speed!"

They went down to the hangars, took out the two battle-planes assigned to them—tiny Nieuports with extremely small wing surface and powerful engines, tricky to handle, but capable of great speed—and rose into the air for short

flights, diving and darting about to make sure of the mechanical fitness of the craft.

The short test-spins finished, the two men returned to Headquarters, where they waited for word that the "sausages" were in the air to be sent in from one of the scout planes by wireless.

One o'clock came, two o'clock, three o'clock. Reports of all sorts came in, but not the word for which they were waiting. By a quarter of four they had about given up hope, but just at that moment an orderly came out of the inner office with a hastily scrawled transcription of a wireless message, and handed it to Dick.

"Balloons rose, 3.26 P.M.," the message read, and then followed a jumble of figures, seemingly meaningless, but actually giving the exact location of the balloons on the staff maps carried by all the men.

"That's all we want to know," Dick said, stuffing the message into a pocket of his leather coat. "We've got three hours of daylight, which ought to be more than enough. Come on!"

Less than ten minutes later the engines of the two Nieuports roared, and the pair went aloft, Dick leading, Dan following at an interval of some two hundred yards.

At almost the same time ten other planes rose

from the field, and veered off in the other direction to make the demonstration which might draw off the watchful Fokkers. There was a hurried waving of gloved hands from plane to plane as they went aloft, then Dick and his companion were alone, and the desperate game was on!

CHAPTER XXIII

THE LONG CHANCE

THE balloons, according to the information which had been received, were located in the Aisne valley between Neufchâtel and Bourgogne. It was Dick's plan to cross the German lines at a point fifteen or twenty miles farther south, keeping eight or ten thousand feet high during this maneuver, strike boldly ahead until deep into the network of roads, supply-depots, etc., back of the German front-line and second-line positions, still keeping high, then, concealing the maneuver as much as possible if he had kept fairly clear from pursuit up to this point, swing round and head back straight for the point where the balloons were stationed.

Should he succeed in carrying out his plans to this point, great altitude would no longer be of any service to him; in fact, it would be, he felt, a distinct disadvantage, and he planned to begin creeping down toward the ground as soon as he had made his turn, counting upon the direction of his flight and the inconspicuous color-

ing of his tiny machine to conceal his true nature and purpose until too late.

“They won’t be very apt to do much shooting at two planes a dozen miles or so back of the front,” he reasoned, “and probably three out of four men on the ground who see us will take us for Boche flyers. Once they know we’re at large behind their lines, they’ll make things hum, but I’ve an idea that if everything goes well, that humming will be just a bit too late to save their ‘sausages’!”

At first everything worked without a flaw. Dick bored straight up into the air, the battle-plane being a quick riser, keeping at it until his altimeter showed a height of ten thousand feet. A glance over his shoulder showed him that Dan was keeping his place.

Putting his plane on an even keel he began driving south and east, glancing from his map to the country below him. Only large landmarks were discernible, but he was fortunate in having a cloudless sky and was sufficiently familiar with the country beneath so that he had no trouble in locating his position.

Ten minutes’ flying took him as far as he felt it necessary to go in a southerly direction, and he swung sharply to the north.

At a rate of more than two miles a minute, the

American was now driving into territory occupied by the Germans, and with every second his danger increased. Believing that the sooner he turned and his plane was heading toward the Allied lines, the more likely he was to be taken for a German machine, he banked sharply and began to swing round, at the same time beginning to plane down toward the earth.

Keeping on his course now became a more difficult matter, for he could trust nothing but his map and his flying instinct, as he was not at all familiar with the ground beneath him. And just as he glanced down to search the landscape for marks which would enable him to locate himself definitely and so lay a straight course for the still invisible captive balloons, he noticed that there had been a sudden increase in the number of planes about him, knew that all these craft were hostile, and saw that several of them were heading toward him as though their suspicions had been aroused by his movements. Obviously the time had come for a swift descent.

For the sake of avoiding shell-fire he would have preferred to keep up around five thousand feet, but the avoidance of dangers formed no part of his plan, and he descended until his altimeter showed no more than a scant fifteen hundred feet.

Just as he glanced at the gauge a shell exploded in the air some distance to one side and considerably above him. A hidden battery of German high-angle guns had commenced reaching for him.

Word that two hostile planes were flying about behind the front lines must have been sent broadcast throughout the German positions, for the fire was steady from all quarters. Some of the shrapnel burst uncomfortably close, and Dick could see two or three gaping rents in the Nieuport's wings, but no damage had yet been done, and he could see that Dan's machine, too, was unscathed.

Now, however, German planes were swooping in toward them from all quarters, at least half a dozen being already in sight and more probably gathering, and Dick saw one of them loose a smoke-rocket that was undoubtedly a signal for the batteries beneath to cease firing and leave the destruction of the raiders to the German airmen.

Almost at the same instant that he realized that he and his companion were in for an air-battle, Dick caught sight of the swaying dots which he knew were the balloons. They were not more than four miles distant and at a height of perhaps twelve hundred feet. He let out a

shout of delight, for he was much closer to his goal than he had believed.

So absorbed was he by the sight of the floating gas-bags which he had come out to destroy that for an instant he forgot those sinister shapes sweeping toward him out of the sky, only to be rudely aroused to a consciousness of the real situation by the sudden staccato clatter of a machine-gun behind him, the reports just reaching him above the roar of his own motor.

Now was the critical moment!

In laying their plans beforehand, he and Dan had agreed that in case they were attacked before reaching the balloons, his part would be to turn and endeavor to engage the attacking Fokkers, while Dan, dodging the fight, was to plane down to the lowest height at which he dared fly, and head for the "sausages" at top speed.

Just as he looked back, the other Nieuport, which had been behind and a little above him, plunged earthward with such appalling swiftness that for an instant Dick thought it had been wrecked. Before he had more than time to think this, however, the tumbling plane righted itself, flattened out and went skimming forward. Dan had followed orders to the letter.

There was no chance, however, to watch Dan. The same glance which had showed him the

sudden earthward plunge of his companion had also revealed the spectacle of three German battle-planes bearing down on him. With a sudden jerk on the "joy-stick" he turned to meet them.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE CRIPPLED EAGLE

As Dick swung to face the unequal struggle which might make it possible for Dan to carry out the rest of their programme, there flashed through his mind some words of advice that Musalle, one of the veterans of the squadron, had given him.

“For all purposes of ordinary flying,” the Frenchman had said, “loops, spins, and all the other fancy flying stunts are as out of place and foolish as it would be for a man to go from his house to his office turning handsprings instead of walking. But in combats, exactly the reverse holds true.

“In a duel with another plane, your job is to make yourself as hard to hit as possible, and to outmaneuver your opponent so that you can continually get at his ‘blind angle’ — where you can shoot at him and he can’t shoot at you. And in such a place, the man who can do the most and dizziest stunts is likely to come out the winner.”

Swerving sharply, he shot up and to the right at the same time. Dick's first maneuver took the Germans somewhat by surprise, but at the same time it came near being his undoing. For the three German planes were above Dick when he started climbing, and his move took him into such a position that for a few seconds he made of himself and his plane the best possible target.

Happily for him, the nearest of his pursuers was in such a situation that he "blanketed" his two companions, and they could not fire, but the machine-gun of the foremost German broke into a clatter, and the air about Dick's machine was full of angry, whistling sounds; but the German did not allow sufficiently for the speed with which his foe was rising, and the stream of bullets whistled underneath.

Freed from this immediate danger, Dick tried to take the offensive. He plunged sideways toward the machine which had just fired at him, dived under him, slurred over in a side-slip that came within an ace of sending his plane out of control, and realized with a sudden thrill that he had won the coveted position: for an instant he was behind and below the Fokker, fairly upon the German's "blind spot" !

His finger was already reaching for the button which controlled the Lewis when the second

German came darting at him from above and to the left.

There was no time to risk a shot at the first German, hardly time to meet this second thrust. Shutting off his motor, Dick dived headlong, twisting to the right as he did so. Once more he succeeded; again he slipped through by a narrow margin—and again he seemed to leap “from the frying-pan into the fire,” for he eluded the rush of the second German only to come squarely into the range of his third foe, and this time he did not get wholly unscathed through the spray of steel bullets.

As he won through, he saw that his left-hand wing had been fairly riddled, and he heard one of the wing-struts twang as though it had been struck, perhaps broken.

There was an instant of terrible uncertainty, when he expected to have the Nieuport fail to respond to the controls, and go lurching off. But a few seconds served to show him that whatever injuries he had received had not yet done him serious damage.

Temporary though his escape might prove, he knew that for the moment at least he could put more distance between himself and his foes, for their maneuvers had resulted in sending him climbing up and away in one direction while the

three Germans were going the opposite way. For the moment Dick devoted his whole attention to gaining height and distance.

A scant twenty seconds was all the time that he had. At the end of this interval the trio were hard after him once more, and now they were acting with more caution and less haste. Instead of pursuing at his own level, one of them came straight behind him, a second climbed higher and to the left, while the third dropped lower and bore off to the right, all three of them commencing to fire almost simultaneously.

Dick's position was one which could not possibly be maintained. Desperate measures alone could save him, and he had recourse to what is just about the "last ditch" for the overmatched airman. He deliberately "faked a fall."

Pretending to fall before an audience of civilian spectators who know little or nothing about aviation is one thing, doing the same stunt so convincingly that it will fool hostile aviators is quite another matter. Dick had seen the trick worked by some of the men in the squadron, but he had never had occasion to attempt it himself. There is only one thing to do: the pilot simply throws his machine out of control, lets it drop as far as he dares, and then tries to recover himself, which sometimes is beyond his

powers. The most skillful of the French bird-men employ the ruse not merely as a defensive, but as an offensive, measure, employing it to get them out of a bad situation and put them at the same time into a dominating position from which they can strike back before the enemy has time to realize that he is not witnessing a genuine fall.

Dick had no hope of succeeding thus far. If the trick gave him another few minutes of comparative safety, and he could jerk the plane back into control, he would be perfectly satisfied.

He shut off his motor while turning, and went into a side-slip that would have scared the life out of him in the early training-days. As he had expected, the Nieuport went at once into a straight nose-dive, then he felt the nauseating motion of the dreaded tail-spin.

At the start of the maneuver he had had about two thousand feet altitude. With the Nieuports it is by no means as easy to regain control as with such machines as the big training-tractors, owing to the greatly decreased wing surface, and he knew that he dared not drop very far. Moreover, there was nothing that he could do: either the machine would straighten out or it would n't.

Those few seconds of uncertainty were the

worst that Dick Allen had ever passed through in his life. He was dropping like a stone; he could see the earth rushing up toward him, and he was as helpless as though he had never been strapped into a plane before. Then, just as he had made up his mind that the plane would never right herself, he was aware that the spin was decreasing. An instant later the machine straightened out; he started his motor, with a great rush of thankfulness, felt the wings again take hold of the air, and knew that he was once more the controlling force of the machine and not merely part of a swiftly falling weight.

Not until that instant had he had a chance to glance about to note the success of his tactics. Now he risked a quick look over his shoulder. Two of the Germans, he saw, had evidently been fooled, for they had gone straight ahead, and were now at least half a mile beyond him and hundreds of feet above.

But not so with the third Fokker!

Instead of following his companions, he had tipped his elevating planes, and come down on a long slant that was timed to strike the American just about the moment he recovered himself!

Without losing a second's time in hesitation, Dick sent his plane through a loop—exactly

HAROLD COE



“The disaster was complete”

like the "loop-the-loop" of the circus performer a few years back—curving up and back until he was flying for a moment head-down above the earth, then heading straight down and plunging down like a stone.

And the instant he headed downward, he pressed the button close to his right hand, and the Lewis gun mounted in front of him spewed out its bullets in a steady stream.

He did not wait to aim, did not wait to see where his pursuer was. Before he made his loop, he had felt that it should bring him almost squarely above the Fokker as it flashed beneath him, and he fired without waiting to make sure that his feeling had been correct.

Had he timed his action with a split-second watch it could not have been more deadly accurate. The German airman had no time to meet the move completely. He did try to escape by dropping, but this brought him squarely into the stream of bullets from Dick's machine-gun.

The disaster was complete—terrible for the man who had caused it and had to witness it. The German himself must have been struck more than once, for he crumpled down in his seat, then fell forward, while his propeller splintered, the plane turned half over, one wing crumpled as though it had smashed against an

invisible barrier in the air, and the whole wrecked fabric plunged down, flaming as it fell.

What might have happened had Dick been forced merely to deal with the other two planes which he had already engaged cannot be told. But while he was downing his first man, two other Fokkers had swept up, and one of them opened fire; and his fire took effect almost as quickly — but happily not so completely — as had Dick's on the fallen Hun.

Dick felt a sharp stab of pain through his left shoulder, there was a crack behind him, and his motor went dead. The fight was over!

But the Nieuport did not fall. It no longer had the motive power to rise, but it began to plane earthward on a long slant. There was no chance of picking a landing-place, but at least he was spared the horror of the helpless plunge which would mean only destruction.

He gave one glance at the earth below, tried to pull the nose of the machine around in the direction of the Allied lines, set his teeth and waited.

CHAPTER XXV

PRISONER

No sooner had the crippled Nieuport started off on its long slant than the German planes began swarming in on it from all sides. There was nothing whatever for Dick to do but to hoist the airman's signal of distress.

So, while three Fokkers were darting at him, intent on finishing him off and sending him hurtling to the ground, he let go of the controls and raised both arms above his head—the airman's signal to friend or foe that his machine has been put out of action and that he is helpless.

The effects of his signal of defeat were immediate. The three or four machines which had been swooping down upon him instantly changed their courses, and he was left to himself. Evidently the rule of the air was that if a beaten airman could save himself and his plane by gliding back to his own lines, it was the courteous duty of his conquerors to give him the chance.

There followed several minutes of unpleasant

uncertainty. As his descent continued, the American soon discovered that clearing the German lines was out of the question. His concern was now to try to find a spot in which he could make a safe landing.

Finally his anxious glance picked out an open space beneath him, comparatively free from obstructions, and offering the best landing-ground in sight. To reach it he would have to go down at a sharper angle than he would have chosen, but beyond it there was a wide stretch of forest and a thicket-bordered stream which he doubted the plane's ability to clear.

He did everything in his power to break the force of the fall, wrenching at the controls to bring the plane against the faint wind that was blowing along the earth, but the ground came up very fast during the last few feet. The plane struck with a terrific shock that nearly tore Dick from his seat in spite of his life-belt. He had just time to be thankful that it had taken a huge "hop" instead of turning over, when it struck a second time, throwing him forward in his seat and making his head strike against a stanchion with such force as to render him unconscious.

CHAPTER XXVI

BEHIND THE GERMAN LINES

WHEN Dick came to himself he was lying flat on his back on the earth and directly above him was the bearded face of a German surgeon. His glance took in several figures in the *feldgrau* uniform, and out of the corner of his eye he could see his plane. The wheels and landing-planes appeared to have been pretty well smashed, but otherwise the machine seemed uninjured.

“Feeling better?” the surgeon was asking, speaking French and employing a curt but by no means unkindly tone.

“I think so,” answered Dick. “I can tell when I try to stand up.”

“Better wait a few minutes,” suggested the German, offering him a flask. “You’ve had a stiff fall.”

Dick did not believe that he had been badly hurt. His abdomen was sore where he had been held back against the force of his fall by the life-belt which kept him in his seat, one shoulder

ached, and the old hurdling hurt in his foot was more than painful; but aside from these things and the inevitable headache there was nothing alarming. At the end of a few minutes he managed to stand up. As soon as he did so, everything spun crazily before his eyes, and for a few minutes he was violently sick. After that, however, he felt shaky but better.

"You've suffered no real injuries," the surgeon told him. "A couple of days and you'll be perfectly well. If your plane had gone a few feet farther, however, it would have been the end of you. It came very near turning completely over."

A subaltern and four soldiers took Dick in charge. To his surprise the young officer apologized to him in excellent French for the fact that he had to walk, and then accommodated his steps to Dick's. It was no go, however, his legs refused to support him, and two of the soldiers had to take him by the arms.

Dick was too ill and spent to take much notice of his surroundings, and realized nothing of what he passed through until they reached a row of rough wooden huts. He was taken into one of these, and fairly fell onto a narrow cot. The instant he stretched out he had a recurrence of the violent nausea. A few minutes of decid-

edly unpleasant semiconsciousness followed, then he fell into a heavy sleep.

When he awoke the thoroughly "slept-out" feeling he experienced made him pretty sure that he had been asleep many hours. The nausea had entirely passed. He was sore and stiff, but otherwise perfectly himself—and tremendously hungry!

For the first time he had an opportunity to take stock of his situation. Even had he not already known it, the sounds which reached him would have told him clearly enough that he was close to the front-line German positions. A battery of heavy guns was in action at no great distance from the spot where he lay, other batteries were firing farther off, and there were occasional bursts of rifle-fire, sufficiently loud to indicate that they were not far distant.

His speculations were interrupted by a gruff challenge from the gray-clad sentry at his door. A moment later two young men in the uniform of German aviators, both still wearing their leather coats, entered the room. One of them, who spoke excellent English, at once came forward, begging Dick not to rise, and explaining that they had come to see how he was.

"I am Lieutenant Freihoff," he explained, "and this is Lieutenant Ertz. We had the honor

of bringing your machine to earth yesterday. I hope your injuries are slight?"

Dick, much surprised at the visit, said that they were, and that he suffered no discomfort.

"If you will give us your name and unit," Freihoff continued, "we will be glad to see that word of your safety reaches your friends."

Dick did as requested, then, not to be outdone in politeness, expressed the hope that the man he had sent down might have escaped — although he knew that there was little chance of it.

"He was killed," Freihoff answered stiffly, but without apparent resentment. "Four of your bullets reached him. A most brilliant performance, Lieutenant Allen, most brilliant."

Dick, rather embarrassed at praise of this sort from his foes, tried to explain that it was more or less luck, — at least a last desperate effort made when he discovered that his opponent had seen through his ruse and outguessed him. The two Germans were silent for a moment, then Ertz said something in German to his companion, and Freihoff said:

"Oh, to be sure! You will probably be glad to know that your companion succeeded in reaching his own lines."

"And the balloons?" Dick couldn't forego asking.

The two Germans looked a trifle uncomfortable, but played the game.

"They were destroyed," Freihoff admitted grudgingly; then his admiration for a fellow bird-man overcame his chagrin at the thought of defeat. "Never has such shooting been seen!" he declared. "Your man picked off those balloons as though he had been shooting at clay balls in a rifle-gallery!"

Ertz, his broad face breaking into a rather pleasant grin, said something in German, speaking directly to Dick, and Freihoff translated.

"Lieutenant Ertz wishes me to say that you have put upon us a heavy and agreeable task," he explained. "Within a week we shall consider it our duty to outdo your raid."

Then the pair of them saluted very stiffly and withdrew.

Shortly after the two officers had left, a soldier brought Dick food. A few minutes later a lieutenant of infantry, followed by a couple of privates, came into the room, and ordered Dick to follow him. As soon as Dick had risen from his cot, the officer blindfolded him.

"There is little chance that you will ever be able to tell your friends anything that you have seen," he said in French, "but it is just as well to make sure that there is no chance at all."

“Do you mind telling me what’s going to be done with me?” Dick asked, “or is that one of the things I’m not to know?”

The German turned toward him. Had the bandage been removed from Dick’s eyes, he would have seen an unpleasant smile upon his captor’s face.

“You are to be held here until late to-night,” answered the officer, “and then sent back to the rear with the other prisoners.”

There was something in the man’s tone that made Dick feel that he was expected to ask, “What other prisoners?” He did so.

“Those that will be taken to-night,” the German answered confidently. “There are to be some trench-raids, on a rather large scale. It may interest you to know that the prisoners will be Americans!”

To his great relief the German did not pursue the subject, and they went on in silence. With his eyes covered by a tight-fitting bandage and no knowledge whatever of his surroundings, Dick could not guess the direction in which he was taken, even in relation to the small wooden building in which he had lain since his capture. Rather to his surprise the sounds of firing did not grow any less distinct, which led him to believe that he was not being taken toward the rear.

After a few minutes of this he began to understand why the hearing of blind people seems developed to an unusual extent. With his eyes covered it seemed to him that his ears were sharper than ordinarily. Even through the steady thunder of artillery firing he picked out many other sounds: a column of men marching somewhere near him along a road and then crossing a narrow wooden bridge; a distant airplane motor overhead; the thudding of pick and shovel as a party of engineers worked on a new section of trench; the staccato clatter of a motor-cycle engine; and everywhere about him guttural German voices.

At the end of perhaps half an hour the subaltern ordered his men to halt. The bandage was removed from Dick's eyes, and he found himself at what was evidently the entrance to a dugout.

The dugout—which appeared to be merely one of several—was only a few yards back of a line of trenches. He thought he saw several machine-guns in position. Off to the right was a large patch of woods, at least half a mile wide and fully as deep, the forward edge of which was undoubtedly held in force. In the other direction the country seemed open. He saw a few trees whose branches had been lopped off and

whose trunks were scarred in many places, clear enough proof that at some time or other this stretch of ground had been the target for heavy fire. He also saw several files of helmeted German infantry making their way forward at a double.

This much he saw: the next instant one of his captors took him by the shoulder and he went into the dugout.

Nothing that he had seen since his capture had astonished him as much as the interior of this dugout. It might have been a bomb-proof in a permanent fort somewhere in the interior of Germany. Its walls and roof were of concrete; there were well-built bunks for fifteen or twenty men, wooden racks for their rifles, a table, several chairs, and, most startling of all, two or three incandescent lights burning brightly!

CHAPTER XXVII

THE BOOMERANG

AT the time of Dick's entrance the dugout was full of men. A single glance showed him that serious work was indeed in prospect, and that these men were evidently to take part in the night's activities. They were cleaning and oiling their rifles, putting better edges on their bayonets, and in a far corner two N.C.O.'s were inspecting an ugly-looking pile of hand-grenades.

Dick's hands were bound, although the officer made a point of asking him if the knot was too tight, but his feet were left free, and he was placed in a far corner of the room. His entrance attracted a good deal of attention. All of the soldiers looked at him curiously, seeming to have some trouble in reconciling his uniform, which was evidently French, and his face which was just as plainly not French. He caught two or three exclamations of "*Amerikaner!*"

The officer who had brought him saluted another officer, evidently in charge of the dugout,

spoke a few words to him and then went out. Dick looked at this second officer, and was not at all pleased at the change. This man was more nearly the type Dick had expected,—a huge, broad-shouldered hulk of a man, with a thick, red face, heavy mustache, small eyes, and a distinctly unpleasant expression. He gave Dick a short glance, then turned away and for the time being paid him no further attention.

Some minutes later, however, the officer had occasion to go near the place where Dick was sitting, his feet and legs sticking straight out in front of him, his back resting against the concrete wall of the room. The big officer stepped squarely on one of Dick's outstretched feet, stumbled, then spun round angrily.

"Keep your feet out of the way!" he snarled.

"Sorry," Dick answered in English, since the officer seemed to speak it. "I couldn't very well get farther out of the way, tied as I am."

"Keep a civil tongue in your head, you dog!" roared the other.

Dick held his tongue for quite another reason, meeting the other's gaze squarely. The German stood still, evidently trying to stare him out of countenance. Finding he could not do this he burst out:

"Do you intend to apologize, or don't you?"

Dick's temper was rapidly getting out of hand, but he managed to hold it a little longer.

"I don't intend to apologize any further," he answered quietly. "You stepped on me intentionally, and you know it. So do your men!"

The officer turned and bellowed an order in German. Four of the soldiers rose, fixed their bayonets, and came forward. Dick had time for a quick glance at the faces which surrounded him. For the most part the men appeared delighted at the spectacle which was evidently in store for them—the mistreatment of a prisoner. Only two or three looked as though they found the sight anything but agreeable.

"Stand up!" commanded the officer.

Dick scrambled to his feet and stood leaning against the wall. The officer stood for a few seconds measuring him, as though uncertain just what form to make the ordeal take, the four soldiers waiting expectantly behind him.

"You flyers have been getting it too soft," the German said at length. "It's the first time I've had my hands on one of you. It strikes me you ought to be able to tell more than anybody else. We'll just see."

At his order the four privates closed in, their bayonets only two or three inches from Dick's breast. A glance at their grinning faces told

clearly enough that they would cheerfully carry out any brutal order that was given them.

The officer took out his watch and stood looking at it.

"I will ask a question," he explained, "and you will have fifteen seconds in which to answer it. If you refuse, these bayonets will press against you, not enough to hurt, just enough to show how they will hurt. Every fifteen seconds there will be another question. Every time you refuse to answer, the bayonets will press a little harder!

"Now—I want the names of the regiments in this sector facing us!"

Even had Dick been minded to answer, he could not have done so. It had been no part of his duties to keep any track of his own forces.

It was so still in the dugout that the ticking of the watch in the officer's hand was distinctly audible. The fifteen seconds passed. The officer nodded to his men, and they put their bayonets, none too gently, against Dick's body.

"Now—" began the officer; then stopped suddenly as there was a rattle of arms at the entrance to the dugout, turned on his heel, and saluted.

A second German officer entered. He was a man of entirely different type, tall, slender, with

a thin, pale face, cold blue eyes, and a high forehead. He looked on occasion as though he could be just as heartlessly cruel as the bully who was facing Dick, but there would be nothing petty about his cruelty. He might be capable of burning a village, but he would not stoop to the tormenting of a single prisoner.

The newcomer evidently demanded an explanation of the situation, for Dick's captor, who looked decidedly ill at ease, first pointed to his prisoner and then to the pile of hand-grenades. Either the explanation was satisfactory, or the superior officer was too busy to concern himself with such trifles. He spoke a few more sentences in rapid German, his inferior standing rigidly at attention meanwhile, then turned and went out.

Grumbling, the big lieutenant called off the four men who surrounded Dick, then turned to his prisoner.

"I'll attend to your case later," he said in the same unpleasant, snarling tone. "At present I have to deal with a few of your friends."

Dick would have been wiser to have held his tongue as he had done, but he failed to do so.

"Better go slow," he suggested quietly. "They won't have their hands tied, you know!"

With an oath the German swung his big arm. Had he taken the time to ball his hand into a

fist, the force of the blow and the helplessness of his victim might have meant a serious injury. As it was, he struck with his open hand, and Dick was bowled over like a tenpin, but done no great hurt, save that he fell in such an awkward position, his roped hands beneath him, that he could hardly move. His sprawling downfall drew a roar of laughter from the soldiers.

"There!" grunted the officer; "that saves us the trouble of tying the dog's feet!"

And there Dick was left, like a sack of meal dumped down in a corner, while the men completed their preparations. A few minutes later the officer and most of the men went out, leaving not more than half a dozen soldiers in the dugout. One of these took up his post at the entrance, while the others squatted on the floor and commenced playing cards, paying no attention to their prisoner.

As Dick could see by glancing through the open doorway, it had now grown perfectly dark outside. There had been, ever since he entered the dugout, a steady rumble and mutter of firing. Within a very short time it became clear enough that this was no mere part of a stereotyped daily programme, for not only did every German battery in the vicinity seem to be firing, but this fire was evidently being returned with interest.

The men gathered in a huddled group at one side, evidently discussing the situation among themselves, although Dick could hear nothing of what they said.

How long the ordeal of the bombardment continued he had no means of telling. There was a watch with a luminous dial strapped round his wrist, but he could not see it. He had made repeated efforts to loosen the rope which bound his hands, but the knots had been too well tied. Not long after the shells commenced banging down around the line of bomb-proofs, the electric system had been put out of commission and the lights had gone out. The imprisoned soldiers had produced two or three candle-ends, and in this flickering and uncertain light they had waited for the end. He could not form any idea of what was actually taking place outside.

But convincing proofs of what was happening were soon furnished!

The heavy door which covered the entrance to the dugout was suddenly wrenched open, and through the opening tumbled and sprawled a stream of men. In the feeble, flickering light of the candle-ends they looked unreal and grotesque. All of them wore the German trench-helmets, while a few had put on their gas-masks. Some were wounded.

It was Dick Allen's first sight of men who had just been subjected to the terrific strain of withstanding shell-fire for hours, and he understood at once that there were worse things than air-duels fought thousands of feet above the earth.

Some time later he realized that the awful clamor outside had grown somewhat less, and once it had begun to diminish, it fell away swiftly, only to be succeeded by other sounds. Now he could hear the crack of rifles, the sinister purring of machine-guns, thudding explosions that he knew were grenades, and the faint sounds of cheers and shouts.

For a few seconds, so stupefied and deadened had his senses been by the nerve-racking bombardment, he did not comprehend the significance of these sounds; then in a flash he understood.

It was the assault following the bombardment! Allied troops—perhaps Americans—had penetrated the German lines! The Boche raid had indeed proved a boomerang of the liveliest sort!

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE TWO CAPTIVES

QUICKLY succeeding the thrill accompanying the realization that Allied forces had taken the German position came an equally sharp thought of a far less comforting sort.

His own situation, bad enough at best, had actually become worse through the presence of his friends! He was only too familiar with the process of "mopping up" captured trenches and dugouts, and he knew that the Allied troops, made cautious by repeated bits of German trickery and faithlessness in the past, took no chances of being shot or stabbed in the back by foes who had made a pretense of surrendering. Unless he could make his presence in the dugout known in time, Dick stood an excellent chance of being bombed by his own men!

No time was left him for the hurried devising of a plan. There came a series of scattering blows at the door of the dugout, the heavy timbers splintered and gave way, and a pencil of

light from an electric torch began probing around the interior of the underground room.

"Come up out of that—understand?" shouted a voice in English.

Dick's heart gave a bound. No native of the British Isles ever spoke with just that accent. The victorious troops were Americans!

At the sound of the voice from the doorway, several of the demoralized Germans staggered to their feet, their hands above their heads.

"*Kamerad! Kamerad!*" they shouted in token of surrender.

"That's all right! But you'll come out one at a time, and with both hands in the air!" said the voice at the door.

An instant later another voice, speaking what Dick guessed was very poor German, evidently repeated the command.

Several of the soldiers, their hands still in the air, were moving toward the door, when Dick saw the same officer who had bullied him begin to creep forward, an ugly-looking grenade in each hand.

"Look out above!" shouted Dick.

There was an instant's pause. The big officer turned with an oath, evidently inclined to hurl one of the grenades at Dick. Before he could put this purpose into effect, however, he was

beset from an unexpected quarter. Another German officer, whom Dick had not before noticed, suddenly flung himself upon the big man and attempted to take the grenades away from him. He was no match for his antagonist in point of strength, and it might have gone badly with him had not several of the soldiers, comprehending the situation and anxious only to give themselves up, come to his assistance. In a few seconds the big man was disarmed, and the other officer turned to the door.

"There are twenty-six men and two officers here," he called, "as well as one prisoner. We will come out one at a time, as you say." He turned to the cowering soldiers. "*Vorwärts!*" he commanded, and one by one they began to file out of the bomb-proof.

A few minutes later Dick found himself in the midst of a group of big, brown-clad infantrymen, who were acting more like a lot of big boys enjoying a Hallowe'en prank than anything else. Dick espied the two silver bars of a captain glittering on one brown shoulder, and turned to the officer at once.

"You aren't by any chance Lieutenant Allen, are you?" the infantry captain asked.

"Yes, I am," answered Dick.

"Well, this is luck!" exclaimed the other.

"We were told to keep an eye out, as your machine was seen to go down somewhere in this quarter. My name's Bramwell, and I'm mighty glad to have been the man to find you."

"You're not half as glad as I am!" Dick answered heartily.

"By the look of you," Captain Bramwell said, "you *have* been through it! I'm going to send back this batch of prisoners under guard. I'll send you along if you like."

Dick agreed willingly, and a few minutes later was on his way back toward the Allied lines. The prisoners were in charge of a subaltern who introduced himself as Lieutenant Black, and as they picked their way back through the broken ground of the captured position, and then of No Man's Land, he got Dick's story out of him. When Dick told him of the attempt at torture which had been cut short earlier in the night, and of the big German officer's attempt to get hold of the hand-grenades later when his men were anxious only to give themselves up, Black said angrily:

"You mean we've bagged that brute in this lot?"

"Yes."

"Which is he?"

Dick pointed out the hulking figure, conspicu-

ous even in the faint light. Black was silent for a few minutes; then he said thoughtfully:

"There are times when a fellow almost wishes we did some of the pretty tricks the Germans do. I'd like to see that devil get what's coming to him!"

"So would I!" agreed Dick.

"But of course we can't," Black went on, "as the American army doesn't make a practice of mistreating its prisoners. But it does get under your skin to know that a bullying brute like that will get decent treatment when what he deserves is a whole lot more than he gave you!"

A short time afterwards they entered the Allied lines, held at this point by French troops with a sprinkling of American regiments. Dick was only too glad to accept Black's offer of a shakedown in his quarters, which proved to be in a huge cellar beneath the battered remains of a French village that was included in the lines at this point. Eight or ten American officers were in the room when Black and his companion entered, and Dick was in for a good deal of hearty hand-shaking and congratulation as soon as the others learned what had happened to him. Finally Black, dropping a hand on to Dick's shoulders, pushed the others off.

"See here, you fellows, let Allen alone!" he

protested. "After what he's been through I guess he wants to sleep, even if to-night's attack takes us clear to Berlin!"

When Dick opened his eyes several hours later, Black and one other man were the only ones in the cellar. Black came forward as soon as he saw that Dick was awake.

"It was all I could do to keep from routing you out just after you'd tumbled in last night," he said. "If you hadn't looked so thoroughly done up, I think I should have done it anyhow."

"Why?" Dick asked.

"Because," explained Black, "a few of us had a chance to witness what must have been just about the strangest affair that's happened since the war began, and you were the one man above all others who should have seen it."

"I don't understand," Dick said.

"Not long after you'd tumbled in," Black went on, "a soldier came to me with word that one of the captured German officers wanted to see me. As you may guess, I hadn't the remotest idea what it was all about, but as I was in a way responsible for the prisoners until they were off my hands, I went to see what was up. You know there was a second German officer in that bunch?"

"Yes," answered Dick, "a good-looking, slim

fellow. He's the one that jumped the big fellow when he started after those grenades."

"That's the one. Well, it seems he's no more than half a German, which accounts for his virtues. He'd been living in America, and came back to Germany at the outbreak of war because of a sense of duty. Wouldn't have fought against the United States, he says, but it was too late to get out when we came in.

"He heard you and me talking last night about what we'd like to do to that big brute that started sticking bayonets into you. And what do you suppose he had to propose to me? — That I let the pair of them fight a duel!"

"A duel!" exclaimed Dick.

"Just that. This little chap — Schall, his name is — said that he considered this other man's conduct an insult to the German army; that he realized the fact that none of us could resent it in the proper way, and that he'd consider it a privilege to take a service sword and put a hole through Drasch, which is the big one's name.

"Of course I told him we couldn't do that — and I wish you could have seen the fellow's face. He was in deadly earnest. He felt a lot worse over that business than you did. Finally I said, 'See here, we can't stand for any duel, but

if you and Drasch can settle this with your fists, I'll see what I can do.' Then he brightened up a whole lot."

"You don't mean you actually did it?"

"We did just that!" Black assured him "The two officers had been confined separately from the men, and it was easy enough to find a cleared place back of the lines where nobody would disturb us. Six of us went along to see fair play.

"And don't think it was just a lark, or that we pulled it off for the pleasure of seeing a couple of Huns pound each other. That young Schall was the most deadly serious thing you ever saw in your life! He made us feel that what he was doing was for the sake of every good quality that the German race possesses, and that he didn't want us to think that he was like Drasch, or that Drasch was a typical German officer."

"What happened?" Dick asked.

"Why, in about ten minutes little Schall had big Drasch on his knees blubbering for mercy. Schall made him apologize to *both armies* before he'd let him get up! I know it sounds rather silly now to talk about it, but if you'd seen it you'd understand that it was about as far from silly as anything on earth could be.

"I'll tell you, if there's one man on earth

I'm really sorry for, it's the chap like Schall who has German blood, wants to be proud of his race, and yet is ashamed of everything he sees his people do!"

For many reasons Dick would have been glad to stay in the cellar under the ruined French village. The strain of the past few days, combined with a heavy cold which he had contracted, made him very wretched, and he felt that the one thing he really wanted was to get into bed and stay there as long as he pleased. Then, too, there was a great deal of comfort in being thrown again with his own countrymen and hearing nothing but good "American."

But in his present situation he was of no value to anybody, and it was his duty to get back to his unit with all possible speed. So after a hearty meal he said good-bye to Black and some of the other officers, and started for the rear in the side-car of a motor-cycle.

During the rest of that day and part of the night he spent his time getting back by various ways to the Aviation Headquarters in the battered château.

It was not in any sense a pleasant journey. Dick Allen was by this time a pretty sick man, and his interest in anything but getting to the end of his journey very slight.

But nothing really mattered or counted until he found himself, utterly spent and weary, holding himself upright before Colonel Farle's desk as he made his report, and wishing that he dared catch hold of the desk so that standing would be an easier matter.

When he had finished his brief recital of what had happened to him, Colonel Farle rose and put his hand on the younger man's shoulder.

"In a few days," he said, "we'll consider this report. At the present moment the place for you is a cot in a hospital, and I'm going to see that you get there before you're an hour older!"

CHAPTER XXIX

THE SPY

"YOU'RE a pretty washed-out looking specimen," Dan Ericsson said as he and Dick shook hands in the outer room at Headquarters.

It was the first day of Dick's return to active duty after ten days on his back in the hospital, and the first time he had seen Dan since he had glanced down from the seat of his Nieuport to see the Minnesotan planing swiftly earthward beneath him.

"I suppose I do look a bit knocked up, but I'm fit enough," Dick answered. "I had no idea what a field-hospital was like. I thought it was a place where you were sent to be sick comfortably and luxuriously. It's nothing of the sort! It's a place where they bully and feed you into getting well much faster than you want to! Why, if I'd had one foot in the grave, those doctors and nurses would have had me back in harness in no time!"

"Sure," agreed Dan; "if this war doesn't teach us anything else, it will have taught us that

we've been wasting altogether too much time being sick."

"Anyhow, never mind me and my sickness now," Dick said. "I want to know what happened to you."

"Why," Dan replied briefly, "I went ahead and knocked the sausages out of their skins!"

Dick laughed heartily.

"That's like you!" he exclaimed. "You tell it in one sentence while another man would take an hour to the story."

"It isn't worth more than a sentence," insisted Dan; "it was really the easiest stunt I've been set since I reached the front. Between the Colonel's diversion with the other planes and your idea of swinging in from the rear, the Huns were completely fooled.

"After I saw that you were hung up with those three Fokkers, and looked good to keep busy for a few minutes, I carried out orders and went for those balloons full speed, flying as low as I dared. It sounds incredible, but absolutely nothing happened to me! The Germans on the ground evidently thought I belonged to their own crew until it was too late, and for just those few precious minutes there weren't any Germans overhead.

"Of course, when I began shooting, they went

after me with shrapnel from the ground, but it was nothing serious. Potting those big balloons was a cinch compared with those toys we popped at in training-camp. I was back here four hours after we started, turning the organization of the Allied forces inside out to find out what had become of you!"

In spite of his boasts that he was perfectly fit for immediate service, Dick's appearance failed to convince Colonel Farle that he was ready for anything, and he put in three long weeks recuperating at Headquarters before he again strapped himself into the seat of a plane.

It was, then, with a feeling of great relief and satisfaction that he heard Colonel Farle say one morning:

"You look fit for active duty again, Allen."

"I'm sure I am, sir."

"You've been sure of that these two weeks and more," answered the Colonel with a smile, "but now I guess you've actually arrived at the point where you can fly without needing an extra life-belt!"

He paused and fumbled with some papers on his desk.

"How deep into German territory have you ever flown?" he asked.

"More than fifty miles, sir."

"In which direction?"

"Toward the Belgian-Luxemburg frontier, sir. I was actually over the Belgian territory for some time."

"That was with a large force or alone?"

"Alone, sir."

"I want you to make another flight," explained the Colonel, "except that this time you will carry a passenger. We want to land one of our spies same distance in the rear of the German lines. I want the same man to take him across to-night and to bring him back in about four days' time. Both trips, of course, will have to be made at night.

"You will report to me at seven o'clock this evening. Until then you are relieved from duty. By the way, the spy is to be landed in the neighborhood of Vouziers. All the maps are at your disposal."

Promptly at seven o'clock that night Dick presented himself at Headquarters. During the afternoon he had spent some time at the hangars, assuring himself that the powerful two-seater in which he would make the flight was ready for the journey.

In Colonel Farle's office at Headquarters, Dick found the spy. He was prepared to see a rather theatrical-looking figure, something like a stage

detective. The instant he looked at the man sitting in the chair against the wall, he realized that the modern spy must be just as inconspicuous as the modern soldier.

This man surely filled that requirement. He was of average height and size, smooth-shaven, without a single unusual feature or distinguishing characteristic, and his clothes, which were those which would be worn by any European of the middle class, would not attract attention anywhere. In a word, he was exactly the sort of man one could see every day for a month, and yet completely forget over night.

"This," explained Colonel Farle shortly, "is M. Lenor, whom you are to convey to his destination."

M. Lenor acknowledged the brief introduction by a bow, and resumed his study of the wall opposite his seat. Colonel Farle unrolled several sections of ordnance maps and picked up a pencil.

"If you gentlemen will draw up your chairs," he proposed, "suppose we go over the ground a little in advance."

For fully three quarters of an hour the three men bent intently above the maps.

It was nearly nine o'clock when Dick and Lenor went down to the hangars. There was

little delay in starting. Dick made a hasty reëxamination of the plane, saw to it that the sketch-maps with which he had been provided were within easy reach, and that the speaking-tube connecting the two seats was in order. Then he and the spy took their seats, Dick raised his hand in signal, and the plane swept across the field and into the air.

Had it not been for the fact that Lenor was suddenly moved to begin talking, the flight of more than a hundred miles would have passed uneventfully enough.

They rose to a height of between eight and ten thousand feet, then Dick set a line for his goal and steered for it by compass. He was intent only on driving, and watching the air about him for the first sign of hostile planes, when Lenor's voice suddenly came to his ear through the tube.

"Doubtless you scorn me because I am a spy," the man said abruptly. "All soldiers do. I do not blame them. It is not a pleasant business, not at all like the work of a soldier. For the most part I say nothing about what I do, for, after all, it is only my own concern and that of those who employ me. But now and then, when I see contempt for me in a soldier's face, I like to tell him why I am what I am."

"You need n't," Dick said, rather embarrassed by the other's frankness. "I feel no contempt for you. Not all men would have the nerve for your work!"

"That is very kind, monsieur," Lenor said gratefully, "but the feeling is there in your mind just the same. I saw it in your eyes when Colonel Farle told you who I was."

And then, as Dick sent the plane humming on its way across that part of France held by the foe, Lenor told his story.

He was a native of Saarbùrg in Lorraine, and so had been born and raised under German rule, although both his parents were French, and all his sympathies were with the French people. Because of physical disability he had been spared the hateful task of serving his time in the German army. He had been employed as a traveling salesman by a big German concern of leather manufacturers.

"No training," he said, "could have been better for a spy. France, Germany, Holland, Belgium, Northern Italy, Switzerland, and even parts of Austria—I have been all over them again and again. You cannot find a bit of railroad track over which I have not ridden, cannot find on a big map a town so small that I have not at least passed through it."

Being a rather keen student of current affairs, Lenor had seen the approach of war, and had left Saarburg before the French frontier was closed. Knowing that he could not fight, but that his knowledge of the country might be of some service to the Government, he had at once offered his services.

“A long time, monsieur, I was that most miserable of all creatures—a spy not trusted by the Government which employs him,” he said. “My services were accepted, I was given work of no consequence, but the fact that I was a German subject—which I did not attempt to conceal—counted heavily against me. I was watched. I could not take a step without other men following me.

“From late in August, 1914, until late the following spring, I was not allowed to set foot outside of Paris. Since then, however, I have been active all the time, and I like to believe that I have done some little good, and that I have done some things better than other men could have done them.”

“I should like to hear about some of them,” Dick said thoughtlessly.

There was a slight pause; then Lenor said:

“Doubtless, monsieur; but that may not be. About himself a spy may talk as much as he

pleases, but of the things that he does, no! If you were to let slip a word that I had been wagging my tongue, some one else would hear about it. Before many days, I should learn that the Government had no further use for my services. A little later, for no apparent reason, I should be arrested, and probably I should remain in prison until the war was finished!

“I will tell you, monsieur, if, after the war, you will come to the little leather-goods shop which I hope one day to set up in Paris; I will tell you everything!”

From time to time Lenor's story had been interrupted, and on several occasions Dick had flown in wide circles or planed down closer to the ground while they made sure of their whereabouts. As long as they were over ground held by the Allies, it was all plain sailing. There were innumerable signal-lights visible, as easy for Dick to read as are the switch-lights of a freight-yard for a locomotive engineer.

And when they were over soil which, though French, was in German hands, Lenor's store of peculiar information took on a new value. Signal-lights which meant nothing to Dick had some significance for the spy. Time and again he would say:

“There is a flying-field, monsieur; best per-

haps to shut off the motor and plane for a ways!"

Or his comments would take another form:

"Aha!" he exclaimed once, "they've moved the big ammunition dump that was down there ten days ago! At least the lights have been changed!"

Perhaps two hours after they had left the ground, Lenor, who had been studying the ground beneath him very intently for some moments, said:

"I think, Lieutenant, we had better go down a bit. We should now be where the signals will be visible. You have them in mind?"

"I think so," answered Dick. "Three white flashes after I have shown my lights means 'All's well! Descend!' A blue flash means 'Wait!' Repeated red flashes mean to give up the attempt and return to our own lines. Am I right?"

"That is correct," answered Lenor.

Following his companion's suggestion, Dick brought his machine down toward the earth in wide circles, one eye on the altimeter, the other watching the air around him. If anything mis-carried, he did not want to be caught at a low level, with a forced and hurried flight, or with a fight on his hands in the darkness above unfamiliar ground.

"Now the lights, if you please!" called Lenor.

Dick leaned forward and turned a switch on the dash. Instantly there winked out on the underside of the landing-plane a row of alternate blue and white lights, especially installed for the occasion. Dick switched them off again at once, waited a minute, and switched them on again.

"We are perhaps too early," suggested the spy. "In ten or fifteen minutes, let us repeat the attempt."

Dick circled warily, coasting with a silent motor as much as he could. Ten minutes later he repeated his signal. He did not see himself the answering flashes from the ground, but Lenor's quick exclamation told him that the spy must have seen them.

"Ah!" exclaimed Lenor. "The three white flashes. All is well! Monsieur, the ground immediately to the left is excellent for a landing. But I beg you to be quick!"

Dick wasted no time, and a few minutes later the plane dropped to earth as softly as a bird. It was rather nervous work in the darkness, ignorant of what lay beneath him, but he had the utmost confidence in Lenor's word.

Hardly had the machine alighted when Lenor, carrying only a small wicker crate containing

three carrier-pigeons, was over the side. Two or three indistinct figures appeared in the darkness.

“All right, monsieur!” Lenor said in a low voice. “In four days’ time, then, at the railroad bridge we have agreed upon?”

“Right!” replied Dick. “Good luck!”

An instant later his motor roared, and he was on his way back to the Allied lines. The whole flight had seemed as peaceful and uneventful as a practice-flight at home!

CHAPTER XXX

THE WORK GOES ON!

NOTHING of any consequence happened in the course of the return journey. Several times Dick knew that he was being followed by German planes, as he saw their lights, but the eluding of pursuit in the darkness was too simple a matter to give him any concern.

Not more than six hours all told elapsed from the time he and Lenor were closeted with Colonel Farle until he was getting out of his flying-togs and making ready for bed.

Dick had some considerable flying of different sorts to do during the next four days, but none of it was in any way remarkable, and he was awaiting with real interest his flight into captured territory to endeavor to pick up Lenor and bring him back with his recently acquired information.

Two days later, Colonel Farle spoke to Dick in the outer office at the château.

“Hold yourself in readiness for Friday night,” he said. “One of Lenor’s pigeons has flown in. He brought word that everything was

going smoothly and that your friend will be at the rendezvous."

Two nights after this, in the same plane which he had used on the former occasion, Dick again rose from the flying-field and started on his lonely flight over captured territory.

This time his task was far more difficult, — so difficult, in fact, that arrangements with the spy had been made in advance so that he was to be at the appointed place on three succeeding nights, in case Dick failed to reach it on the first attempt. Dick had to make the flight relying entirely upon his own knowledge and instincts, and without Lenor's assistance. He was completely equipped with every variety of map that would be of any assistance, but in night-flying all maps have their limits, and none of them are of the slightest use once the aviator is thoroughly at fault.

Lenor was not to be picked up at the same point at which Dick had left him four days previously. The point agreed upon was a certain railroad bridge some six or eight miles in the rear of the German lines. The bridge itself was in constant use, as the railroad which passed over it was a great feeder for the German forces, and this meant that the place would be heavily guarded by the enemy.

Naturally the actual point chosen for Dick's landing was not at the bridge proper, but in a field some hundreds of yards distant from it, and well removed from the line of the railroad.

Knowing that there was an excellent chance of his going wrong several times in the course of the sixty-mile flight, Dick had made the earliest start consistent with safety, and allowed himself a comfortable margin of time. Overconfidence made him careless, and he suddenly realized that he was lost.

Instead of wasting time in trying to set himself right by uncertain means, he got the points of the compass straight, and retraced his course until he was absolutely certain, then tried again. This time he flew lower and used his eyes like a veritable hawk. He had the satisfaction this time of picking up, one after another, several salient features of the country, visible even in the darkness, on which he had counted.

For several minutes he had been following the line of a stream—the same stream over which the bridge passed. For the most part the river flowed through open meadow-land, and was quite plainly visible. At times woods and thickets along its banks made it much harder to distinguish.

Suddenly, to Dick's astonishment, he found

that there were two streams instead of one below him!

“Funny!” he muttered. “I don’t remember any fork in the course of that stream on the map!”

He did the one thing which seemed wise, glancing uneasily at his watch as he began the experiment—he followed first one branch of the stream and then the other, hunting for the bridge.

To make matters worse, he found two of them!

With a degree of confidence in himself grown considerably smaller, he settled upon the branch of the stream which was the right one according to his recollection of the map, swung over it a couple of times as low as he dared, peering down through the blackness at the ground underneath, then swung off straight north with a quick glance at his watch.

His wanderings had taken more time than he had dreamed. He was just ten minutes too early!

Seven or eight minutes later he was again over the appointed spot, but this time at a much higher altitude. When still some distance away and at least seven thousand feet high, he shut off his motor and began to come down. Instantly the

roar of another aeroplane motor reached his ears.

"Hello!" he exclaimed; "somebody else about! That's likely to complicate matters if he spots me."

A moment later the German machine, which had of course been quite invisible, winked on its ordinary lights. Dick's first impulse was to reply by lighting his own; then he realized that this would never do, principally because it had been agreed beforehand that his plane was to show no lights whatever during the entire proceeding, and Lenor's suspicions would surely be aroused by a plane which showed any.

To his relief the sound of the German's engine grew fainter rapidly, and a moment later he saw beneath him, faint but distinguishable, the signal agreed upon. Instantly he began to descend. The landing he made would not have drawn him a very good mark from his teachers during his student days, because it was too hasty to be perfect. On all sides of him flickering lights of different kinds proved all too clearly the proximity of the enemy's forces, while at the bridge, less than a mile away, a huge searchlight suddenly began to sweep the sky with its long beam.

The instant the machine stopped, Dick leaned

forward in his seat, pulling out the automatic pistol which hung at his hip.

Two figures came running toward him through the darkness. Dick dropped from his seat, putting the machine between him and the two figures.

"Halt!" he called, keeping his voice low; "you have the word?"

"Farle!" answered a voice, the Colonel's name having been agreed upon as a password.

"All right," answered Dick; "but that's not Lenor's voice. Where is he?"

"M. Lenor was killed yesterday," answered the voice.

Dick started, not so much at the startling information as at the voice, for it was that of a woman!

"Then who are you?" he demanded.

The woman came close to the plane and held out her hands in a quick gesture of appeal.

"Quick, monsieur," she begged, putting a small roll of papers into Dick's hand; "these are from Lenor. You are to take these and go. Your plane was seen. You have no more than a few seconds. M. Lenor is dead, but you are to say to those who will understand that the work goes on. You hear, monsieur—the work goes on!"



“Quick, Monsieur,” she begged

Her companion, still merely a dim figure beyond the plane, said something to her in a low tone which Dick did not catch. At the same time he saw moving lights in the direction of the bridge, and heard the faint far-off hum of the German plane, evidently coming back.

"You must not wait," the woman cried anxiously. "Start at once."

Dick hesitated.

"See here," he said finally, "do you mean that you're in danger?"

"That is nothing," she answered. "We are always in danger."

"But I can get you out of this," he insisted. "Get in with me."

As he spoke there was a hoarse shout behind them, an answering call from the other side. The bobbing lights came nearer. Dick wasted another few seconds in argument, then suddenly realized that he was talking to empty air. The woman and her companion had melted away into the night.

Further delay being not only useless but dangerous, he climbed quickly into his seat. The first roar of his motor seemed fairly to set fire to the darkness around him. The noise of the engine drowned all other sounds—save the sharp, high-pitched ping of a bullet which

hummed through the air close to his head. The plane started across the field, and as it did so little flashes of flame burst out of the night on all sides and the bullets hummed thicker.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE COMPASS THAT DIDN'T POINT NORTH

A SLIGHTLY longer delay would probably have brought disaster, and as it was Dick climbed into the air through a perfect shower of Mauser bullets. The only light about his plane at which the Germans could aim was the flashing exhaust from his motor, which undoubtedly caused most of them to shoot too far behind the rising and vanishing plane. He wasted no time in dodging, but climbed straight up, every sense strained for the first sound that would tell him of a serious hit, his back fairly tingling and crawling at the possibility of being drilled from behind.

His next concern was for German planes. One, he knew, must be somewhere in the air near him, as he had heard it coming just before the woman spy and her companion vanished. He was never able to tell whether or not any serious pursuit of him was actually attempted, but if it was, none of the hostile planes came within sight, nor, when he shut off his motor, could he hear anything.

Once assured that he was not being pursued, he glanced at his watch. It showed half-past two. He had run just about on schedule. Unless something unexpected occurred he should be back at Headquarters in an hour's time, with a chance for some much-needed sleep ahead of him.

For the first time he had an opportunity to think of the night's adventure. The news of Lenor's death was something of a shock, but the sinister part of it was the bareness of the report, the complete lack of detail. "M. Lenor is dead!" the woman had told him, and that was all. Probably nobody would ever know how his death had occurred. Already the woman herself might have fallen into the hands of the Germans. Dick kept thinking of her insistent words—"The work goes on!" Again he was filled with admiration for the thankless, unswerving devotion of these spies. They worked in darkness, died unknown and unmarked, yet stuck to their task. No matter what happened to one, another was ready—the work went on!

With startling abruptness these thoughts were interrupted by a sudden silence. The intense stillness of the upper air always came with something of a shock, even when he shut the motor off himself: now that it came unexpectedly, it was almost like a blow upon his eardrums.

Dick lost no time in trying every expedient for restoring the engine's activity, but in vain. Apparently it was dead, and there was no getting at the seat of trouble without landing.

And here he was over hostile country, ignorant of his surroundings, and in total darkness. In many respects it was a worse predicament than that from which he had just escaped.

All the way down to earth Dick Allen worked like a Trojan with every faculty. He used all his flying skill in making the descent as slow as possible, at the same time continuing his efforts to start the motor, and trying to pierce the blackness below him in an effort to find some place where he could land in comparative safety. At length, when he was no more than a few hundred feet above the ground, he abandoned his efforts to start the engine and devoted all his attention to the ugly business of landing.

On one count, at least, he appeared to be fortunate. There was no evidence that the ground immediately below him was occupied by any part of the hostile forces. As far as that went, there was no sign that it was occupied by anybody: there was not a light, not a sound, not the least evidence of life. And it was so intensely black that Dick could make out no details whatever.

"No use talking, I've got to take the chance," Dick muttered as he switched on a small electric searchlight on the underside of the fuselage. "I might just as well be captured as smashed up in a bad fall."

The small beam of light showed him at once why the ground beneath him had appeared so completely deserted. He was over what appeared to be a huge forest! And now he was so low that he could no longer hope for much time. The one thing possible was to set the plane on a slant and brace himself for the shock.

Falling into woods was at best a bad business, the chance of injury to himself being very great, and the complete wreck of the plane a dead certainty. Dick unstrapped his life-belt with the intention of jumping the instant the plane touched the tops of the trees, then set his teeth and waited. Happily for him he did not turn off the searchlight. Had he done so he would probably have failed to see the rift in the hitherto unbroken mass of the forest.

There was no telling how wide the clearing might prove to be, but anything in the shape of open ground was a godsend, and Dick risked a rather abrupt drop in preference to the sure smash that would follow a plunge into the timber. And at the last minute he remembered to

refasten his life-belt—which undoubtedly saved him from injury.

The landing was abrupt and gave the pilot a thorough jolting and shaking-up, but the two-seater was a stoutly built affair and appeared to weather the shock without injury.

Dick wasted very few seconds in examining the spot into which he had fallen. It seemed to be merely a chance clearing in the forest, perhaps two hundred yards wide and twice as long. As far as Dick could see there were no buildings and the ground had not recently been cultivated.

He began his investigations of the engine trouble, perfectly certain that he could find the trouble, and, providing some part was not broken, repair it. He succeeded, but not with the speed he could have wished. When finally he had located a stoppage in the feed-pipe and cleared it away, he looked up to find that it was no longer night. The sky was gray and the surrounding forest was a dull green.

Just as he climbed into his seat, he saw from the tail of his eye a quick movement on the edge of the forest. Turning his head he discovered that three people, a man and two children, were watching him. As soon as they found themselves observed, they popped out of sight, only

to reappear at another point. Their actions were furtive as those of wild animals, and they were dressed in rags.

"A few months ago they were probably happy and fairly prosperous peasants, and now look at them!" Dick muttered. "By George, those are the people this war really hits!"

He experienced some slight trouble in rising from the clearing, and shaved the tops of the trees by an uncomfortably slender margin as he rose into the air. Once clear of them he bored straight up. He had planned on getting back under cover of darkness: daylight complicated things. The early hours of the morning were those in which the air was most likely to be full of scouting Fokkers. Dick was still deep in hostile territory, and more anxious than ever to get back unseen.

To his relief he found the plane climbing into a decidedly cloudy sky. This suited his books exactly. By traveling above the clouds he would greatly increase his chances of escaping detection.

A few minutes later he was boring through the curtain of damp vapor, and the earth was shut off from sight as though by a thick blanket. He had taken observations before losing sight of the earth, and had a rather vague idea of his

whereabouts. Once above the clouds, however, he had to steer entirely by the compass.

To his amazement he discovered a few moments later that he had either got clear off his course or that the compass was pointing wrong!

He at once set things right, but a moment later the same phenomenon manifested itself, and he experienced an increasing difficulty in flying. The air seemed full of "pockets," and the machine, an unusually steady craft, tricky as the tiniest and most unstable of battle-planes. Worst of all was the queer action of the compass. Try as he would, he could not keep to his course. Moreover, he knew that he was flying badly, the machine hovering always on the ragged edge of getting out of control. He had several bad side-slips. All these things, added to the inevitable physical discomforts which accompany flights at very great heights, tended to increase his nervousness.

"I've had about enough of this!" he exclaimed finally. "I'm going to slide down a ways and see if that'll help."

A few seconds later he experienced a shock like nothing he had known since the day of his first trip aloft in an aeroplane. He suddenly shot down out of the clouds, but he emerged

wrong side up! He was actually flying with his head pointing toward earth!

He righted himself without difficulty, but with the first twinge of actual fear he had known in months. He remembered hearing other flyers say that once one got above the clouds it was infinitely worse than flying in the darkness, and that nothing seemed to be normal, but it was his first experience.

"I think," he declared with an involuntary shudder, "that I'll stick a trifle closer to Mother Earth! I'd rather take a chance with Brother Boche than go through that sort of thing!"

Finding, to his relief, that the compass had ceased its uncertain and bewildering wobblings, he again straightened his course. He kept to great heights, now and then driving up through the clouds, but only for short intervals. Again and again he sighted planes at various heights and distances, and upon seeing them he usually bolted into the shreds and streamers of vapor, flying through them for a few moments, then planing down again and using his eyes until another disappearance seemed advisable.

These tactics were anything but agreeable. He was flying at such an altitude that he was in constant physical discomfort. He had some difficulty in breathing, his head ached cruelly,

and his heart action was disconcertingly irregular, while his suffering from cold was extreme, and his fingers were so numb that he had trouble operating the controls. But he simply dared not go down until more sure of safety. In his present physical condition he knew that he was incapable of putting up a fight, and that flight must be his course.

Through sheer luck he had evidently struck a section of the front where the German planes were comparatively few that morning, and finally, with a great feeling of thankfulness, he saw far beneath him the network of the two lines of trenches.

Half an hour later the two-seater planed down to the landing-field, and a thoroughly frozen pilot, more dead than alive, climbed numbly down from the seat and staggered toward the hangars.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE EYES OF THE BIG GUNS

“THAT’S the spot!” Dick called through the speaking-tube; “that patch of woods the other side of the ploughed field!”

Dan Ericsson at once swung the nose of the plane in that direction, and the flyers swept over the green mass of the woods, both of them peering down in an effort to see through the enveloping screen of leaves and branches. For all their efforts they could see nothing. The wood might have contained several thousand men, might have been empty—or it might have concealed the German battery for which they were hunting.

“Sure you’re right?” Dan asked, a little uneasily. “We don’t want to be responsible for wasting several thousand dollars’ worth of shells on a harmless bunch of trees!”

“I’m right, fast enough,” Dick answered confidently. “Swing over them again, a little lower down.”

Once more the plane, like a circling hawk, swooped over the woods, and this time Dick’s

sharp eyes were rewarded. He first made out a heap of branches that didn't look just right; then his eye picked out the screened barrel of a heavy gun, a glint of metal, and the gray-green figures of several German artillerymen.

"All right!" he cried; "I've got 'em! Swing off again; the show is n't to begin for five minutes."

Again Dan swung off in a circle, never getting very far from the patch of woods. The two flyers were on duty this morning as the eyes of the big guns. The day before, a scouting plane had marked down the position of a concealed German battery which had for a day or so been flinging shells into the Allied lines with considerable effect. French batteries had been concentrated for the destruction of these pieces, and the attempt was to begin at nine o'clock.

As the French gunners were several miles away from their target, they were wholly unable to watch the results of their fire, and the duty of "spotting" fell upon the airmen. Below the plane streamed out slim trailers of wire, the aerals of a wireless apparatus. It was Dick's duty to watch the bursting shells from the French batteries, and send back to the distant gunners word of just how far off the mark their shots were falling.

Up to that moment the Germans evidently did not realize that the position of their craftily concealed guns had been discovered, and that the plane was there for the purpose of "spotting," for they made no effort to drive it off, as they certainly would do the instant they understood the real significance of its presence.

For three of the five minutes left, Dan bored away from the wood as though he had not the slightest interest in its possible contents, then swung round sharply and came flying back. The maneuver was perfectly timed. He had brought Dick back into an excellent position for observation just as a French shell dropped into the ploughed field, perhaps three hundred yards to one side of the wood and an equal distance short of it.

Instantly Dick was at work, and a cryptic message went through the air to the man in charge of the wireless station behind the bellowing guns.

"Number 1," read the message, "9.30. 300 M."

This meant that the shell, which had been fired from gun No. 1 of the French battery, had missed the target by about three hundred meters. The "9.30" told the gunners in which direction the error had been. The target was assumed to

be the center of the face of a clock. Thus Dick's figures meant that the position of the first shell corresponded to the position of the hour-hand of a clock marking half-past nine. By combining this with the extent of the error, the officer in command of the battery could at once correct his elevation and lateral direction.

A few seconds after the first shell had struck, the second burst. This one soared clear over the wood, coming to earth in a thicket far beyond it and clear to the right. Dick's message read, "No. 2, 500 M. long, 300 M. 3.00."

And then, before the third shell dropped, a concealed battery of German high-angle guns took a hand in the game and began reaching for the plane with shrapnel.

"Rotten shooting!" Dan shouted scornfully through the tube. "I can hang on for a bit this low until they make things hotter."

Dick nodded, far too busy to answer. He knew that with the air around the plane torn by shrapnel the accurate sending of messages would be increasingly difficult, and that before many moments the situation would be further complicated by the arrival of German combat-planes. And he was trying frantically to get the distant guns "on" the target before he and Dan were driven off.

There followed some feverish minutes. Guns One, Two, and Four were busily engaged in plumping their shells down into empty ground, while Number Three's first shot had been almost a center. Evidently something had gone wrong, however, for the other three guns did not seem to be correcting their fire.

Desperate at this apparent check, Dick began sending one message over and over: "Number Three on! Number Three on! Number Three on!" hoping to get this one word through and abandoning his attempts to correct the fire of the other guns. If the battery commander should learn that one of his guns was on the target and its shells reaching their mark, he could correct the fire of his other pieces by that means.

"That's close enough," Dan called back, as a shrapnel from the banging anti-aircraft guns exploded uncomfortably close to them; "we'll go up!"

From the higher level it was even more difficult to do accurate spotting, because of the smoke and dust stirred up by the bursting French projectiles and that of the German high-angles. But Dick saw only too plainly that not only had the three erring guns failed to get "on," but Number Three was still hammering at the mere

edge of the wood, and its shells were doing no actual damage.

"Work fast!" warned Dan. "Couple of Fokkers coming!"

Convinced now that something had gone wrong with the wireless and that he could not hope to get a message through that way, Dick hastily scrawled the corrections for all four guns on a square of thin, tough paper, rolled it into a small compass, and pushed it into a cylinder tied to the leg of a carrier-pigeon which he took from a wicker cage fastened to the side of his seat, then flung the bird as far out into the air as he could.

The pigeon obeyed its homing instinct with the marvelous certainty that makes its kind so valuable for the carrying of messages, but unhappily the instinct triumphed over everything else, and instead of flying straight away from the plane, the bird sheered over toward it. Instantly the tremendous suction of the spinning propeller caught him, he was sucked into the whirling blades and knocked to atoms in an instant.

The last chance of long-distance communication with the distant battery was destroyed! The only way now to get word to them was to take it there! He didn't take the time to shout

a signal to Dan, but jerked on the cord tied to his wrist, and Dan responded as though Dick had seized the controls himself.

Then, just as they were starting off, Dick felt through the receiving-apparatus strapped to his helmet the signals from the battery station, an insistent repetition of his call, then the crisp question, —

“Where are you? Why don’t you signal?”

Once more Dick ordered Dan to change the direction of his flight; again he began sending out the all-important figures to the distant guns.

The sudden sharp explosion of their own machine-gun almost in his ear startled him; he glanced up just long enough to see that Dan was firing at the nearest of three or four converging German planes, then went back to his work.

His business was to get the correct range through to the sweating gunners, no matter what happened to the plane which carried him, and he felt that Dan’s wonderful marksmanship could be trusted to give him a few minutes, even though the enemy planes were faster and outnumbered them four to one.

So, while Dan simultaneously kept up a running fight with the darting Fokkers and kept his observer as close as possible to the bombarded

strip of woodland, Dick concentrated his efforts on trying to get through his messages.

How long the unequal combat continued neither man knew. Nothing but Dan's superb gunnery enabled the plane to maintain its position as long as it did. He managed to send one German down out of control, and to surround himself with such a sheet of flying metal as to make the other three maneuver cautiously, until at last Dick's anxious eyes saw three shells in succession burst in the heart of the wood, and he knew that he had finally succeeded and that the full strength of the battery was "on"!

Then he jerked frantically on the cord and gave Dan the signal to go down. Instead of responding, Dan merely jerked feebly on the cord in turn.

For an instant Dick did not take in what had happened, then he noticed Dan's queer position. The Minnesotan had been hit!

Dick took the controls and hit the slope of descent best calculated for safety. Fighting was out of the question. He could not reach the Lewis, which was operated from Dan's seat, and his only weapon was the automatic pistol in its holster and an ordinary service rifle held in clamps beside his seat. And in the same instant that his hands closed on the controls, he real-

ized that he could not possibly escape: the Fokkers were too close, his own height too great, and his speed too little in comparison with theirs.

It was the first time that he had absolutely given himself up for lost. Even in his single-handed fight back of the German lines he had felt somehow that he was going to come through all right, but now every possibility of escape seemed closed.

Yet in the very moment that he gave up, help as unexpected as it was effective arrived. Dick's first consciousness that something had happened came when he glanced over his shoulder to see how close his pursuers were. They were close enough—too close for comfort! And yet, with their victim almost within their grasp, they suddenly flung up their noses and climbed, instead of continuing their downward swoops. At the same instant Dick's plane careened and side-slipped as though it had dropped into a bad air-pocket, two roaring streaks darted by him, one on the left, the other on the right, both so close that the wind of their passage had rocked his machine as a rowboat is rocked by the waves from a steamer, and two angry little Nieuports darted at the Huns, their machine-guns spitting as they went!

Dick did not wait to see the outcome of the

fight. The intervention of the French combat-planes had given him his chance to get clear, and he planed down swiftly toward the nearest point of safety back of the Allied lines, his one concern the seriousness of Dan's wound.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE GREEN WAVE

THE German's machine-gun bullet had performed very considerately. It had passed through the fleshy part of Dan's shoulder, tearing the muscles without striking the bone, and inflicting a painful but by no means serious wound.

It was an unfortunate shot, inasmuch as it deprived Colonel Farle of one of his best flyers at a moment when he needed the full strength of his squadron.

The morning that Lieutenants Allen and Ericsson spent spotting for the French guns was the last bit of what might be called detached work the squadron was to know for many a day.

For several days thereafter, scout-planes brought in persistent reports of great and increasing activity behind the German lines. It was known, of course, that since the collapse of Russian resistance, immense forces of men and guns had been moved by the foe from the eastern to the western front, and the weight of these

fresh divisions had already been felt by the British forces farther to the north. Now it was evident that the foe intended a huge effort farther to the south, against that part of the line held by French and American forces.

With the first intimation of the gathering storm, the activity of the air forces of both sides increased. All squadrons along the front were kept at full strength, mechanics labored night and day maintaining the planes in instant readiness for service, and the flyers were continually in the air.

The object of the Allied planes was to dominate the air to such an extent that they could fly at will above the German lines, keep close track of the concentrations at different points of men and guns, and so keep the high commands in possession of accurate knowledge which would enable them to be ready for the parrying of the blow when it should fall.

The German airmen, on the other hand, fought a more purely defensive action. They sought to hide through their own activities the movements of their comrades of the land forces.

During these feverish days — which had about them the same heavy, oppressive air which precedes a violent thunderstorm — Dick Allen saw service so severe and constant as to make his

previous experience seem like a mere preliminary to the real thing. Like the rest of the men in the squadron, he simply had no time to feel tired: there was never any let-up of sufficient length to let a man realize how much force he had expended and how badly in need of rest he stood.

When the period of strain finally ended, the beginning of the bombardment which initiated the great German thrust that was to end in what may be called the Second Battle of the Marne came as a positive relief.

Before the actual beginning of the German attacks, Dick Allen had brought himself to believe that he was going to be an eye-witness of the most stupendous German failure that the war had yet produced. He said as much to Dan on one of his hurried visits to the latter's cot in a hospital no great distance back of the lines.

"I tell you, Dan, this is the beginning of the end," he insisted confidently. "I know that all the spring the Boches have been gaining ground, that we've been falling back everywhere, even that we've been losing a frightful number of guns and prisoners. But that doesn't shake my confidence.

"I figure it this way: Our main job is the whittling down of the German forces. This

whittling process goes on more rapidly when the German is taking the offensive than it does when we're attacking. So I believe that we're letting the enemy keep the initiative, trading him ground for his losses, letting him bleed himself until the time comes for the great counter-stroke, when he'll be too weak to stop it."

Dan Ericsson was too restless and irritable over his enforced inactivity to be optimistic about anything.

"I hope you're right," he answered grimly, and that was his sole comment.

But when the tremendous artillery action gave place to the first infantry thrusts, Dick's confidence began to crumble.

One morning during the first week in June, only a few days after the Germans had come storming across the river Aisne in the great rush toward the Marne, he witnessed an operation, small in itself, yet typical of what was going on along the whole length of the front against which the gray-green masses of the foe were flinging themselves.

He was up alone in a little Spad plane, having been set to watch a certain restricted section of the front, his own plane being merely a link in a long chain of watchful, circling aerial outposts. It happened that on this particular morning the

German air forces were inactive, and he had plenty of time to watch what went on beneath him.

For some little time he did not realize that anything was happening directly beneath him. East and west the air was thick with smoke and shaken by the shattering explosions of heavy guns, but immediately below him it seemed quiet. Then his sharp eyes began to pick out details, and he saw that the quiet was only temporary.

The shadow of his plane passed over the battered ruins of a village which defended a bridge-head over a small stream. The village was full of French infantry and machine-guns. Back of the village, taking advantage of every favorable fold in the ground, were three or four batteries of the famous French "75's," holding their fire, waiting for the enemy to betray himself before disclosing their own position. Once he had located the French, Dick began hunting for the foe. Only too soon he found them! On the far side of the stream, hidden from the French by obstacles which could not shelter it from his observation, the ground was fairly crawling with the helmeted figures. Two or three patches of woods and a long, sharp-sided ravine were packed with them, and he saw for the first time the new "infantry cannon," very light guns

which actually accompanied the foot, being hauled by men instead of horses.

Dick did what he could to signal to the men beneath him the presence and location of the foe, dropping several hastily scrawled messages fastened to wooden darts with leaden heads; but even had his information reached them, it would have come too late. As he watched, the attack commenced.

Overmatched from the very outset by at least three times their number of guns, the French "75's" stuck to their position until to hold it longer was merely to make a useless sacrifice, then tried to withdraw, but succeeded in getting clear with no more than half their pieces.

Then while the German guns poured shells into the village, the distant woods and gullies sprouted with moving, gray-green dots, which swarmed down upon the bridge, or pushed into the water where there was evidently a ford in the narrow stream.

Once, twice, three times the French beat back the advancing foe, in spite of the pounding shells. Dick could see the German masses wither under the sweeping, spraying fire of machine-guns, see the heaps of dead which marked every futile effort — and yet one attack followed another, and there seemed to be no decrease in the number

of attacking Germans in spite of their visible and heavy losses.

It took perhaps half an hour for the inevitable to happen. At the end of that time the slender force of defenders had practically ceased to exist. A few scattered dots in pale blue, firing as they fell back, melted into the hills behind the village, where the foe was now swarming about the captured machine-guns, and the wounded which the beaten French had been unable to carry away with them.

Even before the end of Dick's time on patrol, the appearance of the captured position had entirely changed. German engineers had come hurrying up from somewhere, the ruins of the village had been turned into a veritable little fortress studded with nests of machine-guns, the battered bridge had been repaired, and the engineers were already busy spanning the stream with another bridge. Evidently the point was to be employed for the swift passage of large bodies of the enemy.

Dick flew back, oppressed with a sense of helplessness. There were so many of the Germans! They seemed to spring out of the earth like the armed warriors who came up after the sowing of the dragon's teeth in the ancient myth. Against double, even triple their number, the

French could have held the village and the bridge. With reinforcements they might have held it as it was. But they had had to face five or six times their number, and there had been no reinforcements!

And Dick knew that much the same thing was happening on a front which stretched from Rheims to Soissons!

When he returned to Headquarters he found everything in an orderly but feverish confusion. The battered château and the sprawling village which had sheltered the men of the squadron for so many weeks and months lay straight in the path of the foe's advance, and there seemed at the moment no possibility that that advance would be brought to a stop before it had penetrated even deeper into the heart of France. Colonel Farle was moving his forces before the pressure became too great, and while there was time for the removal of all sorts of *matériel*, which otherwise might have to be destroyed or allowed to fall into the hands of the advancing foe.

But Dick was destined to be affected even more deeply than most of his comrades by the withdrawal. He answered a summons to Headquarters, where he found Colonel Farle doing the impossible by accomplishing several things

at once, and was informed that he had been ordered transferred to another squadron.

Dick was bitterly disappointed at the news, and Colonel Farle, busy as he was, took time to speak a few very comforting words.

“You are being transferred to one of the newly formed American flying units,” he said, “and that unquestionably means an advance in rank. I am sorry to have you go. You and your comrades of the squadron have made me proud of my command and my men.”

So that night, instead of assisting in the task of getting the squadron transferred to new quarters farther to the rear, Dick Allen was traveling toward his new post on a French military railroad, while behind him he knew that the Green Wave was still hurling itself against the Allied lines.

CHAPTER XXXIV

PARIS WAITS

DICK began this night journey in a thoroughly wretched state of mind. Above all else he was oppressed by the consciousness—which never left him—of that steady pressure of the German hordes. This feeling had been increased by the hasty withdrawal of Colonel Farle's forces from the position where they had been for so long, and by his own sudden transfer to another point.

The one rift in the gloom was the prospect of immediate service. He felt that the tremendous activities of the past weeks would be infinitely preferable to such enforced idleness as Dan's. He felt that this was the moment of supreme effort for every man in the Allied forces, that every one of them was being called upon for the greatest exertions of which he was capable. That there was any region in which seeming inactivity was the prevailing order of things never entered his head.

When, at a very early hour on a June morning,

he presented himself at the headquarters of the American division to which he was to be attached, situated in one of those little French villages now nameless in the dispatches, but destined one day to be famous, he found the customary scene of activity, and had to wait for some time before anybody would see him.

Then a staff-major, who looked as though he felt that he had a great many more important things to do, came out and spoke to him with most unsatisfactory briefness.

"Lieutenant Allen?" he asked, in that unpleasant tone employed by some men which always conveys the impression that they don't believe what has been told them. "Oh, yes, I believe you—yes, you are to report at once to Major Ferguson in Paris."

Dick could not repress an exclamation of astonishment.

"Paris!" he repeated.

The Major blinked at him.

"Paris!" he repeated, as though not used to having to say a thing twice.

Dick recovered himself and saluted.

"Very well, sir," he said, and went out of the office.

And all the way to Paris, Dick saw things which made him believe that nobody except him-

self and a few others really appreciated the deadly seriousness of the situation at the front, where those thin, bending lines were giving way under the awful weight of the Green Wave.

He had believed that every available regiment of reserve troops was being flung eastward to become part of that human barrier, and yet he could not actually see any evidences that unusual numbers of men, guns, or stores were being sent to the front. It was incredible, but it was true!

During most of his journey his sole companion, a grizzled French major of infantry, slept noisily and thoroughly. Dick resented the other's snoring, being unable to sleep for his own part, and was unaffectedly glad on several counts when the Major woke up, looked about him, and said, "*Bonjour, monsieur!*" with the characteristic politeness of his people — which is even in evidence early in the morning.

To him the American made guarded confession of the doubts and fears which harassed him. The Major was sober, but by no means inclined to agree with Dick's gloomy forebodings.

"Of course we are being driven back," he agreed instantly. "It is inevitable that we should be driven back. It is possible that we may be driven back much farther than we like to withdraw. What would you? Suppose a man is

standing in a gateway, guarding the passage, and another man, bigger than the one in the gate, flings himself upon him. The first man will have to give ground before he can bring the other to a stop.

“It is a law of nature just as much as it is a law of war. If a moving body strikes a stationary body of about the same size and weight, the latter will have to go back until the energy of the former has spent itself. That is all!”

Upon which the Major, apparently dismissing the subject as one of minor importance, lighted a very large cigar, looked placidly out of the window, and began talking about the fertile appearance of the country through which they were passing.

Dick could not help being in a measure put at ease by the older man's total lack of nervousness, but it remained for the appearance and attitude of Paris itself completely to restore his peace of mind.

Paris, he discovered within an hour of his arrival, was by no means ignorant of the possibilities which the immediate future held in store. The city knew that the invader was closer to its gates than he had been since the first months of the war. And yet there was no panic, no apparent fear. For the most part the Parisians

were calm and unafraid. Two things seemed to give them confidence: the constantly increasing numbers of brown-clad American soldiers, and Foch!

Dick had little time for studying the attitude of the Parisian mind. He lost no time in reporting to Major Ferguson, and a host of duties at once occupied all his time. The complete change in the nature of his work seemed queer. One day he was involved in the rush and haste of Farle's withdrawal within sound of the German guns: forty-eight hours later he was part of a new organization which had not yet smelled powder, doing his part in the work of organization and preparation, as though this was the very beginning of operations instead of a vast crisis which had come after four long years of fighting!

Familiar faces were to be encountered on all sides. Almost the first man Dick saw was Bob Holmquist—a captain now—and there were two or three of the men he had known in the training-camp in America.

Before the departure from Paris they had another accession of strength. Dan Ericsson arrived from the hospital, looking a little thin and pale, but declaring himself fit for immediate service.

“Another day,” he said, “and I’d have knocked down that surgeon and climbed out of a window! They kept me there a week after I was ready to fly!”

Upon Dan’s arrival, Holmquist declared that the moment for an official reunion had come, and led Dick and Dan to the same café where they had found him upon their first arrival in Paris, and they found a table in the corner of the room. The appearance of the crowd was very much the same: the one noticeable change was the great increase in the number of American uniforms.

“Well, here we are!” exclaimed Holmquist. “This is n’t just the way the Three Musketeers had planned to get together, but it will do very well. We haven’t managed to sweep the air clear of Germans, nor put an end to the war as we really hoped to do, but we’ve had some hard knocks and given hard ones in exchange, and we’re together in plenty of time for the big show!”

He grinned as his companions looked at him rather blankly.

“Oh, I mean it! You two can pull faces just as long as you please; I know what I’m talking about. You may think this is a mighty black hour. Perhaps it is, but it’s the dark hour

before the dawn. And to-morrow we go up to the front!"

"And probably waste two weeks whipping these youngsters into shape!" grumbled Dan.

This time there was about Bob Holmquist's grin a look of superior intelligence.

"Waste nothing, you old grouch!" he answered. "Of course, a mere lieutenant isn't supposed to know things. You can't be expected to—"

"I suppose a mighty captain knows just what's going to happen?" suggested Dick.

"This particular mighty captain has been told just enough so that he can cure your ill-temper," answered Bob. "Of course I can't betray staff secrets to mere striplings like you, who are n't to be trusted with valuable information, but I can say this much: I happen to know the name of the place that's to be our headquarters, I know that the hangars are ready, that the planes are being set up this minute, and that before we're a week older we'll be in the thick of bigger things than any of us have seen yet!"

CHAPTER XXXV

THE BLACK HAWKS

IN the first faint gray light of an August morning, the camp of the squadron that was destined to be known as the "Black Hawks" presented a lively appearance.

Lights twinkled in all the buildings, motorcycles sped this way and that, hurrying figures darted in all directions. Out on the flying-field sixteen planes, ghostly and vague in the uncertain light, stood in a long, even row in front of the gaping hangars. About the planes dozens of men were busy, and there was an incessant rattle of tools and mutter of speech.

At the far end of the line half a dozen voices suddenly began to sing. The lines were jerky, the tune old, but the song carried with it a certain spirit and "go":

"What would the infantry do without us?
What makes the gunners so keen about us?
Who keeps the Boche in his dugout tight,
Worried and nervous day and night?
We are the eyes of the belching guns!
We are the birds that feed on Huns!
Swift as the arrows that sped of yore,
The Black Hawks of the Flying Corps!"

Somewhere out beyond the line of hills behind which the camp of the Black Hawks lay, heavy guns were already in action, hammering steadily, and farther away there was a lively bickering of rifle-fire. A bugle blew sharply, and from the mess-hall groups and knots of men hurried out and moved toward the flying-field.

Now from the long line of waiting planes there rose the sudden sharp explosions of a powerful motor, which gradually settled into a steady droning roar. One after another the shining motors came to life, drowning out the eager voices which called to each other. A cloud of bluish smoke rose above the field.

The first red shaft of sunlight shot over the line of the distant horizon, and as it did so a plane lifted itself across the short grass and into the air. After an interval another followed it, then another and another. For a time no other sound was audible than the roar of sixteen motors. Finally all sixteen of them were in the air; the sounds of the first ones were already growing fainter. By the time the morning light had begun to spread over the field, nothing was left except knots of mechanics staring eastward after the vanishing planes.

From his position midway of the squadron, Dick Allen could look backward or forward over

the planes, stretched out in regular formation like a flock of gigantic geese. For a time they headed east, then, following the signal of the leading plane, swung to the left, paralleling the line of the Allied positions.

Presently there came droning up from the earth below them a second swarm of planes, a French squadron joining forces with the Americans. There was a brief exchange of smoke-signals; then the two squadrons, keeping some distance apart, all headed to the east, the French slightly higher and somewhat in advance of the Americans.

Below them, had they looked down, the aviators might have seen the earth swarming with troops, the roads lined with moving columns. Seen from above, each regiment would have showed a sea of little pink faces as the infantrymen looked up and cheered themselves hoarse at the spectacle overhead. But the bird-men did not look down. To-morrow, perhaps, they might have dealings with the crawling creatures of the earth, but to-day they had eyes only for the air ahead of them.

None of the flyers knew exactly what had happened during the last few days, save in the most general way. In their isolated camp, close to the front, yet hedged off from it, little infor-

mation reached them. Their knowledge was limited to what they had actually seen. They had watched the gradual stiffening of the French and American lines, the decreasing velocity of the Green Wave, the gradual gathering behind the Allied lines of the vast numbers of reserves which were to be flung forward in the counter-thrust. They knew that the thing they had hoped and prayed for seemed to be coming, but they did not know that it had really come, that for the second time Foch was going to strike when the foe least expected the blow, and that this time the thrust was to go deeper and wound more gravely.

But on this morning their concern was not with the moving masses beneath them. They had gone out in force to seek the foe and fight him wherever found!

An hour of swift cruising passed before the foe showed himself at all. Dick had begun to think that the German air forces had completely withdrawn themselves and refused the issue of a general action, when he saw the first of them, far below and off to the left, darting this way and that as though uncertain in which direction to attempt an escape.

Instantly two of the French planes detached themselves from the squadron and darted in

pursuit. Lower and lower swooped the fleeing German, evidently seeking the protection of his land-batteries, drawing the pursuing Frenchmen after him. Closer and closer they came. Now the guns below were reaching for them: white smoke-puffs began dotting the air about them, but unmindful of this the two Nieuports sped on, intent only on closing with the foe.

Suddenly the air swarmed with German planes where a moment before there had been only one! The ruse had succeeded: the single Fokker had drawn the two Frenchmen away from the support of their comrades and into a very swarm of Boche machines which had suddenly shot up into the air to meet them.

There was no need for signals. Every airman in the two squadrons saw the plight of the daring Nieuports, saw the chance that lay before him, and shot forward.

Intervals were maintained for the sake of safety, but formations were to a great extent lost. From the leading planes of the two squadrons cautioning signals were flashed back to those behind. In aerial combats where several machines are engaged on each side, each airman must keep his distance, or his machine will be a greater source of danger to his own forces than to the foe.

A plane is a pretty big machine; it travels at tremendous speed, and it requires considerable space in which to maneuver. A squadron moving too compactly may come to grief without even encountering the foe—and it was with the intention of preventing such mishaps that the leading planes were now signaling those behind them to preserve their intervals.

As he closed in with the rest, Dick caught flashing glimpses of the first preliminary combat between the two detached French planes and the swarm of Germans about them. He saw one German go fluttering down, and almost at the same instant a Nieuport vanished in a bright flash of flame followed by a huge ball of black smoke, a German shot having struck and exploded its gas-tank.

While the main Franco-American forces were still some distance away, the second Frenchman (Dick did not learn until long afterward that it was none other than Godard himself) was dashed to destruction, but ended his career in a glorious victory for all that.

For several minutes, by a masterly exhibition of flying skill, he had eluded the enemy machines which surrounded him, making no effort to return their fire, but simply maneuvering until he got exactly the position he wanted. When finally

he gained it, he turned his plane into a huge projectile and launched it at the foe, hurtling down through the very center of the swarming Germans, carrying no fewer than three of them with him as he crashed to earth!

Thus at the outset four German planes were put down with a loss of two French machines, and the main forces closed in inspired by Godard's last feat of daring.

For no more than a few seconds did either side maintain any sort of formation. One moment the hostile squadrons were rushing headlong upon each other, every man who could train his weapon without endangering a friendly craft pouring in a stream of bullets; the next, the aerial battle had disintegrated into a number of detached combats—here several planes engaged on each side, there two hostile airmen locked in a duel as though they had the air wholly to themselves; at still another point a single plane struggling manfully against two or more foes.

It was quite impossible to follow any set plan of action, impossible even to keep in mind the "do's" and "dont's" of the training-camps. Each flyer fought according to his own peculiar methods, endeavoring so to place himself that his peculiar abilities could have full scope.

Holmquist, for instance, was primarily an "artful dodger," able to maneuver with such startling speed and dexterity that he could strike again and again from unexpected angles. Ericsson, on the other hand, indulged in no fancy flying, but sought only a fair chance for his deadly trigger-hand.

Dick Allen could never afterward give any clear account of his own part in the fight. He retained clear enough pictures of details: of darting at hostile planes which suddenly vanished from in front of him; of wild swerves and dashes to escape threatening destruction; of seeing one Fokker dart past, the machine undamaged, but the pilot stone dead in his seat; of abruptly realizing that he had exhausted his supply of ammunition for his Lewis—and then suddenly comprehending that the remaining German planes were in headlong flight and that the battle was over!

Sixteen of the Black Hawks had flown proudly out from the field behind the sheltering hills that morning; twelve of them returned at the end of the fight. Of the eighteen French planes which had taken part in the engagement, seven had been sent down, but two of these, it afterwards developed, had been able to land behind their own lines.

A total loss, then, of nine machines out of the thirty-four engaged!

Far heavier, however, had been the German losses. Outnumbered from the outset—only twenty-nine of their planes had been counted—they seemed to have been rather demoralized by Godard's meteor-like plunge through their very midst, and to have fought from the start with no seeming hope of victory. Only twelve of their planes were actually seen to make their escape.

Although four of the Black Hawks had been killed in the fight, it was the loss of Godard, news of which reached the camp soon after the return of the squadron, which had the most depressing effect. Genter, Cameron, Bidwell, and Edsell, the four Americans who had fallen, would all be missed, but there were dozens of others to take their places, while the war might not produce a second Godard!

When Dick was sent out on patrol duty long before dawn the next morning, he rather resented the task. After the events of the previous day he would have been glad of a little rest. Afterwards, however, he was glad of the chance.

He had been out for a couple of hours, with the air to himself, and had swept around near the scene of the battle. It was just growing light on the earth, when out of the sunrise clouds

came winging a single German plane. Instantly Dick prepared for action, swung the nose of his plane toward the foe and began to rise. But the German made no effort to meet his attack, and a moment later Dick was astonished to see the other aviator put both hands above his head—the usual signal that he had been put out of action.

Unwilling to strike after this, and yet fearful of a trick of some sort, Dick changed his course, but kept a watchful eye on the German.

The latter swept down to a much lower level, then, just as he crossed the spot over which Godard's splendid finish had come, he dropped something from the under-side of his plane.

“I thought so!” Dick exclaimed angrily. “Fool that I was to let him slip!”

But hardly had he swung a second time toward the hostile airman, when he checked himself with a sharp exclamation. It was not a bomb that the German had dropped. Between the Fokker and the earth fluttered a swarm of bright-colored dots.

The German had been sent out in the early morning, before the deadly business of the day had really commenced, to mark with flowers the spot at which the bravest of his foes had fallen!

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE RECEDING WAVE

SOME day years hence, when the whole history of the Great War has been written, it will be possible to get a clear and comprehensive idea of the battle, or rather the series of battles, which accomplished the checking and rolling back of the Green Wave.

At the time these battles were fought, none of the participants, not even the airmen who could look down from above on wide stretches of country, could grasp the complete significance of what was being done. They saw detached contests, important in themselves, but of real significance because of their relation to other fragments of the conflict which were hidden from sight—or even which had not yet taken place. Each day's events became possible because of what had happened yesterday, and cleared the way for the operations of to-morrow.

But even though no man could see everything, could not hope even to understand all that he did see, there unquestionably did begin to spread

throughout the Allied forces a feeling of confidence, almost of triumph. Men knew that the blow struck by the Germans had been perhaps the heaviest delivered since the outbreak of the war; it had seemed on the point of succeeding completely; the Green Wave had washed deeper than ever before — yet it had been stopped and flung back; and everywhere sprang up and grew the feeling that never again would the danger be so great, never again would the foe come so close, that perhaps the balance had shifted for the last time.

On that day when the hostile air-fleets fought above the fields of France, Dick Allen saw little of what was passing on the earth below him, and for two days thereafter he knew little of what was going on, save that every road within sight was glutted with traffic from morning until night, and that everything — save the ambulances — was moving toward the front.

But two or three days later the Three Musketeers were detailed for service which took them into the thickest of the fighting, and brought them for the first time into close coöperation with the land forces.

Theirs was by no means the only work done by the Black Hawks that day, but theirs was a detached expedition, and it was the first time

that the trio had actually served together with a single object.

It was early in the morning when they rose from the flying-field, Dan and Bob in battle-planes, Dick alone in a heavier machine of the bombing type. Attached to the fuselage of his machine were two bombs, each weighing several hundred pounds, and carrying a bursting charge sufficient to sink a battleship or destroy a good-sized public building.

A trigger-like device, located within easy reach of Dick's hand, enabled him instantly to detach either or both of the bombs.

Dick's plane was the important member of the little fleet, the other two being merely the armed convoy, whose duty it was to keep off hostile planes while he flew straight to his objective and dropped his bombs.

As soon as they were in the air they assumed a regular formation, Dick flying at an altitude of about three thousand feet, while the two battle-planes soared above and beyond him.

The upper air was already bright with the summer sunlight, but the country beneath the three bird-men was still wrapped in shadow. Even so, the hostile armies were awake and active. The fighting had hardly ceased during the night; it had merely died down; and now the

batteries were again in full cry. The flyers could see the red flashes of the discharges and of the bursting shells. But it was still too dark for any details of the fighting or of the positions of the opposing forces to be visible.

This air-raid of the Three Musketeers, while a part of the whole vast battle that was driving the Germans out of the great salient they had forced in the line between Soissons and Rheims, was purely local in character. A certain part of the German force, already beginning to fall back and engaged now in fighting merely rear-guard actions, must, in the course of its retreat, cross a small stream. For a distance of some three miles the stream was spanned by a single bridge. There were several fords, but it was possible that the Germans were ignorant of their location. If the bridge could be destroyed it would mean that the withdrawal of the German forces in this particular pocket would be seriously clogged, and that the number of guns and prisoners would be greatly increased.

There was nothing unusual in the problem presented. The Germans would be perfectly aware of the value of the bridge to their retreat and would certainly make every effort to prevent its destruction. Just what form this defense would take could not be conjectured. It would

depend upon the conditions attending the German retreat. If this movement was attended by any considerable degree of confusion and disorganization, the bridge might be watched by no more than a detail of infantry or cavalry. If the Germans (as seemed probable from information already received) were withdrawing in good order, the point would be held in force, defended by anti-aircraft guns as well as field-pieces, and probably by aircraft as well.

Leaving the hammering guns behind them — for the bridge was of course situated some distance in the rear of the line the Germans were now defending — the three airmen flew a straight course for their objective. The gray mists below them were beginning to dissipate under the morning sun, and ere long Dick could make out the silver course of the stream. A moment later his eye found the slim tracery of the bridge.

Warily he began to descend, the other planes hovering close, all three of the men watching for hostile planes. They dropped down a couple of hundred feet, and simultaneously German guns below commenced firing, and two Fokkers came slanting swiftly up from the earth.

Dick paid no attention to the hostile aircraft beyond climbing up long enough to give his convoy time to slip down and get between him and

the foe, but centered his efforts on getting down close enough to the bridge to make sure of his stroke. He had no intention of keeping to a safe height and risking a miss: he was going to get close enough for a sure shot.

Above him as he dropped down he heard the rattling guns of the four planes. He was glad the German craft had put in an appearance. Their presence in the air temporarily kept the batteries beneath from firing, and gave him that much more time in which to swing down close to his target.

Had anything been needed to increase his eagerness, the sight which met his eyes as he circled down would have accomplished it. Perhaps a mile from the bridge, in the direction of the Allied lines, a body of men in the gray-green uniform of the foe came over a rise and marched down the slope eastward. Behind them a long column began to unwind itself. The raid had come just in time: already the retreating Germans were coming to the bridge.

Without so much as glancing up to note the progress of the four-cornered fight above him, Dick shot down until he was not more than a few hundred feet above the bridge, then headed into the wind and darted for the mark.

Not for an instant did he doubt his success.

Too many times, both in France and in America, he had practiced this same trick with dummy bombs — sometimes from a moving plane, sometimes sitting on the top of a scaffolding and flinging his bombs at a moving object passing beneath him.

At what he knew was precisely the right instant, he pressed the trigger which released the bombs, and at the same instant tilted the nose of his plane to swing above the force of the explosion. His nerves tight, he waited for the tearing crash. None came! He could not understand. Even had he missed the bridge, the bombs would have exploded as they fell into the water. Could — !

He glanced down. The two ugly bombs still hung from beneath the plane. In some way the mechanism had clogged, and his pull on the trigger had failed to release them!

It was difficult to imagine a worse situation. There he was, hundreds of feet below the zone of possible safety, with the German guns already beginning to fire at him in spite of the danger of hitting their own planes! And he could not possibly land to make repairs. The two bombs hung beneath the landing-plane. If he were to try to land he would only blow himself and the plane to atoms!

Craning his neck over the side of the plane he peered down at the bombs, and instantly saw the trouble: a knot in the heavy cord leading from the trigger to the release had become fouled with a strut. From his seat it was impossible to reach it, but —

He first pulled the trigger back into its original position, set the plane on a long, gradual slant upward, unhooked his life-belt, crawled cautiously out of his seat, then, moving swiftly but with infinite caution, wriggled back the three feet necessary, reached over, hanging on with one hand, jerked at the fouled cord, then leaped back to his seat as the plane careened wildly and almost slipped out of his control.

A moment later, unmindful of the shrapnel that screamed and whistled around him, he was again bearing down on the bridge. A second time he gauged speed and distance, a second time he pulled the trigger, and this time felt the slight lift of the plane as it rose, relieved of the weight of the heavy bombs.

There was silence for a few seconds, then a terrific, splintering crash clearly audible above the roar of the motor. He looked back. Through the pall of smoke he could make out the smashed structure of the bridge, damaged beyond all hope of repair.

Then for the first time he looked up. There above him, like guardian eagles, Dan Ericsson and Bob Holmquist circled. Of the German planes one was a mere speck in the distance, the second a crumpled mass in a field far below!

CHAPTER XXXVII

FROM THE HILLTOP

STRIPPED of their heavy flying-togs, the Three Musketeers sat on the summit of one of the range of hills behind which nestled the camp of the Black Hawks Squadron.

Below them stretched a wide expanse of country. Here and there upon its surface little white balls marked the position of bursting shrapnel. The daylight was beginning to fade, and at one point the red glare of a fire set by the foe was beginning to show.

Along every road which they could see from their perch crawled columns of troops, long strings of guns, wagons, and trucks. And all of them, whether in the blue of France or the olive-drab of the United States, were moving steadily to the east!

The three men watched the scene for a while in silence; then Holmquist said slowly:

“You know, that looks to me like IT!”

“Like what?” Dick asked.

“The beginning of the end!” Holmquist said quietly.

“Go slow!” warned Ericsson.

“Don’t misunderstand me,” the tall Texan said quickly. “I don’t mean I think the war’s as good as over, or that we’ll be in Berlin in a week, or any nonsense of that sort.

“But this is twice that the German masses have come storming victoriously up to the Marne, twice that France has said, ‘They shall not pass!’ and twice that they’ve been rolled back.

“And it was different the first time. The Boche went back that first winter and sat down in his trenches by the Aisne thinking that when he was ready he’d come again, and that next time he wouldn’t be stopped. He was three years coming!

“He came all right, and what happened? Once more France said, ‘They shall not pass!’ and a new voice from overseas added, ‘No, darned if they shall!’ I believe the Hun has heard that new voice. I believe he knows now that he *never* shall pass!”

“I believe you’re right!” Dick muttered, and Dan nodded silent agreement.

“I’m sure I am,” Holmquist said confidently. “We three will do a lot more flying, and there’ll probably be a lot more fighting. It may be that there will be more black days in the future; but

I don't believe any of them will be as black as those we've put behind us.

"No, sir, even if the war lasts another two years, it's entered a new phase. All that down there" — he waved his hand toward the plain below them — "is the turning of the tide!"

They watched in silence while the shadows deepened and the summer night fell; then Dan Ericsson yawned, stretched his big arms, and said:

"Well, war or no war, I've got to have my sleep!"

Laughing, the others rose from the ground and joined him. Then the trio locked arms and began to descend the hill toward the camp, singing softly as they went:

"What would the infantry do without us?
Why are the gunners so keen about us? . . ."

THE END

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