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Author: W. Crispin Sheppard
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK DON HALE WITH THE FLYING SQUADRON ***

# DON HALE
WITH THE
# FLYING SQUADRON

By W. CRISPIN SHEPPARD

*Author of*
"DON HALE IN THE WAR ZONE"
"DON HALE OVER THERE"
"THE RAMBLER CLUB SERIES," ETC.

Illustrated by H. A. BODINE

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Don Hale with the Flying Squadron

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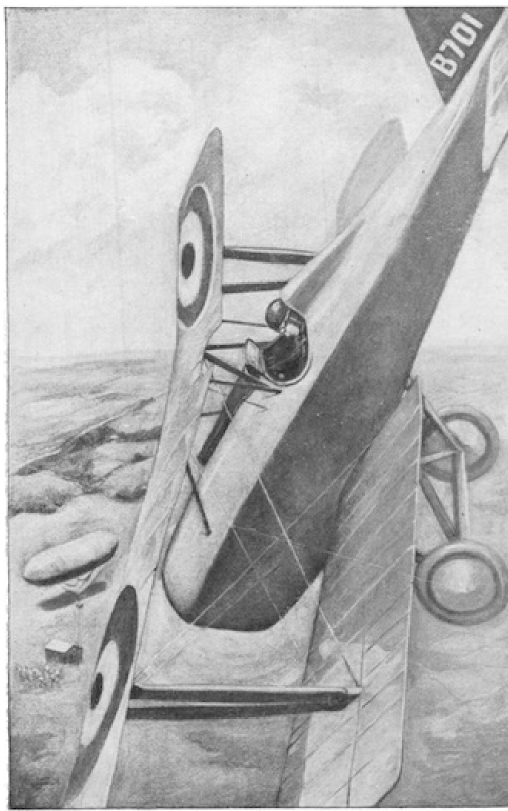


He shut off the engine and dove

## Introduction

“Don Hale with the Flying Squadron” is the third of the “Don Hale Stories.” It follows “Don Hale in the War Zone,” and “Don Hale Over There,” and tells what happens to Don after he relinquishes his dangerous post as an ambulance driver for the Red Cross on the western front.

But Don’s new duties are of a far more dangerous nature; and during his training in the aviation school and after he finally becomes a full-fledged member of that most famous of all flying squadrons, the Lafayette Escadrille, he has interesting experiences and enough exciting adventures to last even the most spirited youngster an entire lifetime.

It may be safely said, however, that the account is not overdrawn; indeed, in the air service, in which most valiant deeds have been performed, it would be hard to exaggerate the perils which beset the “cavalry of the clouds” on every side.

To add to the interest of Don’s experiences with the escadrille there is a certain mystery connected with several characters which is not solved until the end of the story.

In the next book of the series, “Don Hale with the Yanks,” is told the further adventures of the young combat pilot after he has been transferred to the American air service. He sees much of that memorable conflict—one of the turning points of the great war—when, at Chateau Thierry, the German drive for Paris was halted by the victorious Americans.

W. Crispin Sheppard.

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# Don Hale With the Flying Squadron

## CHAPTER I—THE GREENHORN

A rickety-looking cab, containing two passengers and much luggage, and driven by a gray-haired *cocher*, drew slowly up to a high iron gate and came to a halt. And the wheels had scarcely stopped before two young chaps, with exclamations of deep satisfaction and relief, literally tumbled out of the ancient vehicle and stared about them.

“Well, Don, here we are at last!” cried the elder.

“Yes, George. And this is certainly one of the greatest moments of my life. Tomorrow I start my training to become a pilot,” exclaimed the other, such a degree of enthusiasm expressed in his tone as to make the wrinkled cab driver turn, survey him with a curious grin, and comment in the French tongue:

“I guess that’s the way most of them act until something happens.”

But the boys scarcely heard him.

Surmounting the iron gate, inside of which an armed sentry was slowly pacing, this inscription in large, bold letters, stood out against the sky:

“École d’Aviation Militaire de Beaumont.”

“I certainly hope the Boches won’t get you, young monsieur,” continued the driver. “But, if you don’t mind, I’d be glad if you’d will your life insurance to me.”

“I’ll think about it,” laughed the boy. He deposited several pieces of silver in the palm of the hand held toward him, then began the task of getting his luggage off the vehicle. By the time this was done the sentry had opened the great iron gate.

With a hasty good-bye, the boys turned toward the soldier and producing several important-looking papers handed them to him.

And while the proceeding was underway this series of comments passed between five young men, attired in the horizon blue uniform of the French poilu, who were strolling inside the great enclosure not far away:

“Well, well! What have we here?”

“No doubt a couple more pilots.”

“But, if I’m not mistaken, one of them is actually wearing the stars and wings insignia of the air service on his uniform. He’s a corporal.”

"So he is! Such a young chap, too!—looks, for all the world, like a high-school boy on his way home from the place of demerit marks and ciphers."

"Let's give 'em the grand quiz."

It took the sentry only an instant to scan the papers and nod his head in approval, and another instant for the newcomers to gather up their possessions and head for the group of five.

"Step up and give your names, boys." The speaker was a tall, angular youth with bushy red hair and twinkling blue eyes.

"Don Hale," answered one of the newcomers.

"George Glenn," replied the other.

"Of the Lafayette Squadron?"

"Exactly! And on a couple of days' furlough."

And one of the natural but not very agreeable ways of the world was exemplified then and there; for Don Hale, the prospective student of the great military flying school, immediately found his presence totally ignored, while his companion, member of the most famous escadrille of the aviation service, began to receive the homage and admiration due to one who had attained such an exalted position in life. To be a member of the Lafayette Flying Corps was indeed a signal honor—an honor coveted above all things by the majority of the American aviation students.

Don Hale, smiling a little to himself, thereupon seized the opportunity to examine the view outspread before him.

And what the boy saw made him draw a deep, long breath, like one who has just experienced a feeling of vast satisfaction and pleasure. It was an immense level field, or rather a series of fields. Far in the distance long rows of low canvas hangars and tents stood out in faint gray tones against the background of earth and sky. Nearer at hand were lines of rather dingy-looking wooden structures—the barracks—and isolated buildings used for various purposes, while dominating all rose a tall and graceful wireless mast.

Far more interesting to the American lad, however, was the sight of several airplanes performing evolutions in the distant sky. The sun had descended in the west and its cheerful rays no longer touched the earth, but every now and again one or another of the graceful flying machines caught the glow, and, as if touched by a fairy's wand, became transformed for the moment into a flashing object of silver and gold.

Don Hale felt his pulse quicken. How wonderful it was to be up in the heavens, soaring with all the ease, the grace, the certainty of a huge bird of the air! It made him long for the time to come when he, too, would have his ambition fulfilled! Presently a deep gruff voice broke in upon his meditations.

"Better come down to earth, son."

The red-headed chap had spoken.

"Sure thing!" laughed the new student. "What's that, sir—my last job, you ask? Oh, driving a Red Cross ambulance near the Verdun front."

"I must say we seem to have met a couple of real heroes," chuckled the other. "And now, to show you that I haven't forgotten my Fifth Avenue manners, I'll introduce these would-be flyers, most of whom as yet haven't risen above the grasshopper stage of the game."

Thereupon, with many chuckles, he presented Gene Shannon, Cal Cummings, Ben Holt and Roy Mittengale, adding that his own name was Tom Dorsey.

"Glad to know you all!" declared Don Hale, heartily.

"So am I," exclaimed George.

"Very gratifying indeed, I'm sure!" laughed Dorsey. "We all hope that later on some people about whom we are hearing a whole lot won't be so glad to meet us."

"Oh, you coming aces!" grinned Ben Holt.

"Hooray, hooray, for the future cannon-flying express!" chuckled Mittengale. Then, turning toward Don, he said: "I suppose that the day you didn't run into at least a half dozen or so hair-breadth escapes must have seemed like a pretty dull one?"

"I had all the close calls I wanted," confessed the former ambulance driver.

"And yet you are now going in for something which at times ought to make that Red Cross work look like little rides of joy. Ever take a spin in a plane?"

"No, sir."

"Oh, boy! There's some job ahead of you, then." Mittengale laughed. "You'll have to get right down to business."

"You can just better believe I will!" declared Don, enthusiastically. "I'm mighty anxious for the time to arrive when I can go up to business."

"It may never come," suggested Ben Holt. "'Tisn't everybody who is fitted to be an airman. One or two bad spills—an airplane ready for the scrap pile, or a student now and then killed on the training field, and it's all off with some!"

“If you don’t look out, Holt, we’ll elect you chairman and sole member of our committee on pessimism,” laughed Dorsey. “Say, son,”—he addressed Don—“I suppose you have all your papers?”

“Yes, and owing to my father having been a member of a Franco-American aviation corps I didn’t have much trouble in getting them,” returned Don. “He’s now an instructor in an American aviation school.”

“What did they do to you? I’d like to know if your experiences were like my own.”

“Well, here’s the story,” laughed the new *élève*[1] pilot. “I hoofed it to the recruiting office, which is located in the Invalides at Paris, filled out a questionnaire, signed a document requiring me to obey the military laws of France and be governed and punished thereby; then, after that agony was over, the medical man took me in charge. I just had to show him that I was able to balance myself on one foot with eyes closed, jump straight up from a kneeling position, and also walk a straight line after having been whirled around and around on a revolving stool until all the joy in life seemed to have gone.”

“Spies are Everywhere”

“Ugh!” grunted Dorsey. “The very recollection of that ordeal makes me wish to recollect something else.”

“The kind of air-sickness you get by the unearthly dips and twists of an airplane has sea-sickness beaten to a frazzle,” commented Ben Holt, pleasantly.

“Then I’m not anxious to make its acquaintance,” grinned Don. “I had a few nerve tests, too, made in a pitch-dark room, which weren’t altogether pleasant. Among other things, a revolver was unexpectedly fired several times close beside me.”

“It’s tough, how they treat a perfectly respectable chap,” chirped Cal Cummings.

“My, what a relief it was to receive a service order requiring me to report to the headquarters of the Flying Corps of Dijon!”

“That’s an old story with us,” drawled Mittengale. “Once there, you had to answer a lot more questions. Then you paid a visit to the ‘Vestiare,’ where the soldiers are outfitted. A uniform, shoes, socks, overcoat, hat and knapsack were passed out, and thereby, and also perforce, another chapter added to your brief but eventful history.”

“Besides all that, I received a railroad pass to come here, and also three sous, representing that many days’ pay,” chuckled the new candidate. “The salary I’ve already squandered,” he confessed, with a grin.

“Awful! The French Government should be told about it,” exclaimed Gene Shannon, laughingly. “But now, son, perhaps you would like to begin a new chapter by paying the captain a very necessary call?”

“To be sure!” said Don.

He stooped over, preparatory to gathering up his belongings, when Shannon stopped him.

“Leave the department store there, Don,” he remarked. “We’ll send some of the Annamites over to wrestle with ’em. Now come along.”

The “Annamites,” both Don and George knew, were the little yellow-skinned Indo-Chinese, who had journeyed from far-off Asia to give their services to the French Government.

Led by Tom Dorsey, the crowd began to pilot the new student and his chum toward headquarters. To Don Hale it was all wonderfully interesting. The boy was filled with that eager curiosity and anticipation which is one of the glorious possessions of youth. A new life—indeed a startlingly strange life, would soon be opening out before him—one that held vast possibilities, and also terrifying dangers. Whither would it lead him?

“I say, young chap”—Ben Holt’s voice broke in upon his thoughts—“you’ve got to mind your eye in this place. No talking back to officers; no overstaying your leave, eh, Monsieur Nightingale?”

“Oh, cut it out!” snapped Mittengale.

“Yes, there’s a chap who knows!” Holt chuckled. “One day Roy thought he’d enjoy a few extra hours in Paree—result: a nice little chamber two stories underground; a rattling good wooden bench, but uncommonly hard, as a bed; a bottle of water for company and eight days of delightful idleness, to meditate upon the inconsiderate ways of military men.”

“It was well worth it,” growled Mittengale. “Some tender-hearted chaps smuggled in paper and I wrote sixty-four pages of my book entitled ‘Life and Adventures of an Airman in France!’”

“An airman in France!” snickered Ben. “There’s nerve for you! Why, he hasn’t even been above the three hundred foot level yet.”

“Well, that’s just about two hundred and seventy-five feet higher than your best record,” retorted Mittengale, witheringly. “Don’t talk, you poor little grasshop.”

Don Hale paid no attention to these pleasantries, for, at that moment, one of the distant machines circling aloft, now dusky, gray objects, sometimes but faintly visible in the darkening sky, began to volplane. Down, down, came the biplane, in wide and graceful spirals, toward the earth. A few more turns and the wings were silhouetted faintly for the last time against the sky; another instant and they cut across the turf in still swiftly moving lines of grayish white.

“Good work, that!” cried Don, breathlessly.

“Fine!” agreed George.

“Won’t I be jolly glad when I can manage a machine like that!” Don happened to glance at his chum’s face, and was surprised to see a swift, subtle change come across it, an almost sad expression taking the place of his usual buoyant look. “What’s the matter, old chap?”

“I was thinking what a dangerous life you are about to begin, Don. As some of the boys in the squadron say: ‘Death is often carried as a passenger by the airman.’”

“And you engaged in the very same work yourself!” laughed Don. “There’s consistency for you! I understand, though, just how you feel about it, George. Honestly, at times, I’ve worried a whole lot about you. But”—a determined light flashed into his eyes—“we must ‘carry on’ the big job before us.”

“That’s the way to look at it,” acquiesced George, heartily. “You have a cool head and steady nerves, Don; and you’ll be called upon to use all your wits, all your courage and resourcefulness, as never before in the whole course of your life. Great adventures are ahead!”

“Better wait until he gets out of the ground-class before talking that way,” grinned Ben Holt, dryly.

“Don’t discourage the infant class, Holt,” put in Dorsey. “Now, boys ”—he turned to face Don and George—“that good-sized building you spy just across the field is the headquarters of the captain and moniteurs—teachers we call ’em in the good old lingo of the United States. By the way, know much French?”

“Oh, yes,” replied Don.

“Good! Frankly speaking, some of these chaps here do not.” Dorsey chuckled mirthfully. “Their efforts sound weird and wild. And sometimes it has the effect of making the moniteurs act wildly and weirdly.”

“The idea of Dorsey talking about French!” scoffed Ben Holt. “Why, he can’t even speak English. An Englishman’s the authority for that.”

“One’s shortcomings should never be mentioned in polite society,” grinned Tom. “And now, Don, while you’re over there parleying the parlez-vous we’ll get a bunch of the Oriental Wrecking Crew, the Annamites, to lift your traps.”

“As a rule, I rather object to having my things lifted,” laughed Don. “But this time it’s all right.”

“You’ll find our crowd, with a few additions equally handsome, in the big barracks—the third from the end. Now scoot.”

While Don and George didn’t exactly “scoot,” they nevertheless immediately left the group and made good time toward the building indicated. Within a few minutes they entered and were conducted by an orderly to the captain’s sanctum.

If Don had expected any effusive greeting or words of commendation for his willingness to give his services to aid the cause of France he would have been greatly disappointed. The captain, very alert and authoritative in manner, greeted the two boys in a casual, disinterested sort of way, and examined Don’s papers.

Then came the usual number of formalities and an order to report to the sergeant on the aviation field on the following morning.

Don Hale was now duly enrolled as an *élève*, or student pilot, in one of the most important of the great Bleriot flying schools in France.

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[1] Élève—pupil.

## CHAPTER II—NEW COMRADES

A pleasant refreshing breeze was springing up as Don Hale, with his chum, left headquarters and hastened toward the barracks which was to be his temporary home.

There were plenty of signs of life about the great plateau, and occasionally voices came over the air from the distance with peculiar distinctness. By this time all nature had become gray and sombre, and the slowly advancing shadows which heralded the approach of dusk were enveloping the distant hangars and tents and merging the vast, sweeping line of the horizon almost imperceptibly into the coldish tones of the sky.

Here and there lights were beginning to flash into view. From barrack windows, from tents and outbuildings, they shone—each little sparkling, star-like beam carrying with it a message of good cheer and welcome.

Just before Don and George reached the barracks designated by Tom Dorsey, over the door of which was painted in very large black letters “Hotel d’Amerique,” a loud and lusty chorus, composed of French and American voices, accompanied by a piano, started up, singing with ludicrous effect:

“The Yanks are Coming.”

Then, as the last words were carried off on the breeze, the momentary silence that ensued was broken by a loud-voiced student standing by the window, who bawled:

“True enough, boys!—the Yanks are not only coming, but they’re here.”

The aviators immediately crowded to the window, and even before Don and George entered the building, which was to the accompaniment of that well-known classic: “Hail, hail! The gang’s all here!” they had received a noisy and good-natured welcome.

A smiling and dapper little Frenchman was the first to shake them by the hand; and having performed this act with much gravity he immediately struck an attitude and began to recite, in the manner of a schoolboy who has memorized a piece:

“Gentlemens, excuse the bleatings of a little chump who should remain silent before he speaks. Permit me to say, however, that you may use me as a doormat when it is your will and I shall be overwhelmed with joy. And now having bored you to tears I will desist.”

He ended the oration, which some of the fun-loving, mischievous Americans had taught him, with a low bow, evidently much surprised at the chuckles and gurgles of mirth which ran through the room.

Don Hale laughingly made a speech in reply, quite astonishing the Frenchmen present by his ready command of their tongue.

And during it all he had been observing his new home with keen curiosity and lively interest. The interior of the long but rather low wooden structure was whitewashed, and ranged alongside each wall were rows of beds. They were makeshift affairs, however, consisting of a couple of sawhorses with a plank thrown across. Over the top had been placed a mattress, looking as though it had done long and valiant service.

“Clearly, the *élèves* are expected to rough it a bit,” thought Don.

It would be a strange boy indeed, however, who objected to roughing it—Don Hale, at least, was not one of that kind.

The lad was glad to discover that the room was evidently occupied by Frenchmen, as well as by his own compatriots. At one end large posters made by some of the best known artists of France adorned the wall, while at the other were pictures clearly of American origin.

Tom Dorsey made the introductions, adding a word or two, in a jocular fashion, about the characteristics of each. Very naturally, the new student took a decided interest in studying the Americans with whom he would be so closely associated during the weeks to come.

“Among those present” were men of striking dissimilarities in appearance—of widely different stations in life—of various degrees of wealth; but the call of adventure, having brought them all together, had also served to unite them in a common spirit of comradeship perhaps impossible under other circumstances. There was, for instance, Dave Cornwell, of New York, of the beau monde of Fifth Avenue, with aristocracy imprinted unmistakably on his clean-cut features. And in striking contrast to him was Sid Marlow, cowpuncher of Montana, deck hand on a Mississippi steamboat, longshoreman, and, lastly, fighter in the Foreign Legion. In fact, the majority of the American *élèves* had seen service in that famous branch of the French army, which had recruited its members from all parts of the world. No embarrassing questions were asked; an applicant’s antecedents mattered little; he was given a chance to retrieve whatever mistakes he may have made, and, perhaps, through the fiery ordeal of battle, come out a vastly superior man.

Several of the students particularly attracted Don Hale’s attention, one of them being T. Singleton Albert, referred to by his companions as “Drugstore”; for he had at one time been a drugstore clerk and soda-water dispenser in Syracuse. Albert was a rather effeminate looking little chap, who seemed wholly out of place in an aviation school. He appeared diffident to the point of shyness, and his voice, delicate and refined, was seldom heard. Don Hale wondered if he would ever make a flyer, a profession in which courage and daring are such prime requisites.

Another boy who interested the new student greatly was Bobby Dunlap, who had had the singular cognomen of “Peur Jamais” thrust upon him. Tom Dorsey airily explained that on one occasion a student had demanded in French of Bobby if he experienced fear during a certain offensive in which the Foreign Legion took part, whereupon Bobby had blurted out the words “Peur?—Jamais!—Fear?

—Never!” in such a strenuous and convincing tone as to create a big laugh—also a new title for himself, and one that persistently stuck.

There was a certain reserve and hauteur in the manner of a third young chap named Victor Gilbert which somehow appealed to Don Hale, suggesting to his imaginative mind that Gilbert’s sphere in life was, or rather had been, a little different from that of most of his fellow students.

Conversation was going on briskly when a rumble of wheels outside made Don hurry to the window.

“It’s the camion bringing in some of the real birds from the *grande piste*, or principal flying field, which is a good long way from here,” volunteered Peur Jarnais. “Those chaps are the stuff—yes, sir. By Jove, they’d make an eagle jealous! Eagles can’t fly upside down, can they? Of course not; but some of our boys can.”

“It’s a great life if you don’t weaken,” put in Tom Dorsey.

“Ever feel any symptoms of it?” asked Don, smilingly.

“Sure!—a hundred times.”

“I never did,” put in Drugstore, in his mild, weak voice. “To-morrow,” he cleared his throat and paused impressively, his manner indicating that some information of vast importance was about to be communicated—“to-morrow ”—another instant of hesitation, and he began again—“to-morrow I’m going to make my first flight in the air.”

“That means flying at an altitude of twenty-five feet at most,” giggled Mittengale.

“I reckon it also means a machine smashed to bits in landing,” chirped Peur Jamais. “They say it costs the French government an average of five thousand dollars to train its aviators. I’ll bet in your case, Drugstore, they’ll get off cheap at ten thousand.”

Don Hale, his head thrust out of the window, now saw the returning aviators tumbling off the big camion which had halted before the door.

In another moment they bustled into the barracks, and the yellowish rays of the oil lamps fell with strange and picturesque effect across their forms. Each was encased in a great leather coat and trousers and wore a helmet made from the same heavy material. Several, too, still had on their grotesque-looking goggles.

“They make me think of Arctic explorers,” declared Don, with a delighted little laugh.

Don was experiencing a pleasurable sensation, not unmixed with a certain sense of awe. Here, right before him, were actually some of the men who but a short time before had been piloting their machines at dizzy heights in the sky. The fascination of it all seemed to grip him strangely—to make him impatient and anxious to begin his initiation into the art of flying.

“Another little eaglet, sir, ready to carry terror into the heart of the Kaiser.”

In these words Tom Dorsey was introducing him to one of the “real birds.”

The aviator was only a young chap, not many years older than Don, but, like many of the Americans and Frenchmen present, he had allowed his face to remain unshaven, and the resulting growth of beard gave him quite an appearance of maturity.

“There’s a big lot of difference between the way flying schools are conducted over here and in America and Canada,” volunteered the aviator, whose name, Don learned, was Hampton Coles. “On our side of the big pool discipline is probably as strict as in any other branch of the army. We go in for drills and all that sort of thing, while in France, at least at present, the schools are only semi-military in character. The object is to turn out flyers as quickly as possible, which means casting a whole lot of theories, red tape and non-essentials into the junk heap. Flyers are needed—badly needed. The ‘eyes of the army,’ they call them.”

“At what time does work begin?” asked Don.

“We’re in our planes shortly after dawn. At nine o’clock the first session is over; then it’s back to the barracks. Dinner is served at one o’clock, and after that the boys are free to do what they please until five. On our return to the *piste*, or flying field, we usually keep steadily at it until nearly dark.”

“How does it happen that so many are here at this hour?”

“Oh, this crowd only represents a small portion of the students who, for one reason or another, stopped work a bit early,” replied Hampton. “In all, we have about one hundred and twenty-five men, and among them are several Russians—daring chaps they are, too, but rather poor flyers.”

“But the Americans seem pretty good at it, eh?”

Hampton Coles laughed.

“The moniteurs are always bawling out some of the best *élèves* for doing unnecessary and risky stunts,” he declared. “I imagine they think we’re a reckless, hair-brained lot. However”—his tone suddenly sobered; his eyes were turned thoughtfully off into the distance—“it doesn’t do to take many chances in the air. It’s mighty tricky; and so are the machines. Some of our boys have already paid the penalty. Yes, it’s a dangerous game, son.”

“Which only makes it a lot more interesting,” put in Drugstore, quietly.

“To be sure!” laughed Coles. “But, as this rig o’ mine is getting to feel prominent, I’ll skip.”

Jack Norworth presently sauntered over to tell Don that in order to get a bed he would have to go to the commissary depot, about a half mile distant.

"I'll hoof it with you," he volunteered.

"Good!" said Don.

George and Drugstore elected to accompany them; so the four immediately left the Hotel d'Amerique, and, through the slowly-gathering shades of night, started off.

"By the way, where are you staying?" asked Jack, turning to George Glenn.

"At a hotel in the little village of Étainville," replied the young member of the Lafayette Squadron.

"Why, it's at Étainville that we have our club!" cried Jack.

"A club?" queried Don, interestedly.

"Sure thing!"

"I don't like clubs," commented Drugstore.

"Why not?" demanded Jack.

"Oh, the fellows are always calling upon a chap to tell a story, make a speech or do something else to amuse 'em," returned Drugstore, rather hesitatingly.

"Well, what of it?"

"Some can do that sort of thing, but not I." The former dispenser of soda-water spoke in plaintive tones. "Half the time I can't think of the words I want and when I do think of 'em they're not the right ones."

"Oh, what you need is a correspondence school course in the art of self-expression—'think on your feet; latent power aroused; trial lesson free; send no money,'" chuckled Jack.

"Let's hear about the club," said Don.

"It meets in a typical little inn called the Café Rochambeau. The floor is of sanded brick; there are cobwebs everywhere; cats and dogs wander in and out. It's all rustic, dusty and charming. Say, George, have supper at our mess to-night, then, afterward, you and Don can travel over with the bunch."

"Thanks! I'll be delighted," said George.

The four soon reached the commissary depot. Attendants dragged from its generous supply of stores the necessary portions of the bed and delivered them to the boys. Quite naturally, the march back, hampered as they were by the cumbersome articles, did not prove to be agreeable. Finally, however, rather hot and tired, they reached the Hotel d'Amerique.

It took but a few minutes to put the rude contrivance called a bed together in its place alongside the wall, and by this time the crowd was being considerably augmented by the students returning from the *piste*.

"Come along, you chaps! I'll pilot you to the grub department," exclaimed Peur Jamais. "It won't make you think of the Waldorf Astoria."

"Never mind! They've got things on the menu the Waldorf hasn't," chuckled Gene Shannon.

"For instance?" asked Don.

"Horse-meat."

"I'm game," laughed the new student.

Less than five minutes later Don and George, at the head of the advance-guard, reached the dining-hall. They found it a crude, unpretentious structure exteriorally, and equally crude and unpretentious in regard to its interior arrangements. The tables were of rough boards, and tabourets, or stools, took the place of chairs.

The mess-hall was soon filled with a noisy, jolly crowd. Clearly, the hazardous nature of the work had no distressing effects on the minds of the *élèves*. To judge by the manner of those present, theirs might have been the least dangerous of professions; yet, nevertheless, the talk often reverted to the accidents or near-accidents which had occurred on the flying field. But it was the keen enthusiasm of all that especially appealed to Don Hale. Probably none among the gathering enjoyed the meal more than he. The dim, fantastic light cast by the oil lamps, the sombre ever-changing shadows on faces and forms, the grotesque and larger shadows that sported themselves on the four walls, the shrouded, obscured corners, all added their share to the charm and novelty.

A particularly fastidious person could very easily have found fault with the meal, which consisted of soup, meat, mashed potatoes, lentils, war bread and coffee. The horse-meat was tough, the lentils rather gritty, as though some of the soil in which they were planted had determinedly resolved to stand by them to the end. But to hungry men, whose lives in the open meant healthy, vigorous appetites, such little unconventionalities in the art of cooking were of but trifling importance.

As the students were filing out, not in the most orderly fashion, into the clear, moonlit night, Jack Norworth joined Don and George.

"All ready, boys, for the Café Rochambeau?" he asked.

"You bet we are!" cried Don.

## CHAPTER III—SPIES

To reach the peaceful village of Étainville, which, more fortunate than many another in France, had never known the horror and tragedy of war, it was necessary to pass through several little patches of woods. That walk with a number of his compatriots proved to be a very delightful one to Don Hale. Nature, in the soft, greenish moonlight, which filtered in between the foliage and ran in straggling lines and patches on the underbrush or fell in splotches on the trunks and branches, presented a very poetic—a very idyllic appearance. Here and there, amid the pines and firs, gnarled, rugged oaks, ages old, reared their spreading branches against a cloudless sky. A fragrant, delightful odor, like incense, nature's own, filled the air; and the gentle sighing of leaves and grasses swayed to and fro by a capricious breeze joined with the ever constant chant of the insect world of the woods.

Étainville possessed only one main street, a cobbled, winding highway, lined on either hand with picturesque and sometimes dilapidated houses. Near the centre of the village rose the ancient church, the tall and graceful spire of which could be seen over the countryside for many miles. The twentieth century is a busy and a bustling age. Progress, ever on the alert, fairly leaps ahead, but it seemed to have carefully avoided Étainville in its rapid march.

Of all its inhabitants, none was better known or liked than old Père Goubain, proprietor, as was his father and grandfather before him, of the Café Rochambeau. Père Goubain was very fat—so fat, indeed, that he sat practically all day long in a big armchair. During the winter it was generally in the main room of the café, before the big round stove near the centre; but the summer days generally found him comfortably installed in the garden which enclosed the old stuccoed building.

Père Goubain appeared to be the very personification of contentment, except, however, when the Germans happened to be mentioned within his hearing. Then, his rubicund face became redder, his mild, blue eyes fairly blazed with a fierce, vindictive light, and, altogether, he looked quite ferocious indeed.

Such, then, was the Café Rochambeau and the man who greeted the crowd of Americans. To Don and George he was especially gracious. He asked many questions, and delightedly informed them that only the day before he had actually seen a detachment of American soldiers marching through the village street.

"Ah! and how grand they looked, mes amis!" he cried. "With their help—'On les aura'—we shall get them! Ah, les Boches!"

The placid look on his face was gone, and, rising in his chair, he began to sing in a deep bass voice:

"'Ye sons of freedom, wake to glory!
Hark, hark, what myriads bid you rise!
Your children, wives and grandsires hoary,
Behold their tears and hear their cries!
Behold their tears and hear their cries!
Shall hateful tyrants, mischief breeding,
With hireling hosts, a ruffian band,
Affright and desolate the land,
When peace and liberty lie bleeding?
To arms—to arms, ye brave!
Th' avenging sword unsheathe,
March on, march on, all hearts resolved
On liberty or death.'"

Vigorous indeed was the chorus which accompanied Peré Goubain's rendition of the first stanza of the "Marseillaise," and vigorous indeed were the plaudits that resounded throughout the room when the old Frenchman sank back in his armchair.

"Yes, the Yanks are the boys to do it," exclaimed Peur Jamais. "Now, mes garçons—for the council chamber!"

The "Council Chamber" was an apartment adjoining the main room of the café. An oblong table stood in the centre, smaller ones by the walls; and there were plenty of chairs and tabourets for the use of the Americans, for the room practically belonged to them. Very often old Pére Goubain honored the gathering by his presence, and on this occasion he raised his ponderous form, and, with lumbering tread, followed his guests inside.

For their benefit Pére Goubain, a veteran of the Franco-Prussian war, told several interesting reminiscences about that memorable conflict; then, abruptly, he branched off into a subject which brought the old fiery look back into his usually placid blue eyes.

"Ah, what a wonderful system of espionage the Boches have!" he exclaimed. "Its sinister ramifications extend to every corner of our great land and far beyond the seas."

"Know anything about it?" queried Peur Jamais, with interest.

"Listen, mes amis"—old Père Goubain spoke gravely: "Many officers are among my acquaintances. One of them belongs to the French Flying Corps, and he, poor fellow, while in a scouting plane far over the enemy's lines, had the great misfortune to be obliged to descend in hostile territory."

"Captured?" asked Peur Jamais, quite breathlessly.

"He was. But"—a grim smile played about the Frenchman's mouth—"somehow, he managed to make his escape, and, after the most nerve-racking ordeals, succeeded in reaching the Swiss frontier, and from thence returned to France. In this very room, Messieurs, he told me his

experiences.”

Immediately, to Don Hale, and probably also to a number of the others, that modest interior became invested with a singular interest—with a strange and subtle charm. How wonderful to think that a man who had passed through such harrowing adventures should have actually been in that very place!

“And do you know,” continued Père Goubain, with vehemence, “that when the German officers learned the aviator’s name, astounding as it may seem, they told him many facts concerning his own history.”

“But how in the world did the Boches ever learn them?” demanded Peur Jamais.

“As I said before, spies are everywhere; one cannot know whom to trust. Listen, my friends: not a hundred years ago, one of the officers belonging to a training school was actually discovered to be a spy.”

“Whew! That’s going some!” declared Sid Marlow to Don, while Peur Jamais, eagerness expressed in his eyes, began to look curiously about him, as though vaguely suspicious that perhaps some among those gathered together were not all they pretended to be.

Before Père Goubain could resume, several newcomers, also Americans, bustled past the door.

General interest was immediately aroused by the discovery that one carried a bundle of Parisian dailies.

But the old innkeeper had started to say something, and he intended to finish.

“Yes, Messieurs, the Boches possess many ways of obtaining information. For instance, I learned from another officer that spies have even boldly descended into the French or British lines, flying in airplanes captured from the Allies. Naturally, some of these pilots spoke excellent French; others the English tongue equally well. Naturally, also, having all the appearance of belonging to the cause of freedom and justice, they escaped suspicion at the time, and were thus enabled to pick up much valuable information.”

“Very interesting!” drawled one of the late comers. “But what’s all that got to do with Captain Baron Von Richtofen?”

“Captain Baron Von Richtofen?” cried Peur Jamais, interrogatively.

“Never hear of him?”

“No, Monsieur Carrol Gordon.”

“I have,” said George, in an undertone to Don.

“Then I’ll read something for your special benefit, Mr. Peur Jamais.”

Thereupon, Carrol Gordon, the owner of the prized bundle, having opened one of the papers and allowed the yellowish glow of the lamplight to fall across the page, began:

“‘Advices recently received from the western theatre of battle state that the famous Red Squadron of Death, commanded by Captain Baron Von Richtofen, has again made its appearance in several places along the front.’”

“‘The Red Squadron of Death!’” echoed Peur Jamais, something akin to awe in his tone.

“‘The Red Squadron of Death!’” repeated Don.

“Quite an impressive title, I’ll admit,” remarked Carrol, smiling at the great interest which the article had evidently aroused. He resumed:

“‘The Albatross planes belonging to this feared and death-dealing squadron are painted a brilliant scarlet from nose to tail. All are manned by pilots of the greatest skill and daring; and only the most experienced air fighters of the Allies can expect to cope with these crafty and dangerous enemies. The bizarre idea of the red planes is no doubt an attempt on the part of Captain Baron Von Richtofen to instil fear into the hearts of the Allied Flying Corps. At any rate, the reappearance of this squadron, which claims to have destroyed more than sixty allied planes, heralds the near approach of many bitter battles in the air.’”

As Carrol Gordon ceased reading he looked around and remarked:

“Some news, eh? Now how many of you are going to pack your trunks and slide for home?”

“And to think of T. Singleton Albert, the great soda-water clerk of Syracuse, going up against such a game as that!” put in Tom Dorsey, irrelevantly. “Poor Drugstore!”

“One thing to remember always is this, mes garçons,” exclaimed old Père Goubain, nodding his head sagely: “Imagination is a very wonderful thing, and the Boche Baron must realize the hold it has on certain natures. Imagination, mes amis, can have the effect of glorifying the most ordinary and commonplace of objects and detracting from the most sublime. It can rob the heart of determination and destroy hope, and, equally well, it can raise a man’s courage to such heights as to place him on the pinnacle of fame. Bah, I say, for the Baron’s red birds!” The innkeeper snapped his fingers derisively. “I cannot believe that any air fighters of the Allies would be frightened by a few cans of paint.”

“Well spoken, Père Goubain!” laughed Hampton Coles. “Yours are the words of a wise man; which proves that an innkeeper can be a philosopher as well as a server to the material needs of humanity.”

"How would you like to be a combat pilot and meet the Baron, yourself?" asked Jack Norworth, quizzically.

"It would be quite impossible, mon garçon," sighed Père Goubain. "My weight, alas I would sink the ship."

"Shall I give him a message from you if we should happen to meet?" laughed George Glenn.

"Yes, and let it be accompanied by a fusillade of machine gun bullets."

Don Hale thoroughly enjoyed his evening at the club. Instinctively he felt that it was a sort of dividing line between ease and comfort and a strenuous existence, with dangers and perils ever present from the moment he became in actuality an *élève* pilot of the École Militaire d'Aviation de Beaumont.

Finally good-byes were said to Père Goubain, and the crowd filed into the great outdoors. The village street was enveloped in the soft light of the moon, and but for the bark of a distant dog would have been silent. The stuccoed buildings rose pale and ghostlike, or in sombre, mysterious tones, against the sky, and deep shadows crossed the cobbled highway. A few beams of light to cheer those who might be astir came from the windows of the ancient, time-worn hostelry, the Hotel Lion d'Or, where George Glenn was staying.

At the entrance, Don and the others bid the combat pilot of the Lafayette Squadron good-night, and then the march back to the flying field was begun. It was rather late when they arrived at the barracks. The excitement, the great desire to begin his schooling and the new surroundings all tended to drive sleepy feelings away from Don Hale. But Mittengale very solemnly assured him that unless he "hit the pillow" at once he would be liable to have regretful feelings in the morning.

"I know, because I know," he declared.

"Then I'll 'hit the pillow,'" laughed Don.

The sound of laughter and voices was gradually ceasing as Don Hale climbed into his bed.

Several of the lamps had been extinguished and the interior of the big barracks certainly appeared very sombre—very gloomy indeed. Here and there details made a valiant effort to reveal their presence, but, for the most part, shadows, grotesque in shape, deep and grim in tone, held the mastery.

Presently Don Hale's impressions became a little confused, and, within a very few minutes, he was sleeping that sound and dreamless slumber which is another of the glorious possessions of youth.

## CHAPTER IV—"PENGUINS"

"I say, boy, wake up! Didn't you hear the bugle sound? The reveillé! Wake up, for goodness' sake! You'll be late. It's almost three-thirty now. You have that early morning feeling, eh?—a pippin of a feeling, too! I know, because I know!"

The sense of this string of words, jerked out with extraordinary rapidity by Roy Mittengale, was quite lost on Don Hale's mental faculties, but, nevertheless, they had exactly the effect the speaker intended. With a start and a half-stifled gasp, the new student sat up.

Morning! Was it possible that morning had already come? Of course not! He hadn't before suspected Mittengale of being a practical joker. Morning, indeed! He felt quite vexed—quite exasperated, in fact.

The effects his eyes took in were precisely similar to those he had seen on retiring—the same glimmering yellowish lights, the same lurking shadows, the long row of windows framing in the palish moonlight of the outside world.

He was about to protest. But before he had time the big room, all at once, became filled with noise and commotion—with the sounds of men jumping out of bed, of men talking, of men hurrying and bustling about as though their very lives depended upon the swiftness of their movements.

So, after all, Roy wasn't a practical joker.

"All right! All right!" mumbled Don. "I'll get right up."

"You'd better," continued Mittengale, laughingly.

Don Hale certainly had that early morning feeling, besides being cold and shivery; but, though he devoutly wished that he might enjoy a few minutes more of repose, he slipped off the mattress and fairly jumped into his clothes. By the time Don had finished dressing he was alone.

A swift dash for the door and a brisk run after leaving the barracks enabled him, however, to overtake speedily the more tardy students.

It was still a calm, serene moonlight night, with the stars dimmed by the greater lustre of the earth's satellite, and no hint, no trace of color in the eastern sky to herald the approach of another day.

The destination of the hurrying crowd Don found was the wash-house situated not far away; and on arriving there he discovered that certainly "all the comforts of home" appeared to be lacking.

A dash of cold water over his face and arms made the boy feel the need of brisk exercise to counteract the effects of the damp, penetrating chilliness of that early matinal hour. Moisture glistened and sparkled on the tufts of grass, and low over the earth stretched long ghostly

streamers of mist. High up in the heavens a flock of unseen crows, flying swiftly past, sent their cries far over the crisp, fresh air, but, rapidly, distance softened and then stifled the unmusical chorus.

A rush back to the barracks with the rest of the students put warmth into Don Hale’s shivery frame.

“Get in line, son, for the roll call,” commanded Tom Dorsey.

In an orderly double column the students ranged themselves alongside the barracks, an officer appeared and the formality began.

Proudly, the new student answered “present” as he heard his name pronounced by the officer.

“Now I suppose we’ll get a bite to eat,” he remarked to Mittengale, when the men broke ranks.

“Your ‘suppose’ is all wrong,” chuckled the other. “Now you’ll learn what you’re up against.”

“I suspect I’m up against a joker,” laughed Don.

But, again, his suspicion proved to be quite unfounded. The men were forming in line, and a few minutes later the march for the flying field began. The day for which Don Hale had looked forward so long—so expectantly—actually had come. His nerves, responding to the emotions aroused within him, were tingling, but tingling in a most delightful fashion.

The very faintest trace of delicate color, announcing the coming of day, now slowly began to suffuse itself in the eastern sky. It was a cheerless and a gloomy hour, not an hour, surely, for drooping spirits to be abroad; but, fortunately, there appeared to be no drooping spirits among that semi-military line of marching men.

Gradually the long row of curved-roofed hangars, partially hidden by the veils of mists, loomed forth more clearly. Before the head of the line had reached the first of the immense flying fields—there were three—numerous mechanics were rolling rather battered-looking little monoplanes from beneath the protecting shelter of the canvas coverings and placing them side by side in long lines.

“I say, my young knight of the air, cast your optics upon the ‘penguins,’” called Mittengale, who happened to be marching just ahead.

Don Hale, however, required no such invitation. He was already studying the machines with the most intense—the most eager interest. “Penguins,” he knew, are Bleriot monoplanes, the wings of which have been so shortened as to render the machines powerless to lift themselves from the ground; hence the rather curious appellation of “penguins,” birds of that name not being able to fly.

Certainly the “penguins” had an extraordinary fascination for the new candidate. To his active mind they suggested huge dragon-flies—all ready to wing their way lightly to other parts.

A few moments later the boy was standing before the nearest machine. Now every semblance to a military line had vanished. Students, moniteurs, mechanics and laborers were all mingling together before the hangars.

Some time later, while he was still regarding the machines with an absorbing degree of interest, the voice of the head instructor broke sharply in upon his thoughts.

In loud tones he was calling out the names of various students and designating the numbers of the machine they were to use. Immediately the future airmen began jumping into their places, and before many moments had passed every “penguin” in the long line had an occupant.

“Goodness! I certainly feel like an outsider,” murmured Don. “I reckon I’d better hunt up the sergeant and——”

At that second the air became surcharged with a series of startling staccato explosions, with roars, great crashes and bangs, quite ear-splitting in their intensity—the motors were being tested. Gradually the rising crescendo, suggestive of some strange, wild symphony, reached its greatest climax, and then as slowly began to subside. And presently, in its place, came the soft, pleasant drone and hum of many smoothly-working motors and propellers.

Now the highly interested Don Hale saw the assistants removing the blocks from beneath the wheels of the “penguins” and heard the moniteurs giving their pupils a few final words of advice.

“By Jove, don’t I wish I were in one of ’em!” he muttered. “Ah!”

The assistants were giving the propellers of some of the nearer machines a swift turn; and as the whirling blades became but misty circles the strange “birds” got into action.

“By Jove!”

This time Don Hale uttered the exclamation aloud.

A number of “penguins” had begun to “taxi” across the field, and were soon traveling at a most tremendous speed. Some twisted and staggered about, as though, every instant, they must topple over sideways and smash their wings against the turf. Others exhibited every indication of halting their onward rush and spinning around and around like a top, while still others, as straight and true as a swift breeze tearing its way across the countryside, kept rapidly growing smaller and fainter in the distance.

Yes, it truly was a remarkable spectacle that Don Hale had before his eyes. In the semi-darkness of that chill and early hour, the rushing “penguins” seemed to resemble a flock of huge birds, full of life, full of keen intelligence, rather than man-made machines.

There was a thrill and spice about the scene, too, which caused involuntary gasps to frequently come from the mouth of the student. Now and again, “penguins,” while traveling at a headlong

pace, seemed about to smash into one another. The boy almost held his breath.

“Ah!”

One was down. Another, hustling past the fallen “bird,” just graced its broken wing. The game, even in the beginner’s class, was clearly not without its dangers.

Now the most skilfully handled machines had reached their destination—the flag at the other end of the field—and were returning as though borne on the blasts of a hurricane. From faint, insignificant whitish specks they became huge winged creatures in a moment of time, seemingly intent upon crashing their tempestuous way into the groups of moniteurs, mechanics and assistants and even through the hangars themselves.

The tense-faced pilots, however, stopped the engines in time, and, one after another, the “penguins” docilely came to a halt.

“Grand sport, sure enough!” cried Don, delightedly. He would have imparted this thought to others, too, but for the fact that not one among those all around him was paying the slightest attention to his presence. It gave Don a rather unpleasant feeling, as though he was of very little importance. It also served to make him decide to report to the sergeant of the first class at once.

Accordingly, he began walking toward the nearest group; and then, for the first time, he caught a glimpse of several of the Annamites attached to the aviation camp. Picturesque-looking little chaps they were, and unmistakably of the Orient from their yellow complexion and slanting, beady eyes to their small and stocky stature. They were about to cross the field. What was the meaning of that intrusion?

All at once Don Hale understood; and, instinctively, his eyes were turned toward the fallen “penguin,” which, like a wounded bird brought low by the huntsman’s bullet, lay where misfortune had overtaken it. A little crowd was collecting, and soon he discovered three distant figures moving slowly toward the hangars, the one in the centre supported by those on either side.

“The pilot must have been injured,” thought Don, commiseratingly.

In what seemed to be a very short time to him the sun was almost on the horizon, and eagerness to begin his task was gripping him with a strange intensity; no small boy with a lively and joyous anticipation of a visit to the “greatest show on earth” could have experienced more pleasurable sensations, and a glance toward the flying fields beyond served to even further increase them. Above the one adjoining, Bleriot monoplanes were flying at low altitudes; still further in the distance he could see airplanes piloted by more advanced members of the third and fourth class momentarily mounting in the air. The flying fields were beginning to show a pleasant warmth of color, and the Farnum and Caudron machines, high aloft, catching the sun’s reflections, sent them constantly flashing earthward. These planes possessed a certain grace, but they were heavy and clumsy craft indeed compared to several single-seaters—Nieuport or Spad machines. These far outclassing the swiftest of the feathered tribe in their flight, darted in and out, swooped downward from dizzy heights or climbed upward until their wings appeared as the faintest gossamer lines against the soft, purplish tones of the sky.

As Don set off in his quest for the sergeant the majority of the “penguins” were racing and tearing about the field in the most extraordinarily erratic fashion.

Sergeant Girodet was easily found, but, to Don Hale’s intense disappointment, the officer informed him that he would have to wait until the afternoon session, adding rather dryly:

“Monsieur will be safe and sound for several hours longer.”

Don laughed, rejoining:

“And for a good many hours after that, I hope.”

The Annamites were now bringing in the wrecked and battered plane, headed for the repair shops, vast structures employing hundreds and hundreds of skilled mechanics and helpers. As they were near by and the night shift still at work, Don concluded to pay them a brief visit before journeying to the field where the third class, of which T. Singleton Albert was a member, flew in real airplanes to a height of no less than twenty-five feet.

And just at this time the boy was overjoyed to hear a familiar, cheery voice shouting:

“Hello, Don! Hello, old chap!”

Turning quickly, he spied his chum approaching.

“My, but I’m jolly glad to see you, George!” he called. “Playing the part of a wallflower isn’t a pleasant outdoor sport.”

“Well, it’s good you don’t get up in the air about it,” replied George, laughingly. “That’s right—always keep your feet on the ground.”

“I’ll try to, even when I’m a few miles high,” chirped Don.

George agreeing to Don’s plan, the two began traveling after the guttural-speaking Annamites.

“It strikes me ‘penguins’ ought to be easily managed,” declared Don, reflectively. “One just has to drive them in a straight line across the *piste*.”

“Yes, that’s all,” replied George. A twinkling light shone in his eyes. “But——”

“Difficult, eh, old chap?”

And though George nodded emphatically, Don, nevertheless, felt strongly inclined to think that

when once in the pilot’s seat he would surprise not only his chum but a few others as well.

Shortly afterward the two reached the machine and repair shops.

## CHAPTER V—TRAINING

Americans, of course, enjoyed a great popularity all over France, and, therefore, Don and George were welcome guests at the shops, which resembled huge manufacturing plants. They immediately found themselves surrounded by another kind of activity. The din and hum of machinery, the clanging of hammers, the explosive reports of motors vibrated over the air, all symbolizing, as it were, by means of sound, progress and labor.

“They build airplanes here as well as repair them,” explained George.

As the two walked from one point to another Don Hale marveled at what he saw. The framework of hulls and of main planes, the latter with their strong but slender supporting spars, stood in long rows. Everywhere skilled artisans, ordinary mechanics, and helpers worked on various parts of the planes. In the assemblage department Don and George stopped to watch the winged creations, one of the latest products of man’s inventive genius, being put together. A foreman greeted them pleasantly.

“And what do the young Americans think of all this?” he inquired.

“Simply wonderful!” responded Don, enthusiastically.

“Very true!” agreed the men. “Ah! the art of airplane construction has advanced amazingly since the great world war began, mes Americaines. It is now a very exact science, where the laws bearing upon lateral and longitudinal balance, as well as many other things, have to be rigorously observed.”

“I believe that before 1914 the German equipment in the way of airplanes and dirigible balloons was greatly superior to either that of the French or English,” commented George.

“Yes, the Boches had been doing everything in their power to encourage the development of both types of machines, while the other nations, unmindful of the peril which menaced them, were satisfied to let the course of events in that particular direction merely drift along.”

“The Germans are said to have had, in addition to a fleet of huge Zeppelins, almost a thousand airplanes of the finest construction, while their aeronautical factories were rushing work on others,” put in George. “France possessed only about three hundred machines and England still less, probably as few as two hundred and fifty.”

“The Germans at that time held the world’s record for height and sustained flying,” declared Don Hale.

“Correct,” admitted the artisan. “They thought, too, that with the supremacy of their navy of the air, the supremacy of Great Britain’s fleet on the sea could be more than overcome and England invaded. But”—the Frenchman clenched his fists—“our enemies—your enemies—the enemies of the entire world realize at last their error. They failed! They failed! The supremacy of the air now rests with the Allies.”

“And yet, for a while, the Germans had the best scouting and fighting planes,” commented George.

“Yes; the Fokkers. But La France replied to that challenge by constructing the famous Nieuport, the swiftest, the most easily maneuvered airplane that flies. Come! Let me show you a sample.”

Don and George, smiling a little at the tremendous earnestness exhibited by the Frenchman, followed him to another part of the great shop, where the most skilled workers were putting the finishing touches to several Nieuports of the latest model. They were delicate but staunch little machines—their lines as graceful as those of any yacht; and each was finished with a degree of care and attention to detail which scarcely seemed warranted when the perilous nature of the career they were so soon to embark upon was considered.

“What perfect beauties!” cried Don. “Crickets, George! Don’t I wish all my training period were over, so that I could sail sky-high in one of these little rockets!”

“The speed of a rocket, Don, wouldn’t do you very much good while flying over the fighting front,” replied his chum, rather grimly.

Don, too impatient, too restless to remain much longer indoors, soon started off with the other at his side. And all the while the obliging artisan kept imparting interesting bits of information. He told them something about the giant bi-motored Caudron, the Handley-Page and the Caproni, each type of machine representing the highest achievement in airplane building by the respective countries of France, England and Italy.

“The Boches,” he added, with a scowl, “have the Gothas.”

“I remember reading that some of the Gothas which bombed London had a wing-spread of seventy-eight feet, with motors of two hundred and sixty horse power, and carried, besides three men, hundreds of pounds of explosives,” remarked Don.

“Seventy-eight feet is nothing these days,” commented the Frenchman, musingly. “A hundred and fifty is more like it. You and I, mes Americaines, will live to see the time when huge flyers, with comfortable accommodations for passengers, can cross the Atlantic, linking still closer the old world and the new.”

Their volunteer guide now conducted the boys to another department, where they saw many women engaged in sewing together breadths of fine linen cloth destined to be stretched over the skeleton frames.

“Billions have been spent and are being expended in the airplane industry,” continued the man. “Even piano and furniture factories and many others have turned their attention to the fabrication of airplane parts, such as struts, ribs and propellers. And all this, in connection with aeronautic machinery, means work for thousands of mechanics. Vast quantities of raw material are required. Airplanes must be housed: therefore the erection of hangars and other types of buildings will employ thousands more. Then, the training of aviators, too, is a pretty expensive operation.”

“I suppose so,” laughed Don. “However, I’ll try to let ’em down as easily as I can. Coming, George?”

After heartily thanking the obliging artisan for his courtesy the two left the busy shops.

By this time the slowly-rising sun was casting its first pale and delicate tints over the earth. And with these rays the gloom which had taken possession of nature for so many hours began to lift. The dull and lifeless landscape, freed from the embracing mists, took on an aspect of quiet beauty and charm, and drops of dew shone and sparkled like “many a gem of purest ray serene.”

At a brisk walk Don and George set out for the distant aviation field, and before very long the ever moving “penguins” were left far to the rear. Now Don and his chum had an excellent view of the real flying machines, as they winged their way in straight flights from one end of the *piste* to the other, or taxied over the ground to rise in the air with amazing ease and lightness.

Another crowd of moniteurs, students and mechanicians stood around, the moniteurs following the movements of the planes with the most critical attention.

One after another the flyers alighted, some with ease and precision; some striking the earth sufficiently hard to have thrown the pilot out had he not been buckled to his seat.

“Whew! I’ll bet lots of planes are smashed!” cried Don.

“You win,” said George, dryly. “Hello! Look at the machine which just made that bully landing. Whom do you see on the pilot’s seat?”

“Goodness gracious! As I live, it’s Drugstore!” burst out Don.

But as Don, unmindful of the moniteurs or the crowd, left George’s side and rushed up to congratulate him on his success, T. Singleton Albert’s face didn’t have at all its usual half shy and modest look. Instead, it rather suggested the expression worn by some mighty hero on the occasion of his greatest triumph.

“Did you see me?” cried Drugstore, breathlessly.

“I should say so!” exclaimed Don.

“Flying!—Why, there’s nothing to it, son. Oh, boy! Only a perfect boob couldn’t handle these ships.” Drugstore almost stuttered in his elation and excitement. “But, take it from me, son, some of these chaps here couldn’t learn to drive an ash cart. Hello! I say, Rogers”—he raised his voice—“did you see me that time? I brought her down so easily I didn’t even rumple the grass.”

“You’re up in the air right now, Singleton,” chortled Rogers.

Albert, who had a pretty good command of French, swelled up with even greater pride as he listened to the moniteur’s “C’est bien fait, mon ami—it was well done, my friend.”

“I’ll soon be bumping into the clouds,” he declared, a confident grin on his face.

The machine was quickly turned around by several Annamites, and then Drugstore, yelling loudly for every one to get out of the way, started his motor full blast; whereupon the monoplane began to glide swiftly ahead. As the machine attained a speed of about forty miles an hour it gracefully left the terrestrial globe several yards behind, and, like an arrow shot from the archer’s bow, cut through the still, silent air toward its distant goal.

“Some flyer, that baby!” laughed Rogers.

And, indeed, his comments were just. Very few of the other students were approaching Albert’s performance. Their landings were generally faulty—so faulty, in fact, as to endanger the safety of plane and flyer alike.

It was only a very short time before Drugstore’s plane was seen returning. Don Hale watched the machine rapidly growing larger with breathless interest, fearful that Albert’s great flush of enthusiasm might have engendered so great a confidence in his ability as to threaten his efforts with disaster. Exactly at the proper moment, however, exactly in the proper way, the Bleriot dipped; and then, exactly in the proper manner, it struck the earth, and, after rolling a certain distance, came to a halt.

“Well, who said I couldn’t learn to fly!” shouted Drugstore, hilariously. “Whoop! It’s easier than slopping soda-water over a shiny counter. Oh, boy, I’ll soon be able to give an eagle lessons!”

It was now another pupil’s turn to take the machine, and Albert, releasing the restraining straps about his body, jumped stiffly to the ground. His gait for several moments became so noticeably uncertain as to bring forth a volley of humorous observations.

“Success has gone to his head!” cried one.

“To his feet, you mean!” chuckled a second.

“If that grin of his grows any wider his face may be seriously injured!” chirped another.

“Speech, Drugstore, speech!” howled a fourth.

If Albert had been his usual self all this attention and good-natured raillery would probably have brought a flush to his cheeks. At that moment, however, Albert wasn’t quite himself. He forgot to stammer and look embarrassed as he declared importantly:

“Let’s see some of you chaps beat it. Oh, boy, just a little while, and I’ll be shooting up to hit the blue!”

Naturally Albert’s very excellent work fired Don Hale with an even greater desire to begin his apprenticeship at the fascinating game of flying. The sun had never seemed to ascend so slowly. Hours and hours must pass before he could make his start. Really, it was quite a strain on his nerves.

At nine o’clock work was over for the morning, and the students trailed back to the barracks, where they were privileged to remain until five. The particular crowd which occupied the Hotel d’Amerique found a newcomer awaiting them. He was a very rosy-cheeked young chap; and from his uniform, still showing plentiful traces of mud and hard usage, it was seen that he, too, had once been a soldier in the famous Foreign Legion.

“My name is Dan Hagen,” he announced, pleasantly. “I’m from Dublin.”

“Ah ha, boys, we now have with us Dublin Dan!” chortled Roy Mittengale.

And that was the way in which Dan Hagen received a new christening, and one that he accepted with a boisterous, rollicking laugh.

“Call me anything; but don’t call me down,” he said. “I say, how’s flying to-day?”

“As usual, up in the air,” laughed Tom Dorsey.

“Next to me, who’s the newest greeny?”

A half dozen or so fingers were pointed toward Don Hale; a half dozen or so voices gave the desired information.

“Shake, old man!” exclaimed Dublin Dan, extending a big rough hand. “It’s a race between us to see which shall be the first to feel the caressing touches of the wind-blown clouds on our cheeks.”

“I’m on!” laughed Don.

“I say, did you see me land on my last trip?”

T. Singleton Albert voiced this query. It was addressed to no one in particular; and as no one in particular paid the slightest attention to it Drugstore became quite peeved.

“Jealous, eh?” he jeered, with unexpected bravado. “Jealous! Oh, boy! but my cheeks’ll soon feel the caressing touches of these wind-blown clouds. Some joyous expression that, eh?”

“It doesn’t beat yours at the present moment,” declared big Sid Marlow, with a hearty laugh.

Don Hale soon discovered that there was little military discipline about the camp. The students were perfectly free to amuse themselves in any way their fancy dictated, though Cal Cummings informed him that on lecture days absence from the classes was considered a pretty serious offense.

“I’d never want to play hooky,” declared Don, smilingly.

The day, wearing on, brought with it plenty of heat; therefore the shelter of the barracks was soon sought by the majority. Little comfort could be found inside, however. Swarms of flies—“of every known size—of every known species”—so Dublin Dan declared, also used it as a hotel; and, not being of a bashful disposition, they made themselves unpleasantly conspicuous. At one o’clock the little pests were sole masters of the situation, while the crowd joined other crowds in the spacious mess-hall.

During the meal T. Singleton Albert, having been heard to remark: “I say, did you see that last landing I made?” was loudly and insistently called upon to make a speech. Thereupon, he suddenly grew red in the face, and when forced to his feet by strong-arm methods stammered and stuttered to such a degree that the boys, perceiving that he had once more become the old, timid, shy Drugstore, mercifully let him alone.

Following lunch a game of baseball was played between two well-matched teams, one of them being captained by Victor Gilbert. Gilbert’s team won, which Cal Cummings declared was not strange at all, considering the fact that Victor had at one time been a crack player on a college baseball club.

After the game was over, Don, George and Dublin Dan set out for the aviation field together.

## CHAPTER VI—DUBLIN DAN

Don Hale, standing before a much battered and bespattered “penguin,” experienced a delightful thrill, which ran through his entire being. Brimming over with ambition, equally full of confidence, he could see nothing ahead of him but success.

The moniteur in whose charge Don and several others were placed was a rather youthful and pleasant-spoken Frenchman. In a quick, incisive fashion, he began to give a little lecture on the airplane.

“The body is known as the fuselage,” he explained. “At the front and just beneath the wings, as you see, is the engine and propeller. This particular type of plane, and in fact the majority, are drawn

and not pushed through the air. The pilot is seated in the cockpit immediately behind the motor. Two rudders and two ailerons are placed at the rear of the fuselage. The former, vertical, and used for steering the plane horizontally, are operated by a cross-piece of wood upon which the pilot rests his feet. The ailerons are horizontal, connected with a control stick by means of wires, and, of course, tilt the plane either up or down. The control stick is an upright lever in front of the pilot's seat. These are details, however, that you need not bother with now. Monsieur Hale, take your place in number thirty-five. Monsieur Hagen may use number twelve."

Both boys immediately followed instructions, and, after each had securely fastened the belt designed to prevent an unceremonious exit from the plane, the moniteur explained, first to one and then the other, the proper handling of the engine and rudders.

"The two most important things to remember," he said, "are to keep the tail off the ground and the engine going at full speed."

With his nerves at the keenest tension, Don Hale waited for the command to start. Out of the corner of his eye he could see groups standing by the machine, watching him, it seemed, in deadly silence. The familiar figure of George Glenn among them nerved the boy to do his utmost.

"Ready, sir?" asked the mechanician standing by the propeller.

"Ready!" answered Don.

"Throw on the switch!"

With a hand that trembled in spite of all his efforts to control it, Don Hale obeyed.

The mechanician whirled the propeller, and in another moment the motor was emitting a deafening roar; and in still another the "penguin," as though suddenly endowed with life, began a headlong flight over the rather uneven ground.

With all his senses keenly alert, Don Hale felt the rushing wind fanning his cheeks; and a sort of wild exhilaration took possession of him as the "penguin," like a runaway locomotive, sent the ground speeding behind at a rate which fairly dazzled his eyes.

But why did the "penguin" wobble and stagger in such an extraordinary manner?

The more desperately Don strove to assert his authority over the man-made bird the more he seemed to lose his control. Now he felt it swinging to the left; then, a too hasty push with his foot on the steering apparatus threatened to send it wildly careening off to the right. Above the roar of the motor he could faintly hear the shouts and yells of the crowd which he was leaving so far behind.

The confidence which Don had felt before jumping into the machine was given a rude and unpleasant jolt; and, besides this, the speed and erratic movements of the "penguin" were so bewildering as to make the boy lose, for a moment, his usual coolness. The sudden thought, too, that George Glenn was witnessing the almost absurd capering of the "penguin" served only to add to his discomfiture and apprehension.

In his tremendous eagerness to conquer the difficulties, Don made a sudden movement with the control stick, lifting the tail high off the ground, and at the same time he added to his mistake by pushing the rudder too far around. The result was almost terrifying. The "bird," as though roused to sudden fury by his action, began to whirl around and around, its speed seeming to increase with each passing second.

Dazed and dizzy the pilot had just sufficient presence of mind left to shut off the power. But the "penguin" had already begun to somersault.

Don Hale experienced a chilling and sickening fear. So suddenly that he could scarcely realize what had happened, the airplane tumbled over. He heard the sound of breaking supports and felt the impact of a blow. Then he found himself pinned to the ground amidst a mass of wreckage.

Several seconds elapsed before he could think coherently enough to decide that beyond a few bruises and scratches he had not been injured. And, although the "penguin" was as motionless as though it had never made a movement in the whole of its checkered career, the ground still seemed to be whirling rapidly before his eyes. But the dizziness, the pains and aches he was experiencing were as nothing compared to his disillusionment. He had fully expected to make a grand and triumphal trip straight across the flying *piste* to the flag which marked the end of the course and to hear the plaudits of George, the praise of the moniteur and the comments of the admiring crowd. And here he was—in an undignified heap, with the breath almost knocked out of his body, and responsible for the ending of the tempestuous career of what had been but a few moments before a staunch and sturdy "penguin."

Oh yes, he must have surprised his chum George Glenn—of that there couldn't be the slightest doubt!

As Don began painfully to extricate himself, with grim forebodings of what the consequences of the disaster might be, he became conscious of the fact that from almost every point people were running in his direction. He felt the hot blood rushing to his face; he experienced a feeling, too, somewhat akin to anger—for his sharp ears had caught what sounded suspiciously like bursts of hilarious laughter.

And, to add to the boy's discomfiture, he caught sight of a "penguin," wobbling and shaking like a ship in a raging sea, approaching. He had one brief, instantaneous glimpse of a tremendously grinning face—that of Dublin Dan's—as the machine lurched swiftly past. A short time later the foremost of the crowd bore down upon him.

“Are you hurt, Don? Are you hurt?” cried George Glenn, breathlessly.

“No—no!” jerked out Don.

And, as though these words were a signal for a jollification to begin, roars of laughter and howls of merriment broke loose on every side. The students were not averse, it seemed, to enjoying the humor of the situation.

“We have seen the human spinning-top!” guffawed one.

“What a wonderful merry-go-round!” gurgled another. “Sixty miles an hour without budging an inch!”

“Say, boy, wasn’t that enough to make you remember it?” chirped a third.

“You were chasing your tail so fast you nearly caught up with it,” chimed in a fourth. “At any rate, it’s certainly a case for the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Birds, even though it was a tough old rooster.”

Now Don Hale, quite unsteady on his feet, having a jumping throb in his forehead, and being, besides, in a very disgusted state of mind, could not, of course, enter into the spirit of jollification, yet, nevertheless, by a strong effort of the will, he managed to control his tongue and temper.

“I’m glad you enjoyed the impromptu performance, boys,” he said, pleasantly. “I don’t believe I’ll ever be able to equal it again. Ah——”

This “ah!” uttered with the most peculiar intonation, was brought from his lips by the mere fact of his eyes having caught those of the moniteur.

But instead of the angry, steely expression he had expected to see the boy was amazed to observe that the Frenchman appeared as unconcerned as though the incident was of the most trivial character. Yet even this did not take away the fear that he was in for a neat little “bawling out.”

“Monsieur Hale, one sometimes learns more by his mistakes than by his triumphs,” were the words he heard, however. The instructor spoke in genial tones. “Let us hope that it will be true in this case! Come!—now for another trial!”

Like a flash, Don Hale’s mood was changed; his usual buoyancy reasserted itself, and he was now as well able to laugh over his adventure as any of the others. He also had very grateful feelings toward the moniteur for his forbearance.

“Dublin Dan’s ahead in the race so far!” he exclaimed, laughingly, to his chum George Glenn.

“Never mind! The day isn’t over yet,” said George, with a smile.

Full of ardor, full of determination to retrieve himself, the *élève* pilot took the lead in marching back to the starting point.

There were always two things on the practice field which well testified to the hazardous nature of the work; a fleet of extra “penguins” and an ambulance. One of the former was very quickly rolled into place by the assistants. And Don, his ears assailed by a multitude of suggestions and words of advice, climbed at once to his seat.

By this time numerous other “penguins,” at widely separated points, were traveling over the field. Number twelve, Dan’s machine, could actually be seen racing toward them on the home stretch; and in an incredibly short space of time the dull gray wings loomed up strongly against the turf. Following a few extraordinary movements, the machine stopped abruptly, and from the occupant of the pilot’s seat there immediately came a series of loud and boisterous hurrahs.

“Maybe I didn’t have a bully trip!” he shouted. “Thought at first, though, I couldn’t stop the engine, and that I’d have to go clean around the whole earth and come back again. But say, old stay-in-one-place, I can almost feel, even now, the caressing touches of those wind-blown clouds on my cheeks.”

“Well, that’s a great deal better than feeling the caresses of the hard earth, as I did a few moments ago,” laughed Don.

“*Allez, allez! En route!*”[2] commanded the moniteur.

Don, experiencing the same measure of confidence he had had before, though it was now tempered by a much greater respect for the difficulties of the task, waited expectantly.

“Now!” he breathed.

The blades were revolving; the engine began its deafening roar—and, once more, Don was flying over the turf as though hurled from the mouth of a catapult. The new pilot had learned his lesson well. He realized that a firm though delicate movement of the controls is necessary to assure safety and success.

Faster, still faster, the “penguin” tore ahead; and though its movements were far from being smooth it kept to a comparatively straight course, only occasionally displaying an alarming tendency to turn over on its face.

Almost breathless from the effects of the violent wind which continually beat against his face, and as jubilant as a few moments before he had been in despair, Don Hale kept his eyes fixed intently on the flag ahead; and there grew in him a curious feeling that he was being carried along by some wild, unruly runaway. One moment the flag had appeared dim and small in the distance; the next it rose large and sharply defined.

The young pilot switched off the power, the “penguin” began to diminish speed and after running

many yards beyond the goal stopped its headlong flight.

That was certainly a proud moment to the new candidate. The stain of his former defeat was now entirely wiped away. He was convinced that, after all, he had made an auspicious beginning.

“Much good!” exclaimed one of the Annamites, who was stationed in the field to turn the machines around. “One grand fly!”

“Thanks!” laughed Don. “And I’ll do better next time.”

He was, however, to have his confidence a little shaken on the return trip; for the “bird,” apparently without any reason at all, showed an almost irresistible tendency to fly off at a tangent, first in one direction and then another. And when this was finally overcome it seemed to display an equally ardent desire again to bury its nose in the turf. Several times Don had alarming visions of another inglorious smash.

It was, therefore, with the greatest feelings of relief that he again brought the machine to a stop.

And before this had been accomplished he heard George Glenn shout:

“Great—great! Well done, old chap!”

“Surprised, George?” asked Don, gleefully, when he could catch his breath.

“No; there are never any surprises on an aviation field,” laughingly rejoined the other.

“*Vous avez fait de progres, mon ami*,”[3] commended the moniteur. “Better take a few moments’ rest before starting in again.”

Don Hale thought so, too. Naturally, he hadn’t quite recovered from the effects of his exhilarating experience. His pulse was beating a trifle hard, and, unaccustomed to the rushing wind which had beaten so relentlessly upon him, there still remained some of its effects.

“I’m in a better position now to appreciate the feelings of Drugstore,” laughed Don to a little knot gathered about him. “Honestly, I think flying must be the greatest sport in the world.”

“It’s certainly the highest,” chirped Tom Dorsey.

“You’ve got the right idea, son,” chimed in Gene Shannon. “Treat the old birds gently, and you’ll soon be in a position to treat the Boches rough.”

For a while Don was content to watch the antics of the “penguins,” which were now swarming over the field in great numbers, and, as on every previous occasion, he found plenty of thrills in the sight—collisions narrowly averted and machines performing the “chevaux de bois,” as the French say, which, freely translated, means acting like a merry-go-round.

Some time later on he was off in the airplane again, and shot forth and back across the field a number of times, with generally fair success, before taking another welcome rest.

Equally pleased over the afternoon’s work was Dublin Dan; and he proclaimed his satisfaction in a loud and boisterous manner.

“You won’t find me encouraging the scrap heap industry,” he chuckled. “I’m going to tear right through this course and hit the next before I’m many days older.”

“Well, so long as you don’t hit me I’m satisfied,” said Don, with a laugh.

“Never mind. Don’t crow too soon,” interjected the pessimistic Ben Holt. “You chaps are a long way from the sky yet. It’s pretty blue up there; and I’ve seen a few fellows just as blue when they couldn’t make it.”

“I’ll see red if I don’t make it,” chirped Dan.

A few minutes later Dublin Dan was taxiing across the field, while Don leisurely prepared to follow his example—in fact, so leisurely that it was not until number twelve was seen returning that he opened the throttle and sent the “penguin” at full speed ahead.

Ever mindful of the danger of collision, the boy was particularly careful to give the oncoming machine plenty of room, for, owing to the tremendously high rate of speed at which they were traveling, it would be only a few moments before the machines were abreast of one another.

Don Hale noticed that number twelve had suddenly begun to act in the most wildly erratic manner—so much so, indeed, as to suggest that the pilot must have gone all to pieces.

What was the matter? How did it happen that the unusually promising pupil should have lost control of his machine?

And while these thoughts were flashing through his mind he suddenly became filled with a chilling sense of dismay and fear; for number twelve had deviated from its course and was bearing down upon him in a zigzagging line with almost the speed of a lightning express.

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[2] “Go—on your way!”

[3] “You have made progress, my friend.”

## CHAPTER VII—THE VRILLE

Uttering a half-inarticulate cry, the pilot of number thirty-five made a supreme effort to avert a catastrophe.

But, even as he did so, he realized, with a sickening sensation of terror, that it would be futile—that nothing he could do would be of the slightest avail. With eyes staring wildly, he had a quick vision of number twelve, as though its sole purpose on earth was to run him down, fairly hurling itself upon him.

Don Hale gave a loud yell, though the roar of the motor drowned the sound. In a wild panic, he attempted to rise. But the restraining strap jerked him back to his seat. Then he saw the frightened face of Dublin Dan right before his eyes.

And that was the last thing they took in for a moment. He found himself jerked high in the air, then hurled violently forward.

The next instant his head struck the ground with heavy force. A light seemed to flash before his eyes, and, with the dull consciousness that was still left to him, he heard supports, struts and planes of both machines smashing under the heavy blow. Blackness followed.

And then came a moment when he was neither quite conscious of where he was or what had happened. And when he presently opened his eyes it was with the feelings of one who has just awakened from a troubled, uneasy slumber. The sound of excited voices was ringing in his ears; he heard George Glenn loudly calling his name, but he neither answered nor stirred.

The latter was, of course, impossible. He was pinned to the earth on every side by the debris of the "penguin."

As the boy's faculties began to reassert themselves a shudder ran through his frame, and, for the first time, he became conscious of the fact that every joint, every portion of his body was racked with shooting pains. Had he been seriously injured? In his apprehension, he began to aid the rescuers in their efforts to release both him and Dublin Dan.

The vigorous workers soon completed their task, and Don felt strong arms on either side dragging him to his feet. Some one was feeling his pulse; some one was feeling his joints; and some one laid a hand across his brow.

"Badly shaken up; suffering from shock; not much injured, though," he heard a voice exclaim.

An instant before Don Hale's vision had seemed blurred—his consciousness strangely dulled, but, somehow or other, the words "suffering from shock" seemed to revive him in an astonishing degree.

"'Suffering from shock!' Well, who wouldn't be?" he blurted out, almost angrily. He gently pushed aside the supporting hands. "I reckon, fellows, I don't need any props to support me. But say, how is Dublin Dan?"

The young Irishman, surrounded by a crowd, was lying in a half-reclining position upon the turf, his usually florid face pale and drawn. But as Don's query reached his ears he began to struggle up. It was a mighty hard effort, however, bringing many an exclamation of pain from his lips.

"Dublin Dan's all right!" he exclaimed, in a voice quite unlike his own. "But don't let me hear any one say I'm suffering from shock, or I'll paste 'em. Hey, boy, why didn't you get out of my way?"

"A comet couldn't have gotten out of your way," retorted Don, smiling faintly. "But why did you try to butt me off the earth?"

"I didn't do it. It was the 'penguin,'" said Dan. "I think I must have hurt the old bird's feelings by running over a bad place in the ground; or else it got tired of life and decided to quit. And that's where it isn't like the Hagens. What train are you going home on to-night?"

"I'll have to get a few more caressing touches from the earth before I do that," said Don.

The boy was feeling very shaky; his strength seemed to have so far deserted him that it was with difficulty that he managed to stand erect. The pains and aches he was experiencing were so great as to still make him wonder if, after all, he had not sustained some injury which might keep him out of the game for days—that was the only thought bothering him now. Yet he was deeply thankful that the terrific smash-up had had no worse consequences.

Although it was a very important matter to the two principals, the incident was so trivial in the eyes of the older students of the flying field that as soon as it was discovered that neither of the boys was seriously injured they began to retrace their steps.

The moniteur rather sternly demanded from Dan Hagen an explanation of the cause of the mishap.

"Tell him there isn't any explanation," said Dan, when Don had translated the instructor's remarks. "It just happened—that's all. I reckon one of the great joys in this game is that it keeps a chap so perpetually thankful that he's still alive that it makes up for everything else. Say, Don, where do you feel the worst?"

"All over," replied Don.

"Hadn't both of you better get back to the barracks?" asked George Glenn, solicitously.

Don almost indignantly declined the suggestion.

"No, indeed!" he declared. "I'm going to hang around here and watch the other smash-ups."

"And I'm not suffering from shock so much that I can't do the same," said Dan, with a grin.

Both Don and Dan soon found, however, that they had been too much shaken up to enter very thoroughly into the spirit of the occasion. Nevertheless, they were of that age when the very idea of

retiring from the field would have seemed like a deplorable surrender; so they remained until the majority of the pilots began their homeward march.

The boys were glad indeed to reach the Hotel d’Amerique. They removed the dirt and dust from their clothing and enjoyed a refreshing wash; and their feelings were then so far improved that each readily agreed to accompany the crowd, after supper, to Étainville and the club.

Thus the end of Don’s second day was passed very much as the first. They found Père Goubain, as usual, bubbling over with good-nature, and listened to the bits of philosophy which he expounded and to his tales of spies with the same interest as on the night before.

But there was something else which made their visit to the Café Rochambeau far more memorable than they had expected. While the rattle of tongues was in progress every one became aware of the fact that something was going on in the village street. The air was filled with the sounds of wheels jarring and rumbling over the cobbled highway, the steady tramping of horses’ hoofs and the voices of men.

Don and George were the first to rush outside. And what they saw gave them a thrill of pleasure and of exultation.

Yes, yes! The Yanks were not only coming but they had come. Actually!—an American battery was making its way over the lone street toward the front.

It was certainly a warlike scene over which the magic rays of the brilliant moon were playing. At the head of the procession rode the captain, mounted on a big bay horse. Close behind him followed the battery standard bearer carrying the red guidon, which lazily swayed to and fro. Silent and grim, the two horsemen suggested knights of old going forth to battle. Gun carriages and caissons drawn by long teams of mettlesome horses rattled and banged steadily past.

Now and again glinting lights flashed from horses’ trappings, or from the sinister, wicked-looking guns.

Often, from the wooden-shoed inhabitants of the village—men, women and children, who had flocked out into the street to view the interesting spectacle, there came the cries of, “Vive l’Amerique!” And to these salutations officers, cannoneers and postilion drivers sometimes responded with a “Vive la France!”

“What a glorious sight!” exclaimed Père Goubain, who, having managed to lift his ponderous frame from the rocking-chair, had joined the Americans outside.

“I reckon the Germans might as well fire all their spies and give them respectable jobs—eh, Père Goubain?” laughed Peur Jamais.

The old innkeeper shook his head.

“As long as there are Germans there will be spies,” he said, solemnly.

The crowd waited outside until the last gun carriage had become lost to view and only the faint sound of horses’ hoofs and grinding wheels came over the silent air.

Then, as the hour was getting late, the boys bade good-bye to Père Goubain and began their tramp toward the barracks.

Arriving at the aviation field, the students witnessed a spectacle which, to Don and Dublin Dan at least, possessed a singular interest and novelty. It was a dance executed by Annamites and dark-skinned Arabian Zouaves before several huge bonfires built in front of their quarters. With the firelight playing over the forms of the fantastically-moving dancers and the weird, monotonous notes of the native music, the scene was suggestive of some far-off, uncivilized quarter of the globe.

“Those chaps are certainly working hard for their fun,” remarked Dan Hagen.

“Wait till you see them get to fighting, which they sometimes do,” laughed Cal Cummings.

“Excuse me the night the scrap comes off,” chirped Don. “A little of that sort of thing is much too much.”

“Like our smash-up to-day!” chuckled Dublin Dan.

All the boys were pretty tired when they reached the barracks; for training in the flying school often produces a strain on the nerves more fatiguing than hard work. No time, therefore, was lost in turning in.

But Don Hale passed a most uncomfortable and restless night. The pains and aches, partially forgotten while in the midst of lively scenes, now became violent enough to prevent the boy from falling into the slumber which nature craved—in fact he had not slept at all when, after what seemed to be an interminable length of time, the clear, musical notes of the bugle, sounding the reveille, broke in upon his ears.

It was a relief. But, at the same time, Don, blinking-eyed and yawning, scarcely felt in the mood to enjoy the work as he had done on the day before. Out in the open air, however, he soon felt more like himself, and his natural enthusiasm soon overcame all bodily fatigue.

The new *élève* imagined that he had conquered the “penguin,” but the result of the day’s performance, to his great surprise, and equally great disgust, showed him that this was merely an illusion. Both he and Dublin Dan figured in several mishaps, the most serious of which caused Dan’s “penguin” to be towed to the repair shop. Both boys, too, received a varied assortment of bruises. And at night, when summing up the result of the work, Don grimly declared that it certainly was the end of an imperfect day.

A week passed, and then another, with Don and Dan still struggling to obtain a complete mastery over the unruly “birds.” There were several interruptions in the work due to thunder-storms. And after the artillery of the clouds had ceased the rain continued for hours. On such occasions the students amused themselves by getting up impromptu concerts; and sometimes, while the wind and rain beat relentlessly against the Hotel d’Amerique, the notes of such pleasing compositions as Schumann’s “Traumerei,” Schubert’s “Am Meer” and Mendelssohn’s “Spring Song,” played on the piano by a former motion picture artist, mingled with the ominous blasts outside.

On certain days lectures were given; the students were taught the theories of aeronautics and the design and construction of various types of flying machines. They were obliged, too, to take motors apart and put them together again. Then, there were courses in map reading—a very important subject indeed for the aviators must learn to keep track of their aerial travels by such means.

About the middle of the third week Don and Dan were delighted to be informed by the instructor that their progress had been sufficient to entitle them to enter the second class. This did not mean that they were to be allowed to fly. It did mean, however, that they became pilots of real airplanes, though it was not possible to turn on sufficient power for the motors to take the machine off the ground.

The boys found the sensation very different from that experienced while trying to tame the “penguins.” There was a delightful lightness and buoyancy about these monoplanes, as they skimmed over the ground, exhilarating in the highest degree. They continually seemed about to defy the limitations set upon them and leave the terrestrial globe for the firmament above.

And during all the time that Don and Dan were wrestling with the new problems, T. Singleton Albert, the former drugstore clerk of Syracuse, was making the most astonishing progress. Many in the beginning had been accustomed to laugh at the thought of the pale, anemic-looking chap ever attaining his ambition of becoming an airman, but, as Peur Jamais put it, he was “leaving every one of them far behind.”

One evening, when the sun had long disappeared beneath the horizon and the advance-guards of approaching dusk were drawing a veil over the distance and little by little driving the color from objects near at hand, a crowd of boys of the first and second classes journeyed to the third flying field to watch the machines circling around in the sky.

“Won’t I be glad when I get to the real work!” sighed Don.

Dave Cornwells, who was standing by, remarked:

“Boys, do you see that highest machine? Well, the pilot is a certain daring young aviator named T. Singleton Albert.”

“Goodness gracious!” exclaimed Dan Hagen. “Why, that chap is certainly a bird!”

“You’ve said something,” drawled Roy Mittengale. “And he’ll never be satisfied until he gets so high that the earth looks like a rubber ball to him.”

As the shadows slowly deepened over the earth the flyers, one by one, returned to the *grande piste*.

There still remained one airplane high aloft—so insignificant in the vast field of graying sky that it seemed to lose all resemblance to a flying machine and become but a tiny, shapeless speck, so faint at times that the naked eye could no longer follow its varied evolutions. And every one on the *grande piste* seemed to know to whom that machine belonged—it was Albert’s.

“My, shan’t I be glad when I get into his class!” commented Don Hale, whose face was turned toward the sky.

And then, all of a sudden, he gave voice to a loud exclamation. Others did the same; for the faint speck in the sky had suddenly begun to behave in the most extraordinary fashion. First it dove, then soared upward again, not in the orderly fashion which one might expect of a machine piloted by a skilled aviator, but in a way which suggested that something was amiss.

And this impression was strengthened a few moments later when the machine began to volplane at terrific speed, at the same time swinging around and around as though on a pivot.

“The vrille![4] The vrille!” came from dozens of excited students.

“The vrille!” echoed Don Hale, huskily.

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[4] “Vrille”—French for “falling leaf.”

## CHAPTER VIII—THE HERO

The boy had heard about the “vrille,” and he knew that it is one of the most difficult evolutions an airman can perform, and that it had sent many to their death.

For a few moments of tense and awe-stricken silence the onlookers kept their gaze fixed with agonized intentness upon the object which, like a wounded bird, was tumbling through space.

A sickening sensation of horror and despair gripped the spectators. The airplane and its pilot seemed doomed to utter annihilation.

Pale, trembling with apprehension, his throat dry and husky, Don Hale could not keep his eyes away

from the spectacle of that frightful fall. He stood as motionless as though fastened to the turf by means of invisible chains.

Nearer and nearer came the still-revolving plane. Now the machine was so clearly silhouetted against the sky that even the supports could be faintly distinguished.

Don had seen many a terrible sight during his stay in the war zone, but perhaps none had ever affected him so acutely as this. He could not help picturing in his mind the awful fate of poor Drugstore.

Not a voice—not an exclamation was heard. That most awesome silence which sometimes holds sway over spectators when they are witnesses to a catastrophe which they are powerless to avert had settled upon the crowd.

Faces were beginning to be turned aside, and though Don Hale felt an almost irresistible impulse to do the same, an impulse still stronger kept his wide, staring eyes fixed upon the airplane.

But a few moments more, and the tragedy would be over. His nerves were quivering violently. The strain of those few terrible seconds was almost too hard to bear.

And then, just as he was preparing to steel himself for the sound of a sickening crash—for the sight of a machine, smashed and battered to pieces, bursting into flames—a wild, half-stifled cry escaped his lips.

What was the reason?

Because of an almost unbelievable, impossible happening.

The airplane had suddenly stopped its whirling evolutions, and was soaring majestically through the air not a hundred feet above their heads. Its engine had started and was sending a deep droning hum through the air.

It took a few seconds for the strange and oppressive silence to be broken. It was as though the enthralled witnesses of the scene could not at first comprehend the evidences of their vision. Then frantic shouts and wild cheers rang forth over and over again.

Actually!—Drugstore was safe. What did it mean? Had he become such a master aviator that he had been simply giving an exhibition of his skill? It looked that way.

In their joy, the students slapped each other on the shoulder and yelled themselves hoarse.

Around and around the *-piste* flew the airplane, and it was not until a certain calmness had been restored among the students that it volplaned swiftly toward the earth, and, as easily as a bird alighting, struck the ground and presently came to a halt.

And the moment it had done so an excited crowd began rushing toward it from different parts of the field.

No conquering hero was ever acclaimed with greater fervor—with greater enthusiasm than T. Singleton Albert. Hands were thrust forward to shake that of the returned aviator.

The moniteurs praised and chided him at the same time. It was almost unbelievable, one of them declared, that a student with so little experience should have possessed sufficient courage to execute such a dangerous and daring maneuver.

And throughout it all Albert remained quite silent. The demonstration, indeed, seemed to embarrass him—to bring his natural modesty and reserve all the more to the front.

“Simply splendid, T. Singleton!” cried Don, enthusiastically. “Only, I wish to goodness you had notified us beforehand what was coming off. Honestly, my nerves are jumping like a jack-in-the-box. But didn’t the vrille make you dizzy?”

“Yes,” admitted Drugstore—“so much so that just now I wouldn’t be able to look in a mirror and see myself twice in the same place.”

“I don’t think you’ll have any occasion to fear Captain Baron Von Richtofen and his Red Squadron of Death,” chuckled Marlow. “If they ever get after you, son, just pull off the same trick, and it’ll mean a safe getaway.”

Albert clambered out of the machine, and, as though wishing to escape further attention, hurried rather unsteadily toward a camion standing by the side of the field. But such a sensational and unexpected event was not to be dismissed in so unceremonious a fashion. All the way to the waiting vehicle the former soda-water dispenser was obliged to listen to enthusiastic comments and reply to numerous queries.

And so it continued all the way to the Hotel d’Amerique, and even at the supper table later on.

Then it was that Sid Marlow started other demonstration, by exclaiming, in his big, booming voice:

“Sometimes a chap has no right to be modest. I’ve traveled over some pretty rough trails, fellows, and early discovered that modesty is one of the biggest stumbling blocks in the path of success. That’s the reason I haven’t any.”

“We’ve noticed it,” chirped Roy Mittengale.

“You’ll notice it some more, too, when I equal Albert’s record. Now, boys, I call upon our young friend for a speech. Who seconds the motion?”

Everybody did, and with an enthusiasm which brought warm flushes to the face of the embarrassed Albert.

He tried to resist, too, when those nearest at hand forced him to his feet. This time, however, the crowd was determined. They brushed aside the boy's protestations, and presently Drugstore, finding that there was absolutely no chance to escape the trying ordeal, began to make a few stammering remarks.

For a moment the eyes of all in the room fixed intently upon him threatened to stop altogether his halting words. And then, suddenly, to the surprise of all, he collected his scattered wits and pulled himself together. It was as if a new spirit had entered into him. The flush left his cheeks and the tremolo in his voice was replaced by a firm and even tone.

But the first words he uttered when this changed condition had taken possession of him fairly astounded his hearers.

"Boys, I'm through with flying forever."

"Through with flying forever!" cried Don.

Then came an almost riotous demand for explanations. The boys weren't going to stand for any "joshing." But, as cool and collected as before he had been the reverse, Albert voiced his declaration a second time.

"True as I'm standing here, boys, I mean it," he declared. "I'm no hero. That wasn't a joy ride to show what I could do in the way of handling the plane—oh, no! It was nearer to being a real tragedy. And I'm through with the game for all time."

Drugstore's assertions created another sensation. A babel of tongues prevented his next words from being heard.

Big Sid Marlow quickly restored silence.

"Now tell us all about it, Albert," he commanded.

"It's a mighty short story," replied Drugstore. "I made up my mind to do the vrille, but somehow or other, at the very last moment, the idea of actually starting it had such an effect upon my nerves that I decided to leave it for another time. Even the thought, high up there in the air, was enough to send cold chills creeping through me and make me perform some bungling movements with the controls. Before I could regain the mastery over myself, almost before I could realize it, my plane was thrown into the vrille and I was shooting through space, with the machine absolutely out of control." Albert's voice faltered. An intense agitation seemed to grip him. "It was terrible—frightful!" He almost gasped. "Never had I the least expectation of coming through it alive. Never shall I forget those terrifying moments—the agony I suffered. That one experience, fellows, has taken away all the fascination of the game. Call it a yellow streak if you want; call it a case of downright cowardice—I can't help that. I'm going to quit the flying school for good."

And having uttered these words with a conviction which permitted no one to doubt his absolute sincerity, T. Singleton Albert abruptly turned away and made for the door.

"Well," exclaimed Don Hale, "that chap may not think he's a hero, but, all the same, I believe he is."

And to this sentiment every one heartily agreed.

## CHAPTER IX—THE ACE

Many of the students confidently believed that by the time another day had rolled around Albert would have so far recovered from the effects of his thrilling experience as to reconsider his determination. This, however, was not the case.

A few privately expressed the opinion that Drugstore was a quitter, but, somehow or other, the boy's frank avowal had raised him in the opinion of the majority, who sincerely regretted that so promising a pupil should be lost to the school.

During the late afternoon another American arrived. Of course this was not a very important event. Students were always going and coming, some leaving for the *École de Perfectionment*[5] others being sent back to their regiments when it was found that they were not fitted by nature to become successful airmen.

But a little incident in connection with the appearance of the newcomer profoundly interested those of an observant or inquisitive nature. It was a rather dramatic meeting between him and the former college student, Victor Gilbert.

The latter, who was now in the third class and gave promise of being one of the best of the *élève* pilots, upon entering the room and coming face to face with the other halted as though almost petrified with astonishment, and exclaimed:

"Hello! You here, Jason Hamlin!" Whereupon the other answered, in a tone which showed no trace of friendliness:

"Yes, I am here, Gilbert. And one of the reasons I am here is because you are here. Does that disturb you?"

"Not enough for me to notice it," returned Victor Gilbert, coolly.

"Flying is a dangerous game, eh?"

"There are other games just as dangerous."

“There are other games just as dangerous”

At this remark Jason Hamlin’s face flushed perceptibly; his fingers twitched; a steely glare which plainly told of a spirit moved to anger came into his eyes.

But the interesting colloquy ended there.

“I say, wasn’t that mighty curious about Gilbert and Hamlin?” exclaimed Bobby Dunlap, otherwise Peur Jamais, to Don Hale, after the evening meal was over. “I wonder what Gilbert meant by saying: ‘There are other games just as dangerous.’”

“It’s too much of a riddle for me.”

“I tried to pump this Jason person a little,” declared Peur Jamais, “but he was as dry as an old well gone out of business. Strikes me there’s a little mystery which I’ll have to unravel.”

“I’ll let you have all the fun of the unraveling,” chortled Don. “Go to it, Mr. Sherlock Holmes the second.”

“All right!” chirped Bobby. “I hope I shan’t get a punch in the eye while I’m sherlocking. Our friend Jason looks as though he wouldn’t have much trouble in finding his temper.”

“Or losing it,” said Don, with a laugh. “But say, Bobby, I got a letter to-day from George Glenn. And what do you think he’s seen?”

“Break it to me gently.”

Thereupon Don Hale drew from his pocket the missive, and began to read:

“‘To-day I had a mighty exciting experience. It was during my two hours’ patrol over the enemy’s line, and the “Archies” were following my plane thick and fast.’”

“The ‘Archies’! What does he mean by ‘Archies’?” interrupted Bobby.

“It’s a name the flying fighters have given to the anti-aircraft guns,” replied Don. “Though I reckon no one knows exactly the reason why.”

He resumed:

“‘Don, I must confess that this afternoon I got a pretty big scare. I was just about to return to the encampment of the squadron when I saw something that made my pulse throb as it hasn’t throbbed even when I was engaged in a duel in the air. It was the sight of two crimson planes swooping down upon me from above—a part of Captain Baron Von Richtofen’s Red Squadron!’”

“Great Caesar’s bald-headed nanny-goat!” ejaculated Bobby. “Where’s my suit-case? I think I’ll go home with Drugstore.”

“I shouldn’t blame you,” laughed Don.

“‘By the time I made this startling discovery the foremost had opened fire with his machine gun. And the first thing I knew bullets were ripping through my plane.’”

“I don’t think I’ll wait for my suitcase, after all!” exclaimed Peur Jamais. “Whew! What did George do to them for that?”

“The next chapter is as follows,” said Don:

“‘I threw my plane into the vrille, and the next shots sped over my head. That might not have saved

me, either, had it not been that some of the boys, seeing my predicament, literally sailed into the Germans.'"

"Poor child!" cried Bobby. "By this time I really ought to be half-way to the station."

Don continued:

"'From now on I expect things to be more dangerous than usual, which is saying a good bit. I will write again soon if—though I will say au revoir.'"

"I can't say the prospect looks so very enchanting," confessed Bobby. "But, as the French say, 'C'est la guerre!' And that means it isn't any pink tea affair, eh?"

"I guess not; though I never drank any pink tea," laughed Don.

Some time later T. Singleton Albert approached the two.

"I thought I'd say good-bye, fellows," he announced. "I'm leaving during the forenoon to-morrow, and you chaps might not happen to be around."

"It's too bad!" said Don. "I suppose it's no use of our saying a word, eh?"

"Not a bit," declared the other, very emphatically. "That tumble in the air certainly did the business for me. Why, do you know, even the very sight of an airplane going aloft gives me the queerest kind of feelings. Take my advice—be a bit slow in making haste. Then you won't have to pack your suit-cases and get out, as I'm doing."

Albert spoke in the tone of one who felt that his ambitions had been rudely shattered—that the future held no hope.

The daring young airman who had astonished the students by his rapid progress had become once more the drugstore clerk, the very antithesis of what an airman might be expected to appear.

Drugstore solemnly wished them the best luck in the world, hoped they might win fame and glory in the sky, and then, after shaking hands very heartily, wandered away to say his adieus to the others.

"I think, after all, the soda-water counter is his proper sphere in life," remarked Dunlap, presently. "He's more fitted to be reading about the exploits of other chaps than trying to do them himself."

"I hope the weather is all right to-morrow," broke in Don. "It was looking a bit threatening when we came in—all clouded over. Let's take a look outside, 'Fear Never.'"

"All right," chirped Bobby. "Goodness, how I hate rainy days! I think I know, now, how a chicken in a coop must feel."

The two walked outside the crowded barracks, and both at once gave voice to expressions indicative of disappointment.

The entire heavens was covered with a thick canopy of clouds.

"I don't think Druggy need have said good-bye to-night," remarked Peur Jamais, disconsolately. "If I issued a Weather Communique it would sound something like this: High and steady winds; heavy rains, with no intermissions between; lightning and thunder in equal proportions; life-boats and rafts in demand.'"

"Never mind," sighed Don. "There are other days ahead of us."

"If I didn't think there were I'd never be standing here as calmly as this," returned Bobby, laughingly. "Let's go back to the smell of kerosene and dismal light."

It was rather late when the crowd turned in; and the last one hadn't been asleep very long before pattering drops of rain were heard falling upon the roof, while the wind, in soft and musical cadences, kept steadily blowing.

About two A. M. there came a veritable downpour and big, booming reverberations of thunder. Vivid flashes of bluish lightning filled each window with a dazzling glare and cast a weird and uncanny light throughout the room.

"It's a wild night, all right," exclaimed Dublin Dan, half sitting up.

"It means no flying to-morrow," grumbled Mittengale.

"Such little trials have their usefulness." It was Victor Gilbert who spoke. "It teaches, or rather, should teach one to be philosophical and accept the inevitable with resignation."

"I don't want to be philosophical," complained Peur Jamais. "And I won't be philosophical, either. Whew! Some big waste of electric light, that!"

No one made any reply, or if they did it was unheard; for the most appalling detonation shook and rattled the barracks. It seemed as if the structure must be shaken from its very foundations.

And thus the storm continued until the boys were routed from their beds by the musical notes of the bugle.

It was pitch dark and gloomy. The wind tore past with no soft and musical cadences mingled in with its angry whistling, and now and again a flurry of raindrops splattered noisily down.

The usual roll call was held, and then the boys were free to do as they pleased. Don Hale concluded to take a nap in his former place between the sheets.

When he once more opened his eyes the morning was well advanced.

Jumping out of his berth, with an exclamation of surprise, the boy hastily slipped on his clothes and

walked outside.

Scarcely a hint of color could be seen in the landscape. Here and there pools had formed, reflecting the dull, leaden gray of the wind-driven clouds, the air was filled with moisture, and the dull and heavy-looking earth seemed to have absorbed all it could possibly hold.

Gazing at the landscape was not a particularly enjoyable pastime; so the boy reentered the barracks.

An hour passed, during which the crowd amused itself in various ways. Then a shout outside was heard. Although the words themselves were not understood, it was a call so clearly intended to bring the boys that a general stampede for the door was made.

And when they reached it, they perceived a biplane which, in utter defiance of the treacherous wind buffeting it about, was approaching the aviation grounds at tremendous speed, its graceful, rocking form outlined in lightish tones against the sinister-looking storm-clouds.

“I believe he’s going to land!” cried Don.

“Of course. Did you think he was condemned to fly forever!” chirped Dublin Dan.

Now the loud, droning hum of the motors and propellers, which had been filling the air, suddenly ceased, and the object darting swiftly through the sky began to volplane in graceful spirals toward the earth.

Realizing that the biplane, which all now recognized as a Nieuport machine, an *avion de chasse*, as the French call them, would alight some distance away, the crowd started running over the muddy field toward it.

And while they were on the way the pilot made the most perfect *atterrissage*[6] any of them had ever seen.

T. Singleton Albert, who had not yet left, was enthusiastic in his praise.

“Oh, boy, wasn’t that jolly fine!” he cried. “And——”

He got no further; for just then some one bawled out with much gusto and boisterousness:

“It’s a machine belonging to the Lafayette Squadron!”

“The Lafayette Squadron!” echoed a number of others, the rather shrill and falsetto voice of Drugstore being plainly heard.

Sure enough, the insignia of the famous flying squadron—the face of an Indian warrior, now faded and worn by the rains and snows which had beaten upon it, could be clearly distinguished on the body of the rakish-looking plane.

Don Hale forgot all about the dreary prospect ahead of him for the day in his absorbed contemplation of the visiting biplane. Then his glances fell upon the aviator just on the point of stepping from the nacelle, or cockpit.

“Hello!”

He uttered the word aloud and excitedly.

The appearance of the aviator was thoroughly familiar. He had seen pictures of him many a time. A curious thrill shot through the boy; for suddenly he realized that he was looking upon William Thaw, the famous American Ace, one of the most commanding figures of the Franco-American Flying Corps.

Others, too, among the crowd had recognized the renowned aviator, and a burst of enthusiastic cheering ending in a “Rah, rah, for Thaw!” rang out.

The famous ace smilingly bowed his acknowledgments, remarking:

“Many thanks, fellows! I thought I would just take a flyer over here to pay a brief visit to my old friend, the commandant.”

“But—but—you didn’t actually come all the way from the front, Lieutenant Thaw, did you?” almost stuttered T. Singleton Albert, whose eyes were fixed with strange intensity on the trim, though mud-bespattered little Nieuport.

“Oh, yes! Had quite a scrap, too, just before leaving. Did I get the Boche?” Lieutenant Thaw smiled genially. “No. I think that particular Teuton must have had faith in the old adage that ‘He who fights and runs away may live to fight another day.’ Now, boys, I suppose it’s quite safe for me to leave the machine here until I return?”

Being assured that it was, the aviator, with a wave of his hand, started trudging through the soggy field toward the commandant’s office.

By this time Don Hale and Albert were making a close examination of the Nieuport. Both took a look at the cockpit, beautifully finished in hard wood, and at the upholstered pilot’s seat, and studied the brightly-shining nickel-plated instruments which tell the pilot practically everything he needs to know while in the air.

There was something else, too,—an ominous-looking something else—which attracted and held their interest—a Vickers machine gun, the firing of which is so perfectly timed that the bullets fly between the whirling propeller blades.

To Don Hale, and, doubtless, to many others, that weapon, catching and reflecting numerous gleams of light, was almost awe-inspiring. And, to add to these feelings, they presently discovered

several bullet holes in both the upper and lower planes, silent and eloquent testimonials of the perils which always face the intrepid and courageous fighters of the air.

At first Albert had been quite talkative—that is for him; then, as he walked around the machine, studying every detail with the same interest that a connoisseur might have displayed in the contemplation of a rare and priceless piece of statuary, he suddenly became silent. Finally his mild, unassuming air deserted him, and, straightening up, he exclaimed, loudly:

“Fellows, I’ve changed my mind. Nobody is ever going to call me a quitter. I’m not going to leave the school after all. No, sir! I’ll keep at the flying game; and, by George, I’ll get to the front, too.”

Following his sudden and almost vehement outburst, there came a silence.

But it was quickly broken. And as loud as had been the cheering for the visiting aviator it distinctly held second place to that which greeted T. Singleton Albert’s unexpected declaration.

The boys shook his hand and slapped him delightedly on the shoulder.

“Julius Cæsar! The Germans are going to pay dearly on account of this unexpected visit of Lieutenant William Thaw,” cried Roy Mittengale.

“Poor Baron Von Richtofen and his Red Squadron of Death!” laughed Bobby Dunlap. “Just think of all those gallons of red paint gone to waste! Drugstore, your nerve is simply grand!”

A little later, when the American lieutenant returned, the students told him about the incident, whereupon he, too, heartily congratulated Albert.

“We need young chaps like you at the front,” he declared. “The air service is of the greatest importance. It has been called the ‘Eyes of the Army.’ The game, too, is wonderfully thrilling—wonderfully interesting. Let me wish you much glory, success—and safety.”

As he spoke, he climbed into the cockpit.

Don Hale gave the propeller a whirl and, presently, amid a chorus of good-byes, the Nieuport started off. Faster and faster it moved over the field, sending streams of mud and water flying in every direction, and, at last, gaining sufficient momentum, it glided into the air.

The crowd watched the biplane until it had disappeared in the murky, moisture-laden air.

“Boys, I’ll never forget this day,” declared Drugstore. “It’s strange how little things may alter the whole course of a person’s life!”

And every one, quite as solemnly, agreed with him that it was.

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[5] School for advanced students.

[6] Atterrissage—landing.

## CHAPTER X—CORPORAL DON

Not long after this there came another very interesting day in Don Hale’s life. He had graduated from the first and second classes and was to make his first flight in the air.

Only those who have gone through a similar experience can understand Don Hale’s feelings when he seated himself in the cockpit of a much-used though sturdy little plane and laid hold of the controls. No veteran airman or famous “ace”[7] could possibly have felt more exultant or proud.

The school by this time had become very full, and many of the *élèves* were obliged to await their turn; so there were always plenty of spectators on the field; and these generally paid particular attention to the boys who were making their first trial spin in the air. This all added to Don Hale’s tremendous desire to make a good showing; for he still had vivid recollections of his preliminary experiences with the “penguins.”

“Now, remember, make no attempt to turn in the air,” commanded the moniteur in charge. “Perfectly straight flights only; fly no higher than thirty feet above the ground.”

“Get out your tape-measure, Donny,” giggled Roy Mittengale. “Remember, every foot adds to the jolt of the fall at the bottom.”

“Don’t try to imitate Lieutenant Thaw so much that you’ll hurt yourself,” advised Ben Holt.

“Safety first in airplanes means not to go up at all,” chimed in another.

Don, however, wasn’t paying the slightest attention to these jocular remarks, for the mechanic had his hand on the propeller.

It certainly was a wonderful sensation to the young airman when he felt the machine suddenly begin to move, slowly at first, but rapidly gathering momentum, until, like a high power motor car, it was racing at a speed which made him almost gasp for breath.

Presently the boy gritted his teeth together, and, with a peculiar feeling suggestive of I-wonder-what-is-going-to-happen-next state of mind, pulled back gently on the control stick.

And then, abruptly, he realized that the monoplane was traveling ahead with a most wonderful smoothness. The wind rushed past, lashing and stinging his face with its terrific force, but the

heavy goggles prevented his eyes from being affected.

Don Hale glanced over the side of the cockpit, and, a little to his dismay, discovered that he was just skimming a few feet above the surface of the earth.

A quick pull on the control stick sent the monoplane racing aloft, and before the boy, trembling with excitement, could bring it to an even keel he was far above the height limit set by the instructor.

At first Don Hale had been acutely nervous—even fearful and apprehensive. To him it was a very marvelous thing to be actually off the earth, the pilot of a real flying machine. And it scarcely seemed possible that the machine should require so little attention. Like a flash, all the unpleasant feelings that had disturbed him vanished.

Jubilant, exultant, almost ready to shout with the sheer joy of the exhilarating sensations he was experiencing, Don Hale once more looked earthward. How strange the ground looked flying beneath him at incredible speed! How high above it he appeared to be! If anything should happen to his machine a fall from that height might produce most serious results.

With one swift, comprehensive glance, his eyes took in the boys at various points on the field and the planes which, for one reason or another, were resting here and there on the turf. Then his greatest desire and ambition in the world was to descend—to return to that haven of safety.

Yes, flying was easy enough; but when it came to making a landing—that was where the difficulty began.

Nervously, Don switched off the current and pushed the control stick forward.

And, to his utter dismay, the plane seemed to be falling headlong at an acute angle—the ground to be fairly shooting up toward him.

For one brief instant he had a terrible vision of a fatal smash-up. Then, a pull of the lever in the opposite direction brought the nose of the machine upward again. And following this, to the boy’s intense surprise and relief, the monoplane dropped in the most gentle fashion to terra firma, taxi-ing across the field, its speed rapidly diminishing.

When it had come to a stop Don found his face bathed in perspiration and his pulse throbbing in a way that it had seldom done before.

“By George! Am I actually here!” he muttered.

Notwithstanding the fact that the boy had made a mighty good landing and could hear shouts of approval coming from the distance he was too honest with himself to be gratified with the achievement. He knew that it was simply a case of good luck.

“But just wait till next time!” he muttered, grimly. “By George, the earth never seemed so fine before!”

A number of Annamites presently appeared and turned the machine around.

It was not for some time, however, that Don’s nerves quieted down sufficiently for him to put his airplane into motion. With a fervent hope that fate would be as kind to him as it had been before, he switched on the ignition and once again faced the blasts of wind.

Then came the delicious moment of soaring upward—the ecstasy of feeling himself borne through the air as swiftly as the arrow from an archer’s bow and that sense of wonderful freedom which the airman alone can enjoy.

As before, he glanced downward, and a humorous thought came into his mind.

“Certainly I’m the biggest thirty feet that was ever known above the ground,” he murmured. “I hope I don’t fly to the moon.”

With astonishing rapidity the distant hangars, from hazy, indistinct objects, became strong and clear. He could see the students and instructors, watching, it seemed to him, with an interest and close attention that fired his spirit with the keenest determination to make a landing that would surprise them.

He did.

But the machine was not badly wrecked, nor was he himself injured by the fall of fifteen feet.

It was merely a case, Mittengale genially explained, in which the earth happened to be that many feet lower than it should have been.

Don said very little. It rather jarred his sensibilities to hear the mirthful laughter and bantering remarks and to see the Annamites towing an extraordinarily wobbling machine toward the repair shop. And, besides this, to add to his disturbed state of mind, the moniteur, a boyish chap named Boulanger, very loudly called attention to the error which had caused the accident, between times roundly scolding him.

“Quite a neat little bawling out!” chirped Dublin Dan, soothingly. “It’s a great life if you don’t weaken.”

“I don’t include that word in my vocabulary,” exclaimed Don, with a half smile.

But though Don Hale’s start in the third class had not been particularly auspicious, nevertheless, by the end of the day he managed to gain sufficient mastery over the plane to receive a “*Pas mal*, Hale!”—“Not bad!” from the same moniteur who had chided him.

That evening, while lying in his bunk, he summed up the situation in regard to himself. There were

other pupils who had made faster progress, but the boy felt sure that what he had learned he had thoroughly learned. He knew, however, that there was a tremendous amount of work ahead of him before he could possibly hope to equal the skill of the most humble flyer of the Lafayette Squadron—a squadron which he devoutly hoped to join.

Difficulties have the effect on some natures of spurring them to greater zeal and determination; so it was in the case of Don Hale. Each failure, each “bawling out,” each chorus of laughter only acted as a stimulus.

In a little less than a week he had acquired sufficient skill in driving the machine in straight courses across the field to be promoted another step—that is to the *tour de piste*, or tour of the aviation field at a height of about three hundred feet.

This was, of course, designed to teach the airmen how to make their turns in the air, an operation requiring the greatest accuracy and care. Up to this time Don thought he had enjoyed about all the thrills that it was possible to have, but the first *tour de piste* undeceived him. All the other experiences faded into insignificance when compared to this. In his splendid isolation from all mankind, he was filled with a certain sense of awe a little unnerving at first. He was in a situation where no power save his own could be of any avail, and on the first two or three occasions involuntary tremors shook his frame as the Bleriot monoplane banked, or swung around at an angle.

Happily, however, there was no tragedy to record. With increasing confidence, Don dared to rise higher, and within a few hours had reached the required altitude. From this elevation he viewed with absorbed attention the wonderful panorama, which, like a colored map, was outspread before him, revealing fields of various forms, shapes and colors, and patches of woods and hills. And dividing the landscape were light lines—the roads—running in all directions.

His first tour was satisfactory to himself and his instructors. The turns held no terror for him.

Following this several days of bad weather put a stop to the work of the school. During the enforced inactivity Bobby Dunlap had his curiosity and interest in Victor Gilbert and Jason Hamlin still further heightened by a violent altercation between the two, although neither he nor any one else was near enough to overhear the conversation. The fact, too, that the young chaps had evidently been just on the point of indulging in a physical encounter made the “Gilbert-Hamlin affair,” as Bobby termed it, decidedly interesting.

“I’m going to find out all about it some day,” he laughed, nodding his head emphatically.

“Bully boy!” chuckled Sid Marlow.

When the period of dull weather was over Don Hale started in with greater zeal than ever. He was doing his best to equal the record of T. Singleton Albert, who had so far recovered his nerve that he had no hesitancy at all in executing the vrille.

By gradual degrees, Don took his machine to greater altitudes, until, at length, he was making the *tour de piste* at a height of three thousand five hundred feet. Now feeling somewhat like a veteran, he was fully prepared when the order came for him to perform some of the simpler evolutions in the air. One of these consisted in spiraling down to the earth with the engine shut off and landing almost directly beneath the point at which he started. Another was to volplane swiftly downward, and then, while still several hundred feet in the air, bring the machine to a horizontal position and swing around either to the right or left.

These exercises proved to be a pretty severe test on his nerves, and at first affected his head and stomach in a truly distressing manner; but constant practice, combined with a determined will, finally enabled him to gain the mastery over them, and he began keenly to enjoy the great and thrilling swoops through space.

At length there came a time to which he had been looking forward most anxiously, and that was the beginning of his training in a big Caudron biplane, a rather slow but safe machine. This meant that Don Hale’s stay at the École Militaire de Beaumont was nearly at an end.

There were now but two tests before him, one known as the *petit voyage* and the other the *grande voyage*. The first was a sixty mile trip and return; the second a triangular journey, each side being about seventy miles in length.

By the time Don had passed these successfully T. Singleton Albert and Victor Gilbert had gone to the great finishing school located at Pau, in the southern part of France.

It was indeed a happy moment to Don when he received his “*Brevet d’Aviateur Militaire*” from the War Department, which made him a corporal in the French army. This merely meant, however, that he had graduated from the school at Beaumont, and, like the two who had preceded him, was sent to take a course in “acrobatics” at Pau.

Pau, he found, was very delightfully situated, and within sight of the snow-capped Pyrenees.

With even added zest, Don Hale entered into the work before him. It was more dangerous than anything he had attempted in the school at Beaumont; but the tactics he learned were of extreme importance, being precisely those used in air fighting on the front.

About the middle of his course Don Hale was ordered to report to the Mitrailleuse school at Casso, on the shore of a lake, where soldiers in all branches of the army are trained in the use of machine guns. In a two-seater, piloted by another airman, Don Hale practiced firing at captive balloons and moving targets on the lake.

At first it proved very difficult, but constant work soon enabled him to meet the requirements of his instructors.

After the completion of this training he returned to Pau for a short period. Following this he went to Plessis Belleville to add a few final touches before being assigned to combat duty in one of the escadrilles.

The boy's greatest ambition was to join the Lafayette, where he might be near his chum George Glenn, and he passed through a period of much anxiety before the matter was finally settled in the affirmative by the military authorities.

Proud and happy indeed, in his neatly-fitting uniform, with the corporal's stripes on his sleeve and the golden wings and star insignia on his collar, Don Hale set out on his journey to join the escadrille, then encamped not far from Bar-le-Duc, near the Verdun front.

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[7] Ace—a pilot who has brought down five or more enemy planes.

## CHAPTER XI—THE LAFAYETTE

Of all the flying corps in France none performed more valiant deeds or became more renowned than the Lafayette, composed of Americans who journeyed across the sea to help the French in their struggle against the invading hosts. Whether it was in answer to the call of adventure due to the love of thrills and excitement, or to the fascination of a new and wonderful sport, or simply from a sense of duty, are questions of no particular moment—the members of the flying corps are to be judged solely by the remarkable work they accomplished.

The fame of such combat pilots as Rockwell, Prince, Chadwick, MCConnell, Lufbery, Hall, Walcott and numbers of others is of the kind which will last as long as history itself. Never again, perhaps, will men be called upon to repeat their triumphs.

The day Don Hale arrived was an epochal one in his life. George Glenn and T. Singleton Albert met him at the station in a little village crowded with soldiers and permissionnaires.

"I can't tell you, Don, how glad I am to see you; and yet I'm almost sorry to see you," exclaimed Albert, enigmatically. "You're in for excitement that will make your days as an ambulance driver with the Red Cross seem tame by comparison."

"And they were plenty thrilling enough to suit me," laughed Don. "What's the latest news?"

"That this little village was recently bombed."

George Glenn pointed to a sign painted on the side of a building.

"'Cave Voûté,'" read Don, aloud.

These caves, he knew, were underground retreats, where the soldiers or inhabitants could find a refuge in case of a bombardment or a bomb-dropping expedition of the enemy.

"One good thing—our camp is outside the range of the guns," said George.

As the boys walked through the little village, which, during the earlier stages of the war, had been the scene of many an exciting event, Don Hale could not help but remarking on the changed appearance of T. Singleton Albert. There was a gravity and sedateness about him which he judged to be caused by the dangers to which the airmen are constantly exposed.

"Had any exciting adventures yet, Drugstore?" he asked.

"Plenty of them," responded Albert. And then a light which Don Hale had never seen before flashed into the young chap's eyes. "Yet, in spite of that, I wouldn't have missed this experience for all the world. Flying has all the joys, the thrills and excitement of every other sport beaten a thousand miles. I certainly owe a whole lot of thanks to Lieutenant William Thaw."

The three found plenty to talk about, though they were often obliged to let their lively tongues slow down on account of the lines of marching troops and the almost endless procession of motor trucks passing in both directions.

In about three-quarters of an hour they reached their destination—the headquarters of the famous Lafayette Escadrille, which happened to be, at this time, in a beautiful little villa, situated in the midst of spacious grounds.

A number of the American pilots cordially greeted him, and Don was very glad to see among them Victor Gilbert.

After meeting the courteous French captain of the escadrille the boy was shown to a room on the second floor, which he was to share with several others.

Outside of the hazardous nature of their occupation, the members of the American Squadron, unlike the "doughboys" and poilus, lived a life of ease and comfort. They had orderlies who attended to their needs, comfortable feather beds to sleep upon, and their meals, prepared by a French chef, were eaten in a dining-room which delighted the eye by its most artistic furnishings and decorations.

It would have been very hard to analyze Don Hale's feelings on this particular occasion. Expectation, eagerness, happiness and impatience, all seemed to hold sway over his thoughts, and though the reality was before him he could scarcely believe that he actually had become a member of the famous American Squadron.

After a substantial lunch, still in the company of George Glenn and Albert, Don journeyed to the aviation field not very far away.

With the utmost eagerness, he gazed about him. He saw numerous hangars, rest tents and various wooden structures. And, besides these, parked at one side, were ponderous motor trucks, trailers and several automobiles.

Attached to the great encampment were mechanicians, chauffeurs, telephone operators, Red Cross attendants and motor-cyclists—for the business of flying has its prosaic side as well as its thrills. Somehow or other it reminded Don of a country fair on a large scale, and it would have seemed to him very natural indeed had his eyes alighted on a barker, mounted upon a rostrum, exhorting a crowd of spectators to enter. There was a certain air of grimness and sternness, however, about the men whom they encountered that soon removed this impression. From the east came the sullen rumble of countless guns. Sometimes it was low, like the mutterings of distant thunder; sometimes it swelled into a volume, as if a storm was about to burst, and then, like the sighing of the wind, almost faded away.

A patrol was just about to leave for the front, and Don watched the Nieuports taxi across the ground, rise one after another in the air, and, after gaining a high altitude, soar in a V-shaped formation toward the battle front.

The boy thrilled at the sight, and his eyes followed the fast-flying planes until they were lost to sight behind a thin veil of whitish clouds.

“Of course, I’m pretty sure you know just what kind of work we are doing here,” said George Glenn, “but, notwithstanding, I am going to tell you a few things. Our squadron belongs to what is known as the group de combat, and it has a definite sector to cover.

“A patrol is always kept over the enemy’s lines, not only to prevent the German pilots from entering ours but to make their lives as full of spice and adventure as we possibly can.”

“Still, we have a lot to do besides fighting,” put in Albert. “Sometimes our duty is to protect the two or three-seater bombardment planes, the *avions de réglage*, or airplanes used by those who regulate the artillery fire, and the observation and photographic planes. The mission of the big ‘birds,’ although they are armed with two guns, and sometimes three, is a purely defensive one.”

“Quite often,” chimed in George, “escorting bombardment and photographic planes, we travel quite a long distance into ‘Germany,’ as we call the other side of the barbed wire entanglements.”

“It must be wonderful!” cried Don.

“Some of our experiences are, I can assure you,” returned George, with a half smile. “Now, Don, here is something the captain is going to tell you, and if you value your life and my piece of mind you will implicitly obey his instructions.”

“Fire away!” said Don.

“It is to stick by the formation—always! The Germans have a habit of pouncing down upon stragglers, and unless the pilot combines skill, resourcefulness and courage in equal proportions, or sheer good luck intervenes, it is apt to be good-night.”

“You can trust me not to get lost,” said Don, with a serious look in his eyes. “But, boys, I want to see my plane—I must see my plane, and, as the captain is right here on the field, I reckon he’ll show it to me.”

In this view Don was not mistaken; and presently a mechanic rolled out of one of the hangars a small machine, slender of fuselage and beautiful in its proportions. On the tapering body was painted an Indian’s head similar to the one on Lieutenant Thaw’s machine.

“As you see, all of the planes are numbered,” remarked the captain, “and, in addition, each of the pilots has some special mark on the fuselage to distinguish his from the others.”

“Yes, Monsieur le Capitaine,” said Don, with a grin of delight.

“This machine has a motor of two hundred horse power and can travel at a speed of about one hundred and forty miles an hour,” continued the commander. “And at times you will need it all,” he added, dryly. “When may you go up? This afternoon. I will detail Sergeant Reynolds to accompany you in his plane. The German lines must not be crossed, under any consideration, for several days at least.”

“The German lines must not be crossed”

“Oh!” murmured Don.

This was a great disappointment to the boy; for he possessed that daring which youth is prone to indulge—a daring which may often lead to disaster, and, as often, be a means to safety.

The captain, after introducing him to the mechanic who was to look after the Nieuport, walked away.

The next half hour was one of unalloyed delight to Don Hale. He spent it in examining the plane, the various nickel plated instruments with which the cockpit was furnished and the Vickers gun, with its belts of cartridges.

To fire this stationary weapon the pilot would have no need to remove his hand from the controls. The instruments consisted of a compass, an altimetre to register the height, a speed indicator and several others. Then there was a map in a roller case.

The top of the plane was camouflaged by means of spots of a greenish and brownish color; and besides the concentric circles of blue, white, brown and red on the wings the end of the tail had been painted with the tricolor of France.

Though Don Hale, as a rule, was a pretty calm lad, he found it hard to conceal his nervous tension.

His preliminary flight that afternoon, however, was really nothing more than a repetition of those he had taken while in the training schools. A green pilot was not to be fed to the hungry Boches, and he stood in no more danger from that source than if he had been hundreds of miles away.

On the following days the sergeant led him a little further toward the fighting front. And then, having received all the protection which wise counsel and advice could afford, the young airman was pronounced ready to begin his career as a combat pilot.

## CHAPTER XII—ABOVE THE CLOUDS

On a certain morning, just after sunrise, Don Hale, in his fur-lined combination suit, leather aviation helmet, and provided with heavy goggles and gloves, was strapped in his machine. It was one of a row of six, which, in almost perfect alignment, were ready to go aloft.

There was the greatest activity and noise about the flying field. The air was filled with the roar, the drone and the hum of many motors; and in this sea of sound the reverberations of the distant guns were, for the time being, completely lost.

Don had received his instructions to fly at the rear of a formation of six machines, following one another at a distance of fifty metres. This *vol de groupe* would patrol the German lines for a period of several hours.

Don Hale found himself murmuring over and over again: “At last!” And though he tried his best to still the rapid pulsations of his heart—to control a hand that had an extraordinary tendency to tremble, it was without avail. He was going up to face peril of the gravest sort.

Was anything going to happen?

Just then he felt almost afraid to think of what the fates might hold in store for him.

Presently he saw the captain wave his hand as a signal, and a moment later the leader of the patrol rose in the air. The others followed.

There was just an instant more of waiting for Don Hale, and then he, too, was rolling over the ground.

As readily as a leaf borne aloft by a gust of wind the Nieuport answered to the controls and began spiraling upward.

The six machines rose directly over the field, and at a height of about two thousand feet the leader headed toward the east, the others taking up their respective places in the formation.

Higher and higher the fleet of wonderful little machines ascended, and Don Hale glancing over the side of the cockpit, saw a wonderful panorama of the rapidly-receding earth, which the early morning sun was tinting with a soft and poetic glow. The most delicate tints of brown and green were broken here and there by darker notes of a purplish hue, indicating patches of woods. Crisscrossing the earth in all directions were the roads—thread-like lines of palish gray, and, as though some giant hand had scattered them carelessly about at widely distant points, were clusters of little glistening dots—villages, or what remained of villages. Now and again the boy’s eyes caught sight of pools, mirroring on their surfaces the delicate tones of the sky or the clouds above, and presently the river Meuse came into view—a faint and hazy line.

His practice in the school at Pau had taught Don how to preserve his place in the *vol de groupe*, which, when the tremendous speed of the Nieuport is considered, is far from easy, and he had never made a better effort than at the present time. The new member of the Lafayette Squadron remembered vividly the stories he had heard concerning the fate of youthful and venturesome pilots who had disobeyed the commander’s orders.

Eagerly, he kept his eyes open for enemy planes. He could not see any, but he did perceive, far below him, on both sides of the line, numbers of grotesque-looking observation balloons, or sausages, as they have been jocularly christened.

Now the altimetre registered a height of over ten thousand feet—they were approaching the battle-front. Don Hale was about to get his first view of “Germany.”

The boy, however, was too excited—too absorbed in the contemplation of the singular scene below him, and, at the same time, so occupied in handling his plane that he did not feel any tingling sensation of fear.

The battle-ground was covered with a thin veil of purplish smoke, and where the delicate shadows lay thickest on the earth he could occasionally distinguish the flashing lights of the guns or of exploding shells. But it all seemed very distant—very remote. The clouds of smoke from the bursting projectiles and innumerable batteries were but tiny spots amid the surrounding haze. Don realized that a vigorous bombardment from both sides was going on and that a devastating hail of missiles was creating havoc and destruction in the opposing trenches and far to their rear. Then he had a swift glimpse of that irregular brownish stretch of land running between the hostile forces—“No Man’s Land,” the most sinister, the most barren, the most mutilated strip of earth that has ever existed since the world began.

The patrol leader was now mounting higher, and the reason became almost instantly apparent. The air straight ahead had become filled with round puffs of viciously-spurting black smoke. The “Archies” were according the early morning visitors their usual warm reception.

A second more, and not so many yards away there suddenly appeared the largest and wickedest-looking puff of all, and, above the roar of the motor, the startled Don Hale could hear the explosion of the shrapnel shell launched by the German gunners.

The next instant he felt a terrifying thrill. His airplane was falling through space.

Almost stifled by the air rushing past, with a horrifying vision of impending catastrophe, the boy, nevertheless, managed to keep his wits about him. But escape seemed impossible. A perfect hail of “Archies” popped up in the air to the rear, to the side and to the front of the falling machine, the control of which he was desperately trying to regain.

Though his agony of suspense seemed long drawn out it was but a moment when the terrifying descent was over and the machine again flying parallel to the earth.

It was almost miraculous that it had not been riddled with the fragments of the bursting shrapnel shells. The din of their almost continuous explosions was ringing in the aviator’s ears, and in the violently-disturbed air the Nieuport was rocking and plunging like a boat in a heavy sea.

“Never fly in a straight line” was the advice which had been given to Don before setting out on the expedition, and after the first few moments of suspense had passed Don Hale managed to sufficiently calm his jumping nerves and follow this instruction. He turned the nose of his machine upward, and, in a zigzagging flight, shot like a rocket into the blue depths above.

A little later he found an infinite relief in seeing the black thunderbolts exploding hundreds of yards below.

But where was the rest of the patrol? They seemed to have utterly vanished. A strange sense of loneliness such as he had never known before took possession of him. And then, like a flash, he recalled George Glenn’s words: “The Germans have a habit of pouncing down upon any stragglers they may happen to see.”

Were there any enemy scouts about?

He cast a swift, comprehensive glance over the vast expanse of sky.

A number of planes were to be seen far to the rear of the German lines, but whether friends or enemies the new combat pilot could not possibly determine. At any rate, he was sure his companions must have ascended to the cloud level, now close overhead.

Still thrilled at the thought of his narrow escape, he sent the biplane climbing higher aloft. Nothing in his school days could be compared to this flight, a flight in which danger threatened every moment

Plunging into a cloud, the machine became enveloped in soft and fleecy masses of vapor. Not a thing could Don see in any direction. It was a most weird and curious sensation, he found, to be sailing so far above the earth, in the midst of the fog; and though he experienced a certain sense of freedom from danger he had an unpleasant feeling of half suffocation, which impelled him to escape as soon as possible from their enfolding embrace.

Now, through a jagged opening he caught a glimpse of the earth, and just a moment afterward something happened which gave him the greatest scare he had yet had in his brief flying career.

A shadowy object—so faint as to be scarcely discernible—flashed into view to his right, and, while he gazed toward it as though fascinated, in a second of time it had grown into an object of seemingly gigantic proportions, though still so faint in outline that he could scarcely take in its exact form.

Another instant and the phantom-like plane had swept past with lightning speed, leaving in its wake powerful currents o wildly swirling vapor, while the airplane, caught in the eddy, staggered and shook.

“Whew! That was another close call!” breathed Don. “Sure enough!—this isn’t a game for weak nerves. Hello—goodness gracious!”

The Nieuport had shot above the strata of clouds.

Even though his nerves were still tingling, his pulse throbbing violently, the combat pilot could not repress a gasp of admiration as he gazed out over the immense expanse of billowy forms that stretched in every direction in a vast circle against the soft blue field of sky.

It was still early, the sun had not risen high, and its rays, falling upon the clouds, tinted them with the most delicate of rosy hues.

“I almost seem out of the world,” murmured Don, a trifle awesomely.

“And how perfectly safe it looks I—just as though one could float about on the clouds and be in no danger of taking a header to the earth. But where am I in this curious world above? And, more important than all, where are the other planes? I’d be in a nice position, shouldn’t I, if some of Captain Richtofen’s Red Squadron should happen to come along! What shall I do?”

The boy found that skimming close to the fleecy, ever-changing billows, sometimes dipping into them, was a fascinating sport. Up there everything was peace, loneliness and quietude. It seemed almost incredible that only a few miles below, on the earth he had just left, a terrible war was being waged and that every moment tragedies and horrors were taking place.

But the time for decisive action had come.

Boldly, though not without some trepidation, he plunged back into the clouds. Then came a brief period of dense obscurity, followed by a weird, spectral illumination, as the daylight struggled to pierce the masses of moisture-laden air; and presently the Nieuport was again in full view of the shell-torn, battle-scarred earth, far over a hostile country.

Many planes could now be seen, some below, some faint and hazy in the distance, others comparatively near

And while Don was scanning each in turn, hoping to recognize the familiar Indian’s head on the fuselage, he suddenly became conscious of the fact that not very far away a fight in the air had begun. Probably half a dozen or more combat pilots were engaged; and, almost forgetting, in his interest and excitement, the danger of his position, Don Hale watched the wonderful spectacle, with his nerves at the keenest tension.

Every acrobatic performance which he himself had learned at the advanced school at Pau was being used by the rival airmen.

Now and again one or another went down in a spinning nose dive, as though the machine were totally out of control; but instead of crashing to the earth it would right itself, and, with almost incredible speed, rise again to the attack. Fairly leaping over one another, flashing this way and that, narrowly avoiding collisions, they soared upward or swooped down, as a flock of enraged birds fighting among themselves might have done, and, faintly, the enthralled Don Hale could hear the vicious crackling of the machine guns, steadily spurting forth their messenger of death, and see the faint smoking lines left by the tracer ballets.

Were any members of the Lafayette Squadron engaged in the conflict?

The boy mentally voiced this query over and over again as he flew around in a sweeping circle, keeping far above the contenders.

He felt an almost irresistible impulse to join in the fray, and but for the fact that the squadron commander had explicitly ordered him to act only on the defensive probably would have done so. He had seen many a fight from the ground, but then the thrills were of a decidedly different nature

from those which came while he was in the pilot's seat of an airplane.

A moment more, and, just as suddenly as the battle had begun, it ended. One of the combat planes began to fall, turning over and over in the air, now and then the dull gray wings with the Maltese crosses clearly outlined against the floating masses of smoke below.

Into these it plunged and disappeared from view.

Thankful that neither his compatriots no any of the Allied airmen had been the victim, yet shuddering at the thought of the human life which had been sacrificed to the greed of the God of War, Don Hale headed for the west, having satisfied himself that the Allied planes, now rapidly retreating, belonged to a French air squadron.

The black, sputtering "Archies" were beginning to burst beneath him again, one coming so dangerously near that once more a sort of consternation gripped him.

"This won't do at all!" he muttered. "A little bit nearer the ceiling for me!"

He was approaching the lines and "No Man's Land" and following its tortuous course with his eyes he observed in many places the sudden bursts of smoke which told of the explosions of high-calibre shells. All about him the atmosphere was hazy and the distance entirely obscured.

Now rapidly becoming familiar with the new game, Don began to feel more like himself. For the first time he could understand how it was that the experienced pilots learned to treat with comparative indifference the angry shrieks of the attacking "Archies."

At length Don Hale discovered the patrol of Lafayette machines flying in a perfect formation just over the enemy's line.

After facing the dangers of the sky alone the sense of relief and pleasure that the sight of friends near at hand afforded him was delightful indeed. He felt like uttering a whoop of joy.

"Considering all such experiences as I've just had once is too much!" he muttered to himself. "And this time you can just bet I'll not get separated."

Nor did he. The patrol, which was only policing the air, led him into no further danger, and, consequently, when the two hours was over and they headed for the aviation field, nothing had occurred to add more thrills to those he had already received.

Don Hale, however, was thoroughly glad to see the great encampment coming into view; and equally glad when he had spiraled down to the earth and made an almost perfect *atterrissage*.

Waiting machinists helped him out of the cockpit; and as he answered the questions fired toward him the boy felt as proud and happy as any of the "aces" whose fame has spread throughout the world.

His first reconnaissance over the enemy's line was something he could never forget

## CHAPTER XIII—THE FARMER

Several weeks passed, during which Don Hale became thoroughly familiar with and accustomed to the work of the escadrille. The boy was surprised to find how soon the unpleasant feelings which had assailed him on his first day's sortie over the lines had worn off. True, he did pass through some harrowing moments—terrible moments, in which it seemed as though he was doomed to destruction. But, in general, familiarity with the dangers brought that indifference which a seasoned veteran in any of life's great games usually acquires.

By this time the young aviator had engaged in practically every kind of work done by the squadron. He, in company with other pilots, had acted as escorts to the big Caudron bombarding machines, the artillery regulating planes, and those whose duty it was to travel over the enemy's country, observing and taking photographs.

During several of these trips he had been introduced to what the boys pleasantly termed "flaming onions." These are balls of fire sent in a stream from a special gun, and they travel with tremendous speed. Fortunately, however, these sportive attempts of the Germans did no damage to either him or his machine.

During a vigorous attack when the French had succeeded in capturing and holding several of the German trenches he learned a great deal about contact patrol. This consisted of working in conjunction with the infantry, keeping them informed of everything that was taking place on the other side of "No Man's Land," guarding them in every way from surprises and doing all that was possible to facilitate their "Going over the top" by flying low over the ground and vigorously attacking the enemy's troops.

Contact patrol was the most dangerous work of all; for the pilots ran not only the risk of being struck down by the shells from the east but also by those sent by their own batteries in the rear.

Occasionally, too, he joined expeditions which set out to destroy the big observation balloons which hung constantly in the sky, and on one of these trips he had seen an unwieldy monster, somewhat suggestive of an elephant with its trunk cut off, sent flaming to the ground.

But there was a sad, a tragic side connected with all the splendid and courageous work accomplished by the combat pilots. There were some who never returned, and who were listed in the official "*communique*"[8] as being among the missing. There were others, too, whose planes, riddled by the enemy's bullets, were sent crashing earthward, to be smashed and splintered and

torn apart by the terrific impact.

Those were days of gloom and sorrow; but the inevitable had to be accepted.

Two events which interested Don Hale and T. Singleton Albert were the arrivals, at different times, of Bobby Dunlap and Jason Hamlin. The meeting between the latter and Victor Gilbert was of a nature no more cordial than that at the training school.

Gilbert glared at the other, demanding gruffly:

“You seem to find it hard to keep away from my company. There are other Franco-American Squadrons.”

“Thank you for your charming and subtle intimation,” rejoined Hamlin, dryly. “Let me say, however, that I pulled every wire I could so that I might have the pleasure of joining this squadron.”

“Frightfully agreeable, I’m sure!” muttered Gilbert, turning away.

“I say, Peur Jamais,” exclaimed Don Hale, some time later, “how is the Sherlock Holmes business getting on?”

Bobby wagged his head mysteriously.

“Maybe I’m on the trail of something, and maybe I’m not,” he responded. “What do I think it is? To quote a classical remark: ‘I have nothing to say at this time.’ Bombs aren’t the only things that make explosions. Now let us drop the mystery.”

“That’s better than dropping a bomb,” laughed Don.

“That depends upon where you drop it,” chirped Bobby. “But, believe me, Donny, that Hamlin person is some flyer. He’d make an eagle so ashamed of himself that he’d swear off flying and stay on the ground forever. I believe he could almost fly by waving his arms in the air.”

“Wish I could!” sighed Don. “It would come in mighty handy if a fellow’s plane were shot away from him while he was five miles in the air.”

Often pilots when off duty gathered in the bureau, or office, where reports were turned in and other necessary routine work of the squadron transacted. Hanging on the wall was a very large map of the sector, amazingly complete, showing the location of German aviation centres and even the points where their observation balloons were anchored. Naturally, from time to time, there were changes in the map, and the members of the squadron often found great interest in studying it and speculating as to its appearance a few months hence.

As days succeeded days Don, George Glenn, T. Singleton Albert and Bobby Dunlap frequently met in the bureau, and it was on one of these occasions that Bobby took Don Hale aside, and, in a very impressive manner, remarked:

“Do you remember those nights at the Café Rochambeau when old Père Goubain told us a whole lot about German spies?”

“Yes,” answered Don.

“Well, I don’t think he was so very far wrong. I’m brighter than the next person, and it looks to me as if the trail were getting warm.”

“What do you mean?”

Don spoke in a mystified tone.

“Spies—spies!” chuckled Bobby.

“But where are they? Maybe you think I’m a spy?”

“If you are you’d better be careful of little Sherlock,” chirped Peur Jamais.

Some time later, the pilots were rather surprised and amused to see an old French peasant standing out front and gazing in evident wonder at the aviation fields. He was a typical son of the soil, wearing wooden sabots, or shoes; and his faded blue garments showed many traces of his labor in the fields. Almost primitive in appearance, and suggesting the uncouth, illiterate peasants which the French painter Millet loved to depict, he seemed so out of place amidst that most modern of all scenes—an aviation centre—that many of the boys found it rather hard to stifle an inclination to laugh.

“Hello, what’s the news from your section of the universe?” asked Bobby Dunlap, waggishly.

The peasant glanced at him rather stupidly for a moment and then drawled:

“There aren’t enough people left in the place where I come from to be any news. There’s an awful big war going on, isn’t there?”

“Goodness! So you’ve discovered it, too!” laughed Bobby. “Where do you live?”

“Not so very far away.”

“Are you thinking of changing your vocation and becoming an aviator?”

The stolid-looking peasant, evidently seeing no humor in the remark, shook his head and mumbled:

“No.” Then, in a half-embarrassed manner, he inquired: “May I take a glance inside the house?”

“To be sure!” exclaimed Jason Hamlin.

“The world owes everything to the farmer. He is the foundation upon which the world leans. Without him——”

“We’d have to become farmers ourselves,” giggled Bobby.

The peasant, evidently feeling awed by his surroundings, entered the bureau.

Once inside he gazed about him with a sort of abstracted air, uttered a few observations which caused titters of laughter to run around the room, and, presently, remarked to Jason Hamlin:

“This war hasn’t done any good to farming. Pretty big map on the wall. What’s it there for?”

Repressing a smile, T. Singleton Albert attempted to explain, in his own peculiar style of French, whereupon the visiting farmer exclaimed:

“Too bad! But I don’t speak any language except that of my own country.”

A loud laugh went up at the expense of the furiously-blushing Drugstore.

And then Don took it upon himself to impart the information.

“I see!” exclaimed the peasant, musingly.

He walked over to the map and began to examine it, his expression, however, indicating an utter lack of comprehension.

Victor Gilbert, who happened to be among the crowd, remarked in English:

“It’s too bad that the laboring classes should be so uneducated. And the lack of training dwarfs what intelligence they have, so that their minds fail to grasp even simple things.”

The others agreed with him.

But, at any rate, they found the visit of the farmer a pleasant diversion, and all were really sorry when he said good-bye and started for the door.

“That old chap is about the limit,” growled T. Singleton Albert. “Talk about ignorance! It’s a positive wonder he has enough sense to find his way home.”

“And just think!—the poor fellow understands only French,” chirped Bobby Dunlap.

Drugstore was about to retort, when the entrance of several pilots stopped him.

The newcomers had something to tell, too, which aroused a great deal of interest—several of them had had thrilling encounters with Captain Baron Von Richtofen’s Red Squadron of Death.

“I feel sure the Baron was there himself,” declared one. “The way those planes were handled was simply marvelous. I thought I had certainly winged a Boche when he went into the vrille; and I swooped down after him for about two thousand feet, intending to make sure of it. But, in some extraordinary manner, he got his plane under control, and before I could realize it I was shooting below him and his bullets were humming a tune past my ears.”

“Oh, boy, that is music I don’t like to hear!” said Bobby, with a perceptible shiver.

“I reckon all of us prefer symphonies of a less dangerous kind,” remarked Gilbert, adding, rather reflectively: “I haven’t had the pleasure yet of meeting that Baron and his pirate crew. Perhaps some day I shall.”

“Then let us hope it will be a red letter day for you,” cried Don.

That night the escadrille was once more saddened by the disappearance of one of its members, and all telephone queries to the observation posts failed to reveal what had come of him. It was feared, however, that he had fallen behind the German lines and been either killed or captured by the enemy.

Many of the pilots remained late in the bureau discussing their fellow aviator’s possible fate, and while they were busily talking the sound of an anti-aircraft gun brought all who were sitting to their feet.

“I wonder if that means a Boche bombing raid!” cried Don Hale, excitedly.

The next instant a frightful din of crashing guns rent the air.

With a common impulse, a rush was made for the door.

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[8] Communique—Bulletin.

## CHAPTER XIV—THE BOMBARDMENT

By the time the excited crowd had piled outside powerful search-lights were reaching up into the starlit heavens, lifting out of the gloom with strange and fantastic effect the thin veil of clouds which here and there stretched across it.

Even amid the booming of the anti-aircraft batteries and the sharper staccato reports of the machine guns from various parts of the field, all blending into an unearthly din, the droning of the motors high in the air could be distinctly heard. Like a pyrotechnic display, luminous bullets, searching for the invaders, shot up into the sky, often piercing the low-hanging clouds; and mingling in with them were vicious little spurts of fire which told of the explosion of shrapnel shells.

The majority of the pilots, familiar with the dreadful danger which menaced them, made a wild dash for the underground shelters. But Don Hale and a few others, fascinated by the awe-inspiring scene

and situation, remained.

“Isn’t this awful!” cried Bobby Dunlap, with a distinct tremolo in his voice. “Great Scott!”

At that instant a loud, though dull boom from the explosion of a bomb had added its quota of noise to the raging inferno of sound.

It hadn’t landed so far away, either, and, as Don Hale, in the grip of fear and excitement which he found impossible to control, strove to pierce the gloom, three reports, even louder, followed one another in quick succession.

“Great Cæsar!” cried Bobby Dunlap. “It seems as though they are going to wipe the aviation camp off the map. It’s time for us to run for our lives.”

And with these words, jerked out so fast that they were scarcely intelligible, he started off on a headlong sprint to join those who had sought a haven of safety.

But even then neither Don, George nor Albert could tear themselves away from the singular scene that was passing before their eyes. Every search-light—every gun was being used. Dazzling streams of whitish light crossed and criss-crossed or swept in wide circles over the sky—the darkness of night seemed to be rent asunder. Flaming bullets were rising by the thousand.

Notwithstanding the terrific defense of the French batteries the German bombs continued to fall. Their appalling detonations seemed fairly to shake the ground.

It was a situation wherein the tragic and the terrible held full sway. No man alive could have stood it without fear and trembling; for, at any instant, one of the bombs might have fallen into their very midst.

And then, while they stood there, motionless, silent, their pulses quickened by the emotions within, they saw something which brought husky exclamations from their lips.

It was the sight of a German plane, spectral and ghostlike, sailing serenely along in a dazzling sea of light. Flying this way and that, it now and then almost disappeared in the obscurity beyond, but, inexorably, it was pulled back into the field of vision by the ever-moving rays. And then a second and a third plane sprang into view, all appearing as pale, ethereal and ghostlike as the other.

And as the pilots kept their eyes fixed upon this wonderful and singular spectacle, which seemed to combine the elements of the supernatural and unreal, they became witnesses to a scene which is given to but few in this world to see.

Suddenly, just beneath the foremost machine, now in the full glare of light, there appeared a tiny flash of fire, a tiny burst of smoke—the circling flight was ended. Almost simultaneously with the explosion of the shrapnel shell the battleplane began to fall, at first slowly, as though the airmen near the clouds were desperately seeking to regain control.

What was going to happen? A few seconds would tell.

They were thrilling seconds, too, to the little shivering knot of spectators by the bureau.

“Ah—ah!”

A long-drawn, shrill exclamation came from Don Hale.

The plane, after wobbling and staggering for the briefest instant, began a spinning dive toward the earth; and before it had gone many hundred feet a portion of one of its wings was seen to become detached. Almost instantly came a little burst of ruddy flame, rapidly increasing in intensity, until, at last, the airplane was blazing from end to end. Like a flaming meteorite, the doomed machine, still bathed in the dazzling white glare, continued its frightful plunge.

Down, down, it came, whirling and spinning, growing larger and more distinct with each passing second, and leaving behind it a long sinuous trail of sparks and inky smoke.

Absorbed—enthralled by the terrible spectacle, Don Hale almost forgot the danger that ever menaced them.

But before the plane had reached the ground the peril of their exposed position was brought forcibly to his mind by another loud report from a bursting bomb. It seemed to have fallen nearer at hand than any of the others; and he was just about to urge his companions to leave when, without warning, there came a frightful and appalling explosion, so terrible in its power that he found himself jerked off his feet and thrown violently forward.

Shocked, dazed and bewildered, he struck the turf at full length, where he lay as motionless as if the end had come.

He was brought to his senses, however, as suddenly as though ice-water had been dashed into his face. The explosion had hurled aloft great masses of earth and debris; and now, like a descending avalanche, they began beating upon the ground close about him with thuds and bangs and crashes.

With a startled cry, the boy staggered up. A clump of earth struck him on the back with almost stunning force; a piece of board crashed down at his feet, and in wild haste, he began the retreat that should have been made before.

And, to add to the danger, spent bullets from the shrapnel shells came pelting down.

The distance to the nearest underground shelter was very short, but it seemed like a mighty long way to the frightened runners. Could they reach it?

Panting, perspiring, almost desperate, they crossed the last lap of the intervening space and fairly threw themselves into the crowded bomb-proof shelter.

Their wild and unceremonious entrance brought exclamations from the crowd. But no effort was made to speak, however, for, amid the mighty, crashing chorus of the guns, voices could scarcely have been heard.

Huddled together in the shelter, which was dimly lighted by a single oil lamp, feeling the earth trembling beneath their feet, the pilots listened with awe to the sound of the explosions. It was mighty unpleasant to be cooped up—mighty unpleasant to think of what might be happening to the hangars and the little fighting Nieuports, and when, after what seemed to be an interminably long time, the din of the anti-aircraft guns and bursting bombs began to slacken, Don Hale gave a big sigh of relief.

"I guess it's all over, boys," he shouted.

"I'm going to make the Germans sorry for this," cried Bobby Dunlap.

As the crowd, headed by Don, made for the door the firing had ceased, and, in contrast to the terrific racket of a few moments before, the comparative silence seemed almost strange and unnatural. The giant search-lights were still sweeping the sky, but the enemy had evidently been driven away.

Intent upon finding out as quickly as possible what damage had been done, Don Hale and George Glenn hurried toward the point where the bombs seemed to have fallen most thickly. Men were hurrying this way and that, and officers could be heard shouting their orders. It quickly developed, however, that the camp, very fortunately, had sustained but little damage. Great pits had been dug in the ground by the force of the explosions, the end of a hangar demolished, and two machines and a little storehouse destroyed.

"Now I feel very much better," declared Don. "Honestly, I never expected to see that Nieuport of mine again."

"From the amount of noise they made, one might have thought the whole camp was going skyward," declared George. "Before the Boches have a chance to pay us another visit, Don, let's beat it for the villa."

"Done as soon as said," exclaimed Don.

Long accustomed to the terrors and scares of the war zone, the boys had now entirely recovered from the effects of the bombardment from the sky.

With a number of others, they climbed into a big camion and were driven to their headquarters. On the way they saw encampments of soldiers in the fields, their tents, with lights inside, showing as faintly luminous spots in the darkness. Now and again a long convoy lumbered along the road; batteries were moving up nearer the front; reserves, too, passed them, marching steadily and silently, the rhythmic sound of their steadily-tramping feet sounding weirdly in the night.

And though no particular incident marked the journey, Don and George were thoroughly glad when they reached their comfortable room in the ancient villa.

Tired, after the many hours of work and excitement, they immediately turned in.

And thus ended another day.

## CHAPTER XV—A BATTLE IN THE CLOUDS

During the following afternoon Don Hale and T. Singleton Albert were detailed, with eight other pilots, to act as an escort to a big Caudron photographic machine, which was to make a trip to a point many miles inside the German lines in order to take photographs of a railroad centre.

Don Hale's machine on this occasion was armed with eight rockets, with dart-like heads, four on either side of the fuselage. These are designed for the purpose of destroying observation balloons, bullets from the machine guns not being sufficiently large for the purpose. The rockets are projected into space at terrific speed by means of powerful spiral springs, and ignite at the instant of departure.

The art of photography has been a great factor in the world war, driving secrecy from its cover and enabling the opposing forces to make an almost complete record of what was taking place on the other side of the line.

The two-seater Caudron machine which the combat pilots were designated to protect was armed with only one swivel gun. The cameras, pointing downward, were attached to the sides of the fuselage, and in order to take a photograph it was necessary only to pull a string.

It was rather late when the commanding officer gave the signal for the departure. In a spiraling flight, the Nieuports rose in the air, and, at an altitude of about six thousand feet, waited for the photographic machine to meet them at their airy rendezvous.

Immediately arranging themselves in a V-shaped formation, with the big Caudron at the apex, the fleet of planes headed for "Germany." Very soon some of the fighting Nieuports dropped below the machine they were escorting, while others soared a thousand feet above.

The weather was hot and sultry, and frequently the swiftly-speeding planes cut through patches of lazily-floating clouds, which left shining drops of moisture clinging to spars and struts. They sailed high above a long line of French observation balloons, and could see others belonging to the enemy —faint yellowish dots in the distance. But Don Hale was paying very little attention to them, for the

famous town of Verdun, responsible for some of the most desperate battles ever fought in the history of the world, appeared before his eyes. Here and there were great gaps among the red-roofed houses, showing where the high-explosive shells of the Germans had shattered and torn and blown everything to pieces. Faintly, he could see those mighty forts—Vaux and Douaumont and, in another direction, the famous Mort-Homme, so valiantly defended by the French.

And the same scenes which he had witnessed on all his trips over the front were again before him—the haze of smoke floating high above the battle-field, the batteries in action, the flashes of the exploding shells, and the airplanes either hovering like flocks of birds or patrolling the lines.

As they passed over the trenches the Caudron and its escorting Nieuports rose to an altitude of fifteen thousand feet; for the air beneath them was filled with the little balls of black smoke which told that the “Archies” would have liked nothing better than to bring them crashing to the earth. The pigmy and futile efforts of the gunners, however, only served to amuse Don Hale. How harmless the exploding shells appeared! Yet how terrible they were when viewed at closer range!

At various points, silhouetted against the blue of the sky or the scintillating white of the clouds, he could make out hostile airplanes which, as was often the case, were keeping well to the rear of their own lines.

Would they be attacked?

Don Hale scarcely thought so, or, at least, not so long as the formation kept together.

Thus, with his mind at comparative ease, he thoroughly enjoyed the swift flight through the cool air high above the earth. Gazing over the side of the little cockpit, he studied the territory occupied by the Germans with an interest which familiarity never seemed to lessen. Occasionally Don’s view of the network of roads, the tiny villages and the farms, surrounded by their vari-colored fields, was blotted from view by the constantly increasing layers of fleecy white clouds. Their shadows were chasing each other over the warmly-tinted earth.

The wind was blowing straight into “Germany,” and, to Don Hale, the weather conditions seemed to be fast becoming ominous and threatening. This thought at length became a little disquieting. If anything should happen to their planes while over the enemy’s country it might mean a descent; and a descent would undoubtedly mean capture—an inglorious end to a flying career—a fate particularly dreaded by the airmen.

“I won’t be sorry when this trip is over,” muttered Don to himself. “This kind of life certainly gives a chap fifty-seven different kinds of feelings.”

Owing to the great velocity of the flying flotilla, their destination, a town of considerable size, soon afterward came into view, and the whole formation volplaned to a lower level. Now they plunged through the clouds. And on emerging Don could see many evidences of life and activity going on below. Here and there were aviation fields bordered by gray hangars. Almost directly beneath a column of troops on the march suggested so many tiny ants creeping slowly over the ground. A long line of moving dots on a white road indicated a convoy going up nearer the line, while on a railroad leading into the town the eager and interested young combat pilot espied a train traveling, apparently, with a strange and sloth-like motion.

And now the peaceful character of the voyage came to an end. The “Archies” were at work again, and on every side, and dangerously near. Don Hale saw the wicked, lashing little balls of black smoke, though the explosions of the shells could scarcely be heard. Nor were the flying men threatened by the anti-aircraft batteries alone: Albatross and Fokker machines were approaching. And, in order that the enemy planes might not gain too great an altitude and be in a position to dive down upon them, the leader of the flotilla gave a prearranged signal; whereupon several of the convoys began following him to a higher level.

Don Hale, however, had been instructed to remain below, while the photographs were being taken, and the prospect was not altogether a pleasant one. He well knew that the Caudron would take all sorts of risks in order to obtain the desired pictures; and the protecting Nieuports, to fulfil the duties imposed upon them, must all expect to run a fiery gauntlet of shrapnel.

Down—still further down, as though unmindful of their spiteful presence, the big Caudron flew in a circling flight directly over the town.

Now in light, now in shadow, the collection of buildings made a pleasant picture. The golden cross surmounting the spire of the lone church occasionally reflected the mellow rays of the sun, and, like a jet of fire, sent its light into the sky.

But these were things to which Don Hale paid not the slightest attention: his mind was wholly wrapped up in the work ahead of him. He was playing a game in which life and liberty were at stake, and, as the Nieuport rocked and shook in the currents of the air disturbed by the almost continual explosions of the shrapnel shells, he warily watched the movements of the enemy planes.

Somehow or other, now that the perilous moment had come, he felt neither excited, apprehensive nor alarmed. An almost unnatural calmness seemed to have a hold upon him; and even when he saw a hole suddenly appear on the left-hand side of the upper plane, which meant that a piece of flying lead had pierced it, he did not lose his steadiness of hand or presence of mind.

He seemed to be fairly surrounded by the bursting shells. In every direction he turned they were there to meet him. The “flaming onions,” too, were beginning to cut their fiery passage through the air; and as they traveled with terrible swiftness the danger from them was even greater than that from the anti-aircraft guns.

Around and around soared the photographic machine; and around and around soared the Nieuports, both above and below. It was a veritable ride of death, with a chance that some of the combat pilots would pay the penalty for their daring, and be recorded in the brief official communique as among the missing or the dead.

Suddenly the photographic machine darted downward. Don Hale, with his eyes fixed upon it, almost held his breath with suspense and apprehension. It seemed scarcely possible that the pilot could rise again.

However, just as this gloomy thought was becoming fixed in his mind, the airplane began to ascend.

Intuitively, the boy realized that the dangerous mission of the photographer and his pilot was over; for, like a captive bird escaping from its imprisoning cage, the Caudron shot steadily upward, and was soon far beyond the reach of the guns below.

The lower escorting planes, which many times had come close to destruction, immediately followed.

And then Don Hale, strange to say, began to feel the effects of a reaction. The hand, so steady in the midst of terrible peril, now trembled slightly. He found it hard to shake off a curious foreboding—a foreboding that sometimes sent chills along his spine—that much might happen in that perilous return journey over a hostile land.

To show that his fears were entirely justified, when once again the boy gazed aloft he discovered that some of the bolder enemy scouts, now assembled in a formation as formidable as their own, were hot on the trail of the fast retreating Americans.

“Looks like a scrap,” murmured Don.

The pilot cast a look at his machine gun and belt of cartridges, all ready on the instant.

Should he have to use them? He hoped not; yet it looked that way.

And all the time the wind was steadily increasing in force, making necessary the closest attention and most extreme care in handling the biplane. Thus, with the elements against him and surrounded by the gravest danger, Don Hale decided that by the time he reached the aviation field, if he ever did, he should be able to recount a tale as interesting as any of those he had often heard.

Occasionally he glanced over the side of the fuselage, to see the big Caudron, now considerably below him, sometimes skimming close above the clouds and sometimes enveloped in masses of vapor. He very well knew that if an attack were made the photographic machine would be the principal object sought for, owing to the value of the records it was carrying.

And while Don was busily reflecting upon this he suddenly realized that action both above and below him had begun. He could see several planes whirling and darting about, and though the rapid reports of the machine guns were unheard amid the roar of his motor he caught sight of narrow lines of smoke left by the passing tracer bullets.

“Great Julius Cæsar!” he muttered. “I am in for it. I wonder when my part in the show begins!”

It came much sooner than he had expected. While several of the Lafayette machines below and to the rear of the Caudron were engaged in deadly combat by the enemy a fighting plane with the ominous Maltese crosses on its wing flashed past Don Hale, diving vertically toward the tail of the Caudron.

The crucial moment had arrived. Don Hale’s heart was throbbing fast again; his lips were compressed; his eyes flashing. Then, without a second’s indecision—without a thought of the consequences—he, in turn, began a headlong swoop through space.

In a moment or two he shut off the motor; for he was about to execute that evolution taught in the acrobatic school at Pau known as the “Russian Mountain.” Although he had performed it many times under different circumstances, the terrific downward rush never failed to make him gasp for breath. It was the same on this occasion, and his ears seemed to be almost bursting. The rushing wind beat fiercely against him, its whistling notes, ominous and threatening, ringing out loudly. Like a plummet dropped from the clouds, he still plunged in a vertical descent. Now he dashed past, dangerously close to some of the fighting machines, and through an air filled with tracer and flaming bullets.

By this time the Caudron was desperately trying to avoid the enemy in the rear. But it seemed impossible that it could escape from the marvelously swift and brilliantly maneuvered German plane. This machine had just succeeded in gaining an advantageous position when Don Hale swept by.

Now he pushed the control stick away from him, which, raising the ailerons, caused the machine, with startling abruptness, to end its fall and come out on an even keel.

Though jarred and dizzy, the combat pilot lost not a second in starting the engine. Another movement with the control lever, and the Nieuport was shooting upward directly toward the tail of the German plane. Its pilot was already busily engaged in pouring a hail of bullets in the direction of the Caudron.

Don had gone through some thrilling experiences in the war zone, but there had been nothing like this. He realized that the fates had decreed that through his efforts alone the safety of the photographic machine depended. Never before had he fired a Vickers gun in actual combat, and for the briefest interval of time an overwhelming sense of agitation—of excitement gained a hold upon him; and before it had passed, and while the perspiration stood out on his face, he took aim, operating the gun with his left hand, and fired.

He could hear the spitefully-crackling reports; he saw the bursts of smoke spreading outward and upward. Then his machine swept past, in an ascending flight, at a distance of not more than fifty yards.

It was a strange sensation to be gazing upon an enemy's machine so close at hand, and, in his instantaneous glance, the details seemed to be indelibly impressed upon his mind. He saw the helmeted pilot turn; and for the fraction of a second the two gazed into each other's faces.

Before Don Hale could maneuver his plane, in order to renew the attack, he passed through some instants of terrible suspense.

Had his shots taken effect? Or was the photographic machine doomed, after all?

But what the boy saw when he looked again made him feel like uttering a shout of joy. The machine with the black crosses on its wings was descending abruptly, with erratic movements.

"I got him!" breathed the boy.

Triumphant, with his fighting blood aroused to the highest pitch, the young combat pilot, yielding to the now irresistible call of battle, shot toward another *avion de chasse* which bore the enemy's markings. He had not gone very far, however, when he was startled by a fusillade of flaming bullets, passing close to his wings on the right.

A German pilot had stolen upon him from the rear, and Don was in the worst possible position to defend himself.

Instantly he sent the nose of the Nieuport upward, gave the control lever a swift jerk forth and back, and, like a flash, the machine described a complete backward somersault, while its pursuer shot past beneath.

The almost breathless Don Hale realized that his escape had been of the narrowest sort—that he was still in the gravest peril. Other machines were speeding toward him. The odds were entirely too great for an inexperienced combat pilot. Moreover, he had caught a glimpse of three new French planes coming to the rescue. Don's own safety lay in the clouds just above, and he flew toward them with all the speed of which his Nieuport was capable.

And in that upward journey, brief though it was, he sensed rather than saw that the air close about him was filled with fiercely contesting planes, darting, swirling, almost tumbling over one another. The atmosphere, too, was literally criss-crossed by the multitude of faint bluish lines left by tracer bullets.

When the clouds closed about Don Hale and he found the view completely obscured, he experienced a wonderful sensation of relief. Yet his nerves were pretty badly shaken. Like the game hunter who has momentarily escaped the lion's claws yet knows that the mighty animal is lurking near to renew the attack, his thoughts of what the immediate future might have in store for him sent renewed tremors through his frame.

War is a cruel and pitiless thing, in which compassion and the kindlier impulses of the human heart have no place. He himself could give no quarter, nor could he expect any.

And now there was something else besides the relentless foe which began to cause him anxiety—even alarm. The weather conditions had been becoming steadily worse, and the force of the wind, still blowing steadily into "Germany," made the movements of the Nieuport like that of a boat wallowing in the trough of a heavy sea. Sometimes, without an instant's warning, he found himself dropping like a shot, and the next moment, as though raised on the crest of a mighty billow, sent shooting upward.

The clouds were growing thicker; the curious, half luminous light was being replaced by a deep and forbidding gloom, not like that of night or of anything else he had ever seen. And through this weird and seemingly unnatural darkness there occasionally came gleams of spectral bluish light which told him that the greatest artillery in the world was rapidly getting ready for action, and that before long it might be expected to break loose in all its majestic power.

Where was he?—far over the German territory? He could not tell; yet it seemed very likely that such was the case. At any rate, he must make for home. How?—below the clouds? No. There are limits to which one's nerves can be subjected. He must climb through them and fly above. Single-handed it would not do to face those lying in wait below. He felt terribly alone—terribly friendless.

The darkness was suddenly torn asunder by a brighter flash and, for the first time, he heard a sullen rumble, which, beginning like the roll of muffled drums, rapidly increased until it was sounding in a crashing crescendo.

"Great Scott! This is about the worst ever!" muttered Don. "Yes, I certainly shall have something to talk about—only, it will be too much! I never expected that I'd be witnessing a storm from a balcony seat."

He tried to impart a little jocularity to his tone, but the attempt was unsuccessful.

It was a pretty awesome thing to be amid the storm-clouds, with the coppery colored and bluish gleams now playing almost constantly about him; and this singular situation conjured up all sorts of strange fancies.

Now the wind was buffeting the Nieuport wildly about, tearing against the fuselage and planes in heavy gusts.

But at last Don Hale's heart was gladdened by the sight of a circular patch of misty light; and presently shooting through a ragged opening in the clouds he saw the illumination spreading out on

every side and caught a glimpse of blue in the great expanse above. Probably the most inspiring thing he had ever seen, it lifted a load from his mind. As the shadows produced a depressing effect, so the light seemed to radiate optimism and cheer.

Presently the flying Nieuport carried him to another world equally as strange as the one through which he had just passed. Just below him, to the limits of vision, there extended, like a soft and moving blanket, the billowing forms of the wind-swept clouds.

And skimming across their surface was the grotesquely-shaped shadow of the speeding aeroplane.

Then it suddenly occurred to Don that his situation wasn't so very much improved after all. During the mêlée and his subsequent experiences he had totally lost track of his bearings. In which direction was the aviation camp? That was a question he could not begin to answer. One thing alone cheered him—he was, at least, headed for the French lines.

And while debating in his mind how soon he might dare to make a plunge through the vapor he happened to glance behind him. And that single glance was the means of causing him to make a discovery—a discovery that was so startling, so terrifying that the blood seemed to almost freeze in his veins.

Bearing down upon him, and almost within firing range, were two great Albatross planes—both of a scarlet hue.

There could be no doubt about it—they belonged to Captain Baron Von Richtofen's Red Squadron of Death.

## CHAPTER XVI—THE EMPTY HOUSE

During the afternoon of the same day that Don Hale was destined to have his great adventures George Glenn and Bobby Dunlap, off duty, decided to take a little jaunt about the surrounding country.

Leaving the main highway the boys struck off toward the southeast.

The road sometimes took them past stuccoed walls, gray, chipped and broken by the ravages of time; and here and there, rising high above the faded red coping, were the tall and graceful poplars so characteristic of the landscapes. Once in a while, the two, their youthful curiosity aroused, peeped between the bars of the entrance gates to get a look, if they could, at the mansion so secluded from public gaze.

Presently the boys were descending a steep road which led down to a little village at the base. Occasionally, between the trees, they caught glimpses of red-roofed houses, and the spire of an ancient church, all serenely beautiful in the midst of a peaceful landscape.

Now George and Bobby came across *poilus* resting on either side of the highway. And then, to bring the grimness of warfare once more to their minds, a Red Cross ambulance, leaving behind it a long trail of yellowish dust, rumbled up the hill, carrying its load of wounded to the base hospital further to the rear.

Arriving at the bottom of the incline the two found themselves on a road which turned abruptly. Soldiers were billeted in the village; and in the courtyards and out on the streets were rolling kitchens, while parked at various points they saw huge camions awaiting their turn to carry supplies toward the front. Evidently but few of the inhabitants remained; and the reason was at once apparent—there was scarcely a house which did not show some evidence of scorching shell fire or the devastation caused by bombs dropped from the air.

George and Bobby soon passed the quaint old church, no longer a place of worship but a hospital, and continued on, soon leaving behind them the village, with its soldiers, camions and other paraphernalia of war.

“Now let's take a rest,” suggested Bobby, at length.

“You'll not hear any objections from me,” said George. He turned his gaze toward the east, adding: “I hope to goodness Don doesn't run into trouble over the front to-day.”

“I'm with you there, Georgie,” said Peur Jamais, gravely. “I never saw such impolite fellows as those Boches. Just the other day one of them chased me for miles, and all I did was to empty a belt of cartridges in his direction. Honestly, I believe he wanted to hurt me.”

“I guess you're about right,” laughed George.

“Hello! just cast your eyes along the road. But do it gently, though, so as not to hurt them. Do you see that chap yonder—about to cross?”

“My vision being extremely good, I can.”

“Don't you see anything familiar about him?”

George, after taking a long and earnest look at the blue bloused figure, nodded his head.

“Yes; to be sure. It's the peasant who's been visiting our escadrille.”

“Correct, old chap. And say, did you ever notice how chummy he's gotten to be with Jason Hamlin? Funny combination, that—a college highbrow and an humble, downtrodden tiller of the soil. By the way, Vicky Gilbert certainly has said some funny things to Jasy.”

“Have you found out yet what the scrap is all about?”

Peur Jamais pondered an instant before replying, and then said, slowly:

"From what Vicky said it looks as if he thought Hamlin was, or rather wasn't—— No, that he was, I should say——" And here the young combat pilot broke off abruptly, to further remark, after a few moments of earnest reflection: "No—I reckon I'd better wait until further developments. One day I happened to say a few words to one of the chaps about it when along waltzed the captain, who had overheard; and he said to me: 'What do you mean?' Crickets! It was awful!" Bobby began to grin broadly. "It reminded me of the time I used to get hauled up in the principal's room to explain certain things that had happened in the classroom. But, I say; let's skip after the old boy, and interview him."

"What's the good?" asked George.

"None at all. But what's the good of staying here? Coming?"

"First tell me what the captain said."

"'No!—a thousand times no!' as the persecuted heroine in the play has it. Later on—perhaps. Just now my sole desire in life is to inflict some of my French upon the humble plodder."

Without further ado, Peur Jamais started off and George, with a good-humored smile, followed.

It took the boys but a few moments to reach the road where the peasant had been observed; but although he had been walking very slowly the man was not in sight. The road was as deserted as a road could be.

"Hello! That's rather odd!" cried Peur Jamais. "A shabby way to treat a couple of would-be interviewers, I call it. In classic language, I wonder where he's at!"

"That oughtn't to be a hard job for Sherlock Holmes the Second to find out," suggested George.

Bobby laughed and began studying the surroundings with keen attention.

In the fields were growing crops, all bathed in bright, clear sunshine. Little clumps of trees and patches of woods dotted the landscape, while, far off, the irregular contour of the hills limned itself with hazy indistinctness against the brilliant sky. To the left a touch of blue, like a bold splash of paint upon canvas, indicated a pond, and nearer at hand rose three sturdy oaks, majestic specimens of their kind. Just behind these Peur Jamais espied a house.

"I shouldn't wonder a bit if that's the peasant's castle," he remarked. "Suppose we journey over there, Georgie, and see! I declare! I won't be satisfied until I learn a bit more about him. It's a little odd that such an uncouth specimen should take so much interest in an aviation camp."

"Mild adventures, after our strenuous ones, have a sort of appeal to me," confessed George. "So I'm quite willing."

Following the road for a short distance the boys found a narrow path leading across the field; so they headed for the ancient oaks and the house behind them.

They had expected to see some evidences of farming, some indications of laborers in the fields beyond, but on arriving at the structure, a typical old farmhouse, everything wore a mournful and deserted air, as though all human activity and endeavor had long ago departed, leaving the building to crumble and decay.

"It seems that we've had all our pleasure for nothing," grumbled Peur Jamais. "Nobody can be living in this old shack. But as a deserted house is anybody's home, I'm going in."

"I'll share the danger with you," laughed George.

The door stood invitingly ajar, and one vigorous push sent it creaking back on a pair of rusty hinges.

All the dreary and forlorn appearance which marked the exterior of the ancient farmhouse was to be met with in the interior. Dust lay thick on the floors, and a few pieces of broken-down furniture added their quota to the depressing atmosphere.

"This place is enough to give a fellow the creeps!" declared Bobby. "Just imagine how nice it would be strolling around here on a stormy midnight, with lightning the only illumination. Hello!—goodness gracious!"

A very unexpected interruption had caused Peur Jamais to utter the exclamation.

Quick footsteps had sounded. And, as both boys, a little startled, but more surprised, hastily glanced at an open doorway leading to another room, they saw a blue-bloused figure suddenly appear.

It was the peasant for whom they had been seeking.

## CHAPTER XVII—A MYSTERY

At another place and under different circumstances this meeting would have been a most ordinary and commonplace event, but, somehow, in the shadowed and deserted farmhouse it seemed to have imparted to it a curiously dramatic effect.

It was Peur Jamais who broke a rather intense and awkward silence.

"Hello! You are here after all!" he cried.

"Ah! So it is some of my young friends, the aviateurs Americaines!" exclaimed the peasant. His

manner was that of a man who had been startled by an unlooked-for intrusion, and, in consequence, felt considerably displeased. “In France, mes amis, before entering a dwelling one usually knocks.”

“So we do when we enter a dwelling,” said Peur Jamais, airily. “But what in the world are you doing here?”

“And, may I inquire, what in the world are you doing here?”

“We came to see you.”

“You came to see me! How did you get here?”

Thereupon George Glenn, who had a more fluent command of French than Bobby, smilingly explained.

“But, you must remember, people cannot go everywhere they please without knowing that they have the right,” said the peasant, chidingly.

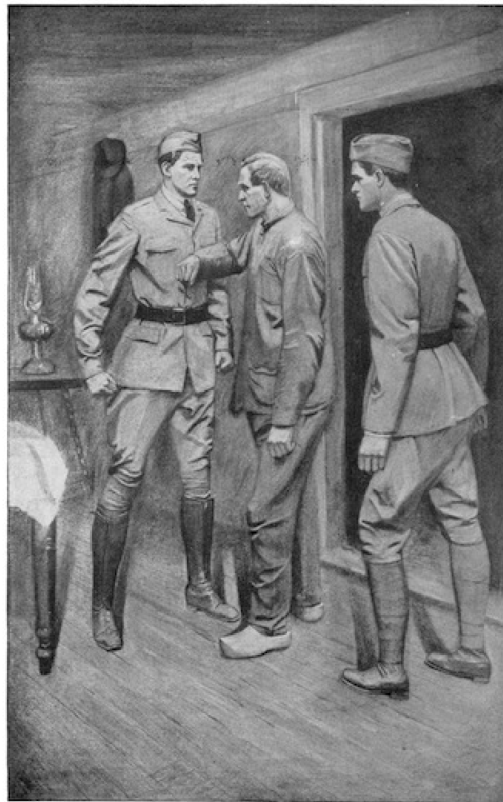
“Well, since we’re here we’re here,” said Peur Jamais. “However, Monsieur, you certainly can’t be staying in a place like this?”

“I believe I have not as yet given any information as to my place of residence.” The Frenchman’s tone clearly conveyed a hint that he was annoyed at the curiosity which Bobby displayed. “Houses are like men, mon ami: they live their allotted time, and then their days are done.”

“Well, come on, Georgie, let us take a look at the old place,” cried Peur Jamais.

And Bobby, with a merry laugh, started for the adjoining room.

But his passage was unexpectedly blocked.



His passage was unexpectedly blocked

The peasant had stepped in front of him, saying in a firm tone:

“Must I remind you, my young friend, of what I said just a few moments ago?”

Bobby was surprised—so much surprised, indeed, that for an instant he stared at the peasant without speaking; and his scrutiny was so searching, so earnest, that the man, as though finding it either annoying or disconcerting, moved toward a shadowy corner of the room.

“But what have you got to say about it?” blurted out Peur Jamais, at length. “It isn’t your house; so I’d like to know why we mayn’t go up-stairs?”

“Like good soldiers, we must sometimes obey commands without knowing the reasons for their being given,” said the peasant, gravely. “So I am sure you will consider me neither impolite nor unobliging if I refrain from speaking further on the subject.”

“Certainly, Monsieur,” put in George, quickly. “We have no wish to intrude. Come on, Bobby.”

Peur Jamais, however, his face wearing a rather curious expression, began to interrogate the Frenchman, beginning with this rather unusual question:

“What’s the best time to plant potatoes?”

The peasant smiled genially.

“Are you thinking of starting a farm?” he queried.

“No; I am merely a seeker after information.”

“Then I would advise you to buy a copy of some agricultural paper which treats such questions exhaustively. And now, if you will pardon me, I will say *au revoir*!”

“No objections, I’m sure!” grumbled Bobby. “I hope your farm prospers. It’s quite a hard life, isn’t it?”

“That depends upon a man’s health, strength and temperament,” countered the peasant, in an unruffled tone. “Goodbye!”

He laid just enough emphasis on the last words to cause the boys to nod and then walk slowly outside.

They had progressed but a few yards when Bobby began to laugh and chuckle in a most peculiar manner. Then his face suddenly became grave and stern.

“Georgie, I think I’ve made a discovery—quite an astonishing discovery, too,” he exclaimed. “That man is as much a peasant as either you or I. He’s merely a bit of human camouflage; he’s masquerading—do you get me?—masquerading! And what’s the answer?”

Peur Jamais’ brow was knit. His hands were clenched.

“I am willing to admit that just now he did not either speak or act exactly like a peasant,” said George.

“You’ve said something, Georgie,” declared Bobby, very earnestly. “Listen!” As they walked slowly, side by side, he gripped George Glenn’s arm. “Ever since that night old Père Goubain talked to us about spies I’ve been keeping my eyes and ears open. Well, do you want to know what I think the answer is?—that mysterious peasant is a spy—yes sir, a confounded spy. Why has he been nosing around the aviation camp? Why didn’t he want us to go up-stairs? Oh yes, it’s all as clear as day. Who knows—it may even have been he who was the means of sending those bombing machines to spill a little fireworks on the camp!”

By this time the two had reached the road, and Bobby stopped and leaned against the fence.

“It strikes me that this hasn’t been such a mild adventure, after all,” he continued, with increasing vehemence. “And through it we may be the means of ridding France of a dangerous enemy; just think of it—you and I, Georgie! I can almost hear the commander saying: ‘My brave and loyal friends, in the name of my countrymen, I thank you!’”

“Can you also see the medals pinned to our manly breasts?” asked the other, quizzically.

“I’m not joking, Georgie.”

“I’m sure you’re not. You look just as earnest as if Captain Von Richtofen and his red planes had come over to pay us their respects.”

Peur Jamais sniffed.

“At any rate it isn’t going to be a laughing matter for some one,” he asserted, grimly. “Pretty smart old chap, that! ‘Buy a copy of some agricultural paper,’ eh! No doubt he’s chuckling now at the way he pulled off those evasive answers. But evasions don’t go with court martials.”

“You are certainly correct there,” acquiesced his companion.

“By George, Georgie, you’re an aggravating chap!” exploded Bobby. “By the way you act one might think that this great discovery was of no more importance than reading an agricultural paper. Wake up! You’re right here on earth, and not up among the clouds!”

“I’m trying to do a little discreet thinking before indulging in any indiscreet remarks,” said George. “You know, as Longfellow says: ‘Things are not always what they seem.’”

“Well, I declare! Indiscreet talking, indeed!” almost shouted Peur Jamais. “I suppose your idea is to let the old bird alone, eh?”

“As yet, I haven’t a very clear idea of what my idea on the subject is,” returned George, with a smile.

“And I have such a clear idea of what my idea is that it fairly dazzles me. Great Julius Cæsar!——”

Peur Jarnais blurted out this exclamation with considerable force, and as he certainly could have neither seen nor heard anything to justify its utterance George very naturally demanded an explanation.

“Oh, it’s nothing that would be likely to interest you,” returned Bobby, sarcastically. “Some rather odd thoughts about Jason Hamlin just happened to pop into my mind.” And then, as though ruminating to himself, he added: “Oh, yes, I’m mighty glad we took this walk. It may have an astonishing sequel.”

George pressed him for an explanation, but Bobby merely replied:

“One of these days you’ll find out.”

“But just think of all the suspense I’ll have to endure,” said George, lightly.

Thereupon the march was resumed.

And notwithstanding the fact that both boys were in the uniform of the flying corps they were occasionally obliged by the ever-vigilant sentries to show their credentials.

It was after one of these experiences that Bobby thoughtfully remarked:

“I can’t understand how, with all their care, that old would-be peasant was able to pull off the trick.”

“What trick?” asked George, innocently.

“Trying to kid me, eh?” jeered Peur Jarnais. “But I’m the original kid that can’t be kidded.”

Toward late afternoon, seeing that a storm was approaching, the two took counsel and decided that it might be better to retrace their steps.

“I prefer my shower baths taken in the regular way,” remarked Bobby. “By the looks of it, I should say the weather is going from bad to worse.”

“And we’ll have to move quickly if we expect to escape it,” commented the other.

During the entire trip George had many times felt twinges of anxiety in regard to his chum Don Hale, which he found quite impossible to cast aside. Acting as an escort over a hostile territory was a very dangerous thing for a new pilot to undertake. He could recall many men who had failed to return from such journeys, some of whom were probably languishing in a German detention camp.

Quite a number of the Lafayette Escadrille were at the villa when the boys arrived. But George Glenn found that he was unable to join in the general fun and jollity.

The storm was very severe indeed; and during its height George, unable to bear the suspense any longer, went to the telephone and called up the bureau on the aviation grounds.

“Hello! Is Don Hale there?” he asked.

A pang shot through him as the answer came back:

“No; neither he nor Albert returned with the rest of the escort.”

“Did not return with the rest of the escort!” gasped George. He felt a peculiar dryness come into his throat and into his heart a sinking feeling. “Were the escorting machines attacked?” he asked.

“Yes; there was a lively scrimmage.”

“Great Scott! This is terrible!” murmured George. Then, speaking into the transmitter again, he asked, weakly: “Have you no news of them at all?”

“None whatever,” came the response. “We have telephoned to the observation post at the front, but they can tell us nothing. Hale, however, has been given credit for preventing the destruction of the Caudron machine.”

By this time several others were crowding around. All had become accustomed to tragic happenings and the occasional disappearance of some of their members; yet every fresh event of the kind brought with it the same distressing pangs.

“This is bad news, indeed!” exclaimed Victor Gilbert. “Poor Don Hale! Poor Albert! I wonder—I do wonder what could have happened to them!”

“I hope it will not be the official communique that tells us,” said George, gloomily, as he replaced the telephone on the hook.

## CHAPTER XVIII—THE RED SQUADRON

When Don Hale saw the red planes of Captain Baron Von Richtofen behind him he certainly received the shock of his life. The oncoming storm, the sense of solitude and the great expanse above the clouds had all lulled him into a sense of security.

A moment’s indecision nearly finished his career as a combat pilot. Streams of bullets were flashing past, and one of them, crashing through the little curved wind shield in front of his head, brought him to a realization that only the quickest possible action could save his life.

He did then what many a flying fighter had done before him. A quick movement of the control lever dipped the rear ailerons, sending the plane almost vertically downward toward the earth. With the engine stopped, he tipped to one side, and the machine entered the vrille, or spinning nose dive.

With frightful velocity, turning on its axis, the Nieuport dove through the agitated storm-clouds. The wind roared past him as it had never roared before, singing and moaning, like the strains of some wild, weird symphony as it beat against the plane’s wires and supports. Gasping for breath, almost dazed by the fearful whirling motion, the boy, nevertheless, felt the joy of triumph surging within him. He had cheated the birds of ill-omen of their prey. He could laugh at their efforts. They would never catch him now that he knew of their presence in the sky.

Down, down shot the little biplane through an obscurity so dense that nothing could be seen in any direction. And soon, while still surrounded by the heavy vapors, it straightened out parallel to the earth, and, shaken and rocked by the wind, sailed swiftly ahead.

But at that instant, just as all danger seemed to be passed, Don Hale made another most alarming discovery—something had happened to his motor, and though he strove with the utmost desperation to get it started it persistently refused to work.

“Tough luck!” he burst out, aloud. “This is the worst ever! Here I am miles over German territory.”

Filled with apprehension, with all sorts of dreadful fancies running through his mind, and the dread and uncertainty of it all making his nerves tremble and twitch, the young combat pilot volplaned through the clouds.

Presently he skimmed through the thinner mists, and saw the darkened and sombre-looking earth beneath him. His head was still aching from the effects of the headlong plunge. His breath, too, came in short and painful gasps. But all these physical manifestations were almost unnoticed in the pilot's excited state of mind.

Was there nothing that he could do to avert the fate for which he seemed destined?

There must be. Surely his career as a combat pilot was not going to come to such an inglorious end!

Feverishly—energetically, Don Hale continued to manipulate the levers that controlled his motor. But there was no sign of it awakening into life. And all the while he was gliding nearer and nearer the earth.

Now the vague, indefinite blurs of color were becoming definite forms and shapes, and the meaningless patches of light and dark houses and trees.

Sick at heart, feeling that everything was lost, with the direst fear of an impending tragedy uppermost in his mind, the boy at length sat back in his seat, and, for the first time, paid close attention to the ground that seemed to be rapidly rising to meet him.

He had concluded that in the all-pervading gloom the Germans had not discovered his presence, but almost immediately the anti-aircraft batteries got into action and the surrounding air became suddenly filled with exploding shrapnel shells.

Now he could hear their viciously-sounding detonations, and the steady crackling of the guns which had sent them aloft.

Though faint and weak, the instinct of self-preservation asserted itself, enabling him to turn the machine this way and that, in an effort to dodge the hail of missiles. The Nieuport was wildly careening from side to side or dropping short distances at lightning speed; and, to add to his dismay, streams of "flaming onions," like rockets of a greenish hue, darted toward the helpless airplane, sparkling brightly in the darkened atmosphere.

Yet, despite the terrible reality of the situation, it seemed to Don that he was going through some strange, weird dream. Dumbly, he wondered how soon the end would come. Only a miracle, it seemed, had saved him thus far. He could not expect such good-fortune to continue. He seemed to stand on the dividing line between life and eternity.

And when a strange, inexplicable calmness had taken possession of him and he felt resigned to the impending fate, the resounding din of the batteries below and the ear-splitting, appalling detonations of the shells suddenly ceased, and he was gliding through the smoke-filled air as unmolested as though on his own side of the line.

What did it mean?

The explanation was simple. The Germans below had at last realized the truth. They were merely waiting for the machine to drop into their midst. It was a galling thought. Not three hundred feet below he could see them. And that picture of men gathering together in groups, of men running and gesticulating, made a curious impression upon his overwrought brain.

Many a time he had heard the boys jocosely referring to the words "Kamerad, kamerad," and for the first time he was in a position to realize fully what that cry must have meant to some of those who uttered it. And after the glorious, boundless freedom of the air—of the vast spaces—how could he stand the horrors of a detention camp, where men, penned in like sheep, were guarded and fed almost as if they were so many captured animals!

Now he was one hundred feet nearer the earth—one hundred feet nearer the clutch of his enemies—and, with the smoothness of a toboggan, the machine was still gliding downward. Yes, the journey would soon be over! He began to think of what the boys of the escadrille would say. In his mind he pictured them sitting around the supper table, speculating as to his unhappy fate.

How strange—how remarkable it seemed to be right there among the enemy! Still held in the grip of an unnatural calmness, he gazed indifferently at those gray-clad figures whose upturned eyes were fastened upon the descending machine.

Now only seventy-five feet separated him from the ground. He would be glad when all was over.

"There won't even be any chance to set fire to the machine," he groaned, aloud. "The Germans will capture it intact. And who knows to what use the crafty Boches may put it! But they'll hear no 'Kamerad, kamerad!' from me."

Suddenly a revulsion of feeling swept over the boy. The sight of the Germans crowding around seemed to fill him with an anger he could not repress. He gritted his teeth and clenched his fists in impotent wrath. And with this fierce rebellion against the cruel fate that awaited him his thoughts flashed back to Captain Baron Von Richtofen and his scarlet planes. How little he had thought when hearing about them in the Café Rochambeau that that selfsame Squadron of Death was destined to play a part in his own career!

For hardly a moment had Don ceased his efforts to get the engine running, and though it seemed useless—a futile task—he renewed them once again. And just as he was about concluding that nothing remained to be done but make a landing on a field toward which he had been heading, his ears caught a sound which fairly electrified him.

"At last!" he gasped.

With a preliminary cough, one of the cylinders of the motor started to work. Could it actually be possible?

A fierce, wild hope, painful in its intensity, seized upon Don Hale. It was an agonizing moment—a moment in which he suffered all the torture of a mind agitated by the most violent conflict between hope and fear.

And while the combat pilot was vaguely wondering if he had received just another cruel stab the old familiar, deafening roar, with startling abruptness, began to resound.

Uttering a shrill whoop of joy, Don Hale sent the Nieuport upward.

No music composed by the world’s greatest masters could have sounded more sweet to him than the steady reverberations of the engine. It still seemed unbelievable—something that could not be. All the joys of a man who, having given up hope, is unexpectedly granted a reprieve were his, as the airplane buffeted its way against the teeth of the ever-freshening wind.

The disappointed Germans immediately sprang to the attack, and the little Nieuport was running the gauntlet of rifle and revolver fire. Fast as it flew, the bullets sped faster, and though the combat pilot could not hear their wicked hum and zip he knew that leaden missiles were flashing all about him, for several holes again appeared in the upper plane.

“Can I make it! Can I make it!” he kept repeating.

Sometimes that wild race against such heavy odds seemed hopeless. He dared not rise too high, for that would give the antiaircraft gunners a chance of bringing him crashing down to the earth. True it was, that many of the infantrymen seemed so paralyzed with astonishment at the sight of a wildly-speeding Nieuport right over their heads as to forget to fire.

As moment succeeded moment, and Don Hale remained unscathed, he peered cautiously over the side of the cockpit. Now he was flying above a little village fairly swarming with the troops of the Kaiser. He could see the heavy camions rumbling through the streets and all the sights typical of military operations which he had observed on the opposite side of the trenches.

The thumping of his heart having in a measure subsided, and the chilling tremors almost disappeared, he found this flying over the enemy’s country, in spite of the bullets that continually sped toward him, a strangely fascinating game.

The little village was presently left far to the rear, and the speeding plane was again over the open country, with its whitish roads and green fields dotted here and there with farms and houses.

All at once he saw something in the distance which caused him to turn his plane in a northwesterly direction. It was a faintish, elongated yellowish spot suggestive of a giant caterpillar, lying close to the ground.

“A balloon—an observation balloon which has just been pulled down!” cried Don Hale to himself. “I’ll get a closer look at it. Great Scott!”

From some totally unexpected quarter he was once again being fired at, and a sharp metallic ring told him that some portion of his engine had been struck by one of the marksmen below.

Once more he passed through an instant of overwhelming anxiety.

But the steady droning roar of the powerful engine brought cheer to his heart.

“No—no; not yet!” he muttered. “I still have a chance to cheat the Boches.”

The thrilling adventures and narrow escapes through which Don Hale had passed instead of lessening his courage and determination had increased them, though he fully realized how strangely the elements of chance had favored him. That sharp ping of the bullet striking the engine acted on his nature like a spark applied to gunpowder, arousing all his combativeness.

As the plane neared the giant observation balloon a sudden and daring idea flashed into the young combat pilot’s mind, and then, almost for the first time, he thought of the part he had played in preventing the destruction of the photographic machine. Why couldn’t he add another feat to his credit?

“By George, I’ll make a good try!” he cried, his pulse beginning to tingle anew.

The Nieuport was now almost upon the huge, unwieldy monster, and Don could plainly see the details on its smooth and shining surface.

The balloon, anchored to a heavy motor tractor, swayed gently from side to side as the cable to which it was attached was drawn down by a windlass. Dozens of men, too, were aiding in its descent by pulling on smaller ropes.

A touch on the control stick sent the Nieuport climbing upward. Then, precisely at the proper moment, Don Hale put an end to the ascending flight, and turning the nose of the machine downward, he shut off the engine and dove straight for the great gas bag.

He had a vision of soldiers scattering in every direction—and they ran like men who were seized with all the mad and unreasoning panic of animals fleeing before a forest fire. There was something ludicrous—almost absurd—in the picture they made which, even in that intensely dramatic moment, involuntarily brought a half smile to the face of the stern, grim-visaged boy in the pilot’s seat.

Don Hale knew that he was running a most appalling risk—indeed tempting fate in a way he had never done before, and staking his life upon his ability to make a success of his daring venture.

The instant for action had come. His machine was pointed directly toward the slick, rounded surface of the balloon.

It made a most alluring target.

Don pushed a button, and by this action fired the eight rockets fastened to the sides of the fuselage.

Instantly there came a resounding, awesome roar, and eight fiery trails, each headed by a brilliant greenish light, were flashing toward the balloon.

Before the pilot could come out of his dive several of the rockets pierced the silken envelope, and from as many points there came vivid bursts of flame—the days of usefulness of that particular "sausage" were certainly over.

Elation was in Don Hale's heart. And then, just as he redressed[9] the machine, he caught a quick glimpse of a mighty burst of flame, which, enveloping the balloon from end to end, rose in ruddy viciously-curling and leaping tongues high in the air. In a moment the Nieuport had passed far beyond.

Casting a look over his shoulder Don saw an extraordinary spectacle—masses of flaming gas swept off by the breeze and illuminating the surrounding gloom.

Triumphant—proud indeed, the boy decided to take no more risks, but make straight for the aviation ground, and, if good fortune still held sway, perhaps reach it before the rapidly gathering storm had burst in all its fury.

Notwithstanding the whirl of excitement, the young pilot had vaguely impressed upon his mind the disturbing truth that the lightning was steadily growing brighter—the reverberations of thunder heavier. To handle the Nieuport successfully in the wind and rain he knew would be a most difficult task.

The boy began to feel, now, the inevitable reaction.

He was seized with a consuming anxiety to be away from the midst of danger. But the rushing currents of air being dead against the Nieuport it seemed to be just crawling along.

For the first time the pilot dared to rise higher. He was passing over one of those desolate stretches which told most eloquently of the terrible conflicts which had taken place. Everywhere great shell-holes, in places overlapping one another, pitted the earth, and the bottoms of many were partly filled with muddy water left by recent rains. Of all the desolate, depressing sights which the eyes of man could look upon this seemed one of the worst. It was as though a blight had descended upon the earth, to wither and destroy everything which lay in its sinister path. Not a village—not a house remained; all were in crumbling ruins. Even the streets themselves could not be traced; and of the trees and patches of woods there remained but grotesque, gaunt trunks, entirely stripped of branches and leaves.

Of course this was not a new sight to the boy, and, under the circumstances, he paid but little attention to it. Thoughts of the trenches over which he must pass, and of the flying "Archies" the plane would be sure to encounter were in his mind. He must ascend still higher.

"This has been a trip, sure enough!" muttered Don. "But if I get through safely I'll never regret it. To-day, I feel that I have done my bit for the Allied cause."

Continually, he glanced in all directions. Vigilance was the price of life. Many an airman had been stealthily approached from behind and brought down without ever knowing what had struck him, and in the gloomy shadows cast by the heavy storm-clouds it was doubly necessary to search the heavens for every sign of the foe.

But, in spite of all the pilot's extreme care, he was destined to make presently another discovery—a discovery which once more set the blood throbbing in his temples. It was the sudden appearance, at about his own altitude, of another of Captain Baron Von Richtofen's planes. It had approached dangerously near, too, before he was aware of its presence.

It took Don Hale an instant to recover his wits. One moment he had seemed to be alone in the vast expanse, and in the next he was confronted by one of the scarlet enemy.

With lightning velocity the Boche bore down upon the Nieuport, and before Don Hale could make a move to alter his course luminous bullets were cutting a fiery trail through the gloom about him.

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[9] Redressed—Straightened out.

## CHAPTER XIX—THE PERILOUS GAME

At times, when the gravest dangers threaten, the human faculties, in some mysterious way, gain a strength and mastery which completely banish terror. Such was the case with Don Hale. As quickly as it was humanly possible to do so, he turned his plane so that the engine was between him and the showers of bullets. Then, obeying the injunction that self-preservation is the first law of nature, he set the Vickers machine gun into action.

And thus began a terrible duel in the air just beneath the tossing edges of heavy and turbulent masses of vapor. It seemed almost certain that one of the machines must be quickly sent crashing and hurtling downward.

The German pilot was evidently a master of his machine, and his evolutions were performed with the greatest brilliancy. Don Hale had a confused vision of a scarlet object flashing around, above and below him with inconceivable rapidity. And he himself, in order to avoid the enemy, was obliged

to execute the most thrilling and daring maneuvers.

And at every favorable opportunity the wicked crackling of the machine guns rang out. Each pilot was fighting with that desperation which characterizes a hunted animal, brought to bay. To Don Hale it seemed more like some thrilling, wonderful sport than an actual combat in which defeat might mean the end of all things earthly. Scores of tracer-bullets, leaving for an instant their long, thin trails of smoke, sped by him whichever way he turned, some passing close to his seat between the planes.

The fight was so fast and furiously contested that Don felt sure it must come to a speedy termination. Every instant he expected to see the bullets from his Vickers put an end to the battling career of that lone member of Captain Baron Von Richtofen's Red Squadron of Death. Yet, extraordinary as it seemed, the enemy plane continued to flash and circle about him with dazzling speed,—so fast indeed that only a confused and blurred vision of its movements was registered on Don Hale's brain. Waves of dizziness swept over him; his face was smarting and stinging from the terrific rush of air, while a touch of air-sickness, a malady which sometimes affects even seasoned flyers, was beginning to threaten him.

But, notwithstanding, he managed to keep a firm grip upon all his faculties. One instant of panic—one instant of relaxation he knew would be enough to bring this strange air duel to a dramatic and tragic conclusion. His main effort was to keep zigzagging behind the enemy's tail, and thus make him waste his bullets on the empty air.

In this he was not always successful. Often he found himself facing the sinister-looking scarlet Albatross, to get instantaneous glimpses of its hooded pilot glaring toward him.

And even in those terrible moments, when the machines threatened to crash into one another, Don Hale could not help thinking what an amazing thing it was that he and this man, whom he had never met, whom he had nothing against, and who, equally, had nothing against him, should be fighting desperately, with all the ferocity of maddened tigers.

The combat, which seemed to be long-drawn-out but which in reality occupied only a very short time, was brought to an end by Don Hale. As the German plane, momentarily occupying an advantageous position, dove toward him, firing as it came, the combat pilot of the Lafayette Escadrille performed an evolution known as the renversement. He sent the Nieuport with meteor-like swiftness upward, and, while making a partial loop, flying head downward, the red Albatross flashed beneath him.

Still defying the laws of gravity, Don Hale straightened the course of his plane, so that it was flying horizontally in a direction exactly opposite to its line of flight at the beginning of the evolution. He then cut off the motor and operated the ailerons at the sides of the planes, which caused the machine to turn over sideways in a semicircle, and thus bring it back to a natural position.

The renversement was made with such remarkable swiftness that before the red Albatross could swing around to renew the attack Don was shooting in an upward drive straight for the shelter of the clouds.

Almost like a bullet from a machine gun he entered the lower strata and continued to climb, safe at last from the enemy who had sought to destroy him. But the lightning glared brighter than ever; the thunder rolled more ominously. He felt sure that only a short distance away the rain was falling in torrents.

Quite naturally, the boy's brain was in a whirl, but a feeling of thankfulness that after encountering so many perils he had escaped unscathed predominated.

Finally emerging from the murky darkness into the light above, Don, scanning the heavens with the most earnest attention, could see no signs of other planes.

"Well, I have had all the adventures I wish for one day!" he soliloquized. "Whew! It was certainly a series of nightmares! Now I'll just stay up here, wait until the storm is over, and after that beat it so fast for the airdrome that a marmite wouldn't stand any chance in the race. How wonderful it is to be up here in this bright sunshine! It seems as though I must have drifted into the arctic regions by mistake. This is certainly great!"

It was, indeed, a singular scene upon which the combat pilot gazed. The upper surfaces of the ever-rolling and tossing clouds, of the purest and most dazzling white, like a vast field of snow and ice, stretched off to the limits of vision. It seemed like a glimpse of another world—a world of wonderful and impressive solitude. Not a sign of life could be seen in all that great circle. There was nothing to link one's thoughts with the world below.

As before, Don saw the shadow of the wind-buffeted plane fantastically skimming over the crests of vapor. Very soon vivid lightning was flashing from cloud to cloud and the rolling, booming reverberations of thunder were beginning to fill the upper region with solemn and awe-inspiring volumes of sound.

Don felt that he must rise still higher. Every gleam filled him with a strange foreboding; it seemed as though, no matter which way he traveled, there was no possibility of escaping the gravest danger. The pilot was having difficulty, too, in navigating the Nieuport in the sweeping gusts of wind. Sometimes it was carried rapidly aloft like a chip on a rising wave, to drop, a moment later, with a suddenness that almost took away his breath.

His altimeter began to register an increasing height, and at length the boy, in an icy region, was looking down upon far-off masses of clouds.

If the young combat pilot of the Lafayette Escadrille had not been so intensely lonely or so worn out with excitement and fatigue, he would positively have enjoyed the strange and unique experience. But now he most ardently hoped that the fury of the tempest would soon abate.

Over what part of the country was he? Perhaps he had gone miles and miles out of his course. There was no way to tell.

And what if anything should happen to his engine, as it had done before?

Now and again his thoughts involuntarily became fixed upon such an eventuality, causing, anew, chilling tremors to sweep through his frame. As important, now, as the beating of his heart were the pulsations of the motor. It filled him with a sense of awe, and his keenly-listening ears were attuned to catch the slightest change in the never-ceasing roar of the engine.

“By this time the boys must think I’m a goner,” he communed to himself, aloud. “Poor George Glenn! I’ll bet no one dreams that I’m away up here, condemned to sail around in great circles until warring nature gets over its tempestuous fury. And, oh boy, but it’s cold! Even with these heavy gloves, my hands are becoming numb. I’m beginning to realize now just how an icicle feels. I don’t know where I am, but I certainly wish I were somewhere else!”

Time began to drag out interminably. Anxiously, he kept glancing down upon that glorious, shimmering, white expanse in the hope that he might discover signs of the clouds beginning to break away—of some little ragged opening through which he might get a glimpse of the earth. But it always presented the same monotonous expanse.

“Not yet! Not yet!” he sighed.

Like a rider driving a fractious steed, he was obliged to pay the closest attention to the navigation of the speedy Nieuport; and as the unruly horse may sometimes take the bit in its mouth, defying the will of its master, so the airplane, aided and abetted by the gale of wind, often gave him cause for the greatest anxiety.

Between the blue heaven above and white clouds below, he kept on flying in great circles, having in his ears the never-ceasing reverberations of the rolling and booming thunder. Would it never end! How long was he condemned to remain so high aloft?

The sun, at length, was descending in the west and before very long must disappear behind the distant masses of vapor. More than once Don considered tempting fate by a descent through the clouds, and each time the peril deterred him. How would it be possible for the Nieuport to live amidst such a raging storm!

“No, no! I can’t risk it,” muttered Don. “By George! Was a human being ever placed in such a position before? Just now I can’t say that I want to enjoy the caressing touches of those wind-blown clouds on my cheek.”

Bravely, the boy tried to divert his mind, but the physical discomforts, besides the increasing sense of being out of the world, made it quite impossible. The storm had now reached its height. Forked tongues of lightning were flashing incessantly in the clouds, illuminating the interior of their swiftly-flying masses with a weird and spectral bluish glare.

“Not yet! Not yet!” sighed Don, again. “Great Scott! I can’t stay up here forever. This is certainly a case where a fellow needs a friend. Hello! Something besides clouds and blue sky at last!”

Far below, just tiny specks, the pilot had observed a flock of birds, skimming close to the ragged, tossing edges of vapor—so close, indeed, that at times they became lost to view as it closed about them.

That sight was, indeed, a grateful one to the lone occupant of the upper air. He turned his machine to watch them, until at length they grew faint in the distance, then became lost to sight, leaving him to feel more alone than ever.

As the sun crept still lower toward the horizon, the effects began to change; the arctic whiteness was being replaced by softer and more mellow tints; delicate purplish shadows filled the hollows of the clouds, and the deep blue of the sky above was slowly fading. The scene constantly grew more wonderful and impressive. The rays of the great coppery-colored ball, at last partly submerged in the clouds, were tipping the masses of flying vapor with an orange glow. Sometimes their varying forms suggested mountain peaks or stretches of rolling hills; sometimes the keenly imaginative Don Hale could see in them suggestions of fairy-like cities, with minarets sparkling like spots of golden flame.

The knowledge that the day was coming to a close made him more and more eager to begin his homeward journey. But, with a persistency that was exasperating—alarming—the storm continued to expend its fury. Still there was not a rift—not a sign to give him either cheer or hope.

And now a new worry—a new apprehension—began to attack him; the gasoline was giving out. He could not hope to keep up his flight much longer. The thought made the blood fairly pound in his temples.

Thrilling as all his adventures had been, was fate going to crown them all with one infinitely more thrilling—infinitely more dangerous?

The combat pilot shuddered as he pondered over the situation. Captain Baron Von Richtofen’s dreaded Squadron of Death seemed indeed puny and insignificant when compared with the tremendous forces of nature which he must eventually face.

A short reprieve from the terrible danger remained. He could not yet bring himself to make that

great plunge—a plunge where all the elements of chance were dead against him—where he could expect no mercy—where no human power save his own could be availing.

Five minutes passed; then ten. He dared not delay much longer. With a tense and drawn face, Don Hale again peered over the side of the cockpit in an effort to discover some point where the storm had spent its force.

There was none.

"It's as bad as staking one's life on the flip of a coin," he groaned. "Well, here goes!"

The boy firmly pursed his lips, operated the ailerons by means of the control lever, and, next instant, the plane was speeding downward. He could see the golden lights and purple shadows apparently flashing up to meet him; he could feel the plane, in the grip of the stronger currents of air, shivering and trembling.

And then a saying of the French pilots came into his mind: "The plane fell like a dead leaf to the ground." Was his Nieuport, too, destined to "fall like a dead leaf to the ground"?

That question must soon be answered.

For one brief instant he pulled up the machine. During that interval of time, short as it was, he had a terrifying vision of a quivering, glimmering light which filled the whole surrounding air. The appalling boom and crash of thunder overwhelmed the sound of the motor. He seemed to be sailing just above some frightful inferno resembling nothing he had ever before encountered.

With a sinking feeling at his heart and a muttered: "Now!" the pilot once more turned the nose of his machine downward.

The dreaded plunge was made.

In a second's time he had left the gold and purple of the upper world and was immersed in the storm-clouds. As though dipped in an icy bath, he felt cold chills running through him and running through him again. Flash after flash of lightning, blinding in its bluish glare, momentarily tore asunder the darkness, and he had instantaneous glimpses of phantom-like masses of vapor and portions of the moisture-laden machine gleaming with a sharp, metallic light.

Electricity seemed to be forming all about him. He could not rid himself of a terrible fear that the machine might get into the path of one of those zigzag streaks of flame chasing each other in every direction. The thunder was cracking like pistol shots multiplied a thousand fold. It came, too, in wild, gurgling notes, or in mighty, deafening detonations that dazed and bewildered the pilot.

In the anguish of his soul, he cried out, not once but many times:

"I am lost! I am lost!"

And so it really seemed; for the bravely-battling plane, almost shaken to pieces by the onrushing wind, was driven first one way and then another, or beaten back, threatening at every instant to topple over on its back and complete the rest of its journey in an uncontrollable spinning dive.

Don Hale was fairly gasping for breath. Every bone in his body ached. His brain was dizzy and reeling. But that powerful instinct of self-preservation implanted in every one prevented him from giving up in utter despair, though he fully expected that the airy caverns of the clouds would be the last thing his eyes were ever destined to look upon.

With teeth gritted together, he fought on, matching his wits and brains with the seething, shrieking vortex that toyed with the plane and seemed bent upon his destruction. And each hard-won victory brought a little more hope to his heart and lessened the strain on his overwrought nerves. Yet it all appeared unreal, unnatural and unearthly—like a chaos—nature itself in the grip of anarchy.

But how thick were the clouds? He could not understand why he should be so long immersed in their humid depths.

However, when torrents of rain presently began thudding and splashing against him he realized that he must be approaching the lower surfaces. How earnestly he longed for the moment to come! Each blinding glare of lightning, each mighty peal of thunder still had a terrifying effect. He could not rid himself of an awful dread that the fates would, at last, decide against him.

Thus, when the Nieuport actually staggered through the last strata, the boy almost felt as if it was something scarcely to be believed. He could not realize that the most terrible part of the voyage was over and that as he had cheated the Germans in their prey so had he cheated the Storm King.

But dangers were not yet ended. All around him extended a curious expanse almost as obscure, almost as gloomy and murky as that through which he had just passed. And where was he to land? In what direction lay the encampment of the Lafayette Escadrille? Don was even in doubt as to whether he had gone beyond that devastated strip of territory—"No Man's Land."

"I reckon there's nothing to do but trust to blind luck," he murmured to himself. "Ah, old earth—good old earth—I never appreciated you so much before!"

Down, still further down glided the Nieuport, while the boy strove to pierce the enshrouding darkness.

At last the very faintest of blurs brought an exclamation of joy to his lips. But as the utmost caution was necessary in approaching the earth, he began to volplane at an angle less steep. It would be the easiest thing in the world, he knew, to smash the biplane in landing, and thus bring disaster at the journey's end.

But still everything was too indistinguishable, too hidden by the rain and shadows for him to gain any idea of the nature of the terrain. All he could make out were faint and mottled grayish patches merging insensibly into one another.

A decision must soon be made. The gasoline was running dangerously low.

Still nearer the earth, like a storm-tossed gull, the Nieuport descended.

It was only a few hundred feet in the air when Don Hale made a discovery that brought a hoarse cry from his lips.

He had seen the faintest possible gleams of ruddy color tingeing the gray gloom to the west.

What was that light? What did it mean?

With joy surging through his heart, Don Hale thought he knew the answer. The light came from flares, lighted on the aviation grounds, to act as a beacon of safety to belated airmen.

“As sure as I live, that’s what it must be!” he cried. “But——” A sudden doubt entered his mind. “Does it come from ‘Germany’ or France?”

The boy felt, however, that to hesitate any longer would be foolhardy in the extreme. He guided his plane toward the faint light, watching it slowly growing stronger with an inexpressible feeling of thankfulness and relief.

Very soon he could faintly trace the lines of a gigantic letter T, formed by a number of fiercely-blazing fires.

There could be no further doubt; it was certainly an aviation field.

Only the knowledge that he must keep all his faculties alert in order to guide the plane prevented the pilot from uttering a series of jubilant shouts.

Now the blazing flares were becoming clear and distinct. He could make out the tongues of flame, and the illumination spreading out on all sides, to cast a faint, delicate glow for a short distance on the water-soaked ground. Then he began to detect the presence of human beings gathered in little knots or running in the direction of the plane.

Steadying his overtaxed nerves, Don Hale skilfully maneuvered his plane, with the rain and the wind still beating fiercely against him.

A bright flash of lightning—the brightest he had seen since leaving the clouds—suddenly bathed the earth in its vivid glare. And that swift transition from almost the darkness of night to the brilliancy of noonday brought peace of mind to the young combat pilot of the Lafayette Escadrille. What cared he now for Captain Baron Von Richtofen and his Red Squadron of Death or the loud and angry rumbling of his other enemy—the Storm King! For there, right below him, were the familiar hangars, the familiar fields—the headquarters of the escadrille itself.

And, only fifty feet above the ground, he could hear, above the wind, which still played its wild symphony on the wires of the machine, the welcoming shouts and hurrahs of his fellow pilots of the squadron.

Twenty-five feet—then ten! And presently the rubber-tired wheels jarred against the ground, and the Nieuport, traveling a short distance, was brought to a stop by the gusts of wind that bore down upon it.

And that had no sooner happened than Don Hale, the happiest boy in the world, was lifted out of the machine by his loudly felicitating and joyous friends.

The perilous game had been played and won.

## CHAPTER XX—HAMLIN

Don Hale was certainly given a tremendous reception; and a short time later, while comfortably seated in a chair at the villa recounting his memorable adventures, was highly gratified to hear T. Singleton Albert verify his statement concerning the destruction of the observation balloon.

“This is the way it came about,” explained Drugstore: “During that scrimmage with the Boches I happened to see Don’s machine, hotly pursued, enter the clouds. And Don being rather new at the game, I thought I’d try to hang around a bit, so as to keep an eye on him if I could.”

“Bully for you!” cried Don. “Albert, you’re a brick!”

“I had a pretty fierce time of it, too, with tracer bullets cutting holes through the air all about me, but, after a while, I managed to slip away from the attacking planes. By that time the scrap was over and the photographic machine and its escort were on their way home.

“Somehow or other, I don’t know why, I had a pretty strong suspicion, Don, that your Nieuport wasn’t among them. So, instead of making for the airdrome, I flew back over the lines, incidentally saying ‘how-do-you-do’ to a number of ‘Archies’ and a bushel or two of ‘onions.’ I shot up pretty high to avoid being shot up myself, and after traveling quite a considerable distance began cutting big spirals in the air. The clouds were looking mighty ominous and threatening, and several times yours truly was tempted to beat it, but, fortunately, something restrained me.

“My Nieuport was away up near the ceiling when, on looking down, I suddenly discovered a plane which appeared exactly as though it was crawling along the ground. Through a pair of binoculars I could see the circles of red, white and blue on the wing tips. Then I volplaned a bit, hoping to make

out whether it was your machine or not.” Albert began to laugh. “Yes, I saw the whole shooting match, Don; and the way that big sausage began to blaze after your little interview certainly tickled my fancy.”

“Oh, boy, but wouldn’t I have enjoyed the sight!” giggled Bobby Dunlap.

“Of course it wasn’t possible for me to tell whether it was your plane or not, Don, but after seeing the Nieuport begin to climb to a higher altitude I concluded to say good-bye to ‘Germany’ and streak for the home plate.

“Very soon it began to rain—rain like the dickens, too, and before I got within miles of the airdrome my bus was doing everything but turning somersaults. Anyway, Don, you’ve got a witness to prove that you turned the trick.”

“That’s simply great!” chuckled Don. “Some afternoon, eh?”

“You bet!” agreed Drugstore. “But it certainly was a jolly rude jolt to me when I got back and found that after all you had not returned.”

“Anyway, he’ll have something to talk about for the rest of his life,” said George Glenn.

“There’s no doubt about that,” laughed Don.

The young pilot had by no means recovered from the effects of his turbulent experiences. Some of the dizziness still remained. His nerves occasionally twitched and he experienced a feeling of physical exhaustion, all the more unpleasant because of his boyish fear that the others might observe it.

It had required a considerable effort for him to tell his story, and a still greater to enter into the general conversation.

Finally the thunder began to roll less frequently; the storm was breaking away.

Soon afterward one of the mechanics stepped into the room to inform Don that his machine had been found full of holes.

“Just a little bit more, and it would have made a capital piece of mosquito netting, Monsieur l’Aviateur,” he declared.

“If I should happen to see any mosquitoes around here so big that they couldn’t get through such holes I’d sure take that next train for home,” guffawed Bobby Dunlap.

“And if I’d had a piece of mosquito netting manufactured for me by German bullets, I wouldn’t even wait for the train; I’d start running,” laughed the mechanic. He turned to Don.

“It’s a great wonder to me, Monsieur, that your nose and ears weren’t clipped off.”

“I expected more than that to happen,” returned Don, with a faint smile.

At length Bobby Dunlap began to tell the hero of the afternoon about the mysterious peasant.

“He’s a German spy, sure as shooting,” he whispered. “But don’t say anything to the boys about it, Donny. George Glenn promised me he wouldn’t.”

“Why not explain the matter to the lieutenant?” asked Don, quite breathlessly.

Peur Jamais reflected an instant, then shook his head.

“I intended to at first,” he declared, “but, thinking it over, concluded to wait until I could arrest the old bird myself and march him over here at the point of a pistol. And, oh boy, that is going to make a bigger sensation than your cooking the big sausage.”

“But he may slip away,” suggested Don.

“That idea struck me, too,” commented Peur Jamais, in a troubled tone. “But”—he brightened up—“it will only mean that somebody else is going to do the point-of-the-pistol act. Wouldn’t it make a dandy movie drama, eh? And, just to think, Donny, if it hadn’t been for old Père Goubain I might never have known what was going on.” Bobby laughed joyously. “Crickets! I can hardly wait for the fireworks to begin.”

In the interest aroused by the story of the mysterious peasant, Don almost forgot his fatigue. He could not remember ever having enjoyed a supper more than he did that evening; and the sense of security and freedom from all danger as they sat around after the meal proved most pleasant and welcome.

On the following day Don Hale was in his Nieuport again, and performed the usual two patrols of two hours each over the lines without meeting with adventures.

Several weeks passed, and it was a time filled with enough narrow escapes and thrilling incidents to last even an aviator a lifetime.

At length Don Hale’s day off arrived. Late in the afternoon he seated himself comfortably by the window and spent the time in reading a book and occasionally joining in the conversation about him. The irrepressible Bobby Dunlap was in the room, as was also Jason Hamlin.

Finally the latter rose to his feet and began walking toward the door, whereupon Bobby blurted out:

“I say, Jasy, have you seen the old peasant lately?”

Hamlin, who was one of those individuals who apparently dislike the slightest familiarity, frowned, remarking briefly:

“Yes; just the other day.”

"I must say, this particular specimen is rather a dull looking old chap until one gets to talking to him. Ever been over to his place, Hammy?"

"Yes," answered Jason.

"So have I," laughed Peur Jamais. "And there's everything there but what a farm ought to have. He must be using some method of growing vegetables by wireless. By the way, Jason, ever go through that old ramshackle house?"

"Only the first floor," responded the other, adding abruptly: "Bobby, several times I've overheard you making mysterious observations in regard to that particular 'specimen,' who is a rather dull looking old chap until one gets to talking to him. How would you like to offer an explanation?"

Bobby's expression swiftly changed. The laughing light left his eyes, and, for an instant, he looked not only surprised but displeased.

"So you were in the house?" he cried. "Well, what did you find?"

"That the peasant was not altogether what he seemed. I heard you also mention Sherlock Holmes, which would naturally suggest that you thought of doing a little investigating. How about it?"

Bobby scowled quite fiercely.

"Really, Jasy, I'm quite surprised at you," he declared. "Did you learn how to eavesdrop in a correspondence school or did it just come naturally?"

"One doesn't have to eavesdrop when you're around, Bobby," returned Hamlin. "You don't know how to whisper."

"Thanks, frightfully," growled Bobby.

"Some people have ears so keen that they can even hear what isn't intended for them. Run outside and play. When I want to tell you anything about the old peasant you'll get it first hand. And as I notice you seem to appreciate his company so much I won't be impolite enough to make any disparaging remarks about him."

"Some people's eyes are so sharp they can even see what isn't intended for them," laughed Hamlin. "However, I won't avail myself of your kind permission to run out and play, but will take a walk instead."

"Where?" asked Bobby.

"It's a secret, but I'll tell you. I'm going in the direction of my destination. So-long, Messieurs. I'll see you later."

And, with a half mocking laugh and a wave of his hand, Hamlin disappeared outside.

"I declare, that chap's about the limit!" exclaimed Peur Jamais to Don Hale. He lowered his voice. "You noticed, Donny, that he didn't want to tell us where he is going. I wonder if——" Bobby paused, looked thoughtfully out of the window, scratched the back of his head, then resumed: "Yes, I'll bet that's just it!"

"What is?" asked Don.

"That Jasy's going over to see the old boy now. Say, Don, put up that book, and see how near my deduction comes to the truth."

"Which means, I suppose, that you're going over there yourself?" asked Don.

"You guessed it the first time. Coming?"

"Having aroused my curiosity so much about the mysterious peasant, I think I will," responded Don. "It adds a touch of activity to a day otherwise full of perfect repose."

## CHAPTER XXI—THE ARREST

The cheerful glow was fading from the sky when Don and Bobby Dunlap started out in quest of mild adventure.

The boys walked leisurely—in fact so leisurely that when Don Hale had his first glimpse of the three majestic oaks which concealed the old farmhouse from view, Venus, the evening star, was making its sparkling presence known in the bluish-gray firmament.

"See here, Donny," almost whispered Bobby, "I don't think we ought to make this a conventional visit. In our present capacity as detectives I feel that we're justified in using any means at all to trap this old codger. Let's steal up and do a little spying ourselves."

"Just the scheme," approved Don.

The two started ahead.

The dreary, deserted aspect of the surroundings, the distant booming of the guns and the nature of the expedition all combined to produce a tingling sensation in Don Hale's nerves.

Now they were approaching the great trees, and the boy caught his first glimpse of the old dilapidated dwelling. In the dim shadows of the end of day, with a mystery hovering over it, it assumed in his eyes a weird and sinister appearance. The gables and chimneys were silhouetted crisply against the translucent tones of the ever-darkening sky. Don's eyes roved over the windows, each a dull and lifeless patch of dark. Everything gave the impression of utter desolation.

“I don’t believe the mysterious peasant can be around just now,” he murmured. “And I reckon Bobby’s idea in regard to Jason Hamlin is altogether wrong.”

Skirting around the old oaks, the two reached an open stretch. However, there were masses of shrubbery beyond, affording excellent places of concealment; so, after a moment’s reflection, Don and Bobby continued straight along, and presently found themselves in the midst of the dense shadows not far from the entrance to the house.

A few minutes passed, and Don began to feel that such a vigil around a deserted house had in it something of the absurd and ridiculous.

“Bobby——” he began.

“Sh-h-h-h!” whispered Bobby.

Then silence between the two ensued.

And in all probability it would have remained unbroken for some time but for the sound of human voices suddenly coming from the house. They were raised, as though the speakers had become engaged in a heated argument.

The watchers were fairly electrified.

“Aha! What did I tell you!” blurted out Bobby, forgetting caution in his eagerness and excitement. “I know those voices. They belong to Hamlin and the spy.”

The altercation grew louder and more turbulent, then quieted down, until, finally, the quietude was as complete as before.

“I wonder what it all means!” murmured Don. “The mystery deepens. Ah! Things seem to be developing fast.”

Cautiously, he stepped over to Peur Jamais’ side. “What’s the next move in the game, Bobby?” he inquired, sotto voce—“the point-of-the-pistol act?”

“Keep still!” commanded Bobby, fiercely. “I’m trying to hear what they have to say. Did you catch any of the words?”

“Not one,” answered Don. Then, with a muttered exclamation indicative of extreme surprise and annoyance, he faced about, nudged Bobby in the ribs, and exclaimed in a low, suppressed tone: “As I live, some one is coming along the road. It won’t do to stay here. We’ll be seen.”

“And if we get around on the other side we’ll most likely be observed by the chaps in the house,” burst out Peur Jamais. “Who in the world could have expected anything like this? By George! It must be a veritable spies’ retreat.”

Somewhat precipitously, Bobby began to move around the vegetation, and Don joined him a moment later on the opposite side.

Peering between the leaves, the latter could soon make out a shadowy form approaching. But the light was too dim for him to see whether the man was civilian or soldier. The boy’s interest was aroused to the highest pitch.

What could this man’s errand be? Evidently he must know the mysterious peasant and be familiar with the grounds.

“Curious! Curious!” muttered Don.

Expectantly—anxiously, he waited until the man had passed, then began retracing his steps, with Bobby close at his heels.

When he had resumed his former position, the boy, gazing over the top of the branches and leaves, was just in time to observe the man disappear in the dense shadows of the old farmhouse.

“Now what do you think of all this?” almost stuttered Bobby. “Oh, boy, but I feel kind of sorry for Jasy, though. This night’s work may get him into a whole pile of trouble.”

He was evidently going to add something more, but the sound of voices again stopped him. They were no longer raised as if in anger, yet, nevertheless, the conversation was evidently being carried on with the greatest seriousness.

And just about this time the two disciples of Sherlock Holmes saw a very dim light appear in one of the windows of the first floor, which, flashing in an erratic fashion, rapidly grew stronger, as though some one were bringing a lamp into the room.

Very soon the last vestige of day had disappeared, and overhead the stars and constellations were shining and twinkling with that wonderful brilliancy which they only possess when viewed far from smoke-filled towns. The boys no longer feared discovery. Night, with all its mystery, all its weirdness and majesty, was upon them, and though his fellow pilot was only a few yards away Don could no longer distinguish his form.

Easy in mind, therefore, they were able to give their undivided attention to the house. Now and again the light was blotted out, as figures momentarily passed in front. It was all very interesting, invoking in the mind thoughts of plots, of mysteries and of the machinations of spies.

“If we could only hear what they are saying,” groaned Bobby.

“I know a way,” declared Don.

“How?”

“I’m going to crawl right up beneath the window and listen.”

“Bravo, Donny! I’m with you there.”

Carefully as the two proceeded, it was impossible, in the darkness, to avoid making some noise; and each time both involuntarily halted in their tracks, half expecting to hear some one come rushing out of the house to investigate.

“Great Scott!”

The young combat pilot could not repress this exclamation, and, at the same instant, he heard a low whistle coming from the unseen Bobby close at hand.

Both had been caused by a peculiar action of one of the occupants of the room. Lamp in hand, he had approached the window, and, thrusting the feeble light outside, moved it up and down and sideways several times.

Mystified—puzzled, Don Hale felt that any further advance under the peculiar circumstances would be entirely too risky, and he was about to whisper this opinion to Bobby when a very faint sound from the rear caused him to turn quickly. A peculiar tingling sensation shot through him. Yet he could not quite explain the reason why. What was it he had heard?—a footfall? Or, in the excitement, had his imagination been tricked by the rustling of the vegetation?

In the darkness and mystery of the night the unseen often assumes in the imagination formidable proportions, carrying with it curious, undefinable fears.

And while Don Hale stood there, irresolute, his ears distinctly caught the sound of footsteps. Then followed a sharp, metallic click.

A stream of whitish light was fantastically streaking across the ground toward the boys.

An involuntary exclamation escaped Don’s lips. He felt himself almost shivering.

But a few paces away stood a man. And, clearly, the electric torch which he carried was seeking them out. What was the meaning of it all? How had they been so unerringly tracked?

Nearer and nearer came the brilliant white rays; then leaving the ground they shot upward, wavered forth and back erratically and presently fell squarely upon his face.

“Make no move, Messieurs!” exclaimed a strong, firm voice. “You are under arrest!”

“Under arrest!” gasped Don, literally astounded. “Who—who are you?”

“I don’t—I don’t understand!” quavered Bobby Dunlap. Rather feebly, sepulchrally he echoed Don Hale’s query: “Who are you?”

The white light suddenly described a circle in the air, and flashed for one brief, solitary instant, upon a silver shield. The man was holding his coat open, thus allowing it to be seen.

“What—what does this mean?” stuttered Peur Jamais, while Don Hale, more surprised, more nonplused than he had ever been in his life, vainly strove to see the features of the mysterious person before them.

“It means that, as a member of the French secret service, I am carrying out my orders,” came the astonishing rejoinder. “Let me repeat: you are under arrest.”

“But why? What for?” almost exploded Bobby, who had found his voice and nerve. “You have made some extraordinary mistake. Aha! Now I think I know what it means—you’ve got the wrong people, that’s it. Those you are seeking are in that house,—in that house, do you understand! Quick, now, before they get away.”

To further increase Bobby’s agitated and disturbed state of mind the man uttered a gruff laugh, following this with a loud whistle.

Almost instantly, as if in answer, footsteps sounded, and, on turning quickly, Don and Bobby saw three men just leaving the house; the beams from a swinging lantern carried by the foremost now and then throwing weird splotches of light upon their forms, one instant bringing them out in sharp relief, the next allowing the darkness to again gather them in its folds.

“It’s all utterly beyond me,” muttered Don Hale, as he viewed the strange little procession approaching.

The man with the lantern was the mysterious peasant. And, strangely enough, he showed no more surprise at finding the two American aviators so close to his door than if such a visit were the most ordinary and commonplace thing in the world. One of those accompanying him was Jason Hamlin; the other the boys had never seen before.

Jason Hamlin was the first to speak.

“And so we meet under rather peculiar circumstances!” he remarked, harshly. “Let me say, Peur Jamais, that——”

“Let me say something first,” interrupted Bobby, savagely. “Do you know what he tells us?”—he jerked his finger in the direction of the man with the electric torch—“that we are under arrest.”

“So am I,” exclaimed Hamlin, in a voice which shook with suppressed anger.

“You, too, under arrest!” gasped Don. “By Jove, this is certainly a weird night!”

“And how about that chap parading around in a peasant’s blouse and wooden shoes?” cried Peur Jamais. “If any one ought to be arrested he’s the one.” He turned to the secret service man. “I

demand that you take him into custody. He’s an impostor—a—a——”

“Softly—softly, my young friend,” broke in the mysterious peasant. “I deeply regret that an unpleasant duty had fallen to my lot, particularly as our country has every reason to be grateful to America.”

He threw open his thin blue blouse, at the same instant raising his lantern. And as the yellow light shone on another shield precisely similar to the one which adorned the breast of the other man, both Don Hale and Bobby Dunlap gave voice to exclamations of the greatest surprise and wonderment.

“So you, too, belong to the secret service!” cried Don.

“Can—can you beat it!” came from Bobby, weakly.

“I think it would be a rather hard job,” broke in Jason Hamlin. “And——”

He was interrupted by the third man, who had been a silent witness to the proceeding.

“Let me put in a word,” he exclaimed, authoritatively. “I also belong to the secret service; and I wish to say to you young Americans that you are at liberty to return to the villa—the headquarters of the Lafayette Escadrille. Under no circumstances, however, are you to leave it until this affair has been entirely cleared up. I and my camarades are not here to answer questions. Your captain has already been notified. Remember, you are technically prisoners. This may seem harsh, ungrateful, and unappreciative perhaps of the work you have done for France, but the law knows no sentiment; it is cold and pitiless. Now you may go.” Addressing his compatriots, he added: “Come, Messieurs.”

Thereupon the three secret service men, with words of adieu, turned toward the house.

“I never was so angry, so wilted with surprise and disgust in the whole course of my life!” fumed Bobby Dunlap. “Not here to answer questions, eh! Never even had the politeness to say why we were pinched. It’s an outrage—that’s what it is!”

“Prisoners, eh!” remarked Don, with a dry laugh.

“And the comedy has to have still another act!” broke in Jason Hamlin, ironically. “You are right, Bobby: it is an outrage. But what you mean is not exactly what I mean.”

And, with this enigmatic remark, the aviator started to make his way toward the road. The two other “prisoners” followed.

## CHAPTER XXII—THE TRIAL

The Hale-Hamlin-Dunlap case certainly created a sensation among the pilots of the Lafayette Escadrille—indeed it created a great deal more talk than the fact that the Germans had begun to paint their battleplanes in colors of the most extraordinary and brilliant hue.

No one could understand the affair; it appeared a most unfathomable mystery, and especially so when the captain of the squadron politely informed Victor Gilbert that he, too, was technically a prisoner.

“Oh, chains and dungeons! I suppose, the next thing, they’ll be arresting the whole squadron!” cried Bobby Dunlap when apprised of this new and singular development in the *cause celebre*. “Goodness gracious, but I wish that last act would begin!”

The patience of the “prisoners” was not to be severely taxed, however; for, on the following morning, they received a summons to appear in the reception hall of the villa.

Entering, they found what appeared to be a court about to open its session. Seated on one side of a long table was the captain of the squadron and a gray-haired military man, a lieutenant, as was revealed by his uniform. Opposite to them sat the secret service men, the former “peasant” scarcely recognizable in his civilian’s clothes. Numerous papers of an official character were strewn about the table, greatly heightening the appearance of a court procedure.

“Messieurs,” exclaimed the military man, looking up gravely, “kindly take seats at the table.”

He looked like a stern old judge as he spoke. His eyes were cold and hard, the lines on his face grim and set and his closely cropped whitish moustache revealed a mouth indicating determination and strength of character.

Bobby Dunlap as a rule was not disposed to take things seriously, but under the present circumstances the silence in the big room, the frigid atmosphere, the formality and the gravity expressed upon the faces of the military men had its effect, making him feel ill at ease, uncomfortable and nervous.

“Messieurs, we are now ready to proceed,” announced the lieutenant at the head of the table. “Let me affirm in the beginning that we have no doubt of your loyalty or devotion to the cause which you espouse. At the same time I must explain that the military authorities as well as the secret service officials never allow the most trivial circumstance to pass without the most thorough investigation. In numerous cases everything is, of course, found to be entirely right, but it may happen that the hundredth will turn out otherwise, and perhaps that which appeared futile—a waste of time—may be revealed, under the searching light of truth, as a dangerous intrigue of our enemies.”

“Indeed, most extraordinary cases have come to our attention,” put in the captain.

"We will hear Monsieur Robert Dunlap first," continued the officer in charge of the proceedings. "Monsieur Dunlap, kindly stand up."

At this, Peur Jamais, whose general appearance and manner belied the name bestowed upon him by his friends, obeyed.

The interrogation began.

"Is it true," asked the officer, "that on several occasions you made use of this expression in reference to Jason Hamlin: 'other games are just as dangerous'?"

"Yes, Monsieur the Lieutenant," gulped Bobby, red and confused.

"In using that expression what did you infer?"

"Well, I—I—you see——" Peur Jamais, finding his tongue getting tangled, abruptly paused. Then, having mastered in a measure his uncomfortable feelings, he resumed: "I heard Monsieur Victor Gilbert make this observation, as well as several others to Monsieur Hamlin, all seeming to indicate ——"

Bobby halted again; the flush on his cheek deepened.

"Continuez, Monsieur," commanded the lieutenant.

"That—that he might be a German spy," exclaimed Bobby, desperately. "I heard so many stories about the espionage system from old Père Goubain, of the Café Rochambeau, near our training camp, that perhaps I became unduly suspicious."

The man whom the boys had formerly called the "mysterious peasant" looked up with a smile.

"With Monsieur the Lieutenant's permission," he exclaimed, "I will explain, though I do not wish the fact to be generally known, that Monsieur Goubain is affiliated with the secret service and has given us much valuable information."

"Oh—oh!" gasped Bobby, while all the other Americans in the room uttered suppressed exclamations.

"His object in speaking so freely was not only to show you the dangers that existed but to get you to keep your eyes open." The man smiled. "In one case, at least, he evidently succeeded."

"You have no evidence against Monsieur Hamlin?" continued the lieutenant, addressing Bobby.

"No, Monsieur the Lieutenant," responded Peur Jamais.

"That will do. You may sit down. Monsieur Gilbert."

When the former college student rose to his feet he showed none of the perturbation which had affected Bobby.

"Monsieur Gilbert," began the lieutenant, "it will be necessary for you to explain your entire connection with this affair, which, as our report indicates, began long before you came to France and joined the Lafayette Escadrille."

"Yes, Monsieur the Lieutenant," returned Gilbert. In an easy, conversational tone he began: "Before hostilities broke out in 1914 my father and Jason Hamlin's were firm friends, as well as business partners. Mrs. Hamlin was born in Germany, and her husband himself had distant relatives living there. The war had not continued very long before disputes began to arise between my father and his partner on account of the latter's ardent championship of the cause of Germany." Gilbert glanced in the direction of Jason Hamlin. "His son, too, was equally disposed to favor that country. And as our fathers had heated arguments so did we. Both of us, I may say, were at work for the firm. Finally the differences became so acute that after a particularly violent altercation, Mr. Hamlin, Senior, announced his intention of withdrawing from the firm, which he shortly did. His son, too, went with him; and, from the closest of friends, we became so estranged as to be considered enemies."

"After the entrance of America into the war did the Hamlins still remain pro-German?" queried the officer.

Victor Gilbert smiled.

"I have never had any conversation with the Mr. Hamlin, Senior, since that time," he replied, "and I do not know what his opinions are. Frankly, I must say that in regard to the son it seemed incomprehensible to me that one with such strong German proclivities could so change his opinions as to come over here and fight for the Allied cause."

"May I speak?" interjected Hamlin, somewhat heatedly.

"Your turn will come in a few minutes, Monsieur," said the presiding officer. "Continuez, Monsieur Gilbert."

"I was astounded when Hamlin came to the aviation school. And, judging from many things he had said, I feared that perhaps he might actually be a spy. And in some of our altercations—altercations that interested Monsieur Dunlap—I intimated just as much."

"You certainly did," jeered Jason Hamlin, with an angry glare. "And if you'd only had sense enough to——"

"Silence—silence!" interrupted the lieutenant.

"Naturally, words may be said in the heat of anger which would not be uttered when cooler judgment prevails," continued Victor, doggedly. "Why, I ask, shouldn't I have been suspicious? And

when I remarked to Hamlin that 'other games are just as dangerous' it was meant as a warning for him to go a bit slow."

"Has your opinion been altered?" asked the lieutenant.

Victor Gilbert nodded.

"Yes, Monsieur the Lieutenant," he replied. "And the reason is because of Hamlin's very excellent record since he joined the squadron."

Jason Hamlin now had the opportunity to explain his side of the case. As he began speaking his manner was decidedly different from that of the other two witnesses. He was clearly angry—aggressive, and his voice, raised high, rang through the room.

"I am very willing to admit that I was pro-German, as Monsieur Gilbert told you," he declared. "But, as events change so can one's opinions change with them. Before America became involved in hostilities I had a perfect right to favor Germany; but to have done so afterward would have been disloyal—indeed a traitorous act. No one has the right to go against his own country. And when I learned that Victor Gilbert had joined an aviation school in France I determined to show him, as well as any others who might have doubted my patriotism, that they were entirely mistaken. And as words without action count for little, I decided to follow his example and become an aviator."

At this point Jason Hamlin's stern expression deepened. He clenched his fists; and when he spoke again it was in even louder tones than before.

"My friend Monsieur Dunlap may think that he alone pierced the disguise of the peasant, but, if so, he is in error; and, surmising that I might be under suspicion, I made it a point to cultivate the man's acquaintance. At last the feelings which injustice always arouse caused me to decide that it was time to make an end of the farce—hence my visit to the farmhouse. I boldly told the secret service man that I knew what was going on; I said he could strip off his peasant's disguise and work to better advantage elsewhere. I declared that I was receiving a very poor reward for daily risking my life for the Allied cause. We had some words, which were brought to an end by the appearance of that secret service man sitting there." With a wave of his hand, Jason Hamlin continued: "The rights of an individual are as sacred as the rights of the government." He drew himself erect. "I ask—I demand to know if you have the slightest evidence against me?"

His flashing eyes, the fearlessness of his manner, the righteous indignation expressed in his voice brought a strong and dramatic touch to the situation.

Following his words there came a silence, curious and impressive.

Bobby Dunlap, fearing that in the judicial atmosphere this outburst might bring a stern rebuke, stared almost open-mouthed at the lieutenant. The latter, however, showing neither surprise nor displeasure, remarked, calmly:

"We have no evidence against you, Monsieur Hamlin. And I may say that reports received from our agents in America are thoroughly satisfactory. Kindly take your seat while we listen for a few moments to Monsieur Castel of the secret service."

Smilingly, the ex-peasant stood up.

"It won't take very much time," he announced. "I am glad indeed that everything has terminated so satisfactorily for all concerned. This case, I may say, was all brought about by remarks being overheard. Sometimes a whisper is enough to set the secret service in action. My confreres and I immediately began an investigation, and all of you young Messieurs have been under surveillance for some time."

"Oh—oh! Can you beat it!" muttered Peur Jamais.

"Messieurs Glenn and Dunlap's actions on the occasion of their visit to the house were rather peculiar, especially that of this young Monsieur here." He pointed to Bobby. "It could be readily seen that his curiosity was not merely the expression of a youthful desire to see the house, and, when he, in the company of Monsieur Hale, started off on their walk yesterday afternoon they were shadowed by my fellow detectives here. And their actions, of course, were so suspicious—a fact which they themselves must admit—that there was nothing to do but place them under arrest. While Monsieur Boulanger came into the house to inform me that the boys were in the garden, Monsieur Brion, who knew where they were concealed, kept track of their movements, and, at a signal which I gave by means of the lamp, he brought the matter to a climax. I believe there is nothing more for me to add."

Bobby Dunlap and Don Hale were now called upon for an explanation, which they gave to the entire satisfaction of those conducting the examination.

At its conclusion the stern-faced lieutenant, with a suspicion of a smile, exclaimed:

"You have all been found not guilty, and, in accordance with that fact, Messieurs Gilbert and Hamlin, I sentence you to shake hands and forget whatever differences may have existed between you. Human nature is fallible, and, had the case been reversed, you, Monsieur Hamlin, would have acted in a precisely similar manner to that of Monsieur Gilbert. Let me take this occasion to thank and compliment you for the noble work which you have been doing in the cause of humanity and justice."

The two young aviators nodded, in recognition, and each, in turn, thanked the lieutenant.

Then, without a remaining trace of animosity, they clasped each other's hands.

And in this happy fashion ended the case of Hamlin and the peasant, which was a nine-days' wonder

in the escadrille.

But, though it was ended, the conversation about it by no means came to such an abrupt termination. The principals came in for many bantering remarks, and had to stand a great deal of good-natured chaffing. Of course Bobby Dunlap was the principal victim.

“I say, Peur Jamais,” laughed George, “can you now almost hear the commander saying ‘My brave and loyal friends, in the name of my countrymen, I thank you’?”

“Joke if you like,” grinned Bobby, good-naturedly. “Anyway, I made a few truthful predictions.”

“How?”

“I said it wasn’t going to be a laughing matter to some one.”

“Correct, old chap.”

“And, after all, it certainly did mean an astonishing sequel.”

And so speaking, Bobby chuckled mirthfully.

Several weeks later, in the spacious grounds of a chateau occupied by the military authorities, a lively and spectacular scene was being enacted. Soldiers were drawn up in a hollow square. And there, where danger did not exist, could be seen all the pomp and pageantry of warfare, so lacking in the actual operations. The warm, clear sunshine shone on generals’ uniforms, on military motor-cars and on high-spirited horses, champing at their bits.

And besides the military there were present a few men in civilian dress, the most prominent among them being an extremely ponderous man with a most beaming face whom all the former students at the École Militaire de Beaumont recognized as old Père Goubain, the proprietor of the Café Rochambeau.

What was the occasion of all this festivity?

It was because a number of airmen, Red Cross ambulance drivers and soldiers had so distinguished themselves as to earn the gratitude of the French Republic that they were to be awarded the Croix de Guerre and other decorations.

Among those who were recipients of the War Cross were Don Hale and T. Singleton Albert. It was Don Hale’s feat in saving the Caudron photographic machine and his subsequent destruction of the observation balloon which had brought him the coveted honor.

And after a general had pinned the Croix de Guerre to his breast and the proceedings were over the first to shake his hand was old Père Goubain.

“Ah! La France can never lose with such young men as you enlisted in her cause,” he exclaimed. “And now, mon ami, what are your plans?”

“I hope to be transferred to the American air service as soon as possible,” returned the smiling Don Hale.

“I knew that would be the answer,” cried old Père Goubain. “And I am very certain that Monsieur Don Hale with the Yanks will be as successful as he was with the Lafayette Squadron, and make a name for himself that will carry beyond the seas.”

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