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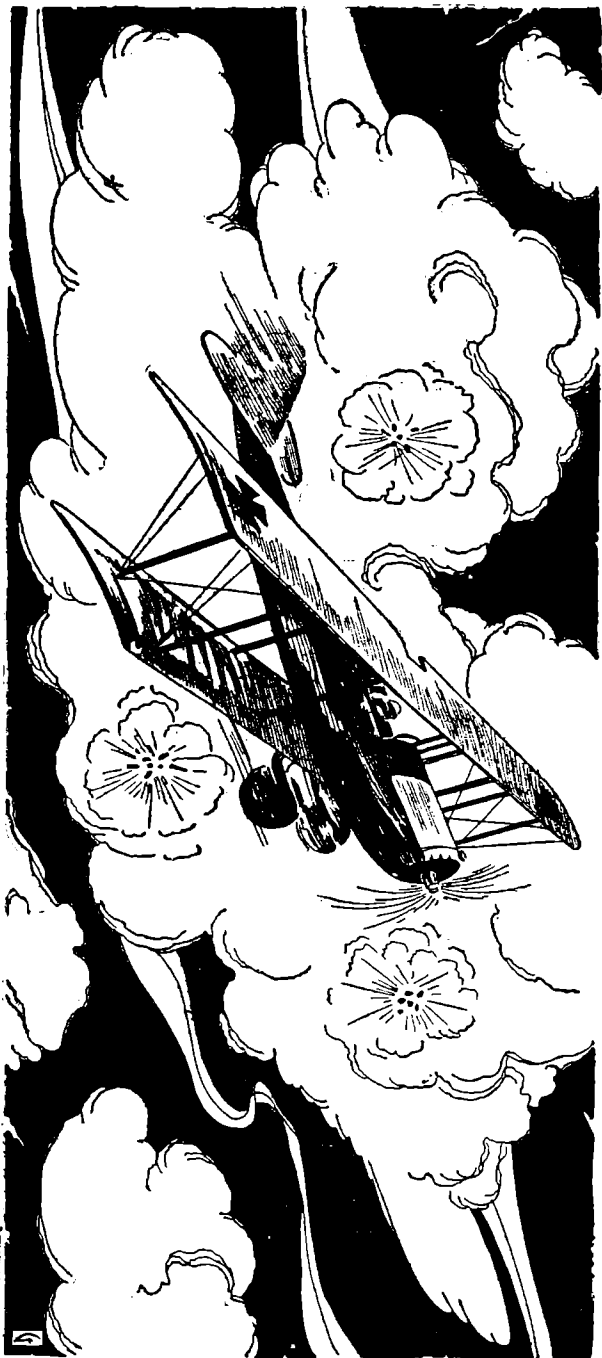
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# When the Yankee Ace Came Back

*The German guns turned vengefully on my crippled plane—and I faced death! Then—did my buddy return from the shadows to help me?*

By

LIEUTENANT "PINKY" MARTIN  
of the Army Air Corps

**A**ERODROME "A" was in a blue funk, with the flight commander a bundle of nerves.

"Dammit," he snapped at mess that night—his name was Major Harlow—"it isn't bad enough to lose Pitkin and Marland yesterday and have three machines lost today, but now Haskell is missing! Where the devil can he be?"

Haskell was our ace of aces. He was a queer chap, hardly more than twenty-eight, but already he was credited with eighteen of the enemy's planes. Whenever he'd get one he'd come back to the officers' quarters and sit down at the battered old piano in our lounging room and bang out wild music that chilled us to the bone by its savagery. Every time he got another score he would do that. His favorite was Rachmaninoff's *Prelude* in C sharp minor. It begins with a stately movement that quickens as the music goes into strange chords in the upper register, and then bursts into crashing sounds of wild frenzy, like "Archie" bursting all around you and big guns spitting death down below. Then, diminishing in tempo and tone, it suggests a tortured soul, dropping to earth, mangled and crushed as the plane piles up.

They say it's the leitmotif of the Russian composer's tempestuous life. He fancied he faced some terrifying and unconquerable power, Fate or Destiny. The helpless horror he experienced before this fanciful Fate, the impossibility of escape except in an opium-induced mirage of paradise, shows in the music.

Anyway, that was what Haskell played whenever he brought down an enemy plane. It gave us the willies to hear him, with his tall, slight frame hunched over that old battered piano, his blond head wagging in time to the music, his long hands spanning the keys and crashing out those terrific chords, he played with an ecstasy that was close to insanity.

Then, quite calmly, he'd get up and grin at the startled look on our faces, and amble off for forty winks.

But Haskell evidently had overplayed his hand. His ambition was to bring down the Black Knight—Von Ehrenfeld, the German ace. How many Allied planes Von Ehrenfeld had bagged, I don't know, but there were a lot. A jolly fellow he was! Once he nearly had me and we tried to shoot it out, up there in the sky. But our ammunition gave out and then we flew alongside each other for a while,

he grinning at me and waving a hand as friendly as you please. Never seemed to hold any grudge at all. All in the business of war, you know. If he got you, that was your hard luck. If you got him, probably he'd go down smiling just the same. Friendly as the devil!

He drove a big Fokker with the nose painted black. That's why we called him the Black Knight. Toodles Haskell had been after him a score of times. Only that morning he had started out to find him—and he hadn't come back. He had been due hours before. That was why the Major was worried.

"Dammit," he complained petulantly, "we've got plenty of hard luck on our hands! The C. O. has given orders we've got to bring down the Knight. He's raising too much devilry. He bombed Aerodrome 'B' this morning and fooled around over the lines, thumbing his nose at us. We're up against it. Toodles was the only man who could get him, and now Toodles is gone. Who the devil," he exclaimed harshly, "is playing that damn piano?"

I listened and caught my breath.

"It's Toodles," I cried, jumping up. "That's the *Prelude* in C sharp minor!"

Tiny Minot leaped to his feet. Tiny had been Toodles' buddy in a way—the way a small dog chums around with a big one. Pure hero worship, on his part. Tiny ran from the table to the door that opened on the lounging room. For a second he stood there with the door pushed slightly open, looking in.

Then he turned to us. His face was as white as death, his jaw sagging. He took two or three staggering steps toward us and nearly collapsed. The Major jumped up.

"What is it?" he cried. "What the devil is going on in there?"

He started for the door, but Tiny stopped him.

"For God's sake, don't go in there," he gasped, his face ashen. "Don't go in, Major. It's Toodles. But he's dead! For God's sake, Major!"

But the Major wouldn't listen. He strode past Tiny and threw open the door. The music had ceased. The Major turned and looked at Tiny questioningly.

"Are you drunk, Minot?" he snapped. "Or are you crazy?"

We crowded around the door. The room was empty!

But before anyone could say a word the telephone rang. It was the operator at headquarters.

In the stillness we heard every word.

"Plane BH4-R2 crossed enemy lines at 4,000 feet up when attacked by enemy plane, Fokker design, at 5:38. Observer reports a combat ensued and plane BH4-R2 was seen to stagger as if pilot had been hit and then start to glide. Flames burst from plane when down to 1,000 feet. Believe plane crashed behind enemy lines. Records show this plane from your station. Report."

We stood there staring at each other, unable to believe or to understand the strange thing that had happened. The BH4-R2 was Toodles' plane.

**T**HAT night we held a council about the Black Knight. He had been regarded as Toodles' own. But now who'd get him? The Major cursed plenty and harped on the reputation of Aerodrome "A." At last he said he himself would lead a flight next morning, and that we would stay up until we got the Knight or until nobody was left.

Early next morning we were tuning up in the gray mists that hang over France just before dawn, when the enemy staged a raid. We heard the drone of the motors, and the Major ordered us up to meet them. I had a Sopwith, one of those blundering old buses left over from heaven knows when. But it had a mighty fine Lewis gun in it, and I went up, alone, in the hurry of the take-off.

I don't know how it ever happened. The Germans had a knack of taking advantage of every low-hanging cloud and hiding themselves for a time, to swoop down when

least expected. I was young at the game, having arrived at the Aerodrome only a few weeks before from the English training fields. The Sop started to act up. In a minute I was behind our patrol and soon I found myself over the enemy lines with the Archie bursting dangerously close. I zigzagged and was attempting to find my way out of the mess when a burst sounded just behind the tail of my plane. I was scared, I can tell you, and looked around to see how much of the plane was left—when out of the mist came humming a big Fokker with a black nose!

It was Von Ehrenfeld all right. He hung just above me and came riding into my tail where the Archie had been a minute before. He was so close I could see the grin on his face.

Down below they had a searchlight going and it was flashing all around. They picked us up in a minute and the Archie stopped. Some flares went up, lighting the ground beautifully, and I could see some deep craters down there. I wondered which one of them I'd land in and whether I'd be dead when I reached the ground or burn to death after cracking up in one of those holes.

**B**ELIEVE me, I could see old John W. Death sitting on my wings, waiting to drop me off into space.

Von Ehrenfeld opened up with his machine-gun. I gave an exhibition of spiraling and banking that ought to have won me something if the C. O. or the flight commander had been present. But I wasn't thinking of medals just then. I wanted to get away from the Black Knight and duck for home.

Ehrenfeld's bullets whizzed around me. They spat into the fuselage and one of them nicked me in the shoulder. It felt like a red-hot needle. But if that was all I got out of it, I'd be thankful.

I think Von Ehrenfeld was playing with me, giving me a little scare before sending my plane crashing to earth. I tried to climb, thinking I could get above him and get my Lewis into action—but my engine missed fire. One of his bullets had done something to it.

He was alongside of me now, thumbing his nose at me. I cursed him and shook my fist. In another second he was up above me while I worked with that damnable engine. I knew he was maneuvering to get behind me and fire into the tail of my plane. That would be the end of the show—for me.

He banked. He zoomed above me. He swung around. And just when I had begun to despair of getting away, I saw another plane swooping down toward us. It came out of the clouds from away up somewhere, looking as thin and misty as the clouds themselves. But on the side of it was something that made me gasp. In big, black letters and figures was the designation "BH4-R2." It was Toodles' bus!

Watching the rev. counter with one eye, out of the corner of the other I saw the plane coming toward us. It gave me a queer sensation at the pit of my stomach. Toodles was supposed to be dead! Had he succeeded in getting away? I wondered. Had he been playing 'possum somewhere, waiting to catch Ehrenfeld off his guard? But they said his bus had crashed.

Suddenly I remembered the crazy happening of the night before when Tiny said he had seen Toodles. Up there in the air, with those drifting clouds coming between us and the earth, shutting us off as though somebody had dropped a curtain and the three of us were backstage alone, I tell you it was a queer feeling I had.

But there wasn't any time to think. At that minute Von Ehrenfeld's gun must have jammed. He quit firing. The other plane sailed alongside me. For a brief instant I looked across and a hand waved encouragingly at me. But I couldn't wave back. I couldn't do a thing but sit there as though paralyzed. The hand that waved at me was as filmy and intangible as a wisp of cloud!

I suppose it was only instinct that kept me right side up.

When I got control of myself again, my plane was practically being pulled to pieces by a hurricane wind that had suddenly sprung up. Down below me was a ground mist that hid everything there. I seemed to be absolutely in a world by myself.

Ehrenfeld had quit me. Whether he had seen the other plane and had transferred his attention to it, or whether he had discontinued the attack because of lack of ammunition, I do not know.

I put my left wing down and turned on the wind that was blowing. Even though the engine continued to cough and sputter, the wind seemed to cradle me so I could ride down it in a long glide. When I finally got through the mist, risking my neck and hoping I'd land in something soft, I brought up with a *crunch* right back of the aerodrome! Some dozens of breathless mechanics came running. I tried to choke down my feelings and inform them I was quite all right. One of our pilots said he didn't know how I had managed to land at all and thought I was damn lucky. Boy! He didn't know the half of it!

IT seemed foolish to try to tell them what had happened to me. H. Q. had reported Toodles as dead and I knew nobody would believe me if I told them about seeing his plane. So I kept my own counsel until I had a chance to talk with Tiny. He was very grave when I told him.

"Yes, Toodles is up there somewhere," Tiny agreed. "But he isn't alive any more. He didn't want to live."

"Didn't want to live?" I repeated in amazement.

"No. Just before he took off the last time, he showed me a letter from his girl back in Iowa or some place. She jilted him. She said she never could marry a flyer—that she admired him greatly and all that but his vocation was too dangerous. She had become interested in an infantry captain, instead, and thought seriously of marrying him.

"I tried to tell Toodles it was for the best; that she was a poor skate, anyway. But he wouldn't listen. He just grinned and ran his long fingers through his shock of blond hair and said he hoped he'd meet Von Ehrenfeld soon. Then he went in there and played that damnable piece. It sounded—honest to God, Pinky—it sounded as though he was playing his own funeral dirge; only it was wild and eerie and savage!"

"And he met Von Ehrenfeld," I added.

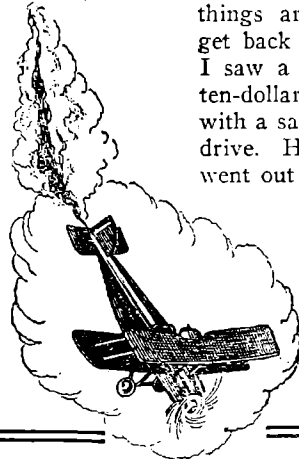
"I don't think so," Tiny insisted. "Not as he wanted to. Something else happened. He didn't get the Knight and that's why he's wandering around up there. He's waiting. He can't rest."

For days we didn't see anything of Von Ehrenfeld. I began to think that maybe Toodles had got him after all, up there in the clouds, when that hurricane came up. I talked it over with Tiny and we agreed that something had happened, although we couldn't tell what.

Airmen get superstitious as the devil. They're as bad as actors, in a way. For example, to whistle before you go up in a flight is bad luck. Flyers believe in charms, too. One of the men in our flight had the propeller of a plane in which he made his first kill, nailed to the bottom of his bus. Another attached some sort of mystic significance to a piece of shrapnel that had been extracted from his side; he had it screwed to the instrument board of his ship. Strange things were painted on the planes—death's heads, jolly rogues, black cats.

Flyers laugh at death. When you're up in the clouds things are different. You become detached. When you get back to earth you want to do things, to break things. I saw a flyer once enter an enlisted man's canteen, lay a ten-dollar bill on the counter and bet he could hit the clock with a salt shaker. Somebody covered the money and he let drive. He didn't hit the clock and he lost the bet. Then he went out and got uproariously drunk.

In spite of superstitions, however, neither Tiny nor I talked about what we thought or had seen. Somehow you don't tell things like that. You don't like to have your buddies think you're any crazier than you actually appear to be.




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Haskell, the American ace of aces, wrecked his plane deliberately—because of a girl. He didn't want to live.

When he reached the Other Side, did he regret his act? Did he want to come back and atone for his weakness? Was that the explanation of the fantastic things that happened above the German lines?

The story of Haskell's death—and its remarkable aftermath—has become one of the legends of the World War. Read the facts as told by Haskell's buddy.

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ABOUT a week later we heard of Ehrenfeld again. He had started working in another sector. They had identified his plane at H. Q. and we got a nasty report on it.

"Listen, you birds," said Major Harlow to us. "Something has to be done! Von Ehrenfeld is at it again over on the left wing. He got away from us before, though somebody laid him up a while. But he's in business again and the C. O. has notified me it's up to us. What are we going to do about it?"

The Major was furious this time. He said we'd go up next morning and if we didn't get Von Ehrenfeld he'd disembowel us all. Hard, the Major was!

We rolled out of bed early. The Major was determined that somehow somebody had to get the Black Knight. It was hardly three o'clock when we pulled our flying suits

over our pajamas and started out. Tiny and I were detailed to the same machine—he to pilot it, and I to make observations and drop a few bombs over the aerodrome where we thought Von Ehrenfeld kept his bus.

"Your business is to smoke him out," Harlow instructed us. "It's a great morning for a flight and he'll probably take after you. Then we'll rush in and get him."

Wasn't that cheerful? We two, the youngest and most inexperienced of the bunch, were to be used as bait. We stood a fine chance of ever getting back alive. However, it was all in the day's work. But I do say that we shook hands with the bunch and threw our hats away, which is the sign that we didn't expect to need them any more.

The aerodrome which we thought Von Ehrenfeld used as his base was about four miles over the line. The sky was a bit misty when we went up and Tiny rose to 6,000 feet. The early-morning mist bothered us even there and we hung around for a quarter of an hour trying to get a

good sight on the target. Below us we could make out a Hun patrol of three machines buzzing around, but somehow they didn't seem to see us in the half darkness above.

When the German planes veered off to one side, we dropped lower—and then, almost before we knew what had happened, the search-lights picked us up and the guns opened with a compliment of Archie. It wasn't long before we were in a bee's nest and a flaming bullet hit us and started a blaze near the tail. I yelled for Tiny to straighten out but he seemed in a daze. Ticklish business as it was, I crawled back along the fuselage and beat out the flame with my hands. I'd hardly got back to my seat before the engine coughed hoarsely and we started to drop—fast.

I figured it was the end. Tiny thought so, too, and as if he figured on getting in one good wallop before we passed out, he dove straight at one of the Boche machines that had returned to attack us. The Boche swerved just in time and all but did a nose-dive. And at that moment Tiny crumpled and I knew he was hit. He turned and waved a hand at me, his face gray with pain. There was nothing to do but pray. I don't remember whether I did or not. I shut my eyes, waiting for the crash.

**T**HEN suddenly our machine seemed to hit a resisting force. If a giant had reached up from the earth and held our plane in its palm, we couldn't have been stopped any easier. It was like putting on the brakes in a swiftly descending elevator when you're almost at the bottom.

There was a bump, of course. A bump and another one. When I opened my eyes we rested about four feet in front of a deep hole. A miracle had happened.

I was thankful. Boy, I was thankful! But it was too early to cheer. We were inside the enemy lines! I discovered that quickly enough, for the artillery was trying to fire at close range, striving to smash us flat. Then it stopped. I looked up. High in the sky was a silver plane, burnished against the rising sun. It looked like a silver bird floating lazily there as if waiting for something. It hardly seemed to move—yet it did move, slowly circling in the sky close to the morning clouds that were dispersing before the one really bright day I ever saw in France.

The guns gave the plane their attention right away but the pilot of that ship seemed to sneer at them. He was too high up for any serious damage from them. We ourselves were forgotten for the moment—but I knew it wouldn't be for long. In a minute or two, gray-coated men would come swarming across that field with guns and bayonets.

I was about to drag Tiny over into the observer's seat and try to get the bus started again, when Tiny pointed upward.

"Look!" he cried.

I looked up but all I could see was that silver plane high up and the two Boches streaking it for home, off in the distance.

"What, Tiny?" I asked. "What do you mean?"

He pointed again. The plane was beautiful up there. It shone as gorgeously as though even the wing cloth were of silver.

"It's Toodles," said Tiny, his voice filled with awe. "He's up there. He's saving us. He knew we needed help and he's come to draw the artillery fire and the other planes. Listen to the guns."

All along the salient they were roaring at him. Smoke bullets puffed high in the air as the gunners attempted to get his range. But he hung there, suspended almost, with no sign of fear. Far off we could hear the drone of our own patrol but the guns were driving them back.

Only that plane hung there suspended. And if there was any doubt in my mind as to its being Toodles, that was quickly dispelled when I put my glasses to my eyes. He was dropping closer to the earth. And I could see the number on the ship, BH4-R21

I got Tiny over into the other seat. His wound was in the side and was more painful than dangerous. I set to work on the engine and started tinkering. What I did, I don't know to this day. But suddenly it coughed. Tiny, with a superhuman effort, leaned over and grabbed the controls. I spun the propeller and like a rabbit leaped into the machine. Before I realized it the machine was taking off. I knew we couldn't go far and I only hoped we'd last until we could get over the lines into our own territory.

The bus jerked and jumped but it climbed. And then in a second I realized that all along the line the guns were still. It frightened me, for I thought they were getting ready to turn back on us. But they didn't.

Suddenly I realized what had happened. Behind us a plane was rising; its nose was painted black and I knew that Von Ehrenfeld had taken to the air. He wasn't after us. He was after that other plane up there—that bright, silver, lovely thing that floated so easily above us.

The guns had quit. They were giving Ehrenfeld a chance at that machine up there. He did not hesitate in his flight. Up, up, he drove with all the speed he had. The other plane waited. I wondered if that specter up there could think and what his thoughts would be as he sat there staring at the plane coming to meet him. I pictured his delicate, filmy hand on the side of the cockpit as he leaned over, looking down.

The silver plane turned. It moved away, higher up into the sky. Von Ehrenfeld followed. Higher and higher they rose, the beautiful phantom plane and the gray one with the black nose. Up, up, the two went to some vast dueling ground we couldn't see, to have it out together.

They headed east—into the path of the sun. I lost them against the light.

No one knew what happened up there in the air. Did they fight together up there—a phantom and a living man? Did the phantom overcome the mortal with mere mortal things like machine-gun bullets, and send the Knight finally crashing to earth somewhere, dead? Or did they engage in a comradely agreement in which neither became the champion, and in which the phantom enticed Von Ehrenfeld off into the spaces where the wind forever blows between the worlds—forever to fly side by side, rivals still, but comrades until the end of time? God only knows.

I looked back at Tiny. He sat there tense, his face rigid as a mask. But his lips were moving. I never asked him what he said.

I had no time to study him long. It was all I could do to keep our bus in the air. Yet somehow by coaxing and cajoling, and finally by a long glide, I managed to pass over our own trenches at a height of not more than 400 yards and then we crashed.

**I**T was flyers' luck. We weren't ready to turn in our chips just then. That's why we weren't injured except for bruises. I dug Tiny out of the wreck. Soon help came and I got him back to the aerodrome and under the care of a surgeon. His wound wasn't so serious. The bullet knocked a couple of ribs out of whack, but what's that in the life of a flyer?

It was at night two days later that I sat beside Tiny's bed, talking to him. He had begged so hard to be released from the temporary hospital that I guess the surgeon, knowing that aviators aren't content unless they've in the thick of things, let him come back. The quarters were deserted, except for Tiny and me. There was some sort of shindig in the town near-by.

But hardly had I seated myself before Major Harlow came in. He eyed us queerly and then as if an impulse struck him he came over to us.

"What do you birds make out of that silver plane the other day?" he asked abruptly.

Tiny and I stared at each other. Then Tiny turned to the Major.

"You may not believe it," he began stoutly, "but it was Toodles."

"What makes you say that?" the Major asked.

"Did you see the markings on the ship?" Tiny queried.

"I heard about them," he evaded. "But by heaven I don't know myself what it's all about. Just now I've received the finest compliment from Headquarters a man could wish."

He took a paper from his pocket.

"It says," he began, "we're to be commended for the strict attention to duty—and all that rot. And it says also that Von Ehrenfeld is down, though H. Q. isn't sure where. Today a wing from his machine was discovered about fifteen kilometers south of us. Where the rest of it is, nobody knows. The wing was torn off as if the plane had been in collision with another. We get credit for prompt action."

THE Major stopped, staring into space, deep in thought. Suddenly he looked up, his brow perplexed.

"In God's name," he cried, "do you really believe that was Toodles up there?"

Tiny nodded.

"But—Toodles is dead! We got an official report of his death over the German lines."

"He's dead—but he was up there," Tiny said determinedly. "For two reasons. The first is that he went out deliberately to commit suicide."

"Suicide!" the Major gasped.

"Yes," said Tiny. "Because of a girl. Listen, Major," he went on hurriedly. "You may say I'm an ass and all that, but this is my theory. He went out, as I said, in an impulsive moment and committed suicide. Then when he got over on the Other Side he regretted his act. He knew that was the wrong thing to do. He found he'd left one matter unaccomplished."

"That was bringing down the Black Knight," I put in.

"Exactly. But he's got him now. I don't know whether they're flying together side by side in the spirit world, grinning at each other like a couple of happy kids, or not. I could believe it, though."

"And the other thing?" the Major asked.

"It has to do with a letter. The day after you got official notice that Toodles had cracked up, a letter came to him from his girl in Iowa, the one who turned him down for the in-

fantry fellow. Toodles was madly in love with her. Being nearest to him here, I opened the letter. The girl was damn sorry for what she had written and would have given her old shoes to recall it. Said the infantry officer was no good, that she found she loved Toodles after all and would wait for him forever. Begged forgiveness and all that. Crawled on her knees to him."

"And by that time he was dead," I said.

"Committed suicide. Deliberately. Knew all about her letter after he died—regretted it horribly. But it was too late then. Toodles couldn't rest until he'd made good—done something heroic to wipe out the stain of suicide."

The Major looked at us strangely.

At that moment the silence was broken by music. Though faint and eerie as if it floated to us from a far distance, it came crashing in on our jangled nerves like the end of the world. It was the *Prelude* by Rachmaninoff that Toodles always played after he had brought down an enemy plane.

It was weird and savage. It was profound and passionate. It began softly with that strange, haunting melody in the agitato movement, sweeping majestically higher and higher and faster into those chords on the upper register. It worked up to that crashing, reverberating passage in quadruple forte like all the big guns in the world sending their horror of death to wreck men's souls and tear and rend their puny bodies. It swept on and on in wild frenzy as if a despairing soul turned to flaunt its helpless horror in the face of Fate.

Major Harlow sprang up and started toward the door of the other room. Tiny tried to stop him.

"For God's sake, Major, don't go in there!" he cried.

But the Major would not listen. Fiercely he yanked the door open.

The room was empty.

"It was Toodles," Tiny said quietly, "playing his own funeral dirge. His work is accomplished now. He's brought down the Black Knight. The girl wasn't fit for him anyway—not fit for Toodles. Twice he saved Pinky and me. Don't you see, Major, his destiny is fulfilled? He's accomplished after death the big thing that made his life incomplete. That was his swan song we heard. We won't see Toodles any more, or his spirit ship up there in the air. He's winging his way into the sun now."