



TWO BIG ACTION NOVELS

SKY DEVILS

**THE BLACK SKULL
FLIGHT PATROLS
HELL**

JULY—15¢

***gripping novel by*
ARCH WHITEHOUSE**



ALSO

**Robert S. Bowen
Kenneth Sinclair
Orlando Rigoni
Anthony Field
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SKY DEVILS

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Vol. 1, No. 2



July, 1938, Issue

2 THRILLING SKY NOVELS

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THE BLACK SKULL FLIGHT PATROLS HELL! . . . by Arch Whitehouse 8

The ominous smoke blots from Jerry ground guns made significant black skulls in the sky—warning to Keith Clark not to lead that maddest of all suicide flights through Europe's war-torn air!

FLAMING DESTINY OF THE SKY DAMNED! by Anthony Field 84

That infamous Black Sheep Squadron thundered behind Jack Quinn through flaming skies on a double mission of hate—for one of their number was a spy who had sold their honor to hell, and the Allied High Command's secret location to the blasting ruin of Boche bombers!

2 SMASHING NOVELETTES

JUNGLE BUZZARD—OR FIGHTING EAGLE? . . . by Orlando Rignol 63

Could Captain Del Trone put fighting spirit back into those war-broken flying jungle-buzzards—by forcing them into crates too slow to flee from death-dealing Fokkers?

LAST FLIGHT FOR MONEY-KILLERS by Omar Gwinn 74

So Wolf and those other hard-bitten, money-killing Hell-Bringers thought I wasn't tough enough to roar through China skies and send Jap crates hurtling down in flames, eh?

2 HELL-RAISING SHORT STORIES

SPANDAU SALUTE by Kenneth Sinclair 47

Fighting that flimsy, bullet-riddled, staggering Nieuport, Terry Ralton wrenched at his controls like a goggled madman . . . Could his best friend actually have sent him to this death-feast of black-crossed buzzards?

ACES AREN'T BORN by Robert Sidney Bowen 54

—They're re-born—fighting stark berserk in shrapnel-shredded skies for a crazy cause!

SPECIAL FEATURE

SLIPSTREAM conducted by Colonel Phillipot Bottles, N.O.G. 50

C'mon, all you air fiends, and join up with the Colonel.



SKY DEVILS published bi-monthly by Western Fiction Publishing Co., Inc. Office of publication 4600 Diversey Ave., Chicago, Illinois. Editorial and executive offices, RKO Bldg., Radio City, New York, N. Y. Entered as second class matter December 10, 1937, at the Post Office at Chicago, Ill., under act of March 3, 1879. Entire contents copyright, 1938, by Western Fiction Publishing Co., Inc. Yearly subscription, \$1.00.

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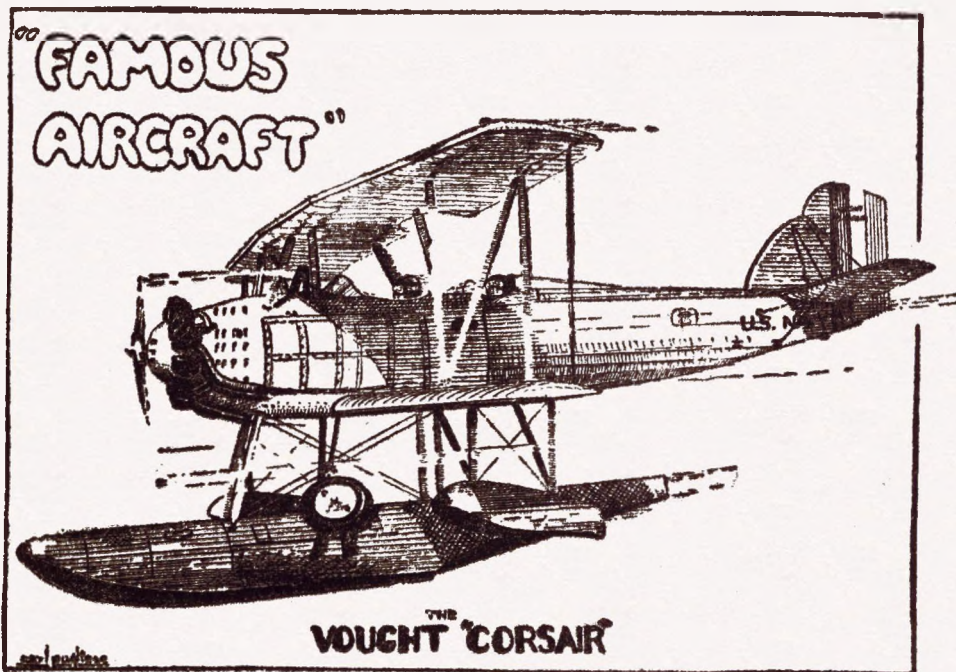
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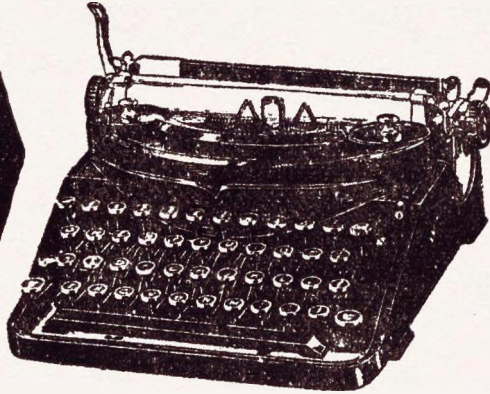
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The Black Skull Flight

CHAPTER I

THUNDER FROM BELOW

A THRILLING

FEATURE-

LENGTH

WAR-AIR

MYSTERY

NOVEL!

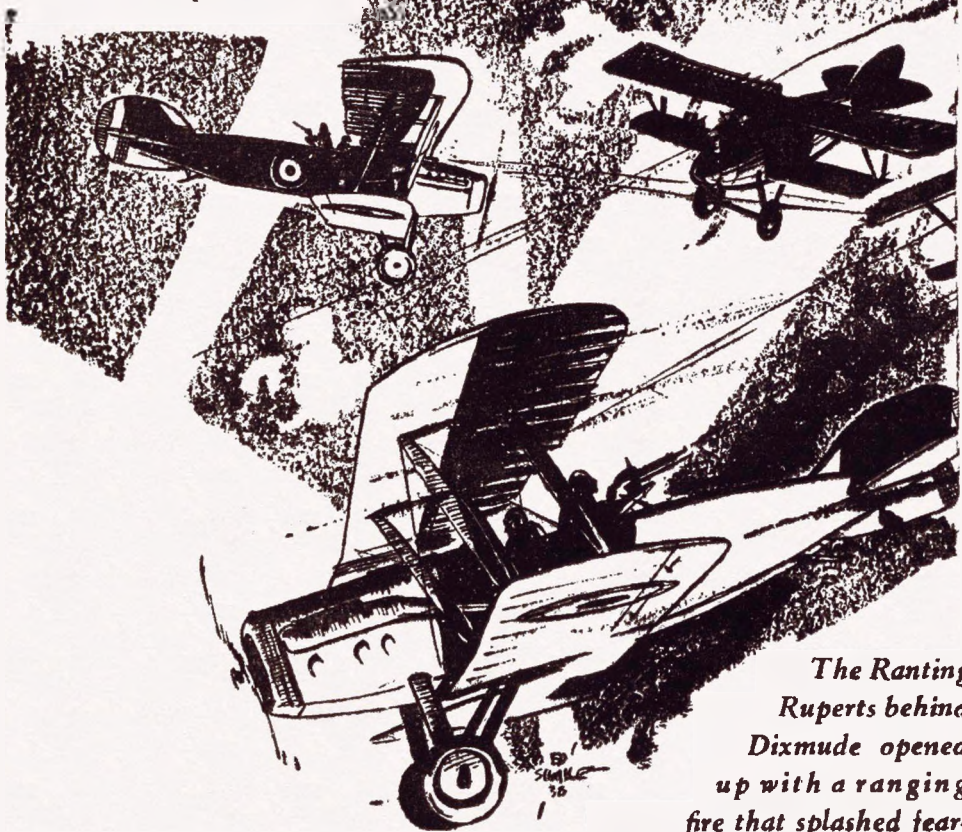
FLANDERS, Bloody April, 1918.
The second German drive halted before Ypres after an advance of ten miles.

German divisions stopped before Amiens after an advance of thirty-five miles.

Bolo Pasha, Levantine resident of Paris, executed for treason.

Baron von Richthofen, premier German airman, killed.

No. 127 Squadron, American Air Service, brigaded with British Independent Air



The Ranting Ruperts behind Dixmude opened up with a ranging fire that splashed fearsome yelks of scarlet and yellow against the night sky. Chunks of shrapnel hissed and whined past their heads.

Force for suicide patrols.

These and a hundred more headlines flaunted in the newspapers from Paris to Brisbane—but no mention of the

Patrols Hell!

By ARCH
WHITEHOUSE



Lieutenant Keith Clark, U. S. A., was warned not to lead that strangest of suicide flights into German domain—warned by ominous black smoke skulls in the sky!

skulls in the smoke over Blankenbergh. Hardly an official notice of the gazet-ting of Lieutenant Keith Clark to "A" Flight under Captain Gregory Dual, the swashbuckling leader of the mad-dest flight in 127.

Of course it might have been the imagination of fighting men, distorted by weariness and flicked with strange lights and shadows, that created this new horror that swept through the fighting squadrons in France like a bone-crushing deluge, but you can't laugh off losses. You can't write men off strength and machines from the "material-on-hand" columns every day with a bland "Missing in Action" explanation. Someone is going to ask

questions, and as a matter of fact, some-one did; but still the skulls in the smoke never got a tumble in the official communiques.

That was all right if you had a cushy job back at Montreuil or even Bar-le-Duc. You could afford to sit back and sniff: "Bah, ghost stories! All I can say is that the cognac up there must be better than it is down here."

Maybe this is a ghost story. Perhaps the boys attached to the Independent Air Force were a little goofy. They had to be or they would never have been selected for that mob. I don't know, but somehow my typewriter sounds different while I pound this out. The keys banging up and down sort of

click like yellow teeth, clacking up and down in a brownish skull.

All I can say is, if you are that way inclined, don't select a nice stormy night when you are alone to read this. They're the nights the lights seem to go out suddenly, and pictures drop from the wall.

I sometimes think I was out there too long myself.

SIX black Camels flaunting cocardes on which the center white spot had been pointed out with dark green for night-flying, swarmed down the Berques field in tight formation. Captain Gregory Dual, "A" Flight's two-streamer guy, was up front. About seventeen inches off his elevators knifed the leading edges of Fred DeWolf's and Dave Dunstan's ships. Behind them in a slightly higher rank came Lloyd Tempest flying No. 4, Bill Crane had the unenviable position of No. 5 directly behind Dual and No. 6, sporting a single streamer sat Keith Clark, ace Camel man who had hours in with No. 3 R.N.A.S. under Ray Collishaw back in '16 before the U. S. had taken up the world's burden.

On this fact alone, Clark arrived at No. 127 with two strikes on him. He had scored victories and had been awarded two medals, but he never spoke about them and never wore the ribbons. Naturally Dual and the boys figured he was up-stage, but they were wrong by about four tank-fulls.

The formation of Camels swept up and climbed for height over their one field: a misnamed piece of real-estate hidden behind a ragged apple orchard. There was only one way to come in—sideslip like hell and when your wingtip seemed all set to gouge out a chunk of turf, you straightened her out, gulped hard and let her tail drag. If you were lucky, a few of the boys would be on hand to tackle her while you fish-

tailed like fury and just stop you from winding up in "B" Flight's hangar.

At 8,000 Dual gave them the white light, stared over the side hoping to get a recall strip, indicating that the show had been called off, but there was no "M" panel out so they slammed on toward Houthem where they were to pick up three 9-Acks equipped with "L" type cameras.

As usual the Velox Vultures were late. Dual swore and glared at the black-dialed watch on his dash. For another five minutes they circled, drew up the Constaninesco gear levers and warmed their guns. Then the Nines suddenly came into the picture charging along like broad-backed walruses fitted with wings.

Dual blew a green Very and got one in reply from Stan Howell, leader of the camera mob. Dual watched the observers bend down to fix the plate boxes and check the drift with the smoke that seeped across the shell-gashed territory west of Peroye. Then, they too warmed their double Lewises and made themselves comfortable on the fold-down seats and waited for the fire-works.

They soon got them. The three-pounders from behind Leke opened up and spat black blobs into the area between the Camels and the Nines.

Bong! Bong! Bong! Bong!

Like a shot Dual threw his ships through the smoke on the assumption that no gun in the world will put a shell in the same place twice. The Nines below plodded on and the observers turned their faces toward the north where four more blobs broke out and sent out monster chunks of blackened steel.

"I'd give ten bucks to know what all this damned camera work is about," growled Keith Clark as he edged away a few feet from Bill Crane's starboard wingtip. "The guys down in the slots claim they know less about what is

going on than someone in Kamchatka, but if they want to know even less, and still be in the thick of it, they ought to get a transfer to the Independent."

His reverie was interrupted by the sudden appearance of three green Pfalz ships that had darted out of the sun. Dual saw them, eased around the back of the triune of defense and shooed them up on the guns of the Nine observers. The Lewis Lancers took care of them with interest and one slipped away in flames. A second bucked like a stallion and threw away a wing. The third made the mistake of trying to turn back and Dave Tempest shot him clear out of the sky without leaving his position in formation.

"Now that's the way to play this game," nodded Clark. "There are times when old Dual shows a spark of imagination. Poor blasted gunners won't get any credit of course. Those Nine pilots, who were probably shivering out of their bucket seats, will probably ring them up. The Limeys are right. P. B. O.—Poor Bloody Observers!"

But the Nines had changed their course now and were heading due west for Middlekerke south of Ostend. Clark frowned and wondered again. But Dual climbed to stay back as they were running past the two-seaters.

FOR another fifteen minutes they braved the heavies outside Ostend and watched a flight of Brandenburgs head out of the harbor and climb for action—interceptor action.

Then ahead lay Blankenbergh and Zeebrugge and Clark began to get the idea.

"Funny, though," he reflected. "Damned little opposition except from the Archie tubes. Smells suspiciously like a plant."

Clark was right. Once six Albatri came out of the sky and tried to head

them off but the effort was puny and once the Camels nosed around to take up the challenge they split wide and dove like mad. Clark caught up to one and fanged its tail assembly away and watched it go down in a sickening spin. He was back into position in no time and got a nod from Dual.

Below them, the 9-Ack observers were working like mad. The guns were flaming hard and the sky was dotted with smoke and belching shells. Clark sensed a strange tingle running up and down his spine, but somehow, this time it did not make him look back over his shoulder. The danger lay ahead.

"'S funny," he argued with himself again. "Can't get it out of my mind. Never saw so much stuff thrown up from below. Wonder what their game is. Never sensed this fear of Archie before."

CHAPTER II

DEATH SMOKE

THE NINES were tightening up expectantly. Ahead lay the strange man-made finger of the Mole that ran out of Zeebrugge harbor. A few U-boats lay in the basin and more guns flamed out from the concrete redoubts that bulged from the shore end.

"I still don't get it, but we're in the Independent and anything can happen," Clark growled again.

It did.

The Nines tried to fork their noses through the smoke so that the verticals would not be clouded with Archie blots. Back and forth, in and out they nosed trying to find an opening that would give them the clearance they wished.

The smoke bloomed out even thicker

from the bang-bang. Clark tried to figure it out and looked about to see whether a sip was setting a smoke cloud.

"No," he mused, watching the Nines and the large dark blots, "but Good God! Maybe I'm seeing things, but those smoke blots certainly look ominous. Jeess! They're almost perfect silhouettes of skulls. Much bigger at the top than at the bottom. And how they keep their formation is a mystery to me."

But Clark's inspection of the strange smoke formations was jerked to a sudden halt. The lead Nine was nowhere to be seen!

"What the . . .?" he gasped.

Then the two-seater on the left-hand side seemed to disappear. One minute its port wing-tip was slashing through a tumbling ball of black smoke. An instant later it was nothing but a crunched jumble of shapeless wreckage.

"Direct hit?" gasped Clark. "No! . . . Nothing exploded that I saw."

The ball of spruce, metal and fabric was rolling down the skyway like a massive chunk of waste. A figure went hurtling from it as if thrown out by centrifugal force. Clark closed his eyes and blanked out the horrible sight of a floundering man who kicked and clawed his way through space until he too disappeared into a black puff-ball.

Dual nosed down and started toward the remaining Nine and then suddenly jerked up. His move had been so fast that Fred DeWolf had shot past and for an instant was blanked by a smoke puff.

They never saw Freddie again. Only another tangle of wreckage, flashing struts and a motor that had ripped itself loose from the metal spider.

"Jeess!" gasped Clark, flying automatically and keeping his position while Dual wheeled and shot back toward the Allied line. "Four ships in as many seconds . . . all done with

smoke . . . smoke that looks like black skulls."

By this time the Camels were hurtling back as fast as their Bentleys would slap them through the sky. Dual climbed and darted clear of every wisp and came out into the open air near the canal that ran out of Bruges to Ostend.

Clark sensed that he was perspiring in every pore. The backs of his hands were dripping wet. The muscles under his lean thighs were trembling, but his steel-gray eyes flamed with a strange fire. He watched Bill Crane edge over and cover part of the area left by DeWolf and wondered again, just what had happened.

But there was no time for figuring out black skulls. There were more all around them now—painted on the gleaming silver fuselage of a Pfalz flight that had come up from Waddamme to head them off. The Camels closed in for action. They tugged at their hydraulic levers again to make certain they had not lost pressure.

Dual watched them carefully and slammed on after he had seen that they were in position.

The Pfalz pilots tried to draw them out by splitting, but Dual raised his hand above the cockpit and gave the old cavalry rally signal, whirling his fist in a small circle above his head. They edged in even tighter and roared through, holding to their course like fanatics. The Pfalz fighters tried to block them out but the Yanks had the edge in steel nerves and at the last second the N-strutted biplanes zoomed up and let them through.

CLARK went through with both guns flaming and slashed out the struts of a Pfalz so that its upper wing collapsed. He switched his nose slightly and directed his double stream into the tail of another and it went

dancing off like a gaffed salmon.

Dual kept on and nosed down slightly so that his needle touched the 140 mark. The Pfalz ships raced after them and bullets slashed through their wings and Dual ordered them to spread until they reached a closer sector of the line.

No use taking on too many too far over.

At Eerneghem Dual rallied his mob and turned swiftly. He was more in his own back yard now and the Pfalz came on to glory. Death and glory.

Dual nosed down slightly again and came up dead under the blunt noses of the Pfalz. Tempest shot the wheels away from one. Dunstan almost collided with a bird with a scarlet band around his belly, but he got in a burst that drove the Pfalz up into a crazy stalling zoom. Clark finished him by darting to one side, feinting a long shot at a man behind and then whipping over with a short burst that caught the floundering Hun full in the ward-room.

Two Pfalz ships dove in flames. Lloyd Tempest blew a red light and screwed off with an aileron dangling. The rest rallied round his tail and at odd instants, Clark and Dual edged out and drove the Pfalz off when they hungered for cold meat.

They got Tempest as far as Houtam and he finally decided to play safe with his battered spar and put her down behind a battery of heavies. He blew them a white light, indicating safety, and they roared on in a four-ship diamond back to Berques.

CHAPTER III

MAJOR ORADELL KNOWS

THERE was a tense air about the Berques field when Captain Dual led his three men in. It

was not so much the excitement of the return as the lack of it. Clark caught it the minute he stepped out of his Camel and started stiff-legged for the tarmac of "A" Flight's hangar where they usually congregated to talk it over before wandering across to the Operations Office to make out their reports.

Dual was chalk white and strutted like a man trying to disguise drunkenness. His back was too stiff, his arms swung too fixed, his eyes were too set and for the first time in his life he failed to watch the rest of his patrol come in. Clark noticed that too.

Major Hubert Oradell, a graduate of the line, a man who had won his rank in the air and who, to his regret, had been posted to top a fighting outfit was on the tarmac, that strange strip of bithulic that fronts every hangar and acts as a runway from the shed to the cab-rank, and which if it could talk could tell more strange stories than all the half-baked writers the war ever turned out. The Major knew what had happened, and in the few seconds that remained before Captain Dual came up and threw him a salute, his mind raced through the events of the past few days, just as minds will in the throes of nervous reaction.

It had all started, it seemed, with the coming of Lieutenant Keith Clark. Clark, the strange figure who would not wear decorations or talk of his past. Clark, who spoke only in monosyllables on the ground. Clark who had brought this wearying tension to the mess whenever he sat down. Major Oradell had tried to draw him out, but within the bounds of their rank, Clark had snubbed him entirely. He respected the Major's seniority but had never made one move to win his favor. As a matter of fact, Clark had turned down a captaincy and the chance to lead "B" flight after Spike Sloan had piled up

outside of Dixmude. Dixie Fletcher, with forty-four hours and two Huns had taken it—leaping at the chance. They had a hell of a fight to make Clark carry one streamer and act as sub-leader.

The Major recalled how he had looked up Clark's record. There was no hoopla about his being a G-2 man, working on a case. He had not changed his name from something that might have been mistaken for a German ancestry. His war record was splendid as his citations had shown. His health, from his most recent medical report, was remarkable for a man who so many hours in the air. His background eradicated any possible chance that he could have been an enemy spy.

But the Major was sane and had tried to forget it all and let his men live their own lives—but, somehow, he could not get away from the fact that a number of strange things had happened since Keith Clark had arrived.

With this panoramic flash of events slashing across the screen of his memory, Major Oradell suddenly realized that Captain Dual was standing before him presenting a war-time, front-area salute that is a cross between scratching an eyebrow and flicking a gnat off a nose. Major Oradell poked a stubby forefinger in the general direction of his shapeless overseas cap and murmured: "You lose them?"

"All three . . . God knows how, Major," gagged Dual, throwing his arms out helplessly.

"Black smoke . . . shaped like . . . something like skulls?" the Major almost whispered.

"Skulls? . . . Black smoke! . . . er, yes, Sir. Come to think of it. That's just what they looked like. My God, Sir. I still don't believe it."

"No . . . Well, you'll get another chance to look at them again tomorrow. They've got to have those pictures on

the Zeebrugge defenses. Where's the other two?"

"Freddie . . . that is, Lieutenant DeWolf went down with them. Ran into the smoke and blew up. What's in that smoke?"

"Where's Tempest?" snapped the Major, returning the salutes of Dunstan, Crane and Clark who came up and stood behind Dual.

"He's O. K." Dual explained, in a low voice. "Went down behind Houtthem . . . aileron shot away and flipping all over the wing. They'll have to send a truck up to get him out. He gave us a white."

"You see that smoke stuff, Clark?" the Major asked.

"Yes Sir," replied Clark quietly, fingering a broken strap of his helmet.

"What do you figure?"

"Nothing."

"JIM . . . out here all this time and can't figure that? . . . Now don't you men go inventing wild ideas about smoke impregnated with weird gas or some disintegrating substance. Those stories are for the boys down at the base. They got to have something to talk about. What do you think, Dunstan?"

"I only saw Freddie go, Sir. He must have smashed into something that fell off one of those Nines. His motor went off free, too."

"Now, there's an idea," beamed the Major. "What do you think of that Clark?"

"Crazy!" Clark replied turning away to watch his Camel being drawn in.

"Um . . . Enlightening, aren't you? Well, it's an idea, anyway. What do you think Crane?"

"All I know Sir," gagged Crane, "is that I saw the Nines one minute and then . . . well, then they weren't."

A few more officers from other flights came up and listened in. Their faces

in the lowering afternoon light seemed to be smudged in on a mouldy canvas with weak charcoal. Their eyes gleamed and flashed like those of humans suffering from the White Plague. Low whispers ran through the half circle of khaki and leather.

"Black skulls of smoke," Dual repeated aloud as though he had suddenly remembered it. The white faces behind seemed to be suddenly swabbed with a fluid that stretched the skin tighter over their cheekbones and drew the lips back.

"Um," repeated Major Oradell. "You men had better come over to my office and get a stiffener. Thank God we're on a British field. A little leeway in the right direction, won't do any harm. Might do some good. This way, you fellows."

Dual and the men of "A" clumped on after the C. O. A few others who were members of 127 took the invitation also. None of them noticed Clark slip away into the hanger and speak a few quiet words to the Flight-Sergeant. When Clark finally joined them they were sitting about the Operations Office on petrol tins, ammo boxes, biscuit cartons and a few odd planks. The Major, with a stiff glass of Three Star in his hand was jabbing at a fingermarked map above the contrivance of engine crates and boards that served as a desk. The others were pulling at glasses of brandy and peering over the edges of the glasses to watch the instructive finger of the Major.

". . . and so we've got to have these photographs," the Major was saying as Clark thumped in in a pair of old rubber-soled British flying boots, "to find out where these guns used on the Mole defenses actually are."

The Major looked up at Clark and then as if uncertain that there was not two of him, stared about the group in front of him again. Finally he pointed

to the bottle and nodded for the late comer to help himself.

"Not me," snapped Clark, sitting down without a smile.

"Oh? . . . Well, suit yourself Clark," the Major replied with a pained look. "I was saying that within a few nights the British are to attempt a Naval landing at Zeebrugge."

"Crazy!" snapped Clark without looking up.

"Eh? . . . Yes, sounds wild, but they're going to try it. Run in a few coastals and a couple of old Yarmouth ferries with some Marines and block off the main basin by sinking an old obsolete battleship across the main channel. Take months to clear it and get the subs out. Good idea, but seems almost impossible to do . . . However, that's their worry. Our's is to get pictures so that they can find the strong points and get the guns out so that the landing party can do its job as safe as possible."

"That right?" asked Clark frowning.

"CERTAINLY it's right. Confidential, of course. No one knows the date, but I believe it will take place this week."

"No pictures yet," warned Clark.

"No . . . we have no pictures as yet . . . that is any of recent date."

"Any other plans?"

"If you can think of any, go to it. We've got to get those pictures."

"Go to it?" prodded Clark.

"Sure. Free-lance, all of you, if you think you can get away with anything. But no crazy stuff. Those days are over."

"O. K. Free lance," smiled Clark.

"Regular patrols, though," warned the Major. "Free lance in your own time."

"What's your idea, Clark?" demanded Captain Dual.

"My business," replied Clark, star-

ing off into space.

"You're not going to cut my ships about fitting in "L" cameras," Dual growled. "That's two-seater stuff. You'd never get away with it."

Clark smiled again and stared out of the window: "Better idea than that," he replied enigmatically.

Dual stared at the Major for backing, but he got none. The Major plodded on with further explanations of the plan to block off the basin at Zeebrugge. The rest emptied their glasses and listened attentively. Clark only looked out of the window and smiled to himself. He was deep in the room near the far corner and the words and explanations of the C. O. barely reached him.

He was watching his mechanic and rigger pull his Camel back on the cab-rank.

"Now about this black smoke business," the Major was saying. "We have heard about this before. A Belgian Spad pilot came back with such a story only the other day and the G.H.Q. tribe seem to have an idea . . . at least, I formulated an idea for them, while talking it over the other day."

Clark was listening intently and yet watching a motorcycle and sidecar clatter up from the road and enter the aerodrome. The Major halted a minute and listened.

"Tempest," Clark explained.

"Good! We'll wait for him," the Major said fumbling for a cigarette from a package on his desk. "As I was saying, I have an idea what this menace might be. Had a talk with a young Corporal who used to be in our photography unit."

Captain Dual rose suddenly and flicked out his brass lighter. The door opened suddenly and Lloyd Tempest came charging into the room. His face was drawn and pale. It seemed to be covered with a wierd mask of terror. In his hand he held a gun. Dual never saw

what happened for he was holding his brass lighter under the Major's cigarette and spinning the wheel with his thumb.

The rest happened so fast no one could quite make it out.

Tempest yelled: "You dirty rat! You sent us into that. Let Freddie go to hell!"

The gun in his hand barked and Tempest went down when Clark hurled himself over his shoulders. Dual turned sharply and stared down at the over-powered young pilot. There was a low sickening thud and Major Oradell went backward and fell into a queer heap near the regimental safe. A pool of blood began to form under his neck.

"Jees! He killed the Major!" someone gasped.

"Why, the dirty low-down skunk!" roared Dual rushing forward and planting his heavy boot-toe with a crash into Tempest's unguarded jaw.

"Cut that!" snarled Clark. "Got to keep him to find out what it's all about."

"But he shot the Major!" screamed Dual. "He'll go to the wall for that!"

"O. K." Clark replied, "but let's find out what's eating him."

CHAPTER IV

TWO SILENT MEN

FOR the next ten minutes the room was in an uproar. A hurried examination disclosed that while Major Oradell had received a wicked wound at the side of his head, he was not dead, but unconscious. Strange to relate, young Tempest was out also with a broken jaw, received from Dual who had tried to stop him from using his gun again.

Clark helped get the Major over to the M. O. shed. Another group brought in the limp and groaning Tempest. A

hurried examination indicated that neither could be moved for days and a hurry call was made to Dunkirk for skilled surgeons to come and make a more complete examination and possibly perform two emergency operations.

"All right men," barked Dual. "I'll take over for now, as I'm supposed to be senior Captain. I don't like the job, but someone has to do it. The men of my flight will make out their patrol reports and I want you all to report at the Operations Office this evening to make out another on this flare-up of Tempest's."

Dual turned and looked for Clark, but the silent strong man was tightening his chin strap with a large shiny safety-pin. His Camel was ticking over smoothly on the cab-rank. Dual allowed his brow to corrugate and he strode after his sub-leader.

"What's the idea, Clark?" he asked quietly.

"Free lance show."

"Sorry, but I can't allow it . . . after this affair in there. There will be an official inquiry, you know and we'll have to have some sort of a report ready for the tribunal. I was hoping you would help me out on this."

"I will. I'm going to find out why Tempest came back and went gunning for you."

"For me? Why you're crazy. He was shooting at the Major."

"Maybe. But you were on that side of the Major giving him a light. He shot from the hip and only missed your ear by inches."

"Good Lord! I never realized that. But look here, Clark. Why not wait until we can get Tempest talking again? We can find out what was in his mind then." said Dual quietly. "No use taking too many chances."

"Might be too late then," replied Clark, buckling the safety-catch of his

web belt. He nodded to the mechanic who pulled the chocks.

"I'm sorry, Clark," persisted Dual, "but I can't allow you to go until this is cleared up."

"Get the hell out of here!" roared the sub-leader, giving the Bentley the gun and swinging his tail around so that it knocked the Captain off his feet. Then before Dual could make another move, Clark raced away into the twilight and roared over the apple trees and charged on toward the line.

Clark was smiling to himself again as he climbed for height over the field. He stared down hoping that his Flight Commander would take off after him but he saw him walking back toward his Nissen hut.

"No, you won't come up after me, will you Dual. I'm afraid you are worried that Tempest *will* come out of it and spill something. I wish I knew what he was trying to say."

The Camel tore on at 12,000 and retraced the route they had taken two hours or so before.

"Come to think of it, all that happened at a crucial moment," Clark reflected as he scanned the skies for enemy opposition. "The Major was just going to tell us what his idea was about that thing up there. Tempest came in bubbling over with something, that had him in an awful stew. What made the Major fall? He had no marks or bullet wounds? The only damage he incurred was when he fell back on that metal safe. But what the devil made him fall?"

He sat and pondered on the mess for twenty minutes or so and tried to reconstruct the whole layout of the room. There was no sane answer, but he could not forget the picture of Dual kicking poor Tempest in the face with such fury. Still, perhaps it was a normal reaction.

CLARK gave the Camel all she had and hurried across Meethkirke and shot toward the grayish waters of the Bruges-Zeebrugge canal. He climbed higher and dodged three salvos of Archie and swept wide of their zone. He turned again and tried to get through the barrage and make for the noted submarine depot, but the shelling was deadly and seemed to literally cut him off. He was taking no chances on those black skulls of smoke. As a matter of fact, he noted that none of these seemed to bear any resemblance to the ominous blobs that had appeared between Blankenbergh and Zeebrugge, but there was no use in taking a chance.

"Wish I had waited until it got darker," he mused. "Can't get through this . . . Hello! Here's my chance."

He turned and spotted a formation of Gotha bombers heading west out of Oedelem. He swept around and tore after them. There were four, in a wide diamond formation.

Like a mad devil he raced into their wake and followed them. He set himself carefully and placed the Camel dead behind the trailing two-engined barge and let the gunner take wild shots at him. He knew that if he stayed in a certain position he would be in the blind area where neither the top rear gun nor the tunnel gun firing below the tail could get at him.

It was a game of chance, but it was worth it. The Gothas plugged on and Clark eased back to stay in his position. Once or twice the rear gunner of the trailing monster flamed out with his Parabellum and tried to get at the elusive Camel, but his great tail blocked his fire off and Clark smiled up at the trail of tracers that zipped over his head. Meanwhile the Ranting Ruperts below were quiet for they were taking no chances either; on trying for a lone Camel when four of their own big bombers were in the same fire zone.

In that way, Clark got through and nosed down like a bullet for the concrete defenses of Zeebrugge. It was almost dark now and he could sense the crackling of machine guns and the early plap-plap-plap of the searchlight arcs which were being broken out to blind him.

The black Camel shot through the sudden maze of searchlight beams and tracer tracery while Clark dropped even lower and studied the sunken redoubts of the 11-inch Tirpitz batteries.

"Ah," he growled. "They know all about those. There's the seaplane base and a few Brandenbergs on the apron. There's the fuel tanks and the light gauge railroad running over the viaduct to the Mole. There's nothing here for me. I want those other batteries."

But now that he was here, Clark suddenly realized the futility of his effort. He had come prepared for nothing. He counted the batteries along the concrete embankment and saw that the metal railings were stranded with barbed wire.

Then, something shot through his mind. It was a wild kaleidoscopic film featuring the wild-eyed Tempest, the unhappy Major. Captain Dual and his sudden rise to power and the tumbling tangled mass of Freddie De Wolf's Camel. The screen flashed on and he saw hundreds of men in khaki and blue being stopped with fire and steel as they clambered up the weedy sodden walls of the Mole. He saw them drop back screaming. He saw fire blazing and cutting them off. He saw youthful Navy midshipmen guiding high speed coastal motor boats in and out of the carnage trying with their life's blood to save those who had been tricked.

That was enough.

"Worth a chance," he agreed. "I'm no newspaper hero, but I might be able to get away with it. If I miss, I've at least tried and there's something in trying."

He said this to himself and then swore under his breath for getting sentimental.

"Shut up. You talk too much," he growled.

CHAPTER V

DEATH ON THE DUNES

THE Camel was whipped over and headed south through a hurricane of lead and steel and then turned hurriedly toward the coast. Clark watched the ground below carefully and sensed that he had passed over Blankenberg.

"Now for it," he muttered coldly as he eased his throttle back and let the Bentley ooze into a low moan. "Neck or nothing to get down in those dunes. The darkness might help, anyway. What you don't see, you don't worry about. Here goes."

The Camel dropped into an easy glide and Clark cut the switch to kill the exhaust flame. He waited for the greyish-yellow mass below to come up to him and held her steady. For what seemed hours he glided in almost silence with nothing but the moan of wires and prop-swish to indicate he was moving. Then gradually the undulating dunes of the Belgian coast swept up and eased toward him. Clark held on as long as he dare and then began to fish-tail gently. There was a sickening feeling at the pit of his stomach as he waited for the first dab of his wheels.

At last it came and the little snub-nosed invader touched the even yellow sand and jerked onward. Clark threw his arm up to protect his face but the Camel scraped her tail-skid through the soft sand and dragged on. The ship reached the edge of the dune, dropped its nose gently and rolled on down into a deep depression. For an instant, Clark

sucked in his breath, fearing she would go over on her back for the ship was still slipping down the sliding wall. Finally she came to a halt with her tail up slightly and Clark breathed a sigh of relief. He clambered out gingerly, wiped the perspiration from his face and went to the tail. He carefully raised it and swung the end around so that the nose was facing the broad flat packed sand of the shore.

"Not so bad," he agreed. "Not so bad. I can get away, anyhow, if I ever get back."

He pulled out a large-scale ordnance-survey map and studied it for a minute under the small light of his dash. Then folding it up, he stuck it in the pocket of the cockpit bag and took out an automatic. He rammed that in his pocket and with no further investigation as to the condition of his ship, he strode off in the strange velvety darkness and headed over the dunes toward the turfed fields beyond.

He moved carefully once he was clear of the sheltering sand dunes and then darted across a narrow road. He slipped through a hedge and his feet stumbled over the newly turned furrows of a plowed field.

"Um . . . Must be near something in the way of a farm," he muttered. "If I follow these furrows I should reach the other side of the field and probably find the farm road that runs from the house to the reaches of this place."

Twenty minutes later he was huddling in the cover of some farm equipment in a small yard. A light gleamed cheerfully from a window nearby. He decided to risk it and make a dash for the house. He could see the bobbing head of a young girl in pig-tails and the hoary figure of a massive stoop-shouldered old man.

"Worth the risk," he agreed. "I'm going in."

He walked quietly to the side door

and knocked gently. Inside a dog let out a low growl and then suddenly quieted down. Clark knocked again and waited with his hand on his automatic.

The door opened releasing a glare of light in which was silhouetted the girl he had seen in the house.

For a minute she blinked and drew back.

"It's quite all right," assured Clark. "Nothing to be afraid of."

He spoke in a quiet French-Flemish dialect he had picked up during his many months on the front. The girl nodded quickly and let him in and closed the door after him. The man in the kitchen was soothing a great dog and peering over his iron rimmed spectacles at the newcomer. The dog came up and greeted Clark in a friendly wag-tail manner and licked the back of his hand.

THE girl came up again and in good English exclaimed: "Well, at least Rolf accepts you. He would never let a German soldier in here."

"There's something in the instinct of a dog then," smiled Clark. "I am Lieutenant Clark of the American Air Service."

"American? . . . How unusual!" the girl replied anxiously. "We have never seen any of your soldiers. Why, you look like the English!"

"A great deal," agreed Clark. "But I must not detain you. This is your father?"

"My father? . . . Non . . . This is Brut Hohnleede . . . You know of him, of course." She was contemplating the fur chin-piece of his helmet.

"Hohnleede? . . . Oh yes. I hardly expected to see him here."

Clark sensed that he was treading on queer ground, but he decided to see it through. He let them take up the conversation from there.

"No . . . he usually works from Os-

tend, but the work has centered around here now . . . We got one, of course. It fell here this afternoon."

"Splendid! May I see it?" Clark asked, not knowing what he was inquiring about.

"Certainly. You are taking it back of course."

The old man broke into the conversation in broad Flemish and the girl explained that he would show it to him.

"Come this way," the girl invited. "We want to get away from here as soon as possible. They will be inquiring again by 10 o'clock. You will have to move fast."

They led him through the kitchen and into a smaller room and then down a narrow flight of stairs to a cellar that smelled of good earth and vegetables. The man carried a small smoking lamp that threatened to lose its glass chimney with every step. Finally the old man placed the lamp on a low bench and reached for a large burlap bag. This he threw back and disclosed a strange silvery something that was about fourteen inches long and made of a metal that looked suspiciously like platinum. At one end was fitted a black cap that looked like the fuse case of an aerial bomb. At the other was a round ring to which was fastened the slim silken strands of a small parachute which might have been about seven feet in diameter.

The old man muttered and nodded to the girl.

"He said that here is the device that is killing all your men who are flying over Zeebrugge. The guns are located in the old net-drying sheds at Blankenberg near the fishing-boat dock."

"The smoke skull idea?" asked Clark trying to quell his sudden interest.

"Yes. You see they have been working on this for sometime. The metal case itself is the new light-weight steel known as alumite. It is filled with the

new "Brisanz" explosive, a most powerful chemical."

Clark frowned as though not quite clear about it.

The man jabbered again hurriedly and the girl took up the explanation.

"You see, these shells are fired into the air and cover the area your raiding ships must pass through. Once in the air the parachutes open and a device in the bottom releases a large cloud of smoke which billows out and blots out all view of the shell and the parachute."

"Oh, no wonder it looks like a skull," beamed Clark. "The smoke comes out of this port at the bottom, billows up inside the parachute and eventually bulges out from the under sides of the parachute and forms the wide upper shape. What then?"

"THESE . . . well, they are actually aerial mines. The shell is so light that the parachute falls very slowly. Now, when one of your ships passes through this smoke cloud as they often do for cover, they hit the shell which they can't see and it explodes."

"But . . . there's something queer here," warned Clark. "I saw one of our men only near to this smoke cloud and he was blown up."

"Yes, they took care of that too. The device also includes a special delicate detonator which is actually fired by leaking electrical impulses from your own ships. Brut Hohnleede has explained that practically all ignition systems have a certain amount of leakage and this energy if brought within twenty feet of this dangling mine, is sufficient to discharge the delicate detonator."

"I get it," nodded Clark. "Brilliant work Meinheer Hohnleede. Now how did you get this?"

"It fell in the east pasture this afternoon."

"But . . . but it didn't explode?"

"Ah no. You see it descends so slowly that it does not hit hard enough to detonate the regular detonator. And they are so expensive that the Germans have issued an order that every one found must be returned to the nearest patrol post. They will be here for it to-night. They check on every one."

"Then I had better be off. I have a ship hidden out there on the dunes."

"A ship?" the girl cried in horror. "But that is impossible! It would explode the moment you started your motor!"

"Good Lord, yes," gasped Clark. "I never thought of that. Do you know how to cut out that electric-impulse detonator, Meimheer Hohnleede?"

The girl repeated the question and the old man shook his head.

"Holy blithering mackerel," bawled the Yank. "I tumble on the whole thing, but can't get it out to prove it."

CHAPTER VI

SHIELDED DEATH

"BUT I've got to get it out," Clark raved, throwing out his hands.

"They won't believe us unless they see it. Besides, we might be able to get some of our artillery experts to take it apart and see what can be done to spike them . . . Look here," he suddenly cried, staring about the dark cellar. "We could shield it in some way from the leaks of my ignition set."

"But how?" the girl asked with a pained expression. "You would require what . . . sheets of lead, rubber, or some such non-conductor?"

"Porcelain!" charged Clark beaming. "Look here, do you have one of those pottery umbrella stands?"

The girl laughed: "Not pottery. We have a sewer . . . what you call a

length of sewer pipe we use for such a purpose. It is upstairs in the front passage. Would that do?"

"Show it to me. Bring that thing up here?"

Together they hurried upstairs again and the girl showed him an old length of clay pipe which had been painted red and crudely decorated for the purpose of holding wet umbrellas. It stood in a shallow metal dish.

Clark raised it and chipped some of the paint away and satisfied himself that it was of an insulating material. Then he wrapped the strange metal device in the silken parachute and added a few old newspapers to pack it in tight.

"But the ends," the girl pondered.

"Uh, the ends. Got to shield the whole thing."

"Just a minute. I have something."

Clark stood contemplating the strange device while the girl went upstairs. The old man watched him with interest and nodded at the arrangement.

"You brave man," the old man finally spluttered in his few words of English.

"Oh, no. Nothing can happen if we shield it O. K."

But the old man wagged his head. He could not understand that. Then the girl returned hurriedly with a bright red rubber raincoat. Before Clark realized what her intentions were she had taken a hefty pair of shears and had cut it clean up the back and split it clean in two.

"Now," she said with authority. "Rubber is an insulation material. We'll tie these pieces over each end. We have some heavy cord here."

"But your new raincoat!" cried Clark in dismay. "It was brand new!"

"Splendid! You see, you must have stolen it from us. I would never consent to let you have my new raincoat. That will clear us—in case anything happens. But I hope nothing does."

"I see. Then they are watching you carefully, eh? Well, I won't lengthen your risk further. I'll be going."

The old man was carefully tying the two sections of rubber raincoat over the ends of the pipe to complete the shielding of the delicate detonation device. Then he took a sheet of paper from his pocket and handed it to Clark.

"He wants you to sign it," the girl explained. "It is for our report to Antwerp. From there it will be secreted through the wire into Holland where it will get official recognition."

Clark saw that the sheet of paper carried a crude drawing of the aerial mine and wording to explain the mechanism. He signed the paper and added that he was taking the captured device back to American Headquarters or would if necessary turn it over to the British at his own field.

"And now, I must thank you for all the help you have given me," Clark said. "Anything I can do for you before I go?"

The girl smiled at him and he noticed her eyes twinkle gayly. He wondered what was back in her mind. She threw a warm glance across at the old man and he encouraged her with a cheery and expectant nod.

"Yes," she finally said, sticking her finger-tips into the small pockets of her neat apron and assuming a saucy swagger. "There is something you can do for me. It may sound strange, but you can give me something."

"Well," fenced Clark, "you see we fly light and I haven't much with me in the way of money."

"Money?" laughed the girl. "What good would *your* money be here?"

"Oh . . . I had forgotten. Well, I guess that's as far as we can go, eh?"

"No . . . my American friend. I ask you for one thing. Let me feel in your pockets. If it's there, it's mine, eh?"

FOR a minute Clark became suspicious, and time was flying. She might take his automatic and he'd want that perhaps later. There might be the matter of his identity card and Service Book. All these were highly important.

"Oh, don't look so glum," beamed the girl. "This is all I want . . . You have more back there and we can never get them."

And before Clark could realize what really had happened, the girl had deftly removed his package of American cigarettes and was placing one between her red lips. Another she handed to the old man whose fingers fairly danced in anticipation.

"Ha ha," the girl clacked on in sincere joy. "You were frightened, eh? You did not know what I wanted. Ah, but these are worth all the risk. You may go now and leave us to our happiness. There's nothing in the whole world like an American cigarette."

"My God!" gasped Clark. "If that's all that's worrying you. I'll see that you get a whole carton next time I come over."

"No . . . no . . . You must not do that. It would be too risky," the girl hurried to explain.

"Don't worry. I won't try to drop it in your backyard. Let's say well down in your east pasture. You could go out there and pick it up any time. I'll see that they are well packed."

"You are very kind, but it is too risky," she warned.

"Maybe, but I'll do it in such a way, no one will ever know what they are. I'll take them out of their original packets and wrap them in something else. Don't worry, there'll be no risk."

The old man sauntered back to his seat by the fire puffing contentedly and fingering the American cigarette as though it had been rolled by the fingers of a princess. Clark picked up the hefty pipe and threw it over his shoulders

and slipped through the back door while the girl held the door open for him.

"Thanks," he whispered. "Some-day, I'll come back and bring you the finest coat you can buy in Paris."

"Or New York . . ." taunted the girl with a pleasant slap across Clark's shoulders. "Now go through the opening between the barn and that haystack. Keep to the willow hedge and you will come out near where I think you left your machine. Best of luck!"

"Thanks," husked Clark as he hurried across the cobbled barnyard and set out for the dunes again.

It took him nearly half an hour to reach the ship with the ungainly load he had assumed. All the way there he fumed and worried as to the probability of his getting it back to Berques safely. He waited under the shadow of his wing and then decided to slit the fabric in the rear of his fuselage and fasten it to the lower cross-section clear of the rudder and elevator controls.

"It will be as far away from the motor then as I can get it," he figured, as he slashed his knife through the black-painted fabric, and bound it in securely with his leather jacket belt and a length of heavy cord he had picked up back at the Belgian farmhouse.

Then with a heavy lump throbbing against his throat he prepared to start the motor. He wondered now just how well that infernal machine *was* insulated. He saw that his wheels were well into the sand and with the switch off and gas on he sucked in vapor to the none-too-cold cylinders by swinging the prop over several times by hand. Then he went around and turned on the switch and went back to the prop. With a smooth even swing he wound it over compression and she caught at once and set up a jerky series of choked explo-

sions. He slipped under the wing, reached inside and eased the throttle again until he had the Bentley turning over easily. Then he climbed in, fastened his belt and opened her up and suddenly remembered the aerial mine behind him.

A cold shiver ran up his spine and he seemed to be sitting on a cake of ice. But he realized, as he reasoned it out, that evidently his crude shielding had done the trick. He breathed easier and yet somehow found it difficult to force the throttle forward and get her moving over the loose sand. Gradually, however, she began to struggle against the loose surface and with short jerks he got clear and ran out on to the hard packed sands that a few hours had been swept by the rollers.

So far, so good!

THEN suddenly figures seemed to appear out of nowhere. Arms waved and the spit of Mausers and Lugers caught his ear. He gave the Bentley the gun and roared down the beach, hoiked her up and swept out toward the sea in a wild climbing turn. He stood her on her tail and climbed like fury seeking the safety of height and then ran into more trouble.

As he turned to follow the coastline down as far as Dunkirk he saw the flickering exhaust lights of some two-engined ships.

The Gothas!

"Um . . . Returning from another hospital raid down at Calais," Clark mumbled. "Lousy nurse-killers. If I didn't have this load of bing-bang in the back, I'd have a smack at those thugs myself."

But he had no choice in the matter. Before he realized what had happened, a black Brandenburg seaplane had charged down on him from somewhere above and had driven him full into the gun-fire of a Gotha's front turret.

The Camel danced under the flailing. Slugs smashed through his struts leaving tell-tale splinters of white spruce. The motor wailed and coughed.

Clark was frantic but he flew superbly through the screaming fire. He pulled a Quentin Roosevelt and slammed inside the group of Gothas and led them a merry dance, darting up and down to put the gunners off and drawing their fire which threatened not only the Camel but every ship in the formation.

Above the Brandenburg with its two threatening talon-like pontoons slammed down on him and tried to pour double streams of fire into him, but Clark fumbling for his hydraulic pump lever to bring up his oil-line pressure so that he could fire his guns without fear of blasting his prop off, swayed back and forth over the wings of the massive Gothas. This silenced the Brandenburg guns until he could adjust his firing gear.

Then, before any of the Germans could make out just what was going on in this mad fandango, Clark dipped sharply and buried two fangs of flaming tracer deep into the bulbous back of the lead Gotha.

That's were the tanks are.

In an instant pandemonium reigned and the great bomber staggered under the surprise blow. Clark poured in another and swept the forward turrets killing both pilot and bomber officer and battering the front gunner into his pit floor.

The Gotha let out a jungle roar and belched flame and smoke. The Brandenburg slammed down at the audacious Yank and peppered him again, but the seaplane's dive had been too prolonged. The pilot had misjudged his distance. The pronged floats of the black seaplane came up with a jerk and caught the trailing edge of a Gotha

wing and forked it off with all the delicacy of a rooting elephant.

There was a crash and an indescribable flurry of struts, wings and flame. Clark slipped clear, poured another burst into a Gotha and edged away through a torrent of lead and tracer and watched the tangled mass go down wailing and moaning to its death.

Then, satisfied that he had escaped that carnage, he headed inland and shot for Berques.

CHAPTER VII

CAPTAIN DUAL DOUBTS

THE black Camel came in creaking and moaning through slashed and distorted flying wires. Someone caught the Very light flicked up by Clark and put out landing flares—oil drums filled with gasoline and waste, set in the conventional "L" design. Clark side-slipped her in and dabbed her down gently and sat still a minute to get his wind before running up to the cab-rank.

There were a few men under the glow of the portable arc when he clambered out—men, strangely in military order. Mechanics in posh leave uniforms with side-arms under the command of a Sergeant who seemed uneasy and stiff.

Captain Dual came out of the half circle of khaki and chalk faces and barked: "That you, Clark?"

"Me . . . somehow," replied Clark reverting back to his short perky style of speech that came over him once he was in company of his own flying mates.

"You're under arrest. My orders. You will leave your ship at once and proceed under guard to the Operations office."

"Arrest?" snapped Clark.

"Arrest . . . Refusal to obey orders of a superior. Also charged for the time

being with communicating with the enemy. Where have you been?"

"Blankenburgh," replied Clark grinning.

"All this time?"

"Sure. Visiting . . . I found out what killed Freddie DeWolf."

"You're crazy . . . and you're under arrest. Guard! Three paces forward!"

"Stop!" rasped Clark. "You don't know military law, Dual. You cannot put me under guard of enlisted men until I have been found guilty. You can put me under open arrest in custody of another officer, but not a Non-Commissioned officer. This is a British field and you're under British 'King's Rules and Regulations'. Better dismiss your guard. I won't run away."

Dual gulped and realized that Clark was right. He turned and dismissed the guard. Then he turned to Clark again: "All right. But you're under open arrest in my custody. You will go to your cubicle."

"I demand to see the Major. Is he conscious yet?"

"He is, but you can't see him."

"This is important, Dual. No time for gagging. And what's more; no one is to touch that ship, or anything in it until I give the word. It's too dangerous."

"What do you mean?"

"Just this. I have something in there that will clear up all this skull-shaped smoke menace thing. I actually have one . . . one of the devices that does that neat little job . . . and it's nothing to fool with."

For a minute, Dual seemed to tremble. Then he caught the long slit in the fuselage fabric. His flashing eyes came back to Clark and he studied him for several seconds.

"You actually been to Blankenburgh?" he snapped.

"Sure. Landed on the dunes and did

a little investigating. A lot other things happened too."

"So you have been communicating with the enemy, eh?" Dual sneered. "We had you right from the start then. And you tried to shove Tempest's action on me. It was you he was looking for. It was you who advised the Nine pilots to use the smoke of the Archies for cover when the going got hot. Do you realize that Tempest's brother was the pilot of that lead Nine? That's how we got the story."

"Is that what Tempest said? Is he conscious too?" Clark asked firmly.

"He's not conscious, but that's what he said in his delirium an hour ago."

"O.K. I'm going in there. I'm seeing the Major and Tempest if possible, at once. You needn't worry. I'm not running away. We'll get to the bottom of this."

"Fine. But report back to your cubicle as soon as you get through. I'll see that your ship is taken care of," replied Dual in a more friendly tone.

CLARK loosened his helmet chin strap and strode through the half-circle of puzzled pilots. He crunched up the cinder path to the M.O. shed which had been turned into an emergency hospital. Two nurses were in attendance and several Army doctors were there with their white surgeon's aprons drawn over their khaki shirts. Their polished field boots seemed strange under those white aprons.

A grey-haired man raised his eyebrows as Clark thumped in.

"May I see the Major, Sir?" Clark asked, removing his oil-streaked helmet.

"Is it anything important?"

"Very important, Sir. I have just come out of . . . well, out of Germany with information that is important to every squadron on the front."

"Um . . . Germany, eh?"

"Well, that is, inside the German

lines. I've got to see him, Sir."

"Very well. I think you may. He's resting nicely now."

A nurse took the nod from the surgeon and led Clark into the quiet strange-smelling room. The Major lay in a strange white bed near a window. A small lamp glowed cheerfully on a stand near the bed.

"Hello, Clark," Oradell greeted in a low voice.

"How are you, Sir?"

"Feel queer, but I guess I'm all right. What the devil happened anyway?"

"Didn't they tell you? Tempest shot at you," said Clark staring at the heavy bandage that was bound low on the Major's head.

"Shot at me? What for? I don't remember that. I thought I fell over on the iron safe."

"You know, that's just what I thought. I could swear you started to fall before Tempest shot. I was diving for his gun arm, and wasn't quite sure."

The Major wagged his head and stared into space, as if trying to figure it out. Then there was a knock at the door and a young officer in medical uniform came in. He wore a strange expression.

"You had a close shave, Sir," he explained as the Major stared up at him. "We have analyzed the mucus from your nostrils and discover traces of a strange gas. Suspiciously like the noted Blue Cross gas the Germans are testing out behind the line. It is diphenylchlorasine, a few whiffs of which are enough to kill a man in twelve seconds."

"Holy Mackerel!" gasped Oradell, jerking up to an elbow. "I get it now. The last thing I remember, Dual was offering me a light from his brass lighter. That's it, I noticed something strange when he was tripping the wheel to ignite it. The thing never did ignite, did it?"

"No . . ." said Clark quietly. "That's

it Major. There's something queer going on. We'll have to watch him. He had that stuff in something that looked like a cigarette lighter. And he just wanted to arrest me for communicating with the enemy. Whew!"

He turned sharply to the young medico: "How's Tempest?"

The young doctor wagged his head slowly: "No. I'm afraid he will be out for days yet. He keep on yelling about his brother and some black smoke clouds."

"Does Dual mention me . . . Clark?"

"Wanted to arrest you . . . for communicating with the enemy?" broke in the Major. "Why he's mad!"

"Lieutenant Tempest *does* mention Lieutenant Clark," came back the young M.O. "He has mentioned him several times . . . rather frantically, I'd say."

The Major stared at Clark for several seconds. "What's it all about anyway, Clark?" he snapped.

Then in quiet words and with short jerky sentences, Clark told of his flight, fights and the discovery of the aerial-mine secret. He told how he had had to shield it to fly away with it safely. The Major listened intently and then frowned.

"Agreeing that you have it out there, Clark," he observed quietly, "don't you think there is something queer about the whole story?"

"What do you mean, Sir? It's still out in my Camel."

"Probably it is, but how do you account for the fact that this man and girl, who no doubt are Allied spies in the enemy lines, should accept *you* at face value and turn something of such grave importance over to you and allow you to carry it away? Why, apparently, they never even knew you had a ship. These people do not work that way. I'm afraid . . ."

FOR a minute Clark was flabbergasted. He knew that the Major's assumptions were reasonable.

"After all, this story that you flew over there on some wild mission of your own and landed on the dunes south of Blankenburgh and then walked right into the house where one of these things had been hidden, takes a little swallowing. Even though you do have it out there."

"But Major! We're wasting good time. That thing ought to be in someone's hands at headquarters. The whole of the Allied air services ought to know about it. If they're going to try to make a landing at Zeebrugge, they ought to know something about this new weapon. We can go into my angle later on," argued Clark, who was beginning to believe that the Major had been hit a little too hard at that.

"Um," mumbled the Major, squirming about in his bed. "Well, what can we do about it? You'll have to leave it in there and fly it down to St. Omer in the morning . . . or perhaps to London. I'll inform G.H.Q. at once and get their orders."

"Too late!" snapped Clark. "Listen!"

They stiffened and their eyes went to slits. Outside the roar of a Bentley opened up. Clark threw a glance at Oradell.

"I knew it! . . . I knew it! Ten bucks that's Dual escaping with my ship . . . and the aerial-mine is still in the fuselage."

Major Oradell dropped back on his pillow—stunned.

CHAPTER VIII

SIXTY-TO-ONE SHOT

CLARK went clattering out to the hangers, but by that time only the flaming pennions of a Camel

exhaust indicated where the run-away might have been. It was the only ship that had been on the cab-rank and he knew that by the time another could be brought out, started and warmed to a reasonable degree, Dual would be five miles away, and five miles at night might just as well be five hundred.

"What happened?" demanded Clark of the Flight-Sergeant.

"Captain Dual ordered me to put twenty gallons in the tank and pull the chocks, Sir," the F-S explained puzzled.

"Where's he going?"

"Didn't say. Just signed the log-book on his 'time-out' and—well, he didn't say anything."

Clark knew there was no argument there. Dual had used his new authority and was probably within his rights. He went back to the M.O. hut and reported to the Major who still lay back exhausted with his ordeal.

"He's gone," reported Clark. "Took the aerial-mine too. Now we're where we started. There's one chance. That man up there at Blankenburgh had a drawing of it and was going to send it through the wire to Allied agents in Holland. That might help."

"Too late," gagged the Major. "Look . . . read this."

He handed a message flimsey over to Clark: "Just came in," he explained. "They're going in to-night."

Clark read the message. It confirmed plans for air assistance prior to the Royal Navy thrust at Zeebrugge. They were to block the channel that night.

He looked at his watch. It was 8 o'clock.

"Give me a message form. I can tell them plenty about the aerial mines and add more about the Tirpitz guns I saw along the sea-wall. I was down pretty low. We can still get them a line on it before they start out of their hide-out in the Thames estuary."

He scribbled for ten minutes and gave

a comprehensive account of what he had seen and a grim explanation of the new aerial menace. The Major read it, signed it and sent it back to the Operations Office for transmission. But he knew they would not believe a word of it, and start anyway.

"Well, what now?" he breathed quietly, staring up at the ceiling.

"The monitor bombardment starts at 11:30 and the smoke-screen will be set down at 11:40," quoted Clark. "The *Vindictive* is due at the Mole on the dot of midnight. It is then the ships will be supposed to be over Zeebrugge to bomb the searchlights and the garrison defenses."

"You see. There will be enough smoke around there to gum up everything. They will not be able to tell skull shapes from anything else. It will be a complete washout for the airmen. Dual certainly got out of something. He was to lead our Camel formation."

Clark's jaw dropped. He sensed what was coming.

"You'd better let Dixie Fletcher lead them. He's a good man," Clark stuck in.

"Um, I was thinking of giving you the job. You've been up there often enough and know the ropes. You ought to be the Flight Commander of 'A' now, anyway."

"That's what I was thinking," opened Clark again. The Major smiled broadly. He felt that at last he had gotten under Clark's skin. But his smile was due for a freezing.

"No, Major," Clark went on. "I mean I know all about that area up there and I figure I could get in there and upset that gag they are trying to pull."

"Are you trying to duck out too, Clark?" the Major spat. "Remember, you do not have that aerial-mine now. No one has seen it even. How do we know you even brought one back? You

have a concise idea about it, I'll admit, but I'm frank to say that I can't even trust you now. I let out the information you brought in, but they'll have to take it for what it's worth. You see, I can't get over that business of that man and girl giving you that device without even knowing who you were."

"But I told them my name and they saw my uniform," Clark argued. "I can see your point now, but I can't explain why they did it. They must have had a reason."

"O.K. We'll let that go for now. But what is your idea about upsetting their gag, as you put it?"

"LOOK here, Major," Clark confided bending over the bed. The girl told me the guns they use for this thing are hidden in the net-drying sheds at Blankenburgh. I know where they are near the fishing-boat dock. Now if I went up there, say disguised as a fisherman, I might be able to get in there and fix them up swell."

The Major frowned and tried to fathom Clark's idea. The young American bent over closer and whispered for several minutes, and then added, "You see, in that way, they will never know that something is wrong. They'll go on firing like mad and never realize that their traps are sprung before they start. Don't you get the result?"

"Look here, Clark," Major Oradell snapped. "I used to think you were crazy. Now I know you are. But look here, how do I look? Do I look like a guy who could not walk out to a ship . . . and perhaps pilot one. You're going to need some help on a fool thing like that, and I might just as well be up there with you as putting on this act here in bed."

"You look exactly like a man who ought to be in a hospital somewhere in the vicinity of Fifth Avenue, with the back of your bed draped with blond

nurses and the room stinking with flowers," growled Clark, "but I'd say, that in a pinch, you have a 60-to-1 chance of waddling out to a ship and dropping dead. Forget it. I can manage."

"I'll take that 60-to-1 shot," Oradell replied pulling back the bed-clothing. "Look here. We have a Bristol Fighter out in 'C' Flight's hangar. They loaned it to us to get some of our mob used to that type of engine on the spy-pick-up jobs. It's a swell ship for this job."

"I can't fly it," Clark snapped. "Haven't flown a two-seater in years . . . Those big Rolls-Royce . . . never handled one."

"That's where I come in," grinned Oradell, pulling on some heavy bed-socks and stuffing the legs of his pyjamas into them. "I'll fly her and you can go play with your Jerry cannons up there. Go get me a helmet several sizes too big to go over this bulged noggin of mine."

"Your language, Major!" beamed Clark in rare admiration. "Be back in ten minutes to bring you out in a wheelbarrow . . . or on a stretcher."

"You get that helmet and doll yourself up like a mackerel muncher, and leave the rest to me."

The take-off from the Berques' field was a mad tableau of unbridled insanity. The surgeons wanted to shoot the Major for even getting out of bed. Clark was arguing as to who should fly the ship after he saw his C. O. practically crawl out on his hands and knees to the cockpit. The Major said nothing—only wagged his head negatively at everything they suggested or ordered—and climbed in. Clark in an old pair of overalls, a pair of infantry boots that had been "lifted" from a German prisoner and an old shapeless felt campaign hat, looked like something that had been blown out of a Yarmouth trawler

in a bad storm. The mechanics fought among themselves to see who should have the honor of starting the Major's motor. No one knew just what it was all about, but they sensed that something hot was in the wind. The Armament Officer argued with the Armorer-Sergeant about fitting double-Lewis guns on the rear turret mounting. They both wanted the pleasure. Major Oradell hung on with both hands to the cockpit combining and wagged his head like a pole-axed steer, but he managed to get one leg up to the wing root and struggle upward with a hefty heave from someone below.

"The damn fool will kill himself," the surgeon from the base fumed. "Never live long enough to get to wherever he's going."

But somehow, as soon as the Major dropped into the wicker-seat of the Fighter, something came over him. He straightened his shoulders, tightened his chin-strap and went through the motions of starting the motor while Clark whirled the starting mag handle. The big Rolls-Royce opened with a bel-
low.

"Wait a minute," Clark yelled. "I forgot something."

In a few minutes he was back. He threw several somethings into the back pit and climbed up and yelled into Oradell's ear.

"You all right?"

"Certainly. What's the matter, getting the breeze up?"

"Jees! You're a glutton for it! Let's go!"

"Right! But remember to cut your way clear when I land, and get out on the off side."

The Bristol Fighter seemed to stiffen for the fray as Major Oradell gave her the gun for the final run-up test and then shut down and signalled the removal of the chocks. Then with a skitish run and a sudden flutter of her

tail, the blunt-faced two-seater roared away into the night like a winged charger that had just been given its head.

CHAPTER IX

BLANKENBURGH AGAIN

THE watch fitted in the metal socket on the Major's dash showed 9:05 with its luminous hands when they reached the line. The sword-blade searchlight beams flicked out and fingered through the fleecy clouds for them. The Ranting Ruperts behind Dixmude opened up with a ranging fire that splashed fearsome yolks of scarlet and yellow against the night sky. Chunks of shrapnel hissed and whined past their heads and pinged through the taut fabric surfaces. Clark sat down on the fold-down seat and reflected on the wild events of the night. At the rate he was going on he would have twelve hours to slap into the time-in-the-air column of his war log. He was beginning to feel it too. He sensed that he was getting drowsy and his eyes were playing strange tricks as he stared at the dancing wind-vane sight of his double Lewis guns. Up front the Major was flying like a man possessed. He darted in and out of the wispy cloud formations and ducked the slashing blades of the the searchlight swordsmen below. Even Clark had to admire his grit and tenacity. But he hoped the Major would hold out long enough to get him there—right side up!

Then before they realized it they were hurtling through the primary air defenses of Zeebrugge, and exchanging bursts with a formation of black Albatri. The fish-tailed vultures were on them like winged darts, but Clark

pulled out of his stupor in time to spray them with well-directed bursts from the rear gun while the Major charged on, like a phantom cavalryman galloping through a mounted picket party. He might have been sitting with a lance looped over his right arm, for all the notice he took of the Albatri.

"There it is, down there!" yelled Clark, slapping the Major's back and pointing down. "That stretch south of that small town. That's Zeebrugge ahead. Stay away from there."

The Major nodded and winged over while Clark held the Albatri off again. They roared in in twos now feinting at the rear gunner from various angles, but Clark was not to be fooled. He waited until they were within range and sprayed a wide arc before the diving biplanes and caught them full on and deflected their aims. The Bristol staggered, and began to fall in a crazy series of boot-lace maneuvers. The Major sat stock still and continued to stare ahead as though nothing uncommon was going on.

"You all right?" screamed Clark.

"Certainly!" the Major yelled back. "What's the matter? Wind up?"

Clark spat in disgust. Then he blazed away at another Albatros that came into range again. The two Lewis guns flamed out and belted the German night-hawk out of the sky. Her wings fluttered a minute to start the action. Then she jerked and tried to get the bit. Clark poured another burst in and emptied the drums while the poor devil in the cockpit threw up his hands to blot out all view of what was ahead.

B O N G !

The Albatros tank went up with a low growl. A feather-design of flame was hurled up against the night backdrop and Clark rammed on two new drums and watched her go down as he re-loaded with two tugs of the cocking handles.

Still the Bristol stayed in her falling-leaf descent. Clark wondered what the hell the Major was doing. But as he stared over the side he caught the move with a broad grin.

He was faking a forced landing.

A light from somewhere below caught them in its pitiless glare and Clark studied the ground below. He saw that the ground smoke and mist was heading up the beach from Ostend way. He slipped his hand into his pocket, drew a large clasp-knife and cut a great slip through the starboard side of the fuselage below the gun mounting.

"O. K.," he yelled into the Major's ear-flap. "All set. See you back at the little farm along the dunes before dawn."

"I'll be there. Take care of yourself . . . and best of luck."

CLARK slapped the Major's back and then clenched his shoulder with an iron grip that sent out his signal of friendship. Then he ducked low in the cockpit—and waited. He fingered through his pockets and made certain that he had all he would require. He watched Oradell's head and checked his movements. They slipped out of the glare of the searchlight which could not be depressed this low and for a minute they streaked through inky blackness.

"Get ready!" thundered Oradell, turning his head and barking into the slip-stream.

"Slap her down, I'm all set," mumbled Clark.

The ship started a series of wild fandangos as though the pilot had suddenly lost control, but Oradell was actually killing all forward speed with frantic fishtailing. Clark hung on and shoved his head out of the opening in the side of the fuselage. He could see the water of the North Sea now and

he set himself for the final slip-in. The Bristol suddenly straightened out an instant and her wheels pawed at the sands and bounced slightly. With his hands clutching two upright members of the fuselage structure, Clark waited until the ship had slowed down sufficiently for an exit.

Then he shoved with his feet against the drum boxes and pulled with his arms and shot out of the side of the ship like a black shapeless torpedo. The Bristol waddled along the sands for twenty or thirty yards—just long enough to draw the attention of the old Naval men who were acting as coast guards. Then while the men in German blue swarmed from their posts and swept on like a black wave toward the Bristol, Clark crept away across the sands, spitting and spluttering against a mouthful of seashells. He saw the Bristol suddenly pick up speed with a thunder of flaming power and roar away into the night.

The Navy guards were watching the ship take off, kneeling now and then to blast a Mauser bullet after it, and Clark made the most of the distraction to skurry across the packed sands toward the rows of sheds that marked the old Blankenburgh fish sheds.

In ten minutes a disreputable figure smoking a massive curved pipe with a tin stoke-hole top to it, sauntered up the beach from the gallery of drawn-up fishing smacks. His face was lined and tanned with the elements. He had the typical small-craft sailor's gait and lummocking movement with his shoulders as he strode up the narrow roadway over which the fish carts had travelled for years with their loads of flipping cod and plaice. He sauntered along, waved his pipe-stem in a friendly manner to a short stocky Prussian who stood with a comfortable stance at one end of the sheds.

"You had better stay away from the

water to-night Herr Verhaeren," the sentry warned quietly. "The Englishers are due again . . . monitors off Ostend this afternoon."

"Ah . . . my friend," the disreputable fisherman replied. "We are used to all that now. Let's see, since 1915 they have tried to get you out, with but little success, eh?"

"And they never will," boasted the young Prussian. "They do not know what we have waiting for them."

"Oh don't they?" muttered the man in the shapeless dungarees, as he wandered on up the rutted road. But the stocky Prussian did not hear that. He was really feeling sorry for the poor helpless Flemish fisherman of Blankenburgh. It was easy to make such a mistake in that strange light.

CHAPTER X

FISHERMAN'S LUCK

IT was also easy for Keith Clark to fake that clumping walk in those heavy boots, and he made the most of his disguise, walking along openly, but with his eyes taking in everything connected with the sheds. Once he stopped to light his pipe again and study a small opening that ran between two long sheds.

He was studying the layout with his eyes but his mind was running over a long lesson in German military law and regulations. He dropped the match and with a casual glance up and down the fish-cart road he suddenly moved like a flash and slipped into the darkness of the space between the net-drying sheds.

There he waited and huddled against a stack of nets that had been rolled up against some poles. For what seemed hours he stood there like a statue. At

last his caution was rewarded. A muffled figure in field gray wearing a long guard greatcoat came up the long black alley. He carried his rifle slung by the sling over his right shoulder. To it was fixed a short sentry bayonet. His hands were in his greatcoat pockets.

Sentry duty under at-ease conditions. These men must be the rawest of Landsturm troops. Useful only for back-area guard and sentry duty.

He passed the stack of rolled-up nets noting absolutely nothing. A long arm flashed out of the darkness behind him and a heavy automatic butt crunched down on him and he crumbled to his knees with a low groan.

"Nicely, now," Clark muttered as he caught the limp figure in his arms. "Nicely does it—and fast, boy."

He slipped the Mauser from the man's shoulder and exchanged hats in one lightning move. Then he tugged at the greatcoat buttons and pulled the man's arms clear of the sleeves. In a minute he had pulled it over his overalls and had staged a lightning transformation. Then resting the rifle against the nets he quickly took out a small box of grease paints and more by instinct than his ability to see, he colored the man's ashen face a darker shade and fastened a small moustache to his upper lip. He drew quick lines about the eyes and accentuated the curve of the lower lip. He felt his pulse and figured he would be out for some time yet. He drew him into the shadow thrown by the roof of the net-shed and slung the rifle over his own shoulder and carried on where the unfortunate guard had left off.

"Got to work fast now," he muttered going out into the road and turning down the next alleyway. "His beat probably included this trail around this main shed. Got to have a lot of luck now."

He sauntered on in his best Land-

sturm manner and came to the other end. Then his eyes gleamed. Ahead under a row of diffused lights three men were working before a metal rack from which protruded the black noses of some strange shells. A quick glance satisfied Clark, as to what they were doing. Behind them gleamed the breeches of four massive high-elevation three-pounders. The men at the shells were screwing the black caps on cup-like attachments fitted to the noses of the shells. They were just starting at the near end.

"Now for it," Clark husked to himself going around the corner again. He waited a minute and watched the operation before the shell racks and then unslung the Mauser. With one eye on the men at the shell rack, he suddenly let out a yell in German:

"Halt . . . that man . . . you . . . you there. Halt!"

Then he waited a second. Someone ran out and cried: "Who . . . what is it?"

Clark raised the rifle and fired twice down the long dark alley toward the fish-road. He yelled again and three men suddenly appeared behind him. They were the garrison-artillery men who had been in front of the shell rack.

"Who? . . . What is it?" one barked.

"A man," Clark replied in excited German. "I saw him dart in there. He ran down there. I'm certain I hit him. Heard him scream."

"I heard something, too," one of the younger men behind him added excitedly, showing what imagination can do.

AN officious *Unter-Offizier* shoved Clark back toward the shell-rack shed.

"You stay and guard this end of the magazine. Allow no one in there. If you hit him, he can't have run far. We

will go and search for him."

Then turning to a switch box at the end of the magazine shed, the *Unter-Offizier* cut off the light from the racks and gave hurried directions for the search. He much wanted to find that prowler himself.

Clark saluted and backed toward the magazine. In a minute the coast was clear. He darted into the dark magazine and unscrewed the caps from the shells that had been completed for firing. He tugged out the gleaming white silk parachutes, made a quick jab at them with a large pair of scissors and stuffed them back and screwed on the four caps again. The rest were easier, for there were no caps to remove. All he had to do was to draw out the white parachutes and give them a quick cut with the shears and stuff them back into the metal tube. There were about forty shells all ready, and it seemed hours before he was half way through.

Then a new thought came to him. He ran out to the end of the magazine and shouted again. His rifle came up and he fired two more shots and waited.

The three men came tearing up from somewhere and barked.

"Which way?"

"Down there! A man in a black moustache . . . dark complexion. In Pioneer Regiment tunic. He was running down there."

Clark pointed in the opposite direction. They went cantering off that way again and Clark darted back to his work. Five minutes and he had finished, leaving the parachutes just as he had found them—ready for capping. A clock back in the town boomed 10 o'clock. The first wave of aerial raiders from Felixstowe would be over in fifteen minutes seeking the back-area defenses with their heavy bombs. A siren screeched out from somewhere and the clatter of gun-teams rattled through the cobbled streets behind the

sheds. Already searchlights were broad-swording across the sky.

Clark hurried back to the end of the magazine shed and waited.

He was uncertain as to just what move to make now. So far luck had been with him. Now out of the dull light that had suddenly been turned on near the sheds he could see some men coming along. Their voices were triumphant. They carried a man by his shoulders and legs toward the hidden guns. They came up to Clark and dropped the man with a low thud. He felt sick—just as he had when Dual had kicked Lloyd Tempest in the face.

"There's your man, just as you described him," beamed one of the garrison-artillery men. "He must have fallen somehow when you fired. He's not hit. Took a bad crash on his head. Wonder who he is."

Then Clark caught the one mistake he had made. About the man's fat neck was a silken cord on which was strung a small religious medal and an identification disc. He should have removed that. Someone reached down and turned the disc over and read it.

"Why, this is old Oscar Heimel," a voice down near the swirl of legs and feet barked. "But . . . look, his face has been darkened and his . . . why, he has on a false moustache!"

The ring of faces went blank for an instant, then slowly they all seemed to turn toward Clark, who was slinging his rifle again as if to continue his post pounding.

"Hey! Gott! Heimel was posted to this beat. How is it you . . . ?"

But Clark was dashing away into the darkness. A shot rang out from a Luger pistol and hissed past his head. Then, as he turned down one of the net-shed alleys a tumultuous blast burst out in front of him. The net-sheds toppled all around him and flame almost blinded him.

He threw his rifle away and pitched headlong into a string of nets that were up being fitted with camouflage spreads. The hullabaloo behind him was suddenly silenced and then it rose again at a new tempo.

Voices were raised and there was a clang of steel. Men leaped out of the darkness and raced for the hidden guns. Another missile came wailing down from the skies. The British airmen had made their first thrust, and were trying to get the guns that were hidden in the sheds, which Clark had reported. Now it looked as though they would get him instead.

HE lay low and could hear the clatter of the gun crews as they swung the breeches of the high-angle guns. Clark knew that amid all this furore no one would notice any change in the parachutes and that in all probability the three garrison-artillery men were screwing on tops as fast as their fingers could work.

Bong! Bong! Bong! Bong!

The first salvo thundered out from the guns and the great aerial mines went up into the sky to do their deadly work.

"I'm getting out of here," gasped Clark. "Anything can happen now."

He started to clear himself of the tangle of wet and painted nets and work his way toward the fish-cart roadway. Then before he could take ten steps there came the roar of four tremendous explosions somewhere out near the dunes.

"What goes up—must come down," smirked Clark, "especially if you slit their parachutes. But this is no place for me."

The big guns scrawnched and the breeches clanked again.

BONG! BONG! BONG! BONG!

Another salvo of aerial mines went up.

Overhead the great R.N.A.S. ships were slipping through the smoke and searchlight beams. Bombs came down and hell reigned. Keith Clark managed to scramble for the roadway. He took off his greatcoat and started to sprint.

BANG! BANG! BONG! BASH!

It seemed minutes before the return concussion answered the belch of the guns, but this time they were closer to the sheds. Men ran screaming in all directions figuring that the hated British monitors were getting their range much quicker tonight.

Shots rang out and men yelled, but Clark was doing that 100 yards in even time, big boots and everything. He charged past the last shed and darted among the boats and made his way down the sands and saw the guns belch out through the net camouflage again. Four lengthy jabs of flame and the screaming wail of the spinning shells that were sent up to stay—at least long enough to trap an Allied plane.

BANG! BING! BONG! BIFF!

Keith Clark staggered on for the beach and then turned and ran along through the clumps of huddled Naval Reserve men who crouched watching the sea beyond for possible signs of landing parties.

Clark gulped something about messages and official runner and kept on through them. They had no eyes for a man in a porkpie hat and infantry gravel-crushing boots. If he wanted to go up there through that hell that was falling from the sky, all well and good. They growled into their moustaches and peered across the rollers where the guns of the British monitors were drawing a yellow slashed design against the horizon.

The dunes . . . and the little farmhouse. . . Perhaps safety, but no assurance of it.

CHAPTER XI

THE MAJOR INVESTIGATES

FOR the second time in about three hours, the little farmhouse nestling behind the war-streaked dunes south of Blankenburgh, received an unfamiliar knock. Again the dog growled and again the young slip of a girl took his collar and answered the door. The old man, still coiled up before the kitchen fire drawing contentment from the American cigarettes Lieutenant Clark had left, turned his gnarled head to peer into the dim recess that framed the doorway. Outside the thunder of guns resounded and the flash of explosives sent up their splintery designs and formed a sparkling back-drop in the black oblong left when the girl drew the door open.

"*Bon soir, Mes'u,*" the girl opened hollowly.

"Good evening," Major Hubert Oradell of the 127th replied. He remembered that Clark had said that the girl spoke good English. "I am Major Oradell. May I come in?"

The girl turned and spoke hurriedly to the man near the fireplace. He grunted, moved his chair from the fire and then nodded an acquiescence.

The Major moved inside, unsteady on his legs and reached for a chair near the fire. He sat down while both the girl and the old man stared at the gory bandage that furred out beneath the shapeless helmet.

"You have been wounded? . . . Up there . . . tonight?" the girl inquired anxiously, fingering the pins that held the bandage behind his jawbone.

"Wounded? . . . Ah no . . . not up there," Major Oradell replied wearily. "A little accident . . . back there . . . before we started. But it's nothing serious. I have a plane . . . out there

on the dunes. . . . You are worried about me. . . . Nothing to worry about even though you may feel that you are getting a lot of unexplained company this evening, eh?"

"I do not know what you mean, Sir," the girl lied beautifully.

"Oh, no matter little girl," the Major smiled into the glowing driftwood fire. "You had one of my men in here earlier this evening. I have seen him and we have talked. It is all clear. You need have no fears."

"You have seen Lieutenant Clark? He got through with the new anti-aircraft shell?" the girl asked, her fingers screwing up her clean white linen kerchief.

"Oh yes," Oradell smiled, rubbing his hands across his eyes. "That's what I wanted to talk to you about—before he comes back."

"Comes back? . . . Where is he?"

"Up there in the net-drying sheds . . . That's where those guns are, aren't they?"

"But that is madness. He will. . . . They will kill him!"

"You don't know Clark," smiled the Major reflectively. "But there's the point again. You *didn't* know Lieutenant Clark, Miss, and yet the minute he walked into this cottage earlier tonight, you told him all about the new shell and turned it over to him without a question. Why did you do that?"

"But . . . but, he was supposed to come for it, wasn't he? He wore the identification piece."

"Identification piece?" Oradell frowned, and then stared into the fire again.

"I hope nothing has gone wrong," the girl went on, exchanging quick glances with the old man. "You see Antwerp ordered us to turn it over to a flying man if he came and showed the proper credentials . . . just as you have."

"I have?" replied Oradell. "Whatever are you talking about?"

Without a word the girl came over closer and turned the edge of her apron back. Under the fold was pinned an ordinary safety pin. Then while Oradell stared puzzled, she placed her slender forefinger on the pin that had been carelessly fastened into the forward part of Oradell's bandage.*

*Author's Note:—The common safety pin, worn at a certain angle, was the Allied's spy's mark of identification throughout the war. This explains the girl's credulity in the case of identification.

OUTSIDE, the roar of heavy artillery and Naval guns broke out anew. The Major sat spellbound, staring at the safety pin under the fold of the girl's apron.

"Listen!" the girl warned. "There go the mine-guns. . . . Notice the strange wail?"

The grim black-nosed shells went up from the tubes of the three-pounders back there in the net-drying sheds. Three pairs of eyes exchanged glances. The girl let out a low scream. Oradell looked up quickly and then saw that she was staring petrified at a great Luger in the hands of the old man at the fire.

The gun was pointed straight at the heart of Major Oradell.

"Non! Non! Non!" the girl cried.

"Don't you see he is a treacherous weasel?" the old man barked. "He does not recognize the symbol!"

"But he says the other man is up at the sheds . . . at the guns!"

"The guns just fired," snarled the old man.

Then before the girl could explain four loud detonations crashed out.

BONG! BONG! BONG! BONG!

The old man listened. The house shook with the blanket of concussion. His old eyes melted into a happy smile. His gun was lowered.

"What is it?" Oradell asked.

"The guns! They have failed. . . . That was the shells dropping back to earth."

"Then he made it!" beamed Oradell, still watching the old man. "He went up to cut the parachutes. . . . He got away with it."

The girl trembling with excitement relayed the information to the old man. He listened intently, smiled again and took up the package of cigarettes and passed them across to the Major.

"One minute he wants to shoot me—the next he hands me a pack of my own cigarettes," Oradell grinned noting the brand. "How did these get here?"

"Lieutenant Clark gave them to us, earlier in the evening."

"Well, let's get this all straight," the Major went on, after lighting his fag and watching the old man settle down to listen to the guns again. "You figured Clark was an agent sent by someone to pick up the aerial-mine shell, because he was—or happened to be—wearing a safety pin on his helmet. Actually he had broken his helmet strap that morning and had used the pin to make a temporary repair. Then, when I came in, you saw this big safety pin on my throat, or showing anyway; and took me for another agent. Is that right?"

"What else could we think?" the girl asked.

"I suppose that sounds reasonable and lucky for us it all worked out well. All we need now is to make sure Clark gets away safely. It is evident that he has managed to spoil their little game."

There was a crumble of footsteps outside. The dog growled again. The hair on the back of the animal's neck stiffened. With wide eyes the girl watched the dog an instant and then went to the door.

"Wonder if that's him now," Oradell said quietly.

"It can't be. Look at Rolf's eyes."

The old man jerked and reached for his gun, but the door opened quickly and a man in khaki stepped in, followed by two men in German field-gray. The man in khaki held a Colt's on them. Across his face was carved a cruel sneer.

"Dual?" gasped Major Oradell. "What the devil are you doing here?"

"We've come to get you . . . and these filthy Belgian spies, Major," Dual snarled, kicking at the dog that threatened to break away from the girl's grasp. "Sit down, we'll wait for the other one. He'll be here in a minute . . . the clever little rat!"

CHAPTER XII

CLARK'S CARTON

THE old man let his gun fall and a painful grimace of resignation swept across his face. The girl quieted the dog and fastened him with a stout chain fitted into the wall near the fireplace.

"And you call *us* rats . . . and spies, eh, Dual?" Major Oradell remonstrated. "You're the rat . . . and the spy!"

"Aw, shut up, Major. It's war and I'm out to get all I can out of it. I've taken my chances with the best of them, and I'm getting bright at last. What's the pay of an Air Service Captain? What's in it for us . . . when it's all over? I'm getting mine now, while the getting is good. . . . Just the same as these Belgians are. They've been getting plenty for their work. It's all salted away for them in London, for when it's all over. You're unlucky, I'm getting away with it."

"Well, what's your game, and what are you going to do with us?"

"Me? Nothing. My job's done. I saved their damned aerial-mine secret and am turning the only people who know anything about it over to the Germans. Mine's in a bank in Amsterdam. Be sitting pretty when it's all over. You'll probably wind up against a stone wall. The breaks of war, Major; and you have to make your own breaks these days."

"O.K. I can take it. Let's get out of here," the Major smiled bravely.

"Oh no, Major. Not yet. We're going to get Clark, too. He'll probably be in shortly. You have a Bristol Fighter back there, eh? He's coming here."

He muttered something in good German to the two Jerry officers who had accompanied him. They nodded and moved over to dark corners of the room. It was evident that Dual had set the stage for the capture of Clark when he returned. The Major noticed that they all wore flying equipment and assumed that they had flown to the dunes too.

"Well," taunted Oradell. "You've got us, Dual. But at what a price!"

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, we have complete drawings on the aerial-mine idea. They're already in Holland. And you are too late to do anything about the damage that has already been done. Those guns, I mean. They won't work tonight. Clark took care of that, you know."

"What the hell sort of a story are you trying to pull on me now?" Dual countered, puzzled.

"I'll tell you in the morning—when it's all over," smiled the Major, lighting another cigarette.

Outside the terrific detonations were continuing. The first stages in the storming of the Mole were being carried out to perfection. The old *Vindictive* was being warped into the wall. The submarine was being jammed under the viaduct. The *Intrepid* and

the *Iphigenia* were being forced into place in the canal basin to block off the submarine base and Allied airmen were thundering through the black clouds above. Years later Captain Edward Altham, C.B., R.N., was to write of the Zeebrugge operations and explain that the unusual severity of the monitor bombardment which continued for more than half an hour had been most effective in making the Zeebrugge garrison take cover, which "facilitated in no small degree the subsequent work of the inshore squadrons"; but of course Captain Altham did not know that it was mainly the explosion of the German aerial mines that fell from the skies, were actually responsible for what success was attained on that memorable night of April 22-23, 1918.

But all this was not helping Major Oradell, the girl or the old man who had played such a big part in the drama, and unless something happened quickly they would go on unhonored and unsung.

IT was the girl who first noticed the change in the great dog's interest. The hackles dropped and his tail began a slow expectant wagging. She listened closely and broke into the conversation to distract Dual's attention.

"But why do you demand all this penalty? Take the old man and myself. Let this brave man and Lieutenant Clark go. They actually stumbled into all this by the most amazing mistake. Why not let them go . . . the reward of brave men?"

"Nice line, sister," smiled Dual. "But where would I wind up? No, it's too bad, but it's either them or me."

The door suddenly opened, and a disreputable figure in boots, overalls and streaked with blood and smoke, staggered into the room. Dual wheeled in his chair like a shot and covered

Keith Clark who with blood-shot eyes fell back against the closed door. He was panting like a hunted animal. He stared into the black muzzle of a Colt's.

"Dual!" he gasped wildly. "What the devil, Major?"

"Come in closer Clark," smirked Dual. "I'd like to kick you full in the teeth—just as I did Tempest. I enjoyed that."

He turned to his German colleagues and called them out of the shadows.

"This is the brilliant gentlemen who almost captured that aerial-nine," he explained to them in German. "Now you can go and call your car, and take the lot to Bruges. I'm leaving at once . . . for Amsterdam . . . via black Camel. Lost, you know, Clark. Lost during the engagement over Zeebrugge, and there will be no one left to deny my explanation. Tempest will be dead before this night is over. We have seen to that. He knew a little too much. You see it was I who called his brother Fred in the Nine-Ack outfit and advised him to use the smoke for cover until he was over his target. But you see, I told him I was Lieutenant Clark."

"Then how did Tempest find out?" fenced Clark raising his hands.

"That, we'll never know. Of course he might have found out by questioning the telephone orderly when he got back. There are several ways he might have found out, but he was too nosey anyway. He sensed some time ago that I was pulling something, for he spotted me drop a message form one day when we were on a balloon show. From that time on, he became a nuisance. But it's all over now, Clark. . . . All over, for all of you. Now, I'm free to clear off into Holland for the duration. . . . Not bad figuring, eh?"

"Not bad," scowled Clark. "Only you missed up on one point."

"Eh? . . . What do you mean. What have you got there? . . . Drop it!"

"That's where you figured wrong, Dual. If I drop it, you'll go to Kingdom Come with all the rest of us. Now how do you figure a way out of this?"

"What you got there, Clark . . . in that long package?" demanded Dual, still holding the gun on the disguised American. "Where you been?"

"Up there. . . This happens to be a sample of that highly excitable *Brisanze* explosive, I had an idea the Allies would like a box of it for examination purposes. It comes in very handy at a point like this. Do you still want me to drop it?"

At the word "*Brisanze*" the two German officers leaped to their feet. They jabbered excitedly to Dual, flinging out their hands in gestures of panic and terror.

Dual quieted them and stared back at Clark.

"O. K." he snarled. "We'll make a dicker. Your Bristol Fighter is out there unguarded. You and the Major may go. The girl and the man stay here. Fair enough? You'll never get through, though, because we have a rare formation upstairs waiting for the stragglers who are trying to get away from that mess up there at Zeebrugge. You get five minutes to get clear."

"Oh no. Nothing doing, Dual," smiled Clark, waving the long narrow box menacingly. "We go and they go. The Major can take them in the Bristol. I'll take your Camel. You can get to Holland—through the wire. Now you get five minutes to make up your mind. Beside, my arm is getting very tired holding this up like this."

CLARK dramatically let his arm quiver and the two Germans let out a low squeal. The effect was interesting on Dual. He lowered his gun an inch or two, not quite realizing just what to do. At last he said: "You win. Get out of here!"

"Get your hats and coats," Clark snapped to the girl. "All right, Major, button up and get away. You take those two . . . But how about the dog? . . ."

"Rolf *must* go," the girl snapped.

"Right. He can be chained up in the back of the Camel. There's room there now that Dual has probably removed the umbrella stand, eh Dual?"

"Don't worry, it's not there, any more," scowled the renegade pilot.

"O. K. Then you will go out with us and with your two partners, will start the Bristol for the Major. I'll stand by and make sure you do not change your mind. Then you can swing my prop, and away we'll go. After that we'll spend the rest of the war wondering how you will explain this to your new masters. Somewhat embarrassing, eh?"

"Come on, let's get it over."

The old man, the girl and the dog led the way out. The two Germans were behind them. Then came the Major, stumbling along, still unable to get his breath at all that had transpired. Captain Dual, still holding on to his Colt's pulled up behind the Major and the grinning Clark wandered along behind.

Through the barnyard they marched, with whispered warnings from the man in the heavy boots and overalls. They crossed a low meadow and eased their way through a hedge. The grass began to thin out and the soft sand began to crumple under their feet.

At last they came upon the Bristol where it had been hidden in the dunes. The Major got in and Clark told the two German officers to assist the girl and the old man into the back seat. They fitted in somehow and then Clark, still flaunting his long cardboard box, ordered Dual to turn the prop over and set it on compression.

Then Dual and the two Germans hooked hands and on signal tugged at the big Bristol prop. Clark wound the starter mag and she kicked over at

once. The Major eased her down and then waited for Clark's orders.

"Warm up as long as you can, and then take off. Beat it home. I'll be with you over Ostend. Come on, Dual, bring that dog and put him safely in the back of my . . . er, your Camel."

The long cardboard box still swung menacingly.

The Camel stood behind a mound a short distance away. Dual led the way like a beaten dog. The two Germans were watching that box like haunted men. They fastened the dog's chain and made him comfortable. Then Clark climbed in and ordered Dual to throw his gun away while he started the Bentley prop.

"Be just like you to think of tossing that automatic through those blades," warned Clark. "Better act nice, or I'll forget to hold on to this. I *may* let it go, once I get into the air, so you'd better scatter the minute that motor opens."

"You win," growled Dual again. "No funny business now. We've played our part."

The Bristol started to roll away. Dual yanked down on the prop. The Bentley opened clean and powerful. The two German officers went cantering up the dune and threw all caution to the wind. Clark waited a minute to make sure all was well, then he called to Dual who stood limp and dejected.

"What sort of a ship is this, Dual?" he asked above the roar of the motor.

"A Camel," replied the amazed Captain.

"Right!" replied Clark. "And that's all there is in this package. A carton of them. . . . Camels! . . . For our little girl friend. She likes American cigarettes."

And with that, Clark stuffed the package down in his cockpit, gave her the gun and roared away after the Bristol Fighter. Two shots rang out from

the top of the dune and Captain Dual fell face-first into the sand.

The reward of he who had failed.

CHAPTER XIII

FLIGHT AND FIGHT

THE Bristol fought her weight and climbed away through a salvo of light anti-aircraft stuff. Clark, buoyant and relieved that his plan should have worked so well, nosed down and swept the trenches dug along the shore and backed with barbed wire; with his front guns. The Bristol floundered clear and climbed on well over the sea. Clark stayed long enough to make sure he had cut the gunners down and then swept seaward after them.

Together they reformed and with the Camel sitting high above the Bristol's big tail they scurried southwest toward Dunkirk. The Ostend batteries blazed away at long range but had to be satisfied with simply making a noise, for they could not get a true range and their shots only added to the general aerial pyrotechnics that were flaming all over the skies.

Below them swept the grand destroyers and ungainly monitors that were pulling away from the coastal operations. Pink-cheeked midshipmen were hurtling high-speed coastal motorboats through the churned surf and protecting the battered ferries that had performed so well at Zeebrugge. Overhead the remnants of the aerial force that had taken part were trying to reform and struggle back into some semblance of formation to stave off the threats of the German night-flying craft.

Through these swirling mobs the Bristol swept with the Camel on her tail, fighting like mad to get through. Then gradually one by one, new black

Camels came into the picture and formed behind the majestic Bristol.

Clark frowned and tried to figure it out between bursts and then suddenly the whole realization swept over him. The raiding Camels of No. 127 under Dixie Fletcher were scrambling back with empty bomb racks and almost empty ammo boxes. They rallied royally and got a Very light signal from Clark.

Then into the final wall of winged power they slammed, with the Major pounding lead from his cockpit. The rear guns of the Bristol also opened fire and Clark saw that the girl was gamely standing up and taking rare shots at every black-winged cross-insignia marked ship that came into view.

"Good girl!" beamed Clark. "You certainly played your part in this game. If it hadn't have been for your preference for American cigarettes, we'd have been in a swell mess by now. Poor old Dual certainly fell for that gag."

The Bristol led them into the plunging Pfalz mob and for ten minutes hell was loose. Clark cut them down with every burst and literally carved a path through the mob. The rest of the Camel pilots, sensing real trouble, pitched in and swept the rest out of the play.

The sky was glutted with fire, wings, struts and tumbling fuselages when it was all over, but the mad pack of Independent Air Force men led by a bullet-torn Bristol Fighter swept triumphantly into the clear and somehow reached

Berques field.

The first thing Clark did was to release the frantic dog back in the fuselage. Then he raced across for the hospital and tore through the door and into the small cubicle. Tempest was in there.

A bland faced nurse with golden hair was trying to force a drink down Tempest's throat. When Clark slammed in, she went ashen and the glass trembled in her hand. Before she could make a move, Clark had snatched the glass from her fingers and then saw her snatch at a powder on a tray. She swallowed it before he could make another move and fell flat across the bed that held Tempest.

Clark knew he had been too late for that, but he smelled the liquid in the glass. It had the odor of almonds.

Arsenic!

Then Dual had been right. Tempest would never have lived to tell the real story had they not returned in time.

"War's a queer thing," he smiled as he poured the liquid into a tank. "One woman works one way, another . . . well, she works her way, too. One wins, the other loses."

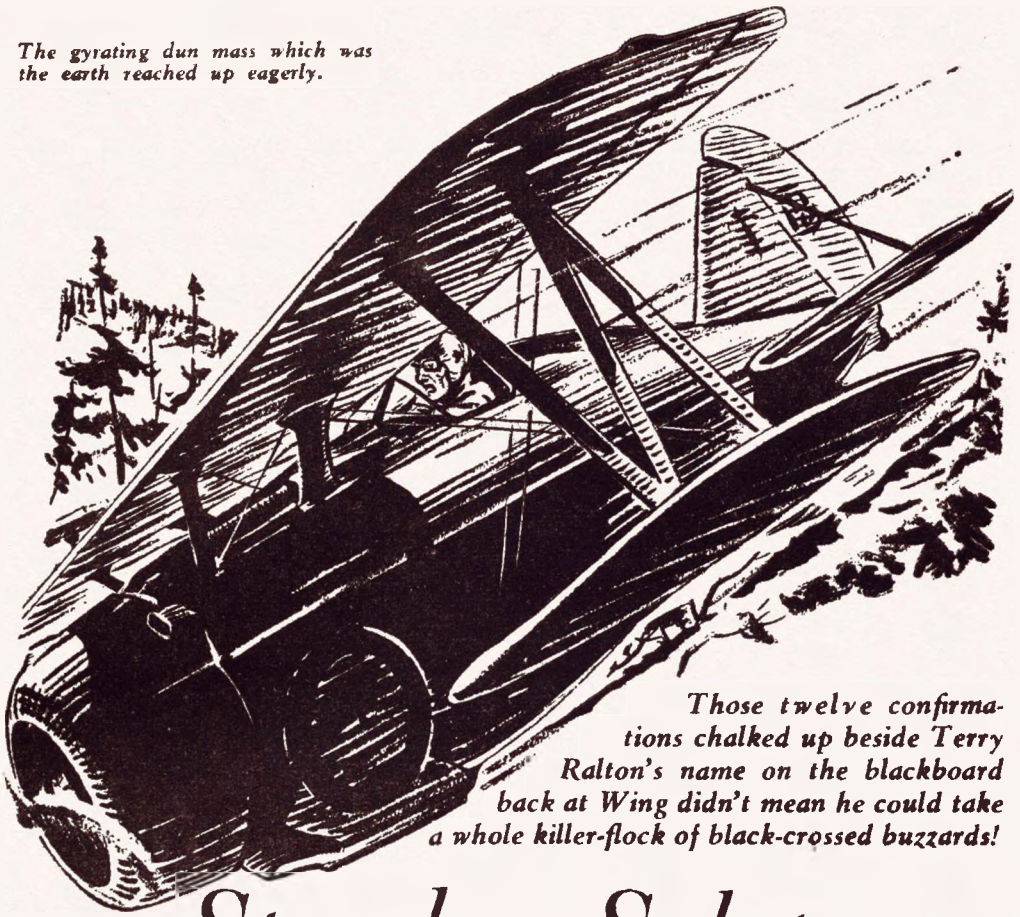
Then he smiled and went out to give the other girl her carton of cigarettes. He never learned her name. She was known by a number . . . K-17. But she got a new raincoat from Paris before she slipped back across the line.

Major Oradell was satisfied to go to bed now.



NOW 3 FOR 10¢
*America's biggest
 cigar value . . .*
 MANUFACTURED AT
 SMALLEST PROFIT!
Cremo
 CREAM O' THEM ALL

The gyrating dun mass which was the earth reached up eagerly.



Those twelve confirmations chalked up beside Terry Ralton's name on the blackboard back at Wing didn't mean he could take a whole killer-flock of black-crossed buzzards!

Spandau Salute

By KENNETH L. SINCLAIR

TERRY RALTON was going down. Spinning in with a dead stick, a center-section strut shot to pieces, and a flock of black-crossed buzzards swarming eagerly around their kill.

His long, thin mouth generally carried a humorous quirk; but now his lips were set in a bitterly defiant snarl. There were twelve confirmations chalked up beside his name on the blackboard at Wing, and as many more chalked up in the records of the German air service, from battles he'd fought far behind the enemy lines. He had attained the peak of his usefulness to the Allied cause; and now he was to be snuffed out because of the treachery of a man whom he had trusted.

But he *wouldn't* die. Rage thrummed through him—and he fought his riddled, staggering Nieuport, wrenching at the controls like a helmeted and goggled madman. His lips writhed. Damned if he'd give Chet Hawley the satisfaction of getting away with this thing. It was the big, grinning Hawley who had haywired Ralton's LeRhone on pretense of souping it up. Hawley, who had taken off in a brand-new ship to accompany Ralton on this voluntary patrol; then when they tangled with the Boche, Hawley had displayed a white streamer from his pit, had flown straight into Germany.

And Terry Ralton pushed back his goggles, felt of the ugly Spandau-slug

gash which coursed along his right temple, and yelled a defiant curse against the mushy dirge of his flying wires. Somehow he'd get out of this damned spin—

But Hawley had done his job too well for that. The LeRhone had torn completely free of its mount-plate, had dropped out of the ship. Now the Nieuport was too heavy to respond to the controls.

The gyrating dun mass which was the earth reached up eagerly. There was a vicious *swisssh*, then a rending impact—then, oblivion.

Terry Ralton was just about half conscious when men in spiked helmets hauled him from the wreckage of his ship, carried him out of the wood in which he had crashed. Not conscious enough to move a finger—but plenty aware of the fact that these guys were Krauts.

They put him in a car. A ramrod blond officer with a pair of silver wings and a pair of glacial blue eyes gave him a drink of very good whiskey from a flask. And that, helped by the rush of the wind against his face as the car careened over rough roads, snapped him out of his crash-shock.

His captor grinned. "I am *ober-leutnant* Borg. You feel better now, *hein?*"

The German's eyes gave Ralton a chill and impersonal inspection.

"Yeah!" Terry Ralton said. He was rigid in the car's seat, staring straight ahead—and in his manner there was some quality of brittle deadliness that made the enemy pilot stare.

The car passed a rumbling train of supply trucks, turned at last into a shrubby-flanked lane which led to a grim old castle. From beyond the dark stone structure came the throb of motors.

"Our field," Borg stated, "iss out there. Now—we get out of the car,

hein?"

With a jolt, Ralton realized that the car had stopped.

"We always giff our prisoners a party to welcome them to the Fatherland—" Borg prompted.

TERRY RALTON would not have called it a party. He would have termed it an exultant, drunken binge of triumph. His wounds and bruises dressed by a physician, he had been given a cot in a room upstairs, and had been allowed to rest, under guard of course, all afternoon. And now he faced the enemy pilots who had tried like blazes to wipe him out of the air before he killed any more of them.

They were young, polite. They drank a toast to him; and probably they wondered a little about the way in which his eyes kept roving around, like those of a caged animal. He saw two of them whisper to each other, then shrug expressively.

But it was not escape that was in Terry Ralton's mind. He was thinking about Hawley, about the black treachery which had lurked behind that easy-going smile. Hawley was an old-timer on the 98th, but had been absent on leave when Ralton joined up, and had returned only a week ago. Ralton had wondered about the big man, had suspected that Hawley's affability was a mask.

Sure, he told himself, he'd been a fool to trust the guy—but somehow he had been drawn to the big pilot. The bonds of friendship are strange things that cleave not to the rules; and now, somehow, Ralton would nail Hawley and batter that affable traitor to—

His thinking processes stalled right there. With blinding clarity he saw Hawley come striding into the big dining hall, escorted by a couple of young Krauts. The three of them were laughing—*laughing!*

And Terry Ralton flung himself from his chair. Trembling like a released steel spring he hurled himself upon the traitor.

This thing was done so quickly that none of the Boche could block it. Fighting mad, Ralton sailed into Hawley, drove battering fists against the big man's face. Hawley threw up an ineffectual guard, but was hurled back against the wall.

Breathing hard, Ralton charged, following up. But the astonished German flyers intervened, pinioned both struggling, panting men.

Borg barked a guttural command. Both Ralton and Hawley were taken into an adjoining room where there was a big desk, fabric from Allied rudders on the walls, and a light fixture made of a rotary motor with bulbs in the spark-plug holes.

Ralton's breathing was a hoarse wheeze. "Damn you, Chet!" he raged, and strove to tear free of his captors. He knew that it wasn't his narrow escape from death which aroused this murderous fury, nor was it so much the fact that he had been checked off the list of those fighting for the Allies. The thing that seared deep into him, and brought pain that somehow was sublimated into murderous fury, was the fact that his friend had failed him, betrayed him.

And friendship, in the air or anywhere else, can sometimes have strange backfires. . . .

Borg flung a string of Teuton gutturals at Hawley. And the big guy, all grinning affability again now, answered in the same language!

Ralton's astonishment at that held him rooted in his tracks, while Borg and the rest of the German pilots quietly withdrew and left the Americans alone.

And then Ralton realized that this was his chance. "You dirty Kraut

spy," he ground out, spacing his words with deliberate finality. "I'm goin' to smash you like a rotten egg—"

Hawley put up a big hand. "Wait, Terry. Hear my side of this. Then—" The big guy shrugged, grinned. "If you still want to smear me, I'll take what's coming to me."

RALTON gave the man a brittle stare. Was the guy actually going to try to bluff his way out of *this*?

"Thanks," Hawley said, "for the chance. My mother was German, Terry. For a while we lived in Jerryland. My sister—" Hawley's big face worked. "She's doing espionage work—for the frogs. While I was on leave a Kraut spy contacted me in Paris, told me that she'd been caught in Berlin, sentenced to be—shot. My kid sister, Terry!" Hawley ground out those words. "I confirmed that, from French sources. Well, the spy offered me a deal. You were knocking Krauts out of the sky, getting plenty publicity as the invincible young hellion who'd measure up to Fonck and Nungesser—you were knocking the Boche flyers' morale into a cocked hat. The price of sis's life was—that I cross you up. I guess maybe I'm a rat, but I took up the proposition. If you knew my sis maybe you'd— Well, to hell with that. I figured your motor would let you down in enemy territory before any of the Jerries jumped us. Well, it didn't work out that way. But now sis will go free, and we'll rot in prison camps—and you know the story."

Terry Ralton trembled, violently. All of his training, all of his ideals stacked up to make him hate this man who'd been human enough to slip from the status of an ideal soldier. He *wanted* to hate Chet Hawley—but he couldn't.

For Ralton, up to now, the war had been simple, and easy. Either you

knocked down the Jerry, or you got knocked down yourself. But he knew that if he'd been in Hawley's shoes, he would have been too damned likely to do exactly what Hawley had done. . . .

And he stuck out his hand, simply. They gripped. And for once Hawley's mask of high affability slipped, revealed the real man underneath. "Thanks, fella," Hawley said in a hoarse whisper.

And Borg rapped imperiously on the door, strode into the room. He had an unfolded bit of paper in his hand—and he clicked his heels, gave Hawley a negligent salute.

"I haff word for you, *leutnant*," the German pilot stated. "From Berlin—"

"Yeah?" Chet Hawley said eagerly, leaning forward as Borg paused. Terry Ralton glanced at the big guy's face—and the unconcealed eagerness which he saw there was almost painful. But then, Terry Ralton had a sister too, back in K. C. . . .

And he whipped his glance back to Borg's blond face. He just barely heard Hawley's words: "Is she—all right, Borg?"

The German ace allowed no flicker of expression to cross his face. "The man who talked to you in Paris," he stated, "had no authority to make that offer. By orders of *der General Stab*, your sister was executed, a week ago."

A deathly silence, broken only by the strident ticking of a small clock which had been set into a piece of shattered prop and placed on the mantel, lay its crushing weight upon the three men in this room.

Hawley was as motionless as rock. His eyes were akin to those of a man belly-stabbed by a bayonet—filled with wordless pain, and stunned reproach. And last he drew in a hoarse breath. His mouth twitched.

"You Boche rats," he said in a strange, taut voice. And in his eyes blazed something akin to madness. "I

sold out to you. Crossed up the finest guy that ever lifted a ship off the ground. I made myself lower even than you—now you won't keep your part of the bargain."

Hawley was thinking with his emotions, not with his head. And such a man always is dangerous.

Borg knew that—and drew his Luger. "There iss nothing I can do about idt—"

"Nothing!" Hawley roared. "Damn you, I'll break you in two!" And the big guy lunged forward.

IN that split-second during which Borg's finger tightened on the trigger of the Luger, Terry Ralton realized that in his hands lay Hawley's life. Ralton was almost at the German's side, due to the fact that he had been facing Hawley when Borg came in. And without thinking consciously about it, Ralton lunged.

Borg's attention was centered upon Hawley's suicidal rush. He made no attempt to stop Ralton—probably was unaware of the younger pilot's move until Ralton slammed one fist down on the Luger, drove the other to Borg's head just behind the ear.

The Luger thudded to the floor. Borg went down like a felled tree.

Hawley kicked savagely, unthinkingly, at the German ace. But Terry Ralton snatched up the Luger, darted to the door, clicked the heavy bronze lock-bolt into place.

His wounded temple was throbbing furiously now; and his heart was pounding like a triphammer. But he forced himself to listen.

And through the heavy door came the sounds of discordant, drunken singing—the pilots' revelry had kept them from hearing the brief and bitter struggle in this room.

Ralton swung around. "Quick!" he flung at Hawley. "We've got to get out

of here Chet, c'mon!"

They swung open a window, crouched down while a sentry paced across the garden; then they slipped out and dodged through the shrubbery.

"I should have killed that dirty rat back there!" Hawley panted.

Ralton gave the man an edged, analytical glance—but said nothing. And they raced on, out to the hangars which crouched at the edge of an orchard which had been partly torn up to provide landing runways.

Light gushed out from one of the hangars. The rhythmic clang of hammer upon iron made music in the night. Farther down the line, a greasemonkey was trying to start a balky motor.

Ralton shifted the Luger from his right to his left hand—in striking the weapon while Borg still held it, Ralton had broken a bone or two in his hand, from the way the hand felt.

And the two Americans prowled between two of the hangars, crouched in the shadows to get the lay of things.

There were two ships on the line—and two only. The Nieuport which big Chet Hawley had surrendered was almost in front of the pilots. But most of the fabric had been torn from the ship's lower wing by inquisitive Boche engineers. . . .

Ralton heard Hawley's guttural curse; and then he swung his head to look down the line. There were three men, not just one, working on the Pfalz which crouched down there. One man was at the prop, another in the pit, a third standing on the leading edge of the lower wing and tinkering with the balky mill.

"Not so good," Ralton said. "The Nieuport sure won't carry double—"

Hawley took hold of Terry Ralton's arm, in a viselike grip. "To hell with that! These Boche murdered my sis—my little sis, understand! By God, they'll pay, for that! Get into that

Nieuport. I'll twist the prop—"

But Ralton resisted Hawley's push. "What about you?" he demanded.

In the deep shadow, even, Ralton could see the bitter expression which came to Hawley's face. "I've been a fool—but I'm not too much of a fool to know where I stand. To hell with me! I'll grab that Pfalz if I can. An' if I can't—" The big guy shrugged.

"Chet," Terry Ralton began. "I want you to know that I'm not blaming—"

The sudden blare of an alarm siren ripped through the night, and cut him off. Back at the castle there were shouts, confused sounds of movement.

"Quick!" Chet Hawley barked.

AND the two Americans darted out onto the tarmac. Terry Ralton flung himself into the Nieuport's cockpit, adjusted the mixing valve. Hawley seized the prop, spun it furiously. The rotary motor coughed, spat, settled down to a smooth purr of power.

Men had, by now, come streaming out of the hangars. A crimson stab of gun-flame reached out toward the Nieuport—but the shot missed. And a gun crew raced toward a machine gun that was mounted on a wagon wheel set on a post. A searchlight beam swung around like a fumbling finger.

But Chet Hawley yanked the Nieuport's chocks, bobbed up at the side of the pit, stuck his big hand over the coaming. The beam of the searchlight fumbled across the ship at just that moment—and Ralton saw that Hawley's raw-boned face was set in the old, mockingly affable grin.

"Luck old son," he boomed.

Their hands met in a quick, firm grip. "What about you—" Terry Ralton began.

"Hell, I'll get out of this. Them three guys have left the Pfalz, see? An' just when they had the motor goin'!"

Ralton looked—and saw that Hawley was right. The three men who had been working on the Pfalz were legging into a hangar, probably to get their side-arms. They were mechanics, not soldiers. . . .

And the others were perilously close to the Nieuport now. Ralton revved the motor, swung the ship. Hawley already had started a dash toward the Pfalz—and Ralton guided the Nieuport in a straight line, keeping between Hawley and the hangars. Men raced toward the Nieuport, yelled and fired shots that zipped past Ralton's head. But then the flailing propeller, glinting wickedly in the light, drove them back.

The mechanics who had deserted the Pfalz to get their guns realized their mistake—but it was too late to do anything about it, when they halted in confusion at the hangar doors. Big Chet Hawley flung himself into the ship's pit, jumped the chocks, whipped the Pfalz around.

Pfalz and Nieuport raced down the field. The Boche ship lifted easily into the night, with the searchlight's beam clinging to it and its wing-surfaces shimmering. But Ralton had a tougher time, with the partly-uncovered Nieuport. Fabric flapped and tore away from the lower wing. The ship lurched, bounded drunkenly, and at last munched into the air, barely clearing the trees at the end of the runway.

IT was a touch-and-go proposition. Hurtling over the shadowy trees, Terry Ralton fought with all the flying ability he had to gain altitude. And his success was slim. At a hundred feet the denuded ship hit her ceiling, refused to climb another inch.

Grim-lipped, Ralton held her straight. He knew that one turn would cost all the altitude that he had gained, crash him in the forest which was streaming by underneath.

An exhaust flare sidled up to him. That was Hawley, in the Pfalz. He could see the big guy's bare head, in the pit of the black-crossed ship; and Hawley waved exultantly.

Ralton waved back—but there was no exultation in his gesture. Maybe they'd get out of Jerryland, all right. But if they did—what about Chet Hawley then? Military law takes no account of human failings. And the thing that Hawley had done, in the mistaken hope of saving his sister, was treason.

There was just one answer to that. A firing squad.

Terry Ralton would go a long way for a friend. Might even lie for Hawley, whose weakness was that he was perhaps too damned human. But that would do no good. Ralton's fall probably had been noticed, reported by the artillery observation balloons. In any case, there would be the fact that Ralton had returned in Hawley's ship, and Hawley in a Pfalz, to explain.

Ralton shook his head. Lying can take a man far—but only into trouble. And he would be doing Hawley no favor by helping him in that way.

He wrestled with the problem, and wrestled with the staggering Nieuport too, while they crossed the silvery ribbon of a river, picked up a railroad, followed it along until they roared over a town where blast-furnaces threw a scarlet glow into the sky.

That would be Verny—and now the Americans knew where they were, knew that there was only a short distance to go before they crossed the lines.

Ralton was amazed that no enemy ships had made a pass at stopping them. That Borg had not gotten into the air in time to pursue them was not surprising—every ship on the field, with the exception of the one Hawley had taken, had had a cold motor. This

Nieuport's motor was a rotary, and needed very little warming. But surely word had been telephoned frantically ahead to other Boche squadrons—

Terry Ralton jerked, tensed in his pit. A new exhaust flare swooped down on the Americans, like some evil comet. Spandau guns stabbed out twin lances of flame. Slugs banged into the Nieuport.

There was just one attacker, a Fokker D-7. Probably the Boche had scattered along the line, to form a net which must at some point catch the escaping Americans. But this Kraut was out to kill—ten yards behind Ralton's flippers he rocked his ship while the Spandaus mushroomed their deadly flame and slugs howled past Ralton's head.

And the hell of it was that Ralton couldn't do a thing to protect himself. On all this flight, he had been unable to gain any altitude. It was all his wide-open motor could do to keep the Nieuport staggering through the air. And one turn would put the crate down in the forest.

Ralton was pinned down, like a beetle in an exhibit case, for the Boche to riddle—

No! Hawley whipped the Pfalz around in a flipper turn, rammed toward the Boche. The enemy pilot veered—there was nothing else for him to do. And Ralton, twisting around in his pit, saw Hawley go plummeting past, following up the Boche and meanwhile hammering at the Spandaus which crouched on the Pfalz's cowl.

Instantly, Ralton caught the significance of that. The Pfalz's guns were either empty, or of such different construction from the Vickers that Hawley couldn't make them work!

AND the Boche, too, caught onto that fact. He rolled, showed crimson Spandau fangs in a tentative attack

upon the Pfalz. And then, when Hawley failed again to use his guns, the Boche was sure. In a more maneuverable ship than the Pfalz, the Kraut baited Hawley, rushed him and drew away.

Hawley, always a headlong plunger, was an easy mark for that sort of tactics. He rushed like a maddened bull.

And the Fokker's Spandaus spat flame, raked the Pfalz at close range.

With a stab of pain that was as real as if it were himself who was hit, Ralton saw the Pfalz stagger. Saw flame lick briefly back from the ship's sleek motor cowl, saw that flame grow and spread with sinister speed.

Hawley saw it too. And Hawley was dead certain that he saw the big guy wave one arm, exultantly, as he swung the blazing Pfalz sharply around, rammed into the astonished Boche.

Pfalz and Fokker met with an impact that seemed to shake the sky. Flame blossomed cruelly, wrapped itself eagerly around the ships as they dropped, one crumpled mass, toward the earth close below.

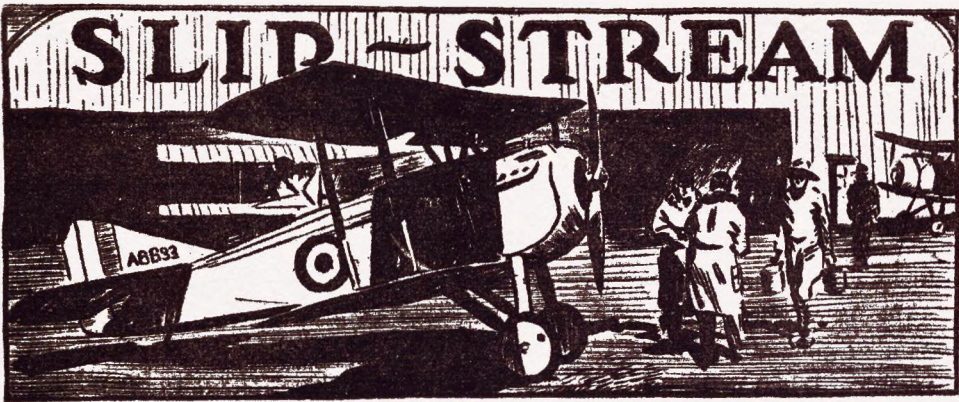
Just as they struck, a gasoline tank explosion hurled flames a hundred feet into the air. In that blinding light Ralton saw trees shrivel as the heat struck them. . . .

And yet Ralton was bathed in icy sweat, when he turned back to his controls. His wounded temple was throbbing again. And the muscles of his throat ached. But the lines were close ahead.

Hawley had slipped, as any man might have slipped, in that foolish attempt to save his sister. But he had more than paid. And he had earned one thing, at least—

Terry Ralton turned again in his pit, looked back at the viciously blazing fire which he was rapidly leaving behind. And his broken right hand lifted, in a crisp salute.

"Good-bye, soldier," he said.



Conducted by
Colonel Phillipot Bottles, N.O.G. [Never Off Ground]

YOU SKY DEVILS fiction filberts probably wonder what in the name of galloping Grummans this particular chunk of insanity is doing in the scented pages of your action almanac.

We don't want this to get around, so use your onions and keep it under your thatch until the past pencillings in our log books have simmered down a bit. We're not like a lot of these other gentlemen adventurers who have just sneaked back through the Immigration balloon net. We know when to keep our traps shut, but what with one thing and several others, mainly meaning we're hungry and there ain't enough PETROL in our tanks to warm a nit on a gnat's noggin; we, like all flesh, have fallen for the frogskins the guy what owns this journal, has laid on the line.

Or are we keepin' you up?

We just got back from Barcelona, if you want the inside cut; that's where a Spick Army (Heh Heh) is playing tag with a guy named Franco who knows more about uniforms than Roscoe Turner and Gusher Goering rolled up into one, and maybe they should be.

Don't ask me how we got there, 'cause we ain't tellin'. There's a lot of guys in Washington who would like to know, right now; but they ain't paying the sugar, so they're staying here.

I'm writing this on an upturned oil drum at Newark Airport. Hump, Reggie, Hank, Deuce and Slug are across the boulevard in the GREASE-BALL'S GLUEPOT, a gin-mill of no mean pay-load; where they're sucking off about three-fifths of what I hope to wangle out of the Editor for set-ups of White Monkeys, which is a Spic-war drink we invented in Madrid.

It only takes a noggin of absinthe, some hot Scotch, three aspirin tablets and a shot of Prestone stirred with a Size-3 tamale; which at least gives you an idea of what we're getting for this ritual. (Editor's Note: Oh yeh?)

Anyway, to set you guys straight so you'll know what you're in for, I'm Col. Bottles, Phillipot Bottles, to you Suh; commander of the Wacky Flight. Known from Pole to Polack . . . pardon, Pole; defenders of the faith, who have performed before the Duke of York, Prince of Pilsner, Duke of Clarence, the Prince of Wales and many other noted Limey taverns. We take 'em all on, big small and sight unseen, but if she has a photograph, it helps.

So far there's Hump O'Mulligan, the screwiest Mick this side of Donnybrook, who can fly anything if you give him the right time. Reggie Whortle-Berry, our Limey ticket-of-leave man, which means he's out of the cooler as long as he stays away from Hangnail Hall, his ancestral muck-pile. The Middle West is well represented by Hank Harrow, a buck-toothed blister who cut his molars on a Model-T crankshaft and knows more about Wrights and Wasps than the guy who thunk 'em up.

Our chief trigger-man is Deuce Garrotte, a little Frog who can do more tricks with a carving knife than Frank Hawks can do with TIME FLIES,

which was plenty, if you saw that last landing. Deuce was frog-marched out of the French Air Service for inconsiderately selling a few Breuget bombers to a guy named Hitler. Three weeks later the Eiffel Tower gang was trying to get him back, because about that time the Nazi undertakers were doing a land-office business burrying Boche airmen who thought you can pull a Breuget out of a power dive. Deuce is full of tricks like that, if you know what I mean.

Then to wind up this Screwey Sextet we have Slug Silvers, late of Chicago, Atlanta and Alcatraz, who ain't such a bad guy if you can take it. I've seen Slug, just for the devilment, of course, nothing really mean about him; shoot the struts out of a Wop Fiat, one at a time, calling his shots like and then follow the guy down just to make certain he hit where he figured . . . which was usually on what goes for a concrete road in Sunny Spain.

So there they are getting the low-down from Douglas Daisy, the top teaser of the Aeolian Air Line hostess chorus. Daisy told me yesterday she's down on the flight-plan as a "sorter" now.

"What do you mean, sorter?" I demanded, drawing my face-fungus back. "Aw you know, Colonel," she said with a coy—coy like in coy-bra—smile. "Since we put these sleeper planes on, I spend most of the night sorting the boys and girls out. It's more fun than a trip on the Hudson Night Line. Some of the girls are keeping records of their altitude attempts, too."

(Editor's Note: That'll be enough of that, Colonel.)

But to get back to the business in hand, I'm telling you slugs all this so you will have some idea of what you're up against. We're in for another adventure and we may need a lot of you mugs to go along . . . in the pages of SKY DEVILS, of course.

You see, our fame and infamy has spread far and wide and it was only last night that that Chink guy blew in and had me paged at the Gluepot. Never mind, even though I was under the automatic phonograph, I still had one boot on and my log-book was intact. It was Daisy's fault anyway. She would mix that Crash Cocktail, a brew devised by one of the screen queens the night they thought they were gonner hit Pike's Peak with the switches on. Daisy said she took the shaker and tossed the joy juice out the window.

I don't believe it, but Daisy swears on a stack of Sears-Roebuck catalogues that the port engine, which had been dead all the way from Salt Lake City, picked up, straightened a bent prop blade and showed fifteen hundred revs on the tachometer.

They carry quarts of the stuff now in lead-lined containers on every flight run by Aeolian—just in case—but it's no stuff to inject into a guy who never goes any further than a vat of White Monkeys.

But anyway, this Chink guy comes in, with a Larry Semon hat, a tweed suit seven horsepower too big and a pair of dogs that simply screech bunnions! He was looking for the Wacky Wing, and looked it.

"I would see Colonel Bottles," he said with a Mott Street lisp, and Reggie only just stopped Deuce from inserting his pig-sticker in the guy's ribs, thinking it was Charlie Chan's little brother.

Hank tugged Daisy off me, rammed a nickel into the musical power plant and set the grinder at, "He's a Japanese Sandman," just to see what would happen. The guy gave him a fin to put his foot through the works and we got down to business.

There was a lot of shush-shush, like the way they act when you want to take a gander at a Boeing Flying Fortress—and did you see the way the Army Air Corps took six of them down to South America and let all the Spic spies down there clamber all over 'em and find out what makes 'em tick? But you try it and you'll land in Leavenworth, breaking cobbles into Woolworth amethysts.

But I soon got the business straightened out and a slug or two into Hi Lo Poker, our Chinese earache. It seems he wanted to hire the Wacky Flight to go to China and chase the Nipponese (that's newspaper slang for Japs)

out of Canton . . . or something.

"I didn't know they was any Nipponese in Canton," growled Hank-the-Harrow. "I bin there many a time. Had a girl there who used to . . ."

"Never mind," I shut him up. "He means Canton, China, not Canton, Ohio. Go on, Hi Lo . . . and keep it high."

"I have heard of your honorable outrages in Spain," he said with a greasy grin, "and I know you're just . . ."

"Now wait a minute," broke in Reggie, who is always a stickler for facts, and time in his log book, "you haven't heard our side of the matter as yet. We demand a new trial."

Reggie talks like that, and sometimes it makes sense.

"The matter of destroying the Skull and T-Bone flight which had been harassing the Loyalist forces," Hi Lo said with a saucy hint of suggestion.

"Who's the Loyalists?" broke in Hump O'Mulligan, giving a dopey Greyhound Bus mauler a hot-foot.

"Jees!" jeesed Silvers. "Don't tell me you were out there wid us for nine months and didn't know which side you wuz on?"

"Them guys in the German Heinkels," explained Hank. "You know they had Indian signs on 'em . . . like on them Sioux blankets they make in Hoboken."

"They sure did when we got at 'em," I added, feeling that a dash of dignity was desirable at this point.

"It really was a dirty trick, though. Hardly cricket, and all that sort of thing. After all," Reggie began to give the game away, and there was no stopping him, "how were they to know we had mounted our guns backwards? How were they to know that when we got in front of them, and used our retrospective mirrors for sights, they were flying virtually into Valhalla?"

The Chink closed his eyes, smiled and put a grimace on his pan which simply closed the contract.

"As the Chinese philosopher has it," he preached, "one should not look forward, too longingly, for . . ."

"He's likely to stop a packet in the paunch," closed Hank.

"And then the little matter of a raid on the hangars of the renowned Suicide Squadron that specializes in dive bombing with 1,000-pound projectiles. I seem to remember that the Wacky Wing completely, well . . ."

"This guy knows too much," broke in Deuce again. "Lemme slit his whistle before he spills the stuff on how we put the zinger into them Moors who were bustin' up the block party at Montoro."

"Ah Ah Ah . . .!" I warned conking Deuce with a medal I had taken . . . er, won at Bilbao, "let Hi Lo proceed with the formalities, first."

"Your record, Colonel," the Chink went on, "is more than worthy. I might add, I represent a Chinese syndicate that is seeking worthwhile support, shall we say?"

"You mean you want us to go over there and nip these Nippons?" demanded Hump.

"Jump the Japs?" added Hank.

"Terrorize the Teutons of Tokyo?" Reggie slipped in.

"I'm sure we understand each other," the Chinese Apostle of Peace smiled. "And now, I may say that you will be given a substantial sum now . . ."

That was as far as he got. It took several minutes, two waitresses, a State trooper and all my personal persuasion to break Deuce and Hump from their death clutch, by massaging their noggins with fire extinguishers and ginger-ale bottles; but eventually we were able to continue the negotiations.

Hi Lo slipped us enough kale to put our crafty craft into flying position again and gave us orders to report within ten days to one Hung Lung in San Francisco, where we were to pick up the next tally of this Oriental scavenger hunt.

So here I sit still at the oil drum, telling you mugs what's ahead, or what

we hope is ahead. The Wacky Wing's on its way to China where we'll attempt to put on an act that will make our Spanish fandango look like a minuet at the Old Ladies' Home.

And while I'm still reasonably sober, let me explain that the Editor has been bombarded by our readers with questions, and you know what editors are; he's slipped them over on the Wacky Wing and I guess it's up to me to give you guys the low-down on what's the inside on aviation.

So if you're in a ceiling-zero on anything in this air racket, shoot the stuff into the Colonel and he'll see that you get it straight from the control tower. It's free and we'll do our best, but don't expect us to give away official information on American military aviation, because we're in deep enough now, since that Spanish omelet we just mixed and we don't want to wind up in Leavenworth . . . there's dirty work enough ahead in China. We'll tell what we can, and can what we can't as the Deacon said. Don't miss our next dispatch from dear old 'Frisco!

(Signed) Col. Phillpot Bottles, N. O. G.

The Question Box

Dear Colonel: I believe two interesting books on war-time aviation were written by Major Bishop and Captain McCudden. Can you tell me what they were and where they can be purchased?—John F. Scott, Chicago.

Answer:—I'll say they wrote two books, and they were knockouts. Bishop wrote "Winged Warfare" and McCudden's book was called "Five Years in the R.F.C." and the title was later changed to "Flying Fury." Both are rare today, but you might try the Aero Digest Library, 515 Madison Avenue, New York.

Dear Colonel: Do you know anything about a Lieut. Frank A. Dixon who served with the American Air Service? I believe he was attached to No. 17 Squadron.—Wayne Holmann, Westfield, New Jersey.

Answer:—You picked on a pippin! Frank A. Dixon was a member of the Seventeenth Aero Squadron and is credited with downing two enemy airplanes and was awarded the CROIX DE GUERRE.

Dear Colonel: Was there a war-time bomber used by the Germans that carried five engines?—Talbot Levine, Arlington, Mass.

Answer:—Right! Believe it or not, the German bomber plane known as the Zeppelin Giant, was powered with five Benz engines. It was the giant of the war, but the first one that went out on a mission was shot down by night-flying pilots on the R.F.C. They never built another.

Dear Colonel: What really is a tracer bullet, and who invented the darn thing?—Benjamin Ripple, St. Louis, Mo.

Answer:—This is an interesting one. The tracer bullet is a hollow missile which carries a certain amount of white phosphorus in the hollow portion of the tail. When the bullet is fired, the phosphorus is ignited and it burns, indicating the line of flight of the bullet. The Kynoch Ammunition Company of Great Britain developed the first tracer bullet.

Dear Colonel: I'm trying to get this variable-pitch propeller business straight and I was going on swell until they pulled this "full-feathering prop gag. Now what is a full-feathering propeller?—Walter Worth, San Antonio, Texas.

Answer:—I can understand your puzzlement, Walt. We've all been through this since they started monkeying around with the prop blades, but a full-feathering prop is one in which the blades may be changed from their ordinary pitch to zero degrees; or to be clearer, so that their edges point in the direction of flight. Thus, if one of the engines, on a multi-engined machine stops, the pilot simply sets the blades at the negative-pitch position and there is no slip-stream effect to make the prop turn the motor over. This eliminates the heavy drag which always sets up when a dead engine is being turned over by the slip-stream. Less drag, more chance of stretching the glide or getting back to the airport, eh?

Aces Aren't Born

By ROBERT SIDNEY BOWEN

Author of "Bullets for the Brave," etc.

FLYING with the automatic ease that comes with long experience in war torn skies, Bill Devon twisted in the seat and glanced across the air space at the all green ship riding along in Number Three position in the seven plane formation. In the pit sat his closest pal, both in the States and over here in France. Kirkwood was his name. Chuck Kirkwood. And to Bill, whatever Chuck did at anytime, and at any place, was better than perfect.

However, as Bill stared at the helmeted head, and the green and red tassel trailing back in the prop-wash, a worried look came into his eyes, and he absently beat his free fist against the side of the cockpit. Something was wrong with Chuck; decidedly wrong. He hadn't acted his old rip-snorting self for almost a month. Where before, he was usually the first man up and the last man down on every patrol, Kirkwood now did his patrols as though he

"Well," he snapped, "what's the excuse this time, Kirkwood?"



How do you become an ace? Well, there are various ways . . .

were in some sort of a trance.

Impulsively, Devon switched his gaze forward to Major Hawker in the lead ship. Hawker had been C.O. for two weeks now. A good man, too. That is, except as far as Chuck Kirkwood was concerned. Hawker acted as though he considered Chuck sore because he, and not Chuck, had been given the command. Bill knew that wasn't true. Chuck wouldn't have taken it as a gift. A skipper's rating was enough for him, he had always insisted. And he'd backed it up by refusing promotion twice before.

No, Chuck wasn't sore about Hawker's oakleaf. But, there was something radically wrong. If Chuck didn't snap out of it soon, a Hun would be bound to catch him off guard, some day. And then it would be too late.

A red Very-light arcing out from the C.O.'s ship cut short Devon's musing. He stiffened in the seat, followed Hawker's pointing hand. Five thousand feet above, and perhaps a quarter of a mile ahead, ten blunt nosed Fokkers were cutting around into the sun. In another minute or so, they'd start down in the blinding glare. Jerking back his loading handles Devon took a quick glance at Kirkwood, and cursed under his breath. Kirkwood hadn't even moved. Not so much as even looked up, as far as Devon could see.

"Come on, Chuck, snap out of it! Damn it, fellow! What the hell?"

Devon growled the words aloud, then directed all of his attention at the job at hand. The Fokkers were in position, and were coming down like ten streaks of greased lightning. They seemed to lose altitude in nothing flat. Devon only had time to swing out a bit for more "fighting room" before a blunt nose was spewing twin streams of jetting flame his way.

Flying with two hands, he belted his ship up over and down in a flash half

roll. No sooner had he started the maneuver than he pulled out of it, and charged back at the Fokker pilot trying to follow him through. Eyes narrowed, face grim, he jabbed both trigger trips and raked the enemy plane from prop to tail skid with made-in-America slugs.

Lady Luck rode with the German for the moment, however, and before Bill's bullets could find the gas tank the Fokker whirled and went thundering off into the clear. Devon roared after it, only to give up the ghost in a matter of seconds, and go swinging out to the edge of the scrap in search of a fresh target.

NEITHER patrol was in formation, now. It was a case of every man for himself, and the air boiled with metal wasps darting this way and that through a crisscross pattern of wavy tracer smoke. Swinging back into the mêlée, Devon took a second out for a flash glance at everything in general. Off to his right he saw two blunt nosed Fokkers trying to crowd Chuck Kirkwood into a cold meat shot position.

A five hour solo fledgling could have beat them to the punch, but Kirkwood seemed content to let them fool around him. At the same time, however, he did not let them drive any Spandaus bullets too close to him.

"Damn fool! Smack 'em, Chuck!"

Devon followed up his words by thundering over and down. That was just too bad for one of the German pilots. He was obviously too intent on plugging Kirkwood, to see Devon roaring in. And when he did, there wasn't a thing in the world he could do about it. Devon's burst was short and sweet, and it practically slammed the German pilot clear down in the pit to the rudder bar.

Pulling out of the short dive, Devon wheeled back toward the other Fokker. Its pilot, however, had witnessed what

had happened to his pal. And that was enough for him. He slapped into a vicious power spin, and removed himself from the engagement, hell-bent. Bill Devon didn't bother following him down. There were others of his gang waiting. Instead he throttled and flew in close to Kirkwood. His pal nodded, and raised one hand in a faint gesture of, "Thanks."

Devon glared, shook his head, and went through the motions of touching off a ton or so of dynamite.

"That's what you need, you bum!" he howled into the roar of his engine. "Right under the seat of your pants, too—to wake you up!"

Kirkwood caught onto the idea, grinned, shrugged, and went sailing away. Devon cursed, and swung back toward the fight again. However, there wasn't any fight, any more. The six German pilots who were still alive, had suddenly remembered a very pressing date in China, and they were now all headed that way, engines full out. A quick glance around told Devon that every member of his flight was still in the air. With a grunt of relief, he wheeled around into formation, and followed Major Hawker back to the home drome.

The C.O. landed first, legged out and stood waiting, hands on hips and arms akimbo. As Kirkwood landed, Hawker started over to the all green ship, but pulled up short as a field orderly ran up and saluted. A second later, he spun around and went trotting over to the squadron office. Devon, watching it all, made a face and groaned helplessly.

"He's just about ready to bounce Chuck right out of the squadron, for keeps!" he muttered. "Can't blame him much, either. Chuck's laying down cold on the job. Damn!"

Turning his ship over to the mechanics he ran after Kirkwood who was shuffling over to his hutment. He caught

up with him at the door, followed him in.

"Listen, Chuck—!"

"Keep it, son! I know! I'm lousy. Well, I admit it. The old pep's gone. Maybe I'm tired, or something. Gimme a cigarette."

Devon produced a pack, held the match for them both, then sat down on the edge of the bunk and stared at his pal. Kirkwood looked just the way he said he felt. His steel grey eyes were dull and listless. His face was drawn, and his mouth curved down at the corners. With a grunted sigh he dropped his long frame into a chair, and blew smoke ceilingward.

"Yup," he muttered, "I feel lousy, and I fly twice as bad. Maybe it's because I've had too much of this damn war. Maybe I'm all burned out."

DEVON cursed.

"Nutts, Chuck! Your kind doesn't burn out. A week in Paris would put you on your feet. Why don't you ask—?"

"Hawker?" Kirkwood broke in. "Swell chance he'd say, yes. The dummy thinks I want his job. I damn well don't! You know that! Aw hell, I'll snap out of it, after awhile."

"After awhile, may be too late," Devon growled. "Hawker is just about ready to rain down all over you."

The other snorted.

"Let him! It does him good to get his pep-talks off his chest. I don't care much, either way. Say, when the hell are we going to get mail around this damn place?"

Devon sat up straight, widened his eyes.

"Oh, I see!" he exclaimed. "A girl, huh? She hasn't written to you recently?"

Kirkwood flung him a scornful look.

"Girl, my eye!" he growled. "I was thinking about my folks. Haven't heard

in a long time. What I couldn't do to those blasted swivel chair censors!"

With that they both lapsed into silence, finished their cigarettes. But, right after that there came a knock on the door, and an orderly entered. Under his arm he had a mud spattered parcel about twice the size of a shoe box. He grinned at Kirkwood, and held it out.

"Mail came while you were on patrol, Skipper. Here's something for you."

Kirkwood let out a whoop, grabbed the parcel, and tore off the string and wrapping paper. Inside was a couple of pounds of home-made fudge, a carton of cookies, a quart bottle of pickles, and one or two other items that neither love nor money can obtain within the borders of the French Republic.

His face lighting up like a Xmas tree, Kirkwood just sat back and beamed at the stuff. Presently, he shoved the box of fudge Devon's way.

"Have some, kid!" he purred. "My sister is aces at that dish. Boy, this is like when I used to be away at school. Dive in, kid, dive in!"

"Oh, so you are alive, after all?"

The voice cracked like a whip. Both Devon and Kirkwood glanced up. Major Hawker stood in the hutment doorway. His piercing eyes bored into Kirkwood's face.

"Well," he snapped, "what's the excuse this time, Kirkwood? I saw Devon take that Hun away, right from under your nose. Had you forgotten how to shoot Vickers guns, too?"

Kirkwood looked at him steadily.

"Not yet, Major," he said slowly. "Just off my feed for awhile. I'll come around, I guess."

"That will be fine!" the C.O. blazed. Then with a sudden change of expression, "Dammit, Kirkwood, you're top man in Huns! You've got a record any pilot would be proud of. Where's your pep? Let's have some of the old steam

I've heard so much about. I don't want to bust you, Kirkwood. But, I damn well will if you keep on flying like an old woman. Come on, what do you say? Let's make you an ace *again!*"

Kirkwood fished for a cigarette.

"I reckon I'll do better, Major," he grunted. "Don't worry too much."

The C.O. nodded his head enthusiastically.

"That's the spirit I want!" he said. "Ten minutes ago, I was going to bounce you, Kirkwood. But, maybe my words have sunk in. Anyway, I'm going to give you another chance. No one can say I'm not fair. Both of you, come over to the squadron office, at once. There's something damn important on tap."

WITH a quick nod to them both, the C.O. turned on his heel and walked out of the hutment. Kirkwood grunted, crammed two big hunks of fudge into his face.

"Come on, kid," he mumbled. "Let's see what this wonderful last chance is all about. Another pep-talk, I bet a nickel!"

Devon grinned inwardly. A bit of the tired look had gone out of Kirkwood's eyes. That was some progress, at least!

Three other pilots of the squadron, and Major Hawker, were in the squadron office when they arrived. The C.O. was busily tacking a sector map to the wall. When he had finished, he stepped back and looked at the pilots.

"Wing called up a short time ago, men," he said. "We've been detailed a mighty important mission. Within the next forty-eight hours our ground forces are going to launch a surprise offensive, here, in the very middle of the Contreau Sector."

The C.O. paused, long enough to place a finger on the map.

"It's flat, sparsely wooded ground, as

you all know," he went on. "Therefore, the success, or failure, of the drive will depend mostly on the element of surprise. In short, the Huns must not even have cause to guess at the location of our offensive. Now, to make that certain, G.H.Q. is going to launch a fake offensive, up here in the Issy sector. Almost right in front of us, as a matter of fact. The plan, is simply this. At a given zero hour, to be announced later, our batteries in the Issy sector will open up with a hour or so of bracket fire. Then the thin line of troops, holding that sector, will move forward. Naturally, the Huns believing a real drive is under way, will suck in their flank forces, and thus weaken the defense of the Contreau sector. You follow me?"

The five pilots nodded silently.

"Good!" Hawker grunted. "Now, here is where we come into the picture. Late this afternoon, you five, and I, will take off from the drome, here, and fly low altitude to this small field next to the woods, here."

Hawker took time out to "spot" the place on the map.

"It is not over a quarter of a mile behind our second line," he continued, "therefore we've all got to sneak in at low altitude, and hide our ships under the trees as soon as possible. There is an old shack, there, where we can bunk tonight. A lorry is on its way up there, now, with Cooper bombs, extra gas, and ammo. A field phone, direct to Army Corps H.Q. will be set up. Once we arrive there, we will be strictly on our own. No mechanics—just us. In other words, we will make the fake drive look like the real thing. When we go into action, the Huns will think us a shock squadron, moved up. We are to give them hell with everything we have, and keep tearing back to the field for re-loading.

"One thing, though! We're bound

to get lots of action. Half the Hun air force is likely to be tossed against us. But, we've got to stick to our job, and make it look real enough until the Hun flanks are sucked in, and the time is ripe for the real offensive in the Contreau sector. That is why I have selected you five pilots to go with me. You've got the stuff. And, I know damn well you can deliver."

Hawker stopped, nodded for emphasis, and looked straight at Kirkwood. Out the corner of his eye, Devon glanced at his pal. Kirkwood did nothing. He didn't even nod.

"And I mean you, in particular, Kirkwood!" Hawker said suddenly. "This is the chance you need, lad. You're going to slam in and show them you haven't lost the old grip, now aren't you?"

Kirkwood half smiled.

"Sure, Major, sure," he grunted. "Anything you say."

"That's it, lad!" Hawker echoed. "Now, one thing more, all of you. We may be gone for over forty-eight hours. Go to the mess and draw iron rations for three days. Stow the stuff in your musette bags, and park it in your ship. Well, that's all. Be ready to take off in a couple of hours. And, the best of luck to all of us. I don't need to tell you that Wing is counting plenty on us. And, we're not the type of let Wing down at a time like this. All right, dismissed."

TWO hours later, to the dot, the six "shock squadron" ships took off in follow-the-leader style, and headed east toward the gathering shadows of night. Taking off right in back of Kirkwood, Devon watched his pal closely for signs of the same old style of sloppy flying. With a sinking heart, he saw them without half trying. Kirkwood didn't seem to have a thought about the coming drive. He lifted his

plane lazily upward, and went drifting east.

When they were all on the ground again, the sun had gone below the western horizon, and their only light was that thrown off by a couple of oil pot flares. Then began the last of the task of preparing to carry out Wing's "bright" idea. With no mechanics to help, it was doubly tough. Every pilot inspected his ship from prop to tail skid, checked instruments, filled the tank, loaded the guns, and put Cooper bombs in the wing racks. And when that was all completed, they went over everything again, just to make sure. No one spoke of it, but all were conscious of the seriousness of the job ahead. All, save Kirkwood, perhaps. To Devon's worried eyes he seemed to do most everything mechanically.

"Still the same!" he breathed fiercely. "Ye gods, will nothing snap him out of it?"

It seemed not, and so Devon occupied his mind by thinking of his own chances. He knew that Hawker had not shot off his face, when he'd mentioned that probably half the Hun air force would pile down on him. The Germans didn't like surprise offensives. And they always kept a couple of squadrons ready to slam in and nip things in the bud, if they could. Yeah, there would be lots of lead flying once things got under way.

And, so went his thoughts, until dog tired he walked with the others over to the weather beaten shack and sank down on the floor. The others were just as tired, and although there were iron rations in the musette bags, nobody bothered to eat. Sleep was the main thing, at the moment.

Devon passed under about two seconds after he relaxed. And then, suddenly—it seemed to be the very next second—the field phone jangled harshly. Everybody woke up, sat up with

a start. The faint light of early dawn filtered through the broken windows. But, it was neither that, nor the jangle of the phone that caused them to stare wild eyed at each other. On the contrary, it was the sudden thunderous roar of exploding shells. No, not American shells exploding to the east of them. But, German shells exploding within spitting distance of their small emergency field.

With a shouted curse, Hawker grabbed for the phone, jerked off the receiver.

"Major Hawker speaking!" he barked. "What the—?"

He cut himself off short, gripped the phone hard. The others saw his eyes widen, then narrow, and the blood to fade down his cheeks into his neck. Presently, he nodded curtly.

"Yes sir!" he shouted. "Count on us! We'll hold out as long as we can!"

The C.O. practically threw the phone away, and leaped to his feet.

"Into your ships!" he cried. "All hell has broken loose. The Huns are beating us to the punch. They're launching a drive, right now—in *this sector!* If they break through our thin line, God knows what will happen. Corps is going to rush up re-enforcements, as soon as possible. Meantime, it's up to us to straffe them back. Get going!"

Amid curses and excited shouts, they all piled out of the shack and over to the ships. Taking turns they spun each other's props; helped each other to taxi out from under the overhanging branches of the trees. Meantime, all hell *had* broken loose for fair. Heavy shells from the hot mouths of German guns way back, were arriving at twenty-second intervals. Every time one exploded it seemed to Devon that the entire six ships were going along with it.

Hell indeed had broken loose.

IN the confusion all about him he had only one chance to look Kirkwood's way. His pal was putting on speed, helping the slower ones to get off and up into the air. But, as Devon took a second look, he had the sudden empty feeling that Kirkwood was purposely holding back his own take-off. The thought made his chest ache.

Chuck was showing the white feather? Had it gone that far? Chuck Kirkwood intended to let the rest go out and do the job without him? For a moment hot anger seethed up in Devon. As he went thundering across the small field he glanced back just once more. Only Kirkwood and Major Hawker were left.

There was another chance, in a couple of moments, for Devon to look back and see if Kirkwood had taken off. But he didn't even think of doing it. Didn't for the very plain reason that the tide waters of hell itself were bursting forth from the German side of the lines. Through glazed eyes he saw the grey clad hordes of German troops storm through the American position, as though they weren't even there. And just ahead of the grey wave rolled a crimson wave—a wave of vivid flame from a German barrage.

To Devon it seemed that he had hardly left the small field, before Yank soldiers were racing westward across it in wild retreat, with the Germans hot on their heels. And then, he had to take his eyes from the heart chilling sight below. From out of the dawn tinted skies above him, seemingly countless fire spitting Fokkers came sweeping down. He had only time to jerk his nose up, before he was in the midst of a swirling, whirling mass of yammering sound, and crackling flame.

Something flashed past his gun sights. Instinctively he jabbed his trigger trips. A split second later a sheet of flame leaped skyward, and in

the center of the crimson hell he saw the blurred outline of a Fokker. Then it was gone, and he was thundering toward another one.

Five seconds, five minutes, or was it five years, when he suddenly found himself in the clear, streaking down at the grey clad hordes below? He didn't know, nor did he care. Outnumbered in the air, practically helpless to do anything about the wild enemy advance on the ground below, it was just a case of fight, fight, fight until he went down, or he ran out of ammo and gas.

Checkmate! For once the Germans had pulled off an attack trick, and were playing it for all they were worth. Slamming down, and zooming out only to slam down guns blazing again, Devon cursed G.H.Q., Wing, and everybody else right on down the line. My God, six pilots to stop all this? Never! Hell, it couldn't be done in a hundred thousand years. It would be a miracle if any of them were even alive by the time air and ground re-enforcements were rushed up. But as for—

He suddenly cut off the thought, jerked up in the seat and bellowed in wild excitement. A flash of green lightning had whizzed down past him at twice his speed. It was a plane, Chuck Kirkwood's plane! And it's pilot had seemingly gone stark raving mad. Right! No one, even in the heat of battle would go as daffy as Kirkwood had gone. Like a thunderbolt he charged straight down at the center of the grey wave, blasted it with Vickers bursts, and Cooper bombs. And when he pulled out of his dive he was less than three feet from the ground. Through wide eyes Devon saw German soldiers fling themselves to the ground, missing Kirkwood's sweeping wings by inches. A few of them didn't miss. The charging plane hit them, flung them off like sacks of wet meal, and kept right on going.

For a moment Devon forgot all about himself. Chuck Kirkwood had found his old fighting self at last—and how! The way the pilot hurled his ship this way and that was proof positive of the fact that Major Hawker's parting words, whatever they had been, had hit home with a bang. Never, since his very first patrol over the lines, was Kirkwood flying as he was flying now.

TWO Fokkers thundered down on him, but he seemed not to notice them. His targets were the grey clad troops on the ground, and only them. Never zooming up more than a hundred feet or so over their heads he slammed them with burst after burst, spilled them on the smoking ground like ten pins—and then spilled others who remained on their feet.

Shouting, cursing at the top of his voice, Devon streaked down to lend a hand. But, he might just as well have tried to trail after a comet gone berserk, as far as keeping pace with Kirkwood was concerned. The madman was here, there, and everywhere in nothing flat. More Fokkers came down, and for awhile Devon lost track of his pal as he fought with every ounce of his skill to save his own skin. He got two ships, and his own was almost in ribbons before he was out in the clear again.

Heart in his throat he searched wildly about for the crazy flying green plane. It was seconds before he saw it, and when he did his heart seemed to turn to ice. Kirkwood was below him and back toward the west a bit. No jetting flame was spewing from his guns. They had either jammed, or he had run out of ammo. But that, was making no difference to the berserk eagle. He still had gas, and his wings were still on his ship. Again and again he was charging the German troops, plowing into them recklessly, and bowling them over with his under-carriage and leading edges of

his lower wings.

Each time he zoomed up he cut back toward the thin American line, leaned half out of the cockpit and waved savagely at them to go forward. One crazy man, without ammo or bombs, charging the German troops, and charging them again. A million rifle bullets streaked up at him, but the hand of Lady Luck, herself, must have been brushing them to one side, for the all green plane kept plowing into the Germans, filling them with fear of the devil.

It couldn't go on forever. And it didn't. Unable to bring down the miracle man from hell, who kept charging into them, the German troops halted their advance, broke and then started falling back. Their action gave new life to the hard pressed Yank soldiers. They rushed forward, led by Kirkwood's wild flying plane, and went hell-bent after the panic stricken Germans.

Like a man who is watching a crazy quilt nightmare unfold before his eyes, Devon tore downward, and slammed the rest of his own slugs into the retreating Germans. As he tried to keep pace with Kirkwood he saw more planes thunder down. For a split second his heart froze. Spandaus slugs would get them both. They would be trapped between two fires. Then suddenly he roared with joy. The diving planes weren't Fokkers! They were Yank Camels, and Spads, and S.E.5s. The whole sky was full of them. Foot by foot half of them drove German craft toward the east. And the other half slammed down to finish the chaos below that Chuck Kirkwood had started.

One man—just one man—!

Devon cried out in sharp alarm. Kirkwood had suddenly zoomed up for altitude. A blast of fire from the very pit of hell, itself, spewed up at him. Devon saw tracers bite through his pal's wings. That is, through what was left of them. Kirkwood's plane stag-

gered off on one wing. Then it was righted, and began to slide slowly around toward the west.

YET, Kirkwood kept it up, somehow. A dozen times, Devon saw it half fall over, as though starting down in an uncontrollable spin. But, each time, Kirkwood managed to haul it back on even keel, and nurse it back westward over the heads of the hand-to-hand fighting troops below. Helpless to do anything, Devon could only keep pace with his pal, and pray fiercely that his luck would hold out.

Dully, he was conscious of another plane riding along with Kirkwood on the other side. But, Devon didn't even give it a single glance. As though the very intensity of his gaze may help keep Kirkwood's ship in the air, he stared at it fixedly.

Presently, however, the nose of the all green ship dipped, and it went slanting earthward. Tearing his gaze from it, Devon looked down, breathed a deep sigh of relief. Kirkwood had forced his ship to hold out long enough. It was now heading down toward the small emergency field, across whose shell cratered surface waves of Yank secondary defense troops were sweeping.

They split and veered to both sides as Kirkwood's plane wobbled and fluttered downward. During the last twenty-five feet of descent, Devon held his breath clamped tight in his lungs, and kept his eyes fixed on the all green ship. And then, its wheels touched, hit a small mound of dirt. The plane bounced upward for about ten feet, and fell back like an exhausted bird.

By that time, Devon's wheels were touching, and he was forced to jerk his gaze back to his own ship. Seconds later, though, when he had settled, he looked again, and shouted with joy as he saw the lean figure of Kirkwood struggling out from the heap of tangled

wreckage. Leaping out himself, he raced over, reached his pal at the same moment Major Hawker did. The C.O.'s plane was also on the ground. Blood oozed out of a slight bullet crease across Kirkwood's left cheek, but he grinned as Hawker and Devon rushed up. The C.O.'s face was lighted up like a four alarm fire.

"Good God, man!" he cried. "I never saw anything like it! There never *has* been anything like it! You stopped the whole damn thing all by yourself. By God, I'll see that you get the Congressional Medal for this, if it's the last thing I do."

Kirkwood half nodded, started to move off.

"Thanks, Major," he grunted.

"And I *will*, too!" the C.O. repeated. "I'm proud of you, Kirkwood. I knew you had it in you. Damn right—I knew I could make you an ace flyer again."

"Reckon you did, Major, I guess," Kirkwood muttered, and started trotting across the field.

Wondering what the hell, Devon chased after him, followed him into the old shack. Kirkwood went directly to his musette bag of iron rations in the corner. It didn't contain iron rations, however. It contained fudge, cookies, pickles and so forth, sent from America.

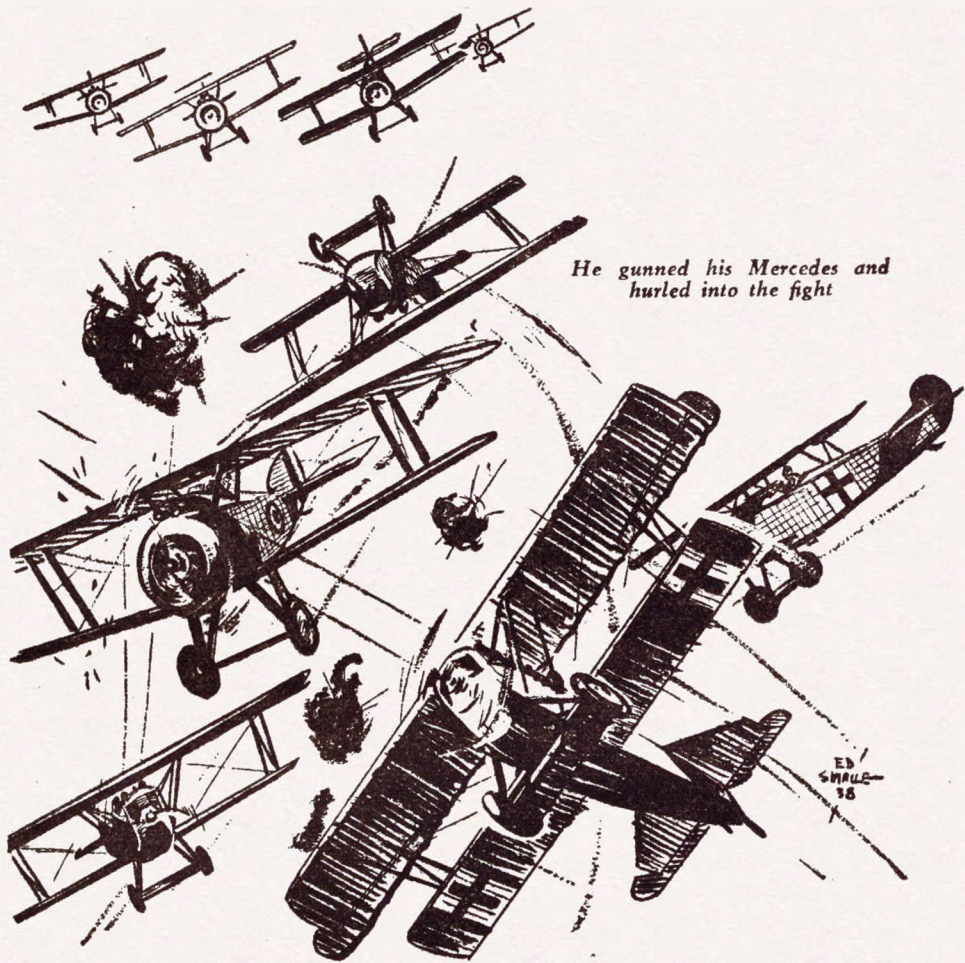
As Kirkwood pulled the stuff out, Devon chuckled.

"Oh! Then it wasn't a pep-talk by the ace maker, huh?"

Kirkwood snorted, crammed fudge into his mouth, and held out the box to him.

"Pep-talk, my eye!" he mumbled. "He kicked me up stairs before I could grab up this stuff. Nuts! I've been waiting two months for this. Think I was going to leave it here for a lot a square-head Huns to gobble up? Like Hell! Here, dive in, kid!"

Jungle Buzzard— By ORLANDO RIGONI *or Fighting Eagle?*



*He gunned his Mercedes and
hurled into the fight*

The C.O. handed Captain Del Trone the job of putting spirit back into war-shattered, washed-up jungle buzzards—and on their first flight into the teeth of death they revolted, left Del Trone sacrifice to Fokker fury!

CAPTAIN DEL TRONE sat stiffly in the chair before the polished desk at Wing Headquarters. He wasn't used to polished desks, and swivel chairs. He was more

comfortable on a broken soap box behind a kitchen table. His deep, dark eyes probed the gray steely ones of the dapper colonel across the desk.

He asked, in a deep voice that

A SMASHING, FAST-ACTION NOVELETTE

seemed to roll from his thick chest without effort, "You're not giving me the drones, sir, because I've failed at Vatry?"

Colonel Southern shook his bald head emphatically, "Hell, no! You've made an enviable record at Vatry, breaking in the kids. It's because of that record that I'm asking you to take the drones."

"It's not an order?"

"No, not exactly. You can refuse if you want to, but you're used to tough assignments, and this is one that'll take plenty of guts, with a capital G. You know how the drones are—they're plenty tough themselves, but they're washed up! They've got their belly full of war, and we've been collecting them back at Monmorte using them to ferry crates. But now we need them—need them damned bad if we're to stay in the air over Epernay. Will you take the job?"

Trone leaned forward earnestly. His short blond hair seemed to bristle on his big head. "Under my own conditions," he agreed.

"Which are . . . ?"

"First, that you'll move them up to Avizy," Trone began.

"Avizy?" the colonel exploded. "Why that's practically in the front lines—it's in the direct line of fire . . ."

"Which is just what I want," Trone snapped. "If they get close enough to the fighting, it might stir up their sluggish blood. And secondly, I want them equipped with Sop Scouts with 100 horse Gnome engines."

"Why dammit, man, those scouts can't do 100 miles an hour with a hurricane on their tails. They'll be no good against D-7's . . ."

"The one thing," Trone explained patiently, "they won't be able to run away. And thirdly, I'm to have no interference with the way I handle this."

The colonel groaned. "You made your bed, captain. It'll be damned hard layin'

on it, but it's yours. It's a toss-up between God and the devil. Good luck!"

A week later, Trone stood on the rough ground before the tent hangars of the new drome at Avizy. His long legs were spraddled and his big hands clasped tightly behind his back. To his left, beyond the long line of shattered trees, a French "75" blasted and hurled huge bites of death at the gray horde entrenched beyond the river in Epernay. On his right, across the bridge that ended in the mangled steel ribbons that had been a railroad, shells screamed, and whistled and exploded with a vicious thunder. In front of him, lined up for inspection, were the twelve drones.

For a long time, Trone studied them and his long jaw squared. In a way, he understood their problem. They had been good men, all of them. Especially Darrow, the one they called "Preacher." But as often happens with men who stay too close to the writhing hell of war, their eyes had become stopped with blood, their noses had become filled with the odors of decaying flesh, and their hearts had become sick with grief.

Trying to keep the fierceness out of his voice, Trone said, "You men have loafed long enough. You can't win a war ferrying crates and bellyaching about the uselessness of it all. Either we get the Germans, or the Germans get us. When they get me, they're going to pay plenty for their fun. We didn't start this war, but we're going to finish it!"

PREACHER DARROW strode out of the line. He was like a skeleton whose bones are pinned together with wire. His eyes had a hot, haunting look, like that of a hunted animal, and his thin lips seemed to struggle with the words before they came out.

"They've been telling us that for years—that we would win the war in

a week—a month—six months! But the Germans go on and on. You kill a thousand today, and they bring up two thousand tomorrow. They're indestructible! It's like fighting a stone wall. Nobody can end the war, it will go on and on and on. I'm tired of this killing—killing—killing!"

Trone stiffened. Swift, hot thoughts surged through his head. He said in that deep, rolling voice of his, "You know, Darrow, when I was on the bum, back in the states, I learned a lot about a man's duty toward his fellowman. I've jungled up with hoboes who had Plato backed off the map for philosophy. Do you know what they'd call you?"

No answer.

Trone went on hotly, "They'd call you a jungle-buzzard, because you live off others of your kind. It's the same here, as if we were all boes in a jungle. You're hiding behind a cloak of righteousness and living off the infantry—the artillery—the fighting airmen! If it wasn't for them, the Boche would break through and you'd pay with your freedom and your blood for their victory. Your children's children would feel the blow of the mailed fist. That's why we've got to fight. Be out on the line at once. We're going over!"

Darrow squinted, "That's an order?"

Trone cried, "Yes, damn you, that's an order. And if you don't follow me, I'll break you down so low, you'll be able to crawl under a worm's belly!"

With that he turned and strode toward the Sops stuttering on the line. He didn't look back until he was tucked in the cockpit of his ship. Then he threw a hot look across the field, and his heart jumped in his chest. They were following him to the line! They swarmed over the crates and settled in the pits.

Trone felt a lump in his throat. His victory had been too easy. Yet he

wasn't sure that he had won. The men hadn't exactly followed him to the line, they had followed Darrow. What would Darrow do when they were in the air?

Trone fisted his eyes and glared through the sheen of his spinning Gnome. Across the field, beyond the river, he could see the white tent of the evacuation hospital with the blood-red cross painted upon the billowing canvas. He could see the long line of stretchers moving in and out of that tent. He could see the ambulances roaring to and fro like mechanical shuttles, and he swallowed hard.

That was the part of war, that made a man sick with grief. It wasn't the killing and fighting and dying—it was seeing those wrecks coming in and it was up to the air men to prevent those wrecks. . . .

With a surge of anger, he thrust the throttle up the brass. The Gnome blasted into life and the Sop Scout rattled and hummed and trembled as the burst of power throbbled through the flimsy framework of wood and rags. He kicked the bar hard, and walked the ship off the chocks. Then he hunched down, timing the takeoff. The field was small. The poplars, that were barren trunks without limbs or leaves, leaped toward him. He pulled the stick toward his guts. The Sop hopped up, slapped down! Trone stiffened. Then the Scout leaped off the ground and cleared the trees by inches!

He jerked a look back. The drones were going up slaunchways of the field, taking off from the corner in the wake of Preacher Darrow. Trone growled fiercely. He wasn't so sure, now, whether he was leading them or not, but they circled and fell in behind him.

BEFORE they reached altitude, they were crossing the belt of scarred earth that bordered the trenches. The

big guns below them throbbed and blasted and tore the air from under his wings. Trone cursed and felt the battle urge hammer in his blood. To him war was a grim game, and the loser was sometimes the winner.

The drones bunched close behind him. Straight into Deutschland he led them and when they were a mile behind the lines, a row of black dots hurled down from the golden ball of the sun with Mercedes roaring full out!

Trone held his thumb up against the sun and recognized them. The new Fokker D-7's! He growled fiercely, a fine match they were for the sluggish Sop Scouts. Let 'em come! The drones would fight or die!

The Fokkers struck like thunder. Trone broke formation and whipped back as the black ships surged back up. He glared across the air for the drones and found them bunched and swinging wide of the fight. He cursed and drove through the black ships with his Vickers blasting twin streams of flame and smoke and death!

He hammered a burst into a black belly and saw the Fokker tremble, but stagger out of the death stream. He gunned the Gnome fiercely and felt the vicious torque of the rotary tearing the stick from his hand. He slapped the stick over and caught black in his rings. Again he batted the trips swiftly and his squinted eyes saw his tracers hammer into the cowling of the Mercedes. The Mercedes spewed smudge that was hot with flame and the black ship broke off at the nose, throwing the flaming engine clear while the broken body turned over spilling a live man!

Trone blinked at that sight and watched the falling man, fascinated. That man would live a lifetime before he struck the earth. He would be well, and able to think, and feel, and pray, and curse and then the strike of the ground would batter him into hell as

a fly is stepped on with the foot!

Even as he stared, Spandau slugs hammered into his pit like stones. They plucked curiously at his sleeve, ripping little bits of leather from his coat. They battered into the pad at his head and cut strips of leather from the cowling. He legged the stick fiercely and rolled, but when he came out, he found himself blocked off by flaming guns from the front, hemmed in with flaming guns on the sides, and beset with flaming guns from the rear.

He cursed hotly and saw his instrument panel burst into fragments of metal and wire and glass and he wondered where the jungle-buzzards were. The drones were offering him as a sacrifice! He bit back his sobbing breath and pulled the stick in. He had to get out of that inferno of shrieking death, he had to. . . .

Then he blinked and felt his blood surge like a stream suddenly loosed in a narrow channel. The drones had come in to save him. They lashed in, in a semi-circle of flaming guns and broke the Fokker trap, downing with that burst, one of the black ships!

Trone laughed then, a crazy, senseless laugh. They had saved him! He had led them into hell, and he had been caught in the flames. They had pulled him out! He waved them a salute as he broke through the trap.

But with the trap broken, the drones pulled off again. Trone stared with red eyes at the retreat. He couldn't let them run out now! He had to make them fight. He whipped his ship upon the German leader, and sent a hot burst of steel and lead into the black tail. The German turned a face twisted with hate and rage upon him, and Trone, grinning mirthlessly, led the black ships right into the middle of the swarming drones.

Hell was born in that sky with sudden fury. Almost with the first slash-

ing flurry of tracer, Trone saw a drone go down. The man had tried to pull free but the swift D-7 had clamped upon his tail. Trone could see the man's white face turn back with pleading and fear written upon it, and the German had answered that look with a burst of slugs that had almost cut the head from the shoulders.

TRONE felt a shiver of horror at that sight, and drove his straining ship in upon the German. His guns found their mark and he hammered that gray back into a froth of blood and rags, but that couldn't save the drone who had answered the call of the good earth.

The drones were scattered now, unable to pull out of the fight. Trone screamed through that fight, striving to save them. He didn't want them all killed on the first patrol. A dead man was good for nothing but worm fodder. He had to make them fight, and live!

His ship was no better than the rest, but he was a superman who made of that Sop Scout, a live thing with poison in its flashing tongue! Across the fight, he saw Bivens, another Drone, caught by the wolf-faced Boche leader. He saw Bivens' ship battered and helpless, and he saw the German hammer a wall of slugs into Biven's back, until the very turtle back of the Sop ran red with blood. Then the ship went down!

Even as that ship fell, Trone saw Preacher Darrow, riding like a mad man through the fight, signalling frantically to his drones. The drones dropped in a steep dive for the earth—all but one of them!

Cursing and straining, Trone saw that lone man caught by the lashing Fokkers and his blood turned to ice in his body. That man was "Snipe" Porter, a diminutive fighter with the

heart of a lion. He was too good a man to lose—he'd make a fighter to be proud of . . .

Daring the death that stared in his face, Trone hurled his ship at that blockade. The other drones had run away without seeing Snipe caught in the trap, and it was up to Trone to save the little fellow.

As Trone hurled his ship among those black wings, Snipe turned a white, grinning face toward him. There was pleading in the eyes of that face, but a smile on the lips. That smile touched Trone in his soft spot and he hammered his guns like a novice splitting the air into ribbons with his slugs!

He got one ship off with a broken control wire. He busted in the nose, splintering the screaming prop! He almost touched wings with another and killed the pilot of a third stone dead with a single slug!

With a wave of thanks, Snipe tore free and waved Trone to follow. Without looking back, he dropped to join his fellows, but Trone was caught in a withering hail of Spandau death! He hunched down instinctively and rolled. The stream of fire followed him. He kicked the bar in a vertical, but found another Boche waiting to finish him. He cursed and pushed the stick against the panel. A Sop wasn't a Spad, but he'd match dives with them!

Down—down—down, he screamed. A thousand feet with the wind snarling and jerking at the wires like a beast clawing at the bars of a cage. Two thousand feet with the struts jumping and drumming and the wings chattering on the hinges. Three thousand feet with his eyes going black in his head and his ears filled with strange sounds. He screamed mightily to clear his head, and bellied the stick!

The Sop flattened and groaned. He could feel the spars bend to the awful force that smacked up against his

rump. The fabric tore off the leading edge in narrow strips and ripped back like ribbons, but the wings held and when he had flattened, he saw the Fokkers surging down upon him!

Toward the lines, he could see the drones heading home and because there was nothing else to do, he gunned his Gnome and set out after them. Perhaps he'd been wrong in taking them out in the slow buses—perhaps if they had had a chance . . .

The Fokkers were screaming after him. He nursed the Gnome and fought the stick. He was almost up to the drones when the Fokkers caught his range. Then he was crossing no-man's-land and the drones were right in front of him.

They passed through a strip of hell as the archies spewed death into the sky upon them, and the Fokkers hatcheted them with bursts from heated guns. And then they were across the lines and setting down on the rough tarmac at Avizy.

TRONE was the last one down, and his landing struts cracked as he slammed the Sop against the ground angrily. He legged out and jerked off his helmet. Within him was a boiling fire. He walked up to the drones standing on the line and faced the Preacher.

But the Preacher spoke first. He strode from the line like a skeleton walking. His face was white with anger. His lips trembled with emotion.

"Trone, you're a butcher!" he cried. "you took us up to that slaughterhouse where we didn't have a chance to live! You killed three good men, Trone, with your bright ideas!"

Trone felt the fire of anger surge through him. He crouched a little, and his words came out like hammer blows. "If you were half as good fighting, as you are at Bible ranting and snivel-

ing, Darrow, those men wouldn't be dead. I put 'em on the spot, and you left them there. You killed them, you—!"

Trone saw a blur before him. The Preacher's long arm came out like a piston driving. Like a thing of steel and iron with hinges and springs, it was. Trone jerked his head. The blow caught him on the shoulder and numbed the bone, so vicious it struck him. He shook his bristling head, and lashed in, snarling!

And in those minutes, Trone learned that the Preacher had courage and power. Toe to toe they slugged like men who had no feeling—as though they were padded and stuffed with straw. Trone could feel his arm numb to the blows that landed upon the Preacher's slim body, yet the Preacher stood his ground, and his great fist cut and bruised Trone's thick, heavy face.

Bleary-eyed, Trone kept up the pummeling. Suddenly the Preacher seemed to go mad with frenzy. He lunged in, rocking on his long legs. Trone saw the fist coming for him as a white blob in a hazy fog. He jerked his head savagely aside, and struck out with all the weight of his thick body behind his blow!

There was the audible crack of bone against bone. A spurt of blood sprayed from the Preacher's lean jaw—a little jet of blood that ran down his long, sagging throat! Then the Preacher went down, and lay still.

For a measured minute, Trone stood over him, sucking madly for the air that was like fire in his lungs. Then he shook his head fiercely like a stunned bull, and because he could think of nothing to say, he legged wearily away toward the little shack he used for an office.

No sooner had he wiped the blood from his face, then the phone jangled. The confirmations were coming in. He

shrugged and picked up the receiver. The jangle of the bell seemed to clear his head.

"Hello," he barked into the transmitter. "This is Trone at Avizy."

The voice on the wire said, "This is Major Wilkins behind Epernay. Just wanted to report a Fokker D-7 down back here near the swamp. Looks like one of your victories."

Trone thought swiftly. A plan began to form in his head. "Hold that ship intact for me, major," he asked. "I've got use for it."

"Sure thing," the major replied.

As Trone hung up the receiver and sank wearily into the rickety chair, the door flung in and Snipe Porter entered. He saluted, grinning. "I just want to thank you, sir, for pulling my fat out of the fire, today. I won't forget it."

Trone smiled wanly at the lad. "You put up a game scrap yourself, Porter. Glad I could help you."

"I—I'm not afraid of the Boches, captain," Porter went on shyly, "Darrow seemed to take the reason out of fighting for all of us, but I'm not afraid. The next time I get a chance at one . . ." Snipe's hand closed suggestively.

Trone fished out a bottle of cognac from under the pile of papers under the table. "Have a drink, Porter. As man to man, there's times when I've been scared myself."

PORTER grasped the bottle. "How?" he saluted, and tipped it up.

When he had gone, Trone stared after him. Nice kid, Snipe. He liked him and he was going to make the other drones fight just like Porter would.

He shifted uneasily and stared out the dirty window at the evacuation hospital across the narrow stream. Maybe he'd done wrong in moving up so close to that place. It might give a man the jitters to see those human wrecks al-

ways coming in—endlessly. The Yanks were getting busy around Chateau Thierry. They'd need help there in the air in a day or so.

That night at Mess, Trone said nothing until the meal was done. He saw the rows of grim faces bent industriously over food and tried to read their thoughts. But a man's thoughts are his own and his tongue is the only key to them. The drones were using their tongues only for the chewing of food.

When the meal was done, Trone kicked back his chair and stared at Preacher Darrow's bruised face. That face was like a blank wall, but the eyes in that face were danger lights, flashing a warning.

"You take these canary birds up on this side of the line in the morning, Darrow. I won't be here. Just go up and take a nice buggy ride for yourselves. The air will do you good . . ."

Darrow winced at the sarcasm, "You don't have to be telling us that, captain. We're not chasing out again to look for death. We're not afraid to die, either. If the Boches attack us—if we have to fight in self-defense, we'll fight. But we're not going out to invite death!"

Trone smiled a cold, taunting smile. "You buzzards could have downed Von Schleuter and his black circus yesterday if you'd had any guts. If you intend to wait here until the Germans come and slap you on the wrist, you'll rot in your bunks!"

"And if we go over in those death wagons you've given us, we'll rot in the stinking mud. I'll do my rotting here," Darrow answered stiffly.

Trone felt the flush of anger color his face. He pounded the table with his big fist. "And while you jungle-buzzards are rotting here, the Germans hold the air, Von Schleuter ferrets out every angle of our trenches and spots every gun within a mile of the front. The doughboys die like flies in a poison pit,

and you saffron bellied lobos toast your shins in comfort!"

With those words ringing against the bare walls of the mess shack, Trone legged through the door. He could feel the ten pairs of eyes boring into his back questioningly.

That night, Trone climbed into the battered Dodge that had been assigned to the new drome and bumped over the muddy road to the swamp behind Epernay. A willing officer from the secondary trenches led him to the captured Fokker. It was a D-7 and needed only a few minor repairs on the empennage to make it good as new.

Trone grabbed a few hours sleep, and in the thin light of breaking day, with the help of a Q.M. sergeant mechanically inclined, he repaired the Fokker. They cleared off a runway on the edge of the swamp. Trone put on his heavy coat that was black as ebony and polished to a shiny smoothness. He pulled his helmet well down to shield his face and strapped his goggles tight.

He climbed into the Fokker and gunned the Mercedes. The huge engine snorted in disgust at the raw gas that sucked into its cold stomach. He tried it again and it caught and surged in a mighty roll of thunder. He warmed it swiftly.

His tanks were full enough. His Spandaus were over half-full of ammo. All right, he was ready to cure the drones! He signalled the sergeant to kick out the rocks that held the wheels, and sent the black ship screaming down the short field!

Swiftly, fiercely he lifted the Fokker. The mist was thick along the river. He cut over the ground haze and headed due east. Even before he was across the trenches, he could see the black ships of Von Schleuter. He lifted higher and hunched low. The time had come to put his plan into execution!

He was directly over the black ships

that looked like crows against the white mist below. He spilled the Fokker and slammed down upon them! The Mercedes screamed in an agony of power as the air tore past the blades. The Boches heard that scream and scattered like chickens under a hawk. They saw the Fokker and waved a salute, bunching closely again.

TRONE tore through that formation with his guns stuttering. The Germans broke again, bewildered. Then Trone nosed up, and his Spandaus were spitting death in twin streams. As he tore through that fight, he unfolded a little American flag that he held in his hand. He let this trail in the wind so that the Germans could see it, and they did see it, and swarmed upon him.

Swiftly he shoved the flag into his pocket and kicked the bar. He tried for a whip turn, but he was unused to the ship. Damned sloppy handling! He cursed as Spandaus lead cut across his cowling. He writhed out of the turn and tore broadside of a Jerry.

Like ebony, that black ship flowed past his rings. His big thumbs snapped down and the Fokker broke in half as though caught in the teeth of a buzz-saw!

Von Schleuter himself screamed such a wild, wolf-cry that it could be heard above the roaring of the massed engines. He signalled fiercely for his men to get this mad-man who dared to attack them in one of their own ships.

Trone hunched low over the stick and his dry lips were mumbling a prayer. He was in a spot and he had to get out. All right, he'd get out! He flung his Fokker for the outside of that fight and hurled through, almost crashing Von Schleuter himself as he screamed out into the open air.

Secretly, Trone rejoiced. If only the Germans were mad enough to follow him across the lines he'd make the

drones fight—make them fight for their very lives! The trenches drifted under his trucks. The ground haze was still a white sheet, swaddling the earth. Trone jerked a look back. The Fokkers were still after him. He felt the air jump as a long-range Spandau burst jittered past his head. Then he saw that the mist had lifted over Avizy, and he headed down into the white froth!

Like ice the damp mist whipped past him. He came out the bottom of the cloud of vapor and jerked stiff in his seat. Right below him were the drones flying toward the south parallel with the lines and formed precisely.

He gulped madly and clenched the stick hard. He had to make them fight now. He had to make them believe he was a German after easy meat and yet he had to be sure not to harm them. He dived upon the tail end of the V with Mercedes stacks rimmed red, and cut a wide burst across the tail man's controls.

The trailing ship lurched out of formation and whipped back in a beautiful renversement. Trone stiffened. That man in the trailing ship, was Snipe Porter—the man who wasn't afraid of Boches!

And Trone learned that Porter could handle a ship. That slower Sop cut up so expertly, that it was across Trone's belly and then nosing up with Vickers spitting flame. The slugs of that gun drummed through the floorboard, cutting the flesh of Trone's big leg. He cursed and rolled madly, nosing down.

Porter slid past swiftly, and lifting with the gun full on, he whipped over to Trone's tail and let go with a burst of lead. Trone could feel those slugs boring into his ship, and he groaned. He didn't want to die that way! He jerked a look across the sky for the Fokkers and he couldn't see them. He could see Preacher Darrow turning back to help Porter.

Trone knew then, that he had to do something quick. He half-looped and rolled flat. He had to signal Porter—tell him who he was. He lifted his hand, but before he could complete the signal, the Vickers slugs hammered into his pit like a wall. He was facing Porter, screaming for him, head-on! He could see the Vickers eyes bleared red and hateful and he could see the fire drool from their steel lips.

At the same instant one of the slugs hit his arm. The convulsing of the stricken muscles caused his hand to fold tight around the stick and his thumb squeezed the trips subconsciously! Trone saw his guns bucking and wondered at them. His hand was numb, without feeling. For a tense minute he held the trips down as he stared at Porter's ship. Then he saw Porter's ship spinning slowly down—down—down. . . .

A curse that was a sob burned from his thick throat and he suddenly realized he was holding the trips down. He forced his paralyzed arm from the stick and hung it outside the pit where it could fend for itself. He felt a great hand closing over his heart, squeezing the blood from it.

He had killed Porter. That thought was a fire in his brain. He had killed Porter—wantonly—meaninglessly. His great frame shook with the sobs that surged from his chest and his eyes bleared and filled and ran over. He fisted them fiercely and hunched down, waiting for Preacher Darrow and the drones to blast him into hell!

But the air was strangely still around him. He whipped the Fokker and his breath stopped in his throat. Over beyond the river, Von Schleuter had come down. He had come down with his hellions and they were strafing the evacuation hospital as a hyena gorging on offal! Trone understood! The wolf

squadren were exacting vengeance for the trick he had played upon them.

And Trone saw something else—he saw Preacher Darrow and the drones, hurling down upon the Germans like jungle beasts eager for the kill. He felt a thrill of triumph at this sight, and almost forgot Snipe Porter whirling down through the haze. He gunned his Mercedes and hurled into the fight to drive the butchers off the wounded men on the ground.

He reached that writhing hell swiftly and reached into his pocket for the American flag that should identify him to the Yanks. But his blood turned cold and sluggish as his hand came out empty. The flag had blown away!

Trone felt suddenly beaten. Both Sops and Fokker converged upon him. The Sops took him to be a German, and the Germans knew him to be a Yank! He rode the gantlet of those massed guns, and with his Spandaus growing hot and stinking, he downed one German as he lashed through!

The fight lifted from the ground a little. The Germans had to stop the strafing for the Yanks meant business and sent death screaming across the air in a dazzling design of gray tracer. Trone saw Darrow hurl upon a Fokker and cut it to ribbons. He saw a Fokker jump a Sop and feed fire to the straining Gnome!

Trone cursed and beat his cowling as that fire flared back. He jumped to the offending German and hammered Spandaus into that back like a living hail. The German turned back one hate-twisted glance and fell, cursing at the madman who killed Spandau nurses with Spandau slugs!

Then, Trone tore his helmet free and threw it away. He cast off his goggles and the drones recognized him for what he was. They lashed in viciously, sending two more Fokkers down to destruction. Trone saw that and gurgled a

laugh deep in his chest. The strafing of that hospital had lit the flame of battle in the drones and they were drones no longer!

Trone could see the forms of the wounded men on the ground, cheering that battle, and the drones could see them too, and the sight sent them into the battle like mad-men. The droning of the engines, the chattering of the guns, the screaming of the props was a mad voice of battle and suddenly out of that crazy design, a sinister maneuver formed and Trone felt cold as he realized it's meaning.

The Germans had suddenly turned upon him. They had singled him out as the cause of all their trouble. They meant to kill him dead with a hail of lead through which no man could come alive! They closed in menacingly and Trone was suddenly helpless to break free!

He hunched down, cursing fiercely, grimly. All right, if this was the end, he had achieved something. He had made the drones fight. Let them take him now—all he asked was a proper price for his killing, and he squinted at the rings!

DARROW hurled at that trap, striving to get him loose. Darrow got himself into a jam and a Fokker whipped to his tail to finish him. But Trone had a chance to get that Fokker and he did. He knocked it off Darrow's tail, and dove for the opening. But the opening was plugged by another black ship, and they closed in tighter and tighter and the slow Sops were helpless to break them up!

Trone growled as the massed Spandaus hurled death at him. So this was the end—this was the. . . .

At the same instant, a white Nieuport with a red nose and a giant LeRhone dragging it like lightning into the sky, thundered into the fight. Trone rec-

ognized that ship. It was his own ship that he had left behind on the ground when he had taken to the Sops. He glared into the pit for a glimpse of the mad-man who drove it, and recognized him. It was Snipe Porter! Snipe Porter had come back from the dead to save him!

Snipe hurled that swift Nieuport at the Fokkers like a thunderbolt. Like a mechanical thing it was, hurled by a catapult. Trone saw his chance and whirled to meet Porter's charge. Together they sent lead crashing into one ship that formed a corner of the trap.

Porter showed, then, that he wasn't afraid of Boches. He held to his victim like a leech as the other Fokkers turned to cut him down. At the same time, the attacked ship left the trap, surging down in smoking ruins, and Trone leaped free!

As Porter thundered clear and dived down to escape the wrath of the Boches, a black ship dived upon him. Trone recognized that ship, and he went down to save Porter. Van Schleuter was in that black ship, and Trone could ask nothing more. . . .

Down—down—down—they screamed like a living tornado! Trone felt the Fokker gaining—gaining—gaining, as the heavy Mercedes dragged it down. Could he pull out? He didn't know—he didn't care. He saw Von Schleuter tripping a burst of hot lead into the Nieuport. Then he snapped on the trips!

Trone held those trips down fiercely, steadily. He had no thought of releasing them. He could see Von Schleuter's back turn red and he could see the blood spray back across the black back of the falling Fokker. Von Schleuter jerked one look back—one look of wolfish hate, and then he was gone!

Trone fought with his ship. The heavy engine had built up the speed to a streak of light. To pull out fast, meant losing his wings. He nursed the ship out of that dive. A hundred feet from the ground it slid off on a wing! Flattened! Dipped down, and crashed near the line in a flurry of dust and wreckage! It spun to a stop and Trone crawled unhurt from the wreckage!

Porter was climbing from the Nieuport. Darrow and the other were coming down from empty skies. They all crowded to the line. Trone grasped Porter's hand.

"Good Lord, man, but I'd thought I had killed you up there in the sky. You had a right to attack me—I was expecting it. But I hadn't intended to shoot back. A slug hit my arm, and my hand pressed the trips without my knowing it. Are you all right?"

Porter grinned broadly. "Your slugs didn't even hit me, captain. A control wire snapped off at the yolk letting me down flat. I made a landing and got out your Nieuport. I could see by your look of surprise when I fell the you weren't a German, and I saw the flag flutter from your pocket! I went back up to save you for what you did for me yesterday. Now we're quits!"

Then Trone saw Darrow. Darrow's face was white and drawn but the light in his eyes was eager and questing. "I'd—I'd like to shake hands with you, too, captain. You were right about this business. I've learned today that we're not fighting men—we're fighting principles! As long as there are men like Von Schleuter in the air, who will bomb a field hospital full of helpless wounded men, then I, nor any of us have any business on the ground!"

Trone felt suddenly very tired as he shook Darrow's hand, and very happy.

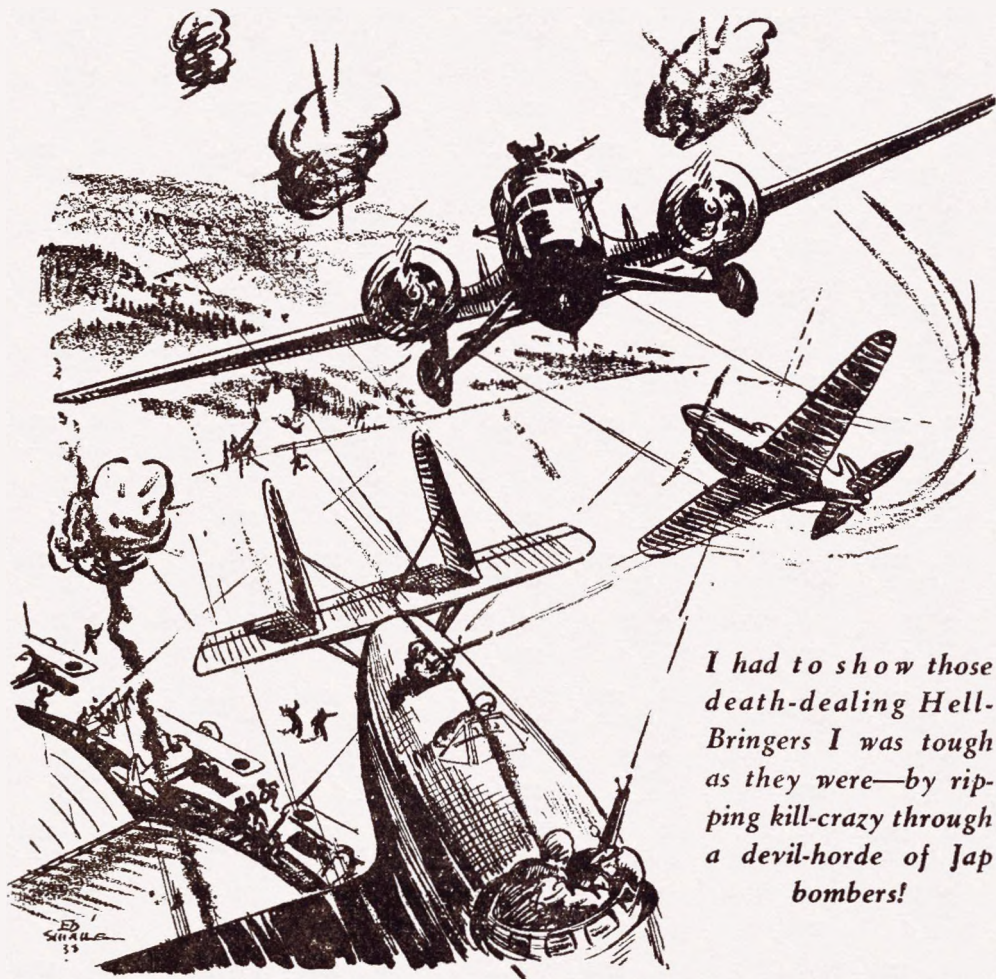
The End

Timely, Human, Pulse-JOLTING Novelette!

Last Flight for Money Killers

I heard the shrapnel hit
the Vic.

By
OMAR GWINN



I had to show those death-dealing Hell-Bringers I was tough as they were—by ripping kill-crazy through a devil-horde of Jap bombers!

“SO they think I flew soft,” I said. “How the hell should I know what they think?” Wolf grated. “You know, all right,” I said. “Whisky! Leave the bottle, you slonch-eyed—” Wolf roared at the Chink bartender, ignoring me.

Wolf was irritated, all right. That’s an elder brother’s privilege in this world. It goes double when he’s your Lieutenant and you’re a pursuit pilot subject to his orders. That’s what I was. Wolf was subject to the Chinese C.O.’s or-

ders, of course — but those didn’t amount to anything. When the Chinese army hired our Hell-Bringers flock to do the dangerous jobs for them, they did it with an implied *carte blanche*: whatever we did was okay with the Chinks.

There were nine of us, and they called us the Hell-Bringers because that was exactly our rep. We got it in the Spanish fracas. We left that mix in a body because we didn’t get the bounty we expected.

This Shanghai business looked a lit-

tle sounder financially to us, so here we were. We were getting top wages and half a G bonus for every Jap plane we could prove we had bagged. The Chinese hated and feared those Jap planes plenty, because they were raising hell with everything.

Not that *we* had any personal quarrel with the Japs. It just happened that we were hired to fight them. Fighting was our trade. I'm not bashful about admitting that: guys like us have been hiring out as fighters for the past 3,000 years. They get paid for what they kill. Maybe you'd like it and maybe you wouldn't. It's all a matter of temperament. Wolf and the remainder of his flock had done it a long time, and now it looked like a good bread-winning job to me. I didn't question the ethics of it . . .

So we'd been in Shanghai ten days and Wolf had bagged three Jap planes—\$1,500 worth. The price was fair enough—because if a Jap got one of us, there was no diplomatic squawk. We were here on our own, strictly at our personal risk.

In those ten days all I'd bagged, it seemed, was the *soft* brand. I'd bagged that this afternoon. I had a Jap cold meat, right over him. He was limping and another blast from my Vickers would have sent him down in flames. It was then the mechanism of my gun got jammed because of an oversight on my part. It wouldn't spit, right when I needed it most. So I buzzed along over the Jap awhile and couldn't get the gun working. The Jap limped away, got clear out of the fracas and away safe. The other H-B's saw it all, and they thought I'd lost the fighting heart; that I'd let the Jap get away out of some soft sentiment. They thought that because by the time we got back to Shanghai I'd got the gun unjammed again. So my alibi for not getting the Jap sounded plenty thin to them.

To understand that, you have to know what kind of men the H-Bs were. They were hard-bitten, hard-living, no-give guys of scattered nationality and I sometimes think their mothers were stone quarries instead of women.

To go soft was to them the unforgivable crime. To them there was only one way to see it: when you were fighting on a salary and piecework basis, you fought hard, and then you had an enemy plane cold meat you downed him. That was all there was to it.

They didn't think I was yellow. That's something else altogether. Guys with the saffron streak down their backs don't become professional air-fighters.

I GUESS they were branding me soft because I'd never really proved myself. I was the youngest of the flock, only 28. All the fighting I'd done had been in the Spain mix. I'd bagged a couple of planes in it—with help. All the other H-Bs were older and had had much more experience. Today I'd had my first good solo chance to outfight another plane and I'd flopped at it, through no fault of my own. Except that they didn't believe that. Their looks, including Wolf's, had told me what they thought. To them I'd simply gone mushy about bagging an enemy I was hired to bag.

Wolf stood there at the bar, drinking hard stuff the hard way and thinking things. He'd squawked against it when I showed up in Spain unexpectedly to join his flock. But I'd joined anyway. And now he felt, like the others, I'd let him down.

He was a big guy. His eyes were hard as the life he'd lived. There was a deep scar down one side of his square-jawed face—a little souvenir of the Big Brawl; he'd got it in 1917 when he was a punk in France flying for the pure love of fighting. He got the Wolf tag for his cunning and his savagery. Few air-

fighters ever lived who could top Wolf, and I don't say that out of any kid-brother awe, either.

I didn't like the things he was thinking. I didn't like to see him standing there tanking and looking that way.

"Listen," I said, getting bitter myself. I wanted to swing him around and bust him on the jaw all at once.

"What's there to listen to?" His voice was deep and seemed sardonic. Enough to make me blaze. He didn't look at me.

"I told you the typewriter jammed. How was I supposed to bring him down—with a pea-shooter? When the machine-gun jammed I took it on the run. It's happened to other men before this."

"It wasn't jammed when you landed," he said.

"I worked at it with my free hand and got the mechanism working again!" I practically yelled at him. I could feel my face hot red with anger.

"Okay," said Wolf. "Forget it."

"You don't believe me, you—!" That's not the thing to call a brother, but I called him it. I grabbed his arm and swung him around facing me.

"So you want something, do you?" His mouth twisted down at one corner and his eyes were dangerous slits all at once.

"You're implying I ran soft," I said. "It's a damned lie. You sound as if you regret ever letting me into this."

"Do I? So what?"

He was tensing and he had enough whisky in him to make him mean. In another splash we'd have been at each other like a couple of mad dogs. But then Julia and her father came in. I saw them in the bar mirror. There was a cafe section beyond the bar. Julia Boynton and her father usually came here for dinner.

So I didn't swing at Wolf. I got control and turned around. So did Wolf.

Julia saw us and came toward us

smiling. And my heart went into a tail-spin, as usual. Just looking at her did that to me. I'd gone soft on her the moment we'd met. That was eight days past—and eight days are a long time in our business. There was sunshine in her smile, sunshine in the gold of her hair and her voice. She was—well, hell, I'm no poet. The first several times I'd met her I'd hoped she might feel for me the things I was feeling about her. But her interest in me seemed to shift after she met Wolf. He always did have a way with women. The way it looked to me now, she was one of those fragile girls who love only hard, strong men—like Wolf. The psychologist guys explain all that. Anyway, she'd been cool to me the last several nights.

SHE was even cooler tonight. I guessed she'd heard from somebody that I'd gone soft this afternoon—and she didn't like them soft.

Coming in with her father, who was a buyer for some big American company, she saw Wolf and me there at the bar.

She came forward smiling with her hand outstretched—to Wolf, not me. She merely nodded politely, a little coldly, to me.

"I'm hungry, John, and glad to see you," she said to Wolf. John is Wolf's real first name. John Lassiter. I'm Robert Lassiter.

"That's fine, Babe. Let's go," Wolf said, grinning. Then he took her arm and they walked away to join her father at the entrance to the cafe section of the place.

Wolf turned carelessly, said over his shoulder to me: "Go get some shut-eye. That's orders."

I clenched and unclenched my fists and breathed hard, watching them go into the cafe. So Wolf was the big hard-bitten hero was he, and she worshipped at his manly shrine? Her femininity

needed his strength to lean upon. Okay. They'd see if I was soft.

Trembling with rage and jealousy, I went to the barracks. Officially, the nine of us H-Bs were part of the Toosung Squadron, but we were quartered apart from the Chinese fliers of the Squadron. Our barracks were near the International Settlement, but not *in* it. That might have meant international complications—for the nine of us were assorted French, Russian, English and American. Our quarters were in part of an old factory building. It was big enough for us to use it for our drome.

This being one of those foggy Shanghai nights, it wasn't likely the Japs would do any bombing—for fear of hitting the Settlement shooting blind. So there were only three of the H-Bs in. The rest were out drinking, no doubt. The three were playing cards. The way they nodded at me and the way they looked was plenty cold. It showed what they were thinking. Well, I thought, to hell with them. To hell with everything.

I didn't do much sleeping that night.

It was about dawn when I dropped off, tossing irritably. And almost at once I heard the gong bonging fast. That was the signal for us to take the ozone—the Japs were bombing again.

By the time I got into the leather and out to the drome room, Wolf was hanging up the phone from the Chinese C. O.'s call.

"Where are they?" I yelled. A couple of H-Bs were warming up their motors and the drone was loud in there.

"Over Chapei," Wolf said. "A dozen or so bombers blasting the place apart. Keep on my tail and don't let more than one get around you at a time."

Then Wolf was running for his plane and I was running for mine. The Chink greaseballs, chosen because they could speak three or four languages as much as for their mechanical ability, were running around. But everything was set.

The nine of us rolled out of there and took the air within two minutes after the C.O. had phoned. I kept my plane right alongside Wolf's. We wheeled north toward Chapei, avoiding the Settlement. That was orders. The nine of us were citizens of no country. We were citizens of hell.

The fog had lifted; the sun was shining.

I could feel the motor purring steady. It was a good plane. All nine were good. They were new Vics, mono combats, which the Chinese had bought from the British without the factory name. The Chinks had painted red flames on the grey sides to identify us to the Japs, who didn't like mixing with us too well.

My jaw set hard as I tested the machine-gun mechanism. It was set on a universal swivel so we could shoot from plenty of angles. It spilled 'em fast and we carried 600 rounds apiece with us on these sorties.

Ahead and below us in the distance, belches of smoke and debris spewed up as the Jap bombs hit bleak-looking Chapei. The wide, sluggish river was a dirty coffee-colored worm writhing as if in slow anguish.

I SHOT a look across at Wolf. I could see the livid grimness of his face, strangely. Wolf always had lived hard. There were scars all over his body to prove it, and scars on his soul too. When he went into fights, fighting for the sheer gloating danger of it, I sometimes thought he didn't have any soul. But up until yesterday I'd always looked up to him. He'd been the model for what I wanted to be. I'd worked hard at a common job for two years so I could study aeronautics and get a pilot's license. Then I'd worked dismal months more to get passage money to Spain. I hadn't told him I was going to join him. I merely went. He'd squawked, but I'd

joined. I hadn't grabbed much glory in Spain, I'll admit, but I figured to grab it here.

And I knew now damned well I was going to grab it here. I was going to prove in this set-to that I hadn't run soft yesterday. I was going to prove it or go down in smoke—and even if I went that way, that would be proof in itself.

And it didn't matter much to me if I did go down in a twisting pile of smoke and wreckage. That was a good way out, as good as any. I'd welcome it. That's how I felt about it. I didn't stand a chance with Julia. It was Wolf she cared about. He was something she could worship—with the worship a woman has for a first-class warrior.

I hated Wolf's guts, even if he was my brother . . .

WOLF gave the signal. We banked to the right and stuck the noses up. He wanted us to come down on top of the Japs, spitting ruin down on the bombers. He wanted us to do it in formation. I had other ideas, but I wasn't ready to put them just yet.

We zoomed up a thousand feet. And then we saw the Jap planes circling over Chapei and we saw the bombs dropping and spewing up destruction in brown ghastly geysers very plain.

Only somebody had been hasty in observation. There weren't a dozen Jap bombers. There were only four—bombers. But circling above and below them were ten fast pursuit planes. As fast and as good as ours, and they had us outnumbered. Wolf saw them and the other H-B's saw them. But it wouldn't make an H-B bat a lash and it didn't change Wolf's plan of attack much except that he signaled us to spread more.

Our motors sounded like a bunch of mad hornets. Wolf signaled for us to spiral up and crack down fast, to disorganize them. He wanted us to spiral

up a few hundred feet more.

The others kept spiraling up, spread out V-shape behind Wolf. I didn't. I had my own idea.

It wasn't that I had contempt for the Japs nor that I underrated them. I didn't. I don't know whether the Japs are justified in their war on the Chinese or not; probably not. But I'll say this for those Japs—they're good fliers and they have guts. The only thing that keeps them from being great fighters is their efficient adherence to discipline. They don't have the solo instinct nor imagination. It's the same defect that kept some of the Germans from being great fighters in the World War.

I set my lips tight and while the rest of the H-Bs followed Wolf up in the V-spiral, I stuck my boat down in a deep power dive. All 14 Jap planes were rising, seeing what Wolf's flock intended.

There was a tingling exhilaration in that dive; something I'd never felt before. It was as if I were a berserk human bullet cannonading into the pits of hell. Don't get the idea I'm posing as a super-god hero. It wasn't that way with me. I was cold crazy mad and I didn't care what happened. I was cold blind mad, and I was going to die that way. I'd prove to those other H-B lugs that, even if I was comparatively new at this business, I wasn't soft.

WHEN I was a couple of hundred feet under the Japs I leveled off, ruddered right so the H-Bs wouldn't be in my line of fire and stuck the Vic up at almost vertical.

It was a crazy thing to do, certainly. But its very craziness had its effect—for it seemed to confuse those orderly Jap minds. No one of them seemed to know how to meet me—and they knew they were going to have their hands full with Wolf's pack in

another moment.

I came up under them like a hornet and I got the trips going on my gun. It was loaded so every 12th round was a tracer. The gun was spitting so fast that two tracers were out before I really was sighting. Those white tracer-lines showed me where I was off. I corrected it with my finger still on the trip. Corrected it at the nearest of the four big bombers. They were the easiest targets and they were the ones making hell-on-earth of Chapei.

I zoomed up close and the clumsy bombers couldn't get their guns set at me. And about that time Wolf and his pack plunged down. All but one of the light Jap combat planes swept forward to meet them. I'd sense enough to keep on the same attacking side, so that the pack's fire didn't come my way nor mine their way.

As I came up under the first of the big bombers, I knew that one at least was cold meat. It was. I riddled its belly and hit the tank. It side-slipped, reeled, tried desperately to right. But it was gone. It went into a leaf. I leveled enough to get out from under and it spun past, a grotesque gargoyle like a living creature in the throes of terrible death. I heard it explode and had a flash of it bursting into flame halfway down and then I didn't see it any more. There was death business all around me.

The lagging Jap combat was coming at me spitting fire, to keep me from getting at those other three valuable bombers. And the three bombers saw it was no place for them. Almost as one they banked and lined for the northeast. Once they got under way, they figured to have enough start to escape.

Above me Wolf and the pack were in a roaring red mix with the other nine Jap combats. I saw two planes crash head-on, go roaring down, twisted

shattered masses of steel and wood and human flesh.

But I saw that only secondarily, because that waspish Jap combat had my range and his steel-spit was spanging into my fuselage. I kicked the Vic's nose up frantically, and the Jap scudded under, shooting holes through my tail fins. It was a narrow squeak. I cracked back around in an inside loop and started after the Jap. And then one of the H-Bs—I couldn't tell which—detached from the melee above and darted down at my Jap. The Jap dived, banked, and came back, trying to get out from under.

It was his tough luck that he came straight back at me. I tripped the trigger before he leveled. My fire got him in the engine-head and did things to it. His engine coughed a few times and his plane went into a spin. Near crashing, the Jap got control and glided down into a burning building which had been fired by the bombs. Rotten irony for him, I thought.

The H-B who had helped me banked back to the melee, waved and pointed toward the fleeing bombers.

I took out after the bombers. They were a couple of miles away by then, but being heavy they were slow getting full speed and there was a chance I'd catch them. Our superior speed had been our advantage through this fracas so far, for all the Japs were idling in circles when we first appeared. I'd only be in the way in that melee up there and it was the bombers which were most important to get. I was the only one free to run them down.

I lined after the heavy bombers, looking back only once—to see another H-B Vic crashing in flames. My heart pounded queerly inside me as I wondered if it were Wolf. Much as I hated him, I still didn't like the thought that maybe that was he who was . . .

I PUT that thought out of my head.

I had work cut out and it was worse than even money I'd get back from it. Those bombers were running to the home drome, wherever it was set up, and no telling what I was running into.

When the Vic was opened it was good for nearly 200 an hour. The steady drone of those powerful motors sent its vibration through me and I opened her up. And I gained fast.

But it must have been 20 or more miles away from Chapei before I got within range. I could tell plainly enough, because two of the bombers cut loose at me with machine guns and their tracers were uncomfortably close before I dived under them. I came up under their bellies and whanged away.

I got one of them, the way I'd got its brother in Chapei. But when I got it, when it crashed down, the other two saw their mistake in bunching close, so they spread. It left me between them, with both fires crossing down on me. Not so good. I dived toward one and got under before it adjusted the range. The other was afraid to spill anything at me because of the danger of hitting the bomber which was sheltering me.

It looked like another hunk of cold meat for me. That was the way it *looked*. It didn't turn out that way. We were traveling all the time and traveling fast.

In fact, we were nearly on top of a Jap drome. I didn't realize it until I was getting set to blast the guts out of the bomber above me and it slid down. I looked toward the ground then.

There was a flock of Japs running around on the tarmac in front of the drome, waving and milling around like a nest of ants. Ants for *my* pants—and big ants! I didn't need binoculars to see those anti-aircraft guns they

were swiveling my direction down there.

Well, I wasn't *that* crazy. The antis and the two bombers and ground machine-guns all against. I couldn't beat that and I knew it. It would have been plain suicide. I took a hurried blast at the bomber above me, but I didn't get it. I think I hit it, but not in the right spot.

Right there I quieted the gun, shot down in an outside loop. It was another crazy thing to do—against all the rules. But again its very irregularity came to my aid. The loop took me down to within a few hundred feet of the drome (it was on Chinese soil, of course; a spot the Japs had captured early in the war).

There was a rattle of machine-gun fire from the ground, but the antis held back. I was moving too fast for them, and I was too far away for the machine-guns to stand much chance of getting me.

Not sparing the time and risk of righting, I took the ship down fast to about 200 feet and left the drome vicinity like a bat out of hell—flying upside down. The antis cut loose at me then, as I knew they would. But I was flying low and away at about 150 m. p. h. A couple of the anti shells exploded close. I heard the shrapnel hit the Vic. Going away from the shells, however, there wasn't much chance of their doing me fatal damage.

I had to fly three miles upside down before I was out of dangerous range and could roll over to normal. When I did, the torque pull was terrific, but I managed to right it. All the blood had gone to my head from being upside down, and I was dizzy.

Dizzy—and mad. I'd got one bomber and the combat plane over Chapei—\$1000 worth. I had proof of them. And the proof was necessary before the Chinks paid off. That's what

burned me: I stood to lose the extra \$500 for the bomber I'd got in the chase. Nobody had seen me get it. I wouldn't be able to prove it.

And then, with Chapei only a few miles in the offing, and while I was cussing a red streak, a Jap combat plane, alone, came out of a low-hanging cloud bank to the west of me. For a moment I thought it was a pursuit plane from the Jap drome. But the direction wasn't right. So I decided it was a straggler.

A chance to bag myself another \$500—and to prove further the softness in me was imaginary.

There were still 50 rounds or so in my gun. Enough, if I used them right.

BANKING short to the right, I plunged the Vic straight at the Jap. There was a snarl on my lips and scalp-lust searing my insides. I held my hand off the gun trip until I had a fair range. I expected the Jap to make it hot for me. My idea was to get in behind him and chase him clear into Shanghai, or at least into Chapei. That way, there'd be proof I'd bagged him.

But a strange thing happened. The Jap didn't speed up and he didn't shoot at me. I worked into a broadside position and blasted away. The first tracer showed I hit him midship. His motor coughed and I saw him waving at me frantically out of the pit. What for? It was a mystery to me. Unless he was trying to tell me he was surrendering.

He'd have to do that anyhow, now. His motor stalled and he nosed the plane down in a dead wobbly glide toward a roadway between the rice fields below. I cussed again then, for being so hasty. If I'd run him into Shanghai, it would have saved me trouble. As it was, I'd have to land and capture him for proof to take in with me.

He landed shaky on one point. The plane veered out of the road into the

marsh and nosed half over.

I fishtailed down behind him, being careful to hit the road square and three-point. I made it without nosing over and rolled up behind him. Pulling my service automatic, I leaped out of the pit, shielding myself on the off side of the plane in case he tried to pot me. I yelled at him and then he crawled out of the pit with his hands high. I ran around to him.

And when I got up close I nearly keeled over. It was like a drunken nightmare, an hallucination!

"Wolf!" I yelled. "How in the hell —"

"A natural question, kid," Wolf said, grinning sardonically. "I guess this is the day you trumped me." Blood was streaming from a bullet gash along his forehead and there was blood dripping down his left sleeve. "I see you didn't fly soft today, Bob," he added.

I stood there for a minute goggling at him. Then I remembered I hated him and changed it to a glare.

"No," I said. "And it's damned lucky you're wounded, or I'd knock your teeth out."

"Plenty of time for that later." He grinned again. He wasn't letting me see a trace of the pain he was suffering—except in the whiteness of his face and the way his mouth twitched at the corners.

Then I said: "But what the hell were you doing in that Jap plane?"

"It was a case something like this," he said, grinning, forcing it. "Two Japs got me into a dog-fight out of the pack. They crippled my motor and forced me down in a running fight." He gestured toward the northwest. "They were idiotic enough to come down after me. Wanted to stuff me and stick me above the fireplace I guess. Or gloat over my capture. Anyway, I played possum. Drooped over the pit like dead. When they landed and came running up—

well, I came to life and let 'em have it with my automatic. Then I grabbed one of their planes and was starting back. You came along and shot me down again. And you did okay, kid."

"Then I guess you can eat those cracks about my being soft," I said after a moment.

"I guess so. You certainly proved you have what it takes. You're one of us."

"Okay, then," I said. "Get into my crate and we'll go to town. I got \$1500 due me."

"That's right," Wolf said.

We got in and went up.

I didn't hate Wolf so much now. I'd showed him and the others that I wasn't soft, that I never would be soft.

When he said, "You're one of us," there was a touch of pride in his voice. He'd squawked like the devil when I'd shown up in Spain and insisted on joining. I suppose he'd figured it would be on his conscience if I got it in the neck. But now he knew I could take care of myself.

When we stowed the plane in the drome, I made Wolf come with me for witness and made the Chinese brass hat shake loose the \$1500. Wolf got a G for himself. The Chinese were fair about that. They paid the same day we did the work for them.

"Well," said Wolf, "what's now?"

And at that moment, with the money in my hands, standing there by the brass hat's door, something began to happen to me. It crept up slowly. It made me uncomfortable at first. I figured it was just the glow of battle fading.

"I think I'll have a few drinks," I said.

"It's a good idea. You rate it. I'll have a quick one or two with you. Then I have to—"

"I know," I said tersely. He had to see Julia.

AFTER we'd had a couple of drinks together and Wolf had left, I sat there in a booth alone. And I kept on having that strange feeling — what I could now identify as a sort of disgust. I wanted to get drunk, but I couldn't. I sat cold sober over two more drinks for the next three hours, staring ahead at nothing, hardly hearing the melancholy music of the geisha girl entertainers.

All I could hear was the whining, sickening moan of a mortally wounded plane as it crashed to earth bearing human victims. I could see the faces of those Japanese pilots as they went twisting down in their trap of steel and wood and searing flames. Young pilots against whom I had neither personal nor national grievance; young men with families, young men with sweethearts.

It came over me like a black cloud all at once. I knew what was revolting inside me, what made me feel this loathsome disgust at myself. It was as if I were a leper.

I was a money killer. A murderer for money.

Perhaps not a murderer. But certainly a killer for money. It wasn't a question of whether the Japs were right or wrong. Right or wrong, it was a matter for the Japanese and Chinese to settle for themselves. Had either country deliberately attacked my own, there would have been no grounds for misgiving. In that case I would have been justified in killing. But this way: *no!*

I saw the whole thing then. In my blind idolizing of Wolf and his adventurous career, it seemed he could do no wrong; that all he did must be right. And perhaps for him it was. He and nearly all the other H-Bs had got the poison in their blood during the World War. They had come out bitter, hard, twisted men. Killing, fighting, was the drug to which they were slaves. But I certainly had no excuse for being that

kind of a guy . . .

When I got up and went out of there, I had just one idea: I was going to take the next boat back to the States and get a civilized job and become a respectable, useful citizen of my own country for a change . . .

I knew there was a boat tomorrow heading down the China Coast to the Philippines and across the pond . . .

I didn't waste much time saying goodbye to Wolf and the other H-Bs. I just told them I was through, that I'd had all the killing for money I could use. They were surprised as hell of course; but they didn't say much. There were strange expressions in their eyes. Half approval, half regret, it seemed to me. But they didn't say much. I didn't invite them to see me off.

Well, I was standing there alone by the gangplank waiting for the flunkies to get around to taking some of my luggage up the gangplank when I saw Julia running toward me across the dock. Her eyes were wide and there was a look in her eyes I'd never seen before.

I stood there wondering and staring at her. I'd avoided saying goodbye to her, because that would have made it tougher.

She got to me. And when she flung her arms around my neck and started sobbing — you could have bowled me over with a great deal less than an anti-gun.

"Wolf—told me! And I'll never let you out of my sight again. Never, never!"

"What—what're you talking about?

It's Wolf you—"

"No!" she cried. "Can't you see, Bob? It's only *you!*"

I'M still dizzy when I think about it.

I'm not the only guy who's discovered it—but women *are* damned peculiar creatures. We did quite a bit of emotional talking and I gathered she'd fallen for me the same way I had for her. She loved me, but she hated my killer career. She hadn't known me long enough to feel she had any business trying to make me quit — and she thought I'd have refused. So that was why she'd been ignoring me and playing up to Wolf these last three nights—she wanted to get enough control of Wolf to make him kick me out of the H-Bs. I'd been wrong: it wasn't Wolf's hard-bitten strength she wanted. She wanted me—before I became like Wolf and the others.

We didn't take that boat. She had to pack. We took the next one.

Julia and I were honeymooning in Hawaii a couple of months later when I got the telegram. I knew I'd have to get it sometime.

Wolf found his finish the way he'd wanted it, the way it had to be for him. He went to hell in a blazing mass of twisted wreckage—a head-on crash in plane-to-plane combat.

I didn't talk to anybody all that day. I couldn't. There was too much lump in my throat.

I couldn't help remembering that, whatever else he'd been, he was my brother. And that once upon a time he'd been my idol . . .

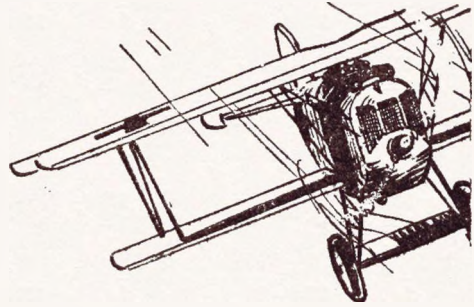


Flaming Destiny of the

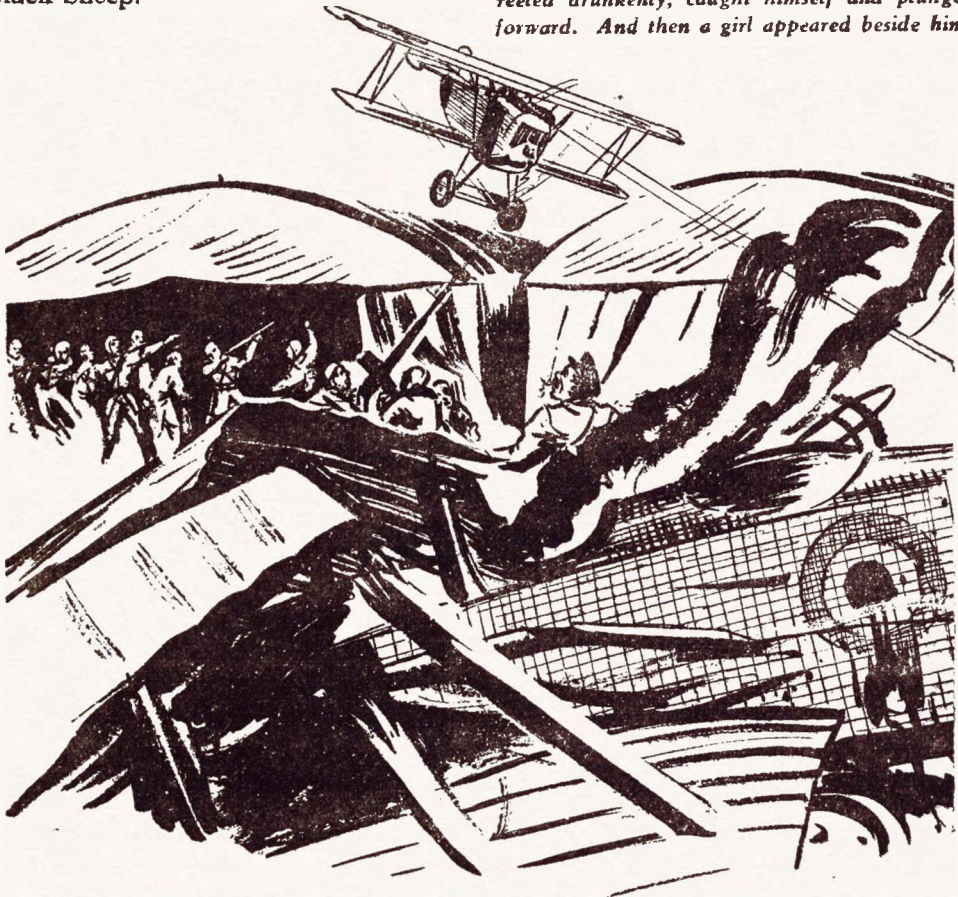
Once again the hell-diving Black Sheep
screaming, shell-torn

CHAPTER I

A MACHINE gun can be pretty nasty in the hands of an expert. And there's something to be said for shrapnel—a hand grenade and a French .45. But the quickest and surest way of acquiring a black eye, a bloody nose or a couple of busted ribs, along the entire Western Front, was to look cock-eyed at one of the Black Sheep.



A dark figure staggered out of that blazing funeral pyre, reeled drunkenly, caught himself and plunged forward. And then a girl appeared beside him!



And on this particular evening, the members of the Black Sheep Squadron were in a particularly nasty mood. Had been, in fact, for the past ten days. Ever since things had started to go hay-wire.

Captain Quinn—boilermaker Jack Quinn—C. O. of the outfit, stood straddle-legged beside one of the hangars and from jaundiced eyes surveyed his domain. The sun was flaming low in the west and already a violet dusk was

Sky Damned!

Squadron roars through war skies!

by
**ANTHONY
FIELD**

Author of "The Devil Looks After His Own," etc.

Some member of that infamous Black Sheep Squadron was a spy who had sold their honor to hell—so theirs was a double mission of hate as they roared through flaming skies in a mad attempt to save the Allied High Command from raw annihilation!



gathering in the east. On the tarmac stood two planes, their motors idling.

A step sounded behind him and he turned as Captain Drake joined him, proffered a crumpled pack of Camels. Quinn took one and they lit up.

"According to the calendar," said Dake, "it's Spring, someplace. Imagine! Robins twittering. The smell of lilacs." He kicked at a clod of dirt. "Nuts! Spring don't come to the Western Front. Smell the nice burnt castor oil. Hear the sweet music—of the big guns up ahead."

"The hell with Spring," growled Quinn. He flung his half-smoked cigarette to the ground, crushed it savagely beneath his heel, turned to watch the flyers straggling toward the mess shack. A half dozen conflicting emotions crawled slowly across his battered face. His Squadron—the infamous Black Sheep! Sky Devils, too tough to discipline, with records as black as their name. Flying, fighting fools who had made history on the Western front. Heroes all.

All? Quinn's face darkened. His hands clenched into huge fists at his side. "Look at 'em," he said bitterly to Dake. "No whistling. No horse play. No scrappy brawls. Not a peep out of them—that bunch of hell raisers. I don't like it."

Dake shrugged. "Neither do I. But you can't blame the men for looking cock-eyed at each other. Hell, that rumor is spreading like wildfire from outfit to outfit, all through the sector."

Quinn spat, ran a gnarled hand around the stubble on his chin. "A spy," he said harshly. "A spy in the Black Sheep." He gagged at the word, continued bitterly. "Listen, Dake, I hand-picked this bunch. They're bad eggs—so tough and hard boiled no brass hat could handle 'em. They'll kick the hell out of military etiquette, maybe, but they've sure blasted the Boche out of the skies. I'm damned if I believe a single man-jack of 'em has sold out to Germany."

Dake—Killer Dake, ex-gangster—blew twin streams of smoke through his thin nostrils. His face was a bleak mask as he drawled: "But you do believe it. And why not? Listen—for the past three weeks Jerry has left his calling card—a flock of bombs—at every drome in the sector. Except ours."

Quinn glowered. "So what?"

Dake's face was still a mask. He

shrugged. "That's not much, maybe. But every few days a Fokker pays us a quick visit—thumbs his nose at us—and then beats it. Nice, friendly social call. Nuts! Why don't we rate a bomb? That's the clincher—and you know it."

An acid venom gnawed at Quinn's heart. He nodded. "I know. That's why I keep a couple of ships warming up all the time. Next time Jerry comes, I'm going up and ride him down. I'll make him talk. By God, I'll find out what's at the bottom of all this."

"Just like that, eh?" mocked Dake. He flicked his cigarette away in a glowing arc. "For all you know—I'm it. Come on, let's eat."

"If I thought you were," growled Quinn, as they headed for the mess shack, "I'd take you apart—into little pieces—just like that."

Dake grinned. "That works both ways, sweetheart," he drawled. "If I . . ."

He broke off suddenly and both men pulled up in mid-stride. Above the distant rumble of the big guns came the drone of a motor. Their eyes swept skyward, focused on a speck that grew larger in the East. The speck sprouted wings and a moment later Quinn's straining eyes made out the twin black crosses of the enemy ship.

"It's a Jerry," he shouted hoarsely. "Come on, Dake."

DAKE hard at his heels, he sprinted headlong across the tarmac, bellying for the mechanics. His eyes never left the Fokker as he ran. It swooped down low, then banked hard around on one wing tip, straightened out and roared skyward again in a soaring climb. Even as Quinn vaulted into the cock-pit of the nearest ship, the Fokker headed under full gun into the East.

Quinn cursed. A stream of vitriolic

oaths spewed from his lips. It was a nice demonstration for he knew that it was futile to chase that vanishing plane. By the time he got his own crate into the air, the Jerry would be a diminishing speck in the distance.

Wearily he raised his hand to signal Dake and the waiting mechanics. Then, wiping the sweat from his brow, he climbed slowly out of the ship and trudged once more towards the mess shack.

A half dozen Black Sheep were gathered at the door. They looked at Quinn. They looked at Dake. No man spoke.

Quinn glared at them belligerently. "Sure," he growled. "Our little playmate again. But he didn't come to fight." Still no one spoke. Quinn felt his biceps swell. "Well, what the hell are you staring at me for?" he demanded.

Suspicion—a gnawing, nameless fear ate deep into the hearts of the Black Sheep. They shuffled their feet, glanced warily at one another. Then, in that same ominous, brooding silence, they turned and trudged back into the mess shack.

In the little estaminet at St. Omer, later that evening, Quinn leaned his bulk against the bar and stared bitterly into his untasted glass of whiskey. He was oblivious to the smoke-fogged room—the high-keyed babble of voices about him—the drunken poilu banging out raucous ditties on the battered piano in the corner. He was thinking of the events of the past two weeks. Machine guns had jammed—mysteriously—control wires had snapped—flights on special, secret missions had run into traps of German Fokkers. He was thinking how nice it would be to wrap his fingers around the neck of the man responsible.

Dake, who stood beside him, jabbed him savagely in the ribs with a hard

elbow. "Come on, Jack," he said. "Toss it down. You need it. You've been growling at yourself for the past ten minutes."

Quinn snorted, tossed down the drink at a gulp and banged on the bar with his empty glass. "Fill 'em up, Emile," he barked at the perspiring proprietor of the cafe. Then he turned to Dake and prodded a stiff forefinger into the Killer's navel. "So I'm going haywire, too?" he snarled. His face purpled and a swelling vein beat savagely in his temple. "Listen, Dake, if I get the rat who's selling us out . . ." The whiskey glass crumpled to fragments in his hand. He swept the pieces to the floor, ground them to dust beneath his heel. "Like that," he said grimly. He shook his two massive clenched fists beneath Dake's nose. "With these hands."

Killer Dake's heavy-lidded eyes never blinked. His thin nostrils flared and his mouth became a cruel, red line. "If I don't get him first," he said evenly.

Emile brought their drinks. They had their glasses half way to their lips when the door to the estaminet opened and a crisp voice called: "Attention!"

Preceded by his orderly, Colonel Gorham, the Commander of the Camouflage School which adjoined the drome of the Black Sheep, entered the cafe. The tinny notes of the piano died out—the babble of voices subsided as the men snapped to attention. That is—all but Quinn and Killer Dake—who still lolled negligently at the bar.

Colonel Gorham was a man who lived up to the maple-leaf on his epaulettes. He was a stickler for military etiquette—a mincing martinet who liked to see men jump. His dark, handsome face flushed, then paled at the insult offered by the two indifferent backs of the flyers.

HE pulled himself up to his fullest, starchiest height. His eyes hardened; the muscle along his jaw bulged. Not waiting for his orderly, he, himself, repeated the order. "'Tention!"

In the hushed silence of the estaminet, the word exploded like a bomb. With all the insolence he could put in the movement, Quinn pivoted slowly around on the bar, leaned back against it, crossed his feet and held up his glass of whiskey.

"Mud in your eye, Colonel," he said and downed the drink.

A red film clouded Gorham's eyes. He clutched the swagger stick he carried so hard that his knuckles stood out white in sharp relief. Slowly, with a firm, measured tread he crossed the cafe, halted a pace before the two Black Sheep.

His voice was brittle, frigid. "Captain Quinn, I believe?"

Quinn scowled. "Never mind the formalities, Colonel. You know damn well I'm Quinn. So what?"

Gorham should have known better—should have known that Quinn was spoiling for a fight. But his pride was wounded. The proper respect due an officer of his rank had been flouted in his face. He had been insulted before a whole cafe full of men. The swagger stick came up. But ever before it could descend, Quinn's long arm shot out and fingers of steel clamped about the Colonel's wrist.

Quinn exerted just the proper amount of pressure—twisted. Gorham's face writhed in pain—and then slowly, the swagger stick trickled from his fingers, clattered noisily to the floor. With the toe of his shoe, Quinn kicked it contemptuously to the center of the room, then released the Colonel's wrist.

"Don't crowd me, Gorham," he growled. "I feel lousy as hell, tonight."

Anger and hate crawled slowly across the Colonel's ashen face. His marble-

blue eyes were pin-points of venom and a line of sweat beaded his upper lip. For a long minute the eyes of the two men clashed like the steel of a pair of duelists engaging.

With an effort Gorham controlled his voice. "You have not heard the end of this, Captain Quinn."

Quinn sighed patiently. "All right—run along now like a good guy. Report to G. H. Q. if you must—but leave me alone."

Gorham's hand dropped to the automatic holstered at his hip. "I would have been within my right to have . . ."

Quinn lounged forward abruptly from the bar, caught the Colonel by the lapels of his tunic. His chin jutted forward until it was but a scant few inches from the Colonel's nose.

"Yeah?" he growled. "Rights—superior officer—discipline. Blah! That's all you Brass Hats think about." And while Gorham's face turned an apoplectic purple—while the veins in his neck threatened to burst—Quinn continued. "Now, get out of my way. *I'm* getting out of here—it smells."

With the words, he let his hands drop from Gorham's tunic and brushed roughly past him towards the door. And while the Colonel stood paralyzed, speechless at his effrontery, he stepped across the threshold and slammed the flimsy door behind him.

CHAPTER 2

OUTSIDE, Quinn raised his head and breathed deeply of the cool, night air. His anger evaporated and his shoulders sagged. Letting off steam had done him good. But he knew that Gorham would raise hell. He sighed heavily at the thought of all the explaining he would have to do, when G. H. Q. hauled him up once more

on the carpet.

The door of the estaminet banged behind him and Duke pulled up beside him.

The Killer was grinning.

"Sweetheart," he chuckled, "if I was a Frog, I'd kiss you. And so would the rest of the Black Sheep. They're all in there grinning like monkeys and Gorham's fit to be tied. But he's scared to say boo at 'em."

Quinn didn't smile. "He's a damn fool if he does. Solomon—or Murphy—or Von Goetz would take him to pieces. I got trouble enough as it is."

From the direction of the drome came the subdued roar of a motor. Quinn's face turned towards the sound as it grew rapidly louder. His eyes narrowed. "Somebody's in a hurry," he said.

Together the two flyers watched twin beams of light blossom in the blackness, dart from side to side as a car sped down the winding road. For some reason that he could not explain, as he watched the headlights grow larger, Quinn grew strangely tense. The headlights vanished for split seconds behind trees and houses, reappeared again, brighter each time. Then they swung into the little village. Quinn felt no surprise when the car rolled up, braked to a sudden halt before the estaminet. The wheels kicked up a cloud of dust that gleamed like flakes of gold in the bright glare.

A figure leaped from behind the wheel and automatically Quinn stepped forward to meet it. The surprise was sudden, complete. For it was a girl—a vision of a girl—who hurried towards him. He had a swift mental impression of a slim figure—of a trench coat several sizes too large wrapped around her—of bobbed hair whipped by the wind and gilded by the reflected rays of the head-lamps behind her. Her face was no more than a pale blur but her eyes

were wide in unmistakable appeal.

She glanced at Duke, then quickly back to Quinn.

"You're Captain Quinn?" she asked breathlessly. "C. O. of the Black Sheep?" Her voice was low, husky. It did things to the hard-bitten Quinn.

"Yeah," he rumbled. "And who are you?"

She came up close to him, turned her face up to his. "I—I'm . . . Never mind who I am. Listen. I must get to Paris. At once. I want one of your pilots to fly me there."

Quinn grunted—as though he had received a jolt in the midriff. "Hey," he growled. "Wait a minute. Not so fast. Maybe you better do a little explaining, first."

The girl's face worked. She bit her lip. Her brows drew into a straight line and her eyes were troubled. "I can't explain now," she said hurriedly. "It would waste valuable time. This is *urgent*, I tell you."

A dozen conflicting thoughts raced through Quinn's brain. For weeks, now, the word *spy* had been uppermost in his mind. He had brooded over it, lived with it, slept with it. Now mysteriously out of the night, had come this strange girl. Beautiful—a phoney story—no explanation. Something warned him to watch his step. His jaw set. He avoided the girl's eyes and scowled.

Busy sorting out his tangle of thoughts and emotions, he failed to hear the door of the estaminet open and close. Not until a harsh voice rasped behind him, did he turn.

"What's this?"

Colonel Gorham, his face still crimson from the recent indignity he had suffered, stalked forward with his orderly at his heels. Quinn felt, rather than saw, the girl stiffen.

"Darned if I know," he said. "She says she's got to get to Paris—fast. Wants a pilot to fly her there."

COLONEL GORHAM'S eyes narrowed to mere slits in his face. He squared his shoulders, drew himself up to the full of his height.

"She's not going, of course," he snapped.

The girl clutched at Quinn's sleeve. Incipient panic flared in her eyes. Her lovely face hardened in lines of desperation.

That was bad enough. Caution might yet override the strange surging of blood in Quinn's veins at her appeal. But the sight of the arrogant Colonel—his curt, instant refusal of her request—made Quinn see red.

He bristled. "Yeah? Who says she's she's not going—and why?"

Colonel Gorham's face went from crimson to white. A vein pulsed dully at either side of his temple.

"You insubordinate fool!" he grated. He stalked forward, his orderly following him, until he stood between the trio and the waiting car. "Who is she? What is she doing here? By what authority . . ."

Quinn breathed heavily. That same tension, that had come upon him when he first saw the headlights of the approaching car, was gripping him now. He sensed that something vital was transpiring—that minutes were precious—that a great deal was at stake. Torn by indecision, he turned troubled eyes to the girl.

"You better talk, sister. Spill it, fast. If you're on the level, you can have anything you ask for."

She glanced at Colonel Gorham's rigid, uncompromising face, shook her head. "I can't tell you anything," she insisted. Then dropping her voice, she whispered frantically to Quinn: "Please! You *must* help me! I've got to get to Colonel Flagg at once."

"She's a spy!" burst out the Colonel. "That's obvious. And what's more—she's under arrest. I . . ."

It was the mere mention of Colonel Flagg that did the trick—the name of the one man from whom Quinn would take orders—the name of the only Brass Hat who could command his respect. Quinn's indecision vanished on the instant. His head sank between his shoulders—his chest swelled.

Gorham saw, cried out warningly as his hand went for the gun at his belt. "Quinn!"

Quinn laughed—a short, nasty laugh. His left arm swept the girl to one side; his right hand clenched into a huge and iron fist. At the same instant Dake, who had stood silently by, went into action like an uncoiled spring.

Gorham's teeth were bared, the gun was in his hand, when Quinn's pile-driver fist connected with the side of his jaw. The Colonel spun half around, his eyes glassy. The gun jerked and roared as he fell, stabbing the night with flame.

"Hell!" said Quinn. "You asked for it." Then he turned back for the girl.

He did not even glance at Dake—he knew that the Killer was like a striking snake in action. Instead he grasped the girl's arm and pulled her on a run to the waiting car.

The door of the estaminet banged open as he shoved her roughly into the front seat, climbed behind the wheel and shifted swiftly into gear. In a moment bedlam broke out behind them. Men shouted, cursed; someone blazed wildly away with a gun. The wheels of the car churned the dust and as it gathered speed, Dake vaulted onto the running-board. The confusion around the estaminet redoubled as he piled breathlessly into the back seat. Then Quinn jammed his heavy boot hard down on the gas and the car leaped down the deserted street.

The hullabaloo faded rapidly behind them as they sped through the little vil-

lage and headed back toward the drome of the Black Sheep.

It was the girl who spoke first. Her eyes, frankly admiring now, studied the granite profile of the man beside her.

"Captain, you certainly can use your fists," she exclaimed enthusiastically. She laughed—a low husky laugh. "He'll probably swear an Army mule kicked him—if he ever wakes up." Then suddenly she sobered. "I'm sorry there had to be trouble. But I swear to you that in helping me—you haven't made a mistake."

Quinn steered dextrously along the rutted road with his left hand for a moment, so that he could blow tenderly on the knuckles of his right.

"I hope not, sister," he said fervently. "I been on the carpet plenty times. And the chances are against me seeing the end of this man's war. But just the same, I'd prefer to have Jerry blast me out of the skies instead of ending up against a brick wall." He blew on his bruised hand again. "Strange. I always thought all Brass Hats had glass jaws. How did you make out, Dake?"

On the rear seat, Dake lounged negligently back on the bouncing cushions. "I guess the Colonel'll have to find a new monkey to shine his shoes—for the next day or so, anyway," he drawled.

Quinn grunted. "Swell."

THE rest of the drive was made in speed and silence. They pulled up to a screeching halt on the drome of the Black Sheep. Even as they piled out, Quinn bellowed and grease monkeys came running. A ship was hastily trundled out of the hangar.

Dake drew his C. O. aside. "Listen, Quinn. This whole outfit has busted regulations high, wide and handsome before. That's why we're here—all the trouble-makers who wouldn't knuckle down and take orders. But this thing is serious. I don't like it."

"Neither do I," admitted Quinn. "But this spy business has been getting my goat. I'm sick of sitting around on my can and just growling about it. Something big is in the wind and there's only one way to find out what it's all about. I'm flying this dame to Paris, myself. Colonel Flagg knows the answers."

Dake nodded. "But hell's going to bust loose any minute. Colonel Gorham won't waste time. You'll be grabbed by the nearest M. P. that spots you. And me . . ."

A mechanic called to Quinn. He strapped on his helmet, took his goggles from his pocket. "Forget it. Look—you stay here in command of the squadron till I get back. If G. H. Q. jumps you—refer 'em to Flagg. If we gambled right—he'll square us. If we didn't . . ."

He left the words unfinished, called the girl and hurried with her to the waiting plane.

CHAPTER 3

THE motor of the Dorand throbbled an even song of power. Quinn ran an expert hand and eye over the mechanism of the Vickers, slapped it lovingly, then turned to the girl in the rear cockpit. He waved a heavy wrench under her nose. "See this?" he asked.

The girl nodded.

"Good," growled Quinn. "I use this on the heads of little girls who go hay-wire in the air and make a grab for the controls. Don't forget."

She smiled at him. "Don't worry. I won't go hay-wire."

Quinn's scowl turned into a slow grin. He chucked her under the chin but there was no disrespect in the gesture. "I believe you, sister," he said simply. "I

think you got what it takes. Take it easy, now and we'll be in Paris in forty minutes."

He settled himself behind the controls, jazzed the throttle once, eased it down again and waved a gauntleted hand at the ground crew. The chocks were yanked clear and slapping the sauce to the motor, the Dorand leaped forward, cleared the row of hangars at the far end of the field, circled once for altitude, then headed into the north.

Quinn lounged negligently at the controls as he arrowed the ship towards Paris. He was vastly intrigued by the slip of a girl in the rear cockpit. No matter who she was, she had guts and there was nothing he admired more than that. He was speculating on what she had to report to Colonel Flagg when she tapped him on the shoulder.

He turned. She pointed up and above them. Following the direction of her finger he made out in the pale light of the rising moon a quartette of ominous shadows that hovered over the tail of the Dorand. His eyes narrowed.

"Fokkers," he shouted at the girl.

She nodded. "I know. I was afraid, maybe, this would happen."

Quinn looked at her narrowly, then smiled. "So you knew, eh? Well, baby, do you want to beat it back to the drome or do we try to fight our way through?"

The girl's lips hardened and flecks of fire danced in the depths of her gray eyes. "Fight," she said simply.

"The odds are a hundred to one against us."

"I know. Fight anyway."

Quinn laughed. And then, as if to answer that challenging laugh and the girl's defiant words—the Fokkers spilled over on their noses and like predatory birds of prey, dived for the Dorand.

Hard-boiled Jack Quinn, Captain and Commander of the Black Sheep Squad-

ron, was aware of an unaccustomed thrill as he prepared for battle. By God! The girl liked a fight as well as he did. What if the odds *were* a hundred to one against them! He cleared his gun for action, fired a short, testing burst. From behind him came the rattle of machine-gun fire. He screwed around swiftly and his eyes flew wide. For with a cool efficiency that matched his own, the girl was firing a clearing burst through the swiveled machine-gun mounted above the rear cockpit. Quinn grinned at the girl—blew her a kiss, then turned back to the controls.

The Fokkers came down in a slashing power dive. Venomous lead thudded into the fuselage of the Dorand. "If they're looking for a fight, by God they'll get one," grunted Quinn. "Boys, here I come."

He ripped the throttle wide, jerked the stick forward, then back. The engine roared a crashing response and the Dorand catapulted heavenward. He completed a perfect loop and as he plunged on the downward arc his Vickers spewed a hail of lead into the center of the Jerry tripe.

The Germans were momentarily caught off guard. Their formation wavered before the unexpected attack and before they could recover the girl hammered out a long, unerring burst on her gun. The apex Jerry crate fell off on one wing. Its pilot threw an imploring hand to heaven then slumped behind the controls.

Quinn chuckled sardonically. The girl had asked for a ride and she was ready to do her share. What had he told her a moment before? That the chances were a hundred to one against them? Nuts to that! What were four Jerry tripe with a machine gunner like that in the rear cockpit!

A devastating barrage of 303's raked the Dorand. It trembled violently and dipped one wing. Quinn jammed down

his rudder bar and thrust the stick to the left. Slowly the crate righted itself and after a moment's hesitation continued on her upward climb.

A black crossed ship came pounding down from nowhere and settled for a fleeting second over his tail. He tugged at the controls violently and tried a swift Immelman but before he could complete the manoeuver splinters of glass flew up into his face from his shattered instrument board.

HE came out of the Immelman in perfect combat position. Centering his gun, he unleashed a thin thread of fire into the midst of the Fokkers. Echoing his own gun came the roar of the Vickers behind him. The pilot of the center Jerry ship rose to his feet and then fell, as his ship dropped nose first to its last landing.

Three rattling Spandaus drummed murderously at the Dorand. Quinn dove but the German crates dove with him. Singing steel whirred past his head like a flock of buzzing bees. Suddenly he jerked back the stick and flung his crate straight into the vortex of the plunging German crates. Behind him, never faltering once, he heard the deadly song of the girl's Vickers.

The Germans broke, gave way before his charge. A savage laugh of exultation rumbled in Quinn's throat. What a girl! What a sky devil she had turned out to be. Even Killer Dake couldn't do better with a machine gun. And then abruptly, the skeleton's dance of death behind him came to an end. Quinn screwed around in his seat and his heart constricted within him. A dry flame licked at his throat.

For the girl was slumped forward against her safety belt, one hand still wrapped around the trigger of her Vickers. Her face was drawn and the ashen pallor of her cheeks was heightened by a thin trickle of blood that

welled from between her lips. An ugly red stain spread slowly across her tunic.

Quinn's hand went out to her. Her eyes fluttered open, her lips moved—twisted, but no words came. Again and again she tried to speak without success. Then, with a weary sigh like a tired child, she closed her eyes once more.

Quinn swallowed at the lump in his throat; his eyes were unaccustomedly dim. "Game to the end, eh, kid?" he muttered.

Then the drumming of lead against the fuselage of the Dorand snapped him back to the urgency of the situation. Guns flaming, a Fokker lashed down at him. He whipped back the stick. The nose of the Dorand came up, faltered. The motor coughed, once—twice—then died out altogether as a tongue of orange flame erupted from the cowlings—swept back avidly in the rush of the slip stream. A searing blast of heat enveloped the cockpit.

Quinn's guts turned to a hard knot. He was crashing down a flamer with Colonel Flag's operative unconscious in the rear cockpit. He almost wished that she were already dead.

CHAPTER 4

BELOW, on the drome of the Black Sheep—frenzied activity. A siren wailed. Men tumbled from bunkhouse and mess shack. An ambulance clanged brazenly across the field. And, then, like a flaming comet, the Dorand landed drunkenly on one wheel, skidded, slewed around and settled in a burst of flame.

As one, the Black Sheep rushed forward. A blast of searing heat pushed them back. And as they watched with wide and unbelieving eyes, a dark figure staggered out of that blazing funeral pyre, reeled drunkenly, stumbled,

caught himself and plunged forward. In his arms he sheltered a limp and grotesque heap.

"My God! It's Quinn!"

With hoarse shouts, the Black Sheep surged towards him, caught him as he fell. A lurid orange glow silhouetted them starkly as they hauled him and the girl clear of the burning crate.

Quinn came to a few minutes later with the burning sensation of whiskey searing his parched throat. The fog rolled back from his brain and he pushed himself up on one arm, climbed unsteadily to his feet. The Dorand still blazed brightly . . . and then he remembered—the girl—the start for Paris—the dog fight. With a bellow he pushed aside the men who were ministering to him, elbowed his way through the group around the girl and dropped to one knee beside her.

The over-sized trench coat had protected her from the flames. But her eyes were closed and she lay still—ominously still.

SICK at heart, Quinn took one slim hand in his own huge paw. "Has . . . is she . . ."

The doctor looked up at last, his face sober. "No, she's not dead yet but I'm damned if I know why," he said crisply. "Three machine-gun slugs. We'll get her over to the field hospital right away." He looked sharply at Quinn. "You better come, too."

Quinn snorted. "Not for treatment. I'm all right. But I'd like to talk to her. She can answer some mighty important questions."

The doctor shook his head. "I'm afraid she might be unconscious like this, for a long time. That is—if she doesn't . . ." He met Quinn's eyes, broke off abruptly.

Quinn ran his tongue over blistered lips. "If—if she does come out of it, send for me right away, will you, doc?"

"It's important."

The doctor nodded, lifted the girl up in his arms.

"Hold it!" said Quinn.

While all eyes watched him, he dug a grimy fist into the pocket of his tunic, fumbled for a tiny scrap of metal. Then, pulling aside the blanket that covered the girl, he smoothed the folds of her trench coat. A pair of goggles slipped from one pocket. Automatically he picked them up, thrust them into his own tunic. Then, while the assembled group watched him in silence, he pinned a D. S. C. on the breast of the girl.

"She deserves it," he said huskily, "far more than I do."

He saluted. And as one man, the flames of the Dorand lighting up the scene, the Black Sheep snapped to attention as the doctor carried the girl toward the waiting ambulance.

The eyes of the hard-boiled C. O. of the Black Sheep were strangely misted as he watched the ambulance careen down the road. He swallowed hard at the lump in his throat.

"So she was really on the level, eh?" said Dake soberly. "Lousy break."

"On the level—and game to her finger-tips," answered Quinn. "Dake . . . if she don't pull through . . ."

"Buck up," snapped Dake. "I know it's tough but this is no time to cry about it. G. H. Q. is raising hell, all right. You and me are slated for a court martial, unless you can think fast. What do we do now?"

Quinn's shoulders squared, his chin stuck out at its usual pugnacious angle. He jabbed a stiff forefinger at the third button of Dake's tunic. "Listen, I'm up to my ears in this spy mess now, and I'm seeing it through."

He whirled around at the group of mechanics and pilots who were clustered around the smouldering wreckage of the Dorand. "Jennings! Kilday! Brice! Jump lively, you monkeys. I

want a ship. Now."

There was that in his voice that made the mechanics jump. His Black Sheep stared wonderingly at his blackened face.

"What the hell's up?" demanded Dake.

"I started for Paris, didn't I?" said Quinn. "Well, that's where I'm going."

"But . . ."

"But nothing I got a whole lot of questions to ask—and Colonel Flagg can answer 'em. If a young girl can do undercover work—so can Jack Quinn. On second thought . . . hmmm . . . that gives me an idea."

He screwed up his face in thought and the resultant grimace made him look like a black-faced gargoyle. "Yeah . . . I think I'll deal myself in. And just on a hunch, I'm taking somebody with me." He turned toward the group of flyers, raised his voice to a bellow. "Hey—Von Goetz! Come over here!"

A tall, slim, deceptively quiet-mannered pilot detached himself from the group, sauntered over to them.

A SPEEDY pursuit plane was trundled out of its hangar. Eager hands spun the prop and the motor coughed, caught. Quinn raised his voice above the sudden roar of the motor.

"We're taking a little jaunt to Paris, you and me. If the breaks are with us, we'll be able to raise a little private hell on our own. And I got a hunch we will—I always did have a nose for trouble and by God, I can smell it." He whirled on Dake. "You just sit tight till I reach Flagg. If a bunch of Brass Hats or M.P.'s come after you—run 'em off the drome!"

Quinn jerked his head at Von Goetz, stalked with long strides to the waiting plane. His hand was already on the throttle as Von Goetz climbed into the rear cockpit.

"Would it be out of order," said Von Goetz sarcastically, as he adjusted his goggles, "to inquire just what I'm supposed to do?"

Quinn groaned aloud. "I knew you'd ask that. Hell—how do I know? For the time being, you can just keep your mouth shut and keep an eye out for Jerry tripes."

Automatically his eyes roved over the instrument board, checked on the positions of the quivering needles in the gauges. Then he jazzed the throttle. The roar of the motor rose to a higher crescendo. The frail ship trembled, the whirling propeller glistened in the dim light. Quinn glanced back over his shoulder, made out the figure of Dake, watching him from straddled legs. He could not see, but he had a pretty good hunch that for once Killer Dake was not wearing his usual bland poker face. With a mocking laugh, he raised his thumb to his nose in that direction, wagged his fingers. Then he signaled to the waiting mechanics. The chocks were pulled out, the ship surged forward. Quinn gave it the gun, taxied at gathering speed across the uneven tarmac. He cleared the trees at the end of the field, kept the stick back and continued to climb.

Undoubtedly the whole outfit, including Dake, thought he had gone completely haywire. He chuckled at the probable thoughts of the pilot in the cockpit directly behind him. Maybe he *was* nuts. He'd soon find out. And he still had a hunch that Von Goetz might come in handy. German born, with all the polish and formality of a Prussian officer, for some reason Von Goetz had always nurtured an undying hatred of the German Military Machine. His hate was cold, calculating, deadly. A model of efficiency, resourcefulness and courage, he was outstanding even among the famous fighting Black Sheep.

Though his heart was heavy when he thought of the girl, Quinn felt better than he had for weeks. He was getting action. That in itself was balm to his fighting spirit. But it was the prospect of yet more action and danger before him, that made the wind in the guy wires sound like a symphony in his ears. There was a gleam in his eyes as, for the second time that night, he headed in the direction of Paris.

COLONEL FLAGG scowled at the papers that littered his desk, then with an oath shoved them to one side. This was the third night in succession that he had remained in his office until well after midnight and he was in a royal temper. In charge of Air Intelligence in those hectic days, his task was a gruelling one. But what exasperated him beyond measure was the constant stream of querulous complaints and questions, of impossible orders, that came from higher up.

His particular headache, right now, was the activity of a daring spy in a certain sector. Rumor, on its fabulous wings, had brought him the information that the trouble focused around the drome of the Black Sheep.

He assaulted the desk with a fist. The Black Sheep! Why, damn it all—he himself was responsible for them. At the suggestion of that fighting madman—Jack Quinn—he had rashly permitted the formation of a squadron of hell-raising fools. What headaches they had given him! Ever since, he had spent half his time getting them out of one mess after another, squaring them with outraged officers who demanded retaliation for all sorts of indignities. And now—this. The Colonel felt a vagrant impulse to tear at his graying hair.

Without the formality of a knock, the door of his office banged open. The Colonel shoved back his chair with a

harsh rasp, jumped to his feet. Then he placed his hands on the edge of the desk and stared at the apparition who had entered.

The apparition saluted.

From the blackened mask of a gargoyle issued a cracked, but familiar voice.

"I'm sorry, sir. But I had to come unannounced."

"Quinn!"

Then for the second time in ten minutes, the Colonel banged a heavy fist on his desk.

"Hah! Just the man I want to see. And when I get through with you . . ." The fury died suddenly from Flagg's voice, as he continued to stare at Quinn's scorched features. He said hurriedly: "At ease . . . That's better. Now—what the hell happened to you?"

Quinn knew that the Colonel, too, in his youth had been a bit of a hell-raising Black Sheep. There was a strong bond between them and now that he had shown his respect—a sincere respect—he relaxed. He sank wearily into a chair and fished in his pockets for a cigarette.

"Crashed," he said tersely as he lit up. "A flamer."

Colonel Flagg hitched one hip on the corner of his desk. "The luck of a fool," he snorted. "But what are you doing in Paris?"

Briefly Quinn told him about the girl, about their flight and the tragedy that had overtaken them. He left out mention of Colonel Gorham. As Quinn talked, the Colonel's face darkened. But he said nothing until Quinn had finished.

Then from the top drawer of his desk he pulled out a bottle and two glasses. Pouring out two stiff shots, he shoved one across to Quinn.

"That was —R5," he said quietly. "One of the best operatives I've got.

I—" he raised his glass in a toast—"I love her like a daughter."

They tossed off their drinks in silent tribute.

But war is war—a grim business and no time for sentimentality. With a sigh the Colonel became once more the shrewd head of the Air Intelligence. "She gave you no message?"

Quinn shook his head. "No, sir. She tried to, up there in the plane. But I couldn't make it out. I know she had important news for you—that's why she was in such a sweat to reach Paris. I thought maybe you could guess what it was."

The Colonel slid off his desk, paced across the floor several times. Suddenly he stopped, looked squarely at Quinn.

"Listen. You know, as well as I do, that there's a spy—a damn clever spy—operating somewhere in your sector. And you know the finger points right at the drome of the Black Sheep. You know your own outfit. Who is he?"

Quinn flung his cigarette savagely at the cuspidor. "I wish I knew, sir," he grated. "If I ever lay my hands on the black-hearted, yellow-bellied traitor, I'll make him sorry he was ever born."

THE Colonel took three more paces, shrugged his shoulders. "I was hoping you could help me. Well, now you know what R5 was doing. She was on the trail of that spy. And from what you tell me, she must have found out something." He ran his hands through his hair. "That's the way it goes. After risking her life to get information, you had to run into a German patrol and she gets crashed. Just tough luck, but the Allied command isn't interested in that—they demands results."

Quinn ran his fingers tenderly over one side of his scorched face. "Tough luck—my elbow. I beg your pardon,

sir. But for weeks the Fokkers have turned tail and run away from Black Sheep ships. This bunch was out to get us and they must have been tipped off."

Colonel Flagg's fists clenched. "So much the worse that we can't lay our hands on him, whoever he is."

He stalked back to his desk, flung himself into his chair and rested his head in his hands. "Now, unless R5 is able to talk, her work will have to be done all over again. And the traitor will be doubly on his guard."

Quinn straightened in his chair. "That's what I came to see you about, sir. The Black Sheep squadron was my idea and it's my outfit. If I say so myself, we've made a sweet record on the Western front. I've handled them so far and if there's a traitor in the outfit, I'll take care of him, too. I want your permission to have a free hand and find him."

Colonel Flagg looked up at him in silence for a long moment. "I know how you feel," he said at last. "But you're a flyer—not an Intelligence man. Just how do you propose to go about it?"

It was one thing to admit to Von Goetz that he had not the faintest notion, but quite another to say the same thing to Colonel Flagg. Quinn evaded a direct answer. "I got several ideas, sir. But of course it will all depend on how things shape up."

Colonel Flagg continued to look doubtful. Quinn rose to his feet and made a sincere appeal. "Listen, Colonel. You know me. You've backed me up before. And until now, it's worked out all right, hasn't it? Just give me a chance. I'll come through."

For a few moments Colonel Flagg drummed a tattoo with his fingers. Then abruptly, for the third time that evening he slammed his fist on the top of the desk. "Done. Go to it, Quinn. I'll see that the necessary orders are

put through. You've got a free hand. And believe me, I hope you succeed."

Quinn smiled wryly. "Thank you, sir. There's just one other favor. Lieutenant Von Goetz is here in Paris with me. He's waiting for me at the Hotel Calais. I could use him."

"Fair enough." Flagg nodded. "I'll see that the orders go through for him, too."

Quinn brought his heels together, saluted smartly. He said nothing more until he had reached the door and had one hand on the knob.

"Oh, I almost forgot, sir. If you can also manage to keep Colonel Gorham off my neck for a while . . ."

A slow tide of crimson crept up from the vicinity of the Colonel's collar. An icy calm crept into his voice as he asked: "And just what seems to be bothering Colonel Gorham?"

Quinn shifted uneasily from one foot to the other. "I—I'm sorry, sir. But circumstances made it necessary. I was forced to hit the Colonel on the jaw, sir."

The Colonel rose from his chair, stretched himself up to his full height. The color continued to rise up his cheeks, belying the frosty gleam in his eye. "Merely a case of assault and battery this time, eh? And on a superior officer."

Beads of perspiration popped out on Quinn's smoke-blackened brow. He thought of Dake, back there at the drome. Drawing a deep breath, he continued hurriedly: "Yes, sir. And Captain Dake. I've left him in charge of the squadron. But . . ."

"And what—" inquired the Colonel politely—far too politely—"did circumstances force Captain Dake to do?"

Quinn was sweating copiously. He watched the flush creeping slowly up the Colonel's face, like the red fluid in a thermometer, rising slowly toward the bursting point. "Captain Dake

also was forced to assault—Colonel Gorham's orderly."

Very carefully, Flagg spread out his fingers on the edge of the desk. "I've already told you, Captain Quinn, that I would let you take on this mission. But until I can mollify Colonel Gorham, I would suggest that you make yourself as scarce as possible."

THE slow tide of crimson reached the bursting point. Flagg pointed a finger at the door. The finger shook. And his voice shook. "Now—damn you—get the hell out of here."

Quinn saluted and ducked at the same time. And as he closed the door hastily behind him, he chuckled. For through the closed portal he could hear the Colonel's fist connect with his desk top.

CHAPTER 5

QUINN was still grinning when he entered the room in the Hotel Calais. Von Goetz, sprawled negligently on the rickety bed, looked up from a scrap of paper on which he was scribbling.

"Love letter?" asked Quinn.

Von Goetz licked his stub of a pencil, frowned in heavy concentration, shook his head.

"No—system. I've been working on it for a year. When the war is over I'm going to Monte Carlo and bust the bank."

"Brilliant," said Quinn. "But so very simple." He surveyed the room with a single, all-inclusive glance. A strip of faded red carpet on the floor, a single chair, a cracked mirror, a dim alcove that contained a wash-stand with a chipped bowl and pitcher upon it. "Just like the Ritz," he murmured.

Von Goetz shrugged. "Paris is a

trifle crowded. Even for this palatial suite I had to give madam the winnings from last night's crap game, two packages of cigarettes and a knitted scarf. I never liked that scarf, anyway."

Quinn stripped off his tunic. A pair of goggles fell to the floor. He picked them up, turned them slowly in his fingers. They had fallen from R-5's trench coat. With a sigh, he carefully tucked them away again, then went into the alcove, poured a little water from the pitcher and dabbed it on his face. Some of the black—not quite all—was transferred to a ragged towel.

"Look," he said, "if you were hunting a spy—just how would you go about it?"

The only response was a mirthless laugh. Quinn dropped the towel and went back into the room, sat down gingerly on the flimsy chair and cautiously tilted it back against the wall.

"No fooling," he said. "How do you catch a spy?"

Reluctantly Von Goetz looked up from his column of figures. "You get down on your knees," he said gravely, "and pray that Mr. Spy drops right in your lap."

Quinn sighed. "And I thought you'd be a help to me. Listen—did I—or did I not—see a bottle of cognac and some glasses hiding behind the wash basin? Maybe there's some inspiration in that bottle."

Von Goetz dropped pencil and paper on the bed, got up. "If you could only spot a spy as easily as you can find liquor, you'd be set. All right—I'll pour a couple."

He vanished into the alcove. Quinn screwed up his face in deep thought. His eyes rested, unseeingly, on the cracked mirror on the wall.

For a moment nothing disturbed his concentration. Then suddenly he went rigid in his chair. Every nerve in his body tingled. An icy finger traced a

chill line down his spine.

For into the rectangle of the mirror materialized a dark shadow. And the shadow moved. For a matter of seconds Quinn watched with fascinated eyes—watched the shadow that moved so silently, so slowly—so ominously across the gleaming surface. Then his heart kicked out a faster beat as he realized that the shadow had its living counterpart a little to the right and behind him. The hair rose at the nape of his neck as he realized that on the iron balcony outside the open window crouched a man. Even through the mirror he could see the light from the street lamp below reflected on the blued steel of an automatic.

Quinn had to think—and think fast. His own gun was with his tunic, at the other side of the room. He made a lightning decision, but it was only his brain that worked fast. Slowly, very casually, he let his tilted chair drop to the floor. From the corner of his eye he saw the figure crouched, waiting, outside the window. And while his every nerve was a-tingle, he sauntered over to the bed, picked up the paper and pencil Von Goetz had dropped and idly scribbled upon it.

He was pretty sure that the intruder had not seen Von Goetz. Hoping that the latter would not speak before he could warn him, he walked casually into the alcove, dropped the slip of paper on the wash-stand. Von Goetz stared at him—at the paper. On it was hurriedly scrawled:

Don't move or talk—we're going to have company.

It was Von Goetz turn to stiffen. A swift glance of understanding passed between them. Then Quinn picked up the drink that had been poured and walked back into the room. His gun was in plain sight but he knew better than to reach for it. Careful not to look directly at the window, he resumed

his place in the chair.

FOR long moments the silence hung heavy in the room. Quinn's ears were strained to catch the slightest sound. It was well that the mirror had warned him, for the first movements of the watcher were furtive, so stealthy, that he barely heard them.

Light as a cat the intruder slid across the sill and dropped to the floor. Quinn's flesh crawled as he sensed the shadowy menace drawing nearer to him. Then suddenly, without warning, it materialized.

A crouching man confronted him. The gleaming automatic was pointed in an unwavering line at the middle of his broad chest. A low, guttural voice said:

"Do not move!"

Then Von Goetz catapulted from the alcove. Before the intruder realized that he had been tricked, the flyer's long arms pinioned him from behind. Quinn shot from his chair, knocked up the hand that held the gun. It exploded with only a barking cough—silenced by the black cylinder attached to the end of the barrel. Plaster sprayed from the ceiling.

With guttural, foreign curses, the intruder struggled frantically to free himself. There was a flurry of fists, the lashing of kicking legs, the thud of blows and a snarl of pain.

Futile to struggle against the like of the Black Sheep. Though the intruder was tall and well-built and he battled with the savage desperation of a trapped animal, it was but the work of minutes for Von Goetz and Quinn to subdue him. An iron fist connected with his jaw; fingers of steel clamped like a vise about his wrist; the gun trickled from nerveless fingers and clattered to the floor. With crimson drops oozing down his cheek and Von Goetz' fingers dug deep on either side of his windpipe, the

man suddenly relaxed and the fight was over.

Von Goetz transferred his grip to the back of his coat collar and curiously the two flyers surveyed their prisoner.

"And just who in hell," demanded Quinn, "are you?"

The man's shoulders sagged, but he did not answer.

"A Kraut, from the cussing he did a few minutes ago," said Von Goetz grimly. He shook his prisoner as a terrier shakes a rat. "Can you talk English, you? If not, I'll oblige with German."

The prisoner found his voice. "I speak English, perfectly," he muttered. "But I am not answering questions."

Von Goetz' eyes narrowed. His jaw sagged for a moment. "Well, I'll be damned," he swore softly. "I never thought it would work."

Quinn scowled at the prisoner. "What would work?"

"Praying," answered Von Goetz. "Praying for a spy to drop in your lap. And here he is."

Quinn's eyes gleamed. A soundless whistle escaped his lips. "Whew! I didn't think—I didn't have time to think. . . . A Jerry spy! Hot dog!" He spat on his hands, rubbed them together. An unholy light glowed in his eye as he took a step closer to the prisoner. "You're going to talk, Jerry! Don't you think he won't."

"Watch it!"

The spy's hand had darted for his pocket. Quinn leaped forward. Von Goetz grabbed at him. But at that they were a split second too late.

The man's hand came up in a lightning gesture to his lips. His Adam's apple bobbed once, convulsively. Then he drew himself erect and faced them with a faint half-smile twitching the corners of his lips.

Von Goetz and Quinn froze as they realized what he had done. He inclined

his head in a mocking bow.

"Yes, you are too late."

Quinn's jaw set in a rigid line. "Who are you?" he demanded swiftly. "What are you doing here? What were you after?"

Again the man smiled. But already the smile contorted in the first spasm of pain. "I shall never have to answer," he said heavily. Then his eyes wandered vaguely around the room. "I have failed," he muttered. "I have failed."

Despite their instinctive hatred for a Jerry spy, Quinn and Von Goetz felt sick at heart as they watched him. Fortunately the poison he had taken was a swift and merciful one. A single, racking shudder shook his body. Von Goetz slipped an arm about him, supported him, headed him toward the bed. He took one stumbling step, then another. His eyes glazed over and his knees turned to water. A long sigh escaped his twisted lips. Then the two flyers picked him up bodily. But it was a lifeless body that they deposited on the bed.

FOR a long moment they stared down at their victim. Then they shrugged off the spell of horror that had gripped them at the spy's dramatic suicide. War is war. They had seen sudden and violent death only too often. And for a spy—Death perched, grinning, always, on his shoulder.

Quinn shook his head. "Too bad I didn't get a chance to work on him. Now we'll never find out what he was after—and how he got on our tail."

"Probably not," agreed Von Goetz. "Unless there's something on him."

They turned the body over and began a thorough search of the dead man's clothing. All labels had been carefully removed from his garments. They found a crumpled pack of cigarettes, a cheap watch of Swiss make, a hand-

ful of change . . . and then Quinn swore savagely under his breath. For from the inside pocket of the dead man he had removed a photograph—a photograph of a young and beautiful girl . . .

"Why—it's the girl—R-5," muttered Von Goetz.

"Yeah," said Quinn harshly. "It ties in some place but I'm damned if I see where. If this mug is carrying R-5's picture, it's a cinch that he's a member of the ring she was working on—the ring that's been raising hell with the Black Sheep." He thrust the picture into his pocket and with a dark scowl making a deep V between his brows, continued the search.

Beside the photograph, there were just three items of interest. First, a small oval-shaped disc. One side was blank but when Quinn turned it over they saw that a number had been stamped on the other.

"Z 91, eh?" muttered Quinn. "That's all. Ever see a tag like this before, Emil?"

Von Goetz shook his head. "No. Can't say that I have."

"Must be his identification," said Quinn. Carefully he smoothed out the first of two crumpled scraps of paper. "Smudged. I can hardly read it. In French. Looks like—Rue Martin—32."

"That's it," said Von Goetz over his shoulder. "What's on the other?"

Quinn smoothed out the second scrap of paper. For a moment the two flyers stared at it. Quinn whistled silently. Though the words were clear and legible, they did not make sense:

TLSR 3MZI FGKS R72YX
HS4E37WW YB61HY9G SOF2
311 NR44XS ID3Y4Y

"Code, by God!" grunted Quinn. "And the chances are it's damned important."

Von Goetz laughed mirthlessly. "Don't expect the answer to that one to drop into your lap. If that's the Im-

perial German code you'll never unravel it."

They lapsed into a silence, considering the problem. Quinn scowled thoughtfully at the still form on the bed. No use wasting regrets that the spy had not lived to talk. All they had was an identification disc, and address, and a meaningless jumble of words. But Quinn's hunches were working overtime that day. The paper bearing the code message fairly seared his fingers. He sensed that it was of vital importance—that even then he was wasting precious moments.

The lines of that still body impressed themselves on his subconscious mind. Vaguely he noted the long limbs, the lean but muscular frame. Then his eyes wandered over the Teutonic features, classic in death, the shock of tousled fair hair.

Suddenly something clicked in his brain. He whirled on his companion, ruffled Von Goetz' neatly combed hair and stepped back to squint at the effect.

"What the . . . ?" began the flyer indignantly.

"Look," Quinn interrupted eagerly. "That Jerry on the bed looks a little bit like you. You can talk German with the best of them. I got an idea."

"I can't believe it," exclaimed Von Goetz sarcastically. But his eyes lit up and he squinted closely at the face of the dead spy.

Quinn ignored the interruption. "That address—he wouldn't have kept it in writing if he'd been there before. Chances are it's a clearing house for Boche information, and if he's never been there—nobody would know him by sight. Get the idea?"

VON GOETZ did. His thin nostrils flared. Like the rest of the Black Sheep, the thought of action and danger exhilarated him. "Go on," he snapped.

Quinn glanced at the watch strapped to his wrist. "It's not one, yet. I'll trail you, cover you from outside. Watch your step—take it easy—find out anything you can. If you get into something over your head, blaze away and I'll come running." Then his voice dropped. "The chances are a hundred to one against you. This spy game is dynamite. This is no order, Emil. I have no right to give you such an order. I . . ." He faltered, stopped.

Von Goetz faced him squarely. "Order be damned," he said earnestly. "Me—I have a date at a certain house on the Rue Martin. And I'm late now. So just don't get in my way."

Any answer to that would have been inadequate. Instead, Quinn stuck out his hand.

CHAPTER 6

QUINN ran a finger around the inside of his collar, jerked his head to ease the growing stiffness at the back of his neck. He did not dare to stir from his post and he did not dare to take his eyes off the lighted window up above him. Five minutes after he had slipped soundlessly into that dark alley, the shade that covered the window had moved a trifle to one side. That was Von Goetz' signal that he had safely entered the spy nest.

But that had been quite some time ago—and the shade had not moved since. Quinn glanced again at the radium hands of the watch strapped to his wrist. Twenty minutes! Twenty minutes that had seemed twenty hours! A growing uneasiness possessed him.

The alley was shrouded in deep gloom, malodorous and stuffy. Leading up the side of the shabby building was the spidery outline of a fire escape. It crept past the lighted window with the

drawn shade, melted into shadows above. Quinn shifted a bit to one side, tried to stretch his cramped muscles. His foot touched a garbage can. Something furry brushed against his puttee, spat, scurried off into the darkness. Occasionally, from the street beyond, came the clatter of a passing cab. Otherwise the city was silent.

Beads of sweat gathered on Quinn's brow. What had happened to Von Goetz. Surely, if all had gone well, he should have come back before this. Quinn scowled at the blank rectangle of the window. If this was what it meant to be a spy—he didn't want any part of it. Action—no matter how hazardous—was meat and drink to him. This watching and waiting was like a file rasping on raw nerves.

He tried to tell himself that Von Goetz was probably making tremendous and important discoveries. But his uneasiness persisted—grew. He sniffed the air—smelled trouble. Unconsciously his hand crept to the gun at his belt. With the gun in his hand, he hesitated. A fierce and bitter battle waged in his own brain. All his instincts urged him to dash after Von Goetz. His cold reasoning urged him to wait—if Von Goetz *was* succeeding in his ruse, the interruption of Quinn might well be his death warrant. And to make it worse—danger hung like an aura about that shabby building at No. 32 Rue Martin.

His nostrils crinkled. His brain seethed. He took a tentative step forward in the darkness.

And then it came. The stillness of the night was suddenly shattered by the crack of a shot. The shade at the lighted window jerked violently—the pane went out with a crash—and glass tinkled down into the alley.

Quinn leaped forward as though he had been shot from a French .75. He leaped upward, caught the lower rungs

of the fire-escape. It was old and rickety and creaked dangerously under his weight. But with that shot Quinn had thrown caution to the winds. The rusted iron bars screeched a protest as he raced upward. He crouched for a split second before the bullet-starred window. Then, hunching one massive shoulder, he catapulted through, landed in a shower of glass into the room beyond.

He took in the scene before him at a single glance. On hands and knees, Von Goetz was trying to push himself up from the floor. In the doorway at the far side of the room, stood a hawk-faced man, a smoking Luger in his fist.

Quinn side-stepped fast along the wall as the Luger roared. His own automatic convulsed to life. The Luger jerked from the German's hand, sailed in a wide arc across the room. He went down slowly, joint by joint.

From the room beyond came hoarse shouts, the sounds of a shattering door.

"The window!" shouted Quinn. "Emil! Can you make it? I'll cover you."

With an effort Von Goetz pulled himself erect, lurched towards the window. A blurred face appeared in the doorway. Quinn squeezed lead fast and the face dissolved in a red mist.

"The next one who shows gets the same," roared Quinn. Swiftly he backed to the shattered window, threw lead again at the doorway, then leaped to the fire-escape.

Von Goetz was already halfway down, the rusted ladder swaying under his hasty descent. Quinn plunged recklessly after him.

A thud in the alley . . . another as Quinn followed. Together the two Black Sheep sprinted through the blackness.

A HEAD popped into silhouette at the window above. Streaks of

orange split the gloom of the alley—lead ricocheted off the brick wall above Quinn's head. Two seconds later the pair erupted from the mouth of the alley, raced headlong down the deserted Rue Martin.

At the corner they ducked into a darkened doorway.

"Get you bad?" asked Quinn anxiously.

"Shoulder," said Von Goetz. "Paralyzed for a moment, that's all. But thanks, old man, for . . ."

"Nuts," said Quinn savagely. "Do you think I'm going to let you die before you tell me that system?"

Colonel Flagg's newest and greenest operatives went into executive session in the bar of the Hotel Calais. The hour was late and they were the only customers. The stout little bartender brought them cognac, rubbed his eyes and retired behind the bar to resume his interrupted snoring.

Quinn was eager for details. "Well, what happened? What did you find out before the fireworks started?"

Von Goetz tossed off a stiff four fingers, coughed, cleared his throat, touched gingerly at his shoulder.

"You'll be surprised. It went off swell, at first. Damned if I know yet what blew the lid off. I must have slipped on one of the answers. But before I did . . ."

Quinn was sitting on the edge of his chair. "Well? Go on! Never mind the dramatics."

Von Goetz dug into his pocket, pulled out a small, leather-bound notebook. He brandished it under Quinn's eager nose. "This," he announced blandly, "is a code-book. I only hope it's the right one."

Quinn pounced on the book and pawed eagerly in his own tunic for the scrap of paper they had taken from the spy who had invaded their room earlier in the evening. With shaking

fingers he smoothed it out on the table, thumbed anxiously through the little leather-bound book.

"Where the hell's that pencil? Get busy, Von Goetz. It's in German."

The cognac was forgotten. For tense moments there was no sound but the heavy breathing of the two men, the labored scratching of the pencil as Von Goetz worked over the code. When at last Von Goetz stopped, Quinn raised anxious eyes to his. "Well—what does it say?"

"Plenty," Von Goetz assured him solemnly. "Ludendorff sends his congratulations. The bridge at Marigny is completed. Two fresh divisions come up at dawn, mass for a surprise attack in the morning."

Quinn frowned darkly. He knew that sector. The Allied position there was precarious at best. With two fresh German divisions thrown against it, the Allied line would crumble—and all hell would not be able to stop the Boche.

He whipped up his hand, glanced at his wrist watch. "Listen, Emil," he said urgently. "Get Flagg on the phone. Tell him to have a D.H. bomber—ready and loaded—waiting for me at La Rochelle in twenty minutes. It's got to be there."

"And where in the hell do you think you're going?" asked Von Goetz.

"I'm going to blast that bridge at Marigny, so those two divisions don't get across."

CHAPTER 7

VON GOETZ and Colonel Flagg had done their part. A short half hour after leaving the Hotel Calais Quinn climbed into the cockpit of a lumbering D. H. at the field at La Rochelle. He jazzed the motor a moment until the pounding cylinders

crashed out a song of defiance. Then he throttled down, signaled to the ground crew and the chocks were yanked away.

The ship rolled forward under half throttle. Quinn gave her more gun and taxied slowly along the ground into the slight east wind. The D. H. was heavy, sluggish from the cargo of explosive death pinned to its belly.

He gave her more gun and pulled gently back on the stick. The bomber answered the controls and lifted into the air. Quinn gained altitude in a slow, banking climb. He circled the field once, got his bearings, then abruptly the brilliant white ground lights below blacked out as the mechanic cut the switch.

For a split second Quinn closed his eyes and flew blind. A thrill of exultation raced through him. Make monkeys out of his Black Sheep, would they? By God! He'd show them. Then he opened his eyes again and they were focused for the velvet night. He became aware of the moon—a pale silver globe casting an eerie light over the world.

He climbed steadily till his altimeter registered five thousand, then leveled off. The roaring of his motor made him impervious to other sounds but, far ahead in the distance, a long line of livid flashes showed him that the enemy artillery was still in action.

The crisp night air flung itself into his face. His prop sang gaily, a spinning metal top, tearing at the impending atmosphere. His eyes strained ahead through his goggles and his heart kicked out a faster beat as he winged his way towards the front and . . . He shrugged. Who knows?

A half hour passed—forty minutes. Then below him appeared the winding thread of the River Marne. A desperate counter attack of the combined Allied forces had checked the German

drive on the far side of the stream. The two opposing forces had dug in and for the past three weeks the heavy artillery of the Boche had been trying in vain to blast a hole through the defending lines.

The bridge at Marigny had long since been blown up by the French, when the Germans first started their push. And now, unless the big guns could shatter the allied forces, the German drive was checked.

At least, so thought the allied high command. But Quinn knew what the high command did not know. The river had been bridged—two fresh divisions were due to cross it in another twenty minutes. If they did, all hell wouldn't be able to stop them.

Quinn kicked his rudder-bar hard right and followed the silver ribbon of the river northward. He was there with two thousand pounds of T. N. T. to see that the Boche didn't cross that river.

He glanced swiftly at his tachometer, counted the seconds, then dipped the nose of the D. H. in a long glide. The moon was a distinct advantage in enabling him to locate his objective but by the same token it revealed him to the enemy. But all that Quinn asked for, then, were two minutes.

He swept up the river at an altitude of a thousand feet. Leaning far out of the cockpit he strained his eyes on the dappled water below. Abruptly he zoomed and went into a steep bank. Below him the pontoon bridge threw a narrow span across the water. On the right bank of the stream as he flew northward, confused masses of dark moving shadows resolved themselves into packed columns of regimented gray-clad troops.

No lights showed but even above the roar of his racing motor, Quinn heard the vague rumble of ten thousand marching feet as the Germans came up

for the surprise attack.

A wild elation filled his heart. He was in time. He had a few jokers up his sleeve that would make the Boche think twice before they crossed the river that morning.

HE circled back, swooped low towards the bridge like a bird of prey awaiting the moment to descend to the kill. Then suddenly he thrust the stick forward and the D. A. dropped her nose toward the water. The wind shrieked through the struts like a banshee's wail. Engine and prop combined in a whirring song of power. Quinn's hand rested steadily on the stick and his feet were firm on the rudder bar. For a fleeting moment a grin twisted his lips. His hand went out to the lever of his port bomb release. The bridge was speeding up to meet him with startling rapidity. With one simultaneous movement, he tripped the release and pulled the stick hard back.

Swiftly, unerringly the bomb plummeted down towards the bridge.

The lumbering D. H. staggered in its steep climb, wobbled drunkenly as a lurid crimson flash lit up the water and the earth below.

Quinn levelled off, banked, circled and roared back to the attack. He cut his motor and dove again. Once more he sent two hundred pounds of death and destruction hurtling down towards the bridge. A perfect hit! A crashing detonation drilled into his ears and in the split second before he zoomed upward again, a volcanic eruption of water, splintered wood and tangled pontoons rose skyward.

For the third time Quinn banked, circled and plunged downward. Another volcanic explosion rent the night. Even through the jarring sound of his engine, the deafening noise was clear. Again and again he tripped his bomb release. The entire surface of the river

seemed to erupt in a billowy cloud of water and flame, and shattered pontoons.

Rid of her load of destruction, the D. H. rode easily now. Of one thing Quinn was sure. No Jerry troops would cross that bridge that morning. But he was not quite so sure whether he would ever break a bottle of cognac in the estaminet at St. Omera again. He swept around in a wide bank and turned the nose of his ship towards the West.

And then a groping yellow finger traced itself across the sky. It cut across the laboring D. H. like a knife. Quinn cursed, snapped himself erect at the controls and jammed his stick over to the right.

The game of dodging that revealing searchlight was on in grim earnest. Again and again that thin pencil of light swept across the heavens. Soon it was reenforced by three others.

Time after time Quinn caught his breath as the ghostly shafts shot past his ship with less than yards to spare. The Archies began blazing away madly, trusting to luck rather than good marksmanship.

Quinn throttled his engine and listened intently. As he had feared he heard the faint throbbing of pounding motors in the distance. The Fokkers were out in search of their prey, awaiting the moment when the glaring eyes of the lights would pin the invader to the sky.

They nailed the D. H. at last. What a moment before had been an invisible roaring bird in the air, was suddenly transformed into a gleaming white thing bathed in a flood of iridescent light. In an instant three gleaming beams had centered on the D. H. Quinn stunted all over the sky in a vain endeavor to shake off the mesh of brilliance which enveloped him.

Then something seemed to smash up

against his goggles. The ship was entirely circled in a noose of liquid silver. The instrument board before him gleamed brightly in the flash of this nocturnal sun.

Quinn nursed a few more revolutions out of his already pounding engine and ran for it. Madly he hurtled through the sky in a wild race with grinning death peering mockingly over his shoulders. Four flashing searchlights held him fast in their revealing fingers.

Though he was going to make a fight of it, Quinn knew that he could not escape. The pursuing Fokkers could outdistance his lumbering bomber two to one. Tensely he waited the moment for Death to tap him on the shoulder.

Then it came. A thin, staccato riveting sound fought against the roar of his motor. Something phosphorescent gleamed in the darkness as a burst of tracers flew past. His finger tensed on the trip of his gun. For a reckless moment he considered swinging into a swift Immelman and sending an answering burst into the teeth of the enemy. But this time discretion would undoubtedly prove the better part of valor.

OUTNUMBERED as he was and with those devastating lights playing upon him, to fight was sheer suicide.

Like a huge hawk, a black silhouette appeared over Quinn's tail. A synchronized Spandau belched forth a flaming streak of tracers. A burst of lead splintered the instrument board before him.

Flying instinct alone saved Quinn. He jammed the rudder and flung the stick over. He fell away before the charging rush of the Fokker, saw the black crossed ship whirl like a juggernaut overhead. He whipped up the nose of the D. H. For fleeting seconds the sights of his guns were dead on the German. His finger twined itself

around the trigger. The whinnying 303's ate their avid way into the Fokker's gas tank. A thin blue flame crawled along the cowling, then burst into a flaring inferno.

The German flyer turned around in the cockpit. Quinn saw the white, fear-stricken face, lit up by the licking flames. Then the Fokker fell over on her nose and plunged towards the shell-torn earth below.

Quinn jerked his ailerons into play and cleared his guns again. He had tasted blood and he decided to stand and fight for it. Better that than take a burst of lead in his back while he was running. They would get him anyway, those Fokkers. But before they did, he would do his damndest to crash a few more of them to hell along with himself.

But success was not to be so simple. The Fokkers were flying rings around the heavy bomber. Again and again lead tore through his fuselage. A bullet thudded into his arm and the stick was wet with blood.

The engine coughed unevenly. He glanced upward and saw a pair of dark shadows darting for his tail. He plunged the stick forward and the ship began a roaring journey toward the earth. The engine was now spluttering badly. Down and down he plunged, muttering a fervent prayer that was half a curse, that his own lines had been crossed.

Again he looked up and his heart kicked out a faster beat. The searchlights and the Fokkers were gone. His eyes strained through the darkness, seeking a place to land. He saw nothing but an impenetrable blackness.

Then, too late, he saw the dim light of a concealed fire. Too late he realized that the needle on his altimeter was fast approaching zero. Swiftly he jerked back on the stick. The D. H. groaned under the strain. The motor

protested loudly, then quit altogether.

Quinn felt himself falling, tail first. Then the weight of the nose made itself felt and whipped down. There was a splintering of dry wood as the under-carriage scraped a tree top. Something struck him a terrific blow on the small of the back. Then the blackness of the night enveloped him.

The infantry dragged him out of the shattered remnants of his ship and carried him to the nearest casualty clearing station. A monocled British Medical Officer extracted a steel slug from his arm, set a couple of broken ribs.

But at seven o'clock, a few hours later, Quinn was having breakfast with his Black Sheep.

CHAPTER 8

A FEW hours' sleep—a bath—a shave—a big hooker of Scotch under his belt—and Quinn was ready for action once more. Now that he was mixed up in this spy business, he was determined to see it through. Not alone to vindicate his Black Sheep but to avenge the gallant R5.

From the hospital came word that she was still unconscious—still hovering between life and death. No chance of getting a lead there. Patiently, laboriously, Quinn canvassed all possible angles in search of a starting point, only to draw a blank in each instance.

It was Von Goetz, arriving from Paris, who reminded him of R5's picture.

Quinn's fist assaulted the table of the mess shack. "Emil!" he exploded. "You've got it!"

"Got what?"

"The lead I've been looking for. The girl's picture. Don't you see? She was operating in this sector. She must have been seen by somebody—she

must have lived some place. Simple! All I got to do is to take her picture around to all the cafes . . . to all the . . ."

He was halfway out the door. Von Goetz shook his head sadly from side to side. "So help me," he said. "I think the C.O.'s going soft on us—soft over that girl."

Quinn traded his battered Spad for a motorcycle that afternoon and canvassed the little villages that sprawled on either side of St. Omer. At each stop he showed the picture of R5, masked his discreet questions under the guise of a heart-sick Romeo. But it was not until eight o'clock that night that he got his first worthwhile lead.

To the south of St. Omer, and dangerously near the Western Front, lay Le Sens. So far, through a combination of luck and circumstance, the small village had escaped Mars' ugly wrath. Mainly because its narrow, winding dirt road—turned now into a river of mud by the spring rains—led to nowhere of importance; but also because its houses were too few, its surrounding farm land barely productive.

For strategic purposes, then, Le Sens would appear quite useless. Yet on the huge war map that covered one whole wall in the General Staff room at German Headquarters, a special black-headed pin noted its location. And on the map that Colonel Flagg used for personal intelligence, Le Sens' finely printed name was carefully circled with red.

And it was here that Quinn hoped to pick up the trail of the girl.

It had turned into a hell of a night. The sky was an inky black and there was a penetrating drizzle of rain falling as Quinn fought his bucking motorcycle over the muddy road that led into the village. He cursed the rain that trickled down his neck, cursed the muck that was spattered over him by the slewing

wheels of the motorcycle, cursed the whole damn mess. But he kept going.

Only once did he deliberately slow up. That was when the stabbing beam of his headlight, swinging suddenly off the road as the motorcycle skidded, flashed against a building. For a few moments Quinn paused, directing the glow of the headlight over the long, low structure—a hangar!

There was cause to wonder over the appearance of an airplane hangar near a village like Le Sens, but Quinn had neither the time nor the inclination to puzzle over it. He swung the wheel back, jammed in the gear, twisted hard on the throttle. And, with his lined face set grimly, with lips drawn back in a half snarl, with eyes narrowed against the rain, he plunged on down the road.

In less than two minutes he roared into Le Sens. In the whole of the small village only one building showed light, and as Quinn splashed to a halt in front of it, a hoarse whisper spilled from his chapped lips.

"Thank God!"

THE light came from a small *boite*, and there was nothing Quinn wanted more at that moment than a shot of liquor. He shoved the motorcycle up against the building, jacked it up, then plowed through the ooze to the door. And even before Quinn had reached the bar, the bartender—a fat, bald, baby-faced Frenchman—had dug up a towel.

"*Beaucoup* mud, *m'sieur*."

"Too damn' *beaucoup*," Quinn said. "Any brandy?"

"*Oui, m'sieur*."

Quinn took the towel and mopped the mud and water from his face as the bartender poured the drink. He tossed the brandy down in one thankful gulp, ordered another. When he had finished this he got out his package of Bull Durham and the girl's picture. He slid the picture across the bar, began

rolling a cigarette.

"Ever see her?"

The bartender glanced at the picture, started. His eyes were wide, a half whisper slipped from his lips.

"*Fille de joie*."

Like a striking adder, Quinn's hand shot out, clamped about the bartender's collar.

"What's that?"

"*Non! Non! Mon capitant! Pardonez moi*."

Slowly, Quinn's mighty hand relaxed its grasp, and the purple began to recede from the Frenchman's face, giving place to a deathly white. With practiced precision, Quinn rolled out the cigarette, but never once did his smouldering eyes leave the bartender's perspiring countenance. And when he finally spoke his voice was steady, emotionless, coated with ice.

"What put that nasty little idea into your head?" he asked slowly. "Talk English."

"It is—it is *oui dire*—what you say, much talk."

"Go on—I'm listening."

The bartender dabbed at his face with the bar towel, tugged for the third time at his collar. Quinn's eyes still stabbed into his.

"She—she come here many times. Sit. Drink. Go out with men." He was waving his arms now, emphasizing the facts upon which he might have based his former statement. "They all say things." He shrugged again. "*C'est la guerre*."

Yellow flame flickered in the gray depths of Quinn's eyes. He lit his cigarette, inhaled deeply, and smoke billowed from his mouth with the next question.

"Who says so?"

"The—the men who—" The bartender paused, having difficulty with his choice of words. Before he could continue the door of the *boite* was flung

open, wind and rain lashed in, and the bartender began gesticulating wildly. "These men, *m'sieur*."

Quinn had already spun about, and was staring now with swift appraisal at the men who entered. There were three of them, an American, an Italian and one of doubtful parentage, and they were dressed in civvies. As they stood there, just inside the door, returning Quinn's inspection, water dripped from their hats and from their coats and formed small puddles on the muddled floor.

The nearest of the trio—the tall, lean, hard-visaged American—was the first to move, the first to speak. Instinctively Quinn disliked him. Disliked the fanatic gleam in his blue eyes, disliked the cruel twist of his thin mouth. Slowly the American crossed the room, leaned against the bar. His voice was sharp, brittle.

"What's chewing at your guts, La Roche?"

"Tell him—explain him, *M'sieur* Whitey, about this *fille*."

La Roche passed the picture over to the American, then stood back, dabbing at his beet-red forehead, obviously relieved. Whitey picked up the picture, scanned it casually. A scornful smirk plucked at the corner of his mouth.

"This dame? What about her?"

HOT anger flamed suddenly through Quinn's body; his eyes narrowed, smouldering with a venomous hate. It wasn't that Quinn felt called upon to defend the girl because he believed there might be any basic truth in the rumors about her! But he did object to the sneering insolence that lay behind that slur.

"What was that?"

Quinn's voice was low and hoarse, but freighted with a leashed resentment. Perhaps Whitey didn't notice this, or perhaps he just didn't give a damn.

His lips thinned out, an ugly snarl touched the corners of his mouth.

"You heard me, buddy. I said she was not so good."

Quinn swung, smashed the flat of his hand across the American's face, slamming him back against the bar. Then, leaning forward, head hung low, arms dangling, Quinn balanced on the balls of his feet.

"Come again?"

For a long moment the American stayed there, back against the bar, staring levelly, calculatingly at Quinn. The left side of his face was flushed; mottled anger glinted in his cold blue eyes. But he didn't move a muscle, just stood there and stared, and Quinn knew that his weren't the actions of a coward, but of a man deliberately charting his course.

Once the stocky Italian's hand dropped toward his coat pocket, but halted at a glance from Whitey. And finally, in a voice that was deathly calm, the American answered.

"What's wrong, fellow?" he asked. "Nerves?"

Whitey's icy calm had its effect on Quinn. With an effort he fought for restraint. Damn it, he couldn't lose his head now! Too much depended on him. His ultimate objective was a hell of a lot more important than his personal emotions. There was a lead here, and he couldn't let it slip out of his grasp. He had to use his head, not his fists. So when he spoke again, the sharp edge of his voice had been dulled.

"Sorry," he said "I guess you're right. This damn' war's got me." He turned back to the bar, moved his glass over toward the petrified bartender. "The round's on me," he said.

La Roche went into action and Quinn, picking up R-5's picture, swung about to face the American.

"I met her about a year ago," he said softly. "And we hit it off pretty

good. Then she disappeared—just vanished into thin air. Since then, between her and the damn' Boche, I've been quietly going nuts.

"I got a tip one day that she was here in Le Sens. So when she's not here, and when I hear cracks like that being made, well—" he tossed down his drink—"you know how it is."

Whitey raised his glass, drank slowly, rolling the liquor in his mouth. "Yeah," he said, "I know. Dames get under a guy's skin sometimes. That's the way it goes. But now about Mabel, here, well, all I know is what I know."

"Mabel?" Quinn was certain the surprise in his voice sounded genuine enough. "That isn't—Oh, I get it."

"Yeah," Whitey said. "Mabel Bowers. Anyhow, that's what she called herself around here—not that it made a damn' bit of difference. But look here, fellow—if you want, I'll take you down to Madam Lucille's place. That's where Mabel stayed, and if there's anyone in town who knows where the kid went, it'll be the old lady. She's that sort."

Quinn had ordered another round of drinks, and was in the process of rolling a cigarette. Beneath lidded eyes he studied Whitey's bland face. Finally he puffed the cigarette to life, raised his drink from the bar, and stared evenly at the lean-faced American.

"Let's go," he said.

THE drizzle had stopped, but there was still a wet mist in the air, and the ground was mucky under foot. Quinn closed the door behind him, stared at his motorcycle, then at Whitey.

"We'll walk," Whitey said. "It'll be easier."

They turned away from the *boite* and headed back along the road over which Quinn had driven. For the first minute no word was spoken, then Whitey began to talk, ramblingly, of the

village, the war, the *boite*. And thus they turned down a small, dark alleyway near the edge of town. Whitey pointed to a black outline at the far end.

"That's the house."

They crossed in intervening alley, continued on a few steps and it was then Quinn suddenly stiffened. He had heard a sound from behind—the sucking sound of a foot being pulled from mud. He whirled—too late. Something hard and unyielding crashed against his head, myriad lights flashed crazily before his eyes, and then all consciousness was swept away in the sea of utter blackness that flowed over him.

CHAPTER 9

BLACKNESS still enveloped him when Quinn slowly opened his eyes. His head throbbed with a dull, pounding ache; his mouth was dry and there was a taste of blood on his lips. He tried to move, discovered that he was bound tightly, and cursed.

Grimly he tried to piece together the scattered segments of his memory. Bit by bit he succeeded, and as the picture took shape, Quinn's anger mounted. He'd been a stupid, blundering fool. Not only had he walked wide-eyed into a trap, but he'd actually supplied the bait.

He strained again at his bonds, but he'd been tied by an expert. The exertion set off a riveting machine inside his head, and he was forced to relax. Whoever had sapped him had put a hell of a lot of feeling into it. Quinn imagined it was the husky Italian. That alley they had crossed undoubtedly led down past the *boite*.

Where in hell was he? He narrowed his eyes, tried to peer through the

darkness, but he succeeded only in distinguishing a hazy blob of black in the distance. All he knew for sure was that he lay on a wooden floor, inside some building, somewhere in Western Europe.

Time moved on leaden feet. Impatiently Quinn tested the ropes that held his wrists. The deadly monotony of inaction was gnawing at his vitals. He grumbled a curse, tried to wet his parched lips with a dry tongue, shouted hoarsely. But all he heard in reply was the flat echo of his own voice.

Again and again he shouted, until the pounding pain in his head made him stop. But even as he lay back, panting from the strain, griting his teeth against the throbbing ache that enveloped his brains, he knew that his efforts had borne fruit.

He saw the faint reflection of a moving light even before he heard the footsteps. The light came closer, casting weird shadows against the far wall, and the footsteps grew louder, more confused. Then, abruptly, as the bearer of the light swung out from behind some concealment, Quinn realized where he was.

The huge blob of black that had caught his attention before, and which had just now caused the wired shadows, was an airplane—a Spad. Without a doubt he was in the hangar he had seen on the way into town.

Almost before he realized it, Whitey was standing before him, the angular lines of his lean face accented by the gasoline lantern's reflection. And it was then, for the first time, that Quinn saw the flowing profusion of almost pure white hair that had given the man his name.

"Getting lonesome?"

"What do you think?"

A smile danced over Whitey's face as he hung the lantern from a nail on the wall.

"I think you're damn' lucky to be alive. What do you think, Carlos?"

The short stocky Italian, righting a fruit box to be used as a seat, showed his white teeth in a wide grin.

"*Madre de Dios*, what a head!"

THE third man of the trio, a sparely built man of medium height, paid only slight attention to what was going on. For a moment he stood just on the fringe of light. Then, as Whitey dragged a chair over toward Quinn, the man turned and walked slowly away.

Quinn twisted himself about, faced Whitey.

"What the hell's this all about?"

"That's just what I was going to ask you."

"We're getting nowhere fast. I'd like to know why you tried to knock my brains out. I'd also like a glass of water."

"It simplified matters to sap you. You might not have come here without raising a fuss, so—" Whitey shrugged. "Carlos had his heart in the job. Almost too much heart."

"All right, so here I am. What for? And how about that water?"

"Carlos, tell Dummy to bring some water. Whitey turned back, dragged a cigarette from a crumpled pack, stuck it between thin lips and lit it. He blew a banner of smoke toward Quinn's face. Then his answer came, sharply, crisply.

"Where's the broad?"

"That," Quinn said thinly, "is what I've been trying to find out."

"Don't hand me that crap. Where is she?"

The lines on Quinn's forehead deepened. The whole set-up became screwier by the minute.

"If I did know, do you think I'd tell you?"

"You'll tell, all right," Whitey shot back. He turned as Dummy appeared with a bucket of water, took the bucket

and put it on the floor near his chair. Then he faced Quinn again.

"Maybe you can have a drink later. If I don't have to use all this first. Now, we'll see just how tough you are."

He crossed to Quinn, hoisted him to his feet, leaned him back against the wall.

"I owe you a smack in the puss, wise guy. See if you like the taste of your own medicine."

There was nothing Quinn could do. He ducked his head as far as possible when Whitey swung, but he couldn't avoid the stinging slap of the man's palm. It smashed across his cheek, set his head ringing. Then Whitey backed off, his lips twisted in a vicious snarl.

Quinn closed his eyes for a fleeting moment against the bolt of pain that roared through his head, spat dryly, and glared back at the American.

"I'll remember that, you . . .!"

"That won't be all you'll have to remember, wise guy. Unless you talk. Where's the girl?"

"Nuts to you!"

Once again Whitey swung, this time with his fist knotted. The blow hammered into Quinn's jaw, bounced his head back against the wall, hurled him off balance. But hardly had he crashed to the floor when Whitey and the Italian were lifting him again, propping him upright.

Dimly, through the thunder that rumbled in his head, Quinn heard Whitey talking, but he paid no attention. His eyeballs ached; the taste of blood had come again to his mouth. Then, abruptly, a deluge of cold water splashed over him, shocking him back to a hazy consciousness.

He felt a hand gripping his collar, saw a thin, flushed face close to his own.

"I said are you gonna talk?"

Two one-syllable words formed on Quinn's lips. With sneering defiance he spat them into Whitey's face.

"Still tough, eh? Well—I'll make you talk! You'll be a jabberin' lunatic before I get through!" Whitey whirled about, crossed swiftly to the plane, and in a moment came back, pulling a grease-covered glove over his right hand. Then, before coming back to Quinn, he stopped by one of the buckets of sand that hung along the wall, and carefully coated the glove with a gritty layer of sand.

HE grabbed Quinn's collar with his left hand, waved the cruel weapon before Quinn's bloodshot eyes.

"Now, are you gonna spill your guts?"

Once more the short Anglo-Saxon epithet rose to Quinn's lips, and once more Quinn hurled it at Whitey. But hardly had he formed the pronoun when the sharp, grit-covered glove smashed into the side of Quinn's face.

Quinn's knees buckled, his eyes glazed, but somehow he held on. Held on while Whitey smashed his fist again and again into Quinn's face, pounding his features into a bloody pulp. But there was a limit even to Quinn's endurance, and long before Whitey's sadistic rage was spent, a merciful unconsciousness claimed him.

When Quinn finally came to, he was aware of a chilling draught of air. Painfully he opened his eyes, stared dazedly about him. He was still in the hangar, lying on the floor where he had fallen. The others were there too, working on the Spad. It was then that Quinn noticed that the hangar doors were open.

For a few moments he watched them, but with a complete indifference. He was too sick to care. His face was raw, numbed; his whole body throbbled with pain. He wanted only to rest, undisturbed, to stretch out somewhere on a cool green field, far from the thunder and agony of war.

Only once did a spark of interest flare within Quinn. That was when he noticed the wings of the Spad being decorated with huge Maltese Crosses. But the flare soon died, and he closed his eyes to drift off into a welcome coma.

Quinn was next conscious of being dragged roughly across the floor of the hangar, and hoisted into the rear office of the Spad. He remained limp, and kept his eyes closed, not caring much what happened. He felt the safety strap tighten about his belly, then felt the slight movement as the crate was rolled out onto the tarmac.

There was a scraping sound as someone clambered into the front cockpit, and, from the sound of his voice, Quinn knew it was Whitey.

"I'll be back," Whitey was saying. "They'll sweat it out of him at Headquarters, all right."

"May—be," another voice said. That would be Carlos. "Hees one tough *bambino*."

"Yeah. They'll find out how tough he is. Anyhow, they can't ride our cans so much now. We haven't located R-5 but this mug will do for a while."

"R-5! She was a pretty lady."

"Like hell! She was a damn Yank spy."

"You say that justa because she no—whatyoucallit."

"All right wise guy, but don't forget to ditch that motorcycle or you might be laughing in hell. Get on the prop." There was a moment of silence, then—

"Contact!"

"Contact!"



CHAPTER 10

THE Spad's motor coughed, caught, then throbbed to life with a steady song of rhythmic power. And as life came to the Spad, life miraculously seemed to flow again through Quinn's veins. New life. The dead weariness that had settled over him seemed to vanish. Even the crucifying pain that stabbed through his head became suddenly dulled. The throaty rumble of the crate's motor acted on him like a shot of adrenalin. His heart picked up, his blood pulsed faster. He was in an airplane. And when Jack Quinn was in an airplane, regardless of the circumstances, the world was his oyster.

Straining against the strap, Quinn raised himself slightly in the rear office, slowly opened one eye. Carlos was standing on one wing, shouting something in Whitey's ear—something that was lost to Quinn in the swift rush of the Spad's slipstream. Then Whitey nodded, jazzed the throttle a couple of times, and Carlos got down.

Abruptly Whitey raised his hand, the chocks were pulled, and the Spad moved forward. Quinn knew that it was going to be tough taking off from the soggy tarmac, especially at night, but he also knew that Whitey could handle a ship. Knew it instinctively from the moment they started. And he was right.

Whitey got the Spad off the ground, and sent it in a long spiralling climb. The prop whirled madly, churning a flashing silver arc in the night, dragging the Spad higher and higher into the heavens. The rain had long since stopped, and the stars were out again, strewn in all their coruscating glory across the black velvet of the sky.

Abruptly, at about ten thousand feet, Whitey levelled off, swung the Spad's nose to the east. And just as abruptly,

Quinn snapped out of his hop. Streaking through the night like a mad meteor, with banners of flame spewing redly from its twin exhausts, it would be but a matter of minutes before the Spad was safely over German territory. Quinn had to act—and act fast.

He tugged once at the bonds about his wrists, tugged again, then strained against them. They gave but little. For a long moment he stared at the Vickers gun, mounted on the swivel just in front of the rear office, its snout almost resting on the Spad's top wing. But it offered little consolation. There was no way he could use it—to any advantage.

The minutes ticked swiftly by. They were well over the German lines by now, and every revolution of the Spad's motor brought Quinn nearer his doom. But it wasn't the thought of that, that brought the curse to Quinn's lips. He'd faced Death before—and spat in his eye. That was his job—and a job he liked. And Quinn knew, without the slightest feeling of emotion, that someday the leering Reaper would catch up with him. But when that day came, Quinn wanted to go out with the feeling of a job well done.

He couldn't go now. Too much depended on his success. The fate of the Black Sheep, if not the morale of the whole air force, hinged on his ability to discover the leak that had done so much damage. To fail now, with success almost within his grasp, would torture his soul more than all the fire and brimstone in hell.

Once again his eyes swung to the Vickers. What the hell was there about the gun that attracted him? What kept pulling his attention back to it? It looked okay. It was mounted right. It wasn't cold enough for the grease to freeze. It— Grease!

The word slammed through the mist that clouded Quinn's brain. Grease! He moved his bound feet about of the

floor of the office, moved them until they struck a heavy, solidly packed can of the stuff. Now, if he could get the can, get its lid off, get some of the contents out. If! If! If! Damn the word!

HE strained against the safety belt, bent forward as far as he could, but his fingers still fell short of the can's handle. Nor could he get his hands around far enough on his left side to loosen the belt. Now he leaned back, inhaling deeply of the rush of air that swept by him, gathered what strength he could. And then, with a sudden forward lurch, he threw his weight against the strap.

His point came up on Fate's dice. The Spad bounced through an air pocket at the precise moment that he surged against the strap, and Whitey was too busy with the crate's controls to hear the commotion behind him. In addition, the abrupt dip of the Spad added to Quinn's forward impetus. The tips of his fingers clawed about the can's handle.

But with the can in his lap, Quinn was still not out of the woods. He had to get the top off now, and get it off in a hurry. And once again Fortune smiled on him. The top of the can had not been jammed in tightly and it was but a matter of minutes for Quinn to pry it out with his fingernails. Then he set to work in earnest.

As the trim Spad roared through the night, Quinn got out a fistful of grease and rubbed it as well as he could over his wrists and the ropes that bound them. Then, adding another handful for good measure, he worked his wrists about as much as possible to distribute the grease. And finally, with his heart hammering madly, he strained at the bonds.

They gave—only the barest fraction of an inch. But they gave.

Little by little, Quinn worked his

right hand through one of the loops. It was slow, tedious, aggravating labor. He cursed under his breath as time sped swiftly by; he kept one eye on the cockpit ahead, relaxing suddenly whenever it seemed as though Whitey might turn around.

Then abruptly it happened. The rope slipped over the base of his thumb, over his knuckles, and his hand came free. Thirty seconds later he had loosed his other hand, and in another half minute he had removed the rope from his ankles. But his luck suddenly changed. As he twisted about to unbuckle the safety belt, Whitey turned and looked back. And when Quinn straightened up he found himself staring straight into the unblinking eye of Whitey's Luger.

There was only one course to take, and Quinn took it. A scorching oath rumbled from his lips as he struck at the gun. Flame flashed in the darkness, a burning pellet of lead gored a furrow along Quinn's side. But he'd accomplished his purpose. The Luger was smashed out of Whitey's grasp, went hurtling over the side of the Spad.

Yet Whitey's reaction was equally quick, equally effective. The gun hadn't cleared the side of the fuselage before his balled left fist hammered against Quinn's jaw, knocking him off balance. And the small Spad lurched madly as Whitey bent over, tried to shove Quinn out into space.

Quinn's foot slipped on a mess of grease, his body swung about, and blackness beckoned ominously below him. Then, out of the corner of his eye, he caught framework of the Vickers, and grabbed. And not a split second too soon.

The Spad dipped, threatened to go into a spin, and Whitey dove for the stick. Now it was Quinn's chance, and he didn't muff it. He snatched one of the ropes from the seat of the rear of-

face, bent forward. And even as Whitey was righting the ship, Quinn twisted the rope about the spy's neck, threatened to garrote him.

Whitey clutched at his throat, fought to breathe, but Quinn tightened his grip. And then, leaning close to Whitey's ear, he shouted:

"Back to St. Omer. Snappy!"

CHAPTER II

ON the way back toward the Black Sheep 'drome, the details of a daring plan of action took swift shape in Quinn's head. It was a plan, which, if successful, would be sure to bust the German spy ring wide open. If not—well, what the hell! And once again the main cog in the scheme—the one man who fitted perfectly into his plans—would be Von Goetz.

Standing in the rear cockpit, one hand grasped firmly about the framework of the Vickers, the other clamped about the rope that circled Whitey's neck, he kept on watch for the familiar landmarks of the Black Sheep 'drome. Down below, the war-torn terrain of the Western Front, bathed now in the pale silver light of a descending moon, moved slowly by.

Then he saw the 'drome—a patchwork of black and gray—and he leaned forward and signalled Whitey—shook his head. Whitey looked puzzled, but flew on. Shortly after, there came into view a deserted field—Quinn's objective. He poked Whitey, pointed toward the field, emphasizing the order with a sharp twist of the rope.

Whitey nodded, cut the motor and the Spad went into a long, sweeping glide, its guys screaming in the swift rush of wind. The field rushing up to

meet them was small, rough of surface, lined on two sides by ragged rows of trees. Quinn prayed that his unwilling pilot knew his stuff!

"Keep it cut!" he shouted. "Roll in from the north!"

Whitey obeyed—explicitly.

With a piece of rope, Quinn bound Whitey's wrists. Then, helping him out of the Spad, he wound the remaining rope about the man's ankles. As an extra precaution, Quinn made a big knot in the middle of his neckerchief, jammed the knot into Whitey's mouth, and tied the neckerchief tightly about his head.

And then, hoping no one would investigate and discover his captive before he returned, Quinn headed swiftly for the nearby 'drome of the Black Sheep.

"You think it will work?"

Side by side they walked through the night—Quinn and Von Goetz—back across the field toward the Spad. Already the moon had dipped below the edge of the earth, and now that heavy darkness that heralds the dawn was beginning to cloak the land. It was Von Goetz who had asked the whispered question.

"I hate like hell to get you messed up in this," Quinn said thickly, "but you're the only one who—"

"Going soft?" There was light mockery in Von Goetz's lowered voice.

Quinn glared at him. "Nuts!" he shot back hoarsely; "If it wasn't—"

"Then answer my question."

Quinn shrugged, took a half dozen steps before he spoke.

"How in hell do I know?"

A silence fell between them then as they moved across the field toward the plane. But it was an understanding silence. These men knew each other—knew the bad points as well as the good. And they knew, too, that each accepted as his own the fatalistic phi-

losophy that governed the squadron of Black Sheep.

They lived recklessly, these Black Sheep—lived only for the needs of the moment. They fought hard but fair, neither asking nor giving quarter. And on that day when the bony finger of Death beckoned them down the dark road to oblivion, they would go without whining, their steps firm, a defiant snarl on their lips. Thus they came to the Spad. Without a wasted moment, Quinn loosened the ropes about Whitey's legs, got him to his feet, yanked the gag from his mouth.

"Whitey," he said softly, "you're in a spot. There are two things I can do. One is—put a gun up against the middle button of your fly and pull the trigger. You'd be a long time dying, Whitey. That slug would eat into your guts and stay there, making you pray to God someone would blow your brains out. It's a hell of a death, Whitey—a hell of a death. And for that, I'd get a D. S. C."

Quinn was staring intently at Whitey's face, watching closely for any reaction. It came. Sweat beaded his forehead; he wet his lips. Quinn went on:

"Or," he said, "I could turn you over to Intelligence with a strong recommendation for clemency, and you'd probably save your skin. You know why I'd do that? Because you kicked in with certain information. Which is it?"

FOR a long, tense moment, Whitey didn't answer. Slowly, Quinn rammed Von Goetz's heavy service automatic into the spy's belly. Idly he toyed with the trigger. His voice, when he spoke, was no more than a hoarse whisper.

"Well—"

Whitey cracked. His face was screwed up into a tight knot; he was

breathing noisily.

"For God's sake, don't shoot! What do you want to know?"

The tension left Quinn's muscles. He took one of the cigarettes Von Goetz held out, puffed it to glowing life. Then, for a full half hour he and Von Goetz hurled questions at Whitey, drawing out every bit of pertinent information the man possessed. At the end of that time, Von Goetz turned to Quinn.

"There's a good chance—a damn good chance!—the trick will work. When do we leave?"

Quinn glanced toward the east, where a faint haze of orange light was beginning to show on the horizon. And when he faced Von Goetz again, his heavy jaw jutted forward, and a light of grim purpose flickered in the depths of his steel-gray eyes.

"Just as fast as we can."

CHAPTER 12

LESS than thirty minutes later the trim little Spad, checked and secretly refueled, was once again pressed into service. And as it lifted its gallant wings out of the gray murk that coated the earth, its cargo strangely resembled the cargo it had borne away from the tarmac at Le Sens.

In the front cockpit, his hand closed firmly about the stick, sat a man who might have been Whitey. And in the rear office lay Quinn, bound as before, roaring once more into the west to keep a date with Death.

Quinn's plan was dangerously simple. With Von Goetz once more in the role of an impersonator, Quinn would be delivered into the den of the lion. Once Von Goetz was accepted as Whitey, Quinn hoped that he would be able to learn the identity of the traitor who was selling them out.

That was all there was to it. Simple? It was too damn' simple! There ought to be a hole there somewhere, but Quinn couldn't see it. Von Goetz had the ability, the knowledge and the guts to get away with his role. Whitey was only a minor cog in the huge German war machine. It would be ridiculously easy for Von Goetz to fall into his place.

Beyond their arrival at German Headquarters, Quinn had made no plans. Hell, how could you? You can't draw to a hand before it's dealt. Sure, he knew he was sticking his head in a noose. So what? He'd done it before and got away with it, and he could do it again. And suppose he didn't? Once more—so what?

And so onward sped the Allied ship, directly into the face of the rising sun, deeper and deeper into the land of the enemy.

With the aid of the rough map Whitey had drawn for him, Von Goetz located the 'drome used by the branch of the German Air intelligence interested in the girl. And almost before Quinn realized it, the wheels of the Spad were bouncing over German soil. The ship had not come to a halt before it was surrounded by the 'drome guard.

As Von Goetz rose up in the front cockpit, he shot a swift glance of encouragement towards Quinn. It was as though he had reached over and clasped his brother Black Sheep's hand. But once his feet touched the ground, Von Goetz changed completely. Holding himself stiffly erect in his best arrogant Prussian manner, he barked an order in German to the Sergeant of the Guard—an order that he and his prisoner be escorted immediately into Ober-Lieutenant Hofstadter's presence.

The fact that Von Goetz was in civilian clothes created no surprise. Apparently a number of German operatives used this 'drome as a base. The

guards jumped to obey Von Goetz' command. Quinn was hauled roughly out of the Spad, the rope was removed from his legs and, surrounded by three of the largest guards, he was made to follow Von Goetz into the large white stone building next to the hangars.

An orderly announced their presence, and they were taken directly before Hofstadter. The Ober-Leutenant—a large, broadfaced Bavarian with a close-cropped moustache—rose as Von Goetz saluted, spoke sharply in German. And in German, Von Goetz replied.

It was explained that Quinn had been captured in Le Sens while searching for R-5, that the picture of the girl had been found on him, and that he had refused to talk even under physical persuasion.

HOFSTADTER came out from behind the large desk, fired a guttural question at Quinn. Von Goetz turned about and, with a thin sneer curling his mouth, said sharply:

"The Herr Lieutenant wants to know if you still refuse."

"You're damn' right I do!"

Quinn put as much vehemence in the reply as he could. Von Goetz shrugged, relayed the information to Hofstadter. The captain bellowed an order, the door was flung open, and the three burly guards came in. And then, with not even a glance from Von Goetz, Quinn was taken down into the basement and thrown into one of the dungeon-like cells.

As the heavy steel door clanged shut behind him, a sinking feeling attacked Quinn's stomach. He didn't like jails worth a damn. They cooped you up, didn't give you a chance. He'd rather face half an army in the open—any day. You could swing your arms, smack somebody in the jaw, do something. But here—hell!

Time shuffled by on leaden feet. For

a while Quinn paced the length of the small, damp, stinking cell, impatience clawing at his vitals. But finally the reaction set in; the physical and mental strain of the last twenty-four hours demanded its toll. His body cried for rest, and its cries could not be denied.

And so Quinn sank, exhausted, to the hard wooden bench, stretched out, and pillowed his head in the crook of his arm.

Almost immediately he was asleep.

CHAPTER 13

QUINN awoke suddenly.

Von Goetz appeared.

Von Goetz' manner was brusque, crisply authoritative, his voice sharp.

"Come here," he snarled. "The guard doesn't speak English—I know. I've learned nothing yet. There's a meeting later on. You'll be questioned. Sit tight. Now shout something back at me."

"Do they feed you in this dump?" Quinn growled. "I haven't eaten for twenty-four hours."

"I'll fix it," Von Goetz shot back. "See you later."

Quinn heard the hollow echo of Von Goetz' receding footsteps, heard him say something in German to the guard. And it wasn't long after that when the guard came with food and cigarettes.

After he had eaten, Quinn resumed his pacing of the floor. He had no idea of the time.

The afternoon dragged slowly. It was well on towards five and Quinn had worked himself into a beautiful lather, when Von Goetz appeared again. His manner was, as before, crisply Prussian. But there was agitation in it, too.

"Listen," he said urgently, "and don't interrupt. I've got the dope but

I've got to talk fast. They haven't called your case yet—awaiting orders from the High Command."

"Well, who's our spy?" growled Quinn.

"Hold on tight," said Von Goetz. "*It's Gorham!*"

"The hell you say!"

"It's a camouflage trick. He's painted messages on the roof of his school—messages which can only be read by Jerry flyers wearing special glasses. Glasses that eliminate certain colors. Those goggles you found on R-5 were a pair."

"Why, the dirty . . ."

"Shut up. Now listen closely. There's a big blow-off due for tonight. The Allied High Command, from Foch down, are personally inspecting the positions in sector 42. Very under cover. Gorham got the information some way and reported here to the Germans. . ."

"Go on—go on," urged Quinn.

"Haven't you guessed?" said Von Goetz. "Jerry is planning to bomb that sector off the earth—and the Allied High Command along with it. A flight of bombers and Fokkers is due to take off from here in an hour."

Von Goetz glanced quickly up the corridor, then continued. "You're going to get away in one of those Fokkers, now. The rest is up to you and the Black Sheep."

"Yeah," growled Quinn. "But how about you?"

"Shut up. I'm giving the orders this time, Quinn. You're not the C. O. now—just a lousy stir-bum. Besides, I can't go. I've got to show up for that meeting within the next ten minutes. If I'm not there, or if I try to duck out on it, it'll screw up the whole thing. We've got to catch them with their pants down."

"And you stay here for the jazz, eh? Like hell!"

"What do you think war is, Quinn?

A Rotary luncheon!"

THERE was irony in Von Goetz' tones—irony that made Quinn a little ashamed of his show of emotion. Von Goetz was right—Quinn knew that. It was tough to run off, leaving someone you knew, someone you liked, holding the bag. But you had to play the cards that were dealt.

"I think Sherman was a pansy," Quinn said.

"Keep your drawers on," Von Goetz said sharply. "They won't bother me—for a while. On the way out I'll tell the guard to bring you your dinner. The rest is up to you. Good luck!"

With a slight wave of his hand, Von Goetz turned, strode erectly down the corridor. Quinn gripped the bars until the knuckles of his hands showed white.

"I'll be seeing you," he said. Then, in a hoarse whisper, he added: "Probably in hell."

Nervously pacing his cell, waiting for the guard to come, Quinn's thoughts turned to the man who had betrayed his countrymen. Gorham! As much as Quinn hated the martinet's guts, he found it hard to believe it was true.

The colonel was the type of army man who usually didn't sell out. It wasn't because of any high patriotism, but usually because they were more interested in their precious authority than in money. Give them some epaulets, a pair of boots, a crop, and a chance to ride herd over a bunch of suckers who couldn't fight back and they were happy.

But if it *was* Gorham—well, that meant the Black Sheep were cleared.

Quinn snapped out of his reverie at the sound of the guard's heavy tread. He moved to the door, waited, every muscle in his body drawn taut. And even before the guard came up, bearing his tray of food, the sudden roar of a Mercedes power plant told Quinn that

the flight was getting ready.

The guard opened the door, unsuspectingly stepped inside.

But, of course, the guard didn't know Quinn.

Whistling a martial air as he put the tray down on the bench, the guard was unaware of Quinn's movements. But when he turned to go the whistling stopped, and the cry that rose to his lips died in a guttural gurgle as Quinn's mighty hand closed about his throat. Now Quinn's fist crashed into the guard's jaw, and with an expiring sigh the man slumped to the ground.

Quinn bent down, rolled the unconscious guard over, dragged off his gray uniform coat. Quickly slipping this on, he bent again, got the man's hat. Then, stepping quickly through the door, he gave one last glance inside the cell.

"Sorry, fellow. That's the way things go."

He slammed the door after him, moved lithely down the corridor. He took the steps that led to the upper hallway two at a time, hugging the rail. At the top he paused, glanced carefully about. About forty feet down the hallway stood two guards. Quinn knew that if they got a good look at him they'd raise an alarm. He hadn't donned the guard's coat with the intention of fooling anyone, but rather with the hope that it would take them an extra moment or two to get wise.

And odd moments, in times such as these, were worth their weight in cognac.

The roar of a half dozen Fokkers pounded in from the tarmac outside. Quinn waited until he saw the two guards faced the other way, then stepped quickly down the hall. And he had almost reached the door when a hoarse shout sounded behind him.

Quinn increased his pace, the man shouted again, louder. There was no alternative left him. Inhaling deeply,

Quinn dashed out of the building—and directly into the arms of a quartet of guards!

It is a matter of debate who was the more surprised. The soldiers gave ground before the very momentum of Quinn's dash, but then one of them spotted the khaki pants. With a grumbling roar he threw himself at Quinn.

THIS was more like it. This was trouble that Quinn could understand—and handle. Racing quickly forward, he met the soldier's charge—met it with a thundering right that landed flush on the man's jaw. And then, without a wasted motion, he pivoted, hurled his knotted left fist at the nearest gray-clad foe. Like a half-filled sack of wheat the man slumped, joining his companion in a peaceful coma.

The very fury of Quinn's attack had its effect on the remaining two. Neither wanted to take the initiative, and it was this indecision which gave Quinn his chance.

He knew then that they weren't armed. But he knew damned well that it would be but a matter of seconds until someone appeared who was. He whirled again, located the nearest Fokker, and sprinted toward it.

He had taken but a half dozen strides when all hell broke loose behind him. The shouts of the soldiers were added to that mad bellowing voice of the hallway. And directly on the heels of that, came the staccato crack of a spitting Luger.

An angry wasp of lead caressed the lobe of Quinn's ear, whined off into space. Another tugged at the tail of the German coat. Little puffs of dust rose lazily from the ground ahead. But the Fokker was only a scant ten feet away—just two more leaps—and—

Flexing his powerful muscles, Quinn flung himself toward the cockpit.

Quinn gave the Fokker the gun.

The powerful Mercedes motor roared, the trim black ship hopped over the restraining chocks, bounded down the runway like a frightened gazelle. And then, as Quinn pulled back on the stick, the German crate rose gracefully.

Behind him, Lugers stabbed the air. Quinn zoomed—zoomed so steeply that for a moment he thought the ship would slip into a disastrous tail spin. He eased up a trifle on the stick and the Fokker ate out of his hand.

BEFORE the yelling German could get a plane into the air, Quinn had his crate at a safe altitude, streaking like an arrow directly into the heart of the lowering sun. Nothing impeded his mad flight across the desolate stretch of No Man's Land. He gave the ship all the sauce it had and roared in the direction of the Black Sheep 'drome.

A splatter of Archie fire greeted him as he soared over the Allied lines. But Quinn was hardly aware of it. Only one thought lived in his brain. Gorham was a traitor and he had placed the Allied High Command in very great peril. There was only one hope—one desperate hope—that Quinn and the Black Sheep could stop the enemy bombers in time!

High above the 'drome of the Black Sheep he killed the engine and dove.

Contact! The engine roared. Quinn gave the bus all the sauce she had, dropped her nose and like a live, intelligent thing the Fokker dropped to a perfect three point landing.

CHAPTER 14

THE 'drome of the Black Sheep came to noisy life. Men erupted from the mess shack, charged out of the bunkhouse. Mechanics, brandishing heavy wrenches and stout iron bars,

streamed from the hangars. Before the glistening prop had ceased whirling, the black-crossed Fokker was surrounded by threatening men, covered by a score of leveled guns. Then Quinn rose in the cockpit and wiped the spattered oil from his grimy face.

"My God! It's Quinn!"

Growls changed to a burst of cheers.

But their jubilation was short-lived. Quinn did not smile at their antics. With an upraised hand, he commanded silence.

"Quiet!" he bellowed. "This is no time for hurrahs. Get this—and get it straight." While the Black Sheep, suddenly sobered, listened in silence, he hurried on: "Never mind how I got the dope. But the Boche have planned the most brazen, daring coup that's ever been pulled on the Western Front. In less than half an hour. . . ."

While the setting sun illumined his face with a lurid glow, he told the Black Sheep the startling news of the intended bombing that he had got behind the German lines. He made a wild and heroic figure, with the wind whipping his hair, eyes gleaming from a face caked with dried oil, blood and grime. His hand raised in a clenched fist, his voice rang in simple eloquence. And there wasn't a man on the field who wouldn't have followed him through the gates of Hell itself.

Quinn did not need their hoarse cheers, when he had finished his dramatic speech, to tell him so. He pivoted around, waved his arms, bellowed order upon order. And a split second later the drome of the Black Sheep came alive with a frenzy of activity.

Eager hands trundled ship after ship from the hangars. Motor after motor spluttered to avid life. The slanting gold and crimson rays of the sun glinted back from whirling propellers. Pilots raced for their ships. Chocks were pulled. And one after another, the sky-

busting squadron of the Black Sheep roared across the tarmac and stretched wings eagerly to the air.

In the lead, Quinn hurtled his plane across the skies in a mad race against time. He glanced back over his shoulder, saw the squadron climb into position, spread fanwise behind him and match his speed with neat precision.

He could see, now, the jagged scars in the earth that were the front line trenches. His fingers tightened on the stick. With a prayer in his heart, he flew straight as an arrow, conscious only of the precious seconds slipping still more speedily by.

His pulse kicked out a faster beat as he winged over the lines. Far below him, in that network of tunnels and dug-outs, were the generals of the Allied High Command. With a surge of exultation, he saw the barbed wire entanglements, the gaping shell holes, the erupting geysers that marked No Man's Land. He had won! He had beaten Jerry to the mark!

And then a savage curse ripped off his lips. The heavy bank of clouds, a deepening violet now, were suddenly torn asunder. Churning the clouds to ragged banners of mist, came three huge bombers. And hovering about them, like a swarm of deadly wasps, darted the protecting convoy of Fokkers.

With a single, sweeping glance, Quinn counted. One . . . two . . . three . . . four . . . six . . . eight . . . twelve . . . fourteen . . .

EVEN as he flipped his ailerons in signal to break formation, he vowed that the Boche would not break through.

Those lumbering bombers, heavy with their murderous cargo, had to be blasted from the skies. Quinn picked out the foremost one for his own, gave his Spad the last ounce of power and hurtled toward it. A Fokker saw, dropped in a screaming dive to protect

it. And in the graying skies over No Man's Land, the two flights tangled. All hell broke loose—a hell of throbbing propellers, of whining motors, of searing lead and sudden, violent death.

It was as though Quinn's very spirit drove his ship through the air at unbelievable speed. The bomber he had marked for his own swerved, tried frantically to get out of his way.

Quinn's gun chattered. With unerring aim the Vickers probed with fingers of steel, found the life-pulse of the giant bomber. The huge ship shuddered in mid-air, then suddenly smoke and flame streamed from it. It fell off on one wing, then with gathering speed plummeted like a meteor gone mad toward the pock-marked terrain below.

First blood!

But if one of those two lumbering bombers escaped, got over the Allied front lines . . .

Even as the thought crossed his mind, he saw another of the bombers receive its death blow. While a Black Sheep plane soared in triumph above it, the big German ship began its last dive.

Quinn, banking sharply around, did not wait to see it crash. The dog fight had scattered over the heavens. He was returning to the fray when he saw something transpiring below him, that made his jaw sag. His eyes bulged in their socket.

As though in a trance he saw one black-crossed ship swoop down, ride like Nemesis on the tail of another! Frantically the foremost Fokker tried to escape. But the second pilot—whoever he was—handled plane and stuttering machine gun like a master. Steel raked the sky—he found the other's blind spot—and the unbelievable duel between two Boche ships ended in grim tragedy. The fleeing pilot flung his arms up in a last imploring gesture to Heaven. Then without a guiding hand on the stick, his ship somersaulted

before the weight of its motor pulled the nose down and it rocketed earthward.

The answer came to Quinn like a flash.

"Emil!" he cried.

It was—it *must* be—Von Goetz, over there in that triumphant Fokker. Quinn exulted. Not only was he exultant to know that Von Goetz still lived. Of such stuff were the Black Sheep made—and Quinn's own gallant heart responded at the thought.

Then the grin died on his lips. A trim Spad hurtled down toward the Fokker. A Black Sheep was after German blood—and he could not possibly know whose hand was piloting that black-crossed plane!

There was no time for Quinn to warn either of them. With a prayer in his heart he shoved the stick forward, swooped in a screaming power dive.

THE Black Sheep pilot was intent only on his victim. His Vickers came to avid life as Quinn shot downward. Lead stitched through the wings of Quinn's plane as it flashed through the narrow space between pursuer and pursued. As he flashed by, Quinn could see the startled face of De la Roche as the latter abruptly ceased firing.

The Frenchman held his fire until Quinn pulled out of his dive, executed a smart Immelman and leveled off. Quinn had no time to marvel at the fact that he was still alive—that his mad, suicidal dive had not been his last. He waved frantically at De la Roche, and though the Frenchman was obviously puzzled by the order, he banked sharply and ceased his pursuit of the Fokker. Then Quinn sped after Von Goetz, signalled to him to head for the Allied lines.

For a brief second Quinn watched the black-crossed plane as it turned its nose into the West.

It was hard to realize that only a few brief, hectic minutes had passed since

the two flights had tangled. The sky over No Man's Land was still a tangle of pinioned wings; of hammering machine guns; of roaring motors. Fokkers and Spads zoomed, dove and side-slipped about each other.

But the battle was over almost before he reached it. The great and daring plan of the Boche had come to disaster. Despite their numbers, the Jerdies were getting the worst of it and they knew it. The last of the bombers, which had escaped thus far unscathed, broke suddenly away and made a desperate dash for its original objective.

Growling deep in his throat, Quinn hurtled down toward it. At the same time, two more of the Black Sheep Spads erupted from the melee and converged on the fleeing bomber.

That was the end—and Quinn knew it even as his hand reached out to the trip of the Vickers. From the corner of his eye he saw another Fokker careen earthward—saw the rest of the Boche convoy suddenly break free and streak at top speed for the German lines. Then the clumsy bomber was lined directly in his ring sights.

A moment later, another flaming coffin dropped into Eternity.

The carnage was over.

The daring plan of the Imperial High Command had been blasted. Quinn was satisfied.

CHAPTER 15

VON GOETZ was nervously pacing up and down the tarmac, when the battle-scarred Black Sheep dropped their wings to earth again. Of the twelve who had soared into the east a short half hour ago, only nine returned.

With eager questions the men crowded around Quinn and Von Goetz,

pressing them for details of their exploit behind the enemy lines.

"Save all that," growled Quinn. "There's one more job we got to do."

"What?" asked Dake.

Quinn's eyes hardened. "Clear the name of the Black Sheep—get the man behind all this dirty work."

An angry rumble issued from the throats of the men at his words—then died away. There was silence for a few moments, then Quinn continued heavily. "He's our old boy friend, Colonel Gorham." The ominous rumble started up again but Quinn silenced it with an upraised hand.

"Take it easy," he said. "This is Von Goetz' party. He took all the risks—did all the dirty work. Gorham belongs to him."

A far-away look came into Von Goetz' marble-blue eyes. "A nice idea, Jack," he murmured. "A nice idea." He looked down at the German uniform he was wearing and a crooked smile twisted at his lips. Yanking the automatic from its holster he examined it carefully. "I think the dear Colonel would appreciate the iron of dying by a German Luger," he drawled. "Let's go."

With Von Goetz in the lead, silently the men moved across the field.

Still in silence, a few minutes later, they crowded into Gorham's private sanctum at the camouflage school.

The Colonel looked up sharply from a large map he had been examining. His eyes blazed in anger at the unexpected interruption. Then the anger faded, yielded place to panic. He made a pass for the gun at his hip but long before he could draw, the Luger in Von Goetz' fist dug deep into his navel.

Gorham stiffened. His face flushed, then paled. Slowly his eyes passed over the sullen faces of the Black Sheep, settled at last on the field gray uniform worn by Von Goetz.

"What—what's the meaning of this?" he demanded.

No one spoke.

Von Goetz reached out a bony hand—ripped the maple leaves from Gorham's shoulders and tossed them into the traitor's face.

Beads of sweat popped out on Gorham's brow. A pulse hammered dully in his throat. He looked wildly, appealingly, about him but his glance was met by nothing but that ominous silence—a silence that was far more terrible than any accusation could have been.

"What—what. . ."

"Shut up, you lousy spy," grated Von Goetz. "And listen." Gorham ran the point of a dry tongue over drier lips. Von Goetz hefted the Luger in his fist. "First, I want you to know that your plan to blast the Allied High Command to hell has failed. Quinn and the Black Sheep have seen to that." Gorham staggered back—pulled up hard against the desk. "Next, I beg to inform you that you are about to die."

Gorham gnawed at his under lip until the blood spurted.

"But I'm so tender-hearted," continued Von Goetz with gentle irony, "that I can't shoot you down in cold blood as you deserve. I couldn't even do that to a mad dog. So I'm going to give you a break."

Gorham's eyes were wide with fear. He seemed to have shrunk physically within the past two minutes.

"Yes," said Von Goetz slowly. Then with his foot he sent the table crashing back to the wall. Gorham looked at him from wild eyes. "You have an automatic, Gorham. I have an automatic. We will start from the center here—each take ten paces towards opposite corners—turn and fire. You understand?"

GORHAM jerked his head up and down, veiled his eyes to hide the

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cunning light that sprang up in them. Swiftly he yanked out the automatic from his holster and the two men stood back to back in the center of the room.

"Ready?" asked Von Goetz.

"Yes," said Gorham.

"Then march."

In the heavy silence of the room their measured footsteps sounded like the strokes of doom. One, two, three . . . Gorham's knuckles stood out white around the butt of his automatic . . . four, five, six . . . Gorham's heart pounded like a trip-hammer and swiftly he calculated the distance to the nearest window . . . Seven, eight, nine . . .

Gorham whirled, fired in one movement—before the count of ten.

Though he wasn't aware of it at the moment, Von Goetz had a new part in his hair. He pivoted swiftly, laughed—and the Luger bucked and roared in his fist. Once—twice.

The automatic sailed from Gorham's hand in a wide arc. He clasped the pit of his stomach, went down slowly, joint by joint.

Von Goetz lit a cigarette, inhaled deeply. Then slowly he stepped across the room to where Gorham lay on the floor in an ever widening pool of blood. "I only shot you in the guts," he said evenly, "because you cheated. You'll die. But you'll die slowly." He turned to Quinn and the grim-faced Black Sheep. "I think that is all we can do here, boys," he said quietly.

"A good job done," rumbled Quinn. He shuddered once, then glared beligerently at the still silent men. "Well, you muggs," he bellowed, "what the hell are we standing here for! On to St. Omer. There's still one job to do."

"What's that?" asked Von Goetz.

Quinn stiffened to attention, clicked his heels together. "Drink a toast. Two toasts," he corrected. "One to the three Black Sheep who are making it hot in hell. The other to the girl—R-5."

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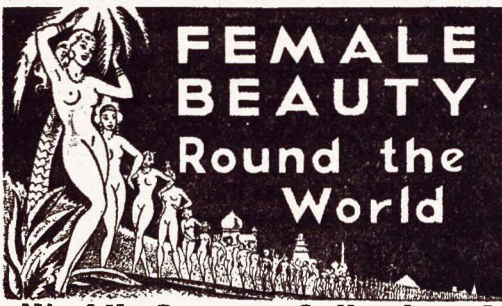
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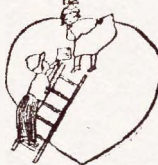
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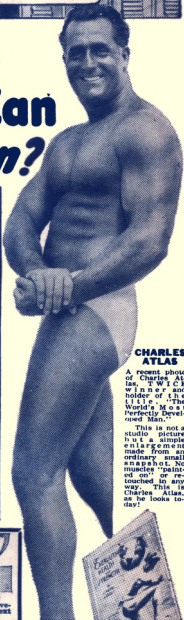


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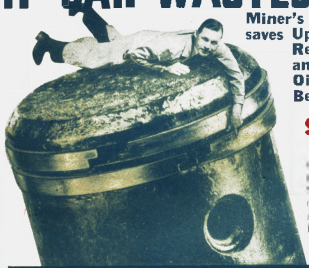
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