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by JOHN PRESCOTT



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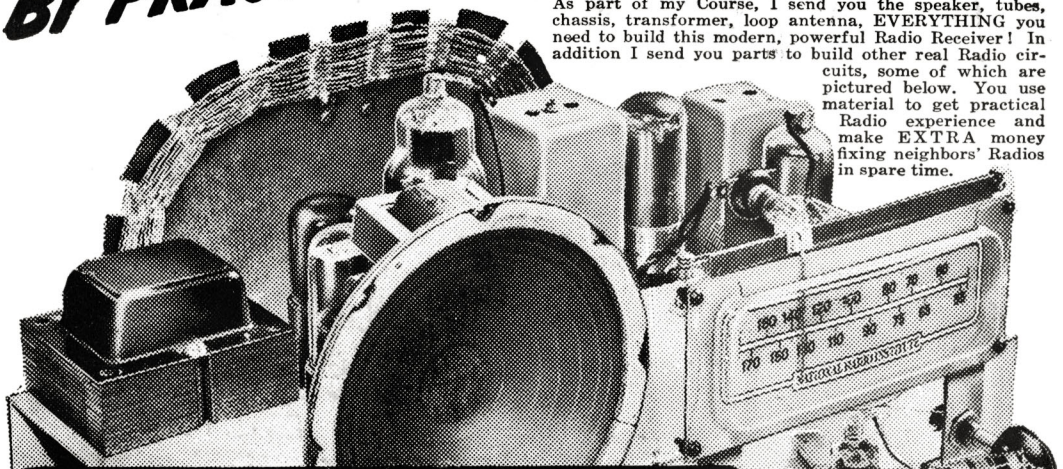
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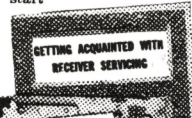
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Two Big Novels of Air Fury!

THE TEXAN FLEW FOR GOLD by HARLIN MESSER 4

The hawk-nosed sons of the desert looked up hungrily, fingering their scimitars. Overhead two battered Messerschmitts roared deep into Arab territory, on a glory-ride to death. In one cockpit a starry-eyed kid peered eagerly ahead. In the other hunched a war-scarred man, bitterly cursing them both for fools.

CAPTAIN DEATH'S CARGO by JOEL ROGERS 80

Once more he drops, slim and dark and insouciant, into the raging hell of bloody rebellion. But now his name is hissed in hate from gun to gun. For the famous Captain Death is earning a traitor's pay!

A Smashing Novelette of Conflict in the Clouds!

DUEL OVER DEUTSCHLAND by John Prescott 48

The silly Nazis thought that Randall and Collins had come to fight them. But no. Tough Tony and Punchin' Pete had their own private war—and Lord help any German Air Force that got in their way!

Four Gripping Stories

COMMAND PERFORMANCE by JOHANAS L. BOUMA 34

The big ship staggered on toward the wall of thundering flak, blood washing her decks and wind screaming through fresh-torn holes. But the crew hung on, grimly waiting for the Captain to turn yellow—again!

REBEL IN A CORSAIR by J. P. WEINEL 43

Lashing a fighter like Joe Bronson to a deck is like plugging a volcano with ice. Just don't be around when the blow-off comes.

THE NO-GLORY PATROL by COLEMAN MEYER 66

Puttering alone out over the Gulf, listening to their engine's cough, looking for wolf-pack subs and thinking about sharks, they knew they could never be heroes!

SNATCH ONE FLAT-TOP by HANK SEARLS 73

The Japs had it soft. All they had to take were Windy Doyle's bullets. But his squadron-mates had to hear his stories.

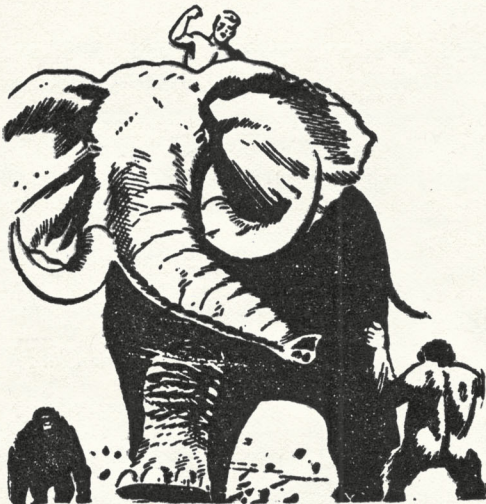
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He looked about him through a haze of pain, trying to locate the enemy.

The hawk-nosed sons of the desert looked up hungrily, fingering their scimitars. Overhead two battered Messerschmitts roared deep into Arab territory, on a one-way glory-ride to death. In one cockpit a starry-eyed kid peered eagerly ahead. In the other hunched a war-scarred man, bitterly cursing them both for fools.

WITH THE SHORTAGE OF gasoline they were flying only two offensive patrols a week, never on the same days, and Bucky Harrison often knew only on the last moment when they would be ordered to do a sortie. Mostly they sat in the dugouts beside the crushed rock strip outside of Ramallah and waited,

The Texan Flew for Gold

By HARLIN MESSNER



Overhead the cream-colored flag with its blue six-pointed star fluttered lazily in a gentle breeze which blew westerly out of the Negev desert, and Bucky thought of how many flags he had flown under in the past twelve years.

Actually, he was too old for combat flying, and his body carried too many battle scars to function properly in modern high speed military aircraft. He smiled at the words. Haganah Wing Three, of which

Buck was a member, was composed of a dozen obsolete Messerschmitt M. E. 109's the New State had obtained from the Czech government, two American built P-36's that had seen duty with the French Air Force, and a single Egyptian Spitfire that had been forced down near Jerusalem the week before, which had not yet been repaired for service, but was not so badly damaged that it couldn't be patched up.

The pilots of Wing Three were as

motley a crew of internationals as were their aircraft: Bucky Harrison, American; Kaar Savenski, Polish; Andre Boudreau, French; several Canadians; two Spanish brothers who had flown with the Loyalists during the Spanish Civil War; and some militants in Red Section who spoke a dozen different tongues and resented deeply any attempts to classify them as to nationalities.

Bucky never showed too deep an interest in his comrades. He kept mostly to himself and his own thoughts. They ran like this:

What a lousy chicken-crut war. No gasoline. No ammunition. Broken down flivver planes that ought to be dusting crops in Texas. Wonder how things are in San Antonio right now? Bucky Boy, this is absolutely your last war. You make enough this time, and you retire.

He was lying on his back in the dugout and looking absently up at the earth and stone roof. Kaar and Andre were playing cards with the two Spaniards on a table near the doorway. It was hot.

THEN it came: footsteps running on the gravel walk outside, a shrill whistle cutting the muggy air like a signal from the traffic policeman, and a voice shouting in English: "Raiders coming! Yellow Section, up!"

"That's us," said Bucky dully. He snatched his automatic from the shelf, a big Mauser that threw a 9mm. cartridge, buckled it into his holster, and clamped a flying helmet on his head. The other four men in Yellow Section were busy putting on flying jackets, stuffing maps in their pockets, running out the doorway. On the flight line the agonized whine of the engines of the Messerschmitts turning over on their automatic starters pierced the air. It was a high pitched wail like a woman in labor, and Bucky waited anxiously; then gave a sigh of relief when the old engines caught up and their muffled thunder pounded the dugout and rocked the timbers.

Bucky left the relative coolness of the sunken dugout and stepped into the eye-squeezing sunglare. The Flight Director, a tiny Frenchman who wore a number of foreign decorations on his shirt pocket, ap-

proached with some papers in his hand. He wore a jaunty red beret, and his legs were tanned a leather-brown, the color of his military shorts. He spoke to Bucky in his precise English.

"About nine or twelve bombers, high, Monsieur Captain. They have crossed the border at Khan Yunis, from the south. A spotter has called in."

"They ought to be here in twenty minutes. Any idea what they're after?"

The Flight Director jerked his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of Jerusalem. "The city itself, perhaps," he said, "or the munitions dump south-west of the city."

"Do they know about that yet? I thought that dump was Top Secret."

"They have a remarkable Intelligence, Monsieur Captain. I would not be surprised if their High Command helped to plan some of our own offensives," he said bitterly. He was a very serious man.

Just then another red beret-topped figure stuck his head out from the window of the radio shack and called to the Flight Director in rapid, excited Yiddish. Bucky did not understand the language, but the F. D. snorted.

"Another report. They have just passed over Gaza. That is only fifteen minutes from here." The FD glanced at his watch.

"They're sticking right to the coast. Maybe they're going after Jaffa-Tel Aviv today?"

"Perhaps. The harbor there is full of shipping. You will fly in support of Wing Two, if necessary." The Haganah First Wing was based far up the coast at Haifa, which Bucky called the "joke front". Raiders seldom penetrated that far north.

The other four members of Yellow Section—Kaar, Andre, and the two Spanish brothers—were sitting in their planes on the flightline, waiting for the Section Leader, the engines of their ships roaring. Mechanics and ground crewmen scurried about the sand-yellow Messerschmitts, making rapid last minute adjustments, big service revolvers flopping loosely on their hips as they ran. Bucky Harrison and the Flight Director had a map spread on the ground. The FD drew a red line to indicate the direction of flight of the bombers.

"Try to catch them here," he said, "before they can cut inland to hit us, or before they can get up to Jaffa."

"You call over to Wing Two and tell them we'll be operating in their area. Last week they didn't make proper identification of Red Section and shot their butts full of holes," growled Bucky.

"I will telephone. And hold Red Section on the alert. If you get into difficulty, they will be sent, Monsieur."

"If we get into trouble it'll be all over before Red Section can get there."

"Yes. Probably. But I will have them alerted."

Another shout from the radio shack. The man in the red beret was leaning out of the window waving his arms.

"Report from Ashkelon," interpreted the FD. "They have just crossed there. The spotter there estimated them at twelve thousand feet."

"Only ten minutes away, too."

"You had better take off, Monsieur. You do not want to be caught on the ground."

LUCKY was walking out toward his plane. His ground crew chief crawled out of the cockpit. On the tail of the German ship was the name *Bucky's Baby*, and the painting of a nude pin-up. Bucky patted the colored drawing affectionately. *Some day I'll change your name to 'Lili Marlene'.*

The radio operator was shouting from the window of his shack.

"He is pretty excited," smiled the FD. "One of the nervous ones."

"There's no place for his kind in a commercial venture like this," grinned Bucky.

The Frenchman stiffened a little. "Yes. You'd better go now."

"On my way."

"Kadeema!" said the FD curtly. He resented the crack about the commercial venture because he felt deeply concerned with the progress of the war his new country was waging. He was a volunteer and did not receive the high pay that Bucky and the rest of the mercenaries were given.

"Have your check book out when I get back," shouted Bucky from his cockpit. The FD couldn't hear him for the roar of the Messerschmitts' engines.

Bucky signaled to have the wheel chocks removed, gunned the engine, and moved up on the line, glancing behind him as he taxied to see that the other four planes followed. The far end of the rocky runway was blurred and dancing in the heat waves of the afternoon. Bucky tapped brakes and let the engine idle.

Kaar Savenski taxied his ship last onto the line and idled his engine. The control man saw that Yellow Section was ready and dropped his handkerchief. Bucky spun the prop to two thousand and released the wheel brakes. He watched the desert sliding past beside him, more quickly now, and finally felt the runway fall gently away beneath him. He was airborne. He gained altitude quickly and banked to swing back over the field. The other four machines were climbing to reach him.

Harrison, you're in the air again. Feel good? Simply topping. Two bombers for you today, Harrison. Make a thousand bucks. Two bombers, and instruct the State to deposit to your account in the First National Bank of San Antonio, Texas, USA, one thousand American smackers. Dollars, Bucky Boy, greenbacks.

What a great lover of mankind you are, Harrison; such a believer in the dignities and rights of free men. Yes, all of that for a mere thousand bucks a month, and a five hundred dollar bonus for every bogey you swat down. Harrison, you wonderful pilot you. You should write recruiting slogans for Haganah.

"Yellow Leader to Section. It's bombers this afternoon; nine or twelve Gypo's coming up the coast. We'll hit them below Jaffa. Watch out for Wing Two. They'll be playing around down there someplace. Over."

He snapped off his radio and looked over the side. Jerusalem was falling away under his left wing. Beyond, ten miles to the east, lay Arab Sawahira, where an Egyptian Army Division was stalled, perched uneasily, neither trying to advance nor attempting to withdraw, but apparently waiting for the long-talked-of enemy offensive to begin rolling.

Over Abu Shusha he could see trucks and lorries about, unloading at an ammunition dump, and tracks leading to the spot

from a main highway. In a few minutes the sea coast appeared beyond the nose of his plane. It would not be long now.

"Yellow Leader to Section. Keep your eyes open. And tighten up that formation. You look sloppy as hell. Over."

He cut the radio again and glanced over his right shoulder. The other four planes were lining themselves up on him. He smiled to himself. They were really good pilots.

THEY were flying now at twelve thousand feet, the altitude reported by the spotter. But Bucky knew the Egyptian bombers would not drop their loads from that height. They seldom ever bombed from above ten thousand feet and seldom did any serious damage then. They were not very good airmen.

Then he saw them, out over the water where at first he hadn't noticed them. They were in four flights of three planes each, so that the last section would pass directly beneath Yellow Section at about six thousand feet. There were twelve Douglas DC-3's, bristling with machine guns from newly cut gun ports in all vulnerable spots, converted to carry a heavy bomb load for the Egyptians.

"Skunks low at nine o'clock," called Bucky over the radio. "Kadeema, and over."

He winged over and began a long, curving dive towards the lead ship in the lead section. It was a long drop. In the little square mirror above his head he could see the other four Messerschmitts following on his tail. The time had been when he would have considered himself in serious difficulty to have ME 109's on his tail, but that was long before, in another country, and another war.

The lead ship fell under his sights and he thumbed the red button on the end of his stick to FEUER. Now. Streams of fire leaped from the 109 and chewed into the starboard engine of the DC-3. Chunks flew off and the prop of the bomber was reduced to spinning harmlessly in the air. Now the Egyptian gunners had him in their sights and he could see their tracer shells arching up about him. He rolled over and grinned to himself as he flashed

past them, their slugs hammering harmlessly on the armor plating on the bottom of the ship.

How many times, when he was piloting P-51's for the 15th Air Force in Italy, had he been robbed of a kill when a clever Nazi rolled over and left him machine gunning the bottom armor plating of a M.E. 109? He'd cursed them then, as the Egyptians were cursing him now.

Another Messerschmitt appeared beneath him. One of the Spaniards. Bucky pulled up the nose of his ship to make his next pass on the bomber. Another Messerschmitt flashed past him—Andre. Then a bomber passed over him, burning fiercely, with Kaar, the Pole, on his tail. The Egyptians were taking to their parachutes.

Where did your cripple go. Bucky Boy? With a smoking engine. Wait for Harrison. Now, give him the squirt gun again.

He raked the converted DC-3 with machine gun fire and punctured it from his nose cannon with a 20mm. shell which seemed to explode somewhere inside the bomber. The big plane shivered all over but stayed in the air. None of its gunners were firing now.

Pretty good flying machine, Mr. Douglas. Don't think you ever intended a DC-3 for a bomber, but don't tell the Gypo's that. Damned clever, these Egyptians; my word, yes.

Bucky brought the plane around for a third sweep. Just then a yellow Messerschmitt darted in under him and fired a burst at the wounded bomber. As it sped past, Harrison caught sight of the word "TERUEL" on the tail. It was the Messerschmitt of one of the Spanish brothers.

"Yellow Leader to Section: Stay off my cripple. Andre, you talk Spanish. Tell that Spic to get his own bomber and lay off my five hundred bucks. Over."

He flew head on at the bomber, blasting away with everything he had. The big ship seemed to erupt fire and smoke and became a flame in the sky.

Scratch one Douglas. One down and one to go. You promised yourself two scalps today. Wonder if they have slant eyes like Japs? Bucky Boy, this is going to be a very profitable afternoon for you.

SUDDENLY, from out of the sun, screamed twelve Spitfires bearing the insignia of the Royal Egyptian Air Force on their wingtips. Buck did not see them coming and was not aware of them until he felt his ship quivering under the hammering of their machine guns. Struggling for altitude, he shot a quick glance in the tiny mirror above his head. Two Spitfires were climbing steadily with him. In a moment they would be close enough to kill him.

Upstairs, Baby. You're in hot water. They must have skipped in from over the sea where the spotters couldn't see them. Where is Wing Two?

They were still climbing. The Egyptians began firing from too far away and tracers sizzled past Bucky's Messerschmitt. The bombers, with two of their number shot down in flames and another falling far behind the formation with a smoking engine, decided they'd had enough fight and began jettisoning their bomb loads in the desert. The bombs fell away in long sticks, out of sight, then reappeared below to blossom in neat rows like poppies in the yellow sand.

"Yellow Leader to Section. Reform. We're in trouble."

With a final glance in the mirror at the two Spitfires, Buck kicked his ship over and went roaring downstairs again. The Spits, anticipating such a move, winged over and quickly followed behind him, firing wildly as they came.

While the remaining DC-3's dropped down on the deck, streaking for home in a wild, disorderly flight, the dogfight which had developed between Yellow Section and the Spitfires moved out over the sea. Bucky was engaged in fierce evasive maneuvers designed to shake the Spitfires from his tail.

The Spaniard's Messerschmitt passed him with three Spits fast behind him. Bucky saw for a brief instant the terror on the face of the pilot, and into his headphones came the muttered curses of the Spaniard as he realized he was finished. Then a thin column of gray smoke trailed from the engine of the 109, darkened and thickened, and the ship rolled gently over and began a headlong drop to the sea seven thousand feet below. Bucky watched

him fall, straight and unwavering, and waited for the white of a parachute which did not come.

He dived again, trying to shake a Spitfire from his own tail.

Think fast, Harrison. That Spit has his hook in you. Is this what you've been waiting for all these years, to end up in one of these winged coffins like that Spic just then? He took it big, though; must have been gut-shot when he flashed past you just now.

At that moment a Spitfire appeared before his sights for a fraction of a second, and Bucky gave him a burst. The Spitfire began to fall apart, and Bucky followed it up by pumping a 20 mm. shell into the cockpit. The Spit fell off and began spinning downward.

Bucky saw Kaar sweep in to attack another Egyptian Spitfire, and the terror stricken enemy pilot cranked back his canopy and parachuted over the side. Andre Boudreau came about and got on the Spit tailing Bucky, and the Egyptian—caught between two fires—pulled out of the combat and joined the Egyptian squadron in streaking out to sea. The dogfight was over almost as quickly as it had begun.

Bucky reassembled Yellow Section to lead it back to Ramallah. They flew all over the sky in no particular formation and, as the landing strip appeared beyond the city, Bucky found himself flying behind and slightly above the other Spanish pilot, the brother of the one who had been shot down a few minutes before.

Bucky contacted him on the radio and told him that he was sorry for the brother. Below him the Spaniard turned and looked up over his shoulder at Bucky, a flat unconcerned expression waxed on his bearded face. "Hay que tomar la muerte como si fuera aspiriana." he said touching his throat mike, "you have to take death as an aspirin."

II

THE BAR IN THE HOTEL EDEN began to fill up about four-thirty every afternoon. By eight-thirty there were no tables left and khaki uniforms

stood three deep at the bar; the orchestra had come on and a tired looking woman sang from the elevated platform at the far end of the room.

"... *Je vous aime, ma chérie*
 "... *Je vous adore* ..."

The conversation buzzed on loosely and disconnectedly in Hebrew, Yiddish, French, some Spanish, some German, some of the Slavic dialects, and a lot of English. English was spoken by all of the waiters since the days of the English occupation, and seemed to be the "unofficial" language.

Bucky Harrison was seated alone at a table in the darkened end of the room. He had come into the city with Andre Boudreau and two Canadians from Red Section, but the other three had gone with girls to the bar.

He had a little Scotch left in a fifth on the table before him, and he was mixing it with water and getting pretty tight. He had wanted to since he had first come back from the sortie that afternoon, after watching the Spanish brother go up to Operations dugout and claim credit for one bomber; he'd watched this pilot walk off alone afterwards. He himself claimed credit for a bomber and a Spit, and had reported one bomber badly hit and smoking which had most probably gone down somewhere along the coast; Andre claimed a Spit and Kaar Savenski had taken one.

It had been a splendid day for Yellow Section—five Egyptians—but Bucky had thought once more of the Spaniard, going straight down, fast, and he had thought about what it'd be like getting it like that. Then Bucky had suddenly been sick at his stomach and had checked out a three-quarter-ton lorry from the motor park, picked up the other three pilots and had come to the Eden to get drunk.

This is not your war, Harrison. You are finished with ideals. You're in this one for everything you can get out of it. You flew in Spain for an ideal, and you flew with the AVG in China for another ideal, and with the 15th Air Force for still the same ideal. And what did it get you? A dozen machine gun slugs in the legs, and a burned, patched, pink face

that'd scare your own mother. Harrison, no more ideals. Now you fly for yourself—

"Beg your pardon, sir; you're Captain Harrison?"

THE speaker was a light young man, decidedly American, with delicate features and well-formed hands such as a painter might have. He was wearing a pair of faded pinks, without any visible rank. Bucky saw from the blue-yellow patch on his shoulder that he had been at one time a member of the Eighth Air Force.

"Perhaps."

"I asked a waiter to point you out. I was told I'd find you here."

Bucky did not say anything. He was trying to sober up a little. The newcomer pulled up a chair and sat down.

"You're older than I had expected, sir. You're drinking Scotch? Good. I was in Cairo three weeks ago and was lucky enough to get two cases from a British officer. Those Limeys are lousy poker players."

He pulled a dark bottle of Haig & Haig from a brown paper sack and set it on the table.

Bucky smiled thickly. "I haven't had a date with those two gents since I've been in the middle east," he said.

"I'm Bill Christian. Waiter, another glass! I'm going to fly with Wing Three. I went out to the strip this afternoon, but I missed you. They told me I'd be assigned to your section."

"We're short a man."

"I heard, this afternoon. Too bad."

"He was a good pilot. You think you can fly his spot?"

"I haven't done much combat flying since the war, but I don't think I've lost the touch. I'll be rusty at first, of course."

"It's a tough war out here. They dish out petro with a medicine dropper. It won't be like the Eighth was."

"I wasn't looking for a bed of roses."

"You'll be working in old crates held together with paper clips, flying over deserts that you can't walk out of. Or the sea. The Mediterranean looks pretty and blue when you're flying above it, but there's

no crash boat service to fish you out if you ditch."

"I know."

"Did you ever see a M.E. 109 go down, Mr.—?"

"Christian."

"... Christian? Did you, when you were in England? I'd seen them before, but I'd forgotten. I'd forgotten about the way they go until this afternoon when that guy got his. They have clipped wings and too much engine and when they're through they roll over gently and fall like a rock, and the engine takes a high pitched whine like the scream of a panther in the swamp at night, and you hear the sound singing in your headphones long after it's gone."

Bucky was gesturing with his hands in a drunken fashion, and he was saying things that were in his mind and his words came out quickly and thick. But his thoughts were clear and sharp. He was not drunk yet mentally. Very clearly he could picture the fighting in the afternoon.

"And when they hit, Christian, have you seen it? Just a hole. Yes. That's it. I once saw them dig the spinner of a 109 from a hole thirty feet deep. In Italy. No pilot, course. Not anything to bury even. They just leveled the place over with a bull dozer. Just like that."

There was a crowd standing around the piano now and an airman on leave from Wing One was playing a boogie piece while the orchestra took an intermission. The crowd loved it. It was an old up-right piano and he had put a sheet of newsprint behind the base keys and it made a sound like a good man on a fast set of drums. The airman was pretty good at it.

Presently one of the Canadians whose name was Frank Ross came over with his girl friend. She was tiny and very dark and very attractive in her CHEN uniform. She was wearing a holster at her side, with a white cord lanyard attached to the butt of her automatic and looped over her neck. Bucky introduced the pilots but he did not know the name of the girl.

"I don't know either," said Frank Ross, grinning at her. "I just picked her up this afternoon and she can't speak English. Has a lot of other talents, though."

THE room was crowded and warm and little beads of perspiration stood out on the girl's forehead like droplets of mercury. She said something in a Balkan dialect and Frank Ross laughed and said, "That's right, Baby, if you say so." and they laughed together.

"What'd she say?" asked Bucky.

"Damned if I know."

"She must be Russian." This was Christian.

"I don't know. She's a Haganah motorcycle dispatch rider, her friend told me. They were at the front together before the State decided not to use women up there."

"Yes, I heard. They treated women badly when they were captured."

"Well, hell," said Frank Ross, "I guess we commit atrocities, too. This is a lovely war." He had read 'lovely war' in a book and it was one of his favorite phrases. "You just over?"

"Yes," said Christian. "My sister and I. She's a doctor. We wanted—to come sooner, but we were afraid we'd lose our American citizenship."

"Yes," said Ross. "You Yankees are like that. Harrison," he added, pointing toward Bucky, "lost his after that Spanish thing in 1937 and didn't get it back until he went back in the AAF in 1941."

"Didn't vote in 'forty," drawled Bucky.

"When did you get over?" asked Christian.

"Harrison and I came together about four months ago. We both got offers from the Arab Legion, but this side pays more," he said.

"You're both mercenaries?" He sounded a little disappointed.

"What else? You think I'd come over here and risk my neck with this crowd for fun? What kind of sap are you?"

"My sister and I came because we feel it is a movement in which we believe." The phrase sounded rehearsed.

Bucky snorted. "I don't fly for ideals," he said. "I'm through with that silliness."

"I get a thousand bucks a month and that's the whole story," said Ross. "You're Hebrew?" he added, smiling that irritating little needle-under-the-fingernail smile of his.

"No," replied Christian. "I came over

to fly without pay because it seems to me that these people are trying to do something that is good, that the movement is a movement of the little people, like me, and like my sister, like you, and Captain Harrison, and that young woman there."

"Get that man," said Ross. Unaccountably, Bucky felt uncomfortable, embarrassed for this fair-haired boy.

Well, Billy Christian, you have something if you can hang on to it. But you won't. You'll see the faults in the New State and the errors it makes, and you'll decide like all the rest of us that it's no skin from your back. Then you'll be like we are. But you've got something now. Go it, boy.

Andre Boudreau came back to the table with the other Canadian from Red Section. Bucky introduced them to Bill Christian, but they had too much on their minds to notice him.

"You should have come over, Harrison," said the Canadian.

"No. The women were full of talk," said Andre Boudreau unpleasantly. "Too much talk."

"They may have known what they were talking about."

"What was it?" asked Bucky.

Frank Ross said, "Aah, something about an offensive the Arabs are planning."

"Where?" asked Bucky Harrison.

"Here. There. Who can say?" said Andre. "Much talk."

"I've heard it before," said the Canadian. "The rumor goes that they're going all-out on a drive up the coast, to cut us off from the sea. To cut off supplies and starve us out."

"They've tried that before."

"They're supposed to be massing armor at the border near El Khabra this time. More talk about the Nazi Brigade, too."

Bucky sat up. He had heard before of a Brigade of German prisoners training at a secret base in the desert.

"I don't listen to rumors," said Andre, pouring himself a drink.

BUCKY didn't sleep well that night. Frank Ross had an argument with the sentry on duty at the motor park when he took the truck back, and Bucky dreamed

about that. He was still a little drunk. The boat was rocking. He lay on his back in the dugout and watched the wooden timbers supporting the roof and they would begin spinning and he'd sit up on his bunk again. He'd drop off to sleep and he'd dream of flying and attacking the DC-3 that afternoon, and Frank arguing with the sentry . . .

. . . And German shock troops at El Khabra.

Early in the morning his head had cleared and he dropped off into a gentle sleep.

German shock troops at El Khabra.

He knew what he would do at daylight. El Khabra wasn't too far away, and he'd hop down there and see what was going on. Maybe shoot up a few motor lorries. He'd take the new pilot along as his Wing man. What was his name? Bill Christian. He'd find out what kind of pilot this Bill Christian was.

Bucky slept in the cool of the early morning. He felt as eager as he had when he was a boy in Texas with his first shotgun, going for ducks early the next morning. He'd laid in bed bundled up in covers against the cold winter morning and had heard a flight of wild geese passing overhead and honking to each other. Now, years later, in another country, he felt the same old thrill in the early morning.

III

THERE WERE FOUR CURIOUS insignias painted on the side of the cockpit of "Bucky's Baby." Small green boxes, with U-\$500-S painted in white in the center of each box, gave the appearance of four five-hundred dollar bills pasted there. The Crew Chief had painted on two more just that morning to bring Bucky's score board to date: four Egyptian aircraft destroyed.

When Bucky had bagged his first one, a few weeks after his arrival in the Middle East, he and the Crew Chief had discussed what sort of insignia to paint on.

"They're Egyptians, ain't they Captain?" maintained the Crew Chief. He was from Trenton, New Jersey, and had been in the Middle East two years, fighting with the

Irgun underground during the British occupation. "Let me paint on a little pyramid, or one of them sphinxes."

Bucky had laughed. "No, one of the other Arab Nations might get an air force. I might even riddle King Abdulla's private transport. Paint on what I tell you." And the Crew Chief had reluctantly painted up the first of the Five-hundred Dollar Bills.

The Chief was always glad to paint up another victory, because he, like the French Flight Director, felt that the sooner the State destroyed its enemies the sooner it would be free to grow. But he shook his head each time he did it. It was such a cold-blooded way of showing a victory. And he always thought to himself, "That Harrison, he's a good pilot, and he takes good care of my machine, but he's cool in the head. Brother, what some guys won't do for money!"

Morning sunlight glistened and sparkled on the plastic canopy around him and its reflection danced like a golden spider up the diagonal yellow stripe on the tail of the M.E. 109, which signified the Section Leader's ship. As he flew southward, seven thousand feet above the oil-top road to Beersheba, Bucky noted that the sun shone overhead from his left.

A few yards below him, in a more protected position flew the new man, Bill Christian. Bucky watched him carefully. Together they had spent an hour in cockpit drill that morning, Bucky going over the fine points of the German fighter and showing him its weaknesses. Christian had seen a 109 on the ground before, but he'd never been in the cockpit. Bucky made certain that he fully understood every point of its operation before taking him up. Pilots were fairly plentiful in the middle east, but not airplanes.

He'd finally convinced the Flight Director that the new man should do a routine patrol in order to get the *feel* of the German ship before going out on a mission with the Section. The Flight Director was reluctant to let them use the gasoline, but Bucky had insisted it would be better to burn the gasoline than to risk losing a pilot and plane, or having him shoot up some of their own people in ignorance.

Bucky had taken Bill Christian over all

the outposts that morning and had tried to explain to him something about the fighting. They were still flying within their own lines.

"Yellow Leader to Wingman. Bill, that black thread down there is the Dhahiriya Road. We hold one end of it and the enemy holds the other. Over."

THE road was oiled so the dust of traffic wouldn't draw artillery fire. Below a Haganah truck convoy was crawling its way to the front. Bucky smiled at Bill Christian peering over the side. He was interested in everything to learn. Bucky was pleased with him.

"Wingman. I thought Beersheba was in our hands."

"Yellow Leader. Newspaper idea. We have a garrison there that has held out since the beginning of the war. But they're cut off. They just haven't been cleaned out. Yet."

The city appeared on their left wingtips, white in the sun, contrasting with the brown desert.

"Yellow Leader to Wingman. Keep your head up. We're over enemy territory now."

Bucky slid off on one wing and roared in over the city. It was about a half-mile wide, mud and stone buildings. The Haganah garrison was holding out in the center of the city. Some riflemen sprawled out on top of a flat-roofed, two-story building waved as they roared overhead. In the street below some Arab sharpshooters in flowing desert turbans fired on them with small arms when they recognized the black Star of David painted on the yellow wings of the Messerschmitts. The two 109's came back twice more and buzzed the city at tree top level, but did not fire on any of the squat buildings. Often times the Haganah held only the top floors and the roof and the Legion troopers held the lower floors of the buildings.

"Yellow Leader to Wingman. We'd better get out of here now if we don't want to get caught. There'll be Spits on their way up here. Over."

Swinging south-west, they quickly left the city behind. They were flying now side

by side, low, over the Negev desert.

Nothing but sand and sand. You'd never be able to get off the ground if you got down in that stuff. You'd be finished, Harrison. Quite finished. You'd die of thirst. Yes. Or one of those desert tribes would capture you. Want to bet? Not that for me. I don't think I could take that. No. I wouldn't let them do their things to me. No. I'll use my Mauser first. The quick way for me. Well, don't think about it, Harrison.

Okay, I won't.

Then don't.

All right. I'm not.

"Wingman to Yellow Leader. Where are we?"

"Yellow Leader. We're about nine kilometers from the Sinai border. And I'm looking for El Khabra."

"Wingman. What's that, a social disease?"

"Egyptian base. But I can't find it. You a navigator?"

"No. But I see something over there on our right. At two o'clock."

On the horizon Bucky could see a settlement of some sort. They flew wide around it with the sun behind them, and kept low on the deck so as not to be spotted.

Then high above them at eleven o'clock Bucky spotted a staggered formation of planes. Then another formation on his right, high. The morning sky was jammed with enemy fighters.

"Wingman to Yellow Leader. There are some planes over there."

"You're telling me! More than we want to mess with. Those Gypos are lousy pilots, but that many would wear us down by sheer numbers. Let's get."

Still hugging the ground, the two Messerschmitts swung about and flew northward once more.

You nearly blundered into something that time, Harrison. Christian handled himself well, though. He's a good pilot. Cool. He knew what your chances would have been against that many Spits. That settles it. Something's up at El Khabra. You've never seen that many Spits at one place since this war started.

You'd think that the government would be on to that. Suppose there are Germans

at El Khabra. And you think there are. What are you going to do, tell the High Command you don't like the way they're running this chicken-crut war? No. Well, you tell me. Yes, you tell me what.

They were climbing again now, to two thousand feet, and flying north-west to avoid Beersheba. Bucky was afraid that Egyptian Spitfires would be in that vicinity since they had buzzed the town a few minutes before.

BELOW him at one o'clock he saw a ragged formation of men and animals ploughing over the sand dunes. Bill Christian hadn't given indication that he'd seen them. Was it a camel caravan, or—?

Bucky winged over for a closer look. Christian saw, and followed. Horsemen. They were bouncing along through the sand in long columns and must have numbered two hundred persons. A small tribe. Bucky felt his heart pounding inside his shirt and felt beads of perspiration pop out on his forehead like drops of swamp water on a lily pad. You didn't often catch them out in the open like this. The horsemen heard the roar of the two Messerschmitts just as Bucky made positive identification. They bolted in panic and scattered wildly with their bright turbans and cloaks flowing behind them as they rode.

"Wingman to Yellow Leader. Are you attacking? Who are those people?"

Bucky pulled his Messerschmitt up a hundred feet over the heads of the horsemen as isolated rifle shots cracked wildly around him. Christian, not anticipating such a move, skidded considerably lower. Bucky watched the Arabs fleeing like ants below him, knowing well that he could catch them, fascinated, like a hunter who walks up on a snake in the brush and watches him silently, almost falling under his spell, before he destroys him. He tried to keep the tension from his voice.

"Yellow Leader. Bill, that's an Arab nomad tribe. I am attacking. Follow, and Kadeema!"

He swept back again, flicked his red stick button to FEUER and applied thumb pressure. The desert below him churned violently into spurts of sand which crawled quickly into the mass of men and horses,

of twisting cloaks, horses down on their haunches, men screaming, struggling to rise, falling, sprawling. Bucky zoomed up again. From the corner of his eye Bucky saw Christian's Messerschmitt bank and come around for his attack.

You like that, Harrison. Yes yes yes. That makes it up for so many people. You liked it too, didn't you? You dirty, greasy, black-hearted barbarians. It's fine this way, isn't it? Not like raiding out-posts and women quarters, but fine, isn't it? Yes. Tell me it's fine.

"Bucky's Baby" was back in a position to attack again. Christian's Messerschmitt was in a steep bank, preparing to sweep in from the opposite direction, catch the Arabs in a cross fire, and criss-cross Bucky.

Now, Harrison. Give it to them again, Harrison. Yes. This is free work. No charge to the State. This I like. All for Harrison. How do you like it down there? Hold up, Harrison. Don't be so eager. You aren't supposed to get excited. Be cool, airplane driver. Don't get so wrapped up in your work.

Up and down worked the two Messerschmitts, chopping the mass struggling below until it was still. Then Bucky rolled over and climbed into the morning sun.

On the ground, a bearded Arab in a satin turban lifted his head from his arms and watched the two planes moving away, silent rage and cold hate burning in his eyes. At his neck was a large blue diamond.

IV

THE FLIGHT DIRECTOR nodded. "No doubt, monsieurs, it is the tribe that was raiding up and down the lines last night," he said. "We received a report on them this morning. They wiped out an outpost on the Beersheba Road." He was seated at his desk in the Operations dug-out. On the wall behind him was a military map of Palestine, Trans-Jordan, and Egypt. His red beret was hanging loosely from the muzzle of an automatic rifle slung on a post at his left.

"Did they take any prisoners?" asked

Bucky Harrison. They had just landed and he still wore his flying helmet.

"No prisoners."

"I didn't consider anything about prisoners," said Bill Christian, with a startled, hurt expression on his face. "I wouldn't have strafed those Arabs if I'd thought there might have been prisoners with them!"

The Flight Director had an ironic smile on his face. "There were no prisoners with them. But had there been, it would have been merciful to strafe them."

Christian looked puzzled.

"At that outpost there were bodies. Things had been done to them, but the indications were that the troopers held out as long as they could and then committed suicide. There were no prisoners. No one taken alive."

"They killed themselves to avoid capture?"

"This is a tough war, kid," said Bucky.

"The nomad tribes are notorious for their treatment of prisoners. The regular troops, the Arab Legionaries, are all right. They have British-trained officers. But the tribes are uncivilized."

"They actually torture prisoners?"

"You've just come out here, haven't you, Monsieur Christian? They do unpleasant things. Very bad things. You didn't hear of our people at the Tel Auja outpost?"

"No."

"Someone will undoubtedly tell you the story. Everyone along the line knows it. Every soldier fears it. It was very bad."

"They were wiped out by a tribe?"

"Their water ran out and they surrendered after two days. Part of the garrison was composed of CHEN troopers. Women soldiers. We recovered some of the bodies later. The things . . ."

"The government decided to withdraw all the CHENS from the front after that," said Bucky.

"That's why you were so anxious to strafe that band."

"Yes. You don't catch them like that often. They're the world's best desert fighters. They come storming out of nowhere, clean out a garrison, and disappear into the desert again. Damned good light cavalry troops."

"Like Indians," observed Frank.

"Yes," laughed Bucky, thinking of the comparison. The Flight Director didn't understand. "American Indians," explained Bucky, "as in the cinema. You know: Pow-pow-pow!"

The F.D.'s face brightened. "Oh yes."

Bucky was serious again. "We got down around El Khabra," he said

THE F.D. frowned. "You have exceeded your authority, have you not, Monsieur Captain? You were not authorized to do a lone sortie into enemy territory. You endangered not only yourself, but your aircraft, and the aircraft and life of a volunteer." The F.D. made it clear that he considered a volunteer more valuable to the State than a hired mercenary.

"I was lost," said Bucky.

"Lost? I believe you mentioned being at Beersheba. Why is it that you did not turn back there, Monsieur Captain?"

Bucky didn't answer.

"Evidently, Monsieur Captain, you do not realize how serious this might be. The General Staff has issued instructions that air units are not to attack targets in the El Khabra area or even to approach that vicinity. I neglected to tell you this morning because your flight plan indicated a routine patrol over our own lines."

"I must have become confused at Beersheba."

"What was the approximate location of this tribe you strafed?"

"About ten kilometers south of Beersheba."

"Traveling . . .?"

"South-south-west Toward El Khabra."

"For a 'lost' airman, Monsieur, you indicate extraordinary knowledge of your position. Did you fly directly over El Khabra?"

"No. There were Egyptian aircraft in the vicinity. More than I've ever seen at one spot."

"Did you see any indication of a massing of troops there? Any artillery or armored equipment?"

"Only the planes."

"I'll have to make a report on this. I am unable to say what action will be taken against you."

"Yes, of course."

"Understand, Monsieur Captain, that this is not a personal matter. The Government has issued certain orders . . ."

"Naturally."

"Only by strict obedience to those elected to authority, by our own people and those hired to fight for us, like yourself, can we hope to bring our state, born in fire and blood, into its rightful glory."

"What a lot of malarkey," laughed Bucky.

HE TURNED on his heels and walked up and out of the dugout. Bill Christian hesitated a moment, then followed. They stood in the bright sunlight again. The shadow of the flag flying above the dugout fell at their feet.

"Was that smart?" questioned Bill. "Can't you get into a lot of trouble over that? Court-martialed?"

"I'm a civilian. An American citizen," smiled Bucky. But he was not pleased with himself. "I'm just a hired airplane driver. The worst they can do is fire and deport me."

"O.K. It's your funeral," laughed Bill. Neither of them were serious about it. Bucky did not tell him how much danger they had been exposed to at El Khabra. He himself did not realize the full extent of it. They were walking together toward the motor park.

"What is this 'Kadeema' business?" asked Bill. "I see it everywhere. Signs in the shops and bars. Everyone uses it. What's it all about?"

"Oh, *that*," smiled Bucky. "It's a battle cry the way we use it in Wing One. 'Tally-Ho', 'Good hunting', . . . you know."

"What is it, Yiddish?"

"Hebrew. It means 'go on', or 'carry on'. It came in during the early days of the war. These people needed a hero then just as we needed one after Pearl. Kelly was our boy. Their's was a volunteer truck driver from New York City. He was in a food convoy trying to break through to Jerusalem and was ambushed. 'Good-by and Kadeema,' he said."

"Everyone says it. I heard Helen use it the other night. It's catching."

"Helen?"

"My sister."

"Oh, yes. When do I meet this lady doctor? You're hiding her?"

"Not at all. She's off duty this afternoon. I'm to meet her at the Eden Bar. Care to come?"

"You bet," said Bucky.

They got a jeep from the motor park after lunch and drove into town. The Eden was crowded, but the sister had not yet come in. Bucky and Christian took a seat in the rear of the room and started drinking the hotel whiskey. It was too early for the orchestra.

PRESENTLY a girl wearing a military blouse and khaki skirt came through the doorway and stood uncertainly. Bucky felt instinctively that this was the one, but he had expected a blond.

Christian saw her. "Here, Helen, over here," he called.

The girl brightened considerably. She was tall and slender, and had a good, warm smile, that gave you the feeling you have when you hold a handful of sparkling pistol cartridges in your palm. She had slender boyish hips and magnificent legs which carried her confidently like a thorough-bred. Bucky was attracted to her instantly.

"Poor darling, am I terribly late?" she said, extending both hands.

"Yes, but you're forgiven," smiled Christian as he stood up. Bucky rose, too. "Helen, this is my Section Leader, Captain Bucky Harrison, Haganah Wing Three."

"A state man?" she smiled.

"Republic of Texas," grinned Bucky.

"A Captain from Texas. There's more brass around here than Fort Benning ever had."

"You were at Benning, Miss Christian?"

"Helen, please. Yes. With the Nurse Corps. These uniforms are old stuff to me. But how long have you been over, Captain?"

"About five months."

"We've just come. We've been trying to get passage for months, though. We're both terribly interested in the Middle East, you know."

"What do you think of the Middle East —Helen?"

"Not at all what I expected. No daily bombings, no firing squads shooting spies against every brick wall, hardly no inconveniences. You wouldn't think we were even in war!" She smiled.

"Disappointed? You wanted romance and adventure, that sort of things?"

"Oh, no. Not really. I just talk. We didn't come over to have a good time. We're here for a purpose, to do a job. The people bear up splendidly."

"Yes. Bill Christian told me last night about the stars in your eyes. It'll wear off."

"I hope not, Captain."

"It always does."

"It did with you?"

"A long time ago."

"Really? You sound a little, well—bitter."

"A little disappointed, maybe. It came to me in Italy, when we were supporting the 36th Division up there. Thirty years ago my father was fighting with the Italian army to capture those same hills I flew over every day. You see what I mean? No progress. The war to end all wars. We've been fighting wars constantly ever since."

"Who?"

"People. People everywhere."

"Each generation has to win its own peace, don't you think? Each generation contributes a little to the whole of humanity, then some day the human race will have removed its last evils and can stand in peace."

"I withdraw from the human race. They sometimes win wars but never peace."

"Oh, I don't know, Captain. The little people always win out. You can't beat them—too many of 'em," she smiled.

"You're so optimistic. Much too cheerful to talk on this topic. What's say we toss it?"

"Righto. You can tell me about the countryside."

"The local excursion stuff, uh?"

They talked until late in the night, then Harrison and Christian drove the girl back to the hospital before returning to the air base.

V

YELLOW SECTION WAS WING-ing home again. The five sand-yellow Messerschmitts flew in a lazy, staggered formation with Bucky Harrison in the lead. Andre Boudreau was dragging slightly behind the rest of the flight and was having a little difficulty with his machine. Near the coast where they had gone to investigate an unidentified DC-3, unmarked, but suspected of being Egyptian, Yellow Section had been jumped by a squadron of Egyptian Spitfires.

Andre had a series of ragged bullet holes worked in the tail assembly of his craft as a result of the engagement, but he had managed to shoot down his attacker. Bill Christian had shot down his first enemy plane. He was not elated over the battle, but seemed to take it as a matter of course. The Spanish pilot, and Kaar, the Pole, had had no luck, but Bucky Harrison had accounted for his fifth and sixth enemy aircraft, and he felt simply splendid about them.

Another thousand dollar day, Harrison. You're little nest egg is growing. In a year you can retire. If you last another year. Well, why not, Harrison. Those Gypo's are lousy pilots. They fly like truck drivers. Well, maybe they'll learn. Or maybe they'll hire some good airplane drivers to do their slug-slinging for them, a bunch of those kid Nazi hot pilots who're out of work since the Big Show, and can take all the dives and twists that you black out on, and then you'll have drawn your last check from the New State.

Or maybe, Harrison, you're through, right now and don't realize it. Just maybe that squirty little Flight Director will report you for buzzing El Khabra and there'll be a pink slip in your pay envelope this month.

Jerusalem came into view and enlarged under their left wing tips. They could see the shining runway beyond the city, white from the scraped over, up-turned rocks, like a flat toothpick lying on a huge brown rug. Kaar Savenski, the Pole, broke away from the formation and went roaring down to buzz the city. Bucky saw the yellow Messerschmitt sliding off on one wing,

dropping lower and lower. He saw him pick out the Eden Hotel, huge and white, unmistakable in the afternoon sun, and make a dry run on it. As the section circled over the strip, waiting to land, the Pole rejoined them, vaguely pleased with himself.

From the ground before the operations dugout three khaki uniformed figures in red berets watched Yellow Section coming in. There was a lot of runway and the 109s came in high and fast. The leader approached as if to land, but did not cut its speed or lower its flaps. Roaring in a few feet over the runway, it suddenly zoomed up and did two victory rolls a hundred feet above the field.

One of the figures watching from the dugout, the French Flight Director was annoyed. "That is the aircraft of Captain Harrison, Monsieur General." He felt that he had to justify the members of his command. "He signifies that he has made two victories today. The maneuver is forbidden, of course, as an unnecessary hazard to the field, but Monsieur Captain fails to comply with the regulations."

"Yes," smiled the big man. "I believe you said before he was an American." He wore the uniform of a Haganah General Staff Officer. The other man was a staff Colonel. He had a beard and he did not smile.

THE other four ships of the Section had landed and taxied up to the camouflaged sheds before Bucky came in. Bucky gunned in from the far end of the strip. His Ground Crew Chief, service revolver banging on his hip and paint brush in hand, was running across the gravel to the ship before Bucky even cut the switch.

"Ho, Capt'n, I seen you!" he laughed.

Buck pushed back his canopy and held up two fingers. "Five and Six, Chief," he grinned.

"I know. I seen you buzz the field." He pulled an uncut bottle of American bourbon from inside his blouse and cracked off the neck on the trailing edge of the Messerschmitt's wing. "Congratulations. You're high man in the Wing, Capt'n. I've been saving this to celebrate your fifth

victory." He poured a drink in a canteen cup and handed it up to Bucky.

"Kadeema, Chief," said Buck.

"You got that kadeema spirit, Capt'n," grinned the Crew Chief. He was pouring himself a drink. "What were they?"

"Douglas DC-3, first. He wasn't flying any colors, but when we came around on him he opened fire on us. He put some holes in this old girl."

"Did he give you much of a time, Capt'n?"

"No. Made two sweeps on him and he fell off in a spin. Crew bailed out. I guess they were going up to make some pictures of Jaffa harbor."

"And the other one?"

"Spit. Pilot rode it down."

"Couldn't get out?"

"I don't think so."

The Crew Chief cursed the misfortune of the enemy pilot.

"What the hell, Chief, what the hell!" said Bucky. "Paint him up." The chief began painting the next two little green boxes on the side of "Bucky's Baby."

Bill Christian came over to congratulate Bucky. He had a drink from the canteen cup, and then he said that they were wanted in the Operations dugout. Slingshot parachute packs over their shoulders, they walked together over the crushed rock strip toward the squatty, earth covered dugouts, which pushed up like brown warts under the late afternoon sun. The sun was behind them and their shadows stretched long and thin on the ground. Where the parachute straps had rested on Bucky's faded khaki shirt was wet with perspiration.

"Monsieur Harrison, Monsieur Christian," said the Flight Director as the two entered the Operations dugout. He was standing and the two Staff Officers were seated beside his desk. They did not stand. The dugout was cool and pleasant.

Staff Officers. You're out of a job, Bucky Boy.

The Flight Director introduced them all around and one of the men was General Garcia who had lived in the United States and was proud of his Americanisms and the other officer was Colonel something who was probably Spanish also, and he

did not talk much. Bucky thought it was odd that they'd send two officers from Ground Command just to fire him, and he intended to tell the officers that Christian was without blame in the incident as it had been his first day in the air. They talked politely for several minutes, congratulated Bucky on his air victories, and were sorry that he could not be decorated because he was a hired mercenary, and congratulated volunteer Christian on downing his first enemy plane. The conversation was in English with the Colonel standing now impatiently and tapping his fingers on the Flight Director's desk.

If you are getting canned, Harrison, this is the nicest way it's ever been done. But this might be something else. Well, General, let's get on with it.

THE General unrolled a map before him. "Captain Harrison, I believe that two days ago you flew near El Khabra. You were 'lost', I believe," smiled the officer.

"Yes."

"Tell me, Captain, did you observe any unusual activity there, any massing of troop, armor, planes, or anything that you consider out of the ordinary?"

"There were a large number of Egyptian aircraft in the air."

"Did you engage the enemy?"

"No."

"I see. Captain, having once seen the city, would you be able to find it again from the air, very quickly, I mean?"

"I think so."

"Knowing well that it is defended possibly better than any base in the middle east, would a lone plane, or possibly two, be able to fly a direct course to the base and bomb it?"

So that's the game. Well, not for you, Harrison, old boy. Not for you. Your contract doesn't call for shows like that. Not even the small print. Put a wet blanket on that idea before it gets to growing.

"I doubt it, General."

"I see. No doubt you've heard rumors the past month that the Arabs are planning a push northward?"

"Yes."

"The Ground Command has been interested in these rumors, too, Captain. Only now we realize that they are more than rumors, that the Arabs are planning a big offensive. Our intelligence reports that El Khabra will be the jumping off point."

"They've tried to come up the coast before. They've never been able to break through."

"Exactly. But this time it's serious. We ordered all airplanes out of that area because we don't want the Arabs to know that we were wise to them. Now we know what they plan, and how they might succeed. We have an agent working as a translator in their Headquarters who reported that the Arab commanders are very confident about the outcome of this offensive and talk about something special which they feel will make this operation a success."

"Any idea what it might be?"

"A vague idea. For the past six months large numbers of Nazi prisoners of war have been 'escaping' from a compound near Cairo. This we have established. We've heard rumors that now a Brigade of Nazis have been training at a secret base in the desert."

"You think that the Arabs have been allowing these Krauts to 'escape' in return for their military services?"

"It's not such a fantastic idea. These Germans, all veterans of Rommel's crack Afrika Korps, have been prisoners for a long time now. They might be willing to fight one last battle in return for a chance to get back to the Fatherland."

"They could train them for a sort of Special Services outfit, a shock troop brigade, like our Palmach troops. They could raise a lot of devil behind our lines."

"Exactly, Captain. And we have reason to believe that is exactly what the Arabs plan. Arab agents recently purchased a surplus American LSM in Naples. A Cairo cotton exporter made the actual purchase, but the ship has been seen up and down the coast engaging in practice runs, not where a cotton merchant vessel normally could be engaged in lawful trade."

"Why not sink the ship?"

"Because we have no proof that it is a vessel of war and, secondly, we've lost

trace of it for the past two weeks. We don't know where it is."

"That's why you talk of bombing El Khabra."

"Yes. Perhaps this German brigade is there. Our agents have been unable to determine, Captain. But it's worth a try. They could open up a hole for Arab armor on the day of the offensive and the Hag-anah First Army of the Field would be wiped out. We've got to get rid of those Germans."

"I don't see, General, why you explain this to me. I'm just a hired airplane driver. I emphasize the word 'hired'."

THE Spaniard smiled. "So I've been told. But time is running out, Captain. We've got to knock those Germans out in the next few days. The Arab offensive is scheduled to start soon."

"When is their D-Day?"

"Next week."

"Do you know the exact day?"

"No. Nor the exact place of attack."

"And a bombing of El Khabra wouldn't really solve the problem, would it? After all, you have no evidence that these Nazi troops are there, do you? Isn't this just a shot in the dark?"

"We rather have to take the chance, Captain. We have to take any chance to win. For the New State, you understand."

"No. I don't understand."

"You understand the danger, yes? You understand what would happen if those troops are allowed to board that LSM and run up the coast? You understand what would happen if they landed behind our lines?"

"Arab nomad tribes operate regularly behind our lines."

"Arab tribes are not seasoned soldiers. They are not as serious as German Afrika Korps people."

"This is not in my contract. I was hired to fly against Egyptian aircraft. Regular patrol duty. Not this stuff. Not one way flights."

"You yourself said that you would be able to locate the city very quickly, Captain. That gives you a better than even chance. No one else has been down there in months."

Not for you, Harrison. Not this stuff. Not for money. Not for love. Not at all. Tell them to get one of those hot pilots from Haganah Wing Two. They all believe in the New State, the Promised Land. They want to die for the cause. Not you, Harrison. This is not your fight. Get all the greenbacks out of it you can and buy a little ranch in Texas. And settle down. But you'll never make it their way, Harrison, old boy.

"No, General, I'm sorry."

"I've spent quite a lot of time in your country, Captain Harrison. I've grown to like your people very much. You Americans are ordinarily a very generous people. I do not understand. I must have been mistaken before."

The other staff officer, the Spaniard with the beard, who had been sitting quietly behind the desk, spoke to the General in Spanish. He did not like Bucky. He glared at him with contempt and suspicion.

"Did you understand him, Captain? I do not know if you speak Spanish or not. He said, 'This one stinks as a coward.' You see how you appear, Captain. I know you for an American, however. One deeply interested in money. I know that you are not a coward. Only a mercenary. Only an American. More concerned in earning your almighty American dollar than saving lives of your comrades."

Hang on, Harrison. Don't get hot. Don't say something you'll regret. He's trying to provoke you. Don't provoke. Don't get insulted. How would he look with a broken nose? The little one. The greasy little one with the beard. How would it be to hang one on a Staff Colonel? Well, not yet. Hold on.

"I'm sorry, General. It's not in my contract. I made an honorable contract with your Government, and this was not in it. I'm a business man. What you want isn't good business. I'm within my rights, General. But your are within your rights also to terminate the contract."

"I'm not concerned with that, Captain. I'm concerned only with saving the lives of some of my comrades, possibly the whole of the Haganah First Army. You understand."

"Not interested, General."

"Well, then. I'm sorry to have taken up your time."

BUCKY could see that the three men there hated him. The General, the officer with the beard, and the Flight Director stood staring at him. Christian spoke up from slightly behind him.

"Just a minute, sir. I'll try it."

"You'll go?"

"Monsieur Christian was the other airman who was on the flight that day," said the Flight Director hastily.

"Don't be a jackass, Christian," said Bucky.

"It's something that's got to be done."

"Don't get your wires crossed, boy. These people here are foot soldiers. They don't understand the risk. They'll get you shot down and you'll spend the rest of your life in some Arab slave quarters."

"You are dismissed, Monsieur Captain," said the Flight Director.

"It's all right. I know the score."

"You'll only get yourself killed. What about Helen?"

"We came over prepared to take a few risks. She'll know. She can take care of herself."

"Don't be a sap, Bill. The odds are against you. You've never done any bombing from a Messerschmitt."

"If you've nothing else to say, Captain, I'd suggest you leave," said the General. "We have quite a number of things to discuss if this mission is to be carried out with a maximum of safety."

"I've got plenty more to say. You're sending this kid down there on a one way flight, unless he can absorb enough information about it to save his own life. You can strap a couple of five hundred pound charges under each wing, take out his guns, and give him just enough gasoline and he may get back. He may get back if he can find his way down there and out of the desert again. He's got to fly straight as an arrow, no zig-zagging, no fooling around on the way back. And those Spits are faster than our old 109's."

"I'm sure that he understands the danger, Captain."

"Two planes could carry twice the load, General. But that's not the point. Chris-

tian won't be able to find his way back without me. I'll go with him."

"You'll go?" smiled the General.

"Yes," said Bucky. Silently, he cursed himself.

VI

THE DAWN WAS COOL AND shivery, and the hand on Bucky's shoulder was firm, not to say peremptory.

"It's time, Captain."

"I'm awake. Get Christian up."

"He's out having his coffee, sir."

Guess he didn't sleep any better than you did, Harrison. Cool boy, though. Didn't even try to see that sister of his last night. Cool, or stupid? He's over twenty-one. Knows what it's all about. You're the boy that worries me, Harrison. How you got mixed up in this is more than I'll ever understand. Let yourself get sucked into this just to keep that kid out of trouble.

In the quiet darkness of the cool morning the engine of one of the two Messerschmitts kicked over and split the air with a scream before it caught, then the other engine started. The two planes warming up roared like thunder in the dugout, and Andre rolled over and opened his eyes.

"Time?" he asked.

"Yes."

Bucky stood in the middle of the floor pulling on his khaki shirt. The dugout was cold and he was glad to button the garment up to the neck. He stuffed the tail in his trousers and reached for his pistol on the shelf above his bunk. He sat down, pulled the clip out, and worked the action back and forth. Then, slipping the automatic back into its leather holster, he strapped it to his leg.

"You going to take off in the dark?" This was Andre again.

"No. Not until I can see the end of the runway. They worked last night to clear out another thousand yards for us. That's one advantage of the desert."

"Where's what's his name . . . Christian?"

"Out Having breakfast."

"Couldn't sleep?"

"I don't know. No more than I, I guess."

Andre sat up and lit a cigarette.

"Maybe it won't be so bad," he commented.

"Yes."

"Amazing things have been done under the element of surprise. Very important, that."

"Yes."

"With luck, you can be over the city before they even know you're there."

"Yes."

"They seldom get their patrols up before seven-thirty or eight."

Yes! Yes! Yes! For God's sake cut it out. I know what I'm up against and I brought it on myself and I'm not asking for sympathy and no one but myself can work it out for me. I don't mind except that it's a chicken-crut war and a chicken-crut people and no fight of my own, and it's no business of mine whether it rolls to the left or to the right, but that I did not want to become involved in it this deeply.

Bucky dug a light jacket from the footlocker at the end of his bunk and slipped it on. He took his flying helmet from the shelf and shoved it into a pocket.

"You want coffee?" he said to Andre.

"I'll come out in a minute."

"Salud, camarada," said the Spaniard.

"Thank you."

BUCKY felt oddly warmed. They were all aware of his mission, alert to his danger. He went out the door into the morning. In the east the first grey streaks of dawn were coming.

"Good morning, Monsieur Captain," greeted the Flight Director. He had not been asleep all night, but Bucky Harrison did not know this. He had personally supervised the disarming of the planes and the attaching of the bomb racks under the wings.

"Morning. Coffee?"

"No, thank you. I drank with your wingman."

"Where is he?"

"On the line. With your planes."

Bucky could hear the planes warming up. He walked over to the operations shack

and poured himself a cup of coffee from the hot-plate. It was thick and warm and fine in the morning. Strong coffee reminded him of New Orleans. He was very nostalgic this morning. Afterwards he walked down on the flight line to join Christian.

"All set?" he asked.

"Whenever you say."

"We'll give it a couple of minutes more to get a little lighter."

The two Messerschmitts looked even more squat and ugly with the 500 lb. bombs tucked under each wing. The explosives hung low, within a foot of the ground. The morning was a light grey now and Bucky could see his crew chief in the cockpit with a flashlight. Christian was very calm and talking to the French Flight Director.

"Don't you have a pistol?" asked Bucky.

"What would I do with a pistol?" smiled Christian.

The Flight Director looked alarmed. "You really should have a pistol."

"I don't own one."

"But you must have a pistol. You must take mine."

"I won't need a pistol," laughed Christian.

"You might," said Bucky.

The Flight Director was unstrapping his belt. He handed his holster to Christian. "It's really a splendid weapon, an American A caliber thirty-eight."

Bill pulled the piece from its holster; it was a Smith & Wesson six-shot revolver. He held the hammer with his thumb and spun the chamber around.

"It's loaded?"

"Oh, yes. Will you require additional cartridges?"

"No," said Christian.

"Well, as you say."

In ten minutes it was light enough. Bucky looked at his watch. Four forty-five. The sun would come up fast.

"All right. We'll go now. You lead off, Bill, and I'll follow in about three minutes. If you pop, I don't want to be near you. See you upstairs."

"Fine."

"Please remember that you carry extra gasoline and a thousand pounds of ex-

plosives, Monsieur," warned the Flight Director. "Utilize all of the runway, and do not circle back over the field." He shook hands with both pilots. "Kadeema."

Bucky climbed up on the wing of his plane to exchange places with his Crew Chief in the cockpit. The Chief slapped him on the back and told him something, but he could not understand above the noise of the engine. He sat down deep and cold in the cockpit.

On his left, ground crewmen pulled the chocks from under the wheels of Christian's Messerschmitt and the plane began waddling slowly up on the runway, the two bombs hanging dangerously close to the ground.

A flashlight blinked at the end of the runway nearly a quarter of a mile away. Once. Twice. Bucky knew that the signalman was running now for the dugout. He wouldn't want to be there if Christian piled up.

The Messerschmitt ahead of Bucky roared to new life, a white, ungloved hand reached up into the light to pull the canopy forward, and the ship moved down the runway, gaining speed, until the noise of Christian's plane was absorbed by the engine of his own. He could just see a dim grey shadow racing across the strip. One minute. No bright ball of flame marred the morning. Christian was clear.

Bucky caught the FD's wave and gunned the engine. The Chief stood beyond him with wheel chocks slung over his shoulders. Releasing the wheel brakes, Bucky spun the prop to 2000 r.p.m. He was moving down the runway.

THEY formed up and flew on their heading in silence. Finally Bucky tired of his thoughts and switched on the radio.

"Yellow Leader to Wingman. We're well beyond Beersheba now, Bill. No danger from that any more. Only trouble we might have is desert spotters reporting us to their base. Over."

"Wingman: How far to El Khabra?"

"Leader: About ten minutes, I think. If I've misjudged, we're cooked. You hear that? Now, when we go in, I'll get the landing strip and you look for the biggest

building in town. We'll split up. It'll take a big building to house a bunch of Germans. Over."

"This crate is flying like a box car. We'll not be able to maneuver until we dump this stuff. Wait—I think I see something!"

"Yellow Leader to Wingman: Give me position."

"Ground at eleven o'clock. Some horses."

"I see. Get off the radio. Maintain radio silence from here in. Over and out."

Bucky cut his radio and peered ahead of him. Over his left wing he could see some horsemen. A ragged, strung-out column of horses, and some pack animals, he thought. He watched; then the wing moved to cover them from his view.

Tribe moving away from El Khabra. Our rotten luck. Well, you didn't expect to beat this trip anyway. Maybe yet. If they haven't got a radio set with them. Why should they have one?

Now the column came into view again under the trailing edge of his wing. He could not distinguish them very well because of his altitude.

They've seen us and stopped the column. And why not. Sound carries ten miles this early in the day. Maybe they won't recognize us. Don't be an ass, Harrison. Any dumb Arab can tell a Messerschmitt from a spitfire. Maybe not. The sun is behind them and they see you against a dark sky. Maybe. What the hell, Harrison, what the hell! What did you expect, anyway? In ten minutes it'll all be over. El Khabra in ten minutes.

It was one of the longest ten minutes in Bucky Harrison's life.

BUCKY had his Messerschmitt in a dive over the air park. Below him stretched two rows of Spitfires, neatly pegged out as if for inspection. He was aiming for a point just right of the column. Jerking the release that had been rigged to drop the bomb under his left wing, he zoomed up again. The bomb arched away, bounced once along the runway, and skidded into the rows of aircraft. The explosion tossed the line of planes into a twisted wreckage as if some giant hand

had taken the landing strip and shook it as a dog does a shoe. Bucky was flipped over on his back and clawing for altitude. The bomb under the right wing hung at an angle.

Who says you can't skip bomb in a 109? Who says you aren't a first class bombardier, Harrison? Not so low, next time. You have holes in your wings. Get rid of that other five hundred pounder. Can't fly like this.

He glanced around him for Christian. The other Messerschmitt had dumped one bomb and was flying on one wing about a thousand feet above the city. At that low altitude he could barely see from one end of town to the other. People were running out into the streets now. There was dust and smoke around a large white building that Christian had smashed.

"Wingman to Yellow Leader: Come in, Leader, can you hear me?"

"I hear you. I'm behind you, on your left."

Bucky saw the other plane circle slightly. He was flying badly. Bucky was watching for a big white building. He did not see any. He could see no building that would house a whole Brigade.

"Damn!" he thought to himself.

"Wingman to Leader: I'm full of holes. There's glass all around me. I flew into that blast."

There's nothing here. Not even any barracks. Wait. There's something. Barracks over there. Arab barracks, though. Well, go get them, Harrison.

"Yellow Leader to Wingman: Are you hurt? Can you fly? Over."

"I'm all right, but this airplane is finished. I've got to get out of here right now."

Bucky saw him jettison his remaining bomb over the city. It struck in a cluster of buildings and demolished them. He passed under him and swung northward again. Bucky made a run on the military barracks and loosened his other bomb. The plane, relieved of its awkward load, rose like a bird released from a cage. He could not tell if the bomb struck home or not.

What a lousy mess. What a deal this turned out to be. Risk your neck to blow up a bunch of mud huts. Too much brass

in this war. Harrison. Always too much brass.

He moistened his lips. The whole attack had taken only a few seconds. Ahead of him far in the distance the other machine was trailing a thin line of smoke. Christian was dropping altitude rapidly.

"Leader to Wingman. You're smoking badly. Get some altitude and hit the silk."

"Can't get up. Too low. Got to ride it down."

Bucky watched him with a frozen face. Did he realize it? That tribe they had passed coming in would give anything to get hold of an airman.

"Wingman to Yellow Leader. I'm all right, but it looks bad for me. I know what the score is. I'm going in now. Tell Helen for me. Tell her, 'Good-by. I love her.' Will you tell her, Harrison? Ka-deema."

"Bill, watch yourself. Bill? Yellow Leader to Wingman. Can you hear me?"

He knew that Christian did not want to talk to him. He turned his head and would not look down again until he was over his own lines. He did not want to watch Christian go in.

VII

BILL CHRISTIAN WAS hunched over the stick in the cockpit and the nose of his Messerschmitt had plowed into a sand dune. The plane smelled of stinking gasoline and in his mouth was a dry taste as if he was holding a copper penny under his tongue and could not spit it out. A red film beyond which he could not penetrate covered him from the outside world. But in a few moments when he could feel things he realized that he was not dead.

He remembered going down, and Harrison trying to contact him on the radio, and the yellow waste land stretching under him, and then cutting the ignition, and leveling off to pancake in. He remembered hitting, smashing, sliding, screaming, grinding, then nothing, nothing, twisting, spinning, and sand flying, and tons of sand and then the awful quietness.

He leaned back and removed his flying helmet and there was a cut on his fore-

head and blood running down his eyes and face. He wiped his face so he could see. It was so quiet. The other Messerschmitt was a speck in the sky moving northward. He was all alone.

For several minutes he sat strapped in his cockpit and did nothing. What was one supposed to do? Wait for a crash boat to fetch you? No. Get out and walk? Where? Surrender? To whom? So he sat there for several minutes more. There was a canteen on the floor board between his feet, but he knew without touching it that it was empty.

When at last he did release his safety belt and push back the shattered canopy around him he found that the effort was tiring. He wondered if he was injured someplace and could not feel it. Pulling himself out of the cockpit largely by use of his arms, he stood beside the wrecked aircraft, but when he tried to walk his left leg refused to support the weight of his body and set him sprawling headlong into the clinging sand. He lay there hopelessly for a minute, sand in his mouth and caked on his blood-smeared face.

He was quite dizzy yet. He knew that he was supposed to remember something, but he did not know what it was. The sun was to the right of the plane and he lay on the shadow side. His wrist watch was stopped at 6:15. What a lovely day he had before him.

What was it?

Bill Christian wrenched every muscle in his body and crawled, half-dragged himself to the wing of the plane. It was not so sandy there. Against the fuselage he propped himself and he reasoned from the dune in which the plane lay half-buried that the sand had smothered out his smoking engine. Harrison had told him to parachute.

Then he remembered it. His head cleared just as quickly as if he'd ducked it into a cold stream. An Arab tribe had seen him go down. How long would it take them to locate him?

Half a mile beyond the wrecked plane, riding hard, beating their mounts up sand dunes, sliding down others, came a band of Arab warriors. They picked up speed on the stretches where the sand was hard-

packed and they could stretch their horses out. In the deep sand they floundered and bounced along slowly. They were strung out abreast in an uneven line, their cloaks flowing behind them as they rode.

The Arabs had abandoned their pack animals as soon as they had first seen the smoke trailing from the wounded Messerschmitt. They had watched the plane drop lower and lower and had then taken out in savage pursuit, rifles popping in the air and wild coarse shouts bursting from their throats.

BILL Christian, appearing very young with his hair matted about the cut on his forehead, sat looking at his left leg sticking out in front of him. It was bent oddly and he could not move it. He heard a rifle shot on his left and he said aloud, "Here it comes." The sound of his own voice comforted him.

The Flight Director's revolver was still strapped to his leg. He was glad now that he had brought it, although he wondered if it would fire because of the sand caked around it. Whom was he going to shoot anyway?

"Didn't you hear of our people at the El Auja outpost?"

Bill shook the idea from his mind and pulled the weapon from its leather holster. The six cartridges sparkled like silver jewels in the chamber.

"At that outpost there were bodies. Things had been done to them, but the indications were that the troopers held out as long as they could and then committed suicide."

"Cut it out," he told himself. He liked the sound of his voice. How long would it take them? Should he fire a shot to attract attention? He could hear yelling in the distance. The sun was higher now and his head was no longer in the shadows. It was warm on the back of his neck.

"Every soldier fears it. They do unpleasant things. Very bad things."

If he had to make a fight of it he would take five of them down with him. There were six cartridges in the revolver, if he could not surrender. He would call to them when they came close.

He saw them before they saw him. They

came up on the crest of a large dune and stopped, nearly a hundred mounted Arabs.

"What now?" He pulled the hammer back with his thumb and held the revolver in his lap with both hands. The Arabs had seen him and swung out in a line to encircle him. One, obviously the leader, unslung a submachine gun from his shoulder and urged his horse down the dune toward the plane. Christian watched him walking his horse slowly over the sand. The Arab was wearing something at his neck that glistened in the sun and he carried the submachine gun across the saddle in front of him.

"He can't see me so good," thought Christian as he watched the Arab shade his eyes. He was walking into the morning sun.

"Speak English?" called Christian hoarsely. The horseman rested the butt of the rapid fire weapon on his leg, muzzle in the air, and rode cautiously on toward the plane.

Bill lifted the revolver and fired a shot. Sand spattered at the feet of the horse and he stopped.

"They do unpleasant things. Very bad things."

THE horseman put the tommy gun to his shoulder and released a stream of fire toward the plane. The slugs ripped and popped through the tail assembly of the aircraft.

"Well," muttered Bill Christian, "you could chop me if you wanted, but you want me alive, evidently." He knew then that he would have to make a fight of it and he wished he could see behind him. He did not like his position. The main body of the Arabs stayed in a semi-circle before him, just out of his pistol range.

"They do unpleasant things. Very bad things. Every soldier fears it."

Apparently the Arab leader was feeling very brave before his followers. He dashed into Bill's pistol range and fired a burst from the submachine gun. Bill was lying prone now, pushing up a little barrier of sand in front of him with his hands. He fired again as Ahmed made a second swing to-



Bill pulled the trigger and his eyes were shut.

ward him and sprinted his horse out of range again.

"The next time I will get you, Arab," he told himself. There were only four cartridges remaining in his pistol.

Once again the Arab charged. His weapon ceased firing while he still held it aimed at Bill. Bill held his own fire, watching.

The Arab wheeled his mount away, out of range. He appeared to be studying the sub-machine gun, shaking it and tugging angrily at its mechanism.

Bill chuckled, although it caught at his throat a little. "Clip's run dry, hey kid? What're you going to do now, you dog?"

The Arab looked back over his shoulder

at the others, who still waited motionless. Evidently, he had boasted he would take this prisoner. Suddenly, he shouted and whipped out a scimitar, spurring straight toward the plane.

Bill lifted the pistol and pulled the trigger and his eyes were shut when the explosion came. When he opened them again, the stallion was down on his front knees with a bright red stain on his flanks where the blood was jetting out and the Arab was scrambling to his feet a few yards in front of the horse. He tried to pull the horse up, let it go, and started to run out of range. Bill Christian fired twice more. The first shot went wild over the head of the fleeing figure, but the second caught

him at the base of the skull and tripped him into the sand,

"They do unpleasant things. Very bad things."

The rest of the tribe watching the drama stood dumb-struck for a minute, waiting for their leader to rise again. Then they realized that he was dead, and came pouring down the big dune, riding, tumbling, falling, like leaves in a cloud of sand and screaming as they rode. The desert spurted and jumped about Bill Christian as the charging horsemen fired a volley at him.

Very calmly he lifted the muzzle of the revolver to his mouth. There was one cartridge left in the chamber.

VIII

THERE WAS A STORY MAKING the round at the Eden Hotel bar about an acquaintance of Bucky's, a newspaper man for a British wire agency. The newsman was the stereotyped war correspondent who had followed the heaviest fighting in Jerusalem months before. As Arab high explosive shells pounded the very guts of the Old Walled City, this Englishman had walked calmly down a street with bricks and shrapnel falling about him, notebook in hand and conscientiously recording everything that he witnessed.

It was said then that he happened to notice, hidden in an ash can and almost completely covered by fallen rubble, a very frightened Haganah lad, huddled over his rifle and crying softly to himself.

"I say, old thing," the newsman was reported to have said as he dug the boy out, "What are you doing here?"

"I'm fighting for Democracy, sir," replied the boy.

It was a very funny story, according to the Britisher's notion of humor, and Bucky always thought of it when he saw that correspondent.

From where Bucky sat, alone at a table in the far end of the room, he could see this Englishman drinking at the bar. Ordinarily he would have called to him, but this afternoon he wanted to be alone as much as possible, before the sister came.

Why don't you call him over, Harrison,

and tell him a really funny story? Tell him about an American who was in this war a whole week before he got it. A whole week! Isn't that priceless?

Bucky was not drinking much because he still had that ordeal with the sister. He'd reported Christian downed when he'd first come in, and the Flight Director agreed that the boy hadn't any chance with a nomad tribe hunting him.

"He had a sister here, did he not, Monsieur?" the Frenchman had asked, with carefully averted eyes.

Bucky had replied, "A doctor at the general hospital. I'll see her this afternoon, but you'd better call her now. You're the Commanding Officer, and that sort of thing."

"Very well. I will attend to that."

"Say that he was killed outright. She understands about those tribesmen, and she shouldn't know that he was captured."

"Very good, Monsieur Captain."

That was all that had passed between Bucky and the French officer concerning the death of Christian. Harrison had spent the afternoon at the base, feeling low, and had driven a jeep in later to meet the sister when she came off duty.

He had been sitting in the bar two hours now, watching the crowds, thinking, and he doubted that she would come. His thoughts were vindictive toward the whole war.

Skip it, Harrison. You didn't have the guns or gasoline to help him and he couldn't have walked out of the desert if you did. Flies don't walk out of fly-paper. He was just unlucky, that's all.

IT WAS later when Helen Christian, wearing a light military tunic, and beret, came in. Pausing uncertainly in the doorway, she caught Bucky's wave from the far side of the room and started toward him on those magnificent legs of hers. When he rose to meet her Bucky realized that she was wearing unusually heavy makeup.

"I'm awfully sorry to be so late," she said; then, noticing Bucky's concern, she added, "I'm all right now, really I am. I had a long cry, but I'm fine now."

"Want something to drink?"

"No. Well, yes. Something strong. That's what I need."

A waiter had followed her over to the table. Bucky ordered, then sat back uneasily. He wasn't sure how to begin.

"No need to tell you, of course, how sorry I am. He was a fine boy."

"Wasn't he, though! You didn't often see it right away. The longer one knew him the better one appreciated him."

"He was brave."

"Some Frenchman called me about it before noon today. I'm afraid I didn't make very good sense then." Her smile was wilting around the corners of her mouth like a dying lily, and Bucky was afraid she was going to cry. "It's all right," she said, holding her head up again. "I'm such a damned baby, anyway."

"Not at all."

"He wasn't my brother really, you know. My father married his mother when we were both kids. I was older—always took care of him."

"No, I didn't realize."

"He was an awfully sensitive boy, made you want to look after him. He used to read a lot, just to be by himself. He was crazy about flying. He learned when he was just a kid and used to spend hours up there alone."

"He was a good pilot."

"He loved that as much as anything. It was natural that he'd get into the Air Corps during the war. He flew in Europe and had a grand record. Four planes he is accredited with. But he was terrified of combat flying; no one but me knew just how terrified he was. I was closer to him than anyone else, and yet there was something about him even I couldn't break through to. He was all alone. He felt as if he didn't quite belong to things."

"Everyone is afraid in battle. The really brave ones carry on like he did, and do their jobs."

"How did it happen? His C.O., that French chap, couldn't put it across very well. What happened to Billy? Did he suffer any?"

"Not at all. I was with him. He felt very good."

"Did you talk to him? Was he shot?"

"He volunteered to fly a very dangerous

bombing mission, deep into enemy territory. He knew he had a slight chance, only a slight chance, but he went."

"He was shot down?"

"No, not exactly. He was bombing from a low altitude and blew his ship up. He crashed in the desert. When he was going down he asked me to tell you that he loved you. He said, 'Good-bye and Kadeema'."

"Good-bye, and Kadeema," repeated the girl softly. "Is that all?"

"He was killed instantly," lied Bucky.

"I'm glad he didn't suffer before he died. I don't think he could have borne pain very well. He was such a sweet boy."

"He was, and it is a shame that he had to get it like this."

Helen Christian sat up. She stared at him for a moment before she said slowly, "What do you mean?"

"I mean, in a tin-horn, bush-league fight. In something that didn't count."

"You don't think it counts?"

"No."

"He wasn't like you. It mattered very much to him. This was something he believed in, as much as his own country. He cared as much for these people and their fight, as he did—as he did for his own life. Do you understand that?"

"I'm afraid I can't get warmed up over a couple of little postage stamp states shooting at each other. I simply don't believe in it. I could fly for one side or the other. It just happens that this team pays more."

"I'm really sorry for you, Captain. At first I was sorry for Billy, but you're the one who deserves sympathy. He believed in something. Maybe it was only a flag, a strip of coastline, and a handful of refugees to you, but it was a *way of life* to him. It was *mankind* to him. He was involved in *mankind*."

"I believe in a flag," said Bucky, raising his voice a little angrily. "It's a little green paper flag, and it has a picture of George Washington on one side and a numerical value stamped on the other. The greatest flag in the world."

"The American dollar. Why does . . ."

"Anyone's dollar, really. Just so it has a purchasing power. It can be American, Spanish, Greek, or Chinese."

"How very happy you must be."

"Not particularly. But ask me in a couple of years, when I've retired, when I'm ranching home in Texas and the only time I go near a plane is to fly over and count my cows."

"I understand you fought in Spain, Captain, for Democracy. You weren't always a mercenary."

"That was ten years ago. I was younger, then, and something of an idealist. I believed, I guess, in mankind, too. Like your Bill. I fought for it in China and later against the Nazis. But no more. I'm sick of mankind. I'm through with that. Now I fight for myself, risk my neck for money only. I spent three wars for mankind, and it isn't better off now than it was in the beginning."

"I didn't realize you were so bitter."

"I'm not bitter. Just smart."

"And Billy wasn't? He's dead out there in the desert because he believed in the freedom and dignity of men? Isn't that smart, Captain? To want a chance for your fellow human beings, to live and raise their children in peace? Tell me that isn't smart, Captain."

"Don't misunderstand me, please. Bill was one of the bravest men I ever knew. He realized he might be killed today, and he went out anyway."

"Which brings up a very interesting point. Why did you go?"

"For him. Because he seemed to me a decent sort. Not for mankind."

"He was mankind."

"Not for me. To me he was an individual. I think I can take some risks for human beings as individuals, but not collectively."

"I can't show you, Captain, if you don't want to see it, but Bill Christian gave himself out there for you, and for me, and for our children to be, and for men everywhere, to advance humanity just a step forward. And the ironic part is that he wasn't really one of us. He didn't belong. He felt he was just a little outside the human race, but he believed in it enough to die for it, as men and women will continue to do as long as they must."

Bucky sat back drinking a long time after the girl walked out.

IX

THE SPEAKER WAS A CRISP and efficient officer from the General Staff, who waved a cane pointer toward the wall map behind the Flight Director's desk as he talked. More than two dozen pilots, the full personnel of Wing Three, crowded into the tiny dugout for the briefing, standing blankly as they were when first aroused from their sleep. It was cool in the dugout and the faint rumble of artillery was barely audible outside in the early morning.

"In brief, gentlemen, this is it. One of our agents working as a translator in the enemy H. Q. slipped through the lines last night. He reported that an American-built LSM is standing off the coast somewhere, packed to the gunwales with crack Nazi troops. You all know that this morning the enemy began attacking our forward positions with infantry and armored support, and that we're managing to hold on, but sometime today that LSM will try to run ashore and put those Germans off. They can raise a lot of stink behind our lines, even lose the war for us. Now we can't patrol our whole coast line. You've got to get that ship, gentlemen, before she puts those troops on our beaches!"

"You will work individually, monsieurs, on the section here, below Jaffa," instructed the Flight Director. "Radio for bombing support when one of you sights the vessel. Questions? Kadeema, then."

Two hours later the sun was well up. Bucky Harrison was flying a generally southern course at ten thousand feet, the sea below him and the coast line in the distance on his left.

On his right stretched the blue Mediterranean, speckled by whitecaps but otherwise calm, outward to a point somewhere beyond where it joined with the dark clouds of the sky. He was conscious of a vast, undisturbed space, as if he looked from high above and into the gray of eternity. Somewhere behind him other planes were busily sweeping the sea, searching, swinging back and forth over a wide district, but Bucky had left the general area of the hunt and was working alone far to the southward.

The engine of his plane sounded strangely cutting this morning, not from any functional disorder, but alone and foreign to Bucky's ear.

Somewhere on his left over where the empty vastness of water became an empty waste of sand, a battle was being fought between men and tanks and guns. Guns were spitting fire, and tanks were being split apart, and men were dying in a general drama of smoke and roar. Bucky was vaguely aware of this, and interested, yet somehow apart and unconcerned. It was as if he was merely a passer-by.

He cut in his radio and was brought back into reality. A voice was directing someone to swing out farther to sea, and Bucky could not understand the reply given, but he thought the voice was of the pilots from Red Section who was speaking on their frequency. He snapped the radio off.

The sky and water were as vacant as a clean swept closet.

She had a lot to say last night.

He had gasoline left for a half-hour's flight, he reflected, banking sharply out to sea to put the sun on his tail. In a few moments he would turn back to the base, refuel, and see if anyone had reported yet. There would be two ancient bombing planes of French design parked on the strip waiting for word to strike.

Imagine that kid spending his whole life alone, then coming over here, dying out there by himself and becoming a member of the human race all of a sudden! Is it worth it? Life meant something to that boy, but he gave it up as easily as you'd snuff out a cigarette.

So what, Harrison. You've seen them come; you've seen them go.

**But this kid, in giving, found a greater wealth than most men find in a lifetime of taking. He was a part of the human race and he did something for it.*

THEN, quite suddenly, there came a reflection of the sun under his left wing tip, about three miles south, and Bucky saw a vessel of some sort traveling in the direction of land, a ship, so large and in such clear view that he wondered how he had failed to notice it.

He circled wide to approach with the sun on his tail, but as he banked he could see that the ship attempted to change its course, too.

Well, they know you're here, Harrison.

The element of surprise gone, Bucky kicked the M. E. 109 over to inspect the vessel. He slid off on his left wing to roar in.

He could see now that the ship was an LSM, painted sea-green, wallowing low in the water and leaving a curving trail of white brine in its wake.

He put the Messerschmitt down low over the water for his approach.

That must be the baby, Harrison. No flags. No markings. Low in the water; must be loaded. Anything on deck? Can't see. Not too close. They see you, all right. People on deck. Oh, yes, Harrison, plenty of people and tarpaulins trying to hide them. You shy, boys? This is the baby, Harrison. Not too close.

Just then the Messerschmitt shuddered and a ragged hole appeared in the wing, from a Bofors shell. The plastic canopy shattered overhead and Bucky ducked instinctively. He hadn't realized that they were firing at him. The fighter was raked over by machine gun fire before he could get out of it.

With the LSM looming before him like a huge steel wall, he could see crew members running along the deck, and a machine gun crew in clear view on the stern firing at him, and he knew there were several others firing; then he banked sharply and swung past the stern of the vessel, so that he could see only the water below him on his right, and for a moment he was afraid he was going in.

Got to get out of this. That thing's got a sting like a battleship. Got to keep out of range.

The 109 was badly shot up, but flying well. Bucky swung about in a wide, half-mile circle, keeping the LSM on his left. He did not want to run under her guns again. The ship had picked up speed now and was running toward shore.

"Yellow Leader to Wing Three: Raider sighted about twenty miles south of map search area. Did you get that? Over."

It must be six or seven miles to shore.

They'll be close enough in twenty minutes to beach that thing. It'll be close. . . .

"Come in, Wing Three. Acknowledge if you understand me."

You're too far out Harrison. They'll never pick you up on radio. Jerry down there hears you, though. He's sweating. He knows he hasn't a tinker's chance when the bombers come.

"Yellow Leader to Wing Three: Come in, base. Yellow Leader has the raider. Come in, please."

Bucky moved in closer to the ship. On the deck the Germans seemed to be rolling back the canvas tarpaulins to make a fight of it. The soldiers were packed in every inch of space.

There must be a brigade down there. They won't be in any shape to fight if they've been crowded up like that for many days. Wonder if base is getting me? Fifteen minutes left. They've got to show up quickly.

"Yellow Leader to Wing Three. Acknowledge me please, if you understand. Repeat: enemy ship sighted. Twenty miles south of the map search area. Traveling toward shore. Did you get that? Over."

" . . . ooorreeeaawk . . . dut-dut-dut . . . dut . . . eeahrwooo . . . " squawked his radio back at him.

They can't hear you, Harrison. Too far. Those bombers will never get here in time.

"Yellow Leader to Wing Three: Repeat please. You are not coming over to me. Do you understand me? DO—YOU—UNDERSTAND—ME? Over."

" . . . rrrreeyooo . . . peep-peep . . . peep-peep . . . ooo-owrraahyeee . . . " responded his earphones.

Bucky relaxed for a moment, fighting to ease his tension.

THE Messerschmitt had fuel enough for perhaps another quarter-hour's flight. Even now he could not make it all the way back to his base and, if he stayed a few minutes longer, he wouldn't even be able to make it back over land to parachute. The LSM, rolling and pitching below him, was making steady progress. The Germans would run up on the beach in another fifteen minutes.

You can go back down there and strafe,

but you already look like a sieve. That little thing has more machine guns than an infantry division, and they're all trying to kill you. You can't sink her with machine guns, but . . .

Bucky maneuvered to get the sun behind him, switched his thumb button off safety, began to dive. They were waiting for him again. The LSM came up quickly, and Bucky could see his bullets striking the water, churning it into a white frenzy, then the hull, and splintering the decks where the men stood packed together like cigars in a box, then falling, some going over the side, and he pulled the nose of the plane up again. As the Messerschmitt shot over the ship it was caught in their fire and a ragged hole burst in the cockpit beside Bucky. At first he felt nothing. Then he tried to move his foot and felt the throbbing deadness. When he glanced he saw that his left boot was a wet mass and not a part of himself any more. He did not look at it again.

Wonder how long it takes to bleed to death! Cut it out. Don't go screwy on me, Harrison. This wreck can't fly itself, you know. I wonder if Bill Christian went through something like this?

He was still climbing and the static of his radio brought him back to reality. *" . . . ssseeemyaahooosshh . . . "* it said.

He smacked the cut-off switch. Silence was better.

He looked around for the ship and at first he didn't see it; then he discovered it behind him on his right wing, and he realized that he must have fainted for a second. The dull shock was beginning to wear off his wounded foot and the pain was creeping in.

Bucky kept the sand-yellow Messerschmitt circling out of range above the LSM.

On the horizon now he could distinguish the coast line from the white-capped green water. The fuel gauge indicated that he was dry, but the engine hadn't begun to miss yet. He would give the Germans another ten minutes, at the most, before they could run ashore.

Wonder if anyone was ever in a spot like this? That's the backbone of the whole enemy offensive right there below you, and you can't do anything about it. Not a single

thing, Harrison. Isn't this lovely. The whole Haganah will be cut up by night-fall. There goes the war. The Eden will be full of those bearded turban boys tonight. Something that's been growing in the middle east for years, wiped out in ten precious minutes.

So slowly that he didn't realize it, the pain crept up his legs and over all his body, so that his actions were mechanical and his thinking deadened, and he was only vaguely aware of the shattered canopy around him, and the maze of dials on the instrument panel before him, and the sharp hole in the cockpit where the air came in, and for a moment he was back in San Antonio, Texas, standing on a bridge and watching the kids boating on the river, the pretty river that twisted and curved all over the city, like Venice, and he thought about the Buckhorn Bar, and the attractive, dark-haired Spanish girls, and landing at Randolph, and how like a city it looked from the air, and he thought of the newspaper man at the Eden and the phrase, 'I'm fighting for Democracy, sir.'

"It was mankind to him. He was involved in mankind."

THEN he was thinking about Helen Christian, holding her head in her hand and smiling at him, and drinking, and he could almost hear her voice.

... to advance humanity just a step forward, don't you think, Captain?

Then it was San Antonio again. He fancied he was standing on the corner by the drugstore, waiting for a bus, and across the street was a huge white stone monument, and beyond that was the Alamo. The dirty, tiny mud Alamo, awkwardly out of place in a city of honking cars, and towering building. He thought that it, too, had played a part in advancing humanity one step forward.

Bucky jerked his head up again and found that he was in a shallow dive. He knew he had fainted again. He was having trouble now in telling reality from his periods of blackness. With great physical effort he pulled the Messerschmitt back into level flight. The engine still held.

All of a sudden you are the most important man in the world. You cannot win a war, but you can lose it. You can retard mankind or you can advance it. Something of a crossroads in which you must make a choice. Christian made it. That Spic made it the other day. They knew something you didn't realize. Helen knows it. That Pole knows it. What do you know?

You know you can put this wreck in a flat glide and just about pancake into the beach up there. And you can sit back and wave at those Krauts when they wade ashore. You know that.

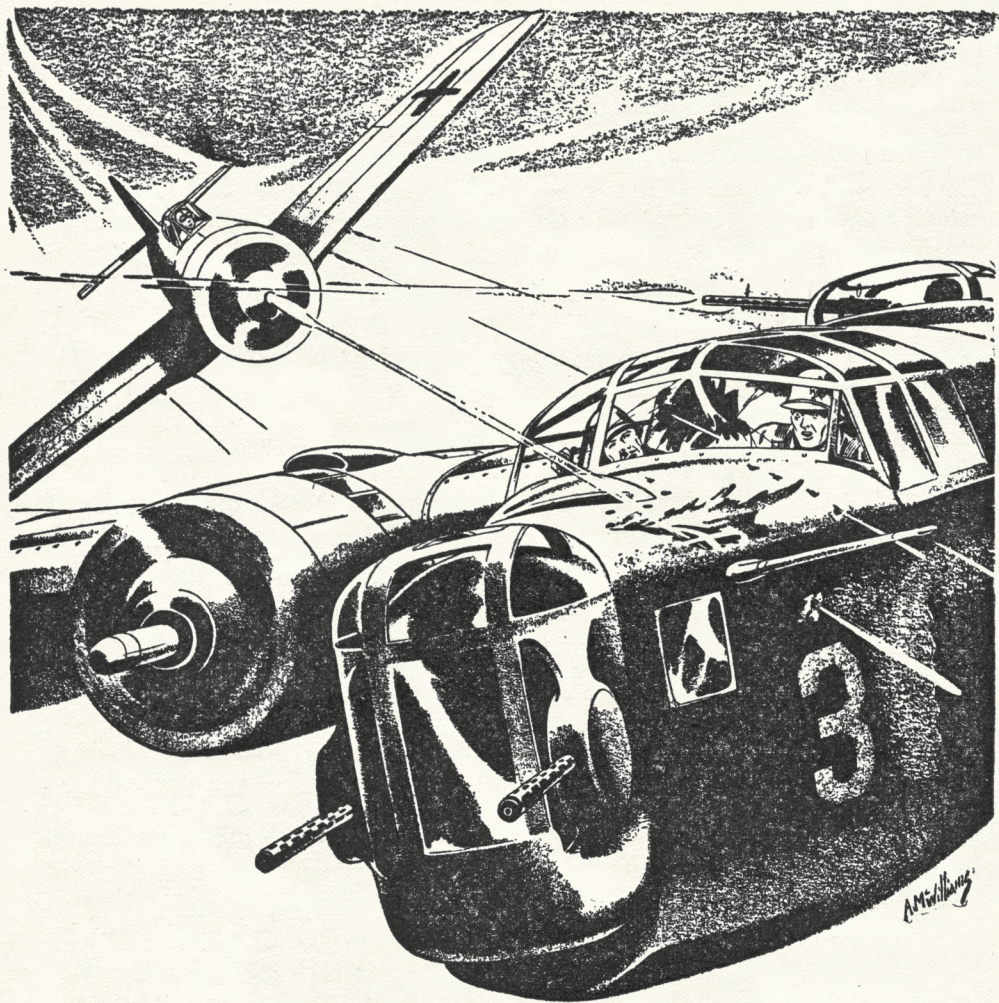
You also know what a Kamikaze can do to an LSM.

"Each generation rather has to win its own peace, don't you think? Each generation contributes a little to the whole..."

The engine suddenly barked, missed, went out, caught again. Bucky lined up on the LSM, again with the sun behind him, so that gunners wouldn't be able to get on him too quickly.

"... of humanity, then someday the human race will have removed its last evils and can stand in peace. The little people always win out. You can't beat them—too many of them."

He could see now that the troops were concentrated forward, to rush ashore the minute the ship touched, and the gunners were firing at him, now they had him, the Messerschmitt was being pounded all over. Bucky was firing back, striking into them, watching them falling, twisting, jumping over the side, smoky lines arcing up from their machine guns, chewing into him, and chunks were tearing out of his wings. Now he wasn't firing back; white-hot irons grazed his neck, jabbed into his body, and there was salt in his mouth, wet and sticky, and the ship loomed before him. He was no longer flying now, but gliding, his prop pinwheeled slowly in front of him, one wheel hung limply from its base, and the cockpit was bright red, once, twice, and a third time, and he fought to keep the plane in the air, a hundred yards more, fifty, there were people running along the deck, and he thought he would strike about mid-ship...



There was no time for evasive action. They had to go on . . .

Command Performance

By JOHANAS L. BOUMA

The big ship staggered on toward the wall of thundering flak, blood washing her decks and wind screaming through fresh-torn holes. But the crew hung on, grimly waiting for the Captain to turn yellow—again.

DAVE LANE KNEW BEFORE the rendezvous over Bari that the mission would be rough in more ways than one. It wasn't only the weather report, nor that the Blechhammer Oil Refinery in Northern Germany was the toughest target on schedule that bothered Lane. But the fact that Colonel Gardner

was riding the co-pilot's position gave him a feeling of dull bitterness. *This one today is it*, he thought. *You're on trial, and that's why the Old Man is along.*

It had been a miserable hour waiting for the green flare to clear them for take-off. Although the morning had been clear and sunny, weather observation had a

storm moving from the Baltic Sea toward the target area. Lane was making a thorough check of the bomber, and feeling uncomfortably alone, when the Old Man's jeep rolled to a stop under the Liberator's nose stingers. The Old Man was dressed for flying, the yellow Mae West and his pack chute under one arm. His hard gray eyes passed over Lane and found the crew huddled beneath the wing. He went over and spoke to Abell, and Lane watched the co-pilot gather his gear, knowing then that the engineer would be making a change on the crew list.

They were at 10,000 when Lane saw the lead box swing toward the Adriatic. The yellow stretch of beach and the white breakers swept below them. He closed in on the leader of the high box, catching the feel of the heavy bomber beneath his gloved hands. He adjusted his oxygen mask and turned his head to find the radio-man watching him; the youngster looked quickly away, and Lane felt a moment of anger before jabbing his mike button and making his report.

"Pilot to crew. Go on oxygen. Don't test-fire your guns until I give the signal."

They did not confirm with the snap of his former crew, but they would learn in time. He would see to that. He'd drill them during their spare hours, the way he had drilled his former crew. Pound it into their head that they had a job to do—and then a man usually ended up by doing it for them.

In a way he had expected their distrust. They were a veteran crew, but that didn't detract from the fact that they might be undependable. He hoped the rumors hadn't added to their natural caution of flying with a strange pilot.

The colonel was pulling his helmet over his iron-gray hair. He pushed the mask up over his thick nose and fastened the snaps. Lane watched him from the corner of his eye, wondering what the Old Man was thinking. He had more missions under his belt than Lane would ever have, and only flew now when there was a reason. Lane thought, *Face it. He doesn't trust you.*

The Old Man touched his shoulder.

"I'd spread a little if I were you. We're

due to hit some turbulence, and I wouldn't care to have the leader's wing clip us."

Lane made the correction, silently cursing the Old Man. He resented the unruffled voice and the fact that the Old Man had spoken at all. He should realize that, regardless of rank, the pilot was always in command of his ship. Lane checked the instrument panel with a sweep of his eyes and looked off across the horizon.

THEY were approaching the Gulf of Venice. A run of narrow islands stretched along the Yugoslavia coast. The sky overhead was a blue pallor that darkened in the distance to a heavy layer of cirrostratus clouds. They would have to pass through the stuff to gain their necessary bombing altitude, and Lane knew suddenly that there was danger of icing.

"If the storm center moves toward the low lands we'll be all right," the Old Man said.

Lane nodded. He saw the guns of the ball turret in the lead ship swing down. Darts of flame left the muzzles, and he called his own crew and told them to fire their guns. The tremble of the recoil reached him, then the silence again. He was glad of that silence. He had never permitted his former crew to jam inter-phone with useless chatter. It was not the way to allow a ship to be run.

The leader took them across the coast below Pola. The cirrostratus was thickening now to a gray wall. The altitude was 15,000 as word came to spread. He could scarcely see the heavily wooded mountains below, and then they were gone and there was only the sense of flying through endless space.

He swung five degrees to the right. The lead ship was gone from his sight now, but he knew it was flying a straight course. Number three bomber had banked five degrees left, and so on back through the formation.

The gray stuff blurred the windshield. Drops of water formed and washed quickly across the plexi-glass. Lane flew by instruments alone, his eyes constantly darting about for the looming shadow of another bomber. The prop spun as if in heavy

snow, and he could scarcely see to the tip of his left wing. And then the sullen pressure came, the lessening of response in the bomber's climb. He looked quickly through his side window and saw a white layer form on the leading edge of the wing. *Ten men and two tons of bombs isn't enough*, he thought. *Now this.*

He checked his instruments. They were still climbing, but at a much lesser degree. He called the navigator. "How thick is this stuff?"

"We should be out of it before long. Don't worry about it."

Lane's hands gripped hard on the wheel. Had he mentioned being worried? Was this the way they took him—not at face value, but on the basis of rumors that had probably turned into ugly untruths? He felt his anger move and center on the Old Man. It was his presence that festered the sore, where it might have healed if left alone. The dark gray turned to white, and then Lane saw a streak of blue in the distance. With startling suddenness the bomber broke into a world of brilliant sky. The sun was fierce and trembling overhead. He looked around and watched the bombers break from the white field and swing in to reform formation. They were above the freezing level, and the ice was melting, running in rivets along the wings and whipping away in the prop's wash.

The Old Man was calling the navigator, asking for a position report. Lane watched the hooded eyes above the oxygen mask. He remembered the first time he had met the Old Man, six months before. It seemed like six years. He had flown his bomber from the States, he and his crew, every man ready to do a job. The Old Man had looked at him, looked through him, smiled his brief smile and wished him luck. "Always remember that as pilot your place is at the controls," the Old Man had warned him. "Your men depend on you, and you must depend on them to do their part. It involves responsibility and leadership. Their safety comes before your own."

They had been a good crew, Lane thought now, because he had molded them. But that didn't mean that he hadn't had to watch them every minute. It had given

him a certain pride to hear it spread about that Dave Lane had a crew that was sure to return home without the loss of a man. Well, he had always made it a point to make the entire ship his own personal responsibility.

"Unidentified fighters at two o'clock!" The gunner's voice sounded harsh to his ears. He saw a string of dots darting toward twelve o'clock. *Like silverfish*, he thought, and then saw the sun gleaming on twin booms.

"Escorting P-38's," he announced crisply, and it gave him pleasure to know that once again he had been right. There were more of the Lightnings off to the left now. He heard the navigator announce that the fighter-bomber rendezvous was fifteen minutes late, and then give the estimated position report; the formation was over Austria, cutting a course between Linz and Vienna. The colonel said his Roger and looked at Lane. "I suppose the target will be covered."

"The lead ship is carrying Pathfinder," Lane said.

The Old Man grunted. "I'm aware of that."

Lane's mouth formed a wry smile. From the looks of things now, the Old Man was probably right; the target would be blanketed over. The cloud cover stretched as far as the eye could reach. In line with the target, towering columns of thunderheads met in a panorama of black and gray. It was hard to judge their distance, although they seemed to be in movement across the far horizon.

"There's your storm," Lane said.

The Old Man nodded, his keen eyes scanning the surrounding sky. Suddenly he pointed. "Fighters. Not ours. On the ball, gunners. Enemy fighters at three o'clock level."

LANE caught a glimpse of them coming in. Up ahead the Lightnings turned to intercept. Lane closed in on the lead ship. Almost flying his left wing in the other's waist window. If the attack broke through, the bombers would need a close concentration of firing power. And then he heard the dull bark as one of the turrets opened up.

The sound and the tremble went through him. He wondered suddenly what would be said back at the base if they were shot down. Would they blame him? It was human nature to condemn a man once accused. He felt his thoughts give way to the necessary presence. Some of the other guns on the ship were taking up the chant. He heard a sudden startled cry and in the next breath saw the yellow streak of a rocket flash past the nose. *Close*, he thought.

"B-two-four going down at five o'clock," a gunner announced and Lane wondered if it belonged to this high box. He was feeling the effort of holding the bomber in close formation now. It was a constant battle. It was a matter of combining instinct and experience; a sudden down-draft or air pocket could hurl you off course and into your wing man. He had seen it happen, and he recalled vividly flying number five position on his third mission, and watching number four ship get caught in a sudden up-draft. Number four's nose had smacked the lead ship's tail, tearing it completely away. Both ships had plummeted down like stones.

An ache spread between his shoulder blades. He caught an occasional glimpse of fighters, but they were swift and passing images and he was unable to discern the types. The guns continued their chatter. Top turret in the lead ship was firing short bursts at an unseen target. A sudden rattle shook the bomber. The controls trembled beneath Lane's hands. He listened to the gunners; machine gun fire had raked the bomb bay, but it had been low enough to miss the tanks and the bomb load.

For a moment there was a break in the firing. The Old Man was still staring out the side window. Suddenly he stiffened, half turned to Lane as if to speak a warning. Leaning forward as much as his safety belt allowed, Lane saw the thin-winged fighter hurling down in a pursuit curve. He heard the Old Man say, "Focke-Wulfe," in a calm voice, and then saw fingers of red flame blossom from the fighter's wings, a larger belching flame from the round nose. There was no time to make an evasive move. The sudden

sharp thought struck him that it should take no longer than a split second for bullets to span the distance, and yet it seemed a matter of minutes. Then there was the contact of steel and aluminum, and the muffled thump of an explosion below his feet. Then there was silence before the Old Man called for a check on the damage.

The bombardier answered. A 20 mm shell had exploded in the nose. The navigator was hurt, but not badly. Most of his instruments had been destroyed. The Old Man turned and looked at Lane. His eyes pierced. "Suppose we'd better turn back?"

"No," Lane said harshly.

He wondered angrily if the old buzzard was needling him, giving him this chance to back out of crossing the target. Testing him. Did he think Lane was yellow? It was not fair. Besides, there was far more danger in turning back alone than in staying with the formation. Lane cursed his thoughts. There was this about the Old Man—he was not one to needle. He was a fighting man. He had only spoken because his thoughts were on the wounded man. "No," Lane said again. "If he isn't badly hurt we'd better go on."

The Old Man nodded as if satisfied with the answer. Lane called the crew and checked on enemy activity; the fighters had broken off their attack under the pressure of escorting Lightnings.

He looked across the cloud pattern that was now breaking below the formation. Here and there he caught snatches of brown earth, and once a town. They should be well over Czechoslovakia by now, and the target could be no more than a half hour's distance.

A long haul, he thought. Farther than Pilsen. He would remember Pilsen for the rest of his days. The horrible happenings that day had burned its scar on his memory, and the only consoling fact was that he had not been to blame. He had done the only thing possible.

THE entire Wing had flown the mission to the Skoda Works. He remembered it as if it had happened yesterday. It had been their twenty-seventh mis-

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look for the bulls-eye

sion, and there had been nothing unusual in the beginning except getting their number three engine shot out and collecting a hole in the main tank. But that was before they found out that somehow their gear had jammed.

They had made it back past the lines, and because of low fuel had decided to set the ship down on an emergency field. When the engineer said that the gear refused to lower, he had left his seat with the angry thought that if you wanted a job done you had to do it yourself. It was up to you as a pilot to check on your crew, they were that undependable.

The bomb bay doors were open and the gas fumes strong. He had checked the gear; the engineer had been right. It refused to lower. He was fooling with the cables when it happened—a miss-fire in number two engine, he had reported afterwards. The spark had blown the bomber apart in a maddening holocaust of ripping flames. He had never been fully conscious of the next few minutes. Somehow he had been thrown clear and had pulled his ripcord. The back chute had saved him, but the engineer also thrown clear, had left his chest chute on the flight deck. Not one other man got out of the ship alive.

He had explained it carefully, over and over, and he had not been given the blame. Outside of the Old Man dressing him down for leaving his position, nothing more was said of the matter. But you could not stop the rumors, and you could not explain it very carefully to everyone who acted as if you were to blame. They looked, many of them, at the obvious. A bomber had exploded in mid-air, and the pilot had been the only one to escape death.

He had carried his own sorrow for the crew inside himself. There was nothing else he could do. And if his former buddies avoided him, he tried not to show that he noticed.

"Target at ten o'clock! Plenty of flak coming up!"

He recognized the nose gunner, and he thought that flak didn't necessarily mean the target. He called the bombardier and heard the navigator answer. The man wasn't hurt badly then. "That's the target, all right. We've got ten minutes to the I.P. . . . Another ten on the bomb run."

"How does it look to you? Will they have to use pathfinder?"

"It's spotty. There's some heavy cumulus down there, but I think we'll be able to get a sight on the target. It's big enough."

Lane didn't answer that. The size of the target is what made it a rough bomb run. He had a picture in his mind of what was down there: the acre upon acre of storage tanks, the buildings housing the compressors, the turbo blowers, the pumps and the vacuum equipment, all the odds and ends that made up an oil refinery. And all around the batteries of .88's would be spaced, their radar screens picking up the bombers overhead

He saw a flare dart from the lead ship, and then the first box making an eighty degree left turn. On his own turn, he took a long look toward the target. He saw it quite clearly for a moment, and then a scatter of cumulus stuff took it out of his sight. The altitude was 24,000 now, and he felt the old tension knot up inside him. It was something he had never been able to escape, and now his hatred of the Old Man increased it. He called the crew to put on flak suits and steel helmets, then picked his own helmet from beside the seat and slipped it over his head. A sharp concentration of flak puffs smeared the sky directly ahead. The first guns getting the range, the altitude of the formation. More flak appeared to their left, then the right, until the entire sky above the target area became a distorted and blotched pattern of crimson explosions and feathery plumes of black and gray smoke.

'And we have to go through it, Lane thought. He could not remember seeing so much flak at one time. Four hundred guns at least. The bomb bay doors made a hoarse rumble as they slid open. He glanced back toward the flight deck and watched the engineer with the walk-around oxygen bottle climb back in his top turret. The gunner had left the sliding door leading to the bomb bay open, and Lane felt the cold wind and saw the gray emptiness that seemed to lead to a formless pit.

THE bombardier called out his instructions. Lane turned the required degrees. The lead box was entering the flak area now. One of the bombers took a hit. It began to drift down. Suddenly a brilliant scar slashed the sky, split and became flaming fragments that twisted and tumbled toward the earth like an immense handful of popping firecrackers.

Lane fought the controls as the first flak reached his bomber. A gaping hole appeared in the left wing. The ship rocked and twisted like a bucking horse. In that moment Lane became the perfect fighting machine. He didn't have to worry about the crew now, or if they were attending to business. They had to sit tight and take it, to sweat it out. But Lane's mind was clear. He had no thought or feeling of personal danger. His legs and his arms worked the controls with the instinct of long experience. It was taking him above the sweating point.

A solid line of flak exploded ahead of the bombers. Lane felt, rather than saw, number four engine take a direct hit. The Old Man ducked as the shrapnel punctured the side of the ship. Then he reached up to work the feathering button.

"Two degrees left," the bombardier said. "Hold her there."

Lane held her, his fingers aching from the constant grip on the wheel. When the bombardier spoke again, he dropped his hands to his lap, keeping a cool eye on the lead box, waiting for the sight of the bombs to drop from its swollen belly. He could almost see the bombardier with his fingers turning the knobs guiding the ship on the target ready to throw the bomb release switches.

"Bombs away!"

He heard it at the same time he saw the lead box unload. He raised a little in his seat, waiting for the upward lunge that would follow the lose of two tons of explosives. When it didn't come, he grasped the controls and yelled, "What's holding it up?"

The bombardier cursed. "I don't know. Maybe the intervalometer is smashed. Maybe that shell or the machine gun burst cut the wires. You'll have to salvo."

Anger moved through Lane. How could he be sure the bombardier knew what he was talking about? He reached for the bomb jettison handle. He worked the handle and felt a slight lurch. "Pilot to ball turret. Give me the count."

"One, two, three, four——"

Lane jerked the handle again. There was no response. "Anything happen?"

"Nothing. Four gone. The rest stuck."

"Bombardier," Lane shouted. "You sure your equipment is out of order?"

"I would have unloaded if it wasn't," the bombardier snapped.

Lane growled and glanced at the Old Man. His jaw tightened. The Old Man's eyes were keen and piercing as ever. He might have been in his office chair instead of five miles above enemy territory with death swarming around. "Keep the bomb bay doors open," Lane said. "I'll keep trying to salvo."

They were in the center of the flak now. He saw another Liberator go down, then another. A tight high scream reached his ears, but this was not the time to investigate. There was time for nothing but to escape this hell that was bursting all around them, splitting the sky with an inferno of flame and death. The plane shook and bucked under the pounding flak. Lane found himself wanting to scream for the lead box to turn from the target, and then he remembered that the run across would clear them as quickly as the turn.

Gradually the flak bursts diminished. The lead box turned in flight, going full speed away from the target. A fighter belt swarmed along the fringe of the target; he saw instantly that they were the escorting Lightnings. He glanced at his instrument panel. The three remaining en-

gines were responding nicely. They would have to carry the load of the disabled number four. He increased speed as he made the turn, hearing the Old Man call for a check-up.

THE tail gunner had a hole in his side. He was unconscious. When the Old Man cleared interphone, Lane called the engineer and told him to check the bomb bay. The next minute the ball turret man called to say that there was fluid running out of the belly. Lane twisted uncomfortably in his seat, wanting to check for himself. Most of those men couldn't tell gas from hydraulic fluid, and that's probably what it was. He wondered how long they would be able to hold to the formation's speed; already the engines were strained to the utmost, and a gap was widening between them and the lead ship.

"Hydraulic leak," the engineer announced. "Four bombs left on the high rack. I tried to kick them out, but they wouldn't budge. One dropped from the front shackle, but stuck to the rear. It's just hanging there."

Lane groaned. He could imagine the shackle twisted, holding the bomb in place. "Listen—" he said, and then decided that the only thing to do was to check the situation himself. He moved abruptly from his seat, half nodding for the Old Man to take over the controls, and then he met the Old Man's eyes. The Old Man smiled a little, not making a move. Lane sat back, thinking, *He's waiting to see what I'll do so he can throw the book at me when we get back home.*

"Check those bombs again," he said. "Check them good. I want them out of there before we reach home territory."

After awhile the engineer said, "No good. They won't budge."

"Forget it," Lane snapped. "Go back to your position." He saw the Old Man point, and saw the storm he had forgotten. A sickly gray mass of air fronted their flight path. Its vapor-like columns reached from the terrain to above their altitude. It seemed to writh and twist, to change shape with the raging winds that tore at its center. A dark belt threatened the horizon beyond the gray mass. He saw the

lead box turn wide on a new course. The formation followed. They were way behind now, and a sudden panic went through him. The storm could be a greater enemy than bullets and shells. He turned his full attention to flying the bomber, trying to urge the last ounce of strength from the engines. They kept dropping back as the storm moved in. They would need some damn good navigation if they lost the formation altogether, he thought. You could never predict a storm. They might be caught on its fringe and be blown miles off course. They might be caught in its center and be pounded to pieces. He called the navigator. The bombardier answered. "I gave him a hypo. He's out cold."

"All right; don't bother him."

He tried again to salvo the bomb load, without results. The bomber was down to 18,000 now, and the gray stuff was closing in fast. *What can I do?* he thought. He couldn't run from the storm because that meant turning back toward Germany. Maybe he should ask the Old Man's opinion. No. To hell with the Old Man. I'm going on through.

The gray stuff swirled around them with increasing rapidity. He had the sudden thought that it was like being lost in a forest, with every tree identical to its neighbor, and all sense of direction lost. The formation was out of sight, but he held to the course. The ever-changing clouds darkened; they were like sheets flapping in a raging wind, the shadows and the light showing with eye-aching changes of pattern. The wind grew in intensity. He could feel the quiver run through the wings, and a tight moaning sound the wind made as it poured through the open bomb bay. The wind and the ship spoke and argued. Rain slammed its gusts against the housing, made its rattling sound and then was lost in the howl of the storm. It was impossible now to tell their heading. The compass was swinging wild. Their rate of drift would be tremendous.

Lane ceased to think. He fought the bomber and he fought the storm, and his heart was caught up in it. Once he looked around at the intense dark fury and he

thought he detected a lighter belt at eleven o'clock. He swung the bomber that way, feeling the wind catch the ship and hurl it onward. The light changed to a copper glow that became the sun, and suddenly it was clear and the storm was behind them.

"The Alps," the Old Man grunted. He did not look at Lane. "We didn't come out badly at all."

LANE saw them in the distance; the white, glaring peaks and the curious crimson fire that danced at their base. A sudden ache of weariness went through him. A dull pain dropped its weight between his shoulder blades. His legs felt heavy and useless, and a dull pounding persisted at the back of his brain. But they were safe. So far they were safe, and their altitude was enough to clear the white mountains.

"It's going to be a rough landing," the Old Man said suddenly.

Damn you, Lane thought, for sitting there and watching me sweat. He wanted to shout that he knew it would be a rough landing. The Old Man didn't have to tell him. By now all the hydraulic fluid would have run out of the lines. They would have to crank the gear down. If it wouldn't crank, they would have to cut the cables, and pray the gear didn't jump its lock. He found himself planning the landing. They'd have to use chutes as brakes, take their chances with the bombs. But if that one dangling by one shackle broke free . . .

They had passed the Alps and were well over the Adriatic now. He thought he caught a glimpse of the formation in the distance, but it was hard to tell. Their Group hadn't been the only one to hit a target that day. He lowered to 5000 and removed his mask and the steel helmet, thinking wryly that there had been no need to keep them on for so long. The Old Man was busy on a K-ration box; he had a tin of cheese open, offering it to Lane, but Lane shook his head. His stomach felt tight and empty, but somehow he had no feeling for food.

The spur of the Italian boot passed below their right wing, and he knew it was time to turn inland. The field was only a few miles away. He called the engineer. "Get busy on that gear. Check it carefully before cranking it down. If you can't handle it, say so."

The engineer said calmly, "It won't be the first time I've cranked one down."

They had passed over the coast when he spoke again. "Your right wheel is shot to hell. The tire is ripped clear through, ready to drop off. You know what that means in a landing. I don't want to crank it down unless you say so. Once down we'll never get it back up."

Lane glanced back to where the engineer had connected his mike at the radio table. The youngster's face was waxen, his eyes dulled with fatigue.

Lane made a slow circle, dropping altitude. They couldn't stay up here. They could bail out, but there were two wounded men on board. The tail gunner was still

AT YOUR WRIST

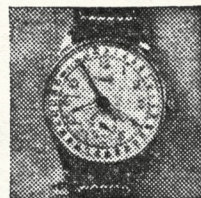
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unconscious. He needed medical attention and fast. Even if he did come out of it long enough to jump, the fall would kill him.

The Old Man leaned over to shout in his ear. "Well?"

"You can jump," Lane snapped. "You don't have to worry."

He knew there was no use in cranking the gear down. The wheel was probably sprung—if he could depend on the engineer being right. They wouldn't stand a chance with the bomb load. There was only one way to land with a chance of coming out of it alive. He thumbed his mike button. "I'm going to circle the field. Anyone that wants to can bail out. I'm bringing this ship in on the breakers down there. She'll sink like a stone with the bomb load, but not if I can get her up on the beach." He paused. "Secure the wounded men. If you've ever learned anything about ditching, this is the time to show it. That's all until I give the next word."

The Old Man looked at him, hooked his thumb over his mike switch. "Co-pilot to crew. You heard what your pilot said. Personally, I never did like the idea of jumping. Anyone ready to bail out, speak up."

Lane felt himself shake violently, suddenly knowing that he cared very much to know if these men would stick with him. For what seemed a long time there was silence, and then a gunner said, "You'll need us to get the wounded men out in case of trouble. I'm sticking with the ship."

"Sure," another gunner said, "we made it so far. Why run out now?"

Lane gripped hard on the wheel to stem his emotion. It was more than a matter of sticking with him; they had accepted him. He pointed in. Then he took the bomber down to deck level for a milk run, listening to the Old Man calling the nearest base for help.

Lane made his final approach. The green water sped toward the ship. The bomber stalled; he felt the nose drop and he hauled back on the wheel with all of

his strength. The tail slammed the water. For a second it seemed the bomber would break up beneath his hands. The open bomb bay hit next. A wave swept through the flight deck. He saw the Old Man snap his safety belt, his head smack hard against the wheel. He wanted to yell for the engineer to cut switches, and he felt himself slam forward as a ton of water hurled over him.

HE came out of it slowly and he heard a voice yell, "Cut the switches!" and he struggled to rise. An arm helped him to sit up, and when he opened his eyes he saw the beach and the crew huddled around him, and he knew that he had done the yelling. He felt sick with shame.

"I cut switches before we hit," the engineer said. He grinned. "Just about didn't make it. A breaker caught us in time, but we were still in deep water."

Lane looked past the breakers and he could see a tip of the twin tails pointing out of the water. "Where's—how's the Old Man?"

"Just coming out of it. The both of you were knocked cold. We got the wounded men out, then came back for you and the colonel."

Lane stood and saw the wounded men grinning up at him, and he thought, *This is a new beginning for me.*

The Old Man tottered over on weak legs and took Lane's arm, drawing him away. "I guess you know why I came along. I know you resented it."

"It doesn't matter. Not now."

"You had a lesson to learn," the Old Man said. "I figured you could learn it better if I came along. But I didn't think it would be such a rough one." He paused. "I hope you learned this—a pilot is not like the captain of an ocean liner who has the run of his ship and leaves a seaman in the wheelhouse. You understand?"

"Perfectly," Lane said.

The Old Man smiled. He looked away and pointed to the truck pulling across the sand, and he sighed. "I hope they remembered to bring a bottle to celebrate your graduation."

REBEL IN A CORSAIR

By J. P. WEINEL



Joe grinned as he poured hot lead into those meatballs.

Lashing a fighter like Joe Bronson to a desk is like plugging a volcano with ice. Just don't be around when the blow-off comes.

THE NEW AIRCRAFT CARRIER, Attacker, knifed through the green waters churning up a foaming white wake with her thirty knots of speed. High above the white capped waves, Commander Joe Bronson leaned lightly against the bulkhead of Admiral Spangler's sea cabin. The acrid smoke from his stale sea-store cigarette burned his throat. But it helped clear away the ominous feeling that had seeped into every nerve in his lean body. The Admiral didn't hold a conference just to pass the time of day. Even Joe, as Operations Officer on the Admiral's staff, did

not know exactly where they were going. The "old man" had mentioned something about shaking down the new air group that came aboard in Pearl Harbor about a week ago, but that was too vague coming from Admiral Spangler.

"Gentlemen," the Admiral said, shifting his eyes rapidly from one staff officer to another. "We have a nasty mission this trip. I wish I could call it a tough assignment, then we would all know just how to tackle it. But it isn't tough—it's just plain nasty."

He fumbled through the jumbled array of

papers on his desk, extracting a small yellow sheet. Slipping on his glasses, he studied the paper. "Gentlemen, the task force commander has ordered us to get photos of the landing beaches and installations on Rojak Island," he said, glancing over the top of his glasses.

"I know! I know!" he said like a mind-reader going into action. "We haven't been able to send a decent strike into Rojak for the past year. Well, we aren't authorized to strike now. Our mission is to get those photos without arousing one iota of suspicion."

"Admiral, I think I could take a photo plane in there and get those pictures," Joe said without feeling. He knew the answer, but there was always a chance the "old man" might change his mind.

"Joe, for the last time, you are my Operations Officer," the Admiral said, yanking off his glasses. "Any flying that will be done on this cruise will be performed by the air group embarked."

Joe didn't answer. He could feel the lash in the Admiral's cold grey eyes.

They mulled over a variety of plans for getting those photos. In the end none were acceptable because they all featured a show of strength. The Japs had to be convinced that Rojak was not important. The entire staff agreed on two points. A single photo plane would be massacred by AA and fighters, and any group large enough to take care of the AA and meatball fighters would alert the Japs.

At the precise moment mild frustration crept into the discussion, the Admiral interrupted. "Joe, you're Operations and I'll give you just about twenty-four hours to whip a plan into shape. I don't give a damn if you have to stay up all night figuring one out, but come tomorrow morning I want the plan on my desk for final approval."

JOE shuffled out with the rest of the staff officers. He eased down to the Intelligence Room and broke out the data on Rojak Island. He ruffled through the maps and statistics without interest. He knew that island as well as his home town. Joe slammed the portfolio shut thinking about the dozen odd plans of attack on Rojak that had ended up in the waste basket dur-

ing the past year. Tonight his mind wandered among a maze of dead ends. The Admiral made it plain enough that very little striking power could be used. And he also made it clear that those photos were vital. The amphibious people needed them, and the reasons were obvious.

Joe lay in his bunk that night smoking stale cigarettes and figuring. But long before midnight the gentle roll of the Attacker had him dead asleep. Joe slept without dreams until his room boy roused him about dawn. He took a cold shower and rushed through his usual breakfast of black coffee and two cigarettes. The "old man" would be waiting for him in the sea cabin.

Joe grunted dourly at the Admiral's aide as he entered the cabin. "Good morning, Admiral," Joe said trying to sound like a man with a good night's sleep behind him.

"Morning, Joe," acknowledged the Admiral motioning Joe to a chair. "Now, let's hear your plan."

Joe lit a cigarette and inhaled the first drag long and deep. "Well sir, it's going to be in the form of a token fighter sweep," Joe said. When he got no reaction from the "old man" he continued. "Just four Corsairs. All loaded to the gunwales with .50 calibre and rockets. One of them will carry the new Z-90 strip camera in its belly." Joe could feel the Admiral's eyes asking a million questions. "They will take off at 1130 and arrive over Rojak at noon. That should catch most of the Jap fighters on the ground. Our Corsairs will attack all fighters on the ground and any AA that gives them trouble, and the..."

"Joe," the Admiral interrupted, "this isn't a token raid we are supposed to make; and I'm not interested in smoking enemy fighters or AA guns. All I want are those photos!"

"Yes sir, Admiral," Joe said hurriedly. "These attacks will be carried out in such a way that on each approach to attack the photo plane can be mapping the landing beaches. They will be poor approaches from a tactical standpoint, and dangerous. But they will cover the beaches and installations in about four runs."

Joe watched the Admiral rub his temples with slow circular motions. The plan was

a good one! If the "old man" had to think it over Joe knew he liked it. The Admiral could pick a bad plan apart without a second's thought.

"Just one question, Joe," the Admiral said looking over the top of his glasses. "Do we have someone in the air group qualified to lead this hop? No second chance, you know. We must get those pictures on the first go-round."

"I think we can find someone who can handle the job." Joe said without thinking.

"All right, set it up for an 1130 take-off today," the Admiral said briskly.

"Aye aye, sir," Joe said quickly.

He eased down to Intelligence to have another look at the maps. It was a good plan, but the "old man" had found the flaw. Now Joe could find the right man to lead the hop. He knew who it had to be. Flipping up the Air Group Commander's button on the squawk box, he said: "Six from three, over."

"This is six, go ahead."

"Is Commander Myers there?" Joe asked.

"Speaking."

"Red, this is Joe. Here's the set-up for today's operations. Four Corsairs carrying full ammo and rockets. Lead plane loaded with a Z-90. I'll be flying number one."

"Got it," acknowledged Myers. "How come the 'old man' is letting you fly?"

"That's a good question but don't ask it," Joe said flicking off the circuit.

JOE had a cup of coffee and then eased down to the fighter squadron ready room. It always gave him a pleasant sensation to walk in a ready room with its bulkheads covered with Mae Wests and sweat-stained flying suits. He found his wingmen playing a noisy game of bridge. The Air Group Commander had assigned him experienced boys. Hogan, Czubinsky and Sawyer, all veterans of the tough fighting in '42. Joe went over the plan with them in detail. They listened intently until Joe had finished. Then Sawyer spoke for all of them. "You lead the way, we'll be right there with you like fleas on a hound dog!"

Joe spent an uncomfortable two hours avoiding the Admiral and trying not to think about flying against the "old man's"

orders. He didn't feel at ease until his Corsair clawed at the salt air, speeding down the deck. He circled the ship until his division had joined up and then set sail straight for Rojak. Joe lit up a cigarette and concentrated on holding course for their objective. Fifteen minutes away from Rojak they pushed over for the deck. Joe nudged his fighter closer to the white-caps and pushed everything up to the fire-wall. Five more minutes and they should pick up Rojak.

"Amber one from Amber base, over," crackled in Joe's earphones. He picked up the mike to answer, but then hung it back up with deliberation. The Admiral had found out! Joe wanted to turn the radio off but they would be needing it for the attack. Amber base called every minute, and the voice grew a little more tense with each transmission. Joe checked his guns and read every instrument with slow deliberation to keep his mind off the Admiral and his return to the carrier.

"Amber one, this is Amber base. Return with your flight immediately. I repeat, return with your flight immediately. There it a court martial waiting for you. The 'old man' sends this. I repeat, the 'old man' sends this."

Joe inhaled on his cigarette until his lungs ached. He formed a quick mental picture of facing those thirteen officers across a long green table and trying to explain why he disobeyed orders. The coral backbone of Rojak Island on the horizon snapped his thoughts. He charged his guns and snuggled a little closer to the water. With a little luck the radars on Rojak should miss them completely.

Joe held his breath as they skimmed along the placid waters inside the reef. Just as they reached the first line of palm trees Joe yanked back on the stick. When they hit two thousand feet he rolled over screaming for the deck. There, parked with military precision, was Rojak's fighter outfit. At five hundred feet tracers commenced floating by him. Joe opened up moving his point of aim right down the line from one Zeke fighter to the next. They were down to grass-top level at the end of the run. Joe pulled them up in a wingover and started another run.

Black pillars of smoke were rising from the burning Zekes. Little orange puffs of AA were beginning to blossom out above and behind them. This would be the last easy run! Joe grinned with satisfaction as he poured hot lead into the meatballs. From now on the pictures came first. Joe shoved on the throttle but it was hard against the stops. The orange and white mushrooms were coming uncomfortably close. The AA gunners were still underestimating the Corsair's speed. Joe tripped the camera and prayed it was working. Lining his gull-winged fighter along the beach he drove hard at a large dual AA emplacement on the far side. He held his piper on until he saw the gunners running for cover. He mashed down the rocket button and tingled with a pleasant satisfaction as the salvo swished off their racks. He followed their telltale plumes of brown exhaust until they exploded merrily smack in the middle of the emplacement.

Joe shot a glance back at his wingmen. He knew just how good it felt to be back in combat again. They were still close aboard and grinning. But he was worried. Those AA boys were getting the set-up fast. He had to get in more runs for full coverage of the beaches and installation. He gave Sawyer the signal for a split attack. He watched Sawyer peel off and start down. Counting five, he reversed course, dropping the nose of his Corsair to pick up that life saving speed. The AA was bearing down hard now, and in the background Joe could see some Zekes milling around. There was no time to try and foul up the AA. He bore down over the beach, tripping the camera.

HALFWAY through the run his plane bucked violently to the left. His right aileron was half gone; part of the wing tip was in shreds. Joe gripped the stick with both hands to hold the plane steady in the run. Three Zekes were joining up high above him. Time was running out! Joe horsed back on the stick, almost blacking out. Throwing his head back, he picked up the horizon, and in between were a couple of Zekes coming straight for him. Joe eased the stick back and started down on his back. Half way down he roll-

ed out flashing across the beach again. His plane staggered but he didn't have time to look for the damage. He tripped the camera for the last time and prayed hard.

Sawyer and Czubinsky were crossing ahead. Joe wrapped it up in a flipper turn and joined up. He pressed the mike against his lips: "Take defensive box formation!"

They slid into the "box" and headed for home. Three Zekes were above them on the starboard bow. Another trio were about nine o'clock flat. Joe held the course steady. The meatballs were apparently baffled by the unorthodox formation. Joe watched them peel off in scooping barrel rolls. He held course until they were about a thousand yards out. Then Joe whirled on them. He and his three wingmen pivoted in their tracks. Twenty-four hungry guns had their snouts pointing at the Japs. Joe mashed down his trigger and the lead meatball burst into an orange glow. It slid off on a wing into a death spiral. The other two pulled up in a steep chandelle. Joe flipped the division back on base course, and just in time! The three Zekes abeam were commencing their run. Joe wheeled the division and drove straight for them. Czubinsky took out the number one boy and it looked like Sawyer got the tail end kito. Joe settled back on base course, his fighter vibrating and bucking.

The remaining Jap fighters had pulled up and were tagging along well on the beam. They didn't seem to savvy the box formation. Joe hoped they would tag along just another ten minutes. By then the offensive air patrol over the Attacker could get them. But the boys from Nippon apparently had enough. Pulling up in a steep wingover, they headed back for Rojak.

Joe slowed his Corsair down and checked his controls at low speed. The plane was sluggish and it took full stick to hold the bad wing up. He looked over the rest of the division. They appeared all right except Sawyer. He had a lot of daylight showing through his rudder, but he had a grin spread all over his face. Joe didn't have time to worry about Sawyer. He had a problem with the Admiral coming up fast.

But a minute later Joe knew everyone in the task force had a problem. He could see an ominous plume of black smoke on

the horizon. He didn't want to believe what his thoughts were telling him. Switching his radio to the command channel, he called: "Amber base, this is Amber one, over." He repeated the call a dozen times but only silence answered him back.

Joe drove the flight at the pillar of smoke and got his answer. The Attacker was belching flame and smoke from her hangar deck. Joe's stomach revolted and tried to force its way to his throat like a toy balloon. The destroyer escorts were milling around the crippled flattop.

"Amber one from Amber base!" came the excited voice over the air. "Joe! Joe, this is Red Myers. I'm up in combat control. We've been hit bad by a sub. Fires and explosions rugged. Joe, the 'old man' says for you to get that lousy nip sub. Joe, he says that's an order! Got it, Joe?"

"Got it, Red," Joe said, trying to sound collected.

Joe checked his gas. Plenty in both tanks! He figured he should have two rockets left and a little .50 calibre. He called Sawyer and got a check to make sure those rockets were still hung okay.

Joe spread the division out in a search formation. His anger made the mathematical computation of the coverage easy. It was just a question of waiting and hoping. Joe figured the Jap couldn't stand the suspense very long. Not when it was an aircraft carrier he had pickled. Joe didn't notice the excessive vibration of his wounded fighter. He scanned the ocean, every inch of it, and watched the plodding minute hand of his watch.

THEN he saw it! Just a little telltale spray of water as the periscope razored through the blue waters below. Joe signaled for a join-up and headed up-sun. He climbed away from the sub and into the sun, but his eyes were hypnotized to that spray. The conning tower broke surface and Joe rolled over. He headed straight for the sub, wide open. Half way down he stopped breathing! The sub had spotted them! It was crash diving!

There was just one chance now. It had to be a salvo of rockets at extreme range.

The years of training, every practice rocket run he had ever made, every range table he had ever studied came back to him now. It came back crystal clear and burning in his brain. He slapped the pippin on the sub and carefully adjusted the maximum range. Joe closed his eyes and mashed down the button. He heard the faint whoosh as the rockets scooted from the fighter. He opened his eyes and found himself pouring out the .50 calibre. He caught the brown plume of the rockets and then the explosion.

Joe couldn't tell if they had connected. He pushed the Corsair straight at the explosion. But there was only a wisp of smoke drifting lazily away. He wanted to die. He wanted to dive his fighter straight into the ocean after that sub. He wanted to do anything but think that he had missed.

Joe pulled up in a steep climbing turn, watching. In defeat he reached for the mike to call Red. But he slammed the mike back on the hook as the snout of a sub broke the surface. He stopped breathing as the bow of the sub reared straight up out of the water and then slid backward in a death slide to the bottom.

He wanted to count to ten before calling, but when he got to four he screamed: "Red! Amber base! Red, this is Joe! Red, I got that Nippo! Red, go tell the 'old man' his orders have been carried out to the letter!"

"Joe, this is Red. Joe, I don't have to tell the Admiral. He knew you would get that sub. Joe, he told the whole ship you would get that sub."

"Red, knock off the routine. Go tell the 'old man'," Joe shouted back impatiently.

"Joe, I can't tell the 'old man'. He was killed a little while ago down on the hanger deck fighting the fires," the voice answered quietly.

Joe looked down at the placid blue waters. He glanced at the sober faces of his wingmen. He closed his eyes and held them shut with the heels of his hands.

"Amber one, this is Amber base," came a new voice over the air clipped, precise tones. "Fires under control. Return to base. We need those photos badly, Joe"—

DUEL OVER DEUTSCHLAND

By JOHN PRESCOTT



The silly Nazis thought Randall and Collins had come to fight them. But no. Tough Tony and Punchin' Pete had their own private war—and Lord help any German Air Force that got in their way!



"Get those guns going, you jerk!" yelled Pete.

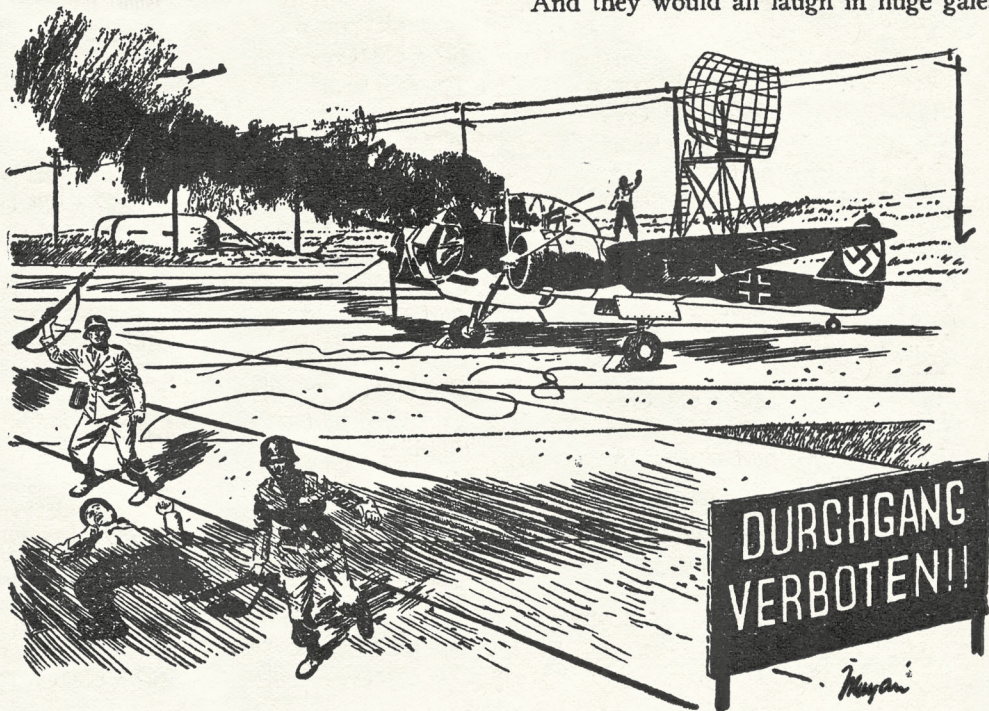
TONY RANDALL'S TAKE-OFF on Pete Collins was a riot . . . a first-rate riot. It had all begun way back in Montgomery, Alabama, and it had carried, the way those things do, to Kelly Field and Fort Sumner; and then it had stopped for a while because Tony had gone over first.

But then it commenced all over again when Pete had the sad luck to wind up as a replacement in Tony's flight. For Pete Collins England was not merry; it was really worse by that time because Tony had acquired the edge in experience and he made sure that none of that ever got by Pete Collins unnoticed.

Sometimes Tony would hold forth with black shining eyes in the club lounge on Forty Squadron; standing at the bar with a mug of light ale or mild and bitters, bowing his head slightly and speaking in that hesitant way that Pete had had when he had first ambled tall and lanky and soft-spoken into pre-flight at Montgomery.

"Well, now," Tony would banter, "I'd have dropped that 109 but the beggar who was flying it lacked the good manners to show me his card. Can't pot an unknown, you know. Couldn't think of it."

And they would all laugh in huge gales



and would look expectantly at Pete who would be in one corner drinking quietly. But he would only smile and put up with it; and that only made it worse because he knew that Tony Randall was waiting for the day when he would unbend to him and show some irritation. It sometimes got really vicious; and Pete knew that the rest of the squadron was wondering just how long he would take it. Pete would wonder a little about that too once in a while; but there was nothing in his background which could supply him an answer.

SOMETIMES, too, Tony could not wait until they returned from a sweep or an escort job, and he would tie into Pete in the air, the way it happened that day when they took the First Air Division to Bremen.

Pete was tall and he sat high and slightly bent over in the Mustang, gazing placidly down at the shining backsides of the Seventeens, lying flatly and without depth against the wide metal of Zuider Zee. He thought there was something symmetrical and vaguely poetic about it, and he stared at them and settled more comfortably in the warmth that pressed through the bubble. He was not thinking of Tony Randall at all, and when his voice came through the headset it jarred him; it had the old sting in it—the old rub.

"All right, sleeping beauty, let's get in here. Let's tighten up; do your dreamin' on your own time."

Pete looked around him quickly and was embarrassed and surprised to find he'd drifted. The flight, with Randall leading, was off to the left and his own ship was nearly over the center of the bomber stream. He pressured slightly on the rudder to swing him back; the ship swung sweetly into the slot and he could hear the soft chuckles coming over VHF from the other planes. Someone hummed, 'Rock abye Baby!' someone else grabbed a few bars from, 'Goodnight Sweetheart', and when the air was briefly clear he heard the Major's voice. It was weary and bespoke the resignation of a man who has put up with something a long time.

"Shut up," the Major said.

After that it was quiet and Pete hitched

self-consciously at the harness webbing and settled as obscurely as he could into the cockpit. It was a hard thing for him to get as far down as he wanted to because he was decidedly not Mustang dimensions. Tony Randall had a prize one for that, too.

"I don't know why they didn't put you into submarines," he'd say thoughtfully. "There must be some way to convert you into a periscope."

But Pete was not thinking so much about that now as he was about his indiscretion. It was bad enough putting up with Randall the way things were, without letting himself wide open to boot. Randall was not one to let him step out of line without remembering it—and he saw to it that everyone else remained freshened on the matter too.

Pete Collins sighed and tried to get comfortable again and thought how different things would be had it not been for the original blunder which had brought the enmity of Tony Randall. It was a small thing to Pete's classics trained mind, but his failure to recognize Tony Randall, on their first meeting at pre-flight, as one of the greatest backs the Bears had ever had had raged as a black ghost in Randall's mind ever since.

They had stood in a tight, excited group with stiff new khakis in the center of the empty barracks at Montgomery; and Pete had looked at the stocky and compact confidence of the dark young man who was Tony Randall and had said vacantly, "Bears?" And to the delighted amazement of all but the suddenly glowering Tony Randall he had further exhibited his ignorance of things mundane by adding: "The Bears—is that some sort of hunting or animal conservation society?"

The umbrage Tony Randall had taken to that had never simmered down; and the incident, coupled with Pete's retiring nature and aversion to aggressiveness, had earned for him, at Randall's instigation, these pungent sobriquets which he tried to forget and never could.

All that was marching across his mind in a sort of montage and then those things were gone and he was hearing and seeing things which had nothing whatsoever to do with his personal and private tribula-

tions; the long contrails far out and sweeping across the length of the stream, and the excitement which began to rattle around in the headset.

He looked quickly around with that sudden chill feeling of unreality which always seemed to seize him at those times. He had wandered a little again and when he corrected in the Major was talking.

"All right," he was saying. "Keep your eyes open and don't let them draw you off. Don't go drifting; stick around."

The static blurred in briefly and when it cleared off Pete heard the Major again. The Major was very calm; he seemed to enjoy everything.

"All right," he was saying. "Let's have some snap now. You listening, Collins? You hear what I'm saying?"

Pete muttered something which he was not sure of himself and then he was making motions with the stick and rudder and tracking Tony Randall's flight in a steep arc to the left. They were already high, but they went for more height, and when they leveled off and went over into dives Pete looked down and saw the white ragged streaks already coming sporadically from the bombers; and the short, bright life of moisture curving away from the wings of the Messerschmitts.

THE pressure was nothing until he went deep in his dive and passed beneath the sudden bellies of the bombers and picked up the brief haze of a 109 going through the ringsight. He pressed the gunswitch automatically, but the ship was already gone and then he was under the bombers and going way down deep into the bucket as the pressure drained his mind. It was white and grey and briefly black, and then white again. The Mustang was in a climb, hanging on its spinner high on the right side of the bomber stream. The rest of the flight was behind him and the Messerschmitts were going into the bombers.

He went over again, going away in a steep bank and falling out of the bottom onto the Messerschmitts. Randall was ahead and to the left, coming out of his turn and steepening the angle of dive. Pete went down with him, staying to the

side and waiting for Randall's move. There were no other planes around that he could recognize except the bombers and the Messerschmitts; the bombers held their line and kept holding it as the Jerries came deep from the side, and Pete followed Randall on a rapidly converging course.

They met beneath the briefly shining bellies of the Seventeens and Pete felt his guns shake as a Messerschmitt swam into the sight and out again. The Jerry flight broke up and Randall curved sharply down and aft along the stream. Pete tried another deflection shot, but the turn was too tight and he relaxed the stick and let the Mustang slide into a long dive before he recovered high on the other side. When he came up that time he was alone and he turned and looked around.

The Mustangs and Messerschmitts were all around and under him, tangled and mixed up over the bombers. Far off in the brightness of the sky in the southwest he saw one going down but he could not tell what it was; the fighters looked too much alike to guess. There were no bombers gone but one was smoking badly from the wing and falling back. There was a brawl going on around it; and he steepened the circle and went back down again.

That time there were more and it was a mess. The fire in the bomber got worse before he was half-way down and the rioting flames and streaming smoke drew Jerries like sugar draws flies. The flames were long and wavering in the ringsight when he came into range and picked up a 109 coming in from the front.

It went fast along the flank of the bomber and Pete let his nose fall off and picked up the Jerry when it passed astern of the Seventeen and into the clear. It was brief and sudden and his guns shook only shortly before the range was gone; he stared hard through the orange ring at the metal and fabric peeling away from the wing, and then it was gone and he was going down below the bomber and receiving the stamped impression on his mind of the salvoed load and the turning figures and the chutes bursting white and faint against the sky.

He came on up through the slanting planes and high up in the clear. When he turned and looked down he saw the Weser twisting like tinsel through Vegesack and Bremen; he saw the bombs falling and their sudden surprising burst, crawling and expanding along the ground; he saw the flak coming into the bombers—the swift, irrational appearance of black and cloudy splashes in the formations; and bombers going down with great fatigue . . . two . . . three . . .

When he came across to the other side of Bremen and joined up on Tony Randall the bombers were coming out and the Jerries were going on down at them through the sparse tracking flak on the outskirts and suburbs of the city. He followed down in a steep pass, through the Messerschmitts, the sharp concussions of near bursts, and the stable, level bombers trundling along.

They got nothing and they went on through and came up and peeled off again. They went down steep and a Jerry flight was coming in from the far left. Randall swung on, but Pete thought the angle too sharp and he kept his heading and waited. They went through the stream and there was more smoke and suddenly one of them was directly in Pete's sight. His thumb went down on the button, but very abruptly Randall came in from the left and picked it up.

"That's me baby," Randall said. "Clear off, dreamer; I'll handle this one."

They were very close to collision and Pete had to wrench hard on the stick and kick violent rudder to avoid the smash. He went up high to the right and saw Randall's guns pumping raggedly at the Jerry. He saw the fire and smoke swirl angrily away from the Messerschmitt, and saw the Jerry plane cant up swiftly and fall into a tight spiral; and he heard the Major's voice coming through again.

"I want to see you two when we get back," he said. "In my office—and make damned sure you get there."

Pete Collins heard him, but he was not listening carefully; he was thinking how very nice it would be to hop on Tony Randall's tail and send him after the Jerry.

II

PETE COLLIN'S ALMOST EXEMPLARY conduct on and off the base of Forty Squadron had never made occasion for a visit to Major Barnes' office; and since this was the first he was very careful to dress correctly in well-pressed greens before he made the short jaunt from the squadron site to Headquarters. It was disconcerting and a little uncomfortable to find that both the Major and Tony Randall were still in flying clothes.

"Where you been?" Tony Randall asked. "Getting a manicure? There's a USO show puttin' in here tonight and I think I'm gonna have a big date. You got a lot of nerve holdin' this thing up."

The Major, who was young and had grown a mustache to appear older, had what Pete thought was a glint of humor in his eyes. There was a trace of it in the curve of his mouth, too; and he seemed to be having trouble repressing it.

"Just kindly restrain yourself, Randall," he said. "The ship you stole from Collins today makes you an ace, I know, but I'm still in command around here and I'll administer the reprimands."

"Sure, sir," Randall said, unabashed. "I didn't mean to usurp nothin'. He's still got his nerve though. There's probably fifty dames just . . ."

"If you please," the Major said with more persistence, and that time it pleased Pete to see that the humor was gone from Barnes' eyes; they were angry and not pleasant.

"What was it you wanted to see me about?" Pete asked him.

"I wanted to see both of you," the Major said. He sat down behind the bare wooden desk and lit a cigarette. He took two drags and ground it out in the ash tray. He scratched his clipped head and swore.

"I can't have this sort of thing going on around here any longer," he said. "This damned business between you two has got to stop."

"I don't think I get you," Tony Randall said blandly "I don't know anything that's been going on around here between us two."

Pete began to say something and then he thought better of it and remained silent. The Major looked up sharply and swore again.

"That Messerschmitt business this afternoon was just one example," he said to Randall. "That was Collins' ship and you cut him out and nailed it. There was no call for that and you know it."

"But it was my fifth; it made me an ace," Randall said with mild surprise. "That's good for the squadron, ain't it? Besides," and he looked slyly at Pete. "I wasn't so sure Pete was going to shoot him down; it looked like maybe he was going to fly formation with him."

"I had a perfect bead on him," Pete Collins said coldly, looking at Tony Randall. "If I hadn't released my button I would have sawed your wing off. Frankly, I'm not so sure it wouldn't have been a good idea."

"Shut up," the Major said loudly, and he plucked irritably at the tender shoots of his mustache. "Shut up, both of you. That's just what I mean. That's just what I mean about this business between you two."

He came up out of the chair and leaned across the desk and glared.

"You two are going to learn to get along together, to fly together and work together if it kills you. And even if it does it might be worth it. I'm not going to have Group and Wing calling me up and asking who's singing lullabies and what not over VHF. I'm not going to have a situation in my command that I can't handle. Understand, Randall? What about you, Collins?"

"I understand, sir," Pete Collins said carefully. He looked at Tony Randall. The eyes of the best back the Bears had ever had were wide.

"Lord knows I've got enough to stew about without having my own men at each other," the Major went on plaintively. "I've got replacements, casualties and parts; Group or Wing is always crawling down my back on some damn thing or other—now they tell me the Jerries have some new plane or other off the boards. Always something."

He pounded the desk for emphasis.

"And I'm not going to have dissension in my own squadron to boot."

Pete did not know whether it was called for or not, but he said, "Yes, sir," again anyway. Randall played it safe and followed suit.

"All right," Barnes said wearily and he went around and sat in the chair again. He retrieved the crumpled butt, straightened it and lit it. "You two are going to fly together alone for awhile. You seem to understand what I'm driving at but I'm taking no chances; I'm going to keep you off regular hops and find you something different until you straighten out."

"Aw, sir," Tony Randall objected. "I got to get more . . ."

"Shut up," the Major snapped. "You'll do as I say."

"Something special?" Randall asked. "Something for just Pete and me? Well, maybe it won't be so bad."

"You get out of here, Randall," the Major said. "As you seem to assume, there must be fifty dames waiting for you and only you at that USO show. I have another matter to discuss with Collins; you're free to leave. You just remember what I said."

"Oh, I'll remember all right," Randall said and he winked at Pete Collins. "We might have a pretty good time at that."

"Wonderful," Pete said without enthusiasm.

WHEN the door closed behind Tony Randall the Major wiped his hand across his face and peered at Pete between his fingers.

"What's the matter with you?" he asked. Pete came back to attention and said, "Sir?"

"What's the matter with you? If I were you I'd have poked him in the nose a good while back. I'd have taken him right out behind the nearest latrine and pasted him. How'd all this start anyway?"

Pete shuffled and thought of his colossal ignorance of the day of meeting. He began haltingly to explain it, but the Major was off on another track.

"Hell, you're a good enough airfighter," he mused. "Got a Junkers 88 all your own, and you've only been here a few

weeks. You can't be afraid of the guy, I'm sure."

"It's got nothing to do with that," Pete said awkwardly. "I simply believe one's mayhem should be directed at the enemy. He merely takes a juvenile delight in baiting me because his ego suffered when I failed to recognize his preeminence in his pre-war occupation. It would signify some weakness on my part were I to take serious notice of him."

The Major said, "Hmm," and looked thoughtfully at his hands. He turned them over and examined the light hair on their backs. "What'd you do before the war, Collins?"

"I was a student of classical architecture," Pete answered quietly. "Just before I came into the army I was working for a firm which designed buildings in the Greek and Roman tradition; university buildings and post offices. Things like that."

The Major said, "Hmm," once more, and having exhausted the possibilities of his hands, stared at the ash tray. He rubbed his face.

"Of course," Pete said thoughtfully, "if you believe I should I could be coldly objective about it and invite Lieutenant Randall out behind the orderly room; if you think it would improve your position with Group or Wing."

The Major sat straight up in the chair and knocked over the ash tray; he didn't seem to notice it.

"Now, wait a minute," he said quickly. "Hold on; don't get excited. Everything's going to be fine, see? I'm not going to have anything like that around here. I was just curious, understand. We're going to work this thing out just the way I've figured it."

"Yes, sir," Pete said. "I understand, and I agreed with you. I don't believe that violence would produce a solution."

"You're absolutely right," the Major said and he stood up quickly and smiled nervously.

"You can take off now, Collins; we'll have this all worked out in no time. You just forget all about it; stop in at the USO tonight; have a whirl."

"Yes, sir," Pete said and he saluted and

opened the door. As he stepped through into the corridor he had the impression that the Major's face bore the expression of someone who's had a very close call.

PETE had never before been to a USO show and he was not exactly sure just what to expect; but what he got was the kind of shock a man does not often receive—not some four odd thousand odd miles from home.

It was the girl. At first she was just any girl singing softly and with nostalgia across the footlights, and then suddenly she wasn't and Pete was no longer slouching way down deep in his seat so the others could see over and around him, but was sitting bolt upright and remembering how it had been when they had gone to a college prom together a long while back.

It did not make any difference now that she had later in their association defined him rather cryptically as a *drip*; she was home now, and old times, and on this black day in Pete Collins' special war something like that was just about what the doctor ordered.

He was fiddling with his hat at the stage entrance when the show was over; and it was pleasing that she was glad to see him.

"Why, Pete Collins," she said, and she put her hand on his arm. "Whatever are you doing here? I had no idea you were in England."

Pete saw rather helplessly, and with a surge of remembrance that annoyed him, that she had the same deep grey eyes and chestnut hair; and the same smile. He had a hard time arranging the words properly.

"I've been here about three weeks," he managed after a moment. "I came over as a replacement."

"Are you flying?" she asked, and she asked it in such a way that inferred surprise if he said yes. He said, "Yes," and she was surprised; although she made an effort not to show it.

"I didn't know," she said. "Nobody tells me anything."

"Well, I haven't been at it for long," he explained.

They were standing just outside the en-

trance and the crowd was beginning to mill around and push and Pete said it might be nice to go over to the club lounge and have a beer or something. Sally Knight, which was the pretty girl's name, thought that was very fine indeed, and since there was only the moonlight she gave him her arm while they walked across the dim field from the theatre Quonset.

"I didn't know you were in show business," Pete said after he became used to the girl's arm.

"The USO people came around one time and said they wanted to organize shows for the boys, and so I went," Sally Knight explained. "I used to sing in the college shows."

"Yes," Pete said. "I remember." And he did; more so than he cared to admit.

She laughed quickly and squeezed his arm and presently they were coming into the bright lobby of the club. There were colored lights and a band playing softly somewhere inside and flyers walking around with yards of fruit salad on their blouses. Her eyes strayed to Pete's lone ETO ribbon and then went quickly away.

"This is exciting," she said when they found the table on the dance floor. "I've never been to a fighter base before. How young everyone is. Are there any aces?"

"Yes, there are a few aces," Pete admitted. He pushed her chair in carefully and took her drink order, and went to the bar with it. When he came back with the tray two others from his flight, Hobart and Kasmarek, had pulled up chairs; and they looked surprised to see him.

"Are you with the dreamer?" Hobart asked Sally Knight in a tone of voice which implied that such a thing was incredible.

"We knew each other in school," Pete Collins explained shortly, and he put the drinks on the table and sat down.

"No kidding," Kasmarek marveled and he looked curiously at Pete.

"Why did he call you the dreamer?" Sally Knight asked brashly.

"He's always goofing off," Hobart said helpfully. He grinned at Pete and helped himself to a shot from Pete's glass. "He's always in a kind of world of his own; we get used to it though."

THE band had stopped but it began to play again and Pete stood up suddenly and with a quaint formal motion took Sally Knight's arm. They stepped onto the floor and began to dance. For a moment they were quiet and it was just nice to hold her that way and remember the college prom a long time ago.

"You haven't changed, then," she said presently. She looked up at him carefully and she had a strange little twist to her lips.

"I guess not," he said. "Same old fashioned guy; no zip."

"Still the same old murky unaggressive Pete Collins," she laughed. "I called you a *drip* one time because of that, remember? I thought maybe I could change you, but I was a sophomore then and I didn't know any better."

"I guess that was a waste of time," Pete said slowly.

"Yes," Sally Knight admitted. "I guess it was, but then when we're that young we're full of the old crusading spirit, aren't we?"

Pete nodded and the music stopped. They waited until the next number began, but it was a samba and those were beyond Pete's elemental knowledge of dancing and so they returned to the table and sat down. Pete went for more drinks and when he returned that time Tony Randall had pulled up a chair and was sitting in it and leaning on the back with his arm; like a saddle. Tony's eyes were wide and glassy.

"She wanted to meet an ace," Kasmarek explained. "Tony's the newest one we've got."

"I'm brand new," Tony admitted without turning away from Sally Knight. "I got my big fat number five this afternoon. Torched a 109 at Bremen."

Sally Knight's eyes were wide with fascination and she did not look at Pete as he stood awkwardly with the glasses. Tony Randall looked casually around the table.

"It's crowded here, sweetheart," he said to Sally. "We ought to go out there and kick that samba around."

"I'd love to," Sally Knight said quickly, and she got up and Tony took her arm firmly and they went onto the floor.

Pete watched them quietly as they faded

into the crowd; then he placed the glasses on the table and sat down. Kasmarek scratched his ear and laughed harshly.

"Well," he said brightly. "I guess that's that."

III

AROUND NOON THE MAJOR had found something for them to do, and when Pete ambled morosely down to Operations he could not avoid the large bulk of Tony Randall who galloped suddenly out of the mess and joined him on the road.

"What a day," Tony Randall said with a vast exhalation of air. He sniffed deeply and stamped a cumbersome tattoo on the road. He sang a song about spring.

"It's September," Pete corrected after a while. "It's not spring."

"It's spring in my heart, Tony Randall said. "It's June in January; it's springtime in the Rockies. What a girl."

"You're referring to Miss Knight?" Pete asked without turning.

"Peaches, not Miss Knight," Tony Randall said. "But that's the dish. What a thrush. What a beaut. Such eyes, such gams, such development. A real babe."

"I hardly think Miss Knight is your type of companion," Pete Collins said. They were approaching the Major's office, but as he said that they stopped and faced each other bleakly before the door.

"I suppose you think she's your type," Tony Randall jeered. He placed his broad, flat face very close to Pete Collins's long, thin one.

"Well, perhaps not," Pete admitted. "But she's a very cultured young lady; I don't think she's any sort of girl that . . ."

At that moment the door beside them opened very suddenly and the Major stuck his head out and said five words.

"Shut up," he snapped. "Get in here."

They went in and the Major snarled at them all the way down the corridor to his office. When they got in there he slammed the door so hard the dust jumped out of the woodwork and sparkled in the sun streaming through the window. He had a big chart on his desk and he dropped into the chair behind it.

"I'm warning you guys for the last time," he said. "This is it. One more and I turn you over to Group for discipline."

Tony Randall began to object, but the Major waved him imperiously to silence. When Tony subsided the Major looked at the chart and spoke more easily.

"I want you two to go have a look at the Schelde," he said.

"The what?" Tony Randall asked.

"The Schelde estuary," Pete informed him. "It's in Holland; formed by the confluence of the . . ."

"I'll conduct this briefing," the Major said without looking up. "I want to know if there's any barge concentration in the estuary. You won't have cameras so you'll have to remember every damn blade of grass and mudhole you see. I want to know what water transportation there is in there, even if it's only a kyak or an aboriginal canoe. I want a full report. If those Jerries are up to anything over in there I want to know. You got that? Randall? Collins?"

"I understand it, sir," Pete Collins said.

When Tony Randall's slow nod signified comprehension the Major folded the chart and rammed it into the desk drawer. He stood up and took them to the door.

"Okay, now. Take off as quick as you can and get back here as quick as you can. You'll have to fly low for good visibility, but be careful of flak; and you'll have to be doubly careful of fighters at that altitude. Keep absolutely away from them; without height you won't have a chance." He paused and placed a placating hand on the shoulder of each. "And work together, damn it, work together."

PETE loafed along the perimeter track until Tony Randall had cleared the runway and then he moved into the slot, locked the tail wheel and revved the Merlin. The hard pull of the fan pushed him deep into the seat and he sat there non-resistant and let the engine have its head. He had a good head-wind and the take-off was short. When he cleared the strip, and the low line of hedge and the farm at the end, he climbed in a rising circle until he sat on Randall's wing.

From Forty Squadron to the Channel

was a matter of minutes. They kept low, maintaining the height they intended to use at the Schelde, and the time went faster than Pete had thought it would; or maybe, he considered, it was because they were so low and everything was a blur. Upstairs it always seemed leisurely, and things far out would be in vision a good while before they actually arrived beneath.

All things were fast and sudden down there—trees, buildings, the patchwork fields, the bright flash of bombers standing on the hard-stands, the thin spines of railway tracks winding and curving, appearing and disappearing; and the white breadth of the beaches, the curling, slow surf and the deep water beyond.

When they hit the beaches they went still lower out across the wide water to get under the Jerry radar. Pete did not like to fly that low but he knew there was no other way to get in close without detection. He did not like the hypnotism of the ruffled monotony of the water, nor did he care for its nearness; no room to compensate for thermals or air shifts. But it was the only way to do it.

They did not talk back and forth on this one, not even when the coast of Holland appeared, imperceptibly at first and then bulked broad and flat ahead. According to pre-arrangement they stayed low until the coast was quite near and then they climbed slowly until they had close to three thousand on the dials. At that height they leveled off and began a wide circle around the estuary.

They were on the southern limits, and looking down, Pete could see the Belgian border on his right. Below and to the left, the broad West Schelde meandered inland like a delta; while beyond and to the north lay flooded Walcheren, North and South Beveland and Schouven. Still further north, Overflakke was not clearly visible at that height.

In a way it was hard for Pete to imagine that he was flying over enemy ground; it looked quiet and peaceful and inoffensive. It was, until Tony Randall broke radio silence and called the Jerries coming in.

"There's four of 'em," he said. "Our level, coming in at two o'clock. They've picked us up all right."

"Well, we'd better move on out," Pete said. "We're in no shape to tangle with them." He increased his throttle and slid up beside the other ship. Tony Randall was grinning and looking at the Jerries. "Let's move out," Pete said. "While we can."

"Let's have one look," Tony Randall said quickly. "You never know; one of those guys might slip. We might be able to tag one."

"We've got a report to get back," Pete Collins said carefully. "The Major's not going to like this at all."

"Hell, he don't have to know it happened in just this way, does he?" Randall said. "Come on, dreamer, hop on and ride me in."

And there was nothing to do then but follow Tony Randall in. Pete watched the other ship lift sharply up and over to his right, rising high and curving into a tight chandelle. He went through the motions with his own ship, joining up on Randall again and watching the confusion break out in the Jerry flight.

The Mustangs were directly above and coming down when the Messerschmitts began to scatter. They broke on the four cardinal compass points and Tony led Pete to the north, out of the sun. The Jerry was low down, trying to reach the cover of the ground, but the Mustangs had the height and speed advantage and presently Randall's guns were spilling flame against the darkness of the earth.

Down low and flat, the Messerschmitt rose high in a climbing turn and they went high up and were in the middle of the other planes. They were all around and coming from the sides. Pete looked around quickly and saw the 109s forming on their tails.

"This is a trap, Tony," he said quickly. "Come on, let's clear off while we can. We're caught cold this way."

But Tony Randall didn't answer; he kept firing away at the Jerry and Pete saw the metal and fabric and this smoke peeling away and coming back into the slipstream. He drew up closer as the Jerries came down fast from above and the rear. He moved again, to cover Randall and he was soaking up tracer from

two ships; it was coming in hard skimming redly off the wings and slamming into the armor.

And still Randall did not break it off.

They went down deep again and came up sharply bending high against the bright sky and the white tracer from behind. The Messerschmitt, smoking badly and beginning to flame, rose up quickly above Randall's nose and in the clear. It floated into Pete's sight and he thumbed the button; he held it hard for a long burst until the Messerschmitt fell off, dropped down in front of Randall's ship, and then fell completely away in a stiff dive straight down.

"That's it," Tony Randall said tightly. "Let's go; let's get rolling."

They were heading west and they dove again; they went at a steep angle until they were only yards above the ground. The firing fell off and finally trailed away. When they came out of the Ooster Schelde, very low and just over the water, Pete looked back and saw the Jerries circling above the crashed plane. In the headset Tony Randall was humming.

"That makes six," he said in a sing-song voice. "Six beauties; thanks for stickin' around, dreamer."

And Pete Collins said something then, and in a manner which his pleasant nature had never before considered.

"Shut your big fat trap," he said with slow and heavy emphasis.

If Tony Randall had anything to say to that Pete did not hear. Directly he had spoken he punched the VHF channel out and cranked the command set to AFN. The music was sweet, but not soothing.

DUE to the gunfire Pete had a little trouble landing; and he had to circle the field until they got the meat wagon and fire truck all arranged along the strip before they'd let him come in wheels up. It took nearly half an hour to do all this, and by the time he'd made the grinding slide, staggered out of the mess and made his way to the Major's office Randall had already made his report and left. It really didn't matter by then; the belly-scraping had knocked the fight all out of him.

"Well I see you got into something,"

the Major said. "Too bad you got jumped."

"Too bad what?" Pete asked. The Major had offered him a chair this time and he leaned forward toward the desk.

"Randall said you got jumped; said there was no way to get away before they were crawling all over you; said he was lucky to get one."

Pete sat back and folded his hands. He grinned without humor.

"It was something like that," he said. "But we made it."

"Yes, I see," Barnes said. He pulled the chart out of the drawer and spread it on the desk. "Randall had to leave; he said you could give me the report better anyway."

"Mighty fine of the Lieutenant," Pete said and he got out the chair and bent over the desk. He made a careless circle with his finger around the Schelde estuary. "I didn't see anything in there at all; nothing around the islands. Overflakee is all we missed. The Dutch made such a mess of things before the Jerries came in I don't think it's good for anything, not even barge concentration."

The Major tapped the chart with a pencil.

"Well, that's something," he said. Then, "How about those fighters? Where'd they come from?"

"We picked them up after we crossed into the Ooster Schelde!" Pete moved his finger along the chart "Right around Rozendaal. Four of them."

"They were 109s, Randall told me. Would you say that too?"

"You bet I would," Pete said. "They were 109s all right."

"Nothing new in there yet, then," the Major mused. "Well—you're sure about that? 109s?"

"They were 109s," Pete said again. "There wasn't anything new at all. Was there supposed to be in that area?"

"No, not that I know of." The Major sat down in the chair and lit a cigarette. "They're supposed to have something somewhere, though, and I'm just wondering when we're going to see it."

Pete sat down again and watched the Major poke about on the chart. The pencil

strayed around the northern section of the Schelde.

"Well," the Major said presently, "you might as well go back over tomorrow and cover what you missed. Just Overflakee, wasn't it?"

"Yes, that's about all; I don't think there's anything up there either, but we can check it."

"All right," Barnes said, and he put the chart in the drawer. "Better make it earlier in the morning this time. The Jerries may be too busy with the bomber stream to bother you."

The Major stood up and Pete Collins did likewise; they went to the door. Barnes opened the door and smiled.

"Well, I'm glad you're getting along all right on this thing," he said. "Randall said everything was all right. You two can work together if you just put your mind to it."

"Yes, it was beautiful," Pete said, and he walked out of the room and down the corridor to the cement driveway.

IT WAS too early for mess, but he wasn't hungry anyway. He went back to the barracks, which were empty, and showered and shaved and dressed even more carefully than when he had called on the Major that first time. When he finished he went over to the post theatre and hung around the stage door until someone came out. It was one of the girls who had danced the night before and she explained brightly that she would be happy to find Sally Knight for him. When Sally came out she was even more fetching than she had been before.

"Why, Pete," she said and she smiled. "How nice of you to call. Aren't you supposed to be flying?"

"Not now," Pete answered. "I just got back. I came over to see if you'd like to go somewhere tonight . . . after the show I mean . . . to go somewhere for a late supper or something like that."

"Oh, Pete, that would be wonderful," Sally Knight said. "But I can't; I've got another engagement."

Pete said, "Oh," and felt very awkward. He knew it was wrong and in bad taste to ask her so late.

"It's Tony Randall," she said impulsively. "He was just here; he said he knew of a little place along the river that has wonderful food; even with the way things are over here."

Pete said, "Oh," again; and then he added, "Tony Randall." He looked at the ground.

"He got another plane today," Sally Knight said in a dreamy voice and when Pete looked at her she was gazing over his shoulder at the sky. She looked at him swiftly and made a short laugh. She patted his arm.

"Pete, you're a swell guy; an old friend and all that . . ."

"I understand," Pete said quietly. "You can't teach an old dog new tricks. It's all right, Sally; you don't have to apologize."

"It's just that I want you to understand, Pete; you're a wonderful friend."

"Sure, Sally," Pete said again. "I understand."

He put his hat back on and walked along the road.

IV

IN THE MORNING PETE DID NOT have anything to say to Tony Randall and so he thought it was a good thing they got away early. They went through a quick briefing with the Major and then to the line and their ships. It was still early, but they had timed their hour of take-off to coincide pretty much with that of the bomber mission. The main stream was to pass over northern Holland near Texel that day and so it seemed reasonable to suppose they could slip in to the south a ways and scout things out while the Jerries were busy further up the line. That's what they supposed.

They went in further north that time, above Walcheren, and along the Ooster Schelde; they were down low, a bit more than on the other trip, and everything whizzed below rapidly. Pete looked out ahead to bring things in slower; and at the end of the Ooster, near Rosendaal, they swung north again across Schouven toward Overflakee. On the far side, near Willemstad, Pete saw the barge.

It was broad and long and lay pressed against the shore in a shallow turning of the water. Randall was still leading, and as they skimmed over Pete was not sure that Tony had seen it.

"We'd better swing around here and go back over that spot," he said over VHF. "There's a barge down there; we'll have to get lower."

"I saw it," Tony Randall said. "So what? Someone's haulin' a load of peat—or potatoes. We get down any lower and we're lookin' for trouble."

"We're supposed to check on things like that," Pete reminded him. "And if we get into a jam we'll have to work our way out; so long as it isn't the kind you worked us into yesterday it's okay with me."

Tony Randall didn't say anything, and since the barge was already far back Pete moved his stick and rudder swiftly and peeled off and lost height; he was very low in his glide before he spotted Randall in the mirror. The other ship was coming around to follow him in.

Pete went flat and shallow over the barge, banking slightly to look at it through the side of the bubble. It looked old and abandoned; it was ill-kept and had water washing above the level of the floor boards. Nearby it on the shore there was a small cabin which appeared equally suffering from lack of use. The path leading to it was obscure and hard to see.

He saw all this swiftly as the plane swept low and then was gone. He flew straight for twenty seconds, picking up speed, and then swung high up to the left; he went up to two thousand feet and looked back. When he glanced ahead he saw the Jerries. At the same time Tony began to yell over VHF.

"Look at 'em," he was shouting. "Now we're caught. You had to go down and look at that wreck and they've got us flat. What a jerk."

Pete did not have the Merlin open, but he pushed the mixture into auto-rich and rammed his throttle to the wall. There were eight Jerries this time, 109s, and they were spread out high and wide to either side. They had already seen them and they were peeling off in passes.

THERE was not much to do just then, Pete thought rather desperately, except fight for height. He had already picked up another thousand, but it was not yet enough; they would need more—much more. And there did not seem to be any way to get it. They were trapped, and he knew coldly there was no getting away.

The first of the Messerschmitts already had a bead on him and as the wings spread across the windscreen he saw the broad band of white fire spill along the leading edge. The plane was stable and motionless and poised; and then swiftly it was none of those things at all. The wing grew and spread, sprouted flat bulk and coolant radiators, and the fire became ragged and formed into streaks which flickered across the shrinking space between the two ships.

There was in the second of meeting the lost tenths of seconds when he might have raised his nose dangerously near stalling and risked a burst, but he didn't do that, but waited, frozen, while the 109 poured at him with the sunlight blurring across the spinner and the glass of the canopy. It was over and gone suddenly and he was in the midst of the others.

They were all around and there was no clear space that he could see at all. They were above and behind, and there was only below to the earth where he could go; but he needed height and there was nothing to do but keep climbing through them. They were like sudden dark shadows passing around him, and each time one came briefly into vision he thumbed the guns; but he could tell he wasn't doing any good.

He couldn't tell about Tony Randall until he gained six thousand and came on up and over. He was in a briefly clear space when he looked down and saw the other Mustang caught in a trap some thousand feet below. There was gunfire cobwebbing all around it, and fresh relays from the Jerry flight kept peeling off and coming in to hit it.

Pete went over fast and he was half way down again when he saw the sick smoke whining away from Randall's cowl. It streamed away in long plaited bands and

Pete went through it and felt his guns shake as a 109 went through the sight at Tony Randall. Pete went deep down in a groaning pull-out and came back up and felt the guns shake again and his own ship vibrating from the gunfire coming into it. He could not see the Jerry and he looked wildly and with the thin ice of panic, but could not find him. He went over again in a steep dive and came out very low and with black patterns squirming in his eyes. When he came up again and saw whiteness and daylight he was watching Tony drift away in his parachute.

He went steeply around Randall and tried to climb again, but they were all around him again and there were no guts in the Merlin. It would not pull, and he was tired from the turn which had nearly blacked him out. The black things were there squirming once more and it was warm. It was very warm and presently the black things went away and he saw the flame coming across the engine cowl.

It was all unreal, but he was moving; standing outside himself and watching his physical shell go through the motions. With what was left in the Merlin he gained a few hundred feet in a shallow slant; and when she sighed and began to fall off he reached with unfeeling fingers for the bubble release. It came free with a roar—it was there and gone; and numbly he was going into the blast of air and over the side and wrenching with sudden strength at the cord. The plane went far down and smashed in a grey cloud shot with red; the wind was west and carried the pall inland. Pete oscillated gracefully above it.

THEY were waiting for him in the field and they stood there with rifles when he struck and rolled and came erect with the lines entangling his arms and legs. They walked him with caution to an open truck and drove him for a short time over a rough road to the east. In twenty minutes or so he saw the widely scattered revetments of an air field; there were fighter planes, a few twin engine ships, a scattering of camouflaged huts and tents. And of course the anti-aircraft guns. They looked like Oerlikons.

They went nearly around the field before they turned in a narrow road and came up before a building which seemed larger than the others. They took him directly into a small waiting room, and through that into an office.

The room was large and the first thing which drew his eye was the wide and ornate desk—a thing of mahogany glory in a place so utterly bereft of any comfort or cleanliness. There was a fat, beefy Luftwaffe Colonel behind it staring at a stack of papers and being careful to seem preoccupied as Pete was arranged in front of the desk. The only other person standing by was Tony Randall. Randall glared at Pete and the Colonel looked up as the guards retired to the door.

"I want to know why you have been flying around this area," the Colonel said presently. "Are you the same two who were in this neighborhood yesterday?" The Colonel had a thick neck, and it bulged slightly with each word. His English was very good.

"According to international law you are entitled only to our names, ranks and serial numbers," Pete Collins pointed out.

The Colonel smirked. "How naive."

"He's a jerk anyway," Tony Randall said suddenly. "Listen to him awhile and you'll hear sillier things than that. If it weren't for him you'd never have us."

"You'd better keep quiet," Pete spoke stiffly and out of the side of his mouth to Tony Randall. Randall's eyebrows went up.

"Since when you tellin' me to keep quiet? Seems to me you been shootin' your mouth off a lot lately."

The Colonel made a faint bubbling noise and they both looked at him. The German's face was very red and his neck came in thick rolls over his collar.

"I am holding the interrogation," he said, and that time the English was slurred. "I will ask the questions. You do not ask each other the questions."

"Well, there's nothing to tell you," Pete said. "Nothing but what is legal under international law."

"I told you he was a jerk," Tony Randall jeered. "He's a damn dreamer." He began to parrot Pete's voice and manner.

"Nothing but what is legal under international law."

"If you please!" The Colonel was losing control; he was standing behind the desk, short and paunchy, and his wattles vibrated around his chins. But Tony Randall had got warmed up on a favorite theme and he did not seem to hear the Colonel.

"Sure, you fat-headed dope," he shouted at Pete. "You got us made prisoners now; you got to go snooping around where we got no business and we get jumped and blown down and now we're prisoners. We'll probably rot before we see England again."

"Schweinen!" the Colonel yelled, reverting to the mother tongue.

"And I got a dame waitin' for me back there," Tony Randall continued heedlessly and with rising heat. "I got a slick dame waitin' and who knows but maybe I'd ask her to marry me; and then you come along and get us blown down."

"You?" Pete Collins demanded; and quietly inside he felt the reserve breaking down. He did not fully understand it, but he knew he relished nothing greater than shaking the the sawdust out of Tony Randall's head.

"You? Marry Sally Knight? Why, you simple oaf!"

He began to shout too; it was getting noisy in the office.

Tony Randall stepped back and looked scandalized.

"Oaf? Me? An oaf?"

"An oaf," Pete reiterated. "And anyone who considered marrying you should be first compelled by governmental statute to submit to psychiatric examination."

The Colonel was leaning cholericly on the desk and making small strangling sounds in his throat; but neither were entirely aware of him. Nor did they heed the two guards who were edging in slowly as they would around a pair of wild boars.

"Oaf!" Tony Randall shouted. "I ought to bust your nose; I ought to break your back. I'm gonna marry that girl if it's the last act of my life."

"And maybe it will be," Pete Collins said with equal rage; and it was like being outside himself somewhere again. He was

not conscious of swinging, but a sudden sharp pain spread wide across his balled fist and Tony Randall was reeling backward with blood all over his face. At the same time the Colonel screamed insanely and the two guards moved in.

AFTER that it got hazy and it was hard to remember all things in their proper order. When Tony went down the guards were there and Pete swung at first one and then the other. He had never before struck anyone in his life and, while he swung blindly, the effect was appalling because the guards went down and they did not get up.

When the second one was flat he turned quickly and saw the Colonel scrabbling in blind fear in a drawer of the desk. Pete could not see clearly but he knew a gun would come jumping and he grabbed the first thing he could find, a thick brief case on the desk, and threw it. It traveled the short distance like a rock from a catapult and caught the Colonel slightly beneath the left ear. The Colonel made a silly little gesture with his hands and sat down heavily in the chair—and slid slowly to the floor.

And fluttering around him and settling upon his rotund belly were the papers from the ruptured brief case. Pete stared, and saw prospective sketches and scale drawings of a stranger appearing plane than he had ever imagined.

V

TONY RANDALL WEAVED slowly toward the desk and leaned on it and spoke with injured dignity to Pete. "Now look what you done. You laid these guys out cold and the rest of the Krauts'll come runnin' and blow us to bits." He sagged into a chair and tenderly fingered his dripping nose. "Geez, where'd you ever learn to swing like that? I haven't had one like that since the Packer game in . . ."

Pete was not sure himself but he did not wish to immediately dispell any illusions Tony Randall might have and so he cut him off with a curt gesture and stuffed the papers into the brief case.

"Listen, Randall," he said. "This is the plane the Major mentioned; the one he said he'd gotten wind of. Apparently the Jerries have been sending the drawings around to their fighter strips for examination. We've got to get this stuff out of here and back to England."

"What plane?" Tony Randall asked listlessly; he was clearly not interested in anything but his nose just then.

"It's a rocket job," Pete said. "They call it a ME 163; looks like a bat. According to the figures it's got a terrific speed. It's going to be used for bomber interception." He looked quickly around the room, which was in a shambles. "We've got to get out of here."

"Get out? What you talking about? We just stick our noses out that door and we lose 'em; and mine's bad enough already. Geez."

"We'll have to change uniforms with the guards," Pete said, overriding Tony Randall's objections. "Nobody's coming yet so apparently nobody heard the row. I saw some 88s outside in the revetments and we can grab one of those."

Tony Randall looked up and gazed vaguely at him. "You crazy?" he asked. "They'll sieve us before we get off the ground. Nothin' doin'."

Randall let his head drop into his hands and Pete stepped close and placed his fist beneath Randall's nose. He jogged it once and Tony yelped. He sat up violently.

"Okay, okay; but no more of that. Geez. My nose feels like a lightbulb now; take it easy."

"Well, then follow through on this thing," Pete said. "We've got to speed it up not much time."

"Okay, okay," Tony Randall said again and he moved slowly and painfully out of the chair and began to strip the clothes from one of the guards. Pete stripped the other and dressed quickly in the Jerry uniform. It was ill-fitting and when he straightened up the effect was ludicrous; his long arms dangled from the sleeves and the tunic came up nearly to his waist. Tony Randall was not much better; he couldn't button the tunic across his chest, and already it was stained with the blood from his still seeping nose.

"You ought to stop that if you can," Pete said and he moved his eyes swiftly around the room again. The Germans were still out and showed no signs of awakening. He studied the floor for more papers but there were none.

"Hah, who got it going?" Tony Randall said. "You think I like it? You think I asked for it?" He mopped at the nose again and added philosophically, "Maybe I did."

Pete went carefully to the door and slowly opened it. The way was clear through the outer office, and from what he could see, in the immediate vicinity of the door of the building. He motioned to Tony and they stepped out of the room and made for the outside.

Outdoors, Pete became fully aware of what they were doing and he felt slightly sick as reaction began to set in. It was fifty yards—sixty or more paces in those tight pants—to the nearest 88, and any moment, any second, might see gunfire rattling from the buildings or from any one of the many Jerries along the flight line. He walked stiffly with his backbone drawn in.

The fifty yards were ten miles and when they got into the sand-bagged revetment they both leaned quietly against the wall for a moment. Tony Randall's face was wet with perspiration; and Pete could feel it running down his back.

"I'll fly this thing," he said presently. It was an 88A and there was a gun mounting behind the pilot blister. "You take the gun."

Tony Randall recovered some of his old splash.

"Say," he said. "I'm flight leader; I'll do the flying for this outfit."

"The instruments," Pete replied quietly. "Can you read German?"

Tony Randall grudgingly admitted his deficiency with that language and when they got into the plane Pete moved into the office. It was all strange in there and for a moment he was cold again and wet with sweat. Behind him he could hear Randall clattering around with the guns; and above all that, the sound he had been dreading—the high hysteria of a siren.

His hands flew among the levers and

switches and by the time the port Jumo coughed, caught and thundered, Tony was giving him a running commentary.

"They know we're on the prowl," he said loudly into the intercom. "They're pourin' out like flies; they're runnin' around like ants; but they don't know where we are yet."

"If we can just get off the ground we'll be all right," Pete answered. The starter on the starboard engine reached its peak and he engaged. It caught quickly and merged its roar with the other one. "We can pull close to three hundred with this thing; England's a short run, and they won't catch us if we can get off all right."

"Well, we better get on the move, then," Tony Randall said. "We're attracting attention now with all this noise." His voice went up. "Here it comes!"

AT the same time Pete kicked the brake and throttled the 88 into the open, the gunfire swept in from the side of the field where the Colonel's office was. It came in wide sheets, whispering around the tremendous exposed canopy, starring the glass plates and stirring the dry ground in dancing dust-devils. Down the field he saw a crew run for the nearest Oerlikon gun pit.

"Get those guys if you can," he said quickly. "If they get to those guns we've had it."

Tony Randall said, "Oi," and short seconds later, while Pete was brutally sticking the ship onto the strip, he heard the machine gun blazing away at the flak battery. It fired in brief spasms and the smell of cordite came down around him on the flight deck.

On the strip and clear of the revetment Pete had never felt so conspicuous in his life. They were all alone in the wide world and there was rifle fire, pistol fire and light machine gun fire coming into them from any direction he chose to look. They were in a bad spot for take-off; it seemed forever before he fought the plane at high speed down to the far end of the field. They ran the gauntlet all the way.

He made the turn in a great sickening lunge and the dust and dirt went out in

high sheets and clouds. Far ahead, now, he could see another group running to the Oerlikon; Randall's gun was a swivel, but it could not cover them at that extreme angle, and so it was safe for the Jerries to get to the gun.

"I'll give 'em a squirt as we go by," Tony Randall called. "Watch out for the planes. There's guys goin' into the revetments up there."

Pete yelled something that sounded like, "Okay," but he was never quite sure because he was suddenly thinking only about getting the 88 up off the ground and not anything that might be trying to stop them along the way. They were moving forward with gathering speed and all those things began to slide by the wings and into the dust behind his vision. The machine gun opened up again and he knew that Tony was firing into the revetments.

The plane was half way down the strip when he knew they could not escape the fire from the Oerlikon. Like fate itself, the slender barrels were rolling down in elevation and coming around to track him in azimuth. They swung with cold, lethal precision, until they were foreshortened and he could look directly into the slightly fanned out muzzles. At that moment they began to fire.

And it was all hell on earth and in the sky that poured over and through the 88 on the bright, ragged streams and flaming banners. A continuous sheet of fire danced and frolicked along the wings, the fuselage and the high glass of the canopy.

Pete felt the jarring and the tearing of the hull below him, but it was a composite and there was no one individual sensation that he could piece out and separate from the whole of it. Even the shattering glass, which exploded violently on one side and then the other as a shell went through and detonated beyond the wing was nothing that he could remember or envision with a greater clarity than any other thing.

It was all one and together; the striving of the Jumos, the painted, sudden streaks, the smell of the machine gun overhead, the Germans on the ground, running crazily and falling, either for aiming or because Randall had somehow reached

them, and the runway which appeared to reach forever.

And then very swiftly the runway was not reaching forever but was coming up sharply to an end; and it surprised him and he realized with a sort of shock that he had not expected to make it. The last few frenzied seconds had seemed like the last brief moments on earth; but incredibly the runway was away beneath them and he no longer felt the tires on the ground. A great tree came up high as he reached for the gear switch, but he swung gracefully and it passed beyond. The gunfire ceased and he no longer felt the pounding of the Oerlikon.

"Hey, Pete," Tony Randall said suddenly. "I just nailed that flak outfit; and they haven't got their planes out yet. You know, I think we're going to make it."

Pete changed the prop pitch and leveled the plane down as far as he could safely fly. Already they were over the Schelde, and not far beyond he saw the cool sanity of the Channel.

"Tony," he said easily. "I do too."

GOING across the Channel Pete managed to get the German radio going on the frequency he wanted and so there was no trouble about getting into England. He contacted Forty Squadron, too, and when he came in carefully to land he saw the whole base had turned out to watch him make the final. But when he landed and saw Sally Knight standing there he lost all interest in the others.

With the brief case dangling from one hand he got down on the firm concrete and stood awkwardly beneath the wing while she ran across the grass toward the plane. She was being very unlike the old Sally, he thought; and he thought that even more so when she fastened herself to the Jerry uniform.

"Hey," he said weakly. "You got the wrong soldier."

"Oh, Pete," she said, "I was worried sick. They told me you'd been long overdue and that there wasn't any chance at all. They said you'd been shot down and that you weren't coming back."

"Well, they were partly right," Pete said. "But we made it all right. We got one of their planes. Tony's okay too; he's in the ship. He'll be right out."

She pulled her head back from the tunic and spoke in a small voice.

"I don't care about Tony," she said, and she ran a slender finger around the outline of a button hole. "Oh, I'm glad he's back. That's wonderful, but I don't care the way I thought I did. Tony's a hero and all that and that's fine; we should have heroes. But last night at dinner I got the impression that he didn't think of much else. I mean I got to feeling like another one of his medals; like a trophy. You're not that way, Pete. You're just wonderful the way you are. You wouldn't collect me like a trophy, would you? You wouldn't want to be a hero, would you?"

To these questions Pete gave a careful and considered, "No," and then he disengaged himself and took the brief case around to the other side of the plane. Tony Randall was coming out of the hatch and Pete shoved the case into his hands.

"This is all yours, Tony," he said. "You give this to the Major along with any story you can think of; it's your show. The credit's yours."

"Well, say, pal," Tony protested, "you had a hand in this. We're in this together; we shed blood." He touched the bulging nose. "It ain't every guy that can do this to me. Only you. And the Packers," he added proudly.

"That's all right," Pete said with quiet insistence. "It's still all yours. You take it and explain it to the Major. It's worth a Silver Star at least. Think of that."

"Say, Pete," Tony said with slow wonder. "You're a real pal. You're sure?"

"Definitely," Pete said.

"Well, if that's the way you want it," Tony Randall said and he shrugged.

Pete patted Tony's arm and they came around the plane and walked to the other side of the ship. As they came beyond the wing Pete failed to see the Major's slow, knowing smile as he caught sight of Pete's battered knuckles and Tony Randall's nose.

Pete had eyes for nothing just then except the bright spot of color in the crowd.



That boy knew this was his last run.

The No-Glory Patrol

By COLEMAN MEYER

Puttering alone out over the Gulf, listening to their engines cough, looking for wolf-pack subs, and thinking about sharks, they knew they could never be heroes.

SOMETIMES I WONDER IF THE Lord doesn't take a quiet pleasure in assembling his humans in the fashion of expensive perfumes; in containers of weird and variegated forms—with no hint of the contents until the stoppers have been removed.

Thinking back upon it now, I wonder if I'd have been able to guess the internal contents when I first met Kip Randolph and Bonzo Blake. Certainly, there was no external indication that the small, dumpy form of Bonzo Blake might have been rightfully labelled: "Hero — Grade A".

Had you been shopping for that grade you'd instinctively have chosen Kip Ran-

dolph. Kip was the External Ball-Carrier, all six good-looking feet of him. He had wavy blonde hair and a smile that produced marvellous results on women and reproduced marvellously in Rotogravure. The first I only surmised; the second I was sure of as all of the papers carried the story later.

As for Bonzo, hell! Just say it the short way—Bonzo wore thick glasses.

World War II was a discouraging affair when the pair of them winged their way out of a clear Texas sky and onto our little field in that fall of '42. The Japs were showing plenty of muscles and the Germans were showing plenty of submarines

and we were showing that it took an awful long time to sharpen up your fighting tools.

It was this lack of fighting tools that occasioned our tiny, humble airbase at Brownsville. It wasn't a base of dashing cap-dented airmen, the "Tallyho!" and "Bandits at four o'clock!" type. Nor was it a base of six-gunned fighters or bulb-snouted bombers.

It was just an airfield peopled with tired little guys who flew tiny, unarmed airplanes hundreds of weary miles over the vast, unfriendly Gulf of Mexico, ever-watching shepherds over the white wakes below. Some of the wakes were bulging tankers, steeped to the brim with the hi-octane that kept Britain's pulsing heart alive. The others were enemy submarines.

We were Civil Air Patrol, step-child of an Army that had neither the men nor the planes for this job of keeping the tankers on top by keeping the submarines on the bottom; the military branch of final refuge for every guy who couldn't pass an Air Force physical—the under-weight and the over-age. The possessors of the lower blood counts and the upper dental plates. And we cared not.

Our guys might have been short on breath but they were long on patriotism.

THAT'S why I surveyed the pair in surprise, from over my desk in the tiny Base Operations office. I had watched their landing from the window and, as I learned later, their arrival patterns were as characteristic as their fingerprints.

The tiny silver Luscombe had Immelmanned over the field, then split-S'ed out to land crosswind in a brisk twenty-five mile breeze. The other was a Stinson that cautiously picked the cross runway, tiptoed gently down—and had then blown a tire when a wind gust ground-looped it.

"Lieutenants Randolph and Blake reporting, sir."

I knew it was Kip Randolph talking. He was just built that way. For this pair he would always do the talking. He was big-shouldered and open-collared. And his cap was correctly dented.

The little dumpy guy alongside of him wore a tie and a red face. His eyes looked

enormous through thick glasses as his red face parted to say, "Sorry about that landing, sir. I guess I just picked up a gust—"

"Never mind the landing, Lieutenant," I said. "That's not the first tire that's been blown on this field. You're Blake, of course?" I didn't wait for his assenting nod before I turned my attention back to the big blonde youngster. "Glad to have you with us, men. Incidentally, Randolph, I think we can dispense with half rolls inside the traffic pattern. It's assumed you know how to fly."

Randolph murmured a conventional, unabashed apology.

I couldn't help letting my surprised glance range over his husky frame. We didn't get them like that here. The single gold bar on his collar seemed proper but it seemed like Air Force wings belonged where the silver wings with the tiny, three-bladed propellor were fastened. My unspoken question communicated itself.

"I've got a bad knee—from football, sir," he blurted out. "They tell me I'll have a waiver from Washington in a few months. In the meanwhile I thought I'd fly around down here for a while. They tell me it's a lazy life in the sun."

My shocked glare didn't make a dent in his armor of assurance.

"I'll give you a short briefing," I said. "You'll get all the technical details tomorrow but to sum it up, it's this; the armed forces are trying to stretch an airforce not large enough for Lake Michigan, over seven oceans. It won't fit. That's why *we're* here, pinch-hitting and doing what we can with what we have. It's just a matter of flying and looking and talking. The flying is to look, the looking is for submarines and the talking is for radio in case you find one."

"How far—" Bonzo Blake began when Randolph finished the sentence for him without apology or leave—just as though it was a natural thing. "How far out to sea, sir?"

I looked at him sharply. Blake subsided his question, in fact didn't even seem conscious that it had been usurped. Mentally I shrugged. "It's a grid search pattern," I replied. "They'll show you how it's done

tomorrow. But it's nearly maximum range for light aircraft so be sharp on your navigation and watch your fuel. It's a hell of a long swim with only an automobile inner tube for company."

"You mean, sir—" Kip Randolph said in a shocked voice. "There are *no* rubber boats?"

"No boats," I nodded with a little grim relish in his slight perturbation. "And not only no boats—there are no Mae Wests. All you have is an engine and your faith in God. If the first fails the second is a comfort. If you see a submarine, radio back to Base. We've one converted bomber that's always alerted. He can reach you in thirty minutes. It's his job to take care of the sub."

Then I added a little fiercely: "And don't call him unless you've really got something. He has a whole coast to take care of."

"You mean, sir—we have no bombs?" Randolph's voice was hollow incredulity.

"Not even a flit gun," I assented cheerily. "But don't let it bother you. We never see anything anyhow—and it's warm in the sun!"

TWO weeks later both Blake and Randolph were veterans—as weary as the rest of us. They were weary from too many air hours and they both had the tiny furrow of perplexity on the brows that marked the Gulf pilot—that wonderment as to just when a coughing engine was going to let you see how good you were with an inner tube and a shark knife.

I was even more perplexed.

They were the oddest team I had ever seen, an inseparable and well-adjusted pair, but it seemed like Randolph did all the talking and most of the thinking. I don't mean that Blake was a dummy; he had a Phi Beta key and was a graduate engineering student. It was just that he seemed content to act as Kip Randolph's personal shadow, voiceless and ever-present. And seemed quite unconscious of such things as personal glory and individual recognition.

Kip was the ebullient extrovert. Not fat-headed in offensive fashion; rather it was just a serene assurance. He made

flat statements that indicated he knew everything about everything. Then he'd proceed to prove it, like the time he wasn't satisfied with the ground crews top overhaul job on his engine. Somebody suggested he take over if he was so damn good. He did. And did the job in half the regular time and it ran about twice as good. And he flew like the airplane was strapped on him.

Blake was merely shy and huge-eyed behind the beer-bottle glasses. He flew all right—it was just that he was unlucky. Everything happened to Blake. Let someone leave a wheel chock on the parking strip—it was Bonzo who ran into it and nosed over.

Let the weather close in and it would be Bonzo whose chart flew out an open window and it was Bonzo the search party would be looking for. Kip came home in instrument weather without instruments and hit it right on the nose.

But, when it came to getting details taken care of, it was Bonzo who earned the ungrudging respect, right from the ground crew up; the line men had a little in parts—only much in enthusiasm. The parts were on Army "requisition" somewhere. And enthusiasm is a hollow substitute for a non-available wrist-pin. Bonzo's engineering brain and his shyly-proffered ingenuity kept stuff in the air that theoretically should not have flown.

Naturally it was Randolph who would hit the paydirt, even though they flew as a team on the long patrols. I was in Base Operations when the speaker overhead burst forth with an engine and a voice.

"Red Base from Red Eleven. Red Base from Red Eleven . . ."

—Eleven . . . go ahead."

Kip's voice was calm, unhurried and precise. As though seeing a submarine was an ordinary thing. He gave a position. ". . . He's at periscope depth and I don't think he's seen me." Then, formulating his plan of battle quite expertly: "He's heading toward a tanker. They should close to torpedo range in half an hour—maybe less. Tell the bomber to come in at 190°. He'll make it nicely if he hurries."

Then he called Bonzo who was flying on his wing. "I'll stick with the sub. Beat

it over to the tanker and put a message drop on the deck. Give them a new course heading to keep them away from the sub until the bomber can get here."

We swung into action at the base and the radio splattered code for bomber clearance. All we could do after that was wait.

It was perhaps fifteen minutes later when Randolph's voice hit the air again, this time in agitation. "... That damn fool tanker's turned on the wrong course! He's heading right into the sub's path. They're closing at double speed! Red Nine from Red Eleven" Red Nine was Bonzo's plane. There was no answer.

After a few despairing minutes he called Base. "... I've got to leave the sub! I can't raise Blake. I'll have to get over to the tanker"

The pigboat had submerged and there was nothing to see or shoot at by the time the bomber arrived. Four hours later the tanker was stalked down, and on the bottom of the Gulf.

WE GOT the story from what was left of the tanker's crew after they were picked up. Bonzo had flown some twenty hasty miles wide open and just over the wave tops on his way to the tanker. It had to be a message drop. The tankers didn't guard our aircraft radio frequencies.

It was so rough down low his earphones slid off and he didn't bother to slip them back on. His meticulous engineering brain rebelled against simple instructions like "Submarine—turn south!" Instead he had plotted a new heading and gave them a course in degrees. It's easy to add or subtract wrong when you're working from zero to three sixty, especially when the heat's on. Then, by the time he'd made a few tight turns over the tanker and kept circling wider to shepherd them he'd lost all sense of direction. So his course led them into the sub instead of away.

It takes time to tell whether a ship is going to or from you so by the time Kip was aware that the tanker was approaching the whole deal was fouled up.

Blake wanted to resign, commit suicide,

be shot or almost anything. None of the alternatives were satisfactory; he couldn't resign, suicide was against regulations, we didn't have anything to shoot people with and anyhow, we needed pilots. "Relax," I advised "There's nothing we can do about it. If we weren't here the tanker would have gotten knocked off anyhow."

"Maybe so," he agreed with stubborn reluctance. Then he made one of the few positive statements he had made since I'd known him—owl-eyes serious behind the thick lenses. "But I can tell you this, Captain; there'll never be another sub get away—if we see one."

Luck ran with Kip. He was just that way. On the second patrol following he picked up another sub and drove it down by the sheer bluff of an aircraft overhead. The tanker crew confirmed it and scrawled a big "THANKS" on the deck.

That did it. Seeing two subs and driving one of them off was quite a bit of glory for our little sector of this war. He bought another cap two sizes larger and now he seemed to consider Bonzo a personal affront—as though the unhappy, dumpy little guy had robbed him of a greater share of glory.

Bonzo still trailed in his shadow, a disconsolate, tubby little shadow who didn't know what to do to make amends.

I didn't realize just how far the thing had gone until I happened in on Randolph lecturing Virgil Hansen, the line-crew chief. "... And, as a last resort—if the sub was getting away—you could always crash-dive if you had to. A thousand pounds of airplane doing about 150 should mess up something—"

Virg had a sour face as he bumped into me around the hangar corner. He spat eloquently. "Mind if we requisition a shovel, Captain?" he asked.

"For . . ." I invited innocently.

"The joints getting so damn full of heroes we oughta have something to bury 'em with!"

A COUPLE of days after that I strolled over to the parking strip to find Bonzo inspecting the landing gear of the Stinson. Something about the size of a five-gallon can, with a crude nose and

equally crude fins, was hanging between the wheels.

"And what are you going to do with that?" I inquired.

"I'm not sure," he confessed seriously. "Maybe I can tell after a few more runs. Perhaps if I can find a way to dump it in some predetermined spot it might work."

"What happens then?"

"It's gasoline, sir. A five gallon can with fins to keep it falling straight. I'm trying some taped strips on the windshield now for a kind of a sight. You see, sir—one of these days these sub guys are gonna learn that we're about as harmless as a housefly. Maybe they know it already."

Kip Randolph sauntered close. He was openly scornful as befitted a veteran of two submarines. "You don't need that junk, Bonzo," he said with a scornful wave of hand.

"Maybe not," Blake admitted with full consideration for the weight of Kip's opinion. "Maybe not."

"If you can't drive 'em down—crash 'em!" Kip offered grandiloquently. He strolled away.

Bonzo's eyes followed him a little wistfully. "He's a hell of a great guy all right," he murmured. "Captain," he added softly. "I know Kip's a little browned off—about me, I mean. He ever ask you for another wing man?"

"Well," I temporized uncomfortably. Then I continued brusquely: "Can't make any crew changes—can't make any changes. We simply haven't the men." And let it go at that.

Right at that time we developed a man and equipment shortage. The Gulf Patrol wasn't all "flying in the sun." We lost two airplanes in the drink. Two more collided. The next patrol found us short so I decided to substitute as observer with Kip and have Bonzo fly solo as wingman.

We left the base on a 160° leg and bored out over the empty Gulf. I fell to musing after the first hour of lonely water and vacant sky. Randolph had the Luscombe trimmed out and was flying with just a toe on the rudder. Bonzo, in the Stinson, was formationed a hundred feet to the right and I noticed that his landing gear held one of the clumsy, finned cans.

Perhaps you haven't been a hundred miles to sea in a tiny, single-engined land plane. I have—many times. There's nothing much to do except sit there and listen to the engine develop noises.

Mechanically I checked the course computer and the stop watch. Getting lost is as bad as an engine that quits. Then the earphones crackled. I looked toward Bonzo. He was sheering off, bellowing into the microphone and wagging wings as he did so.

My eyes caught the sight before my ears absorbed his message—a fat, sleek, semi-submerged shape that patterned the waters below. And a stain of smoke on the horizon that would be a tanker.

KIP instantly eased the throttle, dropped right down on the water. It was Bonzo who had spotted the sub but it was Kip who automatically assumed command, fingers on the microphone button as he called Base and snapped out a position report. Hastily I fumbled through the chart, calculated distances. "The bomber might make it," I shouted. "It'll be touch and go! The sub's surfaced at about eighteen knots. The tanker's closing at maybe eleven."

The answer from Red Base was like a physical blow. "... Bomber out on east run!"

The reply hit all of our earphones simultaneously, Kip and I in the Luscombe and Bonzo in the Stinson. I looked at Kip grimly. Bonzo's voice started to cut in with a transmission when Kip cut him off, spoke roughly into the microphone: "—Shut up! Go on up high and get out of my way!" Then he firewalled the Luscombe. Ten feet off the water and wide open, we vibrated our way toward the surfaced submarine.

The crew was pouring out onto the deck. They weren't preparing to crash dive from the threat of aircraft. They were fitting machine guns into deck stanchions. I swore heartily. Evidently, as Bonzo had said, the word had been passed. They knew that we were about as deadly as a housefly.

Five hundred yards from the sleek form, lazy black things started hurtling back at our

tiny silver plane. I couldn't help but duck; tracer didn't look any different now than it had twenty years ago when I was ducking it in a Spad.

Kip was ruddering a twisting course as best he could. I heard a couple of zinnings! Then I heard a lot of them. The Luscombe shuddered momentarily. Kip pulled up and away in a tight, seat-squashing turn. In an instant we were out of range. I looked at him, shrugged. What the hell—we might as well go home. We didn't have so much as a pop bottle to throw.

The tanker was more than a stain of smoke now. It was a rapidly shaping blot. Bonzo's Stinson was fairly high, circling about in obedience to Kip's barked command. The Luscombe seat-squashed in another turn as it headed toward the tanker. "Get a message drop ready!" Kip shouted. "I'll try them by radio but I know they won't be guarding this frequency. Tell them to turn away from the sub!"

I shook my head. "It's a waste of time," I bawled. "The sub'll stern-chase him down in an hour anyhow!" His involuntary tug at the stick sent the Luscombe jumping skyward and furnished assent for my shouted observation. I looked at him from the corner of my eyes. "So now—what?" I bellowed. "You knew all the answers—when we were around the hangar."

His lips tightened into a grim line as he returned my glance. "Okay," he said. "so I knew all the answers." He shoved the stick forward, the nose dropped and the Luscombe dove for the submarine. I couldn't restrain an involuntary movement for the controls. Then I sank back. What the hell—I'm pushing fifty. Besides nobody lives forever.

Bonzo's pleading voice filled the ear-phones as we started the dive. "Kip! Don't be a fool! You'll never make it—" I'd almost forgotten the circling Stinson, high overhead.

The wing panels were shaking. The fuselage was shuddering. The engine was making a hell of a racket. And it was like running into the stream from a garden hose.

The tiny men on the undersea-boat deck

grew with frightening rapidity. The tiny black blobs of tracer became clouds that looked like buckshot as twin-gun sets spewed an open-throated tunnel into which our tiny plane was rushing. Instinctively I threw my hand in front of my face.

Then the wing-tips bowed out a foot as Kip wrenched the little plane into a crushing 180° turn. It was still shaking when we flew out of range. I was still shaking too. And when I looked at Kip he wasn't much better. He shook his head, said through frozen lips: "I must have been talking pretty wild about crash-diving. Hell! They'll blow this box kite apart before we get within two blocks of them!"

Bonzo's voice tin-tinned the phones. "You guys all right—you all right?" he called anxiously. I looked at what I could see of the Luscombe, assessed the holes, cautiously replied that it looked so. "Well" he continued. "What do we do now?"

Kip took the microphone from me for reply. "I guess—nothing," he answered in a voice that was suddenly humble. "There doesn't seem to be anything we can do . . . unless you have a plan. If so—you're in command!"

THERE was an instant of awed silence from the circling Stinson. Kip passed the talker back to me just as the ear-phones spoke again, this time a little incredulously. "You mean it?" My curt, brief "Roger, over!" was hardly completed before the phones were spilling scratchy short wave tones as Bonzo, a new Bonzo who spoke with something almost like authority, sketched his outline. ". . . And if you think you can stand another run, come in flat and low. Keep the guys with the guns offa me for just a moment. Long enough for me to drop this can of gas. I think I can make it right down the hatch from a straight dive."

I thought of that leaden hail from the submarine deck. "And what good will that do?" I countered.

"Maybe none," he came back equably. "You know of a better idea? In another fifteen minutes they'll be close enough to go to work on the tanker."

I took a look back at the tanker. It seemed to be coming up as fast as a PBY.

"All right," I radioed doubtfully. "One run only. I don't mind a fight with some tools but we don't belong here."

"Na-ah," he negated. "Two. Two runs. I'll have to try and light the stuff on the second run. I got a flare gun here I can use . . ."

I looked at Kip. His lips tightened. He nodded. And the Luscombe dove for the wave tops with the engine wide open. Straight above the sub I saw the Stinson tighten up his tiny circle. And from the sub deck the little black blobs were thin, short threads; level, horizontal threads; short of range but pointed in our direction as the gun crews got oriented.

It seemed like a movie film in slow motion. In thirty seconds they were thicker threads. In forty-five seconds they were the apex of a "V" that was very close. And then it was though we ran into a stone wall.

I guess everything happened together; my earphones squalling with Bonzo's voice—" . . . Hold it for a second longer, guys!" then a giant flail that clutched and shuddered the Luscombe. And then an airplane nose that simply disintegrated.

It was probably the prop that flew apart. The engine, relieved of load, blew into nothingness. The tail smacked into the water at the sudden center of gravity change. It slowed the ship with belt-wrenching abruptness. Then the wheels hit and it flipped slowly on its back.

My jerk at the emergency cable on the door release was as automatic a reflex as my grab for the inner tube. A wing plunged under, spilled me out the door. I damn near strangled on the cord from the earphones before I ripped it free, took gallons of water and suddenly popped to the surface. In another instant Kip was bobbing alongside me.

Somehow I emerged looking the right way, at the black shape of the undersea boat, at the still tight-circling Stinson. And then the water about us was beaten to froth.

The deck-gun crew had merely lowered sights. I shouted to Kip, paddled frantically for the shielding protection of the Luscombe. It sank before I had taken

the second stroke. Suddenly I felt very naked and alone.

The froth was in short bursts. Then I realized why; we were clay pigeons in the choppy waters of the Gulf, short bursts as our heads bobbed, each burst closer. It couldn't last long. I had to fight against closing my eyes. Then Kip shouted: "My God!" I twisted my head for better vision.

The Stinson was a blue, diving line, tail straight up and nose lined for the conning tower. Even at this distance the noise was reaching; the scream of wind and whirling prop, the anguished screech of an engine that had gone clear off the tachometer table.

I waited for the clumsy bomb to drop. Held breath. Wondered why the wings didn't pull off. The gun crews shifted frantically from their level pot shooting, endeavored to pivot completely around and change their shooting angle . . .

And then I knew there was going to be no bomb. That the boy with the thick-eye-glasses had the stabilizer rolled all the way forward and was holding heavy forward pressure on the wheel. And that he knew there could be no second run.

WE watched the submarine die from the deck of the tanker that picked us up. It was a long and agonizing process, black smoke pouring from the angular conning tower, at times obscuring the twisted metal framework that had once been an airplane.

After a while there was a brilliant flash. A later hollow rumble shook the air. Then a portion of pointed nose upended to the sky, hung there.

"Her torpedoes, I guess—" the tanker captain began.

I didn't hear him out. I was looking at Kip. His covering blanket had been cast off, had fallen to the deck. Sodden, bloody about the face from the crash, unkempt, he was facing the pall of smoke and pointed nose. And he was standing to attention, arm in rigid salute.

"I guess," I murmured to the mystified captain. "The Lord knew what he was doing when he assembled his humans—"

Snatch One Flat-Top

By HANK SEARLS

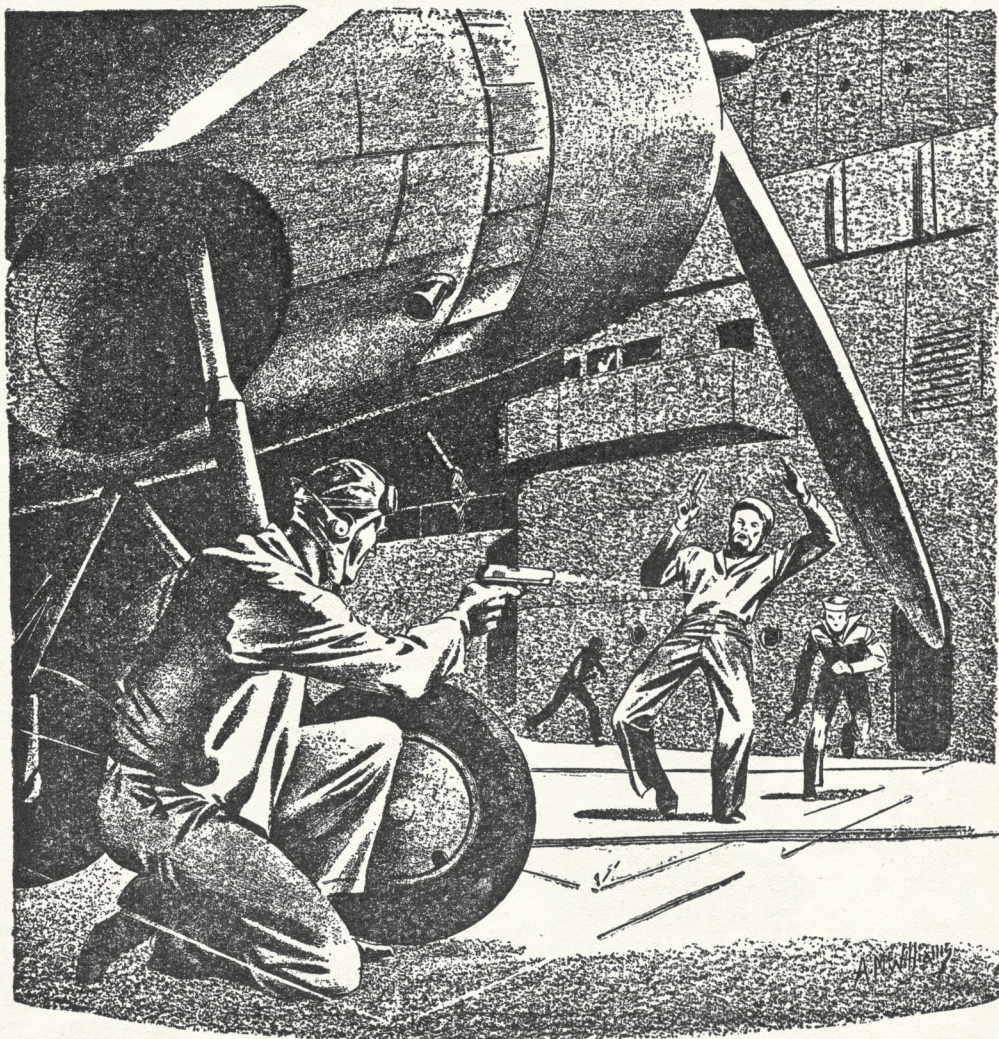
The Japs had it soft. All they had to take were Windy Doyle's bullets.
But his squadron-mates had to hear his stories.

WINDY DOYLE RODE HIS bucking Hellcat through another burst of flak. He grinned at his sweating wingman and picked up the mike.

"Yellow Two, this is Windy Doyle, Terror of Tarawa, Panther of the Pacific, Scourge of the Slopeheads. How about one more run?"

Another ugly black puff appeared between the two planes. Static crackled in Windy's headset.

"Yellow One from Yellow Two—one more run, hell. I'm not gettin' creamed so you can have a new sea story to tell. Get another straight man for your next act. Over and out!"



Windy let him get a step closer and then squeezed off a round.

The wingman blew a kiss and peeled off for home, shaking his head in disgust. Windy smiled sadly at the altimeter.

"Don't know what's wrong with these young fellows nowadays," he said. "Seems like nobody wants to be a hero any more. All that bullet bait down there and everybody picks up and goes home. Mind if I make just one more run?"

The altimeter didn't answer. Windy rolled the Hellcat into half a split S and dove for the Jap picket boats.

Halfway through his screaming dive he began to wish he'd stayed in his bunk that morning. Flak was thick enough to walk on. The stubby Hellcat shuddered and balked and bored on in. Windy banked toward a Jap can and chuckled as he saw the bridge loaded with Jap officers in whites. He gave them a burst, grinned cheerfully as they scattered, and slow-rolled mischievously over the ship. He horsed back on the stick and climbed like a lovesick bee, throttle to the firewall. Angry flak followed him all the way up to ten thousand. He waved goodbye to the Jap pickets and reached absently for his chart board. He plotted his course back to the carrier and leaned out his mixture.

Windy Doyle, by his own admission the hottest pilot in the Pacific, was on his way home with another tale of daring on the high seas.

Because Windy was bored now, he sang as he flashed through the deepening twilight. Because he was Windy Doyle, he began to rock his wings in time with his singing. Because he rocked his wings, he got lost. It could only have happened to Windy.

When finally Windy glanced at his clock he found that he was five minutes past his ETA. He peered anxiously into the gloom below. There were whitecaps as far as the eye could reach, but no carrier, no destroyers, nothing but water. He circled and scratched his head.

"It ain't that I care about myself," he told no one in particular, "It's all those poor boys in that task force getting lost. Also, I could use some dinner."

It was darker now, but a pale moon was rising. Ten thousand feet below, Windy could see phosphorescent streaks. He

thought of sharks and decided to fly back along his course. He looked at his fuel gauge and shuddered.

"Mrs. Doyle's little boy seems to be about to go for a moonlight swim," he muttered. "I hope those sharks have eaten."

FOR half an hour Windy droned along through the night, searching the horizon. He had almost decided to ditch when he spotted an orange glow lighting up the sky to the south. He banked toward it. The glow grew brighter and finally he saw the carrier. From ten thousand feet she was a dim mass knifing through dark waters, her wake gleaming in the moonlight. She had been hit. Flames leaped from her hangar deck and outlined her island structure, but the flight deck seemed usable.

"Fine thing," muttered Windy. "The minute I leave, somebody sets fire to the old homestead. And no insurance, either."

He circled the carrier and throttled back. Then he saw them—dim shadows moving in the landing circle below, waiting their turn to land.

"A helluva time for the night fighters to be landing," he growled, "With poor old Windy damn near out of gas."

Gliding gently down to five hundred feet, he entered the pattern behind the last plane. He dropped his gear, lowered his flaps, and shoved his prop into high RPM. As the blue exhaust of the plane ahead passed over the fantail and jerked to a stop, Windy banked toward the ship and found the LSO's gleaming wands.

He got a roger at first, then seemed to get a high. Something about the way the LSO was handling the wands confused him, and he had a premonition of danger. He shrugged it off. "This is what I get for making like a night fighter," he thought, and tried to concentrate on the signals.

He dragged it up the groove—tail low, nose high above the star-studded horizon, airspeed close to stalling. He nursed the staggering Hellcat along, closer and closer to the moving wands.

Suddenly, it happened. Still four hundred feet astern of the speeding carrier, he saw the wands hesitate, wave frantically, and disappear. Then there was nothing

ahead but a red glow from the hangar deck of the darkened ship.

Windy quietly discussed with himself the parentage of an LSO who would desert a plane in the groove, and gave it the gun for a waveoff. The straining engine missed, caught, coughed, and roared back into life.

"Wave-off, hell," murmured Windy. "Here comes Nighthawk Doyle, ready or not."

He shook off his feeling of danger and got ready to take a cut. He was low, he saw suddenly. The dark stern loomed closer and he poured on the coal. The Hellcat took it and climbed ten feet, clearing the fantail by a good six inches. He horsed back on the stick and cut the gun. The plane stalled to the deck, the tail hook grabbed, and he rolled to an even stop. He was down, he reflected. Now to get ahold of that LSO. He unhooked his straps and pulled himself half out of the cockpit. Suddenly he froze.

Something was wrong. For a moment the moonlit flight deck seemed deserted. Then shadowy figures began to pour from the base island structure wildly shouting figures, madly waving toward him. A shot rang out and a slug whined over his head into the night.

"What the hell" began Windy, ducking back into the cockpit. Then slowly the paralyzing truth pounded through his brain.

It wasn't his carrier!

FROM that moment on, it was as if he were watching himself, without much interest, from a great distance. He found himself tearing at his service automatic, cocking it, and putting a .45 slug through his radio gear. Then he dove over the far side of the cockpit and rolled off the wing. He scrambled under the plane and squatted behind the starboard wheel.

He quickly took stock. Japs still poured from the skinny island structure and, as he watched, someone opened up with a 20 mm. from the bridge. He could hear shrapnel tear into the plane and ricochet off the steel deck.

One Jap, sprinting across the deck, was fifteen yards from the plane now, firing hysterically at the cockpit. Windy let him

get a step closer and squeezed off a round.

The Jap took it in the belly, amazement all over his sallow face. He folded, rolled under the plane like a ball, groaned once and was still.

The main group of Japs hesitated. Windy fired three shots into their midst. One dropped and the rest raced back to the shelter of the island.

Flame from the twenty on the bridge was still stabbing through the darkness. Windy threw a couple of slugs in that direction, then sprinted away from the plane and the island, keeping low. He reached the port side of the flight deck and dropped into a gun tub. Luckily it was empty.

He crouched in the shadows and changed magazines, breathing heavily. He rested a moment, trying to plan ahead. Methodically he figured the odds.

The logical thing to do, he decided, would be to drop quietly over the side, trust to his inflatable life vest, and hope that the American ships would be along. The damaged Jap, an old *Kaga* class carrier, was really logging knots. It seemed possible that the whole U.S. Fleet was on her tail. If so, he at least had a chance.

He was about to hoist himself out of the gun tub and drop to the churning waters below, when the idea took hold. He tried to shove it back into obscurity, but it bobbed to the surface of his mind like a cork.

"Come on, Windy," he whispered to himself, "you know better than that. Why get yourself killed? What'll the women do Stateside? Holy smoke, though, what a story it'd make!"

He reflected a moment and shook his head. Suddenly he heard voices in the next gun tub, voices of excited men, chattering gibberish like angry monkeys. He shrank back into the shadows and inched his way out of the gun tub. He crawled down a ladder and along the catwalk. Three feet above his head he could hear shouts. Feet scampered along the flight deck. The Japs were buzzing like a swarm of angry bees. "You'd think I hadn't been invited," thought Windy. "If they didn't want me, why didn't they say so?"

Farther down the flight deck he found

an open hatch. Through it came smoke and a ruddy glow from the burning hangar deck. He crawled to the edge and looked down.

All was confusion below. Jap fire fighters were battling flames down half the length of the deck; officers were shouting orders. Windy heard the Nip squawk-box begin a high-pitched sing-song. There was silence. Then the agitation on the hangar deck increased.

"Well," muttered Windy, "Everybody on the ship knows I'm aboard now. And this is no place to make their acquaintance."

He saw that the ladder below led down into smoke. Taking a deep breath, he swung his legs through the hatch and started down. The metal rungs grew hotter and the smoke grew thicker. He gasped and choked. Twenty feet down he had to let go and drop. He shot through smoke-filled darkness, finally hit and crumpled to the deck. He struggled to his feet and lurched toward a smoking bulkhead.

Through the flames he could see dim figures wielding hoses and sprays. He sidled down the bulkhead to starboard.

All at once he was out of the smoke, face to face with a startled Jap seaman playing a hose. The Jap opened his mouth to yell. Windy stepped swiftly forward, there was a flash of blue gun metal and a sound of crunching bone, and the Jap sagged to the deck.

Windy stepped over the prostrate body and felt his way through the smoke. It cleared for a moment and he took his bearings. In the starboard bulkhead was a door. Doors, Windy reflected, lead to ladders. And one ladder on this tub must lead to the bridge. He sprinted across the cleared space, fumbled with the latch, and was through.

STEPS led upward. Windy took them three at a time, blood pounding in his ears. At the flight deck level he heard voices above. He melted into the shadows under the steps and waited.

A pair of Jap legs in officer's white trousers marched down the ladder. Windy had a crazy desire to grab them, pull, and watch the fun. He fought it back. The

Jap strode out on the flight deck and Windy swung up the steps.

Thirty feet farther up he came to another door. Cautiously he pushed it open. It creaked and he stopped. He laid his eye to the crack.

Moonlight bathed the scene outside. It was the bridge, all right, and inboard was the darkened pilot-house. Above the creaking of the old carrier's superstructure Windy could hear the quiet voice of a Jap in the pilot-house, evidently the OOD conning the ship.

Windy crept to the pilot-house door. Deep within him he felt his bowels tighten. He checked the safety on his .45 and loosened his life-vest flashlight. Then he quietly swung open the door and stepped in. He closed the door and waited for his eyes to become accustomed to the gloomy green light from the binnacle.

There were four Japs in the pilot-house, each intent on his job. One stood by the engine-room telegraph, another had the wheel. Behind the helmsman stood an officer, his whites standing out in the darkness. In the darkness to starboard another officer sat on a high bridge stool, peering out at the moon-bathed waters.

The officer on the chair said something in a low voice. The other officer repeated it and the helmsman corrected his course. Windy leaned against the after bulkhead and nonchalantly crossed his legs. He flicked on his flashlight.

Four startled yellow faces swung around. With an exclamation the Jap on the stool lunged forward.

"Hold it, Tojo," Windy barked. The Jap yelled and kept coming. A shot reverberated in the tiny compartment. The Jap screamed and dropped.

"Anybody else?" inquired Windy pleasantly.

The three Nips stood as if frozen.

"Okay, slopeheads, who speaks da English?"

The Japs were silent, but Windy thought he caught a momentary gleam in the officer's eye. He decided to bluff.

"All right. I'm counting to five. If you guys aren't out of here by the count of five I start shootin'. Comprenez vous?"

The Japs stared stupidly.

"One . . ." Windy began slowly, "two . . . three . . ."

Beads of sweat broke out on the officer's forehead.

"Four . . ."

WITH a grunt the officer broke for the door. Windy stepped forward and held out an arm.

"Well, buddy, you learned American awful quick. Now stay where you are."

The Jap stopped, hate and fear gleaming from behind his thick glasses.

"Okay, short and ugly. Get this. You're takin' orders from me now. First time I notice anything funny, you get the same medicine I gave your skipper. Understand?"

The Jap nodded sullenly.

"First, get on your loud speaker and pass the word that the American pilot has been shot. Then tell all hands to keep clear of the bridge. If anybody comes up here for the next hour you're gonna be meetin' your ancestors. Savvy?"

The Jap hesitated. Windy moved the gun slightly. The Nip stepped to a transmitter on the bulkhead and flipped a switch. He spoke for a few moments, his strange words booming up from the deck below. He stopped and glared at Windy.

"Don't forget to turn it off," said Windy patiently, "just so we won't be playing to a full house."

The Jap flushed and turned off the speaker.

"Okay. Now, admiral, suppose you show me your chart. Pronto!"

The Nip moved slowly to a table and pointed to a large scale map. Windy inspected it carefully for a moment.

"This us, here?" he asked, indicating a circle on the sheet. The Jap nodded.

"We're heading west, huh?" I see. And who's this behind us, pray tell?"

The Jap spoke for the first time. There was bitterness in his voice.

"It is the Yankee Fleet," he hissed.

"Well, what do you know about that? And it looks like it's about forty miles astern, right?"

"Yes," growled the Jap, "And we draw further away every moment, Yankee."

"Why, Tojo, this surprises me. Is this

any way to run a Navy? What would your ancestors say if they knew we were scooting for home just on account of a few battlewagons and carriers?"

The Jap flushed to an angry scarlet.

"They'd say," continued Windy, "turn and fight! Banzai! Blood for the Emperor!"

On the Jap's face hysteria fought with cowardice, and lost.

"So," concluded Windy, "we turn. Tell your helmsman to come due east."

The Nip's mouth dropped open. "Yankee pilot," he protested, "You are mad! That fleet would blow us out of the water. You would die too, Yankee!"

"Maybe, maybe not. Now, give that order!" Windy, his blue eyes cold as ice, indicated the helmsman with his gun.

The officer spoke. The helmsman hesitated, glanced at the forty-five, and swung the wheel to starboard. Windy let his gaze wander to the east, and his eyes held a silent plea for speed.

FORTY miles east, far beyond Windy's sight, massive ghost-like shapes moved over the dark swells of the Phillipine Sea. A giant task force was tracking a crippled carrier to her lair. Slowed down by its huge battlewagons, the force still logged well over twenty knots.

On the moonlit bridge of the largest carrier in the group, a grey haired old Navy pilot, admiral of the force, paced impatiently. He turned to the carrier's skipper. With the scorn of the flying Navy man for surface vessels he growled:

"That Jap's ahead of us, crippled, and on the lam. But you think these battle-ships got another knot in them? Hell, no! That flat-top will be holed up in Leyte Gulf two hours before we can launch our dawn strike!"

The skipper nodded sadly.

"Yes, sir," he agreed, "Looks that way. Thought we had her sunk this afternoon. Too bad. Well, we haven't done badly today, even if the carrier gets away. The afternoon strike sunk one Jap can, strafed two others and damaged them."

"Good stuff! Any casualties?"

The skipper's face clouded.

"Yes, sir—Doyle's missing. Made one

run too many, it seems. Too bad. A good man."

"Windy Doyle? The hot pilot with all the sea stories? That's *really* too bad. Always liked him. Never believed a word he said, though," reflected the admiral.

Thirty miles west, the hot pilot with all the sea stories was doing some tall figuring. Glancing at his watch occasionally, he tried to control his impatience. He checked his life vest for leaks, dug a whistle and flare out of the survival pocket, and waited.

"Brother," he thought, "if the first salvo from those battlewagons hits this tub, it's really gonna be taps for Windy. And there ain't gonna be no story for the boys!"

Thirty minutes had passed since the turn now. The American force should be just over the horizon. It was almost time. Windy nudged the Jap Officer with the barrel of the Colt.

"Okay, sonny. One more favor for teacher and you're all through. Turn on our running lights—turn on our truck lights—turn on every light on the ship! In other words, make like Christmas Eve."

The Jap stood aghast, then shuffled dully to a switch panel and obeyed. Lights began to flick on all over the ship.

"Good boy," remarked Windy, "I'll bet you were a whiz on the Tokyo pinball circuit."

Twenty miles east the grey-haired admiral stopped pacing the bridge and stiffened like a wise old bird-dog. Just over the western horizon was a glow, and something else. The admiral gaped incredulously. There they were—running lights—truck lights—the whole works! A carrier lit up like a Christmas Tree!

"Sound general quarters," he shouted, and raced for his tin hat.

In the Jap pilot-house Windy waited with the sweating Nips. He could feel their tension rising, and wondered how long the fear of a .45 slug could compete with the fear of a sixteen-inch shell.

Suddenly the eastern sky burst into flame. Gunfire flashed like lightning in a semicircle half way around the horizon. Over the Jap carrier the first sixteen-inch salvo wailed and landed, kicking up half a ton of water.

Windy grinned at the cowering Japs. "So long," he said. "Have fun." He ducked through the door as the second salvo screamed out of the starry night. Roaring like a runaway express, it hit aft. The concussion staggered Windy, but he kept his feet and dove over the rail. Wind whistled in his ears as he hurtled downward. Then he knifed cleanly into the dark, warm waters. Above him the carrier loomed ponderously, dirty red flame breathing from her ports. She passed him, still headed for the task force. Windy inflated his vest, stuck his whistle in his mouth, and tooted it happily.

AN HOUR later an excited destroyer lookout paused in his account of the battle of the crazy carrier long enough to spot Windy's flare, his flashlight, his dye marker, and even to hear his whistle. Three hours after that, in the cool Pacific dawn, the destroyer gave Windy back to the carrier, and received in return five gallons of ice cream—a bargain, according to the destroyer crew.

As Windy stepped out of the breeches buoy he was surrounded by tanned squadron mates.

"Glad you got back, Windy. Tell us all about it."

"This one better be good, Windy. You missed morning quarters."

"Tell us what happened, Windy. We've got all week."

Windy favored them with a cool grin. "Okay, you guys. Just for that, I tell nobody nothin'. This story's too big anyway. This one goes to the admiral."

"Come on, Windy. You made one more run on the can, and then what happened? Run out of gas? It don't have to be true, just good."

Windy shook his head and started for the bridge. One lieutenant-commander, one captain, and one marine orderly later he was in the admiral's stateroom, face to face with the old seadog himself. The admiral looked up from the papers on his desk and smiled.

"Well, Mr. Doyle, glad to see you back. Sit down. What can I do for you?"

"Thought you might be interested in what went on yesterday, sir. I . . ."

"I have a full report of yesterday's strike, Mr. Doyle. If you have anything to add, give it to your ACI officer."

"Well, Admiral, this is different. Frankly, I don't think he'd credit the story. I . . ."

"Look, Mr. Doyle. I've heard of your . . . er . . . stories before. Very interesting experiences you have. I'd like to hear this one, some time. However, I'm pretty busy now. As you've heard, last night a crippled Jap carrier, with every chance of escaping us, turned and steamed right into our formation. With her lights on! Mr. Doyle, those Japs aren't dummies. There's some significance behind that—I'm trying to find out what it is."

Windy's heart sank.

"But, sir . . ."

"Some other time, Mr. Doyle. Some other time." The admiral turned back to his papers.

WINDY opened his mouth to speak. Suddenly laughter welled up within him. He fought it, unsuccessfully. He roared until tears came to his eyes.

"Mr. Doyle, what do you find so funny?" snapped the admiral, looking up.

"Nothing, sir," Windy gasped, rising to leave. "Nothing at all. Just thought of some possibilities on that Jap carrier, that's all."

"Well, what are they?" asked the admiral impatiently.

"There are lots of possibilities, sir. One: maybe they were advertising a fire sale. Two: maybe they wanted a fourth at bridge. Three: maybe . . ."

Windy was at the door now. He saw that the admiral was on the verge of apoplexy and cut it short.

"Well, good day, sir. Hope you figure it out."

Quietly he closed the door and left.

FIVE POLIO PRECAUTIONS ARE LISTED FOR PARENTS

Warning that the 1949 polio season is "just around the corner," the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis today issued a list of precautionary measures to be observed by those in charge of children during the epidemic danger period which usually runs from May through October, reaching its peak during the hot, mid-summer months. The five easy-to-follow health rules for children are:

1. Avoid crowds and places where close contact with other persons is likely.
2. Avoid over-fatigue caused by too active play or exercise, or irregular hours.
3. Avoid swimming in polluted water. Use only beaches or public pools declared safe by local health authorities.
4. Avoid sudden chilling. Remove wet shoes and clothing at once and keep extra blankets and heavier clothing handy for sudden weather changes.
5. Observe the golden rule of personal cleanliness. Keep food



tightly covered and safe from flies or other insects. Garbage should be tightly covered and, if other disposal facilities are lacking, it should be buried or burned.

The National Foundation also listed the following symptoms of infantile paralysis: headache, nausea or upset stomach, muscle soreness or stiffness, and unexplained fever. Should polio strike in your family, call a doctor immediately. Early diagnosis and prompt treatment by qualified medical personnel often prevent serious crippling, the National Foundation pointed out.

The organization emphasized that fear and anxiety should be held to a minimum. A calm, confident attitude is conducive to health and recovery. Parents, it said, should remember that of all those stricken, 50 per cent or more recover completely, while another 25 per cent are left with only slight after effects.

If polio is actually diagnosed, contact the chapter of the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis serving your community. The chapter will pay that part of the cost of care and treatment which patient or family cannot meet.

CUT OUT AND KEEP FOR REFERENCE



Captain Death's Cargo

By JOEL ROGERS

Once more he drops, slim and dark and insouciant, into the raging hell of bloody rebellion. But now his name is hissed in hate from gun to gun. For the famous Captain Death is earning a traitor's pay!

SWINGING his walking stick, with his hat tilted cockily, Captain Death went walking up Connecticut Avenue from Lafayette Park at his quick short brisk military stride, in that cold autumnal night of 1923.

Past the British Embassy he turned sharp left onto M Street, a region of

Washington inhabited by minor diplomats from nationlets without legations of their own, by lobbyists, many officers, departmental chief clerks, and a melange of foreign revolutionaries, counter-revolutionaries, plotters and spies. It was along here that the man from Hondaragua who had summoned him lived.



The shadow of Captain Death swept down upon them!

Dry elm leaves rustled above his head in the darkness. There was a slow cold breeze from the north, he noted. Winter was on its way. He felt stirring in him a vague and troublesome restlessness like that of a migratory wild bird—a recurrent yearning for balmy lands and waters of the deep purple south.

Midway in the block of the quiet side street he entered the lobby of a small brick apartment house, his sparkling eyes searching around him.

"Dr. Romano," he told the elevator man. "I am expected."

On the way upward in the slow-moving lift he slipped from his breast pocket,

just above his gun, the communication which he had received an hour before, on the letterhead of the Hondaraguan Legation. He consulted it again.

Oct. 3, 1923

Captain John Death,
The Cosmos Club, City.

Sir:

I should be pleased if you would get in touch with me at once, in regard to remunerative employment in the service of a gallant little band of men, doomed to speedy death without your aid.

Faithfully,

F. Fernando Romano Y. Diaz, Ph.D.,
Minister Plenipotentiary to the United
States from the Republic of Hondaragua.

Captain Death creased this missive with his thumb nail and put it away, as the elevator came to a stop.

"Whoever recommended me to the learned doctor," he thought, with the flash of a brown smile, "knew how to bait the hook to make me nibble. 'A gallant little band doomed to speedy death'—well, let's see what those tall words mean."

He pressed the ferrule of his walking stick on an apartment bell which the elevator man pointed out to him. He carried his walking stick right-handed but his gun hand was the left.

"Dr. Romano?"

He had been expecting to meet a small tropic-dwarfed Latin-American, but it was a tall and powerful man with a broad Teutonic face and a brush of stiff yellow hair who had opened the door and stood confronting him. Dr. F. Fernando Romano was built like a Hindenburg, and only his dark velvet eyes, the slight tinge of yellow in his eyeballs, and a faint swarthinness of his skin, betrayed his nationality if not his race.

"The same, *senor*. And you?"

"Captain Death, *senor*."

The huge Hondaraguan looked down at the light and slight adventurer, standing so erectly in his neat blue Chesterfield, with walking stick and spats. There was a sprinkling of gray in Captain Death's close-clipped midnight hair, but his small mustache was black as a blackbird's feather, his eyebrows were delicate and arched, and with all the smooth brownness of his face he looked like a man who had never stepped off a city pavement in his life, nor known any perilous hours nor the heat of quick disaster.

"Death?" muttered Dr. Romano.

Then he saw the black sparkle of the famous adventurer's gaze, and there was a light in it which could not be counterfeited. He saw the thin hawk nose and the thin tight mouth.

"Enter, I beg you, Captain," he said with a stiff, creaking bow.

He closed the door quickly.

"I have been pacing the floor for you since you telephoned me, Captain," he added in an agitated voice. "The service for which I am calling on you must be accom-

plished in the next few hours—hours that for hundreds and thousands of men may be laden with life and death."

"All hours," said the black-eyed adventurer, "are laden with those, *senor*."

"True," agreed Dr. Romano.

He cast another quick searching look at Captain Death, as if reading him again.

THE captain took the seat which the big Hondaraguan waved him to and the highball glass which was quickly poured and mixed. He sat leaning forward with his elbows propped on his thighs, rolling his glass thoughtfully between his lean brown fingers while he listened.

"You know something of the situation in my country, Captain," said Dr. Romano rapidly, waving his big plump saffron hands as he talked. "Beautiful Hondaragua, the jewel land of the earth. Torn now by internecine strife from her snow-capped volcanoes to her azure, sun-kissed shores. Under the leadership of General Cesare Martinez, the great *jefes* and *politicos*, the aristocracy, the brains and wealth of Hondaragua, have arisen to destroy President the General Washington Jova, the peon-elected dictator, known popularly in this country as *El Liberador*.

"The insurgents have seized all communications. For two weeks no news of the progress of the revolt has been transmitted to the world. From confidential information just received I learn now that the crisis of the uprising is at hand. In the next few hours the issue must be decided. Allow me, Captain—you can be trusted?"

"By those who trust me, *senor*," said Captain Death.

"Very good," said Dr. Romano.

He rolled his yellowish eyes a moment. "The situation is this, Captain," he went on with a gesture. "President Jova, the Liberator, with three hundred loyal hill Indians, his Cabinet and his family, is at this moment surrounded and cut off in the Arsenal at Mayapalpa, the capital city, by three thousand insurrectos under General Martinez. He is fighting to the last man, and for his life.

"A force of Federals equal in numbers

to the besieging insurgents are fighting their way through the mountain passes to the Liberator's relief. They will arrive within the next twenty-four to seventy-two hours. Will they be in time? That is the question.

"The Liberator may hold out for a day more. He cannot hold out for three. Starvation grips him now. Four days ago his last bit of food was consumed. The last rat in his magazine cellars. The last pigeon in the cotes. In that condition men must count their hours like pieces of small silver.

"However the Arsenal, though small, is strong. Field guns cannot batter it down. With howitzers it could be smashed, or with airplanes bombed to pieces, yes. But Hondaragua has neither howitzers nor airplanes and the insurgents can procure none, though they hold the sea ports. Your great people are in sympathy with the Liberator, whose ideals are consonant with their historic ones, and your State Department has declared an embargo on all military shipments, for fear such would fall into the insurgents' hands.

"Without airplanes and big guns, General Martinez' armies are for the time being held in check. Jova's situation is more desperate, yet hour by hour he is still holding out, bloodily repulsing all assaults. He is not a man to sell his life for a milreis. But how much longer? It's a race between famine and the arrival of the relieving Federal troops. On the outcome of that race rests the destiny of Hondaragua.

"If Jova and his men are taken and shot before relief reaches them, the revolution wins. All opposition to it is demoralized and routed. His scattered peon and Indian adherents are hunted down for execution through the swamps and mountains of Hondaragua, from sea to sea. And what the English did in Ireland or the Aragonese in the Lowlands was little to what will be done there. But, if he holds out till the relief breaks through to him, the cause of the insurgent aristocracy is lost, its anciently entrenched prerogatives abolished, its vast land holdings given over to the people, its leaders cast into exile.

"The issue lies in the scales of the next

few hours. And the scales are balanced."

Dr. Romano took a sip from his glass.

"You are interested, Captain?"

"I am here," said Captain Death.

THAT was all he said. But he had set down his untasted drink. His quick mind was already filled with pictures of maps and far sky horizons, and the calculations of miles to Hondaragua.

"Very good," said Romano.

He sighed. He wiped the pouches beneath his eyes, which were like black walnuts in a yellow cake.

"There is no need of deviously probing you, Captain, to find out on which side your own good wishes lie," he went on. "You have fought under many flags, but always for the liberal cause. You became acquainted with General Jova, I believe, in Paris, four years ago, where you were of considerable assistance to him and his daughter Elena in the matter of the Coupe *apache* gang. Two weeks ago you offered your sword to him, without reply. The insurgents had already seized command of the cables then. You perceive that, although you have never visited Hondaragua, your name is not unknown there."

Captain Death frowned faintly.

"And you have called on me, *senor*—?"

"To throw your weight into the balanced scales of war and overtip them. To write *finis* to the uncertainty of whether or not Jova will hold at the Arsenal for his relief."

"Hit the nail."

"My proposition is this Captain," said the big blond Hondaraguan. "Five thousand dollars gold American, one thousand down, four thousand on completion, if you reach the Arsenal in Mayapalpa City and drop provisions to the Liberator's starving men before the end of twenty-four hours. An errand of mercy, Captain. My agents at Key West will be waiting to load up for you. Can it be done?"

Captain Death looked at his wrist.

"Nine o'clock," he said. "An hour to make Bolling Field and to fuel up. Eleven hundred miles to Key West. Seven more to Mayapalpa. A north wind blowing. I will be at the Arsenal in Mayapalpa, *senor*, by midnight tomorrow."

"Very good," said Dr. Romano.

He let out his breath in a great sigh, and finished his glass off quickly.

"With supplies for the Liberator to be cargoes you at Key West," he reiterated. "Your plane capacity? Eight hundred pounds? Very good. Please listen to my instructions carefully.

"The city of Mayapalpa is in the insurrectos' hands, save only the Arsenal. The Arsenal itself is small. It is of gray granite, three stories high, built in a rectangle about a central patio. It stands at the north end of the plaza. You cannot land there. You must fly over it, as low as possible, and drop your load of supplies into the very center and heart of the Arsenal patio.

"The beleaguered men will receive your cargo. They will know what to do with it."

Dr. Romano arose abruptly, turning his eyes away.

He went to a desk and extracted a green enameled box from it, which he unlocked. He counted out crisp yellow bills, then turned again to Captain Death, who also had arisen.

"A five," he said. "Five ones. A thousand dollars, Captain. The rest—

He riffled the yellow bill remaining in his hand.

"The rest, four thousand dollars, upon fulfillment of the contract."

Captain Death rocked lightly on the balls of his feet. His sparkling black eyes probed deeply into the big Hondaraguan's face. Perhaps he smiled.

"Do you expect me to return for the unpaid balance, *senor*?" he said.

"Very well," said Dr. Romano hastily.

He counted out several more of the bills in his hand, and passed them over to the bright-eyed adventurer with a flourish.

"Permit me to make it a full half of the total now," he said with a Latin smile. "That splits the loss between us if you fail. If you do not come back. Twenty-five hundred in hand and an equal sum to come. Do you want a written contract to that effect, Captain?"

"No man has ever failed to pay me what he owes," said Captain Death.

He creased the crisp bills with his thumb nail down their length, looking at them for a thoughtful moment with his eyes half-shut.

"Let the understanding be exact, *senor*," he said. "I am commissioned, and I am being paid, to come to the aid of General Jova the Liberator within the next twenty-four hours, and to rescue him from his enemies. That is the understanding?"

"Merely to drop supplies," said Dr. Romano. "There is no more required of you."

"Let the understanding be broader, as I have said," reiterated the dark adventurer. "Not merely Jova saved from famine, but Jova saved from death."

Dr. Romano's lips moved soundlessly.

"Very well, it is understood," he agreed with a gesture. "But first, the provisions for the Arsenal, delivered into the stronghold's heart. What aid you can and care to render Jova after that rests with God. Are there any questions, Captain?"

"One," said Captain Death. "How did you become informed of General Jova's desperate plight?"

"Ah!" muttered Dr. Romano.

His eyes rolled. He brushed his hand across his mouth.

"A carrier pigeon," he said, "that the Liberator released today at dawn. Just one got through that hell of fire with its tragic message. Are there any other questions, Captain?"

"None," said Captain Death.

The huge Hondaraguan bowed him to the door.

"I shall be waiting in sleepless impatience for news of your success," muttered the big man, breathing heavily. "In the meantime, *adios*, Captain."

"*Adios*, *Senor*," said Captain Death.

WITHIN twenty minutes he was down in Anacostia on Bolling Field, and his black Falcon-Hurricane amphibian was being run out of its hangar.

"A box of sandwiches and a quart of coffee," he said.

He looked in his flag locker in the ship's stern, and found amidst a neatly stowed pile of a score of bright silk banners, as he had hoped, a blue and white

flag of Hondaragua, with its three crimson stars. And beneath the flag locker, under a false bottom, his long black Vickers gun.

"Something in the wind, Captain?"

"Just following the wild ducks south."

The cold black wind was blowing, and his motor roaring. Wrapped to his hawk nose in fur-lined coveralls, he nestled in his cockpit and advanced throttle. He shot away into the night. He dropped the earth beneath his wheels. The lights of Washington, the black-gleaming Potomac with its sparkling bridges, sank away behind him.

He went riding the mile-high wind south, alone with the small cold creeping stars.

Altimeter and compass, tachometer, bubble. And the black world drifting below like a heavy dream. He drank coffee, bitter and hot, to jolt himself awake.

HE was fifteen thousand feet above Miami, and the north wind still blowing on his tail, when the great crimson tropic dawn rushed upward from the world's dip fifty miles away. Four o'clock. The swift rosy light came flooding through the upper sky, though the world below him still lay in darkness then, as he laid the mainland behind him and went drifting out over the purple-shadowed Keys. The eastern sea was burning like immortal fire, and beyond the Caribbean the sun was booming up, when he saw Key West rising out of the horizon slope, on the last of that string of sapphire sea isles.

Five o'clock.

Three miles above the snowy sand and the darkling bay he cut his gun. Pulling in his wheels, he went swooping down through deepening shadows to water east of the naval seaplane base, off a deserted palm-fringed cove appointed with the Hondaraguan.

A light winkled three times on shore. He plowed foaming up to the white beach of the cove.

It was still the twilight of pre-dawn here. On the world the dawn had not yet come. Shadowy men, hugging their ribs and shivering, clustered on the sand awaiting him.

"Mayapalpa!" said Captain Death.

"The Arsenal!" came back the answer from the beach.

It was the word appointed. Captain Death sprang from a wing out onto the sand. A little truck stood nearby, heaving and shuddering with the thumping of its engine. *Gutierrez y Cohen, Fabricadores de Cigarros*. At the edge of the receding tide boxes and canisters were already stacked up, labeled in crude black letters *Tomatoes, Beef, Bread, Beans*. And the paint not yet dry on them.

Captain Death laughed, with black eyes sparkling.

"Tomatoes!" he said. "Manna from the sky!"

"So, *senor! Si, si, senor!*"

A little fat man with a mottled skin like a toadfish gave rapid whispered orders, waving his hands, shivering in a dirty linen suit and weatherbeaten Panama. His sly oily eyes darted around him. He wiped his face repeatedly with a large soiled handkerchief, though his teeth were clacking.

"It is cold," said Captain Death. "It is cold."

"Si, *Capitan*."

"But Jova forever!" said Captain Death. "Come cold or hell heat."

The fat little cigar-maker muttered something.

The shadowy men were swinging the cargo aboard the amphibian deftly and cautiously. Their eyes seemed to protrude and gleam like marbles in the dim dawn twilight. They passed the boxes from hand to hand with care, whispering cautions in hushed Spanish sibilance like the cooing of uneasy pigeons, while Captain Death stood on a wing and directed the stowing away of the cargo above his fuselage dump hatch.

"*Pronto!*" he said. "Before the Customs men come down. I don't think they would clear me, even with beans. What do you think, *amigos?*"

Only once was there a slip in that careful but swift loading, when a man receiving a canister labeled *Beans* about the size of a gallon slipped and fumbled and fell on his back in the tide's edge, juggling the iron cylinder as he fell and

clasping it finally to his breast. On the shore the little fat man with the toadfish skin uttered a piercing shout and sprawled away through the cloying sand, while two or three of the loaders sprang from the wings with their arms about their heads.

But that was all. The dawn silence was very loud and ringing still. Captain Death flung himself prone on the wing, and reached down an arm to the man gasping in the water.

"Don't spill the beans," he said.

He stood upright, laughing, though his heart was pounding still with that sudden flash of terror which had gripped them all.

THE loading was completed in fourteen minutes by his watch, and he had taken aboard an additional hundred and twenty gallons of gasoline. The tropic dawn was beginning to flood the crinkled water out past the cove. The conspirators swung his wings around, bow to sea.

"*Viva el Libertador!*" said the black-eyed adventurer. "And you, gentlemen, *adios.*"

The little fat cigar-maker with the toadfish skin stood in the water's edge behind the amphibian's wings, screaming a final message up. He had taken off his floppy Panama. His bald head glistened in the flushing sunrise, with two strands of long black hair carefully plastered across it.

"The Arsenal patio!" he screamed. "Remember, low! Drop your whole load, and your work is done!"

"*Adios,*" said Captain Death. "*Adios.*"

He kicked the starter, gave his ship full gun. Down the rutted sandy road through the coconut palms toward the beach he had seen, from the edges of his eyes, a slate-gray touring car coming full speed over the bumps, that looked like a Customs car.

But it was still a quarter-mile away when his tail left the beach. He went skimming out seaward past the rim of the cove in his fleet black ship, and it would take more than the flash of a shield on the coat of an officious embargo-enforcer to stop him now.

A mile out, where the sea was bare of ships and he could be sure of being out

of clear observation from the shore, he idled his engine, swinging off the wind and onto the surface of the sea. From the false bottom of his locker behind him he removed the Vickers gun, and wiped the oil from it.

He spent five minutes mounting it and setting the synchronizing gear, inserting the belt and aligning the sights, while the little waves slapped at his pontoon bow, and his black wings rocked in the off-shore swell, and the blazing bloody sun came up above the sky rim.

The bloody red war sun.

"A little pepper, not nominated in the bond," thought Captain Death.

Westward, from the direction of the Naval base with its tall, spidery wireless masts, a fast speedboat was making out toward him, throwing the white sea-boil from its bows. Low in the sky a seaplane rose up, small as a mosquito, but rapidly growing larger as it headed steadily out his way.

Captain Death flashed a brown smile. His nostrils tightened. They had got some wind of that cargo on the beach. He gave his ship full throttle, swinging round on the pivot of one wing pontoon into the wind.

"Sorry, gentlemen, I can't wait."

Over the slapping sea, and up into the air with a leap of clean wings like a soaring gull. He spiraled higher. He keeled steeply south. The sun below his tilted bow swept around beneath his port-side wing, and he held it there, booming like a wild goose down the sky. The Customs boat on the water far below boiled over in a white arc, heading back for shore. But the lumbering Naval seaplane followed him thirty miles, dropping lower and lower, farther and farther behind, till the horizons closed over it in the purple north.

Cuba rising from the sea ahead, gray-green mountains and white-lipped shores Hazy in the distance to the east, Havana with its long blue promenades passing away beneath his wing. The bells would be ringing there for early mass. The sun was climbing higher.

The Arsenal in Mayapalpa with its starving, dying men was still six hundred miles away.

GRAY-GREEN mountains and valleys steep below, and the deep blue-green sea on either side. Cutting diagonally across the stem of the island where it curves like a banana, the black ship slid toward the southern ocean. Then out over the Gulf of Matamano, while the Isle of Pines drifted past astern, and the land faded, and the great blue blazing stretch of the naked Caribbean opened up before him for half a thousand miles.

Compass set steadily one-ninety. Traveling the wind a mile-and-a-half high over that glaring ocean. Tachometer and altimeter, compass, wind-speed indicator. Tachometer and altimeter, oil, gauge, bubble.

Blue and desolate horizons, agate sky, all merged in a glittering haze and a glassy mirage shine. No ships below. The naked world. Glare, glare, glare. No more tail wind now. A small sultry head-wind blowing from the south, if anything. Blowing sluggishly across that glassy sea, from the Mosquito Keys, from the Gulf of Panama, from the wastes of the Pacific.

Was it blowing, too, in the fire-hammered Arsenal, in Mayapalpa City among the high Cordilleras, upon that little group of famished, dying men?

Hot wind, creeping like a lazy snake.

The long hand moved around the watch. The sun stood up the blazing sky. Glitter and glare. False water shine, without dimensions, without an end, stretching toward eternity. The black ship like a painted bird, flying forever motionless through that motionless mirage of firmament and sea.

"Crockett at the Alamo—Jova at the Arsenal," thought Captain Death. "And I sit here like a stone raven carved on Ysdragil, while eighteen thousand cons pass away."

Toward noon he saw the summits of the Hondaraguan Cordilleras lifting their far blue humps above the sea. They were still a hundred miles remote.

Slowly the gray-green jungle of the Mosquito Coast rose up out of the sky dip, took shape and deeper color, flattened itself out, while the black ship slid toward it above shoaling peacock waters, above submerged coral reefs and snow-white bars, across a vague commingling of muck, pale

green salt inlets and swampy mango lands which was neither sea nor shore. And the great dead volcanoes of Hondaragua rose upward and upward in the sky ahead—Toltoltepec, Chandumyumchac, Lost Fire and Bolivar.

And beyond, the Arsenal.

The black ship's oil pressure was sinking then, its gas was running low. Captain Death knew that it would be a hard and perhaps an impossible fight ever to lift his loaded wings over the mountain passes, and that he would never fly his black ship back this way if ever he made that far.

THE girl with the withered hibiscus in her hair crouched at the narrow embrasure on the Arsenal's top floor, beside the hot gray gun.

"I hear a roaring, Cristobal," she whispered. "I hear them roaring."

Lieutenant Cristobal Veladez, aide for artillery on the staff of the Hondaraguan Liberator, swayed toward her through the bitter, stinging smoke. His gaunt body swayed, but his feet remained stone still. There was a singing in his ear drums. His body seemed to float. He told himself, "I will move my feet. I will descend to the entrance gates, and meet them with empty pistol as they come." And he remained standing there.

"Close your eyes, *senorita*, I beg of you," his dry lips moved.

He saw her dark enormous eyes, her little mouth that trembled up at him, the dead flower with its brown curled petal tips that nestled in her blackbird hair. She had put the white flower on that morning. There was a hibiscus tree growing in the patio by the withered fountain. This had been the seventh morning she had fastened the white flower in her hair.

The seventh morning, the seventh bitter noon. Or had it been eight, or nine? They had eaten on Tuesday last, thought Lieutenant Veladez carefully, a retching broth made from the last handful of *frijoles* and the scrapings of the bark of the hibiscus tree. Tuesday, it had been Tuesday last, a red-letter day.

He had marked it well. The same day in the dawn a carrier-pigeon had come flying home with the news that the relief

was still a week away, and the girl and the wounded men who were yet alive had shared the little bird. That had been Tuesday, the third day of the siege, thought Lieutenant Veladez very carefully, and this was the seventh day.

"Cristobal!"

"Honored *senorita*?"

"Where is my father, Cristobal?"

"While I am alive the Liberator is alive, below—honored *senorita*."

The seventh day, he thought. No, no, the eighth. The water had failed at Friday dusk, and two dreadful nights had passed since then. It must be holy Sunday now.

"Pater noster, qui es in coelis, sanctificatur nomen tuum, adveniat regnum tuum—"

On the stone floor the tall, gaunt Indian priest was praying, kneeling with shoulders back and his great red eyes uplifted, and the skirts of his powderburned cassock entangling the rowels of his Spanish spurs.

"Give us this day our daily bread—"

The eighth day of the siege, thought Lieutenant Veladez with slow, cool mathematics, standing there with his heels together swaying, with his light head and body that seemed to float in space, and his shattered arm strapped against his side in a mess of bloody rags. The eighth day the girl had worn the white flower in her hair. But she would wear the flower no longer, for the hibiscus tree was dead beside the withered fountain.

The haze swam round the tall artillery officer. His burning eyes were too hot for tears. He had seen two hundred men die like flies, till now there were only a handful left, and the dead who lay by the gates and the burst guns below must bury their own dead.

And he must die, and the Liberator die, and Hippolyto, the gaunt priest with his great red eyes, die likewise. And Hondaragua must die with them, the forces of cruelty and oppression victorious, the cause lost, a helpless people lost, the mountains running red with massacre, with fire and guns and savage dogs through many a dreadful night.

But all that seemed remote and unimportant to Lieutenant Veladez. A story told,

long ago. An event predestined and ordained before the first star was set in heaven. He was tired.

It would be better when it was done and over. Only he felt the pity of it, the great pity, that she with her wide child eyes and her sweet, lovely mouth should wear no longer the white flower in her hair.

"Cristobal," she whispered, "I hear a roaring! Everything is roaring."

"Close your eyes—and sleep. I beg you, *senorita*."

"Cristobal! Cristobal, they are coming!"

"*Senorita*, you must go to sleep."

HE bowed his fair head gravely, bending forward from the waist. The world spun round him then. His knees had collapsed beneath him like water. He was on the floor beside her and she was in his arms. Close, close.

"Elena, my beloved!"

Mouth, eyelids, scented hair.

"Ah, Cristobal!"

"Your pardon! I beg of you!" he gasped. "I could not help it. It is not right. Myself a soldier, and you within my honor. But now, now——"

"Now and evermore, Cristobal," she whispered. "I am not afraid, beloved, now. When they come——"

A man was creeping up the thick stone stairs, shuffle, shuffle, shuffle. He came, he stood there in the door. Holding to the doorpost, he swayed like a weighted doll, a bloody bandage around his graying hair. A naked sword within his hand. Thin, ragged beard, smoke-blackened cheeks, eyes in whose great hollow depths there burned an everlasting fire—a dark, unearthly light. There stood General Jova, the Liberator, the seer of visions, he who had fought and dreamed and now would die to make a helpless people free.

"Twenty-one men," whispered the Liberator, in a cobweb voice that seemed to float on air. "From gates to roof, no more. Lieutenant Veladez——"

The girl within the fair-haired artillery officer's arm held her young lips closely pressed against his boy's lean, burning face. He tried to rise to attention, to play the soldier. But his knees were like soft

wax beneath him, and all the world was a darkling mist in which there floated like lustrous stars only the girl's tear-filled eyes.

To play the soldier. No more of that. The time for that was past. The trumpet and the drum.

"Lieutenant Veladez, how many guns are now left for us to fire?"

The young artillery officer moved his dry lips. He could not speak. He swayed stiffly on his knees. He held up one finger. Jova stared.

"No more?"

"No more, Excellency."

"No more," repeated the gray-haired soldier.

He drew wavering circles on the stone floor with the point of his bright sword. Through the silence the gaunt priest prayed, with a rattling voice that rose and fell, holding the crucifix aloft, with revolver and long *machete* knife laid for the moment beside him. In a corner the copper-faced cavalryman, Juan Tualoga, the fierce Yaqui out of Mexico, who had fought against Diaz the Cruel and against Gomez in Venezuela, sat leaning back against the wall in his bright striped blanket, imperturbable, motionless, with a stony look in his Indian eyes and a great spreading stain on his breast.

The Liberator stared at the dead eyes of Juan Tualoga.

"The relief still two days away," he said, in that dusty far-off voice. "If the magazines had not exploded, if the water had not failed, if we had been able to get one word out to our friends beyond the mountains— We have fought a good fight, gentlemen. More was impossible."

He brought his heels together slowly and straightened.

"Gentlemen, I regret—"

He touched his bloody forehead with the hilt of his sword. To Lieutenant Veladez. To Hippolyto the priest. To the dead cavalryman in the corner.

"My salute, gentlemen," he said.

Booma-booma-booma!

The guns had begun again. *Booma-booma-booma!* out where the hot noon burned. *Booma-booma-booma!* echoing from the mountains.

THERE was sun and dust in the plaza. There were little brown men running. Darting, and dropping, and dashing up again. Weaving from shelter to shelter. Lying motionless long minutes together, like the dead men who had lain there many days. Then up again, and running. Running. Always nearer.

Booma-booma-booma! from the four corners of the world. Stone dust flying from the thick walls of the Arsenal. The gates below were shambles of men's torn bodies, twisted ironwork, and chunks of broken granite.

Two guns had been smashed by direct hits through their embrasures yesterday. It had been at dawn today when the magazines caught fire. It had been Tuesday when they had eaten their last food, and the carrier-pigeon had come flying home with news that the relief was still a week away.

Twenty-one of them left, counting the girl and the priest. Counting dead Juan Tualoga.

Booma-booma-booma! echoing from the mountains.

Sun and glare in the naked sky. Sun and fire-flash in the mountain. Sun and dust in the plaza. The little brown men now running, now crouching, quickly, between their week-old dead.

A machine-gun in the tower of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre across the plaza had fastened on the Arsenal's top floor embrasure, playing intermittently a *thump-thump* against the surrounding masonry, like the muffled tapping of a woodpecker on rotten wood. Once a burst in high trajectory had come ripping through the long, narrow gun-port, and struck the ceiling like a flight of bees, scattering its wild slugs in ricochet and tearing the heart from Juan Tualoga's breast, the fierce cavalryman.

But it had not reached the gray deflected gun, with its hot muzzle pointed downward at the plaza.

Boom-booma! A whistling screech and *slam!* Sudden thunder detonated close against the gun-port of this last field-piece on the top floor. Flinders of stone and mortar smoke went flying across the slit of hot brass sky.

The girl in Veladez's arm clapped his ears and trembled, while he fiercely pressed her closer.

"I'm not afraid, Cristobal," she whispered. "Not afraid! But let them be done with it."

He pressed his lips against the withered scentless blossom in her hair. And she would wear the white flower no more. His burning eyes were parched for tears.

"It is too bad," he said in steady tones. "It is a pity, *cara*. For myself, I am a soldier. I have faced this thing before. It is thus a man expects to die. One hour or the next, today or tomorrow—A man's heart is fortified, his soul prepared. But it is not the fate which you have dreamed of, *cara*."

She dragged herself close up against the bell-mouthed gun-port, peering forth again. He caught her by the shoulder, breathing quickly, and pulled her down.

"Wait!" he said.

"They are coming, Cristobal!"

"They must come."

He moved his tongue across his swollen lips. Years and years passed away. His mind floated, cool and keen, like an airy bird high up. Looking downward, he could see himself crouching there, and the dark-eyed girl in his arm, and the dead men at the broken gates below, and the little brown men running, dropping, then up again and darting forward jerkily, all through the hot, glaring noon. He, Cristobal Veladez, who had been a young boy full of dreams and hope not so long ago—he, Cristobal Veladez, lieutenant of the guns—floated on a cloud remote, watching this thing come on, unfold, transpire. Watching the enactment of this dark drama of which he was a part.

The girl had ceased her trembling. He held her close, but she was far away. There was a light in her great haunted eyes. Her burning lips were half parted.

"It was like this before," she whispered, "when he came. It was like this, only darker. I was alone. The men who would take my life had come in. They were all about me. The world seemed to grow dim, like this. I heard the seconds ticking. It was the end of all things. Then he came."

HER voice drifted dustily to Veladez's hearing. Across remote distances and uncounted time. Like the echo in a tomb of a voice that faded centuries ago.

"It was just like this," she whispered, "then. Only darker."

Veladez wet his lips.

"What was this dream, *cara*?"

"It was no dream," she whispered.

"Four years ago. I was barely fifteen. It was in Paris when we were there. The *apaches* had got me in a little cellar by the Seine. Cesare Martinez, the rebel, and Fernando Romano, the traitor, had hired those men to take me, though we did not know it then. They kept me to betray my father. Then at night, at the end of the second day, when I would not yield, their masters gave them a free hand, they came in to me to take what they desired.

"There were five of them, men with knives, garroters, the scum of the sewers, men who made their living from assassination and the sale of women, men with no more hearts than rats. Ah, Cristobal, Cristobal! It was like this then. Waiting."

Lieutenant Veladez dug his lean fingers into her arm with a stony grip. An oath rattled in his throat.

"I knew that the end of my life had come," her dusty voice went on, "and worse than that. Cristobal, in the instant I had prepared myself to die, my consciousness to oblivion, a man came down the cellar stairs, and through the door among them. How he came in I do not know. At first he seemed to be unarmed. He came in smiling. The assassins rushed him with their knives. But I was no longer afraid then of what might come. I had seen the bright look in his eyes, and I knew that it was over—

"So you see that even I have faced the shadow of this hour before, beloved, though I am not a soldier. And if I could prepare myself to endure it all alone, how much easier with you beside me now! It was much darker then. Don't think that I'm afraid—a soldier's daughter scorns weak fears!"

The young artilleryman felt his heart turn over in his breast.

"Ah!" he said. "I did not know you

then. Who was this man who came to aid you, *cara?*

Strange the sharp pang of jealousy which was stabbing at his heart, all because of the light which had leaped into her dark eyes and the memory which seemed to have brushed her half-parted lips like a caress. He pressed hand upon his bosom. The stab of jealousy. His mouth twisted with a dry laugh. Soon that heart which felt so strong and hot would cease its beating, beyond all feeling of pain, love, passion, or despair. And her sweet, lovely mouth would be likewise cold, no flame in her dark eyes to light desire.

"Tell me, was he your lover, *cara?*"

"I saw him only that one time, beloved," she whispered, with her far-off look. "He was not a man for a woman. But still I remember him, and how I saw him smiling, and the bright look he wore."

"Who was he, *cara?* What was his name?"

"He had a gringo name, I think. They called him, those who knew him, El Capitan Death."

"Ah, him!"

"You have heard of him, beloved?"

"I have heard his name," whispered Veladez.

THE guns had died, except for faint and far-off echoes miles away from Chandumyumchac. The tall young artillery officer raised himself on knees and knuckles at the gun port, looking down at the sunlit plaza from behind a corner of the gun shield.

Jova the Liberator crept up beside him. The dead cavalryman sat in the corner, and flies hummed.

"Amen!" said the praying priest.

The noon was breathless still, except for the far-off echo of those guns in the mountain passes where the relief was being held up. Guns echoing from Chandumyumchac and Bolivar.

The gaunt priest arose from his knees, picking up the machete and pistol. His great red eyes were burning with the flame of those who have looked on God. He tightened the sash about his waist, beneath his powder-burnt cassock. He broke his pistol and spun the empty chambers, and

flung it from him with an oath. He ran the pad of his broad thumb down the edge of his machete, softly, expertly.

"To hell with powder and lead," he croaked. "Show me a better weapon than Peter's steel to be used by Peter's son!"

He swung the dark blue steel in rapid circles half a dozen times, swishing the air. The loose, powerful sinews twisted like brown cords along his wrist and naked forearm. His huge silver spurs jingled on stone as he stumbled to the gun port.

"*Padre!*" muttered Veladez. "Will you give us your blessing, *padre?*"

"My son?"

"So that what you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, *Padre Hippolyto,*" said Veladez with simple faith, touching the flower in the girl's hair. "So that hand in hand we may go."

The great priest laughed with a dry cracked voice. His jaw dropped open, his black tongue showed, and he laughed on. He said a word in the Indian tongue.

"*Padre?*"

"There is no marriage in heaven, my son. Better this for her white breast!"

He flashed the smoky steel.

"I am not afraid to die," Elena Jova whispered.

Veladez's slow fingers moved to his pistol. They closed about the oily butt. An instant he closed his eyes, and time stood still. He passed it to the girl, with an averted face.

"Keep that," he said.

Noon sun in the brassy sky. Sun and fire-flash in the far-off mountains. Sun and dust in the plaza.

The hot, stifling silence was broken by a sudden great roar of voices. The scattered advance guard who had been running across the plaza crookedly beneath the burning noon had found shelter commanding the broken gates below. Their rifles pecked, pecked, and no reply.

A bugle blared across the plaza. A drum began to beat.

That roar again. From behind the earth-bag breastworks at the far end of Mayapalpa's great central square, the main body of Cesare Martinez' troops had risen in a mass. They came swarming through the glaring noon in a brown tide. They

were all shouting as they came, with a wordless cry, a vast inchoate howling, a wild beast cry.

A thousand men in a great surging tidal wave, coming crouching, coming raggedly, with the hoarse drums beating and the flashing swords of officers urging them on. Veladez lifted himself inch by inch, holding to the breech-block of the gun. He moistened his lips, and spat.

"They might have done it hours ago," he said, "if they'd had the hearts of men."

The trumpet and the drum.

When the center of that ragged mass was in the gray gun's pointblank fire, Veladez uncorked the shrapnel. *Slam!* A flash. The gray gun recoiling, eager-mouthed, hungry in the guts for more. But no more.

"*Ecce, dies!*" he heard the gaunt priest shouting.

He threw the girl behind him in a corner. They were rushing up the stairs, the howling brown men. The brown tide was swarming in. Hippolyto's machete swinging like a sickle, clean to bone. The sword of Jova stabbing, stabbing, and he backed up against the wall with blood on his dragged beard.

BLIND shadows. Roaring voices. Deep panting breath. Bayonets bloody with the slain below. Veladez grappled a thrusting blade with naked hands. He grappled wrestled with his weakened arms, slipping in a dark red pool, snarling, sobbing, reeling and breathless, fighting on.

"Sons of dogs! Elena, *cara*—!"

Jova was down. They had him hip and throat upon the floor. The *machete* of Hippolyto the priest struck and flashed and struck again like lightning in a stormy sky.

"For Jova!" his hoarse voice roared.

His great red eyes burning, the *machete* striking, leaping. The brown men. Flashing bayonets. Steel on steel. The gaunt priest's sweating face tall over all. He was a madman, he was not sane, with his wild croaking voice and his red eyes.

"Jova! Tonight in Paradise—" Then he fell.

The bayonets pierced him, breast and loins, and he went from sight upon the

floor, beneath a welter of red blades still driving, lunging.

On his knees Lieutenant Veladez wrestled with his famished strength, grappling the breech and naked blade of the rifle that was thrusting at him with relentless hands, sobbing, gasping, croaking oaths, prayers, endearments, words that had no meaning, wild babblements of sound, while he fought to tear the rifle free from those iron hands that were turning the blade toward his heart, and the darkness swam before his eyes, and all the world was roaring. He saw the girl's white face behind him as his struggling face uplifted, her white shoulders in the grip of clawing hands.

"*Cara!*"

Her long dark hair had fallen around her milk-white shoulders. The pale hibiscus flower was mud upon the floor. For an instant she tore free from those filthy hands. From her bosom she drew the pistol he had given her, and pressed it to her temples. He saw, after the passage of eternal years, the hammer fall.

Empty. The gun was empty. The last shot had been fired long hours ago. He had failed her.

Those clawing hands on her again, while she fought like a tigress, back against the wall. The tall artilleryman saw the agony of her tragic eyes. Strength seemed to flow back into his fainting arms. With a dumb croaking roar he tore the rifle free from the man he wrestled with. He drove the blade toward her breast with despairing fury.

"Beloved!"

The white steel never reached that far. A darkness smote the tall artillery officer. His strength collapsed. He fell upon his face, while a great roar seemed to burst from the topmost mountains far away, from the caverns of Chandumyumchac, from the crests of Bolivar. And the great roar went rushing with shattering hammers through the whole world, while he, who had been lieutenant of artillery, lay there upon the floor.

No more for him the sight of her despairing eyes, of her white, tragic face.

"Cristobal, my lover!"

Thunder from Chandumyumchac, from

Chandumyumchac, from Chandumyumchac!

A black bird in the sky.

NOON. The brassy hour had struck. Captain Death was on the wing.

Up over the rising piedmont from the sea his black ship had come drifting with its heavy cargo. Like a lost condor through that sultry yellow sky. Toward the far blue mountains, where the guns were flashing.

Eight thousand feet. Nine thousand. Slow, heavy wings. Oil pressure sinking and big Hurricane motor spitting. Climbing loggily toward the high blue backbone of the Cordilleras, that rose upward and upward beneath the noon. On to the mountain wall, and over.

On to the mountain wall. The black ship would not fly out again the same way she went in, if ever she lifted herself above that ragged barrier. But that was no concern of Captain Death's now. To get there, first.

Dead volcanoes rising upward and upward into the brassy sky. Beyond them Mayapalpa City, not yet in sight. Steadily the bright-eyed adventurer feathered his controls, coaxed his nose higher through the flat noon air toward the narrow V-shaped pass that cut the ragged skyline ahead of him, sharp as the deep hacking of an ax, between Chandumyumchac's lava-covered slope and the fire-forged crags of Bolívar.

Guns flashing far away.

He had taken his last look at his sky maps. The details of them were photographed in his inner vision, mountain and pass and valley. Five miles beyond that wedge-shaped cleft which loomed ahead lay Mayapalpa and the Arsenal steep down the farther mountain slope.

Noon. He was near.

But that deep V-shaped pass must first be crossed straight before him on the high sky rim. Ominously it rushed toward him as the swift blue miles unrolled and the dead volcanoes of Hondaragua lifted their massive crests. Already he sensed, if he did not see, the guns flashing there.

"I'll scrape it," thought Captain Death. "Just scrape it, with no altitude to spare."

He lifted one shoulder. Thrusting a cigaret between his lips, he bent his head down out of the wind blast and struck a match reflectively. Yet quick as lightning, before the cupped flame had fully flared, he pressed it out between thumb and finger.

He took a deep, quiet breath. Firmly and deliberately he rolled the charred end of the matchstick, looking at it with a narrow smile, till it was nothing more than wood shreds. The flame had died. There was no spark left.

He exhaled his breath in a deep sigh, and tossed the unlighted cigaret away.

"Beef and beans for the Liberator, from the good Dr. Romano," he thought softly. "To be delivered low into the center of the Arsenal. The good doctor was insistent about that."

He swung around and opened the basswood hatch door behind him softly, glancing in at his cargo. It was riding solidly. None of the well-stowed boxes and canisters had shifted by an inch. With a shrug he straightened up again, and closed the white hatch door. But for the next few minutes Captain Death sat very lightly in his seat, like a man sitting high above a precipice on the limb of a cracking tree.

"The lid of hell," he thought.

His lips were bent in a tight smile, but for the moment his heart was racing.

He searched his pockets for any more matches, took all he found, and threw them overside into the wind-stream that went rushing by.

Guns were flashing from the heights of the mountain pass that came swiftly toward him through the sky between Chandumyumchac and Bolívar. A crooked line of thin white smoke was rising upward in the still noon air, along the forested terrain below the pass. Thin line of smoke that drifted, wavered, broke again. Battle smoke. And the guns flickering from the mountain heights above, hammering, hammering, guarding the narrow stony gate against that creeping smoke.

War! The heat of powder. Cesare Martinez' guns on crag and ledge of Chandumyumchac, terrible, fiercely roaring, holding the mountain gates.

War in the high Cordilleras!

Captain Death's nostrils tightened. There was a singing in his heart. He was an old campaigner. He read the meaning of that creeping smoke in the forests below the pass.

Jova's relief force fighting to break through.

THIN line of smoke, crawling worm-like toward the mountain cleft. Falling pell-mell back before these savage guns. Brave men, fierce tiger hearts, invincible with the steel fighting up and up, fighting valiantly, fighting desperately, midnight and bitter noon, to save their Liberator from the ring of fire that closed about him in the Arsenal.

Beaten back, and coming on again, and beaten back, snarling, reeling, decimated, these fierce mountain warriors of Jova, helpless with the steel against Martinez' massed batteries smashing from the heights.

One to three days away from Mayapalpa, the big blond Hondaraguan conspirator last night had estimated the Jovistas to be.

But that was where the learned doctor had made his big mistake. The relief was almost in sight of the Arsenal, it was true. Yet still a week away, a month away, as long as Martinez continued to hold the summits of the pass with his flickering guns.

"As far as from here to eternity away," thought Captain Death. "The good Dr. Romano has been misinformed about the urgency of the situation. He did not need me."

The notched pass rushed toward him. Chandumyumchac's gloomy mass soared swiftly in the nearer sky. The sloping woods came up beneath his wings, the thin white smoke that lay in the burning noon. There were splintered trees, hemlock, pine and mountain oak, in the woods below the pass. There were black pastures where fire had burned.

A platoon of Jovistas in their faded blue ran raggedly across a rocky glade a thousand feet below him, and dropped to earth. Shells crashed where they had been. The trees of the forest tossed like a stormy sea.

War in the high Cordilleras! And Captain Death on the wing.

The bright-eyed adventurer heeled his ship over on its ear as the great shadow of the dead volcano loomed above him.

"Viva Jova!"

Steep on one wing he dropped toward the smoky wooded slope, wires screaming motor roaring. The shadow of Chandumyumchac soared up into the sky. The hemlock spears rushed at him from below. From his cockpit he let fly the blue and white flag of Hondaragua, with its three crimson stars. Three hundred feet above the smoky hemlock crests he stretched one arm high, and swung it as he passed.

"Jova forever! Come on, come on!"

Hurling his lifted arm, with that soundless cry, he flashed on upended wings across the thin white line of smoke and the clusters of blue-clad men crouching in the woods below the pass. He went above them and on past, with a roar like black train lightning through the sky.

There was laughter on his tightened lips. They had not heard him, they did not know that he was Captain Death, they did not know whether he was man or devil, likely. But they had seen that gay white banner streaking in the wind, and they had seen his sweeping arm as he went above the hemlock crests, motioning them.

Come on!

The thin blue line was up, it was creeping, staggering, zigzagging through glade and thicket behind him, as he leveled out his tilted ship and rushed toward the V-shaped gorge that cut the towering mountains.

Jova forever! And the thin blue line was up with a roar in answer to him, be he man or devil-bird of the god of Chandumyumchac, the old mountain god. So with a roar, on with white steel, on to the mountain pass!

Jova's fierce mountain warriors were following Captain Death!

War in the high Cordilleras! And Captain Death on the wing.

GUNS flickering from the slopes above him. The great mass of the dead volcano towering high into that hot blue noon.

The air was sweeping upward with a rush like a great river, close against the mountain's slope. On the sweep of the invisible flood Captain Death's black ship rose from the smoky woods toward the pass, toward the flickering guns mounted on the summits.

Up, up, up, a wall of shadows, precipitous and gorged by thousand-foot ravines, old Chandumyumchac lifted its granite crest. Like a little mosquito darting at the flanks of an elephant, Captain Death lifted his black ship toward the pass where Martinez' guns were flashing.

Booma-booma-booma-booma! From the crags of Chandumyumchac. Echoing from Bolivar. Guns lifted their hoarse mouths and bellowed at him.

Guns flashing, flashing, flashing.

On to the pass, on to the pass, and over! The hot rising wind swept wilder and faster, filled with rapids, whirlpools and blind ripples, as it approached the notch through the mountains. The black ship soared upward like a kite. The guns mounted on the crags above the pass roared hot, pointblank, at those black wings rising.

"If they hit," thought Captain Death with cool detachment, "even one rifle shot, one hot shell fragment—if they hit, why, they will know it. But not I."

Tight-lipped. Laughing.

Guns belching from shelf and ledge. Guns slamming savagely as the swift adventurer came dancing, veering, rocking on the sweeping wind up past them. Guns stretching their muzzles to maximum elevation, crashing bursts of rapid shrapnel straight upward, settling back on their haunches in recoil, and flashing up again. Guns slamming hot, hot, hot, as the shadow of Captain Death's black wings soared on the up-slope wind high above their airy fastnesses.

Booma-booma-booma-blam!

But the hand is quicker than the eye. and the wing is quicker than the gun.

The mountain pass dropped beneath the high adventurer, a twisting, crooked gorge, winding between sheer straight walls of rock where stunted black oak and ground pine clung for life. There was a glint

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of running water on the ravine's deep floor below. There were dark, sunless shadows, where the noon light never shone. There were little brown men clustered on crag and ledge, about their flashing batteries, straight below.

Above the deep gorge floor, above the ledges when the massed guns were sparkling, he skidded, whirled, on the cross-mountain current that went rushing between the shoulders of the topmost hills. Deep in the wooded slope below and behind the thin blue line was coming up toward the pass, was coming with a rush, was coming with white steel, against the little brown men clustered on their tall unassailable heights and their loud slamming guns.

Beyond lay Mayapalpa.

Booma-booma booma-blam! And Captain Death above the massed belching batteries, above the ledges thick with their brown-clad swarms. Captain Death, in his black ship, carrying Romano's beef and beans for Jova.

"Let's get rid of some of this dead weight now!" said Captain Death!

His right hand was on the release lever at his fuselage dump hatch. Bright-eyed, tight-lipped, for an immeasurable moment he stared straight down. Battle in the mountains, and Captain Death on wings.

"*Senores!*" he said. "With the compliments of your good friend, Romano!"

Above the batteries he brought the black ship's nose steep upward in a stall. And pulled the dump release.

"*Senores, adios!*"

Half of her cargo must have dropped from her at once. Squat boxes of white pine, ring-ribbed canisters of iron, spilling down. Tumbling, spilling, far below, far below.

Beef and beans.

WITH wings abruptly lightened, the black ship bounced on high, and Captain Death was climbing her desperately. The high hushed noon hung poised in silence for eternal seconds, and only his motor roaring to the sky, while he climbed steeply for his life. Up, up, toward the blinding sun, between the crags of Bolivar and Chandumyumchac, while time stood still.

Then a white blast of air seemed to burst beneath him.

His wings were whipped about. Amidst a great sluggish roar that filled the sky and mountains, he was slammed a thousand feet on high.

Thunder from Chandumyumchac, thunder ripping and rolling from Chandumyumchac, echoing from Bolivar!

He flashed a breathless glance below as his wild wings rocked higher. The thin blue line was coming with a rush up the slope toward the pass, with white steel glinting in the sun. But in the open now, and with ragged banners flying. On to the pass, on to the pass, and over! Jova's fierce mountain warriors following Captain Death!

The thin blue line coming up the slope where its dead had lain these many days, where the iron guns had smashed and hammered from the gates of hell, was sweeping onward now in a wild exultant charge, unhindered. Captain Death could see those ragged Jovista banners flying far below him, underneath the smoke. He could see the thunder-shattered trees below the pass, and the black patches where fire had burned.

But in the pass itself, the narrow rocky gorge, and on crag and ledge above it, neither the little brown men clustered nor the massed batteries flashing were longer to be seen. Crag and ledge themselves had disappeared. It was all veiled with smoke and rock dust there. The shoulders of the mountains had shaken loose. Great rocks a hundred tons in weight went bouncing and rolling like peas down the slopes of Chandumyumchac.

And the echoes still reverberated, rocked and shattered, for fifty miles away.

"*Senores, adios!*"

Ahead of the bright circle of his prop five miles down the farther mountain slope, Mayapalpa City lay like a jewel in the gray-green hills, red-roofed, white-walled beneath the blazing sun, plaza, cathedral, Arsenal, dust roads and guns and men, and the long brown mountain trails winding down toward it. Mayapalpa in the hills, at the end of the long air miles.

Captain Death dropped steeply down the sky toward the nestling little town,

like an eagle from the crests of the dead volcano.

There was sun and dust in the plaza. There was splintered pavement and dead men lying. There was a great roaring sea of brown-clad men swarming thick around the Arsenal flowing in through the broken gates. The flag of Cesare Martinez was being run up above the gray stone citadel then.

The Arsenal had been taken!

CESARE MARTINEZ himself—the Black Bear, as he was known, Commander of the Order of the Sons of Cortez, Companion of the Society of the Condor, Captain-general of the armies of the revolutionary Junta, provisional and acting president of the Hondaraguan Republic by his own proclamation—was with the vanguard of his howling brown-clad troops in person, as they rushed the Arsenal floor by floor with rifle and bayonet during that hushed and bloody noon.

"Jova alive! His ringleaders and lieutenants alive!" The Black Bear gave the order. "For the rest, the common cattle, save the rope!"

It was an order to their liking.

There was only a scant half dozen of starving water-famished men to meet the roaring brown avalanche at the broken gates, with machetes and clubbed guns.

"Jova forever!" their dry voices croaked. Their empty guns swung heavily. Gaunt shadows dying on their feet already, they stood croaking their hoarse cry, their red eyes glaring, swinging their rifle butts with desperate arms as the brown avalanche rushed in.

The steel to them. They went down beneath that rush of trampling feet and thrusting steel. They were no more. On past them, on over them, the thick brown tide went pouring with a roar, a wild beast howl, a roar like the sea in its deep caverns.

A handful of wounded Jovistas lay on straw pallets on the citadel's second floor, in their bloody rags, with flies humming, near their smashed field guns. Starved, gaunt eyes bright with fever. Torn, gan-

7—Wings—Fall



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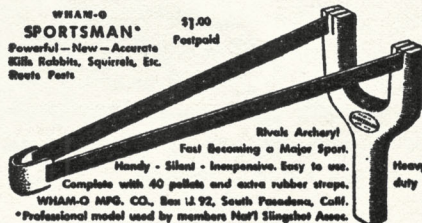
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grenous flesh and splintered bones. Great green-bottle flies went buzzing sluggishly through the steaming heat, and time stood still upon the clock, and the roar of the blood-drunk avalanche came sweeping up the stairs.

A half score, and half of them dead, and the rest dying. But "*Viva Jova!*" the living raised the whisper, struggling to arise as the brown horde surged in. "*Viva La Libertad!*" Blank steel for the carrion. "Give them a dose of pistol and the rifle muzzle to the head!"

Quick scattered shots. The flash of steel. Up to the top of the citadel the brown tide swept on.

"Jova, Jova, Jova! Give us Jova!"

Cesare Martinez, the Black Bear, paused a moment, panting, on the stairs, holding his pounding heart with a hand that trembled.

"Jova alive!" he roared. "There's no meat in a dead scorpion! Jova alive!"

The Captain-general wiped his creased sweating forehead, while the horde of panting, yelling men, of pounding naked feet, of victory-drunk and blood-drunk faces, went rushing upward past him, forcing him back close against the wall in the bend of the stairs, with his pendulous belly sucked in. He grinned with his bloodshot eyes at his aide, Captain Suarez, known as the passion orchid, who stood pressed against the wall beside him.

"We'll hang our Liberator gentleman above the pass," he said. "Plenty of good free air there for the old rascal to dance on, where all his damned *peon* and *vaquero* riff-raff, all his farmers, clerks and mountain Indians, all the filthy rabble that he's roused up with his twaddle about freedom, democracy, fair play, education, an equal chance for every man, down with corruption, and that kind of bellywash, can watch him kick his heels in the mazurka till his bones drop off. I'm not going to have the dance spoiled by some crazy fool too fond of raw steel."

"Attention!" shouted Captain Suarez, the Passion Orchid. "Jova alive!"

Brown avalanche crowding upward. Dog teeth gleaming. Lips twitching with the blood hunt, hoarse panting breath, throaty snarls of victory.

"Jova, Jova, Jova! Give us Jova!"

Above a clash of steel. A great voice bellowing over the mingled roar of the brown men. A woman's scream. That bellow again from the stair head.

"Jova! Tonight in Paradise—"

A wild roar.

Captain-general Martinez, the Black Bear, forced himself upward with his aide, squeezing against the bending wall. The stairs were jammed. They could hold no more. A solid mass of faces. The howl was being passed down from above that Jova had been taken. Captain Suarez, the conqueror's aide, forced an opening upward along the curved stair well.

"Make way! Attention there! Make way!" he shouted. "Is Jova taken?"

THE YELL came back from a dozen throats that Jova and a woman had been taken, with one Jovista officer, badly wounded. It was all a roaring.

"Jova alive!"

The constant roar. The grinning teeth. The pack of blood-drunk, yelling faces that filled the stairs.

"Attention there! Make way for the Captain-general!" the aide shouted. "The Captain-general orders that Jova and any of his more notorious lieutenants and ring-leaders are to be saved for the rope! The so-called *Padre* Hippolyto, Juan Tualoga and Veladez, most particularly, if they are taken!"

The cry was passed from throat to throat that the great priest was dead, and also the Yaqui cavalryman, but that Veladez had been taken.

"Hippolyto always swore he'd get away from me," Martinez snarled to his aide, as they forced their way upward through the throng. "There's no meat in a dead scorpion, I say. Still, Jova's taken. Pass the order up for them to keep their hands off the wench they've got. I'm not going to have any bad blood and knife-play over a filthy jade, as to which saw her first, which got her hands on her first, and so on. Promise them she'll be turned over to the army. Let's get this cleared out."

"Make way for his excellency the Captain-general! Clear out! Clear out! Assembly below on the plaza!"

THAT incessant toneless roar. The black bear brushed quick stinging green bottles away from his face with the hand that held his smoking automatic, as he went up.

"Make way for the Captain-general!" The howl went up.

"Get this rubble cleared out," growled Martinez. "Orders to Rubio, take charge of prisoners and assign burial squads. General assembly at once for the holding of a drumhead court. Distribution of rum afterward. Get them cleared out!"

"Attention!"

"Suarez, I feel—"

What Captain-general Martinez felt he never said. The stone wall which he was pressing his broad shoulders against as he slowly forced his way upward with his aide around the stair bend, was suddenly filled with a faint, intangible vibration, it seemed. The Black Bear felt the first mute trembling in his bones, like the preliminary vibration of earthquake traveling from far away, or like the trembling of a bass viol before its first hoarse note is drawn out audibly.

Then in the instant the vibrations was no longer a shivering, but a sound, which came, and grew, and roared aloud, till all the air was filled with its profound repercussion.

Boom!

A muffled, sullen, shattering roar which came traveling down the mountain slope from the crags of Chandumyumchac.

Echoing from Bolivar.

A single titanic, thunderous drumbeat. Far away. The sound was neither quick nor very loud, but heavy, as it came moving through the sky and solid earth, travelling down from the dead volcano. A sound that had a ponderous darkness in it.

Down from the mountains it came rolling, and struck like the slow blow of an ocean wave upon the thick walls of the Arsenal, upon the hot, suffocating air within that place, upon the eardrums and lungs and heart of Captain-general Cesare Martinez, the Black Bear of Hondaragua, and of all the tight-packed throng wedged together on the stairs.

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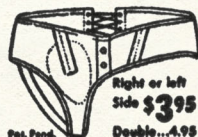
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Thunder from Chandumyumchac, from Chandumyumchac!

It came, it trembled, it passed rolling on.

For a moment the world seemed full of a breathless silence, and no man moved. Then suddenly again they were all shouting, jabbering, howling with a mingled roar and the steps were in turmoil, with some men of the packed throng trying to push their way on upward while many above turned about to heave and buffet their way down.

"Attention!"

Cesare Martinez gripped his shouting aide by the sleeve, with yellow eyeballs glaring. His hackles were bristling, and sweat glistened in the thick creases of his forehead.

"What do you make of that, Suarez?"

"Thunder!" said Suarez from the corner of his stiff lips. "Thunder from Bolivar!"

"No, no, from Chandumyumchac," growled Martinez. "And I never heard thunder like that. It came from the pass, Suarez. A mine? Have they mined—"

"They couldn't have, excellency!" Captain Suarez shouted in reply. "They haven't the sappers nor the explosive to underblow the pass! The situation is impregnable! Absolutely! It must have been a salvo from our guns!"

"Find out, fool!" snarled Martinez.

Swinging his pistol butt and clenched fist, he surged on up the stairs against the throng that was heaving down. His thick, powerful body was buffeted about. It was all he could do to keep his head up. He clawed and grunted, his mouth filled with oaths, his gun butt swinging and jerking.

"Get out of my way! Out of my way! Too many of you cattle! Assemble below! All company commanders! Get your men in order! What's all this pushing back and forth?"

But there was a deep, vague restless alarm growing in those men, hot though they were with blood and victory, which the Captain-general could not place his finger on, which even his fierce presence and savage shouts could not quell nor turn aside. Indeed, he felt the stirring of that

same vague and incoherent uneasiness in his own breast, and could no more give an explanation of it nor smother it than could his men.

SNARLING and striking with clubbed pistol, the Black Bear forced his way to the top floor of the Arsenal, where the dead priest and Juan Tualoga lay, and half a dozen of his own brown-clad men sprawling in red pools on the floor. Twenty or thirty of the victors were milling about there.

The Captain-general caught a glimpse of Jova the Liberator hanging by his wrists on an iron ring on the wall, burning eyes closed unconscious, a deep gash across his forehead and his draggled beard on his breast, broken sword at his feet. A glimpse of the white-faced girl with her midnight hair, the tall, dazed artilleryman being kicked and slammed by gun butts to force him to his feet, both of them backed up at the point of bayonets in a corner of the gun-room.

The Arsenal had been taken now from magazines to roof, the bloody week of siege and slaughter and hammering and assault was written finis to, the battle had been won, and a nation with it, the sword of Jova lay shattered. And Cesare Martinez in this moment now might well have vaunted himself the Napoleon of the Cordilleras, with all the world he knew beneath his feet.

Yet Cesare Martinez, the fierce Captain-general of the Junta, the Black Bear of Hondaragua, felt no elation swelling his breast at this moment when he surged up to the top of the hard-won citadel. Nor did he pause to survey with dramatic triumph and to gibe with choice darts of his well-known wit these last survivors of his savage might, these fatal three for whom the rope was already noosed, figuratively speaking, and the black hood sewn. It was not triumph but a feeling akin to panic in the Black Bear's breast.

He had heard thunder from Chandumyumchac. He had felt the tall hills shaking.

And the panic was in this top gun-room, too, even among the victors with their red steel. The narrow embrasure of

the gun port was crowded with brown men, officers and privates alike, all motionless, muttering, as they stared out at the slit of hot brass sky across the sun-scorched plaza toward the great dead volcanic mass of Chandumyumchac.

"Martinez!" the girl spat, with black eyes blazing. "The fat hidalgo with his dirty fingernails! The fine aristocrat with the smell of the swill still about him, in which he was born! The hirer of *apaches*!"

Like the swift, ungainly forest marauder for which he had been named, the Black Bear rushed lumberingly for the gun port. Of all faces in that room, victor and vanquished living and dead, he was conscious only of the girl Elena Jova's thin, white scornful face, as she stood backed up at the point of steel against the wall in her torn bright-colored peasant fete-day gown, her midnight hair unbound about her shoulders, with a look of death on her mocking lips and a light glowing in her great black eyes.

"Stuff rags into that slut's mouth!" snarled Martinez.

"Cristobal, my lover, awake!" she cried to the dazed artilleryman who swayed on knees beside her. "The hour has come! It is here!"

"Cara?"

"Oh, take my hand, lover!"

With strong black-haired paws the Captain-general seized the shoulders of the men crowded at the gun-port, hurling them aside.

"What's here?" he roared.

"Attention! The Captain-general!"

"Never mind that!" snarled the Black Bear, holding down the surging of his heart. "Captain Rubio, your guard company has the custody of the prisoners! Cut that carrion down, and drag him out! That other swine—Veladez, is it? We've heard his damned guns talking. Is he this *puta's* lover? Very good, he can look on while the army draws lots for her, company by company. All officers, assembly in the plaza at once, for roll-call and a drum-head court! We may be on the march!"

"On the march, excellency?"

"I don't say that we will, but we may. Have your commands ready!"

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"What's happened up at the pass, excellency?" muttered one of the brown-clad men, Rubio, the captain of the guard. "We heard a sound like thunder from the pass. It's knocked my teeth together! Do you think—?"

"A salvo from our guns!" snarled Martinez. "Salvo for victory!"

"Excellency, if that swarm of Jova's blue hellions have broken through—"

The Black Bear swung his gun butt at the muttering fellow's jaw. He kicked the sprawling victim on the floor. No panic! Stop that panic! Crush it out like a spark in powder, before it blew the living world apart.

"What do you all see here?" he shouted, thrusting his head far out the slope-walled gun embrasure, with the muttering pack hurled aside. "What are you all gawking at?"

"Excellency, a black bird in the sky!"

"A bird?" muttered the Captain-general.

HE squeezed his burly shoulders out, staring at the clear hot noon sky toward Chandumyumchac's dead volcanic crest. The blinding sun was in his eyes. Sweat, seeping down from his thick, hairy brows, filmed his vision. Blinking, he wiped his eyes with his hand.

A bugle blew below him in the wide sun-scorched plaza, sharp and clear. His brown-clad regiments were assembling in company rank. Two thousand men, four regiments, by fifties in companies.

Half as many more were up at the pass, high on crags and ledges on the shoulders of Chandumyumchac, holding the mountain gates with their flickering guns. A thousand men up there could hold the mountain gates against all the regiments from the Amazon to the Rio Grande until the granite walls of Chandumyumchac cracked and hoar frost covered hell.

Until the walls of Chandumyumchac cracked—

Again, below the Captain-general, the bugle blew its sharp, insistent note.

The trumpet and the drum.

The Black Bear wiped his sweat-filmed eyes again, blinking up. Heat waves danced on the ragged crest of the volcano.

The sun was white-hot like steel. He saw the black wings in the sky, dropping like an eagle down from the sun, from the crests of Chandumyumchac.

Captain Death was on the wing.

"Ho!" said Martinez.

It was not a word. More like a hoarse crow caw. An exclamation that was strangled in his throat.

THE Black Bear of the Cordilleras did not know who it was on the wing above him, in that hot brass noon. Yet he felt a twitching of his heart, and his tongue was dry in his mouth. On black pinions Captain Death was coming down from the crags of the dead volcano.

A great inchoate roar of voices was swelling from the plaza below the Captain-general. The half-formed regiments were breaking rank, they had begun to scatter like wind-blown autumn leaves.

Far across the plaza, in the shadow of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, where the earth-bag breastworks and gun emplacements stood, a team of run-away artillery mules dashed into view, dragging an empty gun-limber furiously over the clattering cobbles. The bugle blared again with a shrill wavering note. The bugler went running by.

There was an eddy of brown-clad men below Martinez around the broken gates of the Arsenal—some men still pouring forth, others who were already out in the open now trying to jam their way in beneath shelter and no man knowing why.

"Stand fast! Don't lose your heads, fools!" the Captain-general bellowed in a great voice. "Rally those men, Captain Suarez! Signal the artillery! It's nothing but an airplane, and a man in it!"

"Who?" cried Captain Suarez, his aide, the Passion Orchid.

"Why, just a man!" roared Cesare Martinez. "Does it look like a carrier-pigeon? Rally those fools! Signal the artillery to find range!"

His voice had risen to a howl with fear and anger. Panic! Strangle that panic! He beat his hairy fist on the ledge of the gun port.

"Rally those men! Fall in! Parade ranks! Signal the artillery to open fire!"

But still the men below were roaring with that great toneless cry. The running bugler stumbled and sprawled. He scrambled to his knees, blowing a squawking toot with his bent bugle that was like the scream of a dying loon.

Over from the Church of the Holy Sepulchre the runaway artillery team came rumbling, snorting, flashing fire from their hooves, scattering panic before them. Half-way across the plaza the gun-limber over-set, the crazy brutes went down in a tangle of harness and flying hooves, and everything was roaring

Across the shimmering bright square, across the broken cobble paving, the dead sod of the central grass plot, the sun-baked flower beds by the plaza bandstand where red geraniums flamed on dead brown stalks, the scattered regiments were scurrying like a myriad of brown ants, trailing their rifles, looking up over their shoulders with slant eyes and snarling lips at the great black bird rushing down on them.

The hot noon whined with the steep cutting of those wings. The shadow of Captain Death's black ship swept down across the plaza.

"Suarez! Signal artillery, open fire!"

But it was too late for the tangled, panic-struck gun crews to slam their hot three-inch rifles at the swift rushing shadow then, if they had been in position to do so, or if it would have had any effect.

The black ship had dropped from the crags of the dead volcano like the shadow of black lightning, and the wind of its swift passing blew on the gun crews' faces. They flung themselves flat to earth as Captain Death rushed over them—in arm's reach it seemed.

A rush, a shadow, the motor coughing, the hum of wires through the dead flat noon air. So Captain Death passed over Mayapalpa, and the gun crews, and the scattered, scurrying regiments in the plaza.

NOW in the south he swept about in a sharp hooking flipper turn, back toward the Arsenal. His singing wings rushed low over the ancient gray Church of the Holy Sepulchre, missing the tower by inches, and dropping toward the plaza.

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His motor was spitting spurts of smoke. It died in silence as his wheels settled swiftly toward ground.

Captain Death was coming down with dead stick and stalling wings, into the center of his enemies.

There was only the rushing whisper of wind on aerofoils. The fleeing brown men scattered wildly to the far fringes of the square. The sun-scorched pavement was empty except for the kicking, tangled gun-team and the red geraniums and the motionless men in brown who had lain there many days.

The black ship's wheels brushed ground in the shimmering heat. It came rolling fast toward the gates of the Arsenal.

Captain Death was on the wing no longer.

"Cover him with your rifles!" said the Captain-general.

CAPTAIN DEATH. Out of the air. Down to the heart of Mayapalpa.

He would have had to come down with that missing motor, sooner or later anyway. Even with half his cargo jettisoned above the pass, he could not have flown back again the long air miles he had come, should he have chosen to turn around and attempt it. Yet it was not the missing motor and the low gas tanks only which had brought Captain Death down off the wing into the center of his enemies.

The Liberator was in the Black Bear's hands. The Arsenal had fallen.

He must come down. In the air he might continue to keep those brown regiments scattered for the time being, with a little help from his Vickers. But he couldn't save Jova in the air. Nor would that fierce blue horde now pouring through the pass above come down in time to save their Liberator.

"To ground!" thought Captain Death. "To the Arsenal. To the eye to eye. To the gun to gun. To the powwow. Perhaps to Kismet. But let us assume, as a basis of operations, that Captain-general Martinez is a man of sense."

Steep on one wing he whipped around above Mayapalpa's heat-shimmering plaza and the rearing gun-teams and the scattering little brown men. He settled,

skimmed the earth, with his tongue between his teeth, sitting very softly and lightly in his seat, and put his wheels down lightly as a feather in the center of the great bare square. Not a jar that would have broken a bubble. He took a deep breath then.

He had brought his cargo down, or half of it. He was on ground. With dead stick he went rolling at diminished speed straight at the gray pile of the Arsenal.

Hard up against the broken gates he stalled his black wings to a halt. His engine head had even pushed a yard or so in beneath the dark entrance arch. The citadel's granite wall rose straight and sheer above him, shell-hammered and with blackened gun-ports.

Behind him, all across the plaza, men were running. There were men massed in the darkness beneath the entrance arch in front of him, too—whether living or dead, he could not see. The whole hot world seemed motionless and silent after the roaring of the sky.

Hot noon. The Arsenal. He was here.

He sprang up. From his seat cushion he stepped deftly up onto his top wing, and took a stand there lifting his face with a laugh.

"Senors!" he said with a flourish, staring up.

Fifteen or twenty feet straight overhead up the granite wall, in the slope-sided gun embrasure of the Arsenal's top floor, rifles were pointed steadily at him and his ship. He saw the brown fingers crooked on the triggers, the watchful eyes behind. He stood astraddle on the top of his black ship, knuckles on his hips, head bent backward, laughing up.

"Senors!" he said. "A pleasant day to you! And you, the Captain-general!"

He brought his lean brown hand up in a salute to the black-bearded countenance of Cesare Martinez, the Captain-general of the Junta, the Napoleon of the Cordilleras, who was peering down at him murderously over the gun ledge. Four stars on the Black Bear's epaulets, and a pistol in his hairy fist.

"My salute!" said the adventurer.

And if there was mockery in the gesture or the word, it would have required

a more subtle intelligence than Cesare Martinez's to have discerned it.

"El señor el Capitan-general Cesare Martinez, I am not mistaken?" said Captain Death in his cool, clear voice. "The Black Bear of Hondaragua! The field marshal of the Junta! The sword of the aristocracy! The slaughterer of *peons*! And so forth, and farther! Or am I mistaken?"

"You are not mistaken," the Captain-general growled down. "Who are you?"

"Captain Death," said the bright-eyed adventurer.

The weapon tightened in the hairy fist of the Captain-general. With round yellow eyeballs and thick creased forehead he stared down. He was muttering in his throat. There was sweat on his face.

"The *gringo*?" he muttered, in a voice that had lost its roaring tone.

"At your service," said Captain Death.

MARTINEZ'S black hair bristled. His thumb slid up along the butt of his blunt pistol. The rifles beside him did not waver. He stared down at the famous adventurer with a watchful and dangerous look.

"What brings you here, *gringo*?" he snarled. "One tricky move from you, my smiling friend, and you will be blown from where you stand to the top crags of Bolivar!"

Captain Death looked at the tall mass of the old volcano against the sky. He looked at the black ship beneath his feet, with one eyebrow lifted quizzically. He looked at the Captain-general above him, and he laughed. He did not doubt that Martinez had spoken the truth.

He touched his breast pocket carelessly.

"A letter from his excellence, Dr. Fernando Romano y Diaz, minister plenipotentiary from the Hondaraguan Republic to the government of the United States," he said in a matter-of-fact way. "Let that serve as my first credential to you, *Senor el Capitan-general*."

Mortinez's eyes were full of inquiry.

"A messenger from Romano?" he said.

"Merely a carrier-pigeon," said Captain Death.




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"Remain where you are, precisely!" ordered the Captain-general. "Don't try to escape, let me advise you, if there's any such thought in the back of your mind. I will send a guard detail down to escort you up, with your communication. Suarez!"

"I can make it more quickly this way, with your excellency's permission," said Captain Death.

With the word he leaped and caught hold of an iron bar above him, that jutted out from the stone face of the Arsenal over the shattered entrance arch and gates about three feet, and on which in old days an alarm bell had probably been suspended to ring war tocsins, though no bell hung there now.

With quick, strong arms, the adventurer pulled himself up onto the bar. His feet sought toeholds between the ancient stones, his fingers hooked swiftly into chinks above him, and he went mounting and swarming up the granite face of the Arsenal with lithe, agile rapidity, as quick as any cat.

"Stop!" roared Martinez. "Get down, you clawing devil!"

But Captain Death had already grasped the ledge of the top gun-port, and lifted himself with a spring like a jack-in-the-box. Up into the Captain-general's face.

He swung himself to a careless seat on the embrasure's edge with his legs hanging over, and looked with head aslant and one lifted eyebrow at the rifle and pistol muzzles which were thrust against his flank. He laughed at Cesare Martinez's hairy, sweating countenance that was closely pressed against his own.

"I see you are quick on the trigger," he said. "But I come with a letter from Romano."

The Black Bear was breathing stertorously. The speed and agility with which the famous adventurer had come swarming straight up the stone wall at him—though not so difficult a feat as it looked from above—had turned Martinez somewhat green in the liver. He knew a good deal of Captain Death's reputation, moreover. He growled an inaudible word.

Yet, all said, it appeared to him now that there was nothing very dangerous

about the fellow. There he sat on the sloping window ledge, the notorious Captain Death, with a tight smile on his lips and a bright sparkle in his eyes, but with no gun belt on, and of a build not at all big or muscular. One push would send him down faster than he'd come up, thought the Captain-general grimly.

Captain Death! A name. Like any other name. Well, he might be something in the sky. But he was no longer on the wing.

Cesare Martinez breathed heavily. He grunted.

"You come from Fernando Romano?" he said.

"Si. Romano's name is one that has authority with you, *Senor?*" said Captain Death.

"It has," said Martinez.

"I thought so," said the adventurer.

HIS quick eyes had flickered past the Black Bear's shoulder as he spoke, past the men with guns who stood behind Martinez, taking in with one swift glance the gun-room at the top of the captured citadel.

Jova and the girl, and one Jovista officer, blond as a Saxon. Those three, and no more. But Jova was still alive, and on his life depended those of a helpless and crucified people. Jova's sword was broken, but his bold free heart still beat, and a new sword could be forged. Captain Death had come at the thirteenth hour. But even yet, not too late.

The girl's large liquid eyes were fixed on the famous adventurer. His glance brushed hers in passing, and all terror had been lifted from her look then, all despair, even any doubt. He had come. No fear now.

It was a heavy burden, thought Captain Death, it was often very tragic, how lavishly and implicitly women trusted the quick and strong and valiant. How women and children trusted, and humble men. For her, all despair was over. He was there.

Only he himself, and no one else knew how perilous this hour was, and on what a thin knife edge of fate it rested. He sat lightly, quick and watchful, alert to each

move about him, the shadows on each face, the hands that held the rifles. And he was smiling. The light was in his eyes.

He gave the girl no sign, nor Jova. A flicker of his quick bright glance, and then again he was looking with his cool smile into the ominous and searching eyes of the Captain-general, so quickly that Martinez was unaware his glance had shifted for that brief moment.

"Let's see your communication from Romano," growled Martinez with wary suspicion.

Captain Death's left hand darted to his breast. Before the Captain-general could follow the quick gesture or summon any alarm, the adventurer had pulled forth the letter which he had received the previous evening from the big blond Hondaraguan conspirator in Washington.

"My first credential, *Senor*," he said, presenting it with a flourish.

The Captain-general was breathing heavily.

"Watch yourself, *Senor*!" he growled. "You move too quick! Yes, you move a shade too quick, *Senor*. I halfway thought—"

Growling, he took the letter. He scanned it with moving lips.

"Well, this is nothing more than a non-committal note from *Senor Romano* to yourself, and giving no information," he said with an oath. "Romano requests an appointment with you, soliciting your services. You haven't flown two thousand miles like a black buzzard to hand me this, *Senor el Capitan*, at the Arsenal in Mayapalpa among my men! I understood you had a message to me from Romano."

"Merely a credential," said Captain Death.

"You have better credentials than this, I trust?" growled the Black Bear.

"I have," said Captain Death.

"Then what is the purpose of this which you have handed me?"

"Introducing myself," said Captain Death.

Martinez scowled.

"Not necessary," he said.

Again he scrutinized the note laboriously, with muttering lips.

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"It's Romano's hand," he said. "It's bona fide. I see that he requests your services for a group of men in desperate peril. What group of men is *Senor* Romano interested in, now doomed—as he puts it—to quick destruction?"

Captain Death was smiling at some joke of his own, at some joke deep in his breast. With one eyebrow lifted he glanced away from the Captain-general and out at the hot brass noon. At the hills. At the mountain slope with its long brown trails winding down. At the crags of Chandum-yumchac.

"Yourself, *Senor el Capitan-general*," he said softly. "Yourself, and your men."

MARTINEZ laughed harshly. "Seriously, fool," he said. "To what does Romano refer in this note? What service did he contract with you to be performed, which has brought you here?"

He gave a half jerk of his head toward an officer behind him as he spoke.

"Communicate!" he ordered parenthetically, over his shoulder. "His excellency Dr. Fernando Romano. A query in regard to the *gringo* Juan Death."

His teeth shone yellow through his hairy lips, grinning at the adventurer.

"You will not take offense, I trust," he said, "if I check up on you, esteemed *Senor*? Be assured that whatever story you tell me will be verified, and quickly. Before twenty-four hours have passed, I will have communicated by mountain heliograph and cable with his excellency in Washington.

"I've understood that you're inclined to Jova. And Romano is no man's fool—he'd know the same about you. What was this service for which he called on you? I advise you to tell the truth, and quickly. If you are on a mission from Romano, all will be well with you. If not, there are worse ends than a firing squad, my smiling friend."

"Many," said Captain Death. "Many I could tell you of that you do not know."

He looked into Martinez's yellow eyes with a small bright fire in his own.

"His excellency Dr. Romano," he said, "was less certain than the circumstances

warranted, *Senor el Capitan-general*, of the outcome of your siege on the Arsenal. Operating on the supposition that Jova's relief might yet break through before the Arsenal fell, the learned and humanitarian doctor commissioned me to drop supplies for Jova."

"For Jova?" repeated the Captain-general.

"Eight hundred pounds," said Captain Death between his teeth. "Cargoes on board me as beans and tomatoes, beef and bread, by Guiterriez and Cohen, cigar manufacturers, at Key West this morning, to be delivered to the Arsenal."

The Captain-general stared with bulging eyes and muttering lips.

"Let me understand you," he said. "Supplies for Jova—from Romano?"

"That was the understanding," said Captain Death.

There was a mist swimming before the Captain-general's bulging eyeballs. His thick forehead was creased and sweating. Silent words moved on his lips like shadows on a wall. Suddenly he burst into a bellow of hoarse laughter.

"And you, you fool," he roared, "you walked into that trap?"

"Trap?" said Captain Death.

"Noose!" said Martinez.

"Noose?" said Captain Death.

"Fool!" the Captain-general roared, with curling lips. "Are you not even now aware that, after myself, Fernando Romano is head and brains of the revolutionary Junta? And Guiterriez and Cohen are the Junta's fiscal agents? Sooner would I myself take sword in the Liberator's cause than Romano send one bean to feed him, or give him one drop in hell! Brainless dolt, did you think that Romano was sending you to succor Jova?"

"No," said Captain Death in a low, flat voice. "I didn't think so."

"You didn't think so?" repeated Martinez, with creased brows.

"No," said Captain Death.

THE laughter had faded from the Captain-general's face. His jaundiced eyeballs were bulging once more, and he blinked the sweat from them. He muttered to himself. Breathing heavily, he

pressed his face within six inches of the smiling adventurer's. He moistened his lips.

"Let me understand you, *Senor!*" he said. "You knew that you were not being sent to drop supplies for Jova. Then why, *Senor el Capitan*, are you here?"

Captain Death leaned forward out the gun port, glancing down. The sun-baked plaza was filled again with the brown men like ants, all running toward the Arsenal, with a vast hoarse wordless cry. He looked up at the mountains, at the crags of Chandumyumchac, at the long brown trails winding down. He looked at the Black Bear of Hondaragua, and his teeth had snapped together, like a man who bites a thread in two.

The thread of life.

"Why am I here, Captain-general?" he said. "To bring the supplies that were meant for Jova. Half of my cargo I delivered at the pass, upon your guns, Martinez. The rest is in my ship, below, to be delivered."

"Let me understand you!"

"Four hundred pounds of trinitrotoluene, if you must have the word for it," said Captain Death, "with enough fulminate of mercury to kick the starter over at a breath, and blow this world to hell."

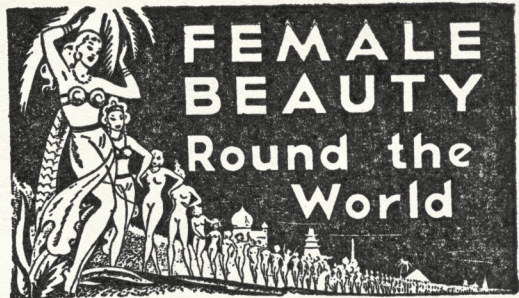
"Let me understand you!" croaked the Captain-general.

"By all means," said the adventurer with cool eyes. "And to the furtherance of that better understanding, *Senor*, I present the rest of my credentials, with your permission."

His bright eyes flashed.

He had watched the rifles behind Martinez, and the hands upon the triggers. And now the body of the Black Bear, by a shift in position, by a staggering and swaying on his feet, was between Captain Death and the rifles for the moment, and Martinez's own gun had wavered, turned aside. The moment that Captain Death had watched and waited for had clicked.

Once more the adventurer's lean left hand had moved toward his breast, with that same lightning gesture he had used before when he pulled Romano's letter forth, and which the Black Bear had been



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too slow to catch. And quick as Captain Death had been before, he was even quicker now.

"Permit me!" he said. "A fuller introduction!"

The muzzle was against the Captain-general's groin. Cesare Martinez pressed forward against the sharp prod of the lean blue muzzle, sagging at the knees. His pendulous belly overlapped the gun as it pushed into his flesh. The heavy automatic dropped clattering from his own stiffened and relaxing fingers, and he did not even know that it had fallen.

"One shot at that black ship below me," said Captain Death, "and these walls, this town, you and your men, are blown to the top crags of Bolivar and the gorges of Chandumyumchac! I think you understand? Above all, you impress me as a man of sound and brilliant sense, *Senor Martinez!*"

"What are the terms?" croaked the Captain-general.

"Let General Jova stand forth," said the adventurer, "and dictate them."

"I'll see you in hell first!"

"Probably," said Captain Death. "But, if it is to be done, give me the word. Let it be done quickly. For Jova's men have come through the mountain gates, and over the debris of your shattered guns, and they are coming down!"

The Black Bear of Hondaragua lifted his bloodshot glance to the shadow of the hills. Sweat filmed his eyes. He wiped them with a heavy hand, and looked again. He looked up at the hills.

On through the mountain gates, down the long winding trails of the hither slope, with ragged banners flying in the sun, Jova's wild mountain warriors were pouring like a swift blue river!

Jova's fierce regiments had burst through the sundered mountain gates, and they were sweeping down!

ON Mayapalpa's great central square, brown men were running with a great formless cry, and guns wheeling about, tangled with their limbers, and riderless horses dashing by. Toward the Arsenal the wild tide swirled and eddied, and there were a thousand men in panic

clawing, swirling, struggling there, with a great cry. Struggling to get away, to get away.

"Excellency! Excellency!"

The beast roar!

"Excellency!"

And the wheeling gun-limbers overset, the riderless horses dashing by.

"Attack! Attack!" the bugle blew.

But the regiments were scattered and the mountain gates were broken and the tall guns were smashed on Chandumyumchac. And with white steel beneath the sun, following Captain Death with a wild mountain yell, from the slope of the dead volcano Jova's fierce horde was pouring down.

The wild beast cry!

"Attack! Retreat!" the crazy bugle blew.

There were little brown men by scores and hundreds fleeing away from the edges of the plaza then, throwing away their rifles as they ran.

Captain-general Cesare Martinez, the Black Bear of the Middle Americas, the Commander of the Sons of Cortez, the companion of the Condor, sweated great drops of brine into his beard. His eyes were glazed, his tongue clabbered. The lean right hand of Captain Death, as tight as steel, as strangling as the rope, was gripped about his hairy throat, holding him as a shield against the rifles behind him, and the pistol of Captain Death was pressed four inches deep into his belly button.

"Do you understand?" said Captain Death.

The Captain-general made a gesture with his hand, and the adventurer loosed his hold upon the throat.

"Let Jova—dictate—the terms," gasped Martinez.

DOWN from the mountain, pouring down, with banners and steel beneath the sun, came Jova's fierce mountain warriors! The plaza of Mayapalpa was deserted, except for the riderless horses and the tangled gun-carriages and the dead men lying on the pavement like waves of seaweed left by an ebbing tide. The roaring died away.

"Retreat! Retreat!" the fainting bugle blew.

Captain Death put a cigarette between his lips. He glanced slantwise with eyes at the dark-haired girl. He was beginning to grow uncomfortable.

General Jova staggered toward him.

"Captain!" the great Liberator croaked. "Captain Death—"

"Some other time," said the adventurer hastily, looking at his wrist.

He held up his hand. He had a suspicion that the old warrior was about to grow oratorical. Perhaps even try to kiss him. The star-eyed girl was moving toward him across the gun-room, too, with her hand in the reeling blond artilleryman's. Perhaps they also were going to grow osculatory.

"Some other time," said the adventurer hastily. "Excuse me, I'm in a hurry now. I think I know what's been kicking up with my motor, and I'll straighten it out in jig time, then borrow a can of gas somewhere. If you've got any mountains you want landscaped off the map, just name them and I'll dump this load I'm carrying down on them on my way back. I've got to be in Washington as quick as I can make it, to collect some important money a bird owes me there."

He dropped himself feet first over the gun-port ledge. The artilleryman and Jova had Martinez's big blue automatic, as well as an armful of rifles which had been dropped in the panic flight.

Except for the big Captain-general of the defunct Junta, there was no other of the brown-clad insurrectos left. They had fled down the stairs of the Arsenal, officer and private, at the word that Captain Death had spoken—"trinitro-toluene!"—and at sight of the blue horde swarming down with steel on the slope of Chandum-yumchac. Jova had the Arsenal, he had Mayapalpa, he had all of Hondaragua now.

Just for an instant Captain Death hung on the window ledge, staring in with his bright-eyed smile. His feet sought toe-holds in the chinks of the crumbling wall.

"Adios!" he said. "Adios!"

And disappeared from sight.

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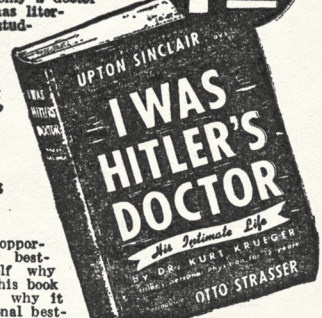
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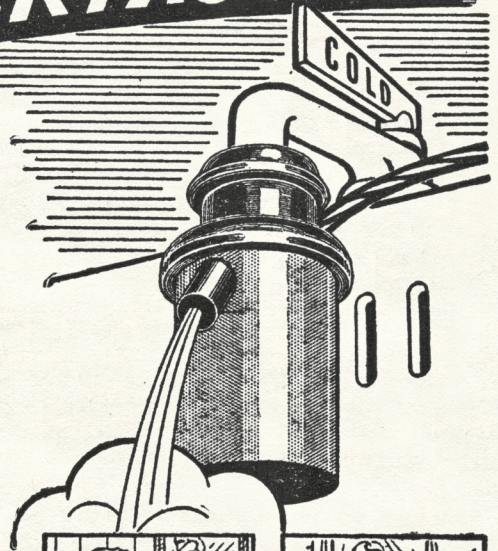
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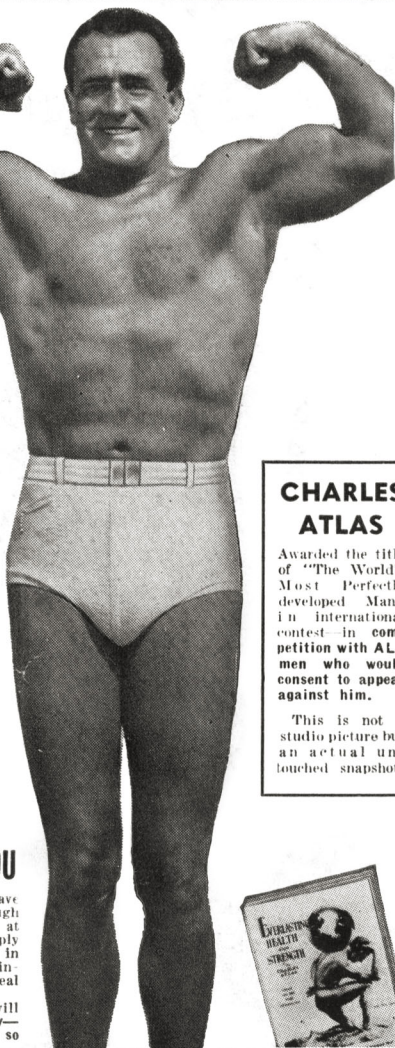
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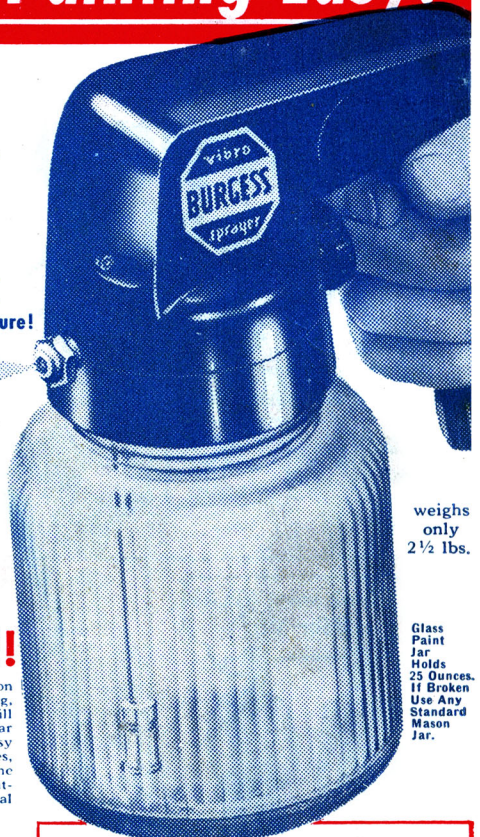
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