

# Isle of Lost Ships

By Donald E. Keyhoe

*Far from the haunts of men flew a strange and sinister craft, pivoting on mighty wings, its twelve engines droning out an ominous symphony. From it bristled the ugly snouts of guns, behind them grim, bearded faces—and stark white against its black bow was mounted a grinning skull. When this winged monster, struck, it left no trace—for dead ships tell no tales! A smashing, complete novel of the clouds.*

## CHAPTER I

“BUT why in the world,” objected Walt Brown, the genial aviation editor of the *Globe*, “should anybody try to stop you from hopping the pond, if you and ‘Porky’ want to risk your crazy necks?”

Gil Tracy, test pilot for Transatlantic Airways, drew heavily on his cigarette before answering.

“I know it sounds goofy,” he replied finally. “But there’ve been so many queer things around here, I’m beginning to wonder if the place isn’t jinxed.”

“You mean those two Dorniers that disappeared?” Walt asked.

Gil sat up suddenly. There was a startled look on his tanned face. “What do you mean, disappeared?” he said. “They both cracked up.”

“Well, when they crack up out in the drink, they usually disappear, don’t they?” Walt countered. “No, but really, Gil, everybody’s talking about it. It was bad enough when the first one went blooey, with twelve engines and the latest equipment on board.”

“I know. I got the blame for it. Old Man Bates said the ship wasn’t O.K. or she wouldn’t have crashed in,” scoffed Walt.

“Listen, Gil,” said Walt, “I know you’ve got your orders not to talk. But it doesn’t add up right. Those Dorniers would fly on any seven engines. They had automatic gyro pilots for blind flying. They had ice eliminating shields. They were on

radio-beacon courses between here and the first seadrome. The weather was fair here, and moderately good at the drome. On top of that, the crews were trained for six months in that kind of flying.

“Then what happens? The old bus just hops off and nobody ever sees her again. Laugh that off!”

Gil knew that Walt was right. From the very first, he had felt there was something decidedly rotten in the air lane between New York and the first of the seadromes which Transatlantic Airways had built and had towed to their anchorages along the route. But orders were orders. Not even when the second Dornier went the way of the first did Mortimer Bates, the multi-millionaire backer of the line, or Slade, the operations manager, admit it was other than extremely bad luck. “Well, let’s forget that,” said Walt, seeing Gil’s irritation, “Maybe your own story won’t have the lid clamped on it. You honestly think somebody tried to bump you off last night?”

“Think so?” grinned Gil. “Say, if you heard a bullet whiz by your ear a couple of inches away, would you think somebody was playing drop the handkerchief? I’d been out to see that our bus was locked up tight—we’ve been careful about it, even keeping a watchman on the hangar, ever since the night some bird tried to set it on fire. Well, I was coming back to my car when I heard a shot. But I couldn’t find a—”

He was interrupted by the whirlwind entrance of his assistant, Porky Baines, who had evidently been running. He was out of breath.

“They’ve done it, Gil—they’ve done it!” he panted.

“Done what?” Gil demanded.

“The ship,” groaned Porky. “Somebody got in last night and wrecked it.”

GIL went white with fury. It was the end of their dream. For six months they had slaved and

planned for the non-stop flight from New York to Madrid. The Lockheed had been purchased with every cent they had, and three thousand borrowed from backers. And now it was all over!

"It's tough, old man—a damned dirty trick," Walt said quietly. "But maybe we can snag whoever's behind it. You said you had a watchman. Where was he?"

Gil whirled on Porky.

"Get Murray in here, and if he's mixed up in this, I'll break his crooked neck!"

His fists clenched savagely. Porky seized the telephone and snapped a number. There was a brief conversation. It ended as Porky slammed down the phone with a roar of rage.

"Randolph took him off," he yelled, leaping to his feet. "Murray said Randolph asked him what he was doing there last night and then told him to beat it. Said he was giving orders around—"

That was as far as he got. Gil was out of the door like a cyclone, headed on a dead run for the Transatlantic Airways offices. Porky dashed after him breathlessly.

"Where's Randolph?" Gil snarled as he flung open the door of the assistant manager's office.

"He's in conference with Mr. Bates and Mr. Slade," said the girl. "Something important. They can't be disturbed."

"Can't, huh?" Gil's blue eyes were gimlet points of anger. "Well, take a good look!"

He crossed the passage to Slade's office. Behind him hurried Porky Baines and with Gil strode into the room.

Eight men were seated around a long mahogany table. At the head was Mortimer Bates, gray-haired, fierce of eye, with the look of a stubborn fighter on his stern old face. But Gil paid no attention to him nor to Slade, the tall, lean operations manager. He walked with quick determined steps around to Randolph, on whose face he saw an expression of sudden alarm. He seized the assistant manager by one arm and hauled him out of his chair onto the floor.

"Get away from me, you lunatic!" shrieked Randolph, his handsome face a picture of fright.

"You like having things smashed up, don't you?" Gil said in a voice of repressed fury. "Well, take a good look at your mug after this!"

HIS fist crashed into the other man's face. Randolph's head went back. Gil drove in a wicked jab and knocked him to the floor. Then he turned and faced the group at the table. His rage was suddenly spent. His eyes rested on Slade's hawk like countenance. Something always made him think of Slade as having been pressed between the covers of a huge book, so long and thin was his face and body. His sharp nose curved down over small, thin lips, and his cool gray eyes were set too close to his nose, as though they, too, had suffered in the pressing process.

"I guess you want an explanation," Gil said.

"Maybe you think it's funny, Tracy, but this will cost you your job," Bates snapped. "Who do you think you are to come bursting in here, breaking up an important conference?"

"It's not who I am," said Gil calmly, "it's how I feel. And you'd do the same, if some dirty sneak had taken the guard off your ship and let his gang in to smash it up."

"What?" roared Bates.

"Our Lockheed, the one we bought for the ocean hop," explained Gil. "We hired a guard for it after somebody tried to set it on fire, and this yellow crook threw our guard off the field. The plane's wrecked."

"What about this, Randolph?" barked Mortimer Bates. "Did you remove their guard?"

"Yes," said Randolph sullenly. "I didn't see any sense in a strange guard out here, when we've been losing ships at sea the way we have. He might be an agent of Oceanic Skyways, trying to put the next Dornier on the blink."

"Just a minute," cut in Slade, curtly. "Tracy, you and Baines will consider yourselves suspended until I investigate this. Perhaps Randolph was wrong, taking off the guard, but what reason would he have for cracking up your plane?"

"Mr. Slade," said Gil with conviction, "someone doesn't want us to make that hop. I'm putting this thing in the hands of the police right now."

"Hold on there, you two," said Bates. "Slade, we don't want any publicity, on top of what's happened already. I've got a hunch. If these two youngsters are so crazy to be fighting, why not give them a chance?"

"I don't understand," said Slade.

“Simple enough,” grunted Bates. “Let ‘em go along and escort the next Dornier. Let ‘em take those two Hawks you were going to sell, and fly a close formation with the big ship. I was going to suggest a guard, anyway. I’m through sending out unarmed planes until we find what happened to those first two. The next one carries a guard inside, too, armed with Thompson guns.”

Bates turned to Gil and Porky. “You already know we’ve lost two planes,” he said. “Maybe you’ve wondered, the same as the rest. Now Phillips here”—he indicated a prim little man at one side—“comes from Lloyds this morning and says they won’t insure us anymore. They’ve got some wild idea those two planes are still afloat.”

Gil and Porky stared. Phillips sniffed.

“I already explained, Mr. Bates,” he said, “that we had our reasons. Mr. Slade thought it might all be a trick of Oceanic Skyways, But”—he paused impressively—“Oceanic has also lost two ships!”

“Good Lord, it just can’t be!” muttered Mortimer Bates.

“I have proof—” began Phillips, frostily.

“Oh, I mean their crashing,” snapped Bates. “You know damned well four big multi-engined planes never crashed into the Atlantic from ordinary causes.”

“I must ask you to keep it confidential,” Phillips whispered, “but we are positive that the same forces were responsible for the sinking of the United Transport steamship Lucia, just last month—if she did sink.”

“What do you mean?” blurted out Porky Baines. “Gosh, where could they hide the old wagon?”

“Where could they hide four huge transatlantic planes?” retorted Phillips. “That’s what we’d like to know. We think the ship was sunk, for a few bits of wreckage were found near the location where her radio went silent. But how and why, we don’t know.”

“Never mind the steamer,” Mortimer Bates grunted. “She didn’t belong to us. But we’ve lost two twelve-engined Dorniers, costing three-quarters of a million apiece. And by the Almighty I’m going to find where those planes went if it takes my last cent!”

As they all filed out he turned to Gil.

“Don’t worry about that Lockheed. If you boys get this ship through to the first drome, I’ll see the

ship is rebuilt for you, and I’ll throw in a new engine besides. I’ll check up on Randolph, too, but keep away from him till we know something.”

## CHAPTER II

FAR from the haunts of men, circling beneath a brassy sky, flew a queer and sinister craft. Like a great hawk waiting for its prey, it pivoted on mighty wings, twelve engines droning out an ominous symphony. From every port in the huge mid-deck bristled the ugly snouts of guns, behind them the faces of a motley crew—bearded, grim, vicious.

Suddenly wheeling from its turn, it dove at a speck hardly visible on the surface of the gray sea below. As the rolling waves came nearer, a black object hurtled down from the mighty plane. With a flash of flame and smoke it struck squarely upon the little schooner beneath. In a few moments naught remained but a few bits of drifting wreckage, a mute testimony to the tragedy that had occurred.

As the red sun sank lower in the western sky, the black-bearded figure beside the thin-lipped pilot spoke a curt command. The big ship banked, changed its course. Straight from the sun it flew, till at last it dipped down to a secret lair, the oddest haven human eyes had ever seen.

But strange as all this was, there was something stranger still. For, as the great wings dipped, the rays of the setting sun flashed full on the bow of the winged monster. And glistening there, stark white against a deadly black—horrible, grim, hideous—was mounted a grinning skull!

As if in greeting to this grisly emblem, a flag fluttered in the evening breeze from the base below. A leering skull, above crossed bones, with empty, sightless eyes—the fearful Jolly Roger, the terrible black flag of bygone pirate days.

Skillfully the pilot landed his huge craft and brought it to a stop. The bearded giant beside him stalked through the great cabin, down to the group that had gathered to meet him. He singled out one man, a pale youth with a scraggly beard.

“Flash this to the Chief,” he said, and his deep voice seemed to rumble from the depths of his polished boots. “We found the vessel, the

Carnegie II, and bombed her to hell and gone. She'll tell no tales."

"I've got a relay flash from the Chief," said the other. He held out a message scrawled on paper. "The next Dornier's going to carry a guard inside, and three fighters for escort."

The giant snatched the paper from him. His brows drew together darkly. But as he read, a grim smile spread over his thick lips. He chuckled deeply.

"The Chief is smart," he said.

FOR the second time since they had headed out to sea, Gil Tracy felt that strange premonition of disaster. He stared up into the brassy sky, then back over the tail of his cruising Hawk, but the sky was empty as before, except for the fighters of Porky Baines and Walt Brown. Below them the Columbia No. 3 of the Dornier ships, swept majestically along, its twelve engines giving out a monotonous thunder as it headed southeast toward the first of the floating seadrome bases.

Inside the great hull of the Dornier was a guard, carefully selected from the ground force of Transatlantic Airways, besides a special guard Bates had employed to augment the others and assist in warding off any possible attack. They were only 75 miles from the seadrome and the sky was clear of any foe.

And yet the disturbing thought came back—it had been somewhere near this position that four huge transports had mysteriously disappeared, with not the slightest hint as to their fate.

Suddenly Gil saw figures moving about in the glassed-in control compartment. One of them seemed to be signaling him. He pushed the stick forward and glided down. Porky and Walt followed their leader, on their respective sides.

Gil edged in skillfully. The Hawk rocked and swayed in the propeller blast of the tip engines, but he held his position. Then he looked across. To his surprise a strange face stared from the compartment. It flashed over him that he had not seen this man either in the guard or in the crew. But before he had time to think twice, the glass panel next to him slid down into its recess.

Some instinct made him rudder out swiftly. Then it happened, like some horrible nightmare.

Windows flashed open in the Dornier's hull, and from the openings were hastily thrust the ugly

snouts of Thompson guns. Dazed with astonishment, Gil saw the rest as some series of weird dreams, broken, almost without meaning—scenes in which he had no part.

Crimson fire, spurting from black muzzles . . . vicious faces, dark with murder-lust, spraying leaden death from weaving guns . . . a savage *br-r-r-r-r* rising above the engines drone, like a death rattle, maddening, terrible.

Walt's ship, sheering wildly, caught full before those flaming guns, twisting, turning, its nose belching black smoke. A glimpse of Walt's face, white, streaked with blood.

His own Hawk leaping at first rattle of those deadly guns, jumping like a beast in fright, shaking as bullets crashed into its wings, twisting upward over the big wing. The fiends below frantically seeking his heart, firing, firing, an endless, hellish barrage.

Porky, in a wild sideslip that took him from sight on the other side, tracers smoking after him. Killers' guns on all sides, blazing, murderous. His own voice, hoarse, terrible: "Walt, Walt. Oh, my God!" Walt's ship, now a flaming coffin, burning its fiery way down the sky to doom. A tumbling figure, pushing out from that inferno, falling over and over, merging at last with the gray sea.

AS HIS mind cleared for a moment, a ricochet bullet crashed through the side of his helmet, hot, searing as it creased his head above the ear. His head went back like a trip-hammer. Then again those dazed thoughts . . . warm blood trickling down his face, dribbling into his mouth . . . the odd, salty taste of it. His stick, jerking in his hands under another raking fire! A shattering of glass dials before him, splinters gashing his hands.

His helmet, its strap severed, tore free and thudded back into the tail. He drew a sobbing breath as the raking fire ceased, then laughed crazily. He was free. But where was Porky? Had they got him, too—downed that brave, crazy little peeler who had fought through a hundred scraps with him before? A lump came into his throat, choking him. His eyes filled, but he dashed the tears away and narrowed his eyes to slits of bitter hate. But almost at once they widened in surprise, and a shout of sheer relief and joy burst from his lips. For Porky had zoomed like a bullet out from

under the Dornier's hull, streaking up out of range in a flash.

Good old Porky! Porky had kept his head, ducking under the Columbia to weather the storm. Gil raced across to join him. They climbed madly while the baffled killers leaned out from the suddenly tilted transport and shredded the air behind them.

For a few seconds they circled out of danger. Did they dare fire on the big ship? Gil guessed that there had been crooks hidden in some of the Dornier's cabins, perhaps with the connivance of part of the crew. Some of the armed guard might even have been traitors. But were all the innocent ones killed?

The answer came sooner than he expected. The Dornier had leveled off into straight flight. Now one of the cabin doors slid back, and before Gil's horrified eyes a struggling figure was hurled out into space. Then another, and another.

Soul-sick, Gil turned his eyes away for a second. When he looked back, the pitiful wretches thrown to their deaths were but specks, far below. As he stared down, they were swallowed up in the gray sea.

Gil's eyes were lit with the lust to destroy; his face was a terrible mask. One thought raced through his brain—kill, kill, kill!

Guns flaming, he plunged onto the Dornier like a demon from hell. The big ship sheered, cringed away like a living thing in fright. His bullets wrote a dancing pattern of death up its lurching back. It skidded off wildly, banking to throw him off. He kicked around, full on, croaking in triumph. The glass control pit panels crashed under his bullets.

In the wrecked pit crouched a terrified group. His slugs hailed into them, stabbing like an invisible sword.

Gloating, cursing through bared teeth, he sprayed the pilot's back with hurtling lead. The pilot fell, his body sprawling across the others, plunging to the rocking floor.

Gil zoomed as the Dornier went into a dive. Porky charged across the tail, pounding rudder and flippers. But suddenly the mighty ship pulled up, leveled, and came around viciously. Living hands once more were on the controls.

Gil dived again. He was like a maniac now, his hair streaming in the shrieking wind, goggles

gone, his eyes red, burning, but hot with killing-lust. He was almost on the ship when he saw two gunners kneeling in the control pit, staring, white-faced, behind their stuttering guns. Scarlet eyes winked hideously at him as he pulled up. Tearing slugs crashed into his beating prop, hammering like mad. It let go with a scream. The Hawk shook mightily. Gil's fingers snapped the switch and the racking engine died.

Consumed with a fierce hate for the ones who had cheated him of his revenge, Gil jammed the stick down and stood the Hawk on its nose. His guns belched hot steel straight into the control pit—piercing, deadly. The plane seemed to leap up at him. In a moment it would be the end. But he would take them with him in that last terrific crash.

ONLY one of the kneeling men remained in the bloody pit. His gun spat furiously and died as he pitched back, his face a scarlet mask. A crashing bullet bit into Gil's shoulder, stunning his right arm. It fell from the stick. The Hawk lifted its nose slightly, and in one last breathless return to sanity, Gil seized the stick with his left hand and hurtled the Hawk past the Dornier's bow with hardly a yard to spare.

He had a flashing glimpse of the pit strewn with its dead or dying, a bloody shambles. A wild hope shot through him that perhaps he had killed the last pilot, but it died a quick death. As he hauled out of the dive and stared upward, he saw the Dornier banking around to meet Porky's savage plunge. Gil swore. How many pilots did the devils have? Twice he had wiped out the control-pit group, and still the winged leviathan flew on.

It came down in a fast spiral after Gil. He swerved, slipping away, but his silent engine betrayed him. He could not escape. In a few moments it would be over—they would wipe out the second witness of that wholesale murder, as they had wiped out Walt. Then it would be Porky's turn. The secret of the lost transports would be buried beneath the waves.

Gil leveled off, hitting diagonally into the wind so as to cross a rolling wave at an easy angle. Up came the nose. He stalled completely. The Hawk hovered like a gull on the crest of the wave, then

settled smartly, and with a quick whip lurched over onto its back.

Gil was waiting for this. He unsnapped his belt and dropped out, upside down. The cold water renewed his energy. He struck out with his uninjured arm and popped up into open water. The Dornier was gliding low. He could see the waiting guns. But just at that second, Porky came plunging in, an angry little hornet shooting red-hot stings that found their marks with quick success. The Dornier's twelve engines roared as in rage, and the big ship pulled up and around.

"The spunky little runt!" he muttered to himself.

The Dornier climbed, swung around over the wreck in spite of Porky's frantic efforts to drive it off. The gunners on the lower side, as it tilted down, jerked their guns toward Gil. He took a deep breath and dived underneath the wreck.

It seemed an age before he heard a curious thudding above him. He held his breath tensely. Bullets spat noisily into the water about him. He held on, his lungs burning hot, his face turning black. The spitting ceased. He could hold out no longer. He pushed from beneath the wreck, strangling, gulping in salt water. It poured down his throat. He gasped for breath, went under, and came up fighting. His fingers clutched the broken wing, and he clung there dazedly. At last his lungs cleared. He stared around the sky.

The Dornier was three miles away, pursuing a tiny speck he knew was Porky's Hawk. In a few minutes both planes disappeared over the horizon. He was left alone. Then, and then only, did he fully realize his hopeless situation.

The sun dropped lower. He caught himself dreading the night, the long, hopeless wait in the dark. His body was already chilled. He kicked now and then to restore circulation. His shoulder was stiff. Every movement cost him a fiery pain. His joints ached, and his tongue was swollen and parched from thirst and the salt water he had swallowed. But he clung there obstinately, though he knew he had hardly a chance in a thousand.

Suddenly he lifted his head. He stared about wildly. Was that a plane, that familiar drone? It came again. This time he knew. It was a plane. His eyes lit, then clouded again. Friend or foe? The ship circled, then came down swiftly. Gil's bloodshot eyes stared upward. Then as the plane

dipped over him, and pulled up into a tight turn at 75 feet, a happy croak left his cracked lips.

"Porky!" he cried hoarsely. "Porky, you old son-of-a-gun!"

### CHAPTER III

PROPPED up against a pillow in his bed in the seadrome dispensary, Gil Tracy stared from his much-bandaged partner to Captain Stoddard, the senior officer of the drome.

"You mean you've suspected something like this?" he asked incredulously.

Captain Stoddard, a bluff but kindly old seadog, retired from the merchant service, nodded his gray head slowly.

"I've thought it was queer all along," he said. "I couldn't see how those ships could be brought down without complicity on the part of some of the crew."

"But we'll never know which ones," muttered Gil. "They tossed the others out." He shivered, then went on grimly. "It was horrible. Somehow, it made me think of the way the pirates used to make their victims walk the plank—only it was a lot worse to see those poor devils falling."

Stoddard glanced at him a little oddly. "Pirates!" he muttered to himself. Then, in a louder tone, "The men behind this game are a lot worse than the old pirates ever thought of being. They're as cruel and bloodthirsty, and they've got all the modern inventions of airplanes and machine guns—and Heaven knows what else to help them."

"You mean you have a hunch what this is all about?" said Porky.

"A man does a lot of thinking," said Stoddard, "out here away from the rest of the world. It comes down to this. They wouldn't sink those planes after all their trouble in capturing them. That means they're hidden somewhere."

"But they couldn't hide those houseboats anywhere," protested Gil. "They're too blamed big."

"They couldn't be floating, day in and day out, at sea," retorted Stoddard. "No, sir, they are hidden away in some mighty good spot."

"But they couldn't stay at sea," objected Gil. "They'd have to have a base as good as one of these seadromes, and—"

“Exactly!” Stoddard’s voice was crisp as he interrupted. “Do you remember that the very first drome of the system was reported lost at sea, while it was being towed out to its anchorage?”

“Holy Moses,” exclaimed Porky. “You don’t think somebody stole one of these floating skyscrapers, surely?”

Stoddard started to speak, then stopped. Someone had come to the door. It was Halliday, the drome surgeon. He looked disapprovingly at Porky.

“Mr. Baines, you’ll start those wounds bleeding again,” he remonstrated. “I told you to lie still. Captain, I’m strongly of the opinion that these two young men ought to be given a hypodermic and left to get some sleep.”

Stoddard calmly inspected the rather skinny surgeon. “In just a few minutes,” he said. His voice was cold. “I’ll take the responsibility, if you please.”

Halliday flushed. “Yes, sir,” he said stiffly, and went out.

“Things like that are always happening,” muttered Stoddard. “Sometimes I wonder if there could be—” He lapsed into silence. But Gil could not restrain himself any longer.

“You were talking about that missing drome,” he prompted. Even if it was stolen, or towed away through a conspiracy, it would have to be anchored somewhere. Sooner or later it would be seen.”

“I’ve told myself all that,” said Stoddard wearily. “But I still think the thing is floating somewhere. Why, man, these seadromes are built to stand a 200-mile hurricane and a 60-foot wave without any trouble at all. They ride like solid ground in a gale.”

“But it still could sink if its tanks were leaking,” observed Gil.

“Every tank is independent,” said Stoddard shortly. “You’d have to puncture several of them. And they have separate chambers, so that one whole tank can’t be punctured in one spot. I tell you it’s impossible to sink one that easy. That seadrome is still—”

He stopped abruptly, looking at Porky. “What’s the matter?” he inquired.

“Someone listening,” whispered Porky. “Out there behind that port. I saw—”

STODDARD leaped to his feet and ran to the port. There was a sound of fast running feet. Stoddard peered out of the port. Then he closed it and came back. He swore under his breath. “Spies, here in my own drome,” he said huskily. “They are afraid that I know something, or that you learned something today.”

“We did,” said Gil, drily. “Plenty.”

Stoddard passed this off without smiling. “Don’t joke about it, my boy,” he said. “I’ve felt all along that there is something sinister about this whole matter.”

“But even if the drome was captured by some mysterious gang,” said Gil, “they’d have to put it somewhere. Even if it was out of the ship lanes, some tramp ship would see it sooner or later.”

“And the tramp might disappear from the high seas,” Stoddard replied grimly. “In fact, there have been several small vessels lost in the past year; nothing startling, because every year a few vessels sail into the port of missing ships. And yet—”

“Judas, what an idea, though!” exclaimed Porky. His little mustache bristled and his pompadour stood on end excitedly. “Think of it; that big drome, equipped with fuel and provisions for months and months—”

“A year, easily,” put in Stoddard.

“And with its own powerplant, and lights, and radio,” said Porky. It sounds like a fairy tale, but think of it off somewhere, with those bloody beggars operating from it, and—”

“And perhaps listening in on every word of the story I sent to Slade and Morton just now,” added Stoddard. “If I could just be sure, I’d search the sea myself! I’d organize an expedition and comb the Atlantic from—”

He stopped with a sharply indrawn breath, a look of amazement on his face. “Good Lord, I never dreamed of that,” he whispered. “It doesn’t seem possible. Michael Sars proved it long ago, but—wait—I can find it in a moment,” he said, hurriedly. “I can tell you then whether it’s a wild chance, or I’m just plain crazy.”

He fairly tore out of the dispensary. He had been gone but a moment when Halliday peeped in at the door.

“Is he gone?” he said. “Want those hypodermics now?”

“No, he’s coming back,” said Gil. “He went to look up something about—” He stopped. Halliday was watching him a little strangely, he thought.

“Well, he mighty near ran over me when he chased out,” complained the skinny surgeon. “I think sometimes the old man’s getting a bit, well—” He made a significant motion about his forehead, and then went on out.

A minute passed while they waited impatiently. Suddenly from out on the drome came a bubbling scream, quickly silenced. Gil felt his hair stand on end.

“That was Stoddard,” he cried hoarsely. “Porky, they’ve got him, they’ve got the old man!”

A chorus of shouts sounded from outside, then a confused clamor. Gil and Porky waited in an agnony of suspense. It seemed ages when Halliday came into the room. His thin face was white, frightened.

“Did you hear him?” he said in a shaking voice. “Poor old devil—I knew it would get him some day.”

“What’s happened?” Porky and Gil shot at him in one breath.

“Stoddard—he jumped over the side,” said Halliday, dropping heavily into a chair. “Akers, the steward, saw him jump. Crazy, stark mad. He’s been acting funny a long time.”

“Good God!” whispered Gil. His eyes sought Porky’s. He read there a mirror of his own thoughts. “You mean—suicide?”

Halliday stared at him blankly. “Of course. They’re lowering a boat, but it won’t do any good. It’s 80 feet down there, and the drop alone would kill him.”

Gil looked away from him. “Suicide,” he whispered.

Halliday did not seem to hear. He was busy, preparing the hypodermic needle. His hands shook a little as he worked.

“Say, if it’s just the same with you, count me out on the dope,” grunted Porky. He had caught Gil’s eye and read the same thought there.

“Why—why, you really need it,” protested Halliday.

“I’m afraid I might go walking in my sleep,” Porky said grimly. “I might jump over the rail and commit suicide.”

Halliday eyed him a second and then went out.

“You dumb cluck,” snapped Gil. “What’s the idea of putting them on guard? Why don’t you keep your trap closed?”

“Never mind my trap,” said Porky. “You lock that door and fix that port so we won’t find ourselves out in the wide open spaces when we wake up.”

Gil nodded slowly. “I guess you’re right. They bumped Stoddard because he knew too much. But I’ll be hanged if I know any more than I did before.”

“I wonder,” muttered Porky drowsily, “who Michael Sars might be.”

MORE than 400 miles away from Seadrome No. 1, not far from the center of New York City, a nervous, sleek-haired young man sat in the center of a strange room. The chair in which he sat was secured to the floor so that it could not be moved. In front of him was a row of mirrors, set at varying angles, with still other mirrors above. The walls, even the sliding panel door through which he had entered, and which now he could not locate with his furtive glance, were likewise covered with polished glass surfaces.

He seemed to be alone, yet he knew that behind the bank of crookedly set mirrors was a lone figure, studying his reflection from every angle. He twisted uncomfortably. If only he could catch one glimpse of that silent man, even a vague outline to relieve his odd sensation of being alone with a phantom! But the bright light in the secondary reflecting mirrors balked his gaze.

Suddenly a voice spoke. It was queerly toneless, with a metallic, slightly hissing quality, and the man before the mirrors knew it came from a hidden amplifier that still further prevented recognition of the speaker’s inflections.

“What have you to report?” the toneless voice inquired.

“I—they had a meeting when No. 1 Seadrome reported the ship as missing.”

“Proceed.”

“Bates blamed it on Oceanic—said it must be a plot to put Transatlantic out of business. Phillips got sore and left. But before he left, he said part of the Columbia’s crew was crooked. That was right after the full report came in from No. 1. Stoddard must have shot it through before our men down there could stop—”

“Confine yourself to facts within your possession,” admonished the hidden speaker. “Did Phillips intimate anything further?”

“No, but I’m afraid of Slade. He gave me a queer look today. That was when I heard Tracy and Baines had reached the drome. Naturally, I was a bit startled.”

“Twice I have warned you to keep your feelings under control. Don’t forget it again. Tracy and Baines will be removed at the proper time. You think Slade is suspicious of you, then?”

“No, but you can’t ever tell what he’s thinking. He’s cold as ice—and he’s too smart. I’d feel better if he were—well, out of there.”

“That is all,” the toneless voice commanded. “Report again at the same hour, tomorrow.”

With obvious relief the man in the chair stood up. He turned to the wall behind him. A mirrored panel slid soundlessly into a groove. He went out. The panel closed.

BEHIND the bank of mirrors the hidden man relaxed in his luxurious chair. His face was in shadow, as he gazed at a row of small glass sections before him, each of which reflected the chair in the outer room from a different angle.

“So Slade is smart,” he said. He laughed softly. “I wonder.”

He reached out a slender hand and pushed away a bracket holding a tiny microphone in position before his lips. Then he touched a small lever. The section of mirrors before him lifted upward, rotating on hinges. Thus uncovered was a desk, on which, under a glass top, were three maps, one of New York City, one of Long Island, and the other of the Atlantic Ocean, with the Transatlantic Airways route outlined upon it.

The man picked up a desk phone and touched a button before him. In a moment a blue light flickered.

“Give me the condensed reports from No. 3, at No. 1 seadrome,” he directed.

“Stoddard removed, according to your flash order of 9:53,” came the reply. “Tracy and Baines have locked themselves into their room, apparently suspicious of Stoddard’s removal. Not believed to have learned any information as to location of Main Base, though Stoddard was overheard to mention Michael Sars and the

missing seadrome. No. 3 asks orders on elimination of Baines and Tracy.”

The man at the desk leaned forward slightly. “Hold them on the seadrome, without force, until further orders,” he said. “Give me the relayed report from Main Base.”

“No. 2 at Main Base reports through No. 3 at the drome as follows: Columbia arrived safely, but with five killed, six hurt during fight with Tracy and Baines. Plane being reconditioned and equipped to go out with orders on patrol. No. 2 asks for detailed orders for operations on S. S. Marie Antoinette.”

“The plan will be transmitted later,” said the man at the desk a bit curtly. “The liner will not be in position for nine days. Have you any report on the Carnegie II?”

“Yes,” came the quick reply. “The Carnegie II was located, carrying out its explorations about 300 miles from Main Base. No. 2 reports it was bombed and completely destroyed.”

“Advise him that a tramp steamer, the Lone Star, was ordered to contact the Carnegie II with supplies in the next week or so, and to be on watch for it. That is all for tonight, but keep tuned in as usual for emergency flashes from the seadrome.”

The man stood up from his big chair. He walked with a quick, catlike tread to the rear of the room. As his hand touched the light switch there, he glanced around. His gaze fell on a Thompson sub-machine gun bearing a silencer. The gun was rigidly braced so that its barrel pointed through a tiny aperture at the junction of four mirrors. He stepped to the breech and peered down the gun. It was aimed at the middle of the chair outside. And from the breech two wires ran to a button on the arm of his own chair.

“So Slade is smart,” he said again, and went to the rear. The light clicked out. The man chuckled in the darkness. There was another click. A second later the room was empty.

#### CHAPTER IV

“I DON’T like the looks of it, that’s all,” muttered Gil Tracy. He gazed across the seadrome cabin at Porky Baines. “If you come right down to it, we’re nothing but prisoners here.”

“That’s putting it pretty strong,” Porky objected. “There just isn’t any way to get off till the next supply boat.”

“I’ve got a mean hunch they don’t intend to let us off here at all,” Gil said grimly, “unless it’s the way they dropped poor old Stoddard.”

“Not so loud,” whispered Porky. “I thought I heard someone.”

Harris, the burly First Officer, who had taken command on Stoddard’s death, stood in the opened door.

Gil hid his startled look. How long had Harris been there, he wondered. He had distrusted the fellow from the very first.

“We’re thinking of getting back into the harness,” said Porky, with a somewhat forced smile. “Isn’t there any chance of service starting up, so we can get ashore?”

Harris shook his massive head, “All transoceanic flights are held up till they finish this investigation,” he said.

“We ought to get back, to tend to our flying business,” Gil said crisply, “I saw a two-seater down on the work-deck. Why not both of us hop it?”

“How about it?” Porky asked, getting Gil’s idea.

“I’ll have to ask headquarters,” said Harris. “You know it ain’t the safest hop in the world in a single-engine ship.”

Gil nodded. “We’re used to taking chances,” he remarked. “Porky here figures its fate, anyhow.”

“Yeah,” agreed Porky, after a quick gulp. “When it’s your time, you’ll get it, sure.”

Harris went on out. Porky turned indignantly to Gil.

“Where d’yuh get that fate stuff, you long-legged bean-eater?”

“Pipe down,” said Gil calmly. “Did you see the way he jumped at it?”

“Did I? Am I blind? He thinks it’s a good way to bump us off without any come back.”

“I wonder what he meant by headquarters?” mused Gil. “I’ll bet plenty that the message never gets to Slade. The bird that’s got those stolen ships is the one that’ll tell him what to do, you can bet on that!”

An hour later Harris came to their cabin, a pleased look on his big, square-jawed face. “It’s

O.K.,” he announced. “You’ve got to sign a release, so I don’t get any blame, and the ship’s yours. I’ll have the boys go over it and get it all set for you. See you later.”

“It’ll be set, all right,” muttered Gil, as the door closed. “They’ll fix it, sure as the devil.”

But the next morning, when Gil and Porky examined the ship minutely, they found nothing wrong. Harris and the chief mechanic stood by and offered to assist.

“I figured something to help out a bit,” Harris offered. “The Marie Antoinette, one of the big liners, is almost in line with your course. I worked it out, and with a true course of 305 you’ll pick her up about 100 miles out.”

“Thanks,” said Gil. He climbed in, glanced at the kapoc cushions and fastened his belt. Porky followed. The engine of the Corsair roared. Gil scrutinized the instruments carefully, but there seemed nothing wrong. He signaled, the deck was cleared, and the Wasp engine hurled the two-seater into the air after a short run.

Then Gil swung the ship onto the course. Harris puzzled him. Why had the big fellow given him that information on the Marie Antoinette, if he was really crooked? Had he perhaps misjudged the man?

THE drome fell away behind them, and soon was a speck on the horizon. The Wasp engine roared steadily, and Gil began to feel a growing confidence. Suddenly Porky poked Gil in the back and pointed off to the south.

“Maybe that’s the liner!” he shouted.

Gil swung the Corsair around and headed for the almost imperceptible speck in the water. He cut the gun, glided down. It was a small ship, bearing the name of the Lone Star.

“A fine sailor you’d make,” he said scornfully. “That’s a tramp steamer.”

The tramp’s crew gaped up as Gil sent the Corsair dizzily above the funnel. Two or three waved. Gil dived over the little vessel once more and then headed back on his course. The steamer ploughed on into the southwest.

Gil automatically checked his instruments. Temperature O. K., tachometer, 1550, oil pressure—

“Hell’s bells!” he blurted out suddenly, though the Wasp’s roar drowned his words. His gaze

remained riveted to the fuel gauge of the reserve tank. He had not been running on it, yet the gauge showed a serious decrease in the reserve tank's contents.

"Maybe they've got the damned valve in backward," he muttered to himself. He switched the handle from "main" to "reserve." For a moment nothing happened. He began to breathe more freely. Then something cold came into the pit of his stomach, for the Wasp sputtered, popped twice and went silent!

Frantically, he snapped the switch back to "main" and nosed down. Instinctively, he banked around toward the tramp steamer, now fifteen miles away. The prop still spun. He nosed down more steeply, sacrificing precious altitude. The Wasp coughed, hit on two or three cylinders and then took up its burden, but not without an ominous miss.

"The dirty cut-throats!" flamed Gil. "They've turned the valve to make it read 'main' when we're on the reserve tank. And the main tank's full of water!"

"Stick her down wind and hold everything," Porky yelled. "We'll get two miles nearer that ship." The engine popped violently and died, and Gil nosed down. He felt the Corsair settle rapidly. He cast a swift look back at Porky. His chunky little partner grinned back, a kapoc cushion held ready to shove before his face. Then the sea leaped up at them. Gil stalled, nose-high. With a splintering crash the Corsair struck. He felt a terrific yank at his belt, a stunning blow on his forehead, and darkness slowly engulfed him.

## CHAPTER V

ITS twelve engines droning an ominous symphony, a strange and sinister craft flew high above the sparkling Atlantic. The rays of the hot summer sun struck squarely on the side of the winged monster. Glistening there, stark white against a deadly black—horrible, grim, hideous—was mounted a grinning skull.

Behind the cruising vulture flew three other planes, each marked with the horrible insignia of the leader. And above this sinister squadron, white fleece-clouds drifted in a blue and peaceful sky.

In the huge control compartment of the leading plane stood a black-bearded giant. But for his

surroundings, he might have been a creature from a bygone day, a figure come to life from a half-forgotten age of blood and strife. Bare-headed he stood, dark eyes glowing from under bushy brows, a look of grim ferocity on his ruthless, brutal face. Swung at his left hip, from the belt which bore his two big guns, was a cutlass in a shining scabbard.

As the thin-lipped, red-bearded pilot gazed from his massed instruments to the empty sea ahead, the grim giant turned to a hollow-faced fellow at his side. He spoke in a deep voice that seemed to rumble up from the compartment deck.

"Have you checked the course again? Sure we'll intercept according to the plan?"

"Exactly on the spot you marked, Kell," said the other.

"Hold the course, then," ordered Kell brusquely. "I'll be in the radio cubby."

He strode back into the big ship. The radio operator looked up nervously. "No. 3 reported from the first drome just now," he said. "Tracy and Baines took off as indicated in last night's relay. Tanks fixed to drop them near the liner. No. 3 relays a request from the Chief for complete removal, if necessary."

Kell scowled, and stared at the clock. "Time for No. 41's signal from the liner," he snarled. "Keep your ears open."

The hollow-faced man came back hurriedly as the radio operator bent to his task. "Two-seater sighted in the water," he said excitedly.

Kell strode to the forward compartment. He picked up a pair of glasses and peered down.

"No one on it," he snapped. "But we'll drop down to be sure."

The big plane descended on a fast glide, and circled for a minute about the drifting wreck.

"That's it, all right," Kell's deep voice was filled with satisfaction. "Well, they both got it. See those cushions. That was a wise trick, pulling out the kapoc and stuffing them with rags. I'd like to have seen their faces when they found the things wouldn't hold them up."

The big plane climbed up again. As it straightened on its course, the radio operator came forward hastily.

"No. 41's signal," he said breathlessly. "I just caught it—"

Kell scanned the message with his fierce dark eyes.

*Radiogram from S.S. Marie Antoinette to William R. Smith, Hotel Commodore, New York City. Position satisfactory. Please radio confirmation of date. Will await immediate answer.*

RALPH R. RAINES

“All set,” Kell barked at his hollow-faced aide. “Forty-one’s standing by to cut off their radio until we snag it. What’s the distance?”

“Thirty miles. She’ll be on the horizon any second.”

“Get the antennae hook out,” boomed Kell swiftly. “Signal Three and Four to circle at a thousand.”

A smudge of smoke had appeared on the horizon. Kell seized the glasses.

“It’s her. Hold dead on,” he rumbled.

STRAIGHT down at the steaming liner swept the pirate squadron. Kell, staring down with an unholy glow in his eyes, saw the huge vessel spring to its full proportions as the plane raced across its deck. Startled faces gazed up from bridge and promenade. White steam burst from the vessel’s siren.

A sudden jerk from below and the plane zoomed. Kell thrust his head out and peered down. A grab-hook was suspended at the end of a stout cable. Caught in the hook were the remains of the ruptured radio antennae.

“Got it!” he shouted. “Haul in, clear the hook. Plug in the speaker!”

A moment later his powerful voice, amplified by some device hidden back in the plane, went roaring down at the liner, distinct and loud above the engines’ drone.

“Heave to!” he snarled. “Get out your gangways, port and starboard!”

The liner swerved sharply away. A volley of oaths thundered from Kell’s thick lips, to be hurled downward by the amplifiers.

“Heave to, you fools! Do you want to be blown out of the water?”

He whirled to a bomb-release behind him, and jerked one ring fiercely. A hundred-pound bomb went slithering down from the mighty plane. It struck ahead of the Marie Antoinette. A geyser of

water spouted up. The sea boiled; then a big wave swept against the liner. The big vessel slowed, and came to a stop with engines full astern. Its flag slowly dropped to the superstructure deck.

“Out with your gangways,” Kell ordered in a stentorian voice. “Put over four boats. One crooked move and we’ll sink you.”

The liner’s decks were black with swarming figures. The ship rolled helplessly in the sea. Out came its boat-davits. A lifeboat, hastily manned, was lowered into the water. Another followed, until at last the four tossed upon the swells.

“Pull away in the boats, pull to leeward,” bawled Kell, “On board the ship—all officers off the bridge. I’m coming aboard; but there’ll be two planes above you. The first trick you pull will be your last!”

Ten minutes later, followed by 50 of his crew, taken from the two Dorniers that had landed, he mounted the liner’s gangway. His men, menacing to a degree only less than their huge leader, swarmed up the gangway swiftly, automatics and Thompson guns in place of the picturesque but murderous cutlass brandished by Kell.

As Kell stepped onto the deck, a gray-haired officer confronted him furiously.

“You madman—this is piracy!” he yelled. Then he fell back, amazed eyes on the bearded leader and the gleaming knife in his hand. As his gaze swept to the villainous crew that spread out to cover the assembled crowd he turned a pasty white.

Kell’s burning eyes drilled into the face of the horrified captain. Deliberately, he raised his cutlass, pressed its point against the other’s middle and forced him back, step by step. A wave of indignation and fright swept over the onlookers, and a mutter of protest swelled into a babble. But at an angry swing of Kell’s massive head, as he glared about the deck, silence fell.

*Crack!* From behind a ventilator on the superstructure, a kneeling figure fired wildly at Kell. The bullet ploughed into the deck ten feet away. Like a flash, Kell’s left hand leaped to his belt. A gun seemed to jump into his clutching fingers. It blazed twice. The kneeling figure pitched forward, stumbled and crashed headlong to the boat-deck.

A ship’s officer leaped forward at Kell. The bearded giant’s teeth bared between his sneering

lips. Up swept the cutlass. It fell with a swish. The man cried out once in agony, then fell with a bubbling groan at Kell's feet. Kell kicked him aside contemptuously.

"Now do you understand?" he roared, glaring around him.

The stocky pirate gathered his force together. "How about the engine-room, and the stokers?" he demanded.

Kell had an ugly grin. "Leave them there, unless they show their dirty faces," he said. "We'll take care of them later."

HURRIEDLY, the remaining pirates herded both crew and passengers to the port and starboard sides of the deck. As the second-class and steerage passengers were driven up, panic-stricken, from their hiding places below, they were speedily forced at point of gun to one side or the other. In a wide circle above the liner, two huge Fokkers flew a watchful guard. The two Dorniers tossed easily on the waves, their skeleton crews ready for a swift departure.

Kell strode to the port side, scrutinized the men with his dark eyes. He stopped before one.

"Number?" he said briefly.

"Forty-one," said the man, a furtive-looking fellow. "Acting as Ralph R. Raines."

"Reports?" snapped Kell, his glance roving constantly about the silent, fearful throng.

"I stuck up the operator, till you snagged the wires," said the man, the color coming back into his sallow cheeks. "Nothing got out. The consignment's in the strong-room. I'm all set to blow it."

Kell signaled his hollow-faced aide. "Guard 41 while he blows the strong-room. Work fast," he ordered, and turned to his stocky lieutenant, who had come back on deck.

"Get this mob below deck. Lock every one of them into the salon. Fifteen minutes for looting the cabins. And remember, no fighting over the stuff—or you'll go down with the ship!"

At his last words the gray-haired captain whirled to the men behind him.

"Are we to die like rats?" he shouted. "God in Heaven! Let's go like men!"

He got no further. Lifting his pistol, the stocky lieutenant calmly fired three shots into the unfortunate officer's heart. He dropped where he

stood. Blood oozed out through his shirt, dripping onto the deck.

But as though this had been a signal, the remaining men broke in a furious wave toward the pirates before them. Kell jumped to a post of vantage, his back to a ventilator. He bellowed an order. A score of Thompson guns snarled into action, mowing down the charging men like wheat before a scythe. In a twinkling the deck became a bloody shambles. Kell, leaping into the midst of the fray, swung his cutlass with a mighty arm. A pale youngster hurtled himself at the bearded leader. Kell, lips drawn back in a wolfish grin, split his head at one blow.

A burly seaman drove in low at the stocky pirate. Caught off guard, the pirate stumbled. But before the seaman could grip the other's windpipe with his huge fingers, Kell's heavy boot struck him full in the face. He sprawled back, his nose a mass of gore, one eye cut open. With cool ferocity, Kell leveled the pistol in his left hand and drilled him through the head.

"Enough of this," Kell thundered. "We waste time. Tumble them below. We want no bodies floating upon the water."

The rest of the captives, broken, many groaning from wounds, offered no further resistance. In a few minutes the deck was cleared, save for the welter of blood which told of that merciless massacre.

Kell summoned the stocky pirate to his side.

"Limit each man to what he can carry in one trip. Those fools would try to carry away the ship itself."

HALF an hour later Kell stood at the gangway of the looted liner. His hollow-faced aide waited in silence. Kell's burning eyes swept the deck, across the pools of blood, taking in every detail. At last he nodded. "Set her off," he commanded. The gaunt-faced pirate stepped to a companionway. He gave an order that was repeated below. Two minutes later a lanky pirate came running up to the deck. Kell and his aide were already half-way down to the boat. The lanky one raced down the steps, jumped in and the boat pushed away. In a few moments they had transferred to the last waiting Dornier. The boat was scuttled, the plane's twelve engines roared

and the winged pirate craft thundered across the waves and into the air.

In the control compartment, Kell stood and watched the liner with expectant eyes. A minute passed. He frowned. Then suddenly the vessel shook as from a mighty explosion far down within its hull. Flame leaped out from its shattered mid-deck. Like a beast, mortally wounded, lying down to die, it rolled to one side and hung there for an interminable instant. Slowly its stern lifted high in the air. A blast of white steam billowed from ruptured boilers.

As though an invisible hand had taken hold of it, the bow dipped under. Then the whole ship slid steeply into its watery grave. The sea boiled for a minute. The Marie Antoinette was gone.

Kell smiled. He turned to the thin-lipped pilot, whose face was deadly pale.

"Fly low," he said. "See if any of them came through that blast."

As the pilot nosed down with trembling hands, Kell pulled his cutlass from its sheath. With his handkerchief he coolly wiped the dark-stained blade, then tossed the cloth through an open port.

High above the sinister squadron that winged its way to a hidden base, white fleece-clouds drifted in a blue and peaceful sky.

## CHAPTER VI

FROM out of the darkness that had laid hold of him, Gil Tracy dimly found himself floundering back to consciousness. Someone had hold of his back, and he felt agonizing pains shoot through his head. He drew a deep breath, then choked as a spray of salt water licked into his mouth.

"Keep your mouth closed, old boy," came a familiar voice.

Gil opened his eyes. Porky was clinging to his collar, supporting him in the rolling swells that rocked the wrecked Corsair.

"Take it easy; the boat's almost here," Porky ordered. He shifted his other hand to get a better hold on the wreck. "Damn those dirty murderin' crooks! If I ever get my mitts on that guy Harris!"

Gil turned over with an effort and grasped at the wreck. He saw a ship's boat not a hundred yards away.

"What happened?" he said weakly.

"You banged your head. It would've been O. K., but those birds stuffed the cushions with rags. I hung on one and went down about a mile."

The boat swung in just then. In a moment they were both lifted aboard. An astonished, red-faced coxswain gazed at them.

"By golly, an' both of you alive! Sure an' I thought you'd gone clean through to China when I saw you hit."

Porky sat down, his little mustache drooping forlornly. He looked over at Gil, who was feeling the lump on his head.

"This is plenty for me," he said. "When I get dry land under me again, I'm going to stay there."

"When do we hit New York?" Gil asked the coxswain.

"We don't. We're headed for Havana."

"Maybe we can get your skipper to put about," said Gil.

"Maybe," said the coxswain doubtfully. "But he's a man set in his ways, and you'll find him hard to argue with."

When they boarded the Lone Star, they found this true. Captain Johnson was a hard-bitten, gruff old fellow, who refused their first request without hesitation. But for five hundred dollars he agreed to cut across the course of the liner, Marie Antoinette, and transfer them to her.

Then he went on deck to give orders for changing the course. Gil and Porky sat down before the radio. Gil twisted the dials.

"It's the liner. Listen in," he suggested to Porky. "It's continental code, but not very fast."

*From S. S. Marie Antoinette to William R. Smith, Hotel Commodore, New York City. Position satisfactory. Please radio confirmation of date. Will await immediate answer.*

*RALPH R. RAINES.*

"I'm glad somebody's position is satisfactory," commented Porky. "Wish I could say the same." He took off his phones.

Gil was copying down words on a pad. "This operator is chinning with the New York operator," he announced. "Asked him to get Mary somebody for a date tomorrow night."

He wrote carelessly for a minute, then sat up as though startled. Porky leaned over the pad.

"Jim's gone goofy," he read. "Just came in and said four airplanes were . . ."

"Were what?" Porky demanded as Gil stopped writing.

Gil took off the phones. He had a curious feeling. The message had been chopped off swiftly.

"That's all," he said. "Four airplanes. Gosh, I wonder—" He got up and dashed on deck. Porky followed and found him in excited conversation with Johnson.

"I'm making 12 knots right now," said the skipper. "Can't do anymore. What makes you think there's something wrong?"

"Wait and see," said Gil vaguely. "Maybe I'm all wet."

"You're doggoned right," said Porky. "And so am I. How about borrowing some dry duds and hanging these up in the sun?"

THREE hours later Captain Johnson called them up on deck. He had a perplexed look. "We ought to be sighting her," he said. "The fact is, she ought to be in plain sight right now. I figured her course all right, and they never run more'n a few miles off on those big liners."

Gil's blue eyes had a strange gleam. He started to speak, then stopped. No, it was too fantastic, that idea. They'd laugh at—

"Drifting boat or wreckage two points off starboard bow!" came the sudden voice of the lookout.

Gil jumped. His tanned face went pale. "I was right!" he exclaimed.

"What do you mean?" demanded Johnson.

"They've sunk her, sunk the liner," whispered Gil. "Those planes the radio operator saw—"

Hurriedly he explained what he had heard on the radio. At first, Johnson's face bore an amused look. But when Gil finished, he was grave, and his face mirrored Gil's expression. The steamer was put around quickly toward the wreckage. As they neared the object, they saw it was part of a life-boat. At the bow were two letters, M. A. Farther on was still other debris, none of it very large.

"Look!" cried Porky suddenly. "What's that over there?"

It was the body of a man, a life-jacket around him. He lay almost at the edge of a floating, jagged section of wood. He did not move. In five

minutes Johnson's men had a boat overside and were bringing the unconscious form on board.

"He's been shot!" exclaimed Porky.

"Get him into my cabin," said Johnson. "We'll work on him. I think he's gone, but maybe we can save him."

It was an hour before the man opened his eyes, and nearly another before he could speak coherently. There was a look of haunting terror in his eyes.

"They threw me with them, with the dead men, and all the blood," he whispered wildly. "They thought I was dead, too."

"Who did it?" said Gil, anxiously.

"The pirates," said the other in a feeble voice. "Pirates out of airplanes—with beards, and guns. The leader was awful."

"Where did they go?" asked John-son.

"I—I don't know. I didn't see. A few jumped overboard, I think."

Porky and Gil exchanged glances. On each face was reflected a cold, grim fury.

"After they left, I found a life-jacket. They fastened the hatches, but I managed to get one open. Just then the ship blew up. I don't remember anything much but being in the water with some wreckage around me."

The man began to cough, and a frothy blood stained his lips. Captain Johnson looked significantly at Gil and shook his head. Gil understood. There was no doubt about it. The poor devil was dying. He bent over him again.

"This leader—what did he look like?"

"Big, almost a giant. He was horrible. He killed five that I saw. He was like the pirates you used to read about. He had a beard, a black beard. I heard one of them call him Kell, when they were throwing the bodies down below. He knocked the fellow down and cursed him."

"Kell!" Captain Johnson started violently. "You're sure?"

"Yes," said the other feebly. "It was Kell that I heard."

ANOTHER spasm of coughing seized him. Johnson motioned Gil and Porky outside the cabin. He came out five minutes later. "He's dead," he told them. "I got him to sign the story. It'll help when we get in port. They'll call us lunatics as it is."

“What did that name Kell mean to you?” Gil asked curiously.

Johnson hesitated. When he spoke, his voice was strained, tense. “It means another Blackbeard,” he almost whispered. “He’s mad, stark mad. He’d have to be, to think he can get away with it in this day and age. They’ll have destroyers combing the sea for him and his bloody crew. They’ll hang him like they hanged his grandfather before him, damn his black soul!”

“His grandfather!” Gil and Porky uttered it in one breath.

“Aye—‘Bloody’ Kell, that sailed with Blackbeard and was hanged with fourteen more in Charleston on a lucky day. One of Blackbeard’s right-hand men, he was.”

“How do you know all this?” demanded Gil.

“Kell’s son killed my father, years back,” Johnson muttered, his face dark with angry memories. “It was on a clipper, and he was first mate, this son of Bloody Kell. A cut-throat like the murdering devil that sired him, crazed when he was drunk, thinking he was the other come to life again.”

“What happened after he killed your father?” asked Porky, his eyes round with astonishment.

“He got away, and disappeared,” Johnson answered grimly. “He hid out, and they never found him. But I heard stories of him and his son in the islands. And once in St. Thomas I saw this son of his. It’s him, all right. Six feet six, and weighs all of 280 pounds. Black eyes, and a murder-look in them. But he’s been reported dead three years. No one’s seen him in that time, at least to tell of.”

Gil listened with an incredulous amazement. It just couldn’t be, here in 1930. It was impossible. And yet, out there beyond the steamer was the mute evidence of tragedy, and in the cabin lay a dead man, victim of a pi-rate bullet.

“We’ll make port,” Johnson said in a hard, determined voice. “We’ll make port, and we’ll set the Navy at the devil’s heels. It’ll be paying him back, the one that killed my father!”

He stalked out of the cabin, up on deck. Gil and Porky stared at each other.

“Flying pirates,” muttered Porky at last. “Now we know what they wanted that Dornier for.”

“I wonder what Stoddard was going to tell us that night,” Gil said. “If only he could have given us a hint.”

“And if he had, we’d be feeding the sharks, like the poor old fellow himself,” replied Porky. “Even now, I’ve got a hunch our lives aren’t worth a plugged nickel.”

BEHIND a wall, one side of which was covered with mirrors set at varying angles, a man sat in a luxurious chair, his sharp, cruel profile in silhouette in the half-glow of a shielded lamp above him. His slender fingers gripped a desk phone tightly.

“Get this flash to Main Base at once,” he said in a voice that held a hint of repressed rage. “To No. 2 at Main Base: Your operations badly bungled. A survivor was left adrift to give out story of attack on the liner. Your identity disclosed, and all details of the attack. United States consumed with anger, and as a result Navy vessels and the Aircraft Carrier Saratoga are standing by in Atlantic waters, for search.

“Baines and Tracy escaped, in spite of explicit orders to you. Fortunately, their story of Stoddard’s theory was discredited by Bates and Slade. Tracy apparently became suspicious of Bates. Little comment on the Michael Sars remark made by Stoddard prior to his removal.

“Bates sending out the fourth Dornier, America, with personally selected guard from outside interests—his factory men and bank-guards. Bates will accompany the America himself. However, this will be covered as usual. America will arrive at Main Base, according to the present plan, tomorrow night. Baines and Tracy invited by Bates to go on the flight, but refused. Apparently, they have had enough experience at sea. I am planning to remove them if necessary, to suppress what little they know. In the meantime, cease patrols; suspend all operations but completion of camouflage of drome, to appear like surroundings. Be ready for defense, though this is not expected necessary.”

The man sat back in his chair. His narrowed eyes rested on a newspaper spread before him, across which ran enormous headlines:

## AIR PIRATES SINK LINER

As he read, the man's lips went tightly shut, and his glance went to the map of the Atlantic Ocean, under the glass top of his desk. His cold eyes rested on a spot marked with a red check. He nodded slowly, as though he had come to a decision.

## CHAPTER VII

THE huge Dornier, America, fourth of the rapidly diminishing fleet of Transatlantic Airways, droned steadily over the gray Atlantic. In the baggage compartment, deep down in the big hull, almost total darkness existed. It was silent, too, except for the full rumble of the twelve powerful engines mounted high up above the main wing. But suddenly this silence was broken by a hoarse whisper.

"Hey, Gil!"

"Over here," came the answer.

"If you ask me," muttered the somewhat disgruntled voice of Porky Baines, "I think this is the dizziest stunt you ever pulled—and that's saying plenty."

"Pipe down," whispered Gil. "It's a lot better than trying the first idea. It'd take a set of false whiskers to pass us off as passengers."

He grinned as he saw Porky's rueful face in the gloom. It had been his own idea to have Porky and himself boxed up and put on board the America just before the take-off.

Porky clambered over the piled-up baggage to the baggage hatch, sliding it open half a foot, and stopped, gazing downward.

"There's a couple of destroyers ahead," he observed. "Boy, old Uncle Sam is sure mad, not turning up those pirates."

Gil stepped toward him, tripped and sprawled flat.

"Damn those chutes," he growled, kicking at the offending objects. "What good are they out here, any-way?"

A sound of steps overhead made them both stop, tense.

"Close that hatch," whispered Gil. "We've got to get up in the tail quick. Did you close up your crate after you got out?"

"Yeah, it's all right," said Porky. He headed toward the main ladder.

"Not that way," said Gil hastily, "The short ladder back here. Remember—it runs into the inspection passage."

"But we can't see up there," protested Porky.

"Yes, we can. I saw a ventilator opening in it yesterday. We can see clear up to the control compartment."

Gil was climbing up the ladder as he spoke. Porky followed. In a few seconds they were in the narrow inspection passage leading back into the tail. It was almost pitch dark. The only light came from the ventilator. Gil knelt down, then threw himself prone and stared through.

PACING up and down the central passage of the mid-deck was Mortimer Bates. Sitting in the main cabin, which Gil could see clearly, was most of the armed guard.

"Looks silly, all those birds there with guns—and nobody in miles to hurt 'em but five passengers," muttered Porky. "Say, what's Martin doing?"

Gil raised his head and looked along the floor of the control deck. Martin, the First Officer of the plane, was down on his knees, working at something in the floor of the radio cubby,

"He's got a place where he can see through," said Gil, puzzled. "It's a round section. Now, what the devil—"

Martin had partially lifted out a section eight inches in diameter. He peered quickly through, then let the piece of flooring settle back. Turning, he beckoned to one of his men. The man went into the officers' lounge cubby and lifted up another section, exactly as Martin had done. He repeated this process in the chart room, not five feet from where Gil and Porky were watching.

"Gil, I don't like the looks of this," said Porky huskily. "Look—Martin's got his reserve crew up forward."

Gil was gazing down into the mid-deck again. Bates had disappeared. While Gil watched, Martin came down from above. He walked through the mid-deck, nodding at the guards. Gil's eyes narrowed. An odd look had come onto the face of one guard. Was he mistaken, or had the air suddenly become tense?

Martin went up to the control deck again. His lanky frame had hardly disappeared when three of

the guards, one by one, carelessly got up and followed. Gil twitched Porky's sleeve.

"Say, this looks lousy! I feel trouble coming—"

He got no further. With a swiftness that left him dazed, four machine guns projected through as many openings in the floor of the control deck, straight at the unsuspecting guard beneath. Even as a horrified cry of warning burst from Gil's lips, all four guns blazed forth with a deafening roar. Caught completely unawares, the guards died in their chairs. Gil, paralyzed at the slaughter taking place before his eyes, tore his glance away from that bloody scene. Porky was struggling to his feet. Gil seized him and pulled him down.

"Too late," he whispered. "We can't do anything, Porky. Keep quiet; maybe we can even up for those poor devils down there!"

Porky subsided, shaking with suppressed fury. Gil raised up and stared through the top of the ventilator. Martin, his angular face white, was gazing down into the main cabin.

"You got them all," he muttered. His hands shook as he rested them on the edge of the circular opening. "Look at them! It's—where's Bates?"

The men about him started.

"He's not there," said Martin wildly. "Get him—search the ship!"

In a minute three of the crew reappeared, Bates struggling between them. The capitalist's face was gray, but he had lost none of his spirit.

"You'll pay for this!" he stormed.

"Want to bump him now?" snarled one of the men holding him. He raised an automatic, watching Martin for approval.

Martin wet his lips nervously.

"No, we'll wait till we get there. Let—let them do it. Lock him up."

Bates was led away, swearing and bellowing threats. Martin wiped his perspiring forehead.

"Clean that up—down there," he told his men, with a shudder. "Throw them out. Wash up the decks."

He turned to the navigator. "Got the course worked out?" he asked.

"Yes. Head straight east till we hit the sixty-first meridian, then shoot north. We'll sight it

easy, and won't lose much time. Less chance of missing, that way."

Martin started toward the control compartment forward. But suddenly the assistant pilot came hurrying back. He, too, was pale.

"Don't toss those birds out yet," he said quickly. "There's a destroyer off our port bow. Better hold our course, too, till they drop astern. Might look queer, changing now."

Porky gripped Gil's shoulder fiercely.

"Those chutes down below—" he gasped. "Maybe we can—"

GIL was already on his feet, catching at the suggestion, pushing Porky ahead of him toward the passage ladder. Down the ladder they tumbled. Gil, above Porky, heard a sudden cry of alarm and amazement. He looked down hurriedly. Lights had been switched on in the baggage hold, and plunging at Porky was a burly member of the crew. Caught without warning, Porky went down under the assault. The man drew back a huge fist.

Gil let go his hold. He dropped like a rock. With a loud groan the man collapsed, as Gil's boots thudded against his skull. Gil completed his onslaught with a vicious punch in the other's solar plexus. The wretch sprawled on his back, hands clasped to his stomach in agony. From above came a startled shout.

"Quick, grab a chute!" snapped Gil. He yanked Porky to his feet, then ran to the baggage hatch and released the fastenings. He pulled it open. At first he saw nothing but wide sea. Then, well off to the port side he saw the gray hull of a destroyer.

He whirled, seized a parachute harness and leaped into it. A pistol barked. The bullet whizzed past Gil's head, and buried itself in a crate. Porky, bent low, hurled himself like a cannonball at the man. The fellow pitched over him, only to meet Gil's crashing fist squarely with his jaw. Men swarmed down the ladder. Porky, jumped to his feet, raced for the open hatch. A tall rascal sprang from the middle of the ladder. Porky fell. Gil dashed forward. His foot caught in the tangled gear and he stumbled.

The tall fellow raised his gun. Porky made a swift grab, knocked it from his hand. Gil got to his knees. A heavy boot caught him brutally on

the jaw. He toppled back, slipped and plunged through the open hatch.

He was a hundred feet down before he knew what had happened. He spun over and over, hurtling down toward the sea. But no thought of his own peril entered his mind for the moment. On his mind was indelibly printed the sight of Porky, struggling with the killers in the Dornier.

Swearing in his helpless fury, he plunged into space. Mechanically, his hand shot to his rip-cord ring, and jerked it. The chute opened with a loud crack, swinging him upright with one lurch. He swayed under the huge white mushroom, vainly seeking for a look of the plane high above.

He looked down. And with the sight of the destroyer below he felt a new hope shoot through him. The Navy ships! The Navy had cruisers in these waters, and an aircraft carrier somewhere on the coast. There was a chance yet for Porky. A sudden light glowed in his blue eyes. The destroyer carried a tiny fighter, secured on its deck. He remembered now—emergency orders to every destroyer assigned to the pirate search.

He slipped the chute to one side, drifting toward the destroyer. Above him came an angry drone, swiftly increasing in volume. Then the Dornier, appeared, sweeping around at him. He grasped the shrouds frantically, tilting the chute till he dropped like a plummet. The Dornier swept by, guns blazing at him from opened ports. But his sudden drop had thrown them off. He let up on the shrouds, and the chute filled again.

## CHAPTER VIII

BENEATH him, the destroyer was racing toward the scene. It was almost under him now. At 20 feet he let go and dropped into the rolling sea. He came up, pulled from under the collapsed silk, and struck out for the destroyer. It had come to a stop, engines astern. Now a boat was being lowered. He gazed up. The Dornier was circling at a thousand feet.

Two minutes later, he was the center of an excited group on the destroyer. He explained breathlessly, but before he had finished, there came a shout from an officer.

“They’re diving on us! Maybe they’ve got bombs on there!”

Men raced to the anti-aircraft guns. Gil’s face went white.

“My buddy’s up there!” he cried. Don’t let them fire on her yet. She hasn’t any bombs.”

The Dornier streaked down. Gil saw that a mooring cable had been let down from the ship. It had a weight fastened at the end.

“The radio!” he yelled, suddenly remembering what had occurred to the Marie Antoinette. “Get out an S.O.S. Send for a cruiser—”

It was too late. The weighted cable tore through the tiny strands of wire as though they had been thread. The Dornier zoomed mightily, twisting away as the anti-aircraft went into angry action. Gil held his breath. He gulped in vast relief when he saw the archie had missed. Porky was up there. Maybe—there was one chance in a thousand—he was still alive! A sailor had run up to the captain. He was sputtering excitedly.

“They’re calling some one—that plane up there,” he cried.

“Calling for those pirate planes!” muttered the captain. “They’ll want to get us out of the way now, so we can’t tell tales!”

“I’ll bring them down!” Gil burst in and dashed for the plane on the destroyer’s deck. The second Dornier was zigzagging in for attack. He flung a look at it, stooped to seize goggles and helmet from the fallen pilot, and leaped into the cockpit. The ship was a Boeing fighter. It was secured to the car of a special light catapult, designed for emergency destroyer duty. The catapult was but 40 feet long. It pointed dead ahead.

“We’re into the wind now,” shouted the mechanic as Gil jazzed the throttle of the thundering Wasp. “Drop your hand when you’re ready, but wait till the bow is up.”

The destroyer ploughed ahead at full speed. Suddenly a loud drone came to Gil’s ears. The second Dornier was diving, its guns flaming. An anti-aircraft gun crashed, then another. The Dornier pulled out wildly.

“They got her!” screeched the mechanic.

Flame and smoke were pouring from the right wing-tip engines of the huge plane. Gil’s eyes gleamed. This was his chance. As the destroyer’s bow came up on a green wave, the car shot forward, banged to a stop at the end of its run. The Boeing, pitched into the air at incredible speed in

that short distance, dipped toward the sea, then picked up, skimmed lightly over the waves, and climbed.

The ship gained speed swiftly. He banked around and gazed behind him. The stricken Dornier was leveling off to land, its whole right wing afire. Suddenly a tongue of crimson shot out, followed by a gigantic cloud of black smoke that quickly became a pillar of flame. A muffled roar drifted up to his ears, even above the roaring Wasp. The Dornier, a mass of fire, plunged heavily into the sea. Pools of burning gasoline spread out over the waves. Into those pools leaped tiny figures, many to disappear, a few to come up on the other side, swimming madly away from the inferno.

The America had climbed high away from the fight, and was circling five miles off to the north. But the other pirate plane came in like an avenging fury. Gil, suddenly overcome by hatred of the unknown pirates, and half-sick with dread for Porky, whipped the fighter around and dove like a streak. But he was too late.

Twisting out of a crooked turn, the mighty Dornier swooped so swiftly, that the destroyer's guns could not follow her dizzy flight. An Archie crew went down under a bitter fire from above. Machine-gunners sprawled on the deck, while from every port of the hurtling pirate spurted scarlet flame from killers' guns.

WITH a thrill of horror, Gil saw four bombs go slithering down. The Dornier lurched out of its dive, pulled up frantically. As it raced into range, he raked its tail with a fierce burst, but it was as though he had fired into a dreadnaught.

The four, bombs struck almost simultaneously. There came a terrific cacophony of sound, a dreadful death-song, and for a moment the entire destroyer was hidden in four leaping geysers. Then came another roar, as the powder stores exploded within the greyhound of the seas.

Sick at heart, Gil saw the pall of smoke lift, to disclose a battered hulk break in two and go swiftly down to its grave below. Not till the Dornier, charging about on tilted wings, swept up at him, did he realize his danger. The next instant he had whipped the Boeing around and was racing at breakneck speed into the western sky. Behind him, baffled pirates sent their bullets snarling after

him, but the superior pace of the fighter soon put a safe distance between him and his unknown foes.

From burning hatred his mind slowly changed to a cold deadly venom, an icy but soul-gripping lust for revenge. Somehow, he would find that hidden lair, the pirate nest from which those fiends came forth to deal death and destruction.

Mechanically, he inspected his instruments, and checked the compass again. He had swung north of his first course, heading straight for New York. He could not do any good by calling the Navy to action now. The destroyer was gone, its crew perished. His one thought was to get to Slade, and to find Randolph, who had disappeared from Transatlantic Airways before he and Porky had come back from the first flight

He gazed ahead. A dull smudge appeared in the dusk. Then a light twinkled. Land! It was a welcome sight. He nosed down. Turning north, he skirted the coast and passed Newark. He headed for Roosevelt, but suddenly changed his mind and glided down into Mitchell Field. There he found an officer whom he knew and had the Boeing hurriedly hidden within an Army hangar.

"If anybody asks about me, or a Navy plane, say you haven't seen me," he told the officer hastily. "Give me a piece of paper and a pencil. If I don't show up or call you by noon tomorrow, send this note to Slade, head of Transatlantic Airways."

## CHAPTER IX

TWO hours later he had reached the Manhattan apartment of Slade and was telling his story, while he gulped down some food Slade's manservant brought him. As he talked, Slade stood up and began to pace the floor of his luxurious living-room, his hands clasped tensely behind him.

"It all goes back to that bird Randolph," said Gil in conclusion. "He was an agent of that gang; he must have bribed the whole Transatlantic force, or most of it."

Slade stopped and stared at him. "Randolph," he muttered. "Tracy, maybe this thing will work out faster than you think. Randolph's coming here tonight."

"He called me this afternoon. He hinted at being in some terrible danger, and intimated that

he'd tell all he knew if I would protect him and get him off with a light sentence."

"I'd like to break his damned neck," Gil rapped out. "But if he can give us the location of—" He halted abruptly. "Good-night, why didn't I think of that before! I've got it!"

"Got what?"

"Their base—how to get to it. That's the one thing I left out of that report."

"What report?" said Slade quickly.

"I gave a memo to Jack Norton at Mitchell Field, outlining what happened today, in case those gangsters got me. I told him to send it to you if I didn't call him by tomorrow."

"Good idea," Slade nodded. "What's this about their base?"

"I heard Martin ask for the course, and the navigator said to strike the sixty-first meridian and fly north. He said they could see 'it' easily. He must have meant their base!"

"Tracy, you've hit it," said Slade. "And we'll strike. If we move swiftly, we may be in time, yet."

"What do you mean?" asked Gil, startled.

Before Slade could answer, the manservant entered. "A Mr. Randolph, sir," he said impassively. "He says he has an—"

"Show him in," said Slade hastily. He turned to Gil. "Now don't alarm the fellow. We may get some valuable information."

Gone was Randolph's sleek appearance, He stood, nervously in the doorway, twisting his hat in his hands, his face pale and haggard, a look of terror in his shifting eyes.

"Well?" Slade's voice was crisp.

Randolph wet his lips furtively. He looked back at the door, then across at the windows. As he saw Gil, he started.

"If I tell you," he said to Slade, "will you have them lock me up where I'll be safe I won't live another—"

"What do you know?" snapped Slade. "Out with it."

"It's about the ships—the Dorniers," muttered Randolph. "I—I was dragged into it. They've got something on me."

"Is anyone else in Transatlantic mixed up in it?" demanded Slade.

"Nobody but Shearer and a few mechanics that I know of now," said Randolph huskily.

"Shearer's pilot of No. 5. You know him. But the Chief would get more in there, somehow, if he wanted to."

"The Chief! Who is he? Where is his hideout?"

"I don't know who he is—nobody does," said Randolph earnestly. "He sits behind a wall with a lot of mirrors tilted so he can see you and you can't see him."

"Quick, how do you get in the place?" barked Slade.

"You go in from an alley near 55th and Sixth Avenue, and through some halls, twisting around and into a basement. Then you come to an office—I've got a key—and you go down through a trap inside a closet to a passage. I don't know where it goes; I get all mixed up by the time I get through the passage. But you signal your number in front of a big door and you stand in front of a periscope so they can see your face."

Gil whirled around to Slade. "Let's get some cops and raid it!" he cried.

"Wait a minute, Tracy," said Slade. "I've a better plan. We'll raid it, but we'll make sure this mysterious Chief is there first. Randolph, you're going in there, tonight."

Randolph turned a deathly white. "Don't send me there!" he gasped. "They'll know it's queer, I only come when I'm ordered."

"You can report that you saw Tracy hurrying to my apartment. That's enough reason for an emergency visit. Simply report, find out if the Chief is there, and leave. I'll arrange a raiding party through MacPherson, the deputy commissioner. After you go in the party will follow into the passage, keeping out of sight of the periscope. You will meet only a plainclothes man in the alley, and will identify yourself. He will probably have someone with him to transmit his orders to the police raiders."

"No, no!" shrieked Randolph. "The Chief will know! He's not human, I tell you. He'll know, and they'll kill me."

"He can't know," snapped Slade, "It'll all be over inside of forty minutes. I tell you, I want that leader! He's the only one who can tell us what we want. You don't know where their secret base is, do you?"

"No," faltered Randolph. "No one knew, except the navigator of each plane, and even he

never knew what kind of a place it was. He just got the position a few minutes before taking off.”

“Well, that’s what I want,” roared Slade. “You go in there, or I’ll hand you over to the police with no recommendations—except a murder charge!”

“I’ll go,” Randolph whispered, but his eyes were sick with dread. Slade swung about and called for his man.

“Parkins, get me Mr. MacPherson,” he directed brusquely.

THE servant took in Randolph and Gil with his impassive gaze as he inclined his head. He left the room. Slade turned to Gil. “Take Randolph into my library. There’s some Scotch in there. Give him a drink. Maybe he’ll need it.”

He eyed the former assistant manager for a second, then went out to the telephone. Within a few minutes he returned.

“Randolph, you will be in the alley at exactly 9:45. That gives you ten minutes to get there. Your Chief couldn’t find out anything in that time. If the Chief is there, yell at the top of your voice as the door opens. The raiders will do the rest. If he isn’t go on out and come back here.”

Randolph hurried out of the apartment. Instantly Slade turned to Gil.

“We’ll have to move fast,” he said crisply. “I didn’t want him to know, for this may all be a plant. But we’re going out to that secret base tonight, whether we learn any more or not!”

“What?” Gil stammered.

“It’s the only way we’ll get action. If we report to the Navy that this pirates nest is on a certain meridian, they’ll think we’re crazy. It might be anywhere between the North and South Poles. We’ll take the last Dornier—No. 5—and fly straight east to the meridian and turn south. That gives a wide stretch to search to the south. The place couldn’t be north of there for that’s up into the steamship lanes, thick with travel. But there is an area well to the south that is almost never traveled.”

“But why not tell the Navy what we’re doing?” said Gil anxiously. “We’ll need them in at the finish, even if we do find the spot.”

“That’s exactly what I’m going to do. You sit down and make out a brief statement of what happened today, with the data on this course

we’re taking, what you heard, and so forth. Tell them where we’re going, that we’ll keep our radio quiet for fear of giving the alarm, but that the second we sight this base, we’ll climb up high and broadcast the alarm. The Dornier is armed, and we’ll be able to bomb the place if we have to.”

“You think it’s an island, or something like that?” queried Gil breathlessly.

“I don’t know,” snapped Slade. “We’ll know later. You get into the library and write the report. I’ll have it radioed to Washington in code.”

He shot a look at his watch and strode to another room. Gil went into the library. Something in Slade’s manner gave him confidence, and even a new hope that they would find Porky and Bates alive at the hidden pirate base. But at the thought of his chunky little partner struggling with the killers in the America’s baggage hull, a shadow came over his face. It was almost too much to hope. Probably he would never see Porky again.

## CHAPTER X

BEHIND a wall of mirrors a tall man hurriedly seated himself in a luxurious chair. He picked up the desk phone before him and said in a swift but almost toneless voice, “Emergency orders. Station X is to be abandoned at once. You will shift all communications to Station F until further orders. No. 1 will relinquish coast and land station control temporarily to No. 5, until the arrival of No. 1 at Main Base, when orders will be sent by relay as usual.”

“Connect me with station commander,” he ordered. There was but a short pause. “It has become necessary to abandon this station, and for me to leave for Main Base. No. 36 will apply for admittance in about one minute. Admit him to me. At once begin the removal of your special papers, and connect the blasting switches for my operation. Signal when clear.”

He sat back, his long fingers tapping methodically on the arm of his chair. He glanced down at a button near his fingers. His lips tightened.

A blue light flickered before him. He turned his periscope handle and peered into the eyepiece. Then he touched a lever at one side. A shelf of small mirrors descended into position in front

of him. In the shining surfaces he could see the reflection of a chair in the middle of the room outside. He touched a switch.

“Enter,” he said briefly.

A somewhat cringing figure came into view on the reflecting mirrors. Randolph, a forced smile on his ghastly face, seated himself fearfully in front of the reflectors outside.

“Report the reason for your emergency visit,” said the man behind the wall, tonelessly.

“Gil Tracy is back in New York,” began Randolph hurriedly. “I—I saw him and thought you would want to know. He was going to Slade’s apartment, and—”

“How do you know? Why were you near Slade’s apartment?”

Randolph started. “I—I was just going—”

“You lie.” There was no rising inflection in the voice, but it cut like a whip. “You are a traitor. Within the past half hour you have offered to turn State’s evidence, to save your rotten life.”

“No—no, I swear I—”

The hidden speaker cut off Randolph’s shrill scream.

“Save yourself one last lie. I know every move you have made. Even now you are planning to signal police raiders you believe waiting in the passage.”

“Believe—I believe waiting?” Randolph whispered hoarsely. “You mean—then there aren’t—”

“There are no raiders.” There was a trace of sardonic humor in the deadly voice. “You fool, do you think you could—”

“My God!” Randolph’s words burst from tortured lips, his face a mask of agonized fear. “Then it was you—all the time you knew and—”

The slender fingers of the man behind the mirrors reached for the button on the arm of his chair. “Yes, you bungling traitor,” he said icily. And his hand descended on the button.

Randolph gave one horrible, choking cry as he jerked to and fro under a deadly fusillade, fired from a machine gun behind the angled mirrors. The gun, muffled to a sinister grunt, poured a hail of slugs into the twitching figure in the bolted chair. His killer leaned forward, his sharp face silhouetted, a cruel smile on his thin lips as he watched in the reflectors before him. He released the gun switch button.

“No. 36 has been removed,” he said mechanically into the desk phone. “Signal when ready for leaving.”

One by one, a row of five red bulbs lit up in front of him. He opened a drawer and put the contents into a briefcase. Then he turned to a wall clock, under which was a switch with a red handle. Calmly, he set the hands back five minutes, made an adjustment, then turned the switch. He moved swiftly to the rear. A panel rotated soundlessly and the room was empty.

GIL TRACY walked restlessly up and down Slade’s library. He could not relax, though he felt the strain of the day. His glance passed across the shelves of books. Histories, travel books, fiction, several encyclopedias—Gil was turning away when his eyes caught the title of a book in the middle of a shelf. It was one of three volumes that appeared to be a condensed encyclopedia. In gold letters he saw: Sars to Zynder.

Sars! Something clicked in his brain. He had all but forgotten Stoddard’s words on that fateful night. He snatched the book and opened to the first entry.

“Michael Sars, explorer, best known to explorers of another day, for his journey in 1910, when he proved that—”

W-H-O-O-M! A stunning explosion from outside shook the floor and rattled window panes behind Gil’s back. He almost dropped the book as he rushed to the window. A block away a pillar of flame leaped up from the middle of a building that seemed to have been almost rent by some tremendous blast. A second explosion shattered the air, and he saw wreckage hurled high. Unthinking, he thrust the book into his side-pocket and shoved open the window to watch. An exclamation behind made him turn. It was Slade, a startled look on his face. He carried a brief-case in his hand.

“Something blew up over there,” said Gil. “Look at the blaze!”

Outside the apartment came the shrill shriek of sirens, the piercing sound of police whistles, and back of it the din of excited voices.

“There goes our last hope of getting that Chief of theirs,” Gil growled. “It looks as though he was always one jump ahead.”

“Which reminds me that we’ll have to be moving, if we’re to carry out my plan,” said Slade. “Everything’s ready. The plane is fueled, and I’ve had a specially selected crew put on board.”

“O.K.,” Gil replied. “I’ll do anything to get even with those devils!”

Slade smiled. “I have a feeling you will meet them within a few hours,” he observed.

Two hours afterward, as Gil sat back from checking the instruments of the last Dornier, he remembered Slade’s words. He looked across the control compartment at the operations manager of Transatlantic Airways. Slade’s rather severe face was outlined against the reflected light from the dash-clock light. There was a grim determination written there.

“Don’t worry,” Gil called across at him. “We’ll get those birds. There’ll be a big surprise party before the night’s over!”

Slade’s thin lips had the ghost of a smile. Gil set the automatic pilot and adjusted it to hold the east course. He caught himself nodding. Slade looked across at him and touched the dual controls.

“Go to sleep if you wish,” he said. “I’ll watch the compass and head her back if she drifts off.”

## CHAPTER XI

A MOMENT later Gil was asleep, utterly worn out from the strain of the day. Five hours later he awoke and gazed at the clock. It was now four in the morning. Already dawn had crept into the sky.

He turned quickly to Slade. The gaunt president was glancing through a book he held close to the cabin light. He faced around as Gil sat up.

“We’ve been on the meridian, headed south, for almost two hours,” he said. “Nothing sighted yet.”

Gil glanced at the book. It was the one he had brought from Slade’s library. Slade had evidently taken it from his pocket to while away the long hours.

“Say, I forgot about that,” Gil exclaimed. “Did you find anything in there?”

Slade handed him the book. His face had an odd look on it, which Gil did not understand.

“I found it very interesting,” he replied. “Read it yourself. It brings a fantastic thought to mind.”

Gil took it, a little puzzled. Slade’s tone held a sardonic humor. But he forgot it in the first few words he read:

“Michael Sars, explorer, best known for his sea journey in 1910, in which he undertook to prove that the vast floating masses of seaweed in the North Atlantic, which have existed there for centuries, do not hide an ‘isle of lost ships.’

“Prior to Sars’ expedition there were a few stories, by sea captains, of being compelled to detour these huge masses of sargassum, from which the great area has derived its name of Sargasso Sea. Some few had held steadfastly to their belief that in the center of the Sargasso Sea, where the whirl of the Gulf Stream is strongest, there was an impassable region where driftwood accumulated, and where derelict ships drifted, to become locked together forever.

“It was to determine the truth of this story of the ‘Isle of Lost Ships’ that Sars set forth on his expedition. While it was impossible for him to sail over every mile of the Sargasso Sea, which extends between 30 degrees and 70 degrees west longitude and from 25 north latitude to 35 north latitude, or over a region of approximately 2,500 by 1,200 miles, he saw enough to convince him that there is no such spot as sailors dreamed about. He admitted that there were some few floating islands of sargassum where the growth was deep and thick enough to make passage difficult. He also found a few predaceous animals of small size on these strange islets. But as these were located far from the normal steamer lanes he discounted the possibility of vessels being forced to detour even in the future, when ocean travel may send liners across parts of the Sargasso Sea.”

Gil looked up dazedly to find Slade watching him with interest.

“Good Lord—the Sargasso Sea!” Gil exclaimed breathlessly. “I’ve heard of it, but I thought it was always a fairy tale. Could it really be possible—”

For answer Slade opened a port in the side of the compartment and gazed down.

“Look,” he said.

Gil stared. The surface of the ocean was covered with masses of seaweed in every

direction, as far as he could see. He shot a glance at the altimeter. They were at only 2,000 feet.

"I dropped down to see if we were over the Sargasso," said Slade calmly. "Now that it is light, we can go clear down and take a good look."

EXPERTLY he sent the Dornier on a power glide to a hundred feet. The Atlantic sped beneath them, frequently completely hidden by floating islets that stretched for three or four hundred feet. They appeared almost solid. On one of the largest was a clump of what seemed to be shrubbery.

"Steamers never come this way," said Slade, in answer to his glance. "Only by air could this be seen. I begin to think that this man Sars was not very thorough, after all."

"But the base—if it's really down here, they'll see us coming," said Gil anxiously. "Let's radio the Navy ships now."

"Wait. They would hear our signal at the base, and be warned. Wait till we're sure."

Gil assented reluctantly. He took the controls at Slade's nod and started climbing. Suddenly he gazed off to the right. A blur showed there. It grew in size. He seized a high-powered glass and focused it. Then his heart almost leaped into his throat.

Brought close by the magic of the glass, silhouetted against the gray laky, were the masts of ships, covered with tangled rigging. In the foreground he saw a huge vessel, a Navy collier, its stern half-hidden by a blackened four-master with rotting sails. Beyond lay ship after ship, some heeled over, others wedged together, all motionless, still—dead things in a graveyard of dead ships.

"My God, it's real!" Gil shouted huskily. He threw a swift look at Slade. The gaunt face of the man beside him was alight with a peculiar glow. But Gil was staring through the glass again, unthinking.

He started. For beyond a battered schooner he saw a huge platform, a massive deck with bayed-out center. And on that enormous deck was a huge plane. A missing Dornier! They had found the lost seadrome!

He tore the glass from his eyes. "We've found it—it's their base!" he cried. He turned to shout at the radio operator. Then an astounding thing happened. A pistol appeared suddenly in Slade's

hand. And that pistol was pointed straight at his heart.

"Sit still, Tracy," said Slade, with quiet amusement. "Not that it makes much difference, for you've taken your last trick in this game."

GIL could do nothing but gape at the gaunt face above the leveled gun. Slade, the president of Transatlantic Airways—had the man gone mad? His world whirled about him. Then slowly, as he stared into the ironically amused eyes in that hawklike face, it came to him in one tremendous jolt.

Slade, head of the great airline, in reality a crook, one of the mysterious band that had stolen the Dorniers, one of the pirates!

"You were in on it all the time!" he cried at last. "It was you that fixed the crews of those planes. You knew—"

"My dear Tracy," said Slade with a hint of scorn, "you are really quite slow. Of course I knew. You see, I am the Chief you were so wrought up about."

Gil hardly heard him. What a fool he had been! Slade, conspiring to use Bates' millions to build up an ocean air service only so that he and his gang of killers could steal the expensive equipment and prey on helpless steamers from their secret base. Slade, hearing every plan of Bates, apparently laying traps for the pirates himself, then calmly issuing orders to his pirate mob to offset his official directions.

Randolph—but Randolph had not known. Then he saw. The mirrors Randolph had described, the masked voice—what a scheme! Not even those of his own gang had known that the Chief was Slade.

Gil's eyes swept down in horror at the scene unfolding itself beneath. They were almost over the pirate base, with its half-camouflaged seadrome wedged into the edge of this isle of lost ships. He could see a thinned-out lane in the seaweed masses, where the pirates had evidently blasted their way clear, to get the drome into place.

It was like a nightmare, some weird phantasm from which he must surely awake. It seemed no ocean, but a green-gray desert that stretched away for miles, to the horizon, moving soddently now and then under the wind. And it came to him, in

vast despair, that there was not one chance in a million of escaping from this horrible place.

Slade seemed to read his mind. He curled his thin lips into a smile of contemptuous triumph.

“Right, Tracy. You are here forever, just as those ships are here till the end of the world. But I have a pleasant little nest down there for you, to reward you for your good work. Do you see that ship—the one with the orange and black hull?”

Gil gazed down. It was an ancient vessel, with broad arrows set perpendicularly on its sides.

“One of dear old England’s convict ships, thought lost in 1790—a very pleasant home. Your friend Baines will find it so, and the others I have ordered kept in there for a while. You will join them very soon now.”

A wave of hope shot through Gil, quickly tempered with rage and horror; hope and joy at learning that Porky still lived, and deep horror at realization of what his friend was undergoing.

THEN something broke within Gil Tracy’s breast. It was as though a thousand devils had infused their hate and fury into his heart. So swiftly did he spring that Slade’s arm was knocked aside in a flash. The pistol roared, and its flame singed Gil’s hair. The bullet crashed through the nearest panel. Slade gave a cry for help. A clamor of voices sounded behind. The gun barked again.

Gil’s fist drove in like a battering ram. Slade jerked back his head. The blow struck squarely, and his head snapped clear to his shoulders. His eyes dilated from a suddenly blackened face. Gil whirled as Slade fell to the compartment deck. His hand clutched the pistol that slipped from Slade’s nerveless fingers.

A man leaped into the passage behind. Gil fired twice. The man fell from sight. But others drove over him, trampling across his body as though it had been a sack of wheat. Gil emptied his gun. The navigator plunged forward, a pistol flaming in his hands. The air-speed meter crashed to bits. Glass flew.

With a quick inspiration, Gil seized the control wheel of the huge plane. He yanked it back to his chest. The Dornier jerked its nose skyward. The men in the passage went slithering into the rear of the control deck, cursing and howling in rage.

Before Gil could throw the wheel forward, the Dornier pitched off to the right in a frightful whip. Gil was hurled against the side of the compartment. He fought his way back to the wheel and closed the two master throttles. Twelve engines went silent at his touch, but the nose stayed down. The battered derelicts in the seaweed below seemed to leap up at him. He braced himself and pulled with all his might. The nose came up grudgingly, but too late.

A towering mast flashed beneath the hull. Gil held his breath as he kicked wildly away. He missed the mast, but a broken, stump-masted old schooner loomed up directly in front of the plunging plane. He tried to zoom, but in vain. The Dornier crashed through the last jagged stump, careened madly and shot up on its nose.

Gil held his breath as the plane hurtled between two steel vessels. He closed his eyes for a second as a rust-red hull swam into sight from out of the dizzy whirl. There was a splintering crash, but the plane still moved. Gil’s eyes darted open and he saw what had happened. The outstretched wing had caught first, the tips shattering. The ruptured wing-stumps went tearing between the two derelicts. Suddenly they wedged with a grinding screech, merged with a furor of frightened screams from the cabin behind. The Dornier whipped around this newly created axis and threw itself upside down into the Sargasso Sea.

Gil felt himself hurled backward, plunged into a mass of seaweed, rank and evil-smelling, to find himself in darkness underneath. It drove him to panicky action, and he fought his way up through the thick layer of tangled grasses. His body had driven a hole into the weeds, and he came through at last, as he found the opening. He looked hurriedly about him. The wreck was still wedged. Smoke poured from it, but it did not catch fire. He struck out, finally reaching a Jacob’s ladder on the hull of the nearest vessel, and clambered up the side.

## CHAPTER XII

A FEELING of desolation came over him. He had escaped, but to what end? There was absolutely no way in the world of getting out of this isle of missing ships, except by air, and his chances of seizing a pirate plane alone and unaided were infinitesimal. Then the memory of

Slade's words came to him, and he stiffened. The prison ship! Porky was down there. Porky was still alive!

The thought sent a thrill through him, gave him new hope. He turned and made his way to the bridge of the freighter. A musty log-book, yellowed by age, lay on the deck of the chart-room. He picked it up.

"S.S. Roritan," he read. "En route Liverpool to New Orleans, February 19, 1903. Rudder disabled in storm, shipping heavy seas. Crew tried to abandon ship, but forced back at point of guns. Will attempt to make—"

The entry ended there. On the next sheet Gil saw a faded brown stain. The paper tore in his hands. He dropped the book with a little shiver. Twenty-seven years and more! And this was but one of the dead fleet he had seen from the air. That prison ship! England had used them back in the 18th century. And perhaps even older ships lay hidden here. He went to the bridge and gazed about him.

A quarter of a mile away he saw moving figures. Men were hastily clambering across deserted hulks, crossing improvised gangways from vessel to vessel. Then he saw that practically every derelict in this strange place was thus connected, as though the pirates, or perhaps someone before them, had explored every nook and cranny of this lost world. Where planks could not be thrown, rope ladders had been secured between ship's sides.

The sight of the advancing group brought him to action. While they might not know of an enemy's presence in the Dornier which had crashed, they might learn it from some of the survivors in the wreck. Better that they would think he had gone down—and stayed down—than to have them start an immediate search for him.

He regained the deck and found a rope connection between the freighter's stern and the nearest vessel. This was an old sloop, with black and rotten shrouds. He hurried along its deck and onto an old square-rigger of indefinite age. At its stern he gazed down with startled eyes on a strange ship—a vessel with a high poop oddly carved and decorated, a ship which he knew must have been a Spanish galleon of years far gone by. It bore marks of conflict, with gaping holes in its sides, above the water-line. He was swinging

aboard it from a broken mast which had been laid between the two, when he saw something move at one side. He saw a man duck back out of sight.

On tiptoe, his fist clenched, Gil approached the spot where the man had disappeared. He leaped around the cabin's side. The man was running wildly for the next vessel.

"Stop," Gil thundered. "Stop or I'll fire!"

IT WAS an empty threat, for he had no gun. But the man instantly stopped, his hands lifted. He was dressed in dirty and tattered dungarees, and his face was scraggly with a matted beard. Gil dashed across the deck and seized the fellow. "Keep quiet," he snapped. "You make one sound and I'll break your neck." Then he relaxed his hold, for the man had turned a terrified face toward him. Gil saw that he was quite old, almost feeble.

"I won't do anything," whispered the old man, hopelessly. "I guess it's all over, now."

"What do you mean?" demanded Gil brusquely.

The old fellow's eyes widened. He gaped for a second. "You—you're not one of Kell's men?" he said hoarsely. "You didn't come to kill us?"

Gil scrutinized him intently. The old man seemed sincere.

"Never mind me," he retorted. "Who are you, if you're not one of Kell's outfit?"

The old man seemed dazed. "I—I'm one of the Lucy B. Matthews crew," he whispered. "Lost here back in 1916—been here, like all the rest, ever since. That is—till they came!"

He pointed with a gnarled finger toward the direction from which Gil had come.

"You mean there are others here—survivors of these ships?" said Gil eagerly. "People besides these pirates?"

"Yes, a few of us left," said the old fellow, slowly. "Not many. Kell tried to kill us all off when he found us here."

"How about their prisoners—the men in the convict ship?" asked Gil. "Do you know about them, which ones are still alive?"

The old man shook his head. "No, but Matt—he's the youngest of us that are left—Matt might know. He gets over there, he's trying to find a way to blow them up some night. He might know."

"Take me to him," said Gil quickly. "Don't be afraid," as the old fellow backed away. "I'm with you. I was in that plane that crashed; they tried to kill me and I crashed it."

"Plane?" said the other feebly. "Oh, I see—I heard it but I hid. I was afraid they'd see me."

He led the way to a ladder and went down it with an agility surprising for a man of his age and apparent weakness. Ten minutes later Gil found himself in the cabin of a small yacht, surrounded by eleven men, varying in ages from about thirty to seventy, all with that fearful, furtive look which he had first seen on the old man's face.

Matt proved to be a stalwart fellow, dark of skin, with a fierce, angry eye and suspicious manner. He unbent as Gil hurriedly explained his story.

"That clears up a lot of things," he said when Gil finished. "We never knew how they worked it, getting that big platform in here with nobody the wiser. They hauled it in with a couple of tugs as far as they could, and then blasted ships and stuff out of the way till they had a snug berth for it. Hell broke loose when that platform was rigged up. We all thought we were saved—some of the people had been in this Godforsaken spot for 30 years!"

Gil looked around him a little dazedly. "It's like a bad dream," he confessed. "This place just doesn't seem real."

"It's real enough," retorted Matt. "It's hell—and always was, even before those devils came. But we always hoped we'd get away. We used to try to send a message outside with one of the wireless sets, but nobody knew how to run one, and I guess even if we did send something it wasn't picked up. This place is way off from any steamer lane."

"What do you live on?" asked Gil curiously.

"There's plenty of food—yes, and liquor, too," said Matt. "Before Kell and his outfit came, we'd search every ship that drifted in and find what it carried. And we issued the stuff equally. Even now, there's plenty to keep a thousand men alive here for years. Strange ships have come in here, but they never go out—no more'n any of us ever will."

Gil sat up sharply.

"Don't say that!" he protested. "I've a hunch we can make a break out of here."

"How?" demanded Matt. A light sprang into his eyes.

"Wait a second. You said some of these ships still have radio sets on them?"

"Radio? Oh, you mean wireless," replied Matt.

"They used to call it that," said Gil.

"Yes, but none of us knows how to run one, and besides, you'd have to start up a boiler to get steam for the dynamos. Kell or some of his gang would see the smoke."

"Not if we do it at night," said Gil quickly. "But that's only part of my idea. Listen to this, and see if you think it'll work."

### CHAPTER XIII

IN A black, tiny cell down on the lower deck of the convict ship bearing the ironic name of Friendship, Porky Baines slumped against the slanting side of his prison as far as his manacles would let him go. His hands were chained close together, the cuffs tearing cruelly into his flesh, and both arms were stretched above his head by a stout chain, so that he had almost to stand on tiptoe to keep from wrenching his arms from their sockets.

His body, racked by pain, was almost at breaking point of absolute exhaustion. He stared up at a tiny opening between his cell and the next and drew a breath of the foul air before trying a hoarse whisper to the man he knew was locked there.

"Can you hear me?" he called softly.

A low groan was the answer. Porky could guess at the man's misery, for he had heard the pirate guards beating him as they brought him in. His own body bore severe bruises and welts from the same cause.

"Where did you come from?" Porky asked hurriedly.

"We were on the first seadrome," came the slow reply. "Four of us Navy pilots. They sent us out there with four fighters, ready for emergency duty."

"How'd these devils get you?" Porky said.

"Somebody on the seadrome gave us dope. I passed out after eating. I came to in the air; I was in one of those Dorniers with the skulls on the bow. This fellow Kell was there—he'd brought

down some men to steal our ships. That's all I know. I guess it's curtains, or maybe worse."

His voice was hopeless. But another voice interrupted as Porky started to answer. "Hold everything, Bill," it admonished the other Navy man. "The *Saratoga* isn't far off here—she's right near the edge of the sea-weed. Maybe she'll send out some scouts and they'll sight this place."

"Yes, and we've got another chance," added Porky, wincing as the manacles bit into his wrists. "Gil Tracy's liable to come through; he got away from that fight yesterday. I heard Kell say so, and—"

"Tracy's dead," said the man next to him forlornly. "He came out here with the last Dornier; it crashed just after we landed. And it seems everybody but the navigator and one mechanic got bumped. Kell was in a good humor about it; it seems somebody he was afraid of was in there, too. I didn't get all of it."

Porky went cold. Gil dead! It struck him like a knife between his shoulders. For a second he forgot his misery. He tore blindly at his fetters till the agony brought him back to his senses.

"Maybe it was better, Gil," he whispered to himself. "Better than this, old man."

A SENSE of utter despair settled on him. He was sagging, in a semi-conscious condition, from the chains that held him when gruff voices sounded from the deck above. In a minute five or six pirates appeared. Porky and the other prisoners were roughly unshackled, then chained together and marched up on deck. It was well after nightfall, but the surrounding area was bright. Porky saw dazedly that the illumination came from floodlights on the seadrome which was only three hundred yards away. Other lights glowed in a large vessel near the drome. He guessed that the current for the lighting system came from the seadrome's dynamos.

He and the other captives trod wearily across a rude gangway to another vessel, then onto the larger one, evidently the pirates' headquarters. In another moment he found himself in a huge and luxuriously furnished cabin, occupied by Kell and a score of his killers.

Kell leaned back from the table at which he sat and eyed the captives with a fierce amusement. His face was flushed under his black beard. A

brandy bottle sat half emptied before him. He poured himself another drink and took it at one gulp.

"We'll make it short and sweet," he said grimly. "Because I'm feeling satisfied tonight, I'll give you each one chance. If you want to join us here, with no tricks—just a straight cruise under the Jolly Roger, say the word. If not—"

His silence was expressive. He glared around at Porky, who was at the end. "Well, speak up!" he snarled.

Porky's lips set in stoical silence. Kell swept the rest with his fierce gaze. He sneered.

"So that's it?" he muttered. "Well, that suits me. Maybe you'll wish you could change your minds in a bit, but it'll be too late then."

He turned to one of the guards. "Take 'em to the drome and take off the chains, he ordered. "Get every-body up for the show. We'll make it one these lily-fingers won't forget."

A bloodthirsty group had already gathered near the center of the seadrome, under the floodlights. Porky and the other captives were shoved into the center of the crowd, where stood a tall, bearded rascal with a handle from which dangled strips of rawhide. Porky saw with horror that each of the rawhide strips was tipped with lead, and he knew that he gazed upon the dreadful cat-o'-nine-tails.

Yells and jeers rang out from the pirate mob, when there came a sudden interruption. With a shout, a man came dashing from one of the seadrome buildings. Porky saw that it was the radio office.

"We've got to stop them!" he cried. His face was white with fear. "They're calling for help, the Navy—"

Kell leaped on him furiously. "What? Who's calling?" he bellowed.

"Out there—they must be on one of the ships," babbled the man, in fright. "It's a powerful signal—maybe the Cyclops—"

"Look—there's a light! They've started a fire," broke in another pirate:

Kell whirled. Across the mass of tangled rigging and derelict ships, showing faintly beyond the floodlight circle, a pillar of red flame was leaping up into the night.

"The Cornardol!" roared Kell. "Get over there, you fools! Slit their damned throats and put out

that fire. It's a beacon—they'll be looking for it if they fly in here. Out with those floodlights."

PORKY BAINES could hold back no longer. Like a wildcat, he hurled himself onto Kell, his hands snatching the whip from Kell. A pistol roared behind him. He heard the bullet's angry whine, but he was beyond caring now. Kell, momentarily dumbfounded by the attack, stood with a mighty arm outstretched as it had been when Porky seized the whip. Instantly, Porky whirled the "cat" back of him. It whistled through the air and caught the giant on suddenly outflung arms. One hissing strip went through his guard and bit deeply into his cheek. Blood spurting out. A shriek of animal pain and rage came from Kell's lips. His hand flashed to his belt. Porky swiftly sidestepped and snapped the whip again. And just then the lights went out.

The pandemonium that followed seemed a nightmare. Porky heard Kell bellow with pain once again as the cat-o'-nine-tails struck home. Then the air was filled with curses, the sounds of bodies striking together, and above all the roar of Kell for lights. Porky crawled on hands and knees across the deck to where he knew the rack stood. He felt for the clasps that secured the spread-eagle manacles and leg-shackles. The flogged Navy pilot fell almost unconscious on the deck as he released him.

One dim light flashed on at the side of the drome, and Porky's eyes almost started from his head. A little band of men was pouring across an improvised gangway. And at the head of that band was Gil Tracy!

"Gil!" Porky's shout was both a greeting and a battle-cry. The sight of Gil, whom he had thought dead, sent a desperate courage and gladness coursing through his veins. He flung a look about him. A bearded pirate was kneeling upon one of the captives, his hand drawn back, a knife gleaming there. Porky launched himself as though he had been catapulted. The knife went clattering. Porky smashed home a side blow to the pirate's ear. The man grunted and went silent.

A Thompson gun stuttered into action. Three pirates fell. Porky sent two shots crashing into a fourth man, then ran for the sub-machine gun. But Gil was already before him.

"Porky, you old devil!" Gil cried out.

"Up and at 'em, fellow," Porky shouted joyfully.

From behind Gil, Matt, the big leader of the castaways, charged like an enraged bull. Across the fallen bodies he leaped, his huge fist driving straight into a pirate jaw. And when the rascal fell, another Thompson gun was added to the attacker's battery.

"Into that ship," Gil yelled at Porky. "We'll cover you—get the engines going!"

Porky emptied his pistol full into the face of a pirate that suddenly came from behind the flogging-rack. Then he hurled the empty weapon like a rock in Kell's general direction and dashed for the plane Gil had indicated. It was the fourth Dornier, the one in which they had seen the guard murdered the day before, and in which he had been made a captive by Martin and his gang.

He felt his way into the engine-room. At last he found a switch and turned on the lights. Then he cut in one engine and tripped the starter. The engine sputtered into life. Leaving it at fourth-throttle, he ran to the next. Soon the craft was vibrating with the power of its twelve special Wasps. He threw the engines to cockpit control and raced for the upper deck.

ACROSS the drome he saw the battle still raging. But Gil's band seemed to have the upper hand for a minute. Porky saw the reason. At the other end of the huge platform a little group of pirates was gathered around four Navy planes. Once those fighters got into the air, the Dornier would be lost, for it had not been armed.

He set the brakes tight and sent the engines to thundering. They responded with an eager pull. He snapped the master throttles to idling and hurried out of the ship. Gil and his men were working their way back to the Dornier, under a hot fire from the pirates. There were now only two of the Navy pilots left, the flogged one having fallen, unconscious, and another a victim to a pirate bullet.

Only four of Matt's band remained, but they fought with the ferocity of tigers.

"Gil—look, they're sneaking off with the fighters," Porky shouted as he reached Gil's side.

Gil flashed a quick look down the deck. Two of the planes were moving forward. The others were silent.

## CHAPTER XIV

“They’ve only two pilots there,” he yelled. “We’ve got to take the other ships, or we’re sunk. Porky, you stick with the Dornier. Matt and his men will go with you—”

*B-r-r-r-r-r-r-r!* The leading fighter had zoomed up and instantly nosed down for a raking fire at the group in the center of the deck. It lasted for but a second, as the plane nosed down and then up to avoid a crash. A man behind Matt went down with a cry. Gil whirled with his Thompson gun at his shoulder. Full in the light he stood as the second fighter charged in the same way. His rattling gun spoke one second ahead of the snarling nose-guns. The fighter dipped steeply, zoomed up crooked and whipped onto its back. It struck with a resounding crash at the edge of the seadrome buildings. A tongue of flame leaped out.

“Get your ship off,” Gil barked at Porky. Turning, he ran at top speed for the remaining fighters, one of the Navy men behind him.

He was half-way there when he saw Kell dashing madly in the same direction. The giant was easily out-distancing him. Gil had discarded his gun and was helpless to stop the pirate leader. He saw Kell vault into the cockpit, then out at the prop. The engine caught with a roar. Gil sped for the wingtip, to yank the ship aside into a crash, but he missed. As he jumped for the wing, Kell fired at the two racing figures. The Navy pilot gave a moan. The fighter swept down the drome and hurled itself into the air after the Dornier, which had just taken off.

“He got my arm—I can’t fly,” muttered the Navy pilot. “You’ll have to make it. I’ll help you get started.”

Gil was at the prop. He jerked it through. The engine sputtered, died. He tried again. This time it caught. He dared not wait to warm up, but climbed in as the other man jumped out. Down the platform he raced at full gun, holding the nose down while the cold engine struggled with the load. His heart sank as he neared the edge of the platform, for the engine was still missing. But suddenly it burst into a clear, full-throated song. And instantly Gil hauled up into a dizzy zoom that took him three hundred feet in a twinkling.

HE WAS not one moment too soon. In the light from the burning plane he saw the remainder of the pirates running back desperately to the seadrome. He scanned the almost hidden isle of lost ships. If only the S.O.S call had gone through! If it had, they had a chance, depending on how close the Saratoga was to the seaweed area. He had no way of knowing that. And only aircraft could help them now.

Ahead of him he saw a spurt of flame stab the darkness. He whipped the fighter around and darted in that direction. The huge bulk of the Dornier loomed up. And on each side, catching it between them in a withering crossfire, was a pirate fighter.

Gil drove in like a bullet at the ship on his right. The Dornier was weaving drunkenly. The first pirate pulled up abruptly as Gil’s guns snarled, into his tail. In the murky light, Gil lost him for a second, then drew onto his tail again as the other was silhouetted against the burning wreck. The pirate looped. Gil grinned to himself and hauled his stick back. He tightened up in the loop and thumbed his gun-trip. The pirate sheered away into the night, but Gil closed up the gap relentlessly.

The pirate Immelmanned and lost on the climb. Gil raced in for the kill. He rocked the nose with steady feet. His guns rattled above the engine’s roar. The pirate fell off, pulled out, and then slumped in his seat under one last burst from Gil. His plane went spinning down into the isle of lost ships, to join the other dead things there.

Suddenly the seadrome sprang into brilliant light. Startled, Gil looked down. Two huge planes stood at the end of the mighty platform, brought up by the plane-deck elevator. As one rolled down the deck into the air he saw the elevator descend again. The pirates were fleeing! They knew their cause was lost!

A frantic turn by the Dornier recalled him to Porky’s difficulties. He charged across at the lone fighter, which was sweeping in furiously, its guns spitting orange flame against the night. The pirate held to his dive tenaciously. Gil jammed his stick forward, teeth bared in a snarl. For he knew, without seeing, that the man in the other plane was Kell. As the Dornier tilted on steep wings to

evade that mad onrush, the glow from the drome flashed across both ships. And there, huge in the tiny ship, was the hulking frame of the pirate leader. It gave Gil a savage lust to kill, as he remembered the ferocity of this man. He tripped his guns and snapped his ship into a turn.

But the madman seemed to live a charmed life. Not till Gil had twice sprayed his plunging ship did he swerve out of that vengeful dive. And as he whipped around, Gil saw with a start that the first of the other Dorniers was boring up to the leader's aid.

NOT till the lower Dornier leveled and a trap opened in its top did Porky's ship move from its steady course, though Kell had again banked around and was charging in from the left, with Gil frantically trying to head him off. Suddenly Porky's ship nosed down, it seemed to slow its speed. And from beneath it something dropped down, something that looked dimly like an anchor on a line.

Gil saw it hurtle down. Then he saw the pirates beneath turn sharply. It came to him in a flash, as he saw a gleaming object go whirling out into space. Porky had snagged one of the big ship's props. And that prop, shattering to bits, would certainly go crashing into other props in line with it!

The lower Dornier nosed down, twisting around toward the drome. Flame was creeping from one of its engine nacelles. Gil shouted in triumph at Porky's skill.

"Porky—you dizzy old squirrel," he yelled.

But his triumph was gained too soon. Infuriated, Kell came in with a mad abandon. The Dornier faltered, slipped off and slid steeply down into the Sargasso Sea. Gil saw it turn back erratically, twisting its way toward the drome. It was the only thing Porky could do. He could not land in that graveyard of dead ships, for those towering masts and bulky funnels would mean a terrific crash.

Gil turned on Kell. But even as he dashed in, consumed by a searing murder-lust, the sky above suddenly rained winged ships. Down from the night they came, Navy fighters, huge bombers, and powerful two-seaters, all hurtling to the zone of light beneath.

Kell saw, and turned to flee into the dark. Gil was after him in a wild dive. A two-seater cut in. Kell whipped onto wingtips and raced back. Gil flung over into a dizzy turn, yanking into a half-split as Kell darted away. His guns raked, the pirate hotly. As though stung, Kell gave up all attempt at flight. Gil could tell by his furious return that he had made up his mind to die, but die hard.

The Navy ship, not quick enough in its bank, came full under Kell's blazing guns. The man in the rear fired a short burst, then pitched forward on his face. The pilot swerved to bring his nose guns to bear, but in vain. Kell drove onto his tail and riddled him with red-hot slugs. The two-seater fell off and became a mass of flames.

His taste of blood seemed to give Kell a superhuman skill and courage. As Gil plunged across at him, he dove under a huge bomber, through a fiery barrage from its six gunners, to shoot up under the belly of another monster ship. He hung onto his prop, dropping out only as Gil raked his tail. He skidded off, and for a second Gil thought he had scored. But as the bomber slithered down, Kell snapped into a tight turn and closed on Gil.

A sheet of vivid crimson lit up the sky, followed by a stunning detonation. The very heavens seemed to tremble as the mighty bomber disintegrated under an exploded bomb. Half-dazed, Gil saw Kell charge through the flame-filled sky at him. He pulled up steeply, then sent the nose whirling around as Kell tightened in. Together they circled, while around and above them flew Navy planes, their pilots apparently uncertain as to which was pirate and which was attacker.

KELL'S nose went up, then down in a swift movement as he utilized the added speed to close in for a fatal burst. But Gil was too quick. As Kell nosed up for that fraction of a second, Gil jerked his stick clear to his stomach. The fighter seemed to chase its own tail in a frightful leap. Kell's ship jumped into Gil's sights and with a shaking hand he tripped his guns.

So close were they that Gil could see his tracers flaming beyond Kell's massive head as the pirate ducked low. But duck as he might, he could not escape that lethal blast. Gil saw him tense and

then rear upward. Then Kell sagged forward and his ship went steeply down to doom.

A few seconds later Gil had landed and was running to the crashed Dornier.

The first person he saw was Matt.

"They're done for!" he cried. "Look at 'em over there—got their hands up; the second they saw the other planes, they quit. Pirates!"

"Where's Porky?" demanded Gil.

"Hello, you old bean-eater," said a rather weak voice. Gil jumped, then a look of pure joy went over his face. For it was Porky.

Gil seized him by both shoulders and shook him.

"Hold everything, I've had enough," gasped Porky. He seized Gil's hand and grinned at him. "Fellow, when you went out of that bus yesterday, I thought it was finis. Maybe you're right about that fate stuff."

"Say, where's Mortimer Bates?" said Gil suddenly. "Did they bump the poor old man?"

"Poor old man?" snorted a familiar voice. "I'll have you know, young fellow, I'm as good a man as I ever was. If you don't believe it, go look back in that cabin."

GIL and Porky turned and gazed with surprise on the multimillionaire backer of Transatlantic Airways. Bates was rubbing his right fist gently. "I broke out too late for the scrap," he said, with a grim smile, "That is, till a couple of these long-beards came in out of turn. One of them, I'm glad to say, won't be around for the hanging of this mob. The other one will stretch a rope, I guess—but he needs a few teeth."

He clapped a hearty hand on each one's shoulder.

"I heard about Slade," he said to Gil. His face darkened for a second. "The damn dirty—" his voice trailed off into a mumble as he shook his shaggy head. "I certainly swallowed the bait. It was all a frame-up. He saw this place when he flew over it on a transatlantic hop three years ago, and realized what it was. So he put the idea of a seadrome chain up to me. Making me pay for this pirates' nest!"

"But I'll clean up on it," he announced. He glanced over at the Navy planes, from which stern-faced pilots and gunners were climbing out to herd the sullen pirates into the seadrome

offices. "Think of it: Fly to Europe by way of the most romantic air route in the world, the line over which bearded pirates fought and died; fly by seadrome and cross over the strange isle of lost ships, where Gil Tracy and Porky Baines, officers of the line, led a Navy flight to save Mortimer Bates, owner of Transatlantic Airways, then prisoner of Kell—"

"Officers of the line," gulped Porky. "You mean you want—"

"Listen," said Mortimer Bates fiercely, but with a twinkle in his eyes, "you can't kill off my operations manager and his assistant, and most of the rest of my force, without doing something about it. You're elected."

"O.K.," said Gil, after a quick look at Porky. "But we'd like to take a month off to start, if you don't mind."

"Sure—take two months," said Mortimer Bates. "You'll need it."

"It isn't that," said Gil with a grin. "You see, Porky and I want to finish up that hop in the Lockheed—after you fix it up for us."

Mortimer Bates chuckled.

"Don't worry about the Lockheed," he said. "But I should think you'd have had enough of ocean flying."

"This will be a lot different," put in Porky. "Maybe we can get across this time without somebody taking a shot at us every other second. Eh, Gil?"

"You said it," Gil told him.