

Scourge of the Steel Eagles

By Arch Whitehouse Featuring Coffin Kirk

“Coffin” Kirk sought rest—but it was stark tragedy that he found in that jungle village at the foot of massive Mount Dulit. For the “death that does not speak” had cut a ghastly swath through that peaceful Kayan settlement—had left but a single horrified native to describe the merciless wrath of the “steel eagles that leap out of solid rock.” Yet Kirk could not turn back. And Fate was beckoning him onward along a path that led to—the fires of hell itself!

FOR the man who sat at the controls of the Hawker Osprey, the last five hundred miles from Cape Sirk had been heartbreaking. He had been flying those long miles like a weary automaton. His blood-shot eyes were now mere slits. His lips were dry, cracked. His hands trembled more and more as with obvious effort he moved the control stick to combat the tormenting gusts that threw the plane from side to side.

And Brune’i—his goal—was still seventy miles distant.

A glance at the map. That was Bintulu they had just passed, with volcanic Mount Dulit off there to the right, an austere sentinel amid jungle hell and Iban mystery.

“Coffin” Kirk shook his head sleepily—and made a decision. “It’s foolish to go on,” he told himself. “Can’t stay awake. Eighteen hundred miles of this is enough. Might pile up, somewhere.”

He smiled grimly as his mind sifted the events of the recent mad days in Singapore which had closed with their hurried flight out in a bedaubed Osprey appropriated from the British to replace the Northrop used in saving the great Naval base from destruction by the Circle of Death.

His thoughts returned to his ship. They had left the white line of froth and sand that had guided him ever since he had crossed the Java Sea. Caution must be exercised. An Osprey does 175 top—but cable and radio messages travel with the speed of light.

“Coffin” Kirk twisted painfully in his seat, glanced at the monstrous figure huddled under the Scarff gun mounting. Then he eased the throttle back and picked out a clearing among the nipa palms below. “A few shacks down below,” he muttered through his puffed lips. “Should be able to get a rest there of some sort. Ought to suit you, Tank. Just your type of stamping grounds.”

The Osprey, in answer to Kirk’s efforts, swished low over a fringe of tapang trees. Ahead lay the small space which had caught his eye from above. He turned again over a row of hutments standing high on bow-legged trestles, then skimmed carefully in for a landing.

The Osprey, seeming to welcome the release from the strain, dropped gently to the lush turf. Kirk held her true, then swung her around and carefully taxied back toward the uneven row of nipa-thatched dwellings.

He waited for the Chief to appear—but no one came out to greet him. Strangely, there were no dusty Kayan children about. No saronged women or tall lean men with Pythan daggers in their belts.

Kirk frowned, turned in his seat, and slapped the shoulder of the figure behind him.

“Come on, Tank! We’re down, you lazy devil.” The stooped, muscle-bulging figure behind struggled up, peered over the rim of the gun mounting. He blinked his small, animal-like eyes, sniffed through his widespread nostrils, and emitted a deep grunt.

“Right. It doesn’t smell so good to me, either,” agreed Kirk. “Let’s have a look-see, eh?”

TOGETHER they climbed out. Kirk packed a heavy gun at his hip. But before moving toward the huts, he had Tank take the tail of the Osprey and swing it around in case they would have to make a hurried takeoff.

Then they started for the Long House—the important building of the village. It was typically Kayan, sagged across the roof and raised on ironwood piles. Along each side, were smaller

huts, each with its own Toh-god insignia above the narrow doorway.

Still no movement. No chanting of tribal ceremonies. No clacking of Kayan tongues. No life.

They approached carefully, Kirk fearing he had made a mistake in selecting this place to land, and Tank adding to his worries by making strange noises and running with short strides from one shadow to another.

“What’s happened here?” Kirk said, speaking more to himself than asking a question. Then he espied several natives curled up about the ladders of their homes.

Tank, a strange, broad-bodied figure in dirty white slacks, rubber-soled sneakers, and a Navy blue blouse, darted from figure to figure. But not one moved.

Kirk was anxious now. Puzzled and wary, he moved nearer the figures. They all lay in convulsive positions—dead!

“Holy Moses! What’s been going on here?”

Tank didn’t—and, of course, couldn’t—answer. He was now scaling the single-pole ladder and entering the Long House.

Kirk turned two of the bodies over. They were Kayans, as indicated by the tattoo marks on their temples and chests. And death had come quickly, had stiffened them like bronze figures battered from a statuary group. Silently and cruelly that death had come, leaving only a weird coating of white froth about their lips. And terror was stamped indelibly on their distorted faces.

Kirk, now fully awakened by the tragedy, darted up the pole ladder and entered the Long House. Inside, in the half light, he made out the usual row of dried skulls, the garish designs of the Hantu ghost gods, and the bright tribal ornamentation.

Even here, death had struck. Women sat stiff and stark with stone bowls of rice in their laps. Children lay prostrate with native toys in their fists. Men, with their hands on long knives, had been swept out of existence before they could remove the blades from their sheaths.

“This didn’t happen very long ago, Tank,” Kirk said hollowly. “Look at the fire. It’s still smouldering.”

They continued their ghastly inspection through every hut. It was the same story

everywhere. Death—stiffening death that had caught a whole village unaware! Death, silent and sure!

Kirk examined another body. The same stiffness of joints and muscle. The same stark horror in the face. The same whitish crystallization about the mouth.

Tank continued to move from one corpse to another. Then finally he sat down on a polished log and stared into the dying fire. Weariness was likewise tugging at Kirk’s muscles. His eyes were bleary, and he walked with the stride of a drunken man. But the mystery of the stricken Kayan village had accelerated the tempo of his mind to breakneck speed. He tried to figure what had caused it. Had this been some accident due to the ignorance of the natives? Had it been some crazy mass suicide event demanded by the indisputable laws of a religion? Or had it been caused by an enemy who commanded a devilish power of death?

THIS was the most amazing scene Kirk and Tank had come upon in all their months of adventuring around the globe. From the United States they had first followed their trail of revenge to Britain, France, and Germany. Then had come their wild flight across Asia to Singapore where they had scored against the fabulously wealthy, but ingeniously wicked, Sir Eric Spelter, that member of the grim Circle of Death.

Their crusade of revenge had really started, however, more than twenty years before—in a zoo in Berlin. Kirk’s mind flashed back to that day, when he, a youngster, had seen his own father murdered by the German Secret Police—when he had finally escaped with the young ape who was destined to become Tank, his lifelong friend and protector.

He stared at Tank now and wondered what his ape mind made of all this. So far, Tank had been a figure of action, of blameless loyalty—a friend of unbelievable strength and physical cunning. What could the ape think of a man-made death that left no wounds—that left only a horrible, crystal-ized froth around the lips?

“Come on, Tank.” Kirk finally said. “There’s no use staying here. We’d better try to get through to Brunei and report this matter to the British District Commissioner—to someone connected

with the British Foreign Service. We can do no good here.”

The ape, sensing Kirk’s meaning by his tone, got up and glanced about for the last time. Then they began to walk back toward their ship.

“Ugh! No place for a white man—or for you, either, Tank,” Kirk growled as they came to the last row of huts near the clearing.

But the ape abruptly gave a low growl, twitched convulsively, and darted past Kirk.

“What’s up? You getting it, too?” snapped Kirk. Then he peered ahead—and saw what had affected the anthropoid. A strange garish figure in Kayan war paint was standing by the Osprey! Tank was hurrying toward him on his short, bandy legs—so Kirk followed at a trot to be ready to allay any trouble.

The man by their ship was old and bony. He wore a dirty sarong which was decorated with brownish shark teeth, and his chest bore blue tattoo marks. His face was partially hidden by a white bone mask from which hung tufts of human hair tied up with colored cords. In one hand he carried a long polished spear, and in the other was a decorated shield of Punan design.

Kirk found the man drawing his long finger nails through the soft new paint that they had daubed over the Osprey’s fuselage and wings. And his finger scratching had laid bare a red, white, and blue cocarde of the British Boyal Air Force.

The native now turned and glared at Tank. Then he switched his gaze on Kirk and said in the Malay tongue: “Why has the Tuan killed my people with the death that does not scream?”

Luckily, Kirk knew the language. Frowning, he laid one hand on his automatic: “But surely the great Penghulu (chief) does not believe we have done this horrible thing?”

“The Tuan’s eagle of steel that screams has brought this death that does not speak. I have seen these eagles before with their proper markings,” he continued, indicating the exposed cocarde. “You have tried to cover it up. See! My ancient fingers have found your proper war markings here.”

Kirk caught the meaning at once. Someone flying a British ship had caused the death of the Kayan villagers. This would be hard to explain.

“The great Penghulu is mistaken, on the oath of my God,” Kirk tried to explain. “We have been flying the steel eagle for many moons from a distant country of the Great Sovereign. We are now heading for Brunei, the seat of the White Chief—to tell him what has happened and to bring the White Chief’s warriors to seek out the devils who caused it and establish justice.”

“But you and your steel eagle have done it!” came the reply. “That I know for three suns ago I saw you flying over my village when I was going to the Tor god’s mountain for advice.”

“Is that why you, too, did not die of the silent death? You were away?”

“That is so. But I saw your steel eagles. You killed my sons and daughters. You, too, fly the steel eagles that come out of the mountain!”

The chief stood his ground, threw out his feeble chest. And Kirk was at a loss. What was the meaning of this “out of the mountain” business? What did it mean?

“I am sorry for the people of the great Penghulu. But this is not of our doing. We have just arrived here—have but now learned of the effects of the silent death.”

“I see lies in your eyes—as I see lies on the side of your steel eagle,” the old Chief bellowed, again picking at the Osprey’s paint. Then he turned his keen eyes upon Tank: “Here, too, is a lie—an ape which appears as a man!”

Quickly, “Coffin” Kirk called upon his art of ventriloquism. “Old Chief,” Tank appeared to say, “these are strange days. Today men fly in machines they themselves make—because the Tor gods do not provide them with wings. Today the ape—if he has such knowledge as I have—can be a man and speak as you do.”

The effect was amazing. The Penghulu stiffened, backed away. He stared wild-eyed at Tank, who added: “Do not be afraid, old Father. I shall not harm you. My companion and I shall bring aid for the people of the jungle. And the Tuan speaks the truth—we did not kill your children.”

The Penghulu’s eyes never left Tank as he retreated, clenching his spear and drawing his shield tighter to him.

“We shall fly to Brunei at once, Father,” Kirk added. “We shall bring aid and the steel eagle death to those who did this to your followers.”

But the old Chief now turned and raced on his bony shanks into the depths of the forest, wailing high-screeching cries toward sacred Mount Dulit.

“WELL, that’s a nice mess,” observed Kirk. “The old boy believes we killed his tribesmen—but most certainly someone did, someone flying a British plane, too.”

Tank simply stared at the portion of the jungle that had swallowed the old Kayan chief, probably wondering what has caused him to leave so unceremoniously.

Kirk’s mind raced on now with new vigor. He prepared the Osprey for flight again, racked his brain as to their next move. Tank, uncertain what was going on but loyal to the end, climbed back into the rear cockpit and stood up as Kirk started the Rolls-Royce “Kestrel” engine. It was getting darker now, but there was enough light from the nearby sea to allow a reasonably safe take-off.

The “Kestrel” roared into life, and the Osprey stiffened for flight. Kirk hoiked her tail as she began to move away. Then he hurtled her headlong toward the shadowy hut at the far end of the kampong, skillfully guided her through the fringe of the trees—and they were in the clear.

Having gained altitude, Kirk consulted his compass with the intention of continuing to Brunei and warning the British District Commissioner of what they had observed. He could not help pondering on the old Kayan chief’s words. What had he meant by the steel eagles that had flown “out of the mountain?”

It was certain that they had been British ships—but what squadrons were stationed in Borneo? He had heard of none. Of course, they might be one or two planes of the Fleet Air Arm doing routine shows off their catapults. But it was hardly likely, as most of the British Navy vessels were off Singapore. Certainly, none of it made much sense.

A scud of clouds now slipped in from the north and obscured what gleam had been offered by a quartering moon. This was not so good. But somehow Kirk found that his weariness has been erased by the mystery of the silent death that had struck the little Kayan village. He was now ready for anything—and he got it!

KIRK has just settled himself when his bloodflecked eyes spotted the rushing outline of a plane of some sort! It had charged past his nose hardly a hundred feet ahead. Behind, Tank stirred and peered over Kirk’s shoulder. But they could see nothing now through the dank streaks of mist that fogged their windscreen and goggles.

“What was that?” Kirk asked. Tank answered by clutching his shoulder, and the warning came just in time. Kirk yanked his stick back, zoomed up to allow another wraithlike plane to slam past, directly ahead.

“Lord! That was close! What the devil was that?”

Kirk pulled higher into the mist, then with new determination he turned inland in the direction taken by the two ghost planes, giving the Osprey the throttle even though the hackles twitched at the back of his neck.

Tank was still clutching his shoulder and making strange, pathetic noises through his broad nostrils. Kirk put one hand up, gripped the back of his pal’s hand, and squeezed it to give him confidence.

Then another plane—a silver biplane of beautiful lines—slammed past his vision!

“Whew!” gasped “Coffin” Kirk. “This is getting too hot. What the deuce is this? I’ll swear I’ve seen that model of plane somewhere before.”

He followed what seemed to be the outline of a ship, now a few hundred feet ahead. Tank shuffled about in the back seat, began to make clutching gestures at the twin-Lewis guns.

“Take it easy,” warned Kirk. “No shooting yet. We’ll just follow them—and see what this is all about.”

They raced through the mist, even though Kirk expected at any moment to feel the thudding crash of two planes coming together. It was eerie, this breakneck speed over the jungles. But fatigued though he was, Kirk somehow hung on. He’d see this thing through!

Then suddenly, after five or ten minutes of tense flying, they came out of the clouds and into the clear. Above, the chunk of yellow moon glowed down on them and stars twinkled. And below were the nipa-palm foothills of volcanic Mount Dulit.

But now there were no silver biplanes in sight!

“Damn!” spat Kirk, staring about and putting the Osprey into an easy curling turn. “Where did they go? And what were they?”

He glanced at his altimeter. They were now skidding about at less than 4,000 feet; and he knew he would have to be careful, for the jagged shoulders of the volcano were well over 5,000. He circled once more, climbing for height, when suddenly out of nowhere came six of the silver biplanes.

Kirk recognized them and whistled. “Whew! Fairey ‘Ferores’ of the Belgian Air Service! What in Heaven’s name are they doing over Borneo?”

But there was no time to ponder on that. Before he could bank to evade their path, the bedaubed Osprey was the target for every gun aboard the six single-seaters.

Kirk knew they were in for it now. He knew these Ferores were powered with 925-h.p. Hissoc engines which packed 20 mm. Oerlikon aero cannon within their noses. There were also four Browning guns aboard each, two between the cylinder banks and two in the lower wings. And the Feroce was capable of 270 m.p.h. at 13,000 feet—perhaps 225 down here.

Here were six of these babies—and perhaps more somewhere back in the scud.

Tank now went into action, automatically pressing the triggers of the two guns and pointing them in the general direction of the oncoming fighters. Kirk kicked the Osprey all over the sky, tried to outfly them. For about a minute he was safe—for they had to be careful in formation. But finally two separated from the group and then came in from sharp angles.

That was too much. A burst of Browning stuff slammed into the Osprey’s empennage, made it a sieve. Kirk tried to pour a short hail of lead back at them, but it was useless. Tank, in the meantime, was still hanging onto his triggers, burning out the Lewis barrels with one continual burst from the double drums.

Two more bursts slammed into the Hawker ship, sent an aileron fluttering away. Kirk fought his crippled ship. She was spinning now—plummeting them down toward the green hell below.

The two Ferores continued to pound at him, would not leave them to their fate. Mercilessly, one of them drove in a vicious 20 mm. cannon

blast that all but blew the “Kestrel” engine from its bearers.

Kirk knew that the sensible move was to take to the silk. “But no,” he argued with himself. “If we do, those ruthless killers will have too simple a target. I’ll stick with this ship to the finish.”

The silver fighters continued to hammer in lead, but now their aim was hindered by the spinning target. Tank kept on firing until there was nothing left in the drums. Kirk meanwhile had all he could do to stop the Osprey from nosing out of the spin which was their one salvation.

THINGS were happening fast now. The two Ferores hung over them like silver vultures. Short spurts of fire snapped out of their snouts at intervals.

Tank screamed, infuriated at his lack of ammunition. Kirk, too, went mad trying to get the Osprey to spin tighter.

He glanced down quickly. It wouldn’t be long now! “Hang on, Tank!” he screamed. “Hang on!” And he reached over and snatched at one of the great ape’s hands to make him take a firm clutch on the gun mounting—to save himself from being thrown out.

Another burst of gunfire now splashed a streaked, spluttering design across their right wing and made the Osprey jerk crazily.

Kirk took another look over the side, saw it was too late to take to the silk. Below, the waving fronds of the nipa palms could be seen fringing a low swamp that trickled its slimy fingers into the rocky foothills of Dulit.

The Osprey was behaving badly now. Kirk fought what controls he had to get her out. The dark fronds below were wheeling before his eyes into a feathery stew as he struggled to get the Hawker out of her spin for a hundred to one chance at a safe landing. But his futile attempts made him believe he was flying his last flight.

Finally Kirk frantically set her in neutral and prayed—and the old Osprey, answering the laws of flight, came out just as her wheels slashed through the light top vegetation. At that, Kirk took over again—to find that they were plunging toward some jagged rocks! With his last effort, he quickly pulled back on the stick and just managed to skim her over the crags by inches.

Then, as the ground beyond rushed up to meet them, Kirk obeyed the airman's law of safety in smash-ups. He stuck a wing-tip down, ducked down inside the cockpit—and let her cartwheel over.

CRASH!

KIRK had little idea what really happened after that. There was a thudding bash somewhere behind his ears, then blue-green lights spattered before his eyes and all was black.

With the first thud, Tank went headlong out of the rear cockpit followed by the two Lewis guns that were wrenched off their mounting. The anthropoid landed in a rolling ball on a flat section of cracked sandstone, and there he lay for several seconds.

Finally, he stirred, then crawled to his elbows and knees and looked around for the wreck. It lay nearby—and a small trickle of bluish flame had begun to run along one of the fractured wings. Tank spotted it, and his instinct told him that something was wrong. He uttered strange noises through his great nostrils, clambered to his feet. His great teeth bared, he charged for the side of the buckled fuselage.

With one leap he was on top of the fuselage reaching in for Kirk, who, huddled up under the instrument board, was covered by a wing which had been driven back so that it formed a barrier over the cockpit opening.

Tank screamed into the night as the smoke poured up from burning fuel which had trickled down the wing from the wrenched tanks. He sniffed, cried—struggled with the tangle of dural. The man inside did not move.

Suddenly there was a fearful puff as more fuel gushed out, splashed across the tangled cowling of the engine, and spattered across the hot exhaust ports of the "Kestrel." Tank sent up his jungle cry—and then went to work.

Tank fought on to save his master. Standing astride the fuselage, he took hold of the metal circle bracket of the gun mounting and with a mighty heave tore it off and hurled it at the flames that were crawling up the wing. Then he dropped inside and ripped out cross-bracing ribs, steel tie-rods, and slabs of dural panels.

Flame snaked a scarlet tongue through the opening and Tank screamed at it. He reached

forward, gripped the top of Kirk's bucket seat, and gave another frantic wrench. The metal spade-back came out and Tank threw it sky-ward over his shoulder. Then he shoved outward with both feet, ripped the metal fuselage wide open, and reached forward and grabbed Kirk under his armpits.

"Ugh-h-h-h!" sighed the battered Kirk.

Tank wrenched again—but he could not move his master. He screamed every oath he knew in the ape language, then finally sensed that Kirk was being held back by the binding safety belt. Tank then dived down, drew the heavy manila cording of the belt into his mouth, and with three snatching jerks of his sharp teeth ripped it open!

His master sighed again, started to struggle. Tank grabbed him now, and with a last wrench got him clear and clambered with him over the jagged edges of the cockpit. Then hardly had he set Kirk down, some thirty feet from the wreck, when an enveloping boom of flame and smoke covered the ill-fated Osprey.

Kirk came to in a few seconds and shakily got to his feet. But when he stumbled forward, he made an unearthly clatter across the rocks. The wreckage boomed again and blazing fuel went skyward as the main tank blew out with a savage roar.

Kirk peered over his elbow, groaned, and fell flat. Tank got to his hands and knees, huddled against his master to protect him from the threat of fire. Then he got up quickly, charged at the burning fuselage again, and came out with two drums of machine-gun ammunition. He handed them to Kirk with the expression of one who might be handing out picnic lunch boxes.

"Thanks, Tank," Kirk muttered through lips that were puffed and bleeding. Then when he again tried to walk, once more there came that strange, metallic clatter at his feet. Kirk fell to his knees, unable to figure out what was wrong with him.

"Legs feel all right," he muttered. "But I can't walk. Maybe I sprained an ankle."

He started to feel of his feet—then started to grin. He felt farther and began to laugh. The puzzled Tank moved over, peered into his face which was illuminated by the glare of the blazing Osprey.

"It's all right, Tank, old boy. No wonder I couldn't walk. You jerked me out of there so hard you ripped out the rudder pedals. They're still on my feet!" And he kicked his feet out of the rubber toestraps that hooked the broken pedal plates to his feet.

NOW they crawled to one side, picked up the two guns, and hid behind a slab of rock to watch the circling Feroces above. At the sight of the planes, Tank muttered through his nose again, shoved a gun and a drum of ammunition toward Kirk.

"No. Not now, Tank. Let them think we crashed and fried. There's something sinister going on around here. Just keep your eyes open."

The blaze died down, and they could now see beyond the area of the rocks. Not two hundred yards away towered the western wall of Mount Dulit.

"Whew!" Kirk half-whistled. "We certainly came close enough to that. But look, Tank! That light blinking up there on the side of the rock! There's three of them—in a triangular arrangement."

The ape stared up to where Kirk was pointing, then frowned and began his low muttering again.

"Come on. Let's move up that way," said Kirk. And they grabbed a gun apiece, stuck a drum on each, and started across the splintered rock causeway toward the base of the mountain.

Kirk realized what a close call they'd had. And he realized that but for the unswerving loyalty of his ape pal he would have been a cinder by now. But, there was no time for sentiment now. Those three lights gleaming on the side of the rock wall held his attention as they clambered and fought their way through the scrub vegetation.

"Look, Tank!" he muttered again. "The top light is blinking on and off. A signal of some kind!"

The ape answered with a low whinnying growl of understanding.

The two Feroces now came over again, and Kirk again stopped Tank from taking a shot at them.

"No, Tank. Let them think our bodies are back there in that pile-up. They wanted us down, so let them think we are. Meanwhile, we're after the guy who is working those lights."

The Feroces split up now, one taking the lead while the other seemed to hold back. Kirk tried to figure out just what they were doing, then suddenly jerked to a standstill and stared with amazed eyes. The lead Feroce was heading straight for the side of the mountain!

"What's the matter with that fool?" he asked himself. "Can't he see the wall?"

Tank emitted a low whine, and they both stopped and watched.

"There he goes—straight for the wall!"

Then to their amazement they saw the silver Feroce sweep into a low glide headlong for a point between the three lights. They stood spellbound, expecting any second to see it pile up and tumble a splintering wreck, to the base of the sheer wall.

But then the Feroce disappeared!

"My Lord!" husked Kirk. "What happened to him?"

Tank simply stood staring up at the rock wall, not a sound coming from his expressionless mug.

"Did you see that, Tank?" demanded Kirk. "That bird flew smack into that wall—and went out of sight!"

The top light now blinked three times, then went on steady again. The second Feroce wheeled, set a steady course, and also headed straight for the center of the triangle of lights.

It approached the wall slowly, its engine throttled down, then slipped into nothingness just as the first had done.

"That's enough for me," said Kirk. "We're probably seeing things. We're damned tired, and that smacking around we got in that crash didn't help any. I'm going to get some sleep and see if I can see things in a sensible light in the morning."

They struggled on through to a small patch of nipa, cut a few boughs and heavy fronds with a knife, and made a bed that was well sheltered from outside view. There they huddled together, the Lewis guns near at hand, and lay pondering on the mad events of the night.

Kirk knew he had seen things correctly, of course. But there was no sane answer to it. How did those Belgian ships get through the wall? Why had they fired on him for no apparent reason? What did all this have to do with the village of silent death—and the white crustation that marked the lips of the dead Kayan villagers?

“It certainly looks like solid rock up there, but it couldn’t be,” Kirk argued with himself. “They’ve doped out some gag there whereby they get in safely. But now where did they get those Belgian ships, and what are they doing here?”

Sleep quickly overtook the American adventurer, but troubled dreams of the mountain caused him to twist and turn continually.

BUT Kirk’s sleep was not long. Hardly an hour after he dropped off, twitching and quivering from nervous reaction, when he felt himself being aroused by Tank. His doze had brought some relief to his tired muscles, nevertheless, and he was quickly up and crouching beside the ape.

“What is it?” he demanded. But Tank reached over, clamped a heavy paw across his mouth, and whined softly.

Kirk nodded and pushed Tank’s hand away. He saw what had aroused the anthropoid. Flickering lights were moving about near the pile of Osprey wreckage back in the distance. It appeared that they had axes and were chopping away at the blackened dural.

“They came to look for us, eh?” mumbled Kirk. Then as he watched the group turned from the wreck and headed in their direction. Soon they were nearby.

The voices were a strange mixture of several languages. Kirk caught splashes of French, throaty Flemish, the crackling Nipponese tongue, and also guttural German.

Both Kirk and Tank reached for the Lewis guns—and waited. On came the men, winding through the thicket and rocks in a snake-march safari formation.

“They haven’t seen us, Tank. This is a break. We’ll follow them back and find out what this is all about. But no shooting now,” warned Kirk, holding his hand over the pistol grip of the ape’s gun and wagging his head.

The mumbling group passed within ten yards of them and headed toward the sheer rock wall ahead.

“Coffin” Kirk and Tank fell in quietly some distance behind. The trail led across another tangle of broken rock, and they followed as silent as ghosts, watching the flickering lights and listening to the scraping of heavy boots across the uneven rock track. The men ahead were turning

sharply to the left, apparently making for a jagged opening in the mountain wall.

Kirk was trudging along ahead of the ape, and now he was so intent on covering the party ahead that he forgot about his pal.

Now the party ahead disappeared, seemingly swallowed up by the mountain, and Kirk hurried along to make certain just where it was they had entered the wall. He caught a strange, pungent smell, and sniffed cautiously.

“Volcanic gas, I guess,” he muttered to himself. “This hell-fire mountain is supposed to be inactive—but you certainly can smell it. But where the deuce did those fellows go?”

He hurried up to the rock wall, then saw a narrow opening in the face. Darting to one side, he peered about cautiously, then turned to find Tank.

But the ape was nowhere in sight!

“What the devil?” Kirk growled under his breath. “Where did he buzz off to now? Just when I need him, he’s gone.”

But he dared not search about now. Anyhow, he figured, Tank would be all right. He might have returned to the thicket where they had slept.

“Don’t blame him. He must have been dead tired,” agreed Kirk to himself. And with that he hurried along up the steep and winding passageway that lay beyond the narrow opening in the wall. He felt he must check on the men who had been so interested in his crash. Just who were they? What were they doing here? And what was ahead up this steep, nature-slashed ramp?

He was uncertain as to what course he should take, now that Tank had disappeared. He peered ahead, heard the voices again.

Then abruptly came disaster.

All Kirk heard was a low swish—then something thudded down on his head.

An explosion of blinding light spattered across his vision. A million bombs seemed to burst behind his forehead. He fell forward on his face—out.

CENTURIES seemed to have passed before Kirk came to. When he did finally regain consciousness, he rolled over and tried to get to his hands and knees. He sensed he was on a rough bed. Like a boxer who has been tagged on the

button, he shook his head, tried to focus his vision.

Pour walls imprisoned him—whitewashed walls of solid stone. A small door was at one end, and it had a small square window, carefully barred. He instinctively looked around for Tank—then remembered the ape’s disappearance. He was alone, groggy, with a head that spun and with a mouth that was as dry as the inside of an old derby—and tasted as bad.

“Someone must have conked me,” he reflected, trying to make his eyes behave. “Where the deuce am I—and where is that ape?”

Somehow, he got to his feet, steadied himself, and tottered toward the door. There he hung onto the window bars and stared out. And the scene that met his eyes almost knocked him over again.

Through a rocky opening above, a mid-day sun threw its golden glory down on a full stage of action. There, before him, was a great squadron of gun-bristling airplanes—single-seaters, two-seaters, and even larger types of the high-speed bomber class.

They were all new and in splendid condition. And they were all silver with the same insignia—at least most of them had the same insignia. A few were just getting their new cocardes painted on them.

And it was a cocarde that made Brian “Coffin” Kirk gasp—a golden circle on a triangle of scarlet with a sharp dagger pointing to the center.

“The Circle of Death!” breathed Kirk. “Here in Borneo!”

Finally, he let his eyes wander from the insignia painted on a number of American Seversky fighters nearby. He looked up the sides of the great wall of rock opposite, then back to the stony floor which was as even as a billiard table. The whole space, Kirk judged, was fully 500 yards long and about 150 yards wide.

“Where is this?” he asked himself—and then his eyes caught the smart outlines of a flight of Pairey Peroces off to one side. A number of men were adding the strange insignia to their fuselages.

“They flew in here last night, if this is the next day,” Kirk figured. “These devils have some sort of an entrance through that rock wall.” Then he listened and heard motor noises somewhere.

Orders rang out, men darted about. Ships were quickly moved and a wide space was cleared.

“What’s up now?” demanded Kirk to himself.

He heard a siren scream, then men formed in rows along the open floor. Puzzled, Kirk watched carefully now.

Then to his amazement, he saw a plane—a German Heinkel high-speed light bomber—come out of nowhere in the rock wall at the far end, dangle in midair for a minute, then drop down for a landing on the stone floor. Quickly, men standing in lines worked a drag-rope and hook device of the type used on aircraft carrier decks and before the ship had run twenty yards it was checked to a standstill.

Kirk, unable to believe his eyes, rubbed them, stared again. It certainly looked as though that rock wall beyond was solid. But as he stared, he realized that there was some sort of a brown dancing film there. He wondered whether his eyes were playing him false, but he tried them again on something solid and they appeared to be functioning normally.

“Mighty queer,” he muttered to himself as another Heinkel slipped into the strange, rock-walled airport.

Kirk now sniffed, and he caught the same pungent smell he had noticed the night before when he had started after the men who had investigated his crash. This made him certain that he was somewhere behind those three mysterious lights that he’d seen high on the rock face.

He kept hanging to the window, watched eagerly as men working at a pile of gleaming silver tanks began to carry one to each ship. Then a bugle rang out and its notes echoed and reechoed between the walls.

Immediately, the men dropped everything, hurried to the central portion of the area. There was a tense air of drama.

Then, it all began to come to Kirk. He was somewhere inside the skyscraper walls of the inactive volcano Dulit. The smoke he smelled was coming from somewhere below—somewhere in the very bowels of the earth. And this great gallery was somewhere inside the upper portion of the crater.

A bellowing order rang out. Men stiffened, then on another command relaxed into something of an “at-ease” position.

A man in a trim, greenish-khaki uniform, but wearing no decorations or orders, stepped forward from the group that had just alighted from the two Heinkels. Trim and hawk-eyed, he peered through *pince-nez* from which dangled a narrow silver chain. He gave the group a patronizing smile.

"He must have these birds eating out of his hands," observed Kirk. "Wonder who he is?"

"Gentlemen," the man bawled in a firm military tone. "I am, as you may know, General Pierce Compte Cockosaert. . . ."

"The Belgian," hissed Kirk. "That accounts for the stolen *Feroces*, at any rate."

". . . I have come," he heard the General say, "to lead you in this newest effort of our great organization. And here with me is Rear-Admiral Ichi Tamuracho."

"Two of the original heads of the Circle of Death," snarled Kirk gripping the bars of the small doorway.

". . . We are ready for our first major move in our great world-wide plan. So far, we have been halted in our other moves because we were foolish enough to believe we could carry them out with small forces. This time, however, we shall succeed!"

A roar of applause went up.

"You are all being well paid and well attended to?"

A louder roar this time.

"You know that our amazing new weapon has been successful in the tests against the Kayan tribesmen. You have seen what it will do to groups in fairly congested areas. You know what it will do to northern Borneo and the Philippines!"

It was evident that a hundred pair of eyes now instinctively turned to the stacks of silver drums near the planes.

"You know how easy it is for us to procure this substance of death here in the belly of Dulit. And you understand that we only have to spread it over Brunei and the appointed strong points in the Philippines to completely erase them as bases or forts. There is no question about that.

"Meanwhile I have seen to it that you have been provided with the best of flying equipment, as well as aviation fuel from the captured Dutch tankers and the Silent Death from the bowels of Dulit. And you will all reap great rewards when

we appoint the new governing bodies here in the Far East."

A shout of approval went up at that.

"You rats!" snarled Kirk. "So that's how the poor Kayan natives were bumped off? You tried your gas doom out on them—from ships flying the British insignia."

"Are there further questions as to our plans?" the Belgian General asked.

"There is, General Cockosaert," said a man stepping forward.

"Speak up, Denbaerg."

"It is about the man who was shot down last night. We have him a prisoner here. We understand he is Brian Kirk, the man who has long been a stumbling block to the Circle of Death. What about him? And what does his coming here mean?"

"It was because of this Brian Kirk that the Admiral and I decided to come here. Moreover, we wish to see that this particular mission of ours is carried out properly. I had been advised of Kirk's capture. We will have him brought out here. We will make him talk."

"And the other guy who was with him," an American voice bawled.

"The other? There were two?"

"There was an observer firing from the back seat. They both escaped somehow and we have only located Kirk. Something ought to be done—to make sure nothing slips up."

The admiral and Cockosaert consulted quietly for a minute. They must placate these men somehow, reassure them that there was nothing to fear.

"Have this swine Brian Kirk brought out!" the Belgian barked.

KIRK had been listening to this conversation with keen interest. He knew he would be in for it now. He knew also that the poison gas they were using was being obtained in some manner from the bubbling depths of Dulit and that they were planning a wholesale slaughter through Northern Borneo and into the Philippines in an effort to carry out their mad plan for another world war and widespread destruction. This was the Circle of Death at its worst.

Now there was a jangle at the lock of his cell door, and someone opened it and came in. At a

glance Kirk took in his trim uniform and expensive kit and sidearms. Also he noticed that the man wore one of the latest gas-masks.

He wondered about that, then realized that everyone there carried a mask. Working so near the vent of Dulit, they had to for safety.

“You’re wanted outside,” the man said. He spoke in a clipped voice, appeared to be British. The bridge of his nose had a long white scar across it, the result of a crash, Kirk figured.

“What do they want—and who are they?” Kirk asked, stalling for time.

“You needn’t try to pull that one, Kirk. We all know you, and you know who we are. The leaders want to see you.”

Kirk slyly kicked the door shut, then a voice appeared to come from underneath the army cot upon which he had lately been reclining.

“Don’t go, Kirk. They’re going to rub you out. I heard them talking about it.”

The Britisher seemed puzzled for a moment. He glanced at Kirk.

Then the voice again came from under the bed: “If they want me, they must take me out by force.”

“Who is that?” the British flyer demanded.

“That’s for you to find out,” cracked Kirk. “Lay low, Brunner!” he then called toward the cot.

“But what’s he doing under there?” the Britisher demanded, drawing a heavy gun from his hip holster.

“Let him come and get me,” the voice beneath the bed said in a more muffled tone.

The Englishman dropped to one knee, started to raise the blankets. Then Kirk moved like a striking cobra. His foot shot out and caught the Englishman under the chin, sent him rolling over with a dull groan—entirely out.

Kirk grabbed the man’s gun at once, then unstrapped the gas-mask from his shoulders and slipped it over his face. He tied the guard up tightly.

Outside, the consultation was going on again. But Kirk knew he would have to work fast. He looked again and noticed that the men who had arrived in the Heinkels were not equipped with gas-masks. He looked the situation over closely, then drew the door open slightly. His eyes rested on the bank of silver tanks that stood across the

area. And he was about to draw a bead on the containers and pull the trigger when to his amazement the head of Tank appeared over the edge of the pile of gas cannisters.

“What the—? How the devil did he get in here?”

This upset his plans completely. He had intended to puncture a number of the gas tanks, cause some sort of a commotion, and make the best of it. But with Tank out there without a mask, his intentions were blocked. What to do now?

Kirk huddled behind the door again and pondered with himself. How could he get out of this mess now? In a minute, they would be coming over to see what the delay was all about.

Then there came a sudden strong draft which banged the door shut with an ominous click!

“Hell’s fire! I’m locked in again,” he muttered. “Worse than that, the keys are still on the other side and I can’t reach them through this small grating. I’m trapped!”

Two men now broke away from the group and started for the cell. Tank, still unnoticed, was standing up across the gallery and was waving the Lewis gun he had retained from the night before.

Kirk was flabbergasted. He had no idea what to do. Ventriloquism would be of no help now. It had worked once, but—

AN idea came to him. Quickly he placed his mouth near the opening in the door, threw his voice so that it appeared to be coming from somewhere well down the gallery.

“Take all stations!” his words ordered, seemingly from about twenty yards away. “Serious gas escape from filling chamber below! Take all stations!”

There was a slight move among the men. Then Kirk repeated the orders again. And this time, the men on the fringe began to run. The group in the center seemed unable to comprehend at first, then it dawned on them that they were in danger.

Cockosaert screamed, shouted for a mask. The Jap twirled fast and started running wild-eyed toward a man who stood preparing to adjust his mask. The Jap clutched at it and they went down fighting together.

At that instant, Tank, recognizing Kirk’s voice, hoisted his gun to the top of the silver tanks and began firing.

The group in front of the Heinkels went down in a welter of blood. Others started to fire—then stopped, realizing that they would be emptying their guns into the deadly gas containers.

Kirk, unable to figure out what Tank would do next, began yelling across the gallery to him. Tank clambered over the top of the cannisters and continued to sweep the whole gallery left and right with his rattling gun. A Heinkel started up, boomed and thundered through the hail of fire from Tank's gun.

Kirk watched the plane race down the gallery and disappear through the weird brown film to thunder off into a nothingness.

"They must charge through that peculiar smoke or vapor that has the color of the rocks," said Kirk. "Yes, that's it—a slowly rising vapor. A natural screen at the entrance of this rocky gallery."

He shouted across to Tank who was still sending short bursts across the gallery. The ape heard him now and came charging toward the locked door.

"Open it! . . . Open it!" screeched Kirk. "The door Tank—the lock. Twist it!"

The ape, insane now with emotion, only bashed at the door wildly with the gun. But finally he became enraged to the limit of his animal ferocity. He grabbed the doorway with both paws inside the opening of the small window, braced his feet against the solid rock wall, and yanked.

CRASH!

The thick wooden door came out with a wrench of heavy timbers and Tank went down on his back with a thud. Kirk darted out, pulled the heavy door off the ape, and helped him to his feet. Then over the ape's face he shoved a gas mask salvaged from a nearby corpse.

Shots were echoing up and down the gallery now. Men were creeping out of holes and openings. Kirk grabbed Tank's paw, rushed him across the gallery to where a Heinkel He.170K stood chugging away.

"Perfect!" snorted Kirk, firing a shot from the hip and knocking the man off the wing root who had just started the 910-h.p. Daimler-Benz engine. "Get up there, Tank. There's a gun mounted in the back cockpit."

The ape, groggy but game, was on top of the Heinkel fuselage in a leap. He shoved back the

gun hatch, was soon spraying hot lead all over the gallery. Kirk took his other gun, fired a few shots into the silver cannisters, then quickly ran across to where the Feroxes were huddled together, their wings almost interlaced for space-saving.

Carefully, he took two more shots, directing them into the fuel tanks. The first released the gas, and the second provided the spark that ignited the fuel. A small tank went up with a roar, spraying gasoline all over the first Feroxe. He took a long shot at another and his first bullet ignited her at once.

"Let them try to get those babies out of there," snarled Kirk, running back for the Heinkel. "I don't know where old Cockosaert pinched them, but they'll never fly any of them out of here."

He was up on the wing again and ready to drop into the cockpit. A few men crawled about on their hands and knees. A few darted from corner to corner and started to fire shots. Tank still blazed away, managed to set fire to two Severskys far down the gallery.

"Now for the great experiment," husked Kirk as he slipped behind the heavy stick control. "I saw one guy go out of here. I ought to be able to make it, too."

He gave her the gun with a last look at the silver cannisters, then held his breath. The Heinkel was still warm and he had no trouble in throttling her up to top revs at once. He held her nose down, sensed that she handled heavy.

Ahead, the strange wall of vapor rose slowly. Kirk was actually scared now. He had figured it all out from a distance; he prayed he was right. From behind, Tank threw his great arms around his neck, fearful of a crash.

Kirk held tight. He was near the moving vapor now. Yet maybe he was approaching wrong. Maybe some lever had been pulled to bar the opening he knew must be there.

But the Heinkel charged through, danced a minute in the updraft of the vapor, then staggered out into glorious sunlight.

For a moment, Kirk could hardly believe his eyes. He looked back. There behind him was the sleek wall of Dulit seemingly unyielding and impassive. Then he noted the sockets of the three lights that had marked the entrance through which the stolen ships of the Circle of Death had flown. And he knew it was not a dream.

“Whew! That was an experience. And what a hide-out!”

But again, he sensed that the speedy Heinkel was flying heavy, and he inspected her all over inside. Then his eyes caught the bank of bomb releases near his right elbow. Every release was clamped down in its prong.

With sudden realization of what this meant, Kirk turned back toward Dulit. He climbed the plane hard, circled for position, and managed to get over the upper jagged ridges of the old volcano so that he could peer down.

Below, hidden beyond the thinning cloud of vapor that arose from the depths, was the long gallery. A few masked men could be seen trying to block out the fire of the burning ships.

Kirk did not hesitate. One by one, he pulled the bomb toggles.

The Heinkel jerked as the bombs left the interior compartments. On the metal plate in front of him was the information that they were 50 kg. bombs and that there were six of them aboard.

“Swell!” he muttered. “Let’s go!”

The last two “eggs” fanged out of their containers before the first two hit.

KER-R-UMP!

There was a gargantuan roar from below. Then another—and the wide maw of Dulit seemed to gasp with the thud of the giant blows.

CR-R-R-ASH!

The last two 50 kg. projectiles, intended for the nerve center of the layout, smashed into the solid flooring of the hidden airport and broke it wide open with a crushing, rocky splintering amid searing flame. The explosions echoed upward and the Heinkel danced on the thud of concussion.

“COFFIN” KIRK circled, tried to see what really had happened. Then suddenly from below an even greater belch of explosion bonged out. And this time the Heinkel was hurled over on her back. Tank almost went out of the open hatchway, just managed to hang on as great chunks of rock went thundering high in the air past the overturned bomber-fighter.

The dormant Dulit had replied in her own manner! Old Dulit had returned to life!

Kirk’s bombs had opened up a new fissure for her trapped tongues of Vulcan to break through,

and now the world went mad in a roar of spouting lava rocketing rocks.

Kirk fought to get the Heinkel straight. Then, in the great heated spew of volcanic breath the Heinkel bounced up another thousand feet. The American quickly gave her more throttle, fought his way into the clear.

Below, another great boom thundered out and he turned just in time to see a massive chunk of side wall slip slowly down to block out the vapor-curtained opening. “Coffin” Kirk then knew that no other plane would ever fly in, or out of Dulit’s gallery!

“Well, that’s that,” he muttered, through parched lips. And Kirk smiled to himself as he checked his fuel in the tanks and learned he would have no trouble in making Brunei, where he could make some sort of a report to the British Foreign Service officials.

On second thought, he wondered whether they would believe him if he did tell his story.