

Vultures Vortex

A “Coffin” Kirk Adventure by Arch Whitehouse

Out of the pall of fog that curtained the trackless Atlantic roared a sleek Northrop—and no stranger pair of flyers had ever been seen than the men who manned it. One was tight-lipped Brian Kirk whose “dead pan” had won him the name “Coffin.” The other was a burly, stoop-shouldered mechanic—a forbidding, animal-like figure. His hair-matted hands bore the strength of cold steel, and Fate had decreed that they soon would be drenched with blood.

DOWN the main runway of the Gatwick Airport raced a silver monoplane. Once in the air, it banked sharply over the Lorenz blind landing lorry and snarled away toward London. A single beam of light from a rotating beacon touched it just before it was lost in the leaden clouds—revealed the stark lines of an American Northrop 2-E service-type ship bearing a strange insignia on its side.

Two British mechanics in cream-linen smocks watched the plane as it hurtled away. There was frank admiration in their eyes. But as the boom of the 750 Cyclone gradually filtered out, their expressions turned to plain awe. Neither spoke. There was that unmistakable air of men waiting for someone else to open the conversation.

“Rum couple, eh, Edgar?” said the first finally. He had a clipped accent.

“Rather! That mechanic lad, anyway. Never seen an uglier man in my life,” replied the other, staring at the “Incoming Aircraft” report.

“These American sportsmen chaps know the game, though, Edgar,” the first mechanic remarked, watching the fast disappearing Northrop.

“I should think so, coming all this way just as though they were out for an afternoon’s spree.”

“But as you say, that mechanic blighter was a crusty old noggin. Ever see a face like that—outside of a nightmare?”

“If he hadn’t spoken to me, I should have said it was old Consul himself. You remember old

Consul—the variety show monkey who used to roller-skate, eat toffee-apples, and ride a bike all over the stage?”

“I should think I do. He was a treat at our house, was old Consul. But this mechanic bloke was bigger than Consul,” laughed the other. “And was he strong! Did you see him crank that inertia starter? Like windin’ up a ten shillin’ watch!”

“A nice pair. The pilot chap had—what do they call it in the American films? Oh, yes, a *dead pan*.”

They both turned as footsteps approached from behind.

“What cheer, Sparks?” Edgar greeted. “How’s things on the Stockholm run?”

The man greeted as Sparks was a small chap in a dusty blue uniform. He had a thin thatch of straw-colored hair and light blue eyes set close to a long thin nose. He wore the peaked cap of the Aktiebolaget Aero-transport Company. On his sleeve was the regulation radio operator’s badge stitched in gold cord.

“Who was that in the Northrop?” he asked in a thick accent. Then he reached out, took the “Outgoing Report” book, and ran his short spatulate finger along the line just filled in by the mechanic.

“An American chap named ‘Coffin’ Kirk,” said Edgar. “His plane had American markings,” said the Swedish radio man.

“Of course. American registry.”

“But I don’t understand.”

“He just flew it here—all the way across.”

“Across the Atlantic?” gasped the Swede.

“Well, in easy stages—Nova Scotia, Greenland, Iceland, Scotland, and down to Gatwick. Damn nice show, I call it.”

“And he had a passenger?”

“Eighto! A rum looking mechanic chap. A bit on the strong side, too.”

“What was his name?” They consulted the report again and Edgar said: “Funny,

I never noticed that. He signed himself ‘Coffin’ Kirk and the mechanic just ‘Tank!’ That’s queer.”

The radio man studied the details for several seconds, then jotted down the registration numbers of the American Northrop.

“What’s the game, Florman?” the Gatwick mechanic asked.

“I’m just interested—in the Northrop, I mean. I’d like to buy a plane like that. Maybe he’d sell it, eh?”

“Hardly. I think he’s continuing on.”

“What’s his destination?”

“He didn’t say. He should have, I suppose.”

“I think he’s heading for Le Bourget,” the other mechanic added.

“Are you sure it’s Le Bourget?” Florman asked with insistence. “Not Tempelhof?”

“I couldn’t say for sure. But I think the mechanic said Tempelhof.”

“You ‘think.’ All I heard him do was grunt,” said the other mechanic. His pal contradicted him.

“Why he plainly said, ‘Get away from that starter? I’ll wind it.’”

Without a word of thanks, the radio man hurried away toward a big Junkers plane that stood on the tarmac near the embarkation platform.

“We get all sorts, don’t we?” said Edgar, as they picked up their service kits and wandered over to the hangars.

“Coffin Kirk and Tank,” snorted the other. “We don’t’arf!”

ACROSS the North Sea, in the hurrying city of Berlin, a bulbous man in heavy tweeds, thick eyeglasses, and an Alpine hat a full size too small, puffed up the Wittenbergplatz, then crossed with anxious strides between a Tauentzienstrasse omnibus and two girl cyclists. With a quick look around, he darted into the arcade on the opposite corner. There he hesitated, glanced across the street at the motor cars parked at the curb. Two Daimlers, a British Bentley, and an open Benz. He nodded, wiped his brow with a large colored handkerchief, and went inside a cool restaurant.

He sat down, ordered a drink, and carefully scrutinized the patrons. It was well into the afternoon and the before-dinner crowd was not on hand as yet. Finally the waiter returned. He was a

thin, creaky sort of man with no hair on his head. Great blue veins stood out on his forehead. He placed the drink before the fat man in tweeds and said: “You’re wanted on the telephone. Booth three, sir.”

The fat man nodded, wiped his forehead again, then went across the room to where the telephone booths were lined against the wall.

Once inside the designated booth, he raised the receiver off the hook, spoke two words quietly, then hung up. Thereupon, a narrow panel opened at the back of the booth. The fat man squeezed his way through.

In the semi-dark room within he slipped off his coat. Then from a small locker he selected a black cloak that offered a monk’s cowl hood and voluminous sleeves. He knotted a gold cord about his waist, drew the hood over his head, and from a slash-pocket took a black mask and fitted it to his face. On the left breast of that cloak was embroidered a scarlet circle bearing a human skull design set in white.

Now the fat man turned to a small wall panel and pressed a sunken block. The panel swung back and disclosed a narrow set of steel stairs. He hurried up them and rapped three times on a metal door above.

A guttural “Come in, No. 7,” came in response.

The fat man puffed in, stared about the high ceilinged room for a moment, then hurried to a vacant chair at the round table.

On a raised dais opposite sat a man in a gold cloak and gold mask. His cloak was likewise decorated with the scarlet circle and skull insignia.

“You are late, No. 7!” the voice boomed from behind the gold mask. “Are you not acquainted with our rules?”

No. 7 arose with a menial bow. Plainly, flustered, he took up a short gilt dagger that had been stuck in a metal slot in front of his chair. He held it by the blade as he spoke.

“It was unavoidable, *Herr* Master,” he began. “I have received important news—very important news.”

The eyes of the man in the gold robe flashed through his mask. “From the Madrid circle?” he barked.

“No, Master from London from Edvin Florman. He informs—”

“No. 7!” boomed the Master. “Again you have insulted our code. We do not use names here!”

No. 7 bowed and placed the hilt of the dagger to his forehead.

“I am a dog, Master. But in my anxiety I forget. It is No. 23 of whom I speak.”

“Then speak!”

“The news concerns Brian Kirk, Master. He is on his way here. He left London a few hours ago.”

The announcement came like a thunderclap. Twelve pairs of eyes turned on No. 7.

THE man in the gold cloak sat down. His long yellow hands clutched the carved lion-heads on the arms of his chair.

“Brian Kirk! *The* Brian Kirk?” he finally managed to get out.

“None other, Master. He is flying here. He has flown all the way from America. It can mean but one thing—we must trace him and stop him. It should be easy in the air.”

The man who sat at the round table opposite an emblazoned figure 11 in the top of the table began to twist in his seat and cast inquiring glances about.

“This was before your time, No. 11,” the Master started to explain. Then he nodded to the man on his right. “You tell him, No. 1.”

No. 1 got up, took up his dagger in the accepted manner, and spoke in a thin voice: “Brian Kirk is the son of an American air service man who fell into our hands late in the war. Brian Kirk, about eleven or twelve at the time, had been in Berlin with his tutor. He was somewhat under guard, being an American. He could have been sent into Switzerland, but for some reason his parents decided that he should continue his studies here. We thought nothing of it at the time, but eventually we discovered that the boy was acting as a carrier for Allied agents.”

The Master spoke softly into a telephone and No. 1 went on.

“We watched this lad, found that he frequented the Berlin Zoo. We also learned that his father, a Captain Dongan Kirk, had disappeared from his squadron and was reported missing in action. We of the Circle of Death were suspicious. We had the lad watched closely. Then one day we observed the lad transferring some important papers to one of the Zoo keepers.”

“The Zoo keeper turned out to be Dongan Kirk. Of course, we tried to corner him. There was a scuffle near the bear cages and Dongan Kirk was fatally shot. In the excitement, the lad disappeared. Even though we had the Zoo covered for hours, we never found him. We did find a cap and part of a coat near the bars of the lion cage, but we could discover no other evidence that gave a hint of what happened to him.”

The Master used the telephone again and No. 1 hesitated before going on.

“Some years later,” No. 1 finally continued, “we discovered that a Brian Kirk was a student at an American technical college. We traced him—learned that he later transferred to Harvard. He was a clever student, a skilled athlete, and a crack fencer. In fact, he held the American intercollegiate 440-yard run record.

“Finally he was picked on the American Olympic team that competed at Berlin last year. Nevertheless, Brian Kirk did not appear here. We learned later that he dropped out to take a flying Cadet course at Randolph Field. That is all we knew of him except—”

No. 1 looked up at the Master.

“Except,” boomed the Master, “that three months ago we were advised through a Berlin newspaper that well, that Brian Kirk was now ready to avenge the death of Dongan Kirk.”

“And now,” broke in No. 7, “Brian Kirk is on his way to Berlin—to face the Circle of Death.”

A low-toned gong rang out above the Master’s head. The men stood up, placed the gleaming tips of their daggers on the gold circle that split the center. Then in resounding tones they cried: “Death to Brian Kirk!”

OUT of a small private hangar at Le Bourget Field a silver monoplane was wheeled. A stocky man in dirty white coveralls had the tail of the Northrop on his shoulder, was dragging the machine out single-handed! The staff of French mechanics seemed uncertain what to do; for they had been rudely shoved off when they attempted to assist. They followed the machine out, watched the stalwart mechanic lower the tail to the ground. Then to their amazement, the ugly little man grabbed the top of the fin with a hairy hand, climbed on the tail plane, and vaulted lightly to the back of the fuselage.

Cat-like, he ran along the rounded back of the military machine, stepped on the cross members of the cowl-covered cockpit, and made his way to the nose. Then he gripped the blade of the prop and swung himself lightly to the ground.

"I have read about them," remarked one of the French mechanics, "but I have never seen one before."

"What do you mean?" his rigger mate questioned. "Why these American Indians. Didn't you see that fellow's face? It is really red and he has no face whiskers—just as it says in the books."

"But American Indians," said the rigger, "are always tall, straight men who walk like statues," remonstrated the other. "This man is short, stocky, and bow-legged."

"Nevertheless, I have never seen such a face before. Grotesque! But *Mon Dieu!* Is he not strong?"

The stalwart mechanic from America now stood near the nose of the Northrop watching the Frenchmen with a wary eye. Now and then he turned slowly and peered toward the hangars. It was evident he was expecting someone. Uncertain, he turned again, then gave a sudden hop and landed in a sitting position on the leading edge of the wing. The French mechanics were amazed.

"I have never seen such disrespect for aircraft" one said under his breath.

"But here comes the American pilot," said one. "He'll make him get off!"

The heavy-set Yank mechanic now climbed up on the wing root, peered over the shatter-proof glass cowling, and saw the young American approaching. Sight of the flyer made him frankly joyful, for his feet beat a happy tattoo on the dural covering of the wing. He made low crooning sounds, and his hands kept tapping the top of the cockpit in expectation.

"What are you doing up there, Tank?" the American said gruffly.

The mechanic addressed as Tank looked sheepish. Running a long forefinger around his shirt collar, he replied: "I had to get up here. Those Frenchmen were trying to steal the clock out of the cockpit."

It suddenly dawned upon the Frenchmen what the mechanic had said. In a body they moved forward.

"But *M'seu,*" they cried. "What your man has said is not true—for none of us have been able to lay a hand on your aeroplane. He would not let us near the machine. He is telling an untruth."

"You would steal the wheel from a wheelbarrow," Tank said without even looking at them.

Again the amazed mechanics stared at one another. They were unable to appreciate the humor of the situation.

"Well, never mind," said the American. "Get your 'Clearance Outward' book, will you. I'm leaving."

"You have reported to the Customs Office, *M'seu?*"

"Yes, here's my Triptyque. I'm heading for I'm heading north-east er to Germany."

"Tempelhof?"

"Germany yes, Berlin."

"You will have to report in at Cologne, of course," the mechanic explained.

"Yes, I understand that. The Customs officer explained that," the flyer said, scribbling his name on the book offered him.

THE American pilot was a well-built man of more than medium height. He carried himself well, his heavy buckthorn cane apparently being nothing more than an appurtenance. He was dark complexioned and kept his hair close cropped. His face, the most impressive thing about him—never seemed to change expression. Only the clear hazel eyes seemed to move. His visage seemed to veil some bitterness.

The contrast between these two men who flew the Northrop was even more startling now that they stood together.

The almost shapeless little man with the longshoreman's shoulders wore dirty rubber-soled shoes of the "sneaker" type. They were irregularly laced and soiled with engine oil. His coverall was too long in the leg and too narrow across the shoulders. The pockets were torn and grimy. A heavy, whitish-gray shirt could be seen through the opening between the buttons. His neck was almost black from sunburn and heavy curly hair. But it was his face that was most striking. A

cartoonist's idea of the typical Irishman best described it. The upper lip was wide and deep, and the nose appeared to have stopped too many roundhouse punches. The eyes, small and beady, snuggled under a line of bushy brows. And there was a strange pinkness to the skin that seemed an incongruous contrast to the sunburned neck and hands.

Kirk, on the other hand, was almost dapper in his neat gabardine Norfolk jacket and well-cut breeches. Polished riding boots, a sports-type soft-collar shirt, a dull green tie, and chamois-leather gloves completed his outfit. A wrist-watch with a split-second hand gleamed on his left wrist. "Scram, bums!" the homely mechanic now cracked as he pulled a hopeless-looking helmet out of his pocket.

"That will be all," explained Kirk, handing the book back.

The mechanics, however, did not move. They stood staring at the report and the strange names signed there.

"Coffin Kirk and Tank," they read. "Coffin *biere* *cercueil*—a casket for the dead?"

Then they turned and stared at the garish insignia painted on the side of the Northrop. It represented a closed coffin with the number "13" painted on it. Through the coffin's sides, running at a 45-degree angle, was depicted a beautiful old-fashioned dueling sword. "What are you mugs staring at?" the American mechanic said. "Git out of the way and let a guy work who will work."

"Coffin Kirk," they repeated hollowly, backing away. "These mad Americans!"

Tank now clambered over the wing and rammed the Eclipse inertia starter handle into the shaft hole. Then with amazing speed and ease he wound the device much as a child winds a clockwork locomotive.

Kirk climbed into the cockpit, stepped on the starter release, and the Cyclone bellowed into power. Then Tank made a wild leap, landed lightly on the wing, and with another bound was in the rear cockpit and had the hatch cover closed. Before Kirk had warmed the engine, Tank had curled up in the rear and was apparently sound asleep.

Lights now blossomed out from the front of the Administration Building and flooded the runway. Darkness had fallen suddenly as it does at certain

periods in Europe, and Kirk was glad of the illumination to aid his take-off. Just then, however, a signal from the control tower and another from a French gendarme on the tarmac commanded that he wait. A Luft Hansa Junkers airliner was coming in for a landing.

Kirk paused in the clear until the big monoplane was down, then he got the "green" from the tower. He rolled away, made for the long runway, and set her for the take-off. The Junkers had now reached the Administration Building and passenger ramp, so Kirk gave the Northrop the gun.

The pilot of the Junkers turned the wheel over to his co-pilot, hurriedly directed his field glasses toward the Northrop. He went white when he saw the insignia on the side, and he was out of his cockpit and away as soon as he could get his manifest clear. He rushed through the Booking Hall and sought the telegraph office.

KIRK settled back once he was clear, picked out the River Oise and followed it for some time. As he neared the Belgian border, he cut in his headphone jack, listened to the routine radio traffic with which that section of Europe is glutted. Messages in English, French, and German battered at his ears, but he finally selected the Tempelhof station and listened carefully. He knew German well. He knew French, too, and was acquainted with the several Flemish dialects encountered in Belgium and Holland.

Once he caught the routine announcement of his own flight and a report on his destination. They would look for him at Cologne in a couple of hours.

He pondered on his situation now, wondered why he had ever started on this mad adventure. What chance did he stand against modern communications, the intense vigilance of Customs and border patrols? Why had he selected this method of approach when he could have undertaken his quest under so many disguises? There was but one answer! His heritage—the heritage handed down by Dongan Kirk, who had blazed a brilliant trail of glory and heroism across frantic World War skies until he was betrayed and done to death by a hellish syndicate of human devils who accepted no flag or allegiance, who boiled the pot of war for their own ends.

The air was true and clean. It provided speed of movement and a weapon of surprise. There were certain laws that had to be obeyed, indisputable laws that no man can ignore. The air was free and a plane was shackled to no timetable. Brian "Coffin" Kirk had accepted all this months before. He had spent years laying his plans. It had taken time, money, keen effort. No wonder his face had developed that "dead pan" look that had brought him the sobriquet "Coffin." But "Coffin" Kirk had sounded good to him and he accepted it, warmed inwardly. He lived up to it on the running track, the fencing strip, the golf course, the laboratories, and the classrooms.

He aroused himself, studied the map he had marked before he left Le Bourget, and checked his position east of St. Quentin. He closed his eyes, remembered the wartime magic of that name, then returned to his job of navigating his ship toward Germany.

He glanced around once and relaxed into a grim smile as he watched the sleeping mechanic behind him.

"Do you notice anything, Tank?" Kirk said to himself. "You ought to. You're heading home, old chap."

But the man behind him did not move and Kirk returned to his work. Once he cleared the first foothills of the Ardennes, however, he reached well under the instrument board and pulled a short steel lever. In response, two neat metal plates folded down from what appeared to be extra oil tanks set behind the engine. The removal of the plates disclosed two .50 caliber Browning guns. The metal ammunition belts came up through narrow slots between the outer covering and the cockpit paneling.

This ruse was necessary to obtain Customs permits and international travel Carnets. Coffin Kirk smiled as he drew back the loading handles and watched the aluminum belt crawl into the feed blocks.

CRASH!

No sooner had Kirk completed the loading of the guns when something struck the Northrop with a terrific smash. Kirk cringed under the cowling, quickly glanced about. Tank was up, screaming gutturals and clutching at the metal framework of the coffin-marked fuselage.

Kirk slipped his arms through the loops of his seat chute and waited. He stared about, then brought the Northrop around in a tight turn. A spray of silver-green fire slashed past his nose and he had to hoik sharply to clear.

Kirk bellowed something at Tank behind. Then, as he whipped around again, he saw a trim biplane with a skull-like frontal area.

"Heinkel He51 630 h.p. B.M.W. VI engine," he muttered like a man repeating a Litany. "She does 217 and has a bad blind-spot dead underneath and slightly forward."

Kirk had awaited an emergency like this for months. He had planned his defense daily in his training at Randolph Field. Yes, he knew what he was to do. But he had never actually fired at a man in his life. In practice it had been simple—a routine maneuver, a feint to the right or left, a faked hoik that suddenly switched into a dip, then up and—

"I don't like it," he snarled. "But I have no choice. The poor swine was sent out to stop me—and now, it's either him or me."

The Northrop was in the hands of a master. The German Heinkel fighter, flaunting a gaudy Swastika insignia, came around headlong again, splashed another burst at the silver monoplane. Kirk waited, danced to the right, then to the left. He saw the speedy Heinkel swerve and open fire again.

Kirk nosed down a trifle, snapped the Northrop up into a throttle-controlled stall, then went down fast. The Heinkel seemed to hesitate above as if the German pilot was uncertain what to do. It was then that the Northrop sped in like an arrow and from her gun ports poured two fiery streams of steel. The fusillade converged dead on the Heinkel's vitals. Kirk held the Northrop true, held his triggers down until the last possible moment.

He had to act fast then, for the Heinkel disintegrated in mid-air. A tremendous explosion belched yellow ochre against the night sky. Kirk zipped over on one wing-tip and watched the wreckage gather itself for the long wailing tumble to earth.

Tank was up hammering his hairy fists against the glass of the cowling, jabbering in strange phrases, and staring with eyes that seemed not to understand. Then a sudden tenderness crept into the eyes and he moved forward slowly, put one

arm about Kirk's shoulder and buried his face against his neck.

"It's all right, Tank, old boy. It's all right. This sort of thing is new to you, eh? Well, you'd better get used to it, we're going to have a lot more before the year is out."

He stroked the sleeve of Tank's coverall, soothed him. Then in pathetic seriousness, Tank sat back, straightened his grotesque helmet, and took up a position of watchful waiting.

FOR another hour the Northrop hammered her way across western Germany. Rhenish Prussia, Nassau, and Hess swept by, the moon portraying the landscape in stark lines.

Finally, they crossed Saxony and headed for Dessau. At that point, Kirk turned a trifle to the south and followed a river that led toward the open country of south Brandenburg. And now he noted that Tank had become restless, made strange noises as he moved about his confined cockpit, and peered over the side at the colorless panorama below.

Kirk watched Tank for some minutes, then said: "So you're finally beginning to sense something, eh, Tank?"

But Tank's nervousness had nothing to do with the proximity of his native heath, as Kirk had believed. Tank was staring ahead and to port with those strange piercing eyes of his—and now Kirk caught the idea. There was another plane near.

He set himself for anything, then caught the harsh but efficient lines of a Junkers Ju.53 that came hurtling out of the north.

"Luft Hansa Tempelhof-to-Rome run," he muttered. He quickly snapped in his phone jack, ran the wave-length lever over to the Luft Hansa frequency. He caught the trailing words of an official message being relayed back to Berlin.

" American Northrop, listed as missing on flight from Le Bourget to Tempelhof, seen flying at 4,000 feet over Kottbus in southern Brandenburg."

Kirk smiled, then caught the flash of something streaking at him from the Junkers' control-pit window. He reached for his gun releases, but held his fire when he realized that he was getting an international light beam signal.

The signal repeated K-L-U K-L-U.

Kirk quickly read it to mean: "You should stop. Standing into danger. Report nearest Customs aerodrome."

Kirk grinned and picked up the Aldis lamp he had bought at Croydon. Quickly he took the pistol grip and triggered D-D-D. This meant "Keep clear of me. I am maneuvering with difficulty."

He saw the big Junkers swing wide and let him through. Then Kirk nosed down sharply and held his dive until he was skimming the tree tops and thundering across the agricultural districts of lower Brandenburg.

For twenty minutes he flew a zigzag course, then passed over a country road that trailed off from a main highway, and hugged the Spree River for about four miles. Abruptly, it turned sharply through a heavily timbered stretch and came out again in a wide grassy plain. Kirk hugged it closely, and finally circled a low, rambling rustic-type building that had a log roof, several outside balconies, and a dull pattern of flower gardens before it.

He circled again and caught the flashing of an upright oblong of light.

Tank now became nervous again, made strange noises through his teeth.

"Take it easy!" snapped Kirk. "He's signaling through a door. You'll be down there soon enough, if he flashes 'All safe.'"

The signaling took a new note now, and the call Kirk had awaited came through.

"Come in Come in All Clear—Rolf."

Kirk smiled and shut off the motor. The Northrop held her glide smoothly in the calm night air, and in a few seconds he was running the ship up toward the great building. Tank had the hatch back and was leaping all over the cockpit sniffing and making low clucking sounds.

The Northrop now taxied across the wide expanse of turf, over a low crowned road, and well up on the cracked stone driveway that curled around in front of the Bavarian-type hostel.

"Steady, Tank," warned Kirk, as he sat back and waited, one hand still on his throttle. But the figure in the back seat was up, both hands on the sides of the cockpit. His knees were bent and a strange crooning cry came from his nostrils.

"Steady!" Kirk cried again, holding Tank back with one arm until a slight, fuzzy-headed man was

framed in the doorway. Tank made an audible cry and Kirk had to restrain him.

"*Herr* Kirk?" the man in the doorway asked quietly.

"Rolf! . . . Nostrand!" replied Kirk.

There was no holding Tank now. With a leap he was out of the cockpit and running across the half-moon of turf. In a trice he was pawing the slim man in the green baize apron.

The man known as Rolf Nostrand fell back in terror. And Kirk leaped out of his cockpit to hold the crazed mechanic off.

"It's Tank, Rolf!" he cried. "It's Tank! You remember Tank!"

THE next few seconds were a nightmare for the little German hostel keeper. He stared at Tank with eyes that streamed with tears. Then he looked from Tank to Kirk and tried to speak. But for a long time words would not come. Tank, emitting low crooning gutturals, cried on Nostrand's shoulder and generally behaved badly.

"But I do not understand, *Herr* Kirk. It is not the same Tank. You, too, have grown so big!"

There was a crunching on the gravel behind them and they turned. A man in a polished-leather cap and greenish-blue uniform stood there, one foot on the pedal of a bicycle. He was beginning to unstrap a carbine from his shoulder when Tank made a quick movement.

"Who is this, *Herr* Nostrand?" the German constable said in a flinty voice. "I have received a report—"

But he got no further. There was a low growl and Tank was flying through the air, arms and legs outstretched. He landed full force on the chest of the man with the carbine and there was a jangling crash. Kirk tried to stop him, but he was too late. Tank let out a mad scream, throttled the man with a terrific rendering of flesh, then dropped his body in a heap. Tank then backed away two bow-legged paces, raised the carbine, and brought the stock down on the quivering constable's head.

For another minute, Tank was a wild man. He broke the carbine stock as though it were a match stick, then he twisted the steel barrel into a badly bent tube. The bicycle next took the full force of his wrath, three quick movements serving to double the frame into a tangle of metal.

Kirk and Nostrand stared in horror, then without a word they picked up the dead man and carried him off. In a few minutes they came back and disposed of the remains of the bicycle and rifle.

Tank watched, still muttering.

In a short time Kirk and Nostrand had cleaned up the marks on the driveway and had raked over the gravel. Then, with the little German's assistance, Kirk ran the Northrop into a shed set well away from the main building.

Once they were settled down around the broad clean table inside the hostel, Kirk turned to Rolf. "How long can I stay here?" he asked.

"Until Thursday night—early Friday morning at the latest. The hikers of the Hitler Youth Movement do not begin to get here until Friday afternoon. Of course, we shall have to be careful about Rudolstadt."

"That was the policeman?" queried Kirk. Neither had wished to talk about Tank's victim.

"Yes, he patrols the road between here and Sorau. He will surely be missed by noon tomorrow."

"Poor devil! He certainly walked into that. I shall have to watch Tank closer."

"But it had to happen *Herr* Kirk. I have often suspected him—and he would have reported us."

"Yes, it had to happen, I suppose."

"Yet I cannot believe it," *Herr* Nostrand said, peering across at Tank. "He was so little when I last saw him."

"Oh, he's improved since that day, haven't you, Tank?" Kirk said quietly.

"Very much, but I do have a lot of trouble with my German," Tank replied in fluent Prussian.

The hair on *Herr* Nostrand's head stood up like the spines on a porcupine's back. He stared amazed at Tank, then at Kirk. Tank continued:

"It's the true Berlin accent that I've been trying to get," he said inspecting a blood-spot on his sleeve.

"But but he talks He speaks!" gasped Nostrand. "I have heard him!"

"Yes, he has even learned to speak," agreed Kirk quietly. "I did have some trouble in keeping him at school, though." Then Tank spoke again:

"When do I get a crack at a Death's Head Huzzar—or a Gestapo?" he cried, breaking up a loaf of bread.

“He knows about the Gestapo—the Secret Police?” gaged *Herr* Nostrand.

“Oh, he reads a lot, does Tank,” replied Kirk, lighting a cigarette. “But we have much to talk about, eh, Rolf?”

The slim German reached for a long narrow bottle of Hock and poured three glasses: “I suppose he drinks, too, eh?” he said uncertainly.

“Oh, he has all the vices. Give him a short one.”

They held their glasses aloft and the eyes of Kirk and Nostrand met under the light.

“To the extermination of the Circle of Death,” they both muttered. Tank drank, too, and put the glass down with: “It’s all right, but I’d sooner have beer.”

THEY were quiet for a time, and Coffin Kirk seemed lost in memories. But finally he spoke. “I suppose you wonder how I got out that day.”

“It has always been a puzzle to me,” Nostrand replied.

“I saw them corner my father a few minutes after I had handed him the Zoo catalog you gave me. You remember how we used the catalog to pass our messages. I saw father go down under the first flurry. I think they shot him in the stomach and then ran him through while he struggled on the ground. He yelled something to me and I obeyed. I ran through the monkey house then saw too late that the door at the other end was closed.

“There was nothing to do but to hide in one of the cages, and kid-like, without realizing the danger, I snatched the cage keys from the guard’s wall cabinet and let myself into the cell of the big female ape.”

“*Gott in Himmel!*” gasped Rolf.

“I think the ape’s name was Katy or—”

“Big Katrina! She would have killed me!”

“That was it—Katrina. Well, no sooner had I climbed in when she grabbed me, lugged me over into the far corner, and cuddled me close to her. She had Tank then, too, you remember.”

“Tank was only a few months old,” added Rolf.

“There you are. The mother instinct. She covered me with her great body while the soldiers were racing back and forth looking for me. Tank and I snuggled together there for more than two

hours. I waited for you to come later, but you never came back.”

“I went to jail for three years,” explained Nostrand. “I only got out after the *Putsch*. Then I obtained this post.”

“I hung around after the Zoo was closed,” Kirk continued. “Then I opened the cage and let Katrina and Tank out. Together we worked our way through the buildings and finally made the wall. Tank, of course, climbed up easily. Katrina likewise climbed up, and then somehow sensed that I couldn’t make it. So she hung with one foot and jerked me up. But just as I started over the wall, someone spotted us and fired.”

“Katrina was killed,” said Nostrand sadly.

“Yes, Katrina, who was as big as a man, was killed. And Tank and I ran away. We managed to hide aboard a brick barge in the river that night and woke up the next morning well on our way toward Hamburg. We were days on our way and saw many strange things which at the time were too much for me to comprehend. I learned since that it was the Socialist Revolution. At any rate, the Armistice was signed and I, with Tank, slunk aboard an outgoing American freighter by crawling up the hawser. They never found us again until we had been to sea for three days. That’s how I got back to America, Rolf.”

“And you took Tank and taught him all these things?” said the amazed Nostrand. “It is unbelievable!”

“He never tells you all the things I taught him,” said Tank.

Nostrand turned, stared at the stalwart mechanic. Tank was sound asleep. Like a flash, Nostrand turned, smiled at Kirk, and said: “Now I understand. Ventriloquism! It is very clever.”

“And very handy at times,” said Kirk. “An ape that ‘talks’ often makes other people say things they had no idea they were going to say.”

“You will need all these things if you are going to break up the Circle of Death.”

“Now you must talk,” said Kirk, lighting another cigarette.

“There is very little to say. The Circle is still in existence. They know of you. They waited for you during the Olympics. You were to come with the American team, eh?”

“I was selected—but I had other things to do. For one thing, I had to learn to fly.”

“They know that, too.”

“Yes, they tried to stop me—a German Heinkel fighter. But, I was ready for him. He made one mistake.”

“The Heinkel has a blind spot, as I told you,” Nostrand said examining the end of his cigar. “But what are your plans, *Herr* Kirk?”

Kirk waited for several seconds before he answered. He stared ahead for some time, looking at nothing. Then he said: “My plans have been changed since I arrived here. That poor devil out there—he didn’t deserve that.”

Nostrand sat staring at the American. “It was unfortunate,” he agreed. “Very unfortunate. But we must not lose sight of the fact that Rudolstadt would have been our undoing.”

“That’s just it, Rolf. He was a pawn in the game of the Circle of Death. Otherwise he might have sat here with us enjoying a glass of schnapps. What evidence we have indicates he was not innocent—yet he might have been an unknowing tool in their hands. That’s what bothers me.”

“But,” said Nostrand, “Innocent Rudolstadts in Spain, in Italy, in Ireland, and in Russia are likewise dying because of the Circle of Death. Many Rudolstadts in other countries will die by the thousands unless we stop it.” The little German hesitated, sat watching the American, fascinated.

“When I started out, I had but one idea, Rolf. I was charged with revenge for what happened in the Berlin Zoo when my father was cut down in cold blood. It is all different now. I see it in a new light. Even he was just one of millions. His name might have been Rudolstadt.”

Nostrand nodded, let his gaze fall to the floor.

“No, Rolf, it is no longer revenge for a murder in a Berlin Zoo. I know that my father was a brave man. He did what he saw as his duty. Had he lived he would have been renowned as a hero. But instead he died obscurely on the beaten pathway of a Zoo. No, Rolf. We have a bigger job now. We are going to do something for all the Rudolstadts and all the Dongan Kirks in the world—and that calls for extermination of the Circle of Death.”

Kirk was emotionless now and his words came in a tuneless monotone. He was piercing Nostrand

with his steely eyes and his hands were gripping the carved arms of the chair.

“The ruthless leader of those merciless devils must be struck down. But you have done your part. The rest is up to me. You need take no more risks, Rolf. Tank and I will carry on.”

“But I want to aid you, *Herr* Kirk,” remonstrated the little German.

“No,” replied Kirk. “You must reconsider. You are in great danger harboring us. Tomorrow we go.”

“As you wish, *Herr* Kirk,” Rolf whispered, head bowed. “But you seem to forget that I, too, have a mission in life. I lost three sons in the war and a wife after the Revolution. Do you think it is all over for me? Do you believe they let me out of jail because they wished it so?”

“What do you mean, Rolf?”

“I was released and put here because they knew you would come, *Herr* Kirk. They knew that sooner or later they would trap you through me. And they will get me, too, the minute you are taken care of.”

Kirk’s face went the color of aged marble.

“You risked this, Rolf? You knew this all the time—and yet you worked for me? You stayed here and waited for me to come?”

“What was there left to do?” the little German pleaded.

“My Lord!” gasped Kirk. “What a man you are!”

They sat silent for several minutes, searching each other’s eyes.

“You’re the bravest man I have ever known, Rolf Nostrand,” Coffin Kirk finally said.

THE next morning greeted Coffin Kirk with a sunny smile. He stepped to the window of his room, drank in the beauties of the German countryside. A hiking trail crawled pleasantly through a wood about two miles away, rambled at its ease through fields and mellow copses, then disappeared behind a low hillock that glistened with dew.

Tank aroused himself from a folding cot, came over beside Kirk. He stared at the scene with a doleful mug, a mug that had most of the hair carefully removed by electrolysis and expertly tattooed to the color of a human being’s. His years living in close company with Kirk had erased

many of his monkey traits and movements. He walked nearly upright and he had adopted the human movements of the head when spoken to, the gestures of mankind.

Male clothing was as much a part of his life as his three meals a day at a table with cutlery and china. He exercised as regularly as did Kirk, he was proficient on a bicycle, and Kirk had even taught him to swim, an accomplishment that astonished his anthropology professors at college.

With his adopted mannerisms of man and his acceptance of the common standards of living, Tank had one outstanding trait—his blind loyalty to Coffin Kirk. Throughout all the years after their escape from Berlin, Tank never wavered in his trust. As the years piled up, they became firmer friends, found in one another an armor-plate strength that could not be broken. By the time Kirk was a young man, Tank had so aped his movements and manners that few realized that Kirk's "man" was anything but a man.

Kirk smiled at Tank as the ape stared out upon the unfamiliar picture-book scene outside. Tank placed his big paw on the American's shoulder, gave him an affectionate grip.

"Yes, Tank old boy. Here we are—back in Germany."

Tank sniffed, nodded his head.

"Perhaps your memories will be awakened when we go to Berlin. How would you like to take in the Zoo again, Tank? No, I guess that wouldn't do. I remember too well the visit we made to the Zoo in New York. We couldn't risk another display like that."

Kirk allowed himself a smile as he recalled the reaction of the monkeys in the Bronx Zoo. On seeing Tank, some screamed and ranted at their bars, some cried and shoved their arms through the cages in pathetic supplication, others just sat and bared their teeth. Poor Tank had stood staring at the scene, utterly frozen. His eyes squinted and he found himself making noises that had not come from his throat in years. It was only by a great effort that Kirk managed to get him into a taxi and hurry him away.

AND now the cheery odor of breakfast aroused them and in a short time they were downstairs enjoying a full meal with Rolf. The latter was now dour and none too talkative. Tank helped carry the

dishes away, then curled up on a settee and fingered clumsily through the pages of the *Schweizer Illustrierte Zeitung*.

Kirk and Nostrand sat at the table with a map of the city of Berlin before them.

"Once in the city," explained Nostrand, "you can take an omnibus to the Wittenbergplatz. Get off at this corner and walk up one more square. The building has an arcade."

"I think I remember that section," Kirk said, peering at the map. "Yes, I am certain I do now."

"That is about all I can tell you about it, except that they meet in a room two floors above the street. I have never found out how they get up there. I have watched many times. I have been into the nearby buildings, believing that they had some sort of a secret passage through the walls or over the roofs, but I have not been able to discover it."

"But you have seen them enter the building?"

"Yes, I have followed them into the restaurant on the street floor on several occasions. They sit at tables—and then disappear."

"But that's impossible, Rolf."

"My better judgment says so, *Herr* Kirk, but nevertheless they disappear. I have seen them at the table one minute, and the next they have gone, leaving half-eaten meals."

"But they can't just disappear," protested Kirk. "Try to remember. Do you recall any of them being called away to the kitchen, to another table, to answer a telephone?"

A gleam shot across Nostrand's face.

"That is it! That is it, *Herr* Kirk. I remember now. They are usually called to a telephone. The restaurant has several boxes booths, I believe you call them. That is it!"

"Right! They are called to a telephone booth and they never come back. They get upstairs, somehow, through one of those telephone booths. It's perfect!"

"You are going at once?"

"The quicker the better. We can waste no more time."

"And you will go to Berlin by rail? You will not fly, *Herr* Kirk?"

"I have been trying to settle that point. They know I have crossed the German border. They will now expect me to use other means of transportation than the air. No, the railroad is out.

I must fly. That will put them off. I stand a better chance in the sky.”

“It is suicide! Why not try a disguise and use the roads the omnibus a cycle?”

“No, boldness is what will count now. I will go directly to Tempelhof and report that I have been lost and that I had to come down somewhere north of here. It requires such a bold stroke.”

Tank suddenly made a queer noise, rustled the weekly magazine which was full of aviation pictures. Kirk went over, stared at the picture that had excited the ape man.

It was a photograph of a Heinkel fighter!

“That’s it, Tank. That’s one of them, anyway. From now on you must keep your eyes peeled for them.”

Tank tore up the magazine, hurled it against the wall. Then he curled up again and went to sleep.

“Can I get away now?” asked Kirk. “Is it too risky?”

“Perhaps that would be best. True, we are miles from anywhere out here, but on the other hand they will be searching for Rudolstadt later in the day. It will be better if you get away now. But you can return at anytime—except over the weekend. This place will be alive with Youth Movement hikers between Friday and Sunday nights.”

“Right away, it is, then!”

But as Kirk spoke, Nostrand’s face fell. He had been staring at the window that faced the front of the hostel. And now the low crunch of bicycle wheels over the cracked stone drive caught their ears.

KIRK gave a low command to Tank, and the ape immediately turned around and assumed a noncommittal pose in his chair. Nostrand moved toward the door. “It is the police,” he said. “They have missed Rudolstadt.”

“All right. Play safe and take it easy. We may be able to talk them out of this.”

But Kirk was in for the surprise of his life.

He could see the troop of cycle police roll into view with correct military precision. They dismounted, stacked their bicycles in a true line, and clicked their heels. Then Kirk knew something was really off.

Again, the old fear crept back, all the way from 1918—the fear that haunted men know, a cold, tight-fitting fear that makes them walk with one shoulder braced, expecting any minute to feel the clap of an official hand.

Kirk’s throat went dry, and he knew speech would not come easily. And he needed his powers of speech. Again he spoke to Tank, and the ape man sat back, simulated a tired man who has no particular interest in life.

There was the clump, clump, clump of heavy feet across the veranda of the hostel. There was a loud official rapping on the door. Kirk glanced about, saw a black patent leather helmet near each window.

The game was up before it had started!

With feigned cheerfulness, Nostrand opened the door, greeted the Sergeant in charge with a jocular salute.

“Good morning, *Mein Herr* Sergeant!” Nostrand boomed. “Have the police decided on a happy holiday in the—”

That was as far as Nostrand got. Two heavy carbine muzzles were rammed into his stomach and he was shoved back into the room. Two more police with short carbines stepped in from behind, clumped across the floor, and covered Tank and Kirk.

“You are all under arrest and will submit to close confinement until the arrival of the Gestapo,” the Sergeant in charge boomed in thick Prussian.

“The Secret Police, Sergeant?” gasped Nostrand. “But what have we done? What is the meaning of this?”

“Have you seen anything of Constable Rudolstadt?” barked the crusty Sergeant.

“Constable Rudolstadt? No, Sergeant.”

“A likely story! At 10:23 last night he reported seeing an American plane preparing to land in this area. He left the police phone to report personally. Nothing has been heard of him since. And you say you have not seen him?”

“But no, Sergeant! We—” Nostrand started to say.

He was interrupted by a cruel blow across the mouth with the flat side of a carbine stock that knocked him up against the wall. Nostrand looked at Coffin Kirk, closed his eyes. Kirk made a quick swoop, brought down the man who had struck

Rolf with a short uppercut that almost lifted the man's head off his shoulders.

"No, Tank!" screamed Kirk watching the ape out of the corner of his eye. He swung once more and the Sergeant also went down, his knees giving way as Kirk brought a swift short right to his chin.

Kirk was quickly surrounded with bristling carbine barrels.

THE police now swarmed in from every door and window. They forced Kirk into a corner, made him pull on a heavy canvas jacket. It was drawn up tight and fastened behind with stout hempen tapes. Then the arms, which were closed at the ends so that it was impossible to get the hands out, were crossed across his chest and the sleeves bound tightly behind his back.

"We will teach you to assault the police, *Herr* Kirk," the puffing Sergeant snarled when they had brought him around again. "The strait-jacket is what will make your kind behave."

They now had Nostrand and Tank in the jackets, too. Then bustling and scurrying around, the leaders spoke curtly into telephones and scribbled out formal reports. They took Kirk's papers and passports, piled them on a table.

"Why did you not report in at Cologne, *Herr* Kirk, when you reported you were flying into Germany? Do you not know Customs regulations?"

"I lost my way," Kirk said, unable to keep his eyes off Tank.

"You engaged a German plane, too—and shot it down!" the Sergeant snarled, standing close to Kirk's face.

"What with?" came from the corner where Tank sat mournfully contemplating the strange jacket into which he had been forced. "All we got aboard that boiler is a bottle of Bromo Seltzer. Can't your guys take it—or did they get tangled up in our prop-wash?"

"Shut up, ugly swine!" the Sergeant clipped, turning suddenly on Tank.

"If I'm ugly," Tank said in reply, "you had better stay away from a mirror. You'd never get over it."

The Sergeant fumed through his scrubbing-brush mustache, and for a minute Kirk talked fast, afraid he was going to draw his Luger and kill Tank where he stood. "But you have no right to

hold us like this. Ours was not a criminal act. We were lost."

"You are *Herr* Kirk, are you not?" the Sergeant blurted again. "That is enough for us. You are a dangerous member of a foreign espionage ring. Of that much we are certain."

"If those are the charges, I demand instant release and an opportunity to consult my Consul."

"You may see your Consul after the Gestapo is through with you. My duty, now that I have you cornered successfully, is to hold you here until the Gestapo motor car arrives."

And with that the Sergeant, gave a few short orders. His men were broken up into parties, some to guard the hostel, others to make a thorough search for Rudolstadt, and three others to look for the plane.

Kirk knew then he had to work fast. Nostrand was a helpless figure sitting on a chair behind the table. Tank still maintained his stoic calm, staring down at his folded arms and the strange jacket.

The Sergeant took a seat at the table and began to make out his report. He spoke to Nostrand now and again and added his explanations to his report.

Finally, Kirk decided on action. He caught Tank's eye. The ape-man was behind the Sergeant and was able to watch both Kirk and Nostrand. Kirk made a suggestive motion by raising his elbows from his side and forcing his arms out. Tank watched him for some time.

The Sergeant was alone with them now, for he was quite confident that three men in strait-jackets were nothing to worry about. Besides, he could call in some of his constables if any trouble started.

But he had not figured on Tank.

The ape-man now made a slight movement, watching Kirk as he did so. Kirk nodded, encouraged the ape. He drew in his breath, watched Tank do the same. And now with fascinated eyes he saw the heavy seams of Tank's strait-jacket stretch. He nodded again eagerly and Tank responded with his monstrous strength. This time the white linen stitches of the shoulder seams began to flick up like tiny seeds. Kirk signaled Tank to stop and rest.

Tank stared down at the broken seams and a dumb smile crossed his face. He went at it again, took his breathing time from Kirk. Then with a final effort, Tank forced his shoulders clear out of

the strait-jacket. With a quick movement, he drew his arms out of the bound sleeves—and made a quick leap for the German at the table.

The Sergeant had heard the sharp rip behind him and had turned slowly in his chair. He let out a choked gurgle as he saw Tank dive for him. That was the last thing he remembered on this earth.

Tank throttled the man cold, shoved him back in his chair. Then he took the Sergeant's official dirk from the leather scabbard that hung from his official belt and started across the floor toward Kirk.

A Constable came in, let out a gasp and fumbled for his Luger, but his holster flap caught and he never lived to make an official complaint about it. Tank hurled himself again, struck the Constable to the floor, then quietly plunged the dirk through the man's throat.

In two minutes, Tank had slashed the bonds of both Kirk and Nostrand, and now he stood chattering over the fallen Sergeant.

"Good work, Tank," husked Kirk, slapping the ape across the shoulders. "Now then, Rolf. We've got to get you out of here first of all."

"But how can I go?" the frantic little German cried.

"I'll fly you into Czechoslovakia to Prague. It's only about a hundred miles from here. I can do it in an hour. You've got enough papers to get you by."

Nostrand was befuddled, but he obeyed orders. They retrieved their passports and other documents from the pile on the table, then collected the two Lugers from the two dead policemen and set plans for getting to the hidden Northrop.

Then they heard hurried steps outside, and they hugged the wall behind the door. Three policemen came charging in, shouting that they had discovered the mangled body of Bu-dolstadt. But they stopped short, stared at the bodies of the Sergeant and Constable on the floor. Their hesitation was fateful. Kirk brought a Luger butt down on the head of one. Tank quickly crumpled the second, and Nostrand obtained satisfactory revenge for his bash in the face by downing the third with the flat of a carbine.

"Come on!" ordered Kirk. "The shortest way to the shed, Rolf!"

Kirk and Nostrand then took up the carbines and Lugers, Tank grasped his bloody dirk, and together they started to crawl out of the back window.

"Wait a minute!" whispered Kirk. "We'll draw them into it."

With lightning moves, they collected everything burnable and piled it near the main doorway. Then they ripped down the wall lamps and poured the kerosene over the papers, rugs, and light wicker furniture. Then, after setting a match to it, they darted back into the small dining hall where they had been taken prisoner.

"Lock that door, and as soon as they all flock around to the front of the hostel, we'll slip out of this window," explained Kirk.

As they waited, they could hear the flames crackling in the open hallway. In a few minutes, when smoke began to trickle under the door sill, they heard frantic voices out in front of the hostel.

"Now!" said Kirk. "You first, Tank. Come on!"

The voices were wilder now and men were thumping on the door and smashing at the lock with the stocks of their carbines.

"Go around to the front windows!" screamed Kirk, feigning terror. Then he, too, dropped outside and raced after Nostrand and Tank who were running off between the small huts and cottages.

In a few moments they were ripping open the shed door and Tank was dragging the Northrop out like a child fussing with a tricycle. In another minute he had the starter wound and Kirk was in the pilot's seat setting the controls for the takeoff. Nostrand climbed in the back and huddled down. The engine caught at once and Tank came up over the wing and dropped in beside the little German.

Kirk ran her as long as he dared for a warm-up, then sighted two Constables charging toward the shed. Quickly he released the wheel brakes and let the Northrop roll away under a heavy fire from the two Constables.

The silver ship leaped and bucked along the narrow stretch of greensward. She charged past a row of small huts and Kirk held her tight until he reached the end of the row. Ahead loomed another long barracks-like building and with a quick flip of the stick he hoiked her up with only inches to spare. Next, he let her have her head at about

twenty feet for another mile. Then he zoomed hard, and swung back toward the burning hostel.

As they roared over the smoke and flames they saw a cavalcade of gleaming motor cars.

The Gestapo had arrived—a few minutes too late.

YES, the die had been cast. Blood had been spilled and officialdom had been aroused. Kirk knew all this as he swept away toward the southeast. An hour later he landed at Euzyn on the northeast side of Prague.

“You can’t land here,” Nostrand cried. “This is Ruzyn—it is not yet finished.”

“I know. But you get out and we’ll tell them we didn’t know—that we made a mistake and will immediately go back to Kbley, the regular airport, and report in.”

Nostrand grinned. He sensed the cleverness of Kirk’s ruse.

The airport at Euzyn was being completed to relieve the heavy traffic of the main Prague field at Kbley. A number of workmen came over from their tractors and grading machines and excitedly attempted to explain the situation.

“Yes, I know all that,” answered Kirk in German. “But I made a mistake. I’ll refuel here then go on to Kbley and report to the Customs officials.”

The workmen nodded grimly—and Nostrand wandered off, apparently to find fuel. No one noticed that he did not return, for they were much too interested in the American plane and its strange insignia. Kirk rolled the Northrop toward a heavy fuel wagon and made a deal with the man in charge to fill his own tanks from it. Luckily, it was a good grade of gasoline.

Then without making too much fuss about the missing Nostrand, Kirk took off again with Tank sitting up in the back seat, trying to figure out in his ape mind what it was all about.

This time Kirk swung almost due north in a line toward the German border. He crossed at Dresden and followed the Spree River north. Berlin was his goal.

Twice he was fired upon for crossing a restricted area. Over Lubben the anti-aircraft fire was particularly keen and a chunk of shrapnel chopped a chunk from his port wing-tip. Tank sat

up, stared at the damage, and began to make his strange grunting sounds again.

Kirk took her up to 12,000 and cleared, then he cut wide of Potsdam and swept around to the north-east side of Berlin. He glanced about as he set himself for the glide to Tempelhof. He realized what he was up against, but knew now that he had to face it—or give up his quest.

The great Tempelhof administration building with its two lattice towers now lay below him. Out beyond the embarkation gangway was a slab of concrete on which was painted in bold white letters the name “Berlin.” On the roof of the building were hundreds of gay sun umbrellas and tables where happy diners sat and watched the activity of the crowds and planes below. Kirk wondered what was ahead for him.

The “come in” flash from the central control tower came just as a Luft Hansa Junkers raced away for the north. He put the Northrop down and got another wave from a ground officer who held a long disc-tipped signaling stick. He was ordered to run over to the raised platform in front of the control tower. Here he saw a sign marked “Customs” and he realized that he was up against it.

At the platform Kirk got another signal ordering him to proceed along the high wire fence to a special transient hangar. He watched four men in gray-green uniforms march alongside of his ship. They wore heavy belts and carried side-arms and short cutlass-like swords.

“Now we’re in for it, Tank,” he observed over his shoulder as they ran the Northrop in.

A squad of mechanics came over, took over the plane as Kirk and Tank climbed out.

“Your papers, *Herr* Kirk!” a tall heavy man with piggish eyes said suddenly. “You have your papers and passports, yes?”

Kirk handed over his passport and the one for Tank which had been manufactured for the occasion. Beyond that, however, everything was in order. The German officials checked the papers and the numbers on the plane.

“You have been delayed, eh?” the German said.

“Slightly. Lost my way trying to find Cologne.”

“Lost your way after flying across the Atlantic? That is a little too much, *Herr* Kirk.”

“Take it or leave it,” said Kirk.

“I’m hungry. Let’s get out of here,” Tank broke in.

“I’m sorry, *Herr* Kirk, but you will have to wait a few minutes until we check you through. You will wait here, yes?”

Kirk nodded, took out his buckthorn stick, and stood off from the Northrop. The four men in uniform were not far away and Kirk knew he was being held a prisoner.

He wandered over to the Northrop, gave orders for the plane to be refueled. He had made certain that the guns were carefully hidden and was confident that the painstaking German mechanics would worry more about getting the motor checked than the mere matter of two small tanks that seemed to have no screw-cap openings.

The ape-man now moved about uncertain of his position; and Kirk stayed near him, for he sensed that Tank was gradually working himself up for a fight. He was watching the men in uniform out of the corner of his eye and his long hairy fingers were twitching.

In the interim, the Northrop was refueled and to all intents and purposes prepared for a continuation of its journey. Still no one came. But the four men in uniform never took their eyes off them. Kirk was slowly being boiled into a mad frenzy. To be held like this was one thing and to know that his death was being plotted only added to his anxiety. The fact that he was helpless and could do nothing was worse than being tied up.

He stood in the hangar mouth and listened to the aerial activity outside. Great airliners from London, Paris, Amsterdam, and Rome came in with efficient regularity. Then a loud siren screeched out and all activity halted. From the north came the concerted roar of powerful engines!

Tank immediately began to dance about with nervous gestures. The men in uniform took a new and more watchful attitude. A formation of Heinkel fighters swept around in a gaudy display, broke off in threes, and made meticulous landings on the wide concrete runway.

“I get, it,” said Kirk under his breath, as he grabbed Tank’s elbow. “Steady, Tank!”

They watched the Heinkels roll up before the high metal fence and halt in military line-up.

“They have no intention of letting us get away, this time,” Kirk muttered to himself.

They watched the smartly-dressed pilots climb out and stand before their planes. Then, before Kirk could sense what was really going on, a large black Benz sedan came squealing around the corner of the hangar and came to a stop just outside.

“Now for it,” Kirk whispered out of one corner of his mouth. “Take it easy, Tank!”

THREE men got out of the car and stared about. Two stayed in the front seat, the driver and a stocky bull-necked man in uniform. The three men came toward Kirk who nonchalantly tucked his blackthorn stick under his arm and took out a cigarette case. He selected a cork-tipped cigarette, lit it without glancing toward the men who were approaching.

“*Herr* Kirk?” the man in the fore said quietly. “I am very glad to see you.”

“You’re a damned liar,” said Kirk quietly without changing his expression. “You’re scared stiff, and you know it.”

For a moment the yellow-faced man was unable to answer. He had hardly expected this.

“You will, of course, come quietly. We are of the Gestapo—the Secret Police.”

The man was fairly tall, well dressed, almost foppish. He had a trim grayish military mustache. His eyes were close to his thin nose and they were shifty. He had a slight scar under one eye that had dragged the lower lid down off line giving him a particularly sinister appearance.

“That’s another lie! You are not the Secret Police. You are Baron von Audemars, of the Circle of Death. I’ll never forget, you, von Audemars. You killed my father—in the Berlin Zoo years ago.”

“Sure,” said Tank from one side while von Audemars stood and gasped. “I remember that guy. I was in the cage when it happened.”

The others stared at Kirk, then at Tank. They were unable to make out what was happening.

“Cage? . . . Zoo?” the narrow-faced German said, feigning that he was unable to comprehend.

“Yeah! And you, not me, should have been in that cage, von Audemars,” Tank said without changing his expression. “You were the wild animal, not me.”

Von Audemars was stunned. Tank certainly looked like an ape—but he spoke! The three Germans moved up closer, stared at Tank.

“Take it easy, Tank,” warned Kirk. “Of course, we know you, von Audemars. We know every member of the Circle of Death—you, Sir Eric Spelter, Longeman Worth, Pierre Compte, Cockosaert, and all the rest of them.”

Instantly the German sensed that it was he who was trapped, not Kirk. He tried to step back a pace and draw a gun from his pocket, but Kirk had moved like lightning.

With a quick move of his hand he flipped his burning cigarette into von Audemars’ face. The German screamed. Then Kirk drew on the handle of his blackthorn stick and out came a gleaming blade.

He allowed the sheath section to drop to his left hand. A quick swish served to knock the gun from von Audemars’ hand. Then another lightning movement and he had run von Audemars through the chest.

“That’s for the Circle of Death!” he cried.

MEANWHILE, Tank had stood still unable to understand what had happened. Then, as the two Germans behind von Audemars leaped forward, Tank grabbed one by the throat and with a quick snatch hurled him full at the other who was trying to pull a Luger out of his coat pocket.

Kirk leaped, grabbed the gun dropped by von Audemars, and began blasting away at the four Germans across the hangar who were uncertain as to whether to draw their short swords or their pistols.

They had little time to come to a decision. Kirk dropped two of them cold. Then Tank darted across the hangar floor, leaped up on the wing of the Northrop, and felled an amazed mechanic with the inertia starter handle. The ape-man then began winding the starter like a madman.

Somewhere outside boomed the three engines of a heavy Junkers plane taking off. Kirk again raised his pistol.

“Everyone stand still!” he bawled. “No one is to move!”

Then he jabbed the blade back into the blackthorn stick and backed toward the Northrop. The mechanics huddled against the wall, uncertain what was really going on. Kirk leaped for the

cockpit, dropped in, and kicked over the starter. The Cyclone opened with a roar.

Two shots now rang out from the car outside. A man in uniform was blazing away at them with a short carbine.

Kirk ducked down, released the brakes, and let the Northrop roar out of the hangar. Ahead of him, not forty yards away, stood the row of Heinkels. The pilots were scrambling into their cockpits.

“Glory! They are taking no chances,” muttered Kirk. “Three of them are in the air already.”

He kept the Northrop low to gain speed, then quickly hoiked over the fighters. A burst of fire hammered at him from somewhere above and Kirk zigzagged all over the field to get away. The three Heinkels came down at him hard, and their bullets kicked up dust off the runway below, but Kirk yanked the Northrop over into a sharp turn and kited off at right angles. Tank in the back seat danced about the cockpit, thumped on the glass cover.

“Take it easy, Tank! Take it easy! Where’s that Junkers?” Kirk yelled.

The Heinkels were now coming after him again and Kirk turned quickly, let down the gun panels, and opened fire. The first Heinkel took his initial burst full in the nose and the silver blades of the prop went flying through the air like berserk broadswords. Kirk twisted out, dived down, came up under the second, and loosed a quick-snap-shot. The Heinkel zoomed slowly, rolled over on its back, screwed over to one side, and smashed directly into the third. They went down together and crashed into a small hut at one side of the airport.

Kirk curled away, then raced after the Junkers. The big transport was heading due east, and he intended to use it for a shield in case the other Heinkels followed him.

As he raced along and finally caught the big German airliner he sighted something that brought a glow to his heart. From a short stub mast above the control cabin of the Junkers fluttered a small square white flag with a black swastika marked in the center. Kirk knew that it was an official government flag.

“It’s the Big Boy himself,” he chuckled. Then his glee died. Was he fighting the Circle of Death and the German government, too? There was no

question about it. The Junkers transport was carrying *Generaloberst* Herman Goering, Reich Minister for Air!

“Wait a minute,” Kirk cried as he steadied himself. “There’s something queer here. Goering’s escort was on the ground when I got off. These other Heinkels were in the air. They’re Circle of Death ships, not official government jobs!”

Six Heinkels above maneuvered again, and suddenly three of them dived down, their wires and struts screaming. Tank let out low-throated growls. Their Heinkel tracer cut weird low-angled designs in the sky and a crossfire streaked across the Northrop’s fin.

Kirk took a quick look fore and aft. Then with a mad disregard for the bullets, he suddenly darted under the long fuselage of the Junkers.

The Heinkel guns abruptly held their wrath; the German fighters fell back baffled.

“Come on! Shoot away! If you can pepper me without peppering your big boss, you’re better shots than I give you credit for.”

Kirk held his position doggedly, only eased back and forth gently to keep dead under the Junkers. The three Heinkels were blocked out completely. One Heinkel pilot tried a short snapshot dive, but he gave up when his tracers drew treacherous streaks around the wing-tips of the transport. Kirk let his eyes close slightly, smiled grimly.

For five or six minutes this unbelievable game of tag continued. Then from below came the real escort Heinkels, the six of them easing in with uncomfortable twists to get between the Circle of Death fighters and the Junkers. A few shots were exchanged, then the escort fighters forced the opposing formation to split up.

“They’re playing the game,” Kirk muttered. “Goering’s guys are on the up and up. Hello, now they’re trying to get me out of here.”

THE big Junkers was swinging back and forth, so Kirk took a chance and darted out. He looked up at the control pit of the Junkers, half expecting to get a heavy burst of fire from a portable machine gun. Instead he saw the uniformed arm of the copilot signaling him on.

Kirk dropped back, pulled out his radio mike, set the wave length lever to the Luft Hansa frequency, and called the Junkers.

In a moment he had raised them.

“I am staying near the transport until I am over the German border,” he said. “If I am in any way molested by German military planes, I shall take cover again beneath you.” There came a quick reply:

“The *Generaloberst* presents his compliments and promises immunity all the way to the border. We hope you will keep safely clear according to rules of the air.”

“Thank you,” answered Kirk, “and happy landings!”

With that, Coffin Kirk dropped into a position well behind the airliner.

Tank just crooned to himself, his eyes half closed, and in another hour they were screaming across the North Sea.