

The Squadron in Scarlet

By Donald E. Keyhoe Featuring "The Devildog Squadron"

For months the grim spectre of that German staffel had stalked up and down the Front, dropping its sinister messages of death upon British and French squadrons. And now at last it struck at the flying Marines. For out of the cloud mists over that Devildog drome a white-winged German plane swooped low, and from it came the threat of doom—a black coffin holding the body of a Devildog pilot.

CHAPTER I THE BLACK COFFIN STAFFEL

"CYCLONE BILL" Garrity, C.O. of the mad Marines, blew a fierce blast from his reeking pipe as he turned away from the window of the squadron office. His face was as dark as the scudding storm clouds outside, and there was a battling light in his eyes as he glared at Hick Jones, second-in-command of the Devildog squadron. "Well, he's been gone two hours—the damned young whelp!" he roared. "Wait till I lay my claws on him! 'Lucky' Lane, eh? He'll be lucky if I don't skin him and nail his carcass on the wall—just to warn the rest of this outfit that I'm getting mad."

Hick Jones, a lanky Texan, long accustomed to the wrathful explosions of Cyclone Bill, stretched his arms sidewise and indulged in a yawn. "That ornery coyote has shore got yuh on the jump," he observed.

Garrity's face assumed the color of a ripe tomato. "On the jump, huh?" he bellowed. "I'll show you who's on the jump—and him, too. I've stood for all I'll take from him, or anybody else on this drome. The crazy jackass—scooting out of here on lone patrol not five minutes after I post an order against it."

"Probably a-ridin' one of his wild hunches," ventured Hick Jones. "He shore has got plenty of 'em."

"When I put out an order, it's going to be obeyed," snapped Garrity. "Am I in command of this field or not?"

"Yuh ain't goin' to get any argument on that," said the Texan. "I'd just as soon hop in a den o'

rattlers as take over this here bunch o' lunatics, But if I was ever to be S.C.—"

"You'd lose your mind—what little there is to lose," said Garrity witheringly. He bit grimly into his pipe stem. "As if I didn't have enough trouble already! Twenty-three raving idiots that call themselves Marines, the Boche trying to get even for the Phantom Staffel affair, and Brent's wild stunt last month—"

He stopped suddenly, looking down at Hick. His expression changed.

"Three new replacements showed up this afternoon," he muttered. "Bywaters, Morse, and McGinnis—take them in hand. The others will be in tomorrow."

The languid look had gone from Hick's countenance. His eyes were narrowed and hard. He stared into space for a moment.

"I can't get if outta my head that Larry Brent an' Chub Dexter might be hangin' on somewhere," he said thoughtfully. "Nobody saw 'em get bumped—they just up an' disappeared that day."

"Queer," said Garrity shortly. "But there must have been Boche above those clouds you led the flight through. Probably they got Brent and Dexter at first crack."

Hick shook his head in a dissatisfied manner. "Then why didn't they jump us, too?"

"I don't know." Garrity seemed lost in grim thoughts. "But there's one thing certain—we've lost eight men in two weeks!"

"And nobody can swear to seein' one of 'em with a Boche on his tail," growled Hick. "I tell yuh, I don't like it. An' the gang's gettin' jumpy. I reckon—"

He ceased. From out of the gloomy skies had come a droning roar, the sound of a descending plane coming in at high speed.

"Here comes yore trouble-buster," he said with a wide grin.

CYCLONE BILL emptied his pipe with a bang and strode outside. For a moment he stood staring up at the lowering clouds. Then abruptly he caught at Hick, who had followed him.

"That's not a Spad," he exclaimed. "Listen to that engine."

"Boche," snapped Hick, his languor entirely gone. He whirled and bawled an order. The field siren shrieked. Mechanics fled for guns. Pilots poured from the mess. Machine-gun crews hastily prepared to go into action.

Out of the swirling cloud mists plunged a white blur. Dizzily, it scorched down at the drome—a white-winged Hanover with some dark emblem on its side.

From five angles, the Devildog field men poured a slashing fire up into the Boche's wings. But the white ship never swerved from its mad dive till it was two hundred feet from the ground. Then, on riddled wings, it shot up into a terrific zoom. For an instant a white face showed from the observer's pit, and even at that distance Garrity could see the distorted features, the wild glare of the man's face.

But he was not thinking of the man. His fingernails were clenched into his palms, digging cruelly into the flesh. It had come. He had seen it, that weird insignia—and G-2 was right.

Something flashed free from the bottom of the Boche ship, where it had been secured.

"Bomb!" came a yell. But Garrity knew it was no bomb. He waited tensely, with a cold something around his heart.

Plop! A black parachute opened above the falling object. The thing ceased to tumble, settled to a slow sway. And then the guns of the Devildogs suddenly fell to silence. Men stared fearfully upward, and then a hoarse mutter ran like a wave from man to man.

For the thing beneath the chute was a black coffin!

Gruesome, sinister as a dark phantom of death, it settled to the ground. For a second no one

moved, each man's eyes fixed on the grisly thing that had been dropped into their midst.

GARRITY was the first to move. He strode to the black coffin, to where it lay half-hidden by the folds of enshrouding silk. With an effort, he forced himself to pull away the collapsed parachute. The coffin lay waiting his touch, but dread held him back. Strong though he was, hard-boiled a fighter as the Marines had ever known, Cyclone Bill Garrity felt himself tremble with an icy premonition.

Then with a sudden jerk he released the fastening and threw open the coffin lid. Then he stood transfixed, staring.

"Tommy!" he whispered. "Oh, my God!"

Blindly, he turned away from the pale face that lay revealed. An anguished sob came to his lips. For it was one of his wild brood—Tommy Deane, who had been missing for a week.

"They got him, Hick," he said hoarsely. "They got him—damn their souls!"

Hick Jones stood there, all the easy good humor gone from his eyes, his lips flat and hard. "The Black Coffin Staffel," he rasped at last. "So it's been them—all this time."

Garrity stooped and closed the top of the coffin slowly, reverently. "I sent him to his death," he said. His voice was shaken. "It was my idea—"

The men were closing around, awe-stricken. Garrity ceased speaking, motioned for them to remove the gruesome thing there upon the ground. Silently, they bore it away. Garrity turned to Hick Jones, and all the sternness was gone from his face.

"If I'd seen him shot down, it wouldn't have been so bad. But to come home like this—"

"Poor devil," said Hick huskily. He looked away. Garrity saw him gulp once. Tommy Deane had been one of Hick's earlier flight mates. Then the Texan turned back, a curious expression in his eyes. "Yuh said yuh sent him to his death," he spoke in a puzzled manner.

Garrity looked around. There was no one near them. "You've heard of this Black Coffin *Jagdstaffel*? I heard you say—"

"Oh, I've heard a plenty. Mostly, I figgered it was a lotta bunk. The Frogs, go into cold shivers if yuh even yap about that mob, but they're like to be goofy, anyhow."

"The thing has been hushed up as much as possible," Garrity told him in a low voice. "If half of what I've heard is true, they're the most blood-thirsty Boche squadron on the whole Front. And they fight like fiends. They hit the Limeys first—dropped an empty coffin one day to throw a scare into the lily livers. The Limeys thought it was a joke."

"Yuh needn't tell me the rest," said Hick. "I've listened to it down at Bar-le-Duc. Every time the Krauts got one of the Limeys, they sent him back in a box."

"That's right. They wrecked the morale of a whole Wing in about three days. The British went after them with everything they had. But the Black Coffin Staffel just faded out of sight. Next week they showed up in the French sectors."

"And now it's us, huh?"

"I had warning of it," said Garrity slowly. "G.H.Q. said they were somewhere across from us—and they'd come to wipe out the Devildogs."

"Yeah?" said Hick in a grating voice. "Well, they'll go a long ways gettin' this outfit boxed up an' six feet under." Then he stiffened. "Yuh think they got Larry an' Chub an' the rest th' same way?"

"No—thank God. They'd have sent back the bodies."

"Probably some other Boche mob," muttered the Texan. "Might be they got shot down without bein' bumped. I dunno why, but I got a funny feelin' they ain't all gone west."

GARRITY did not seem to hear, for he did not answer. When he did speak, it was to revert to the Black Coffin *Jagdstaffel*.

"Get the men together, Hick," he ordered. "Tell them what we're up against. Make them realize we're in a tough spot. This is no ordinary Boche squadron. There is something strange about them. Intelligence can't find their base. No one knows who the leader is, but he must be a wizard. There's a report that his men fight for him like demons. The instant he gets in any danger, they act downright crazy—to make a pass at him is sure death."

He turned and started toward the office. Then he paused. "I'm going to Group," he said. "And I'll have something important to tell you when I get back. Meanwhile, no one leaves the field. And

keep your eyes open for anything queer. I've an idea—"

He stopped. A faint rattle had drifted down out of the clouds—the sharp sound of machine guns, then the roar of engines. In a few moments the sounds had become a furious din.

"Sounds like some bird was catchin' plenty o' hell," said Hick Jones. "I don't hear nothin' but Kraut engines."

The uproar suddenly ceased, the roar becoming a swiftly decreasing rumble. But at the same time a moaning sigh came from the clouds above the drome, a sigh that grew louder and louder until it was a shriek of wings. Nose-down, a Spad dropped out of the gray mists, spinning rapidly.

"It's Lucky Lane," exclaimed Hick. "He's gone an' run into trouble as per usual."

But no pursuing foe charged after the spinning Spad. The plane whirled down at breathless speed.

"Out of control," yelled Garrity. "He's going to crash—get the meat-wagon!"

Hick whirled to run, then stopped. For the Spad had slued out of the spin at two hundred feet and was leveling out under the touch of its Devildog pilot. Up came the nose—but not quite soon enough. The Spad hit tail-high, curved off jerkily on one wheel and then went onto its back with a resounding crash.

Silence, while the dust settled. Then, galvanized into action, everyone began to run toward the wreck. But before they could reach it, a head was poked up through a crumpled wing, a head now devoid of a helmet and atop of which blazed a thatch of fiery red hair.

"Good Lord, he's done it again," groaned Garrity, as he saw the grinning face of the pilot, unmarred save for a scratch along one cheek. "Why in the devil can't he bust a leg or something and get himself out of my way for a couple of months?"

A LITTLE breathlessly, the pilot emerged, wiggling arms and legs to ascertain their condition before advancing toward the glaring C.O.

"Too bad about the ship, sir," he reported with the manner of one to whom the loss of a twenty-thousand dollar plane was a minor incident. "But I—"

"Shut up!" bellowed Cyclone Bill, his eyes blazing. "You're through! Grounded—done—I'm going to lock you up and throw the key away."

"Yes, but—"

"Lucky Lane again, eh? You can crack a good ship all to smithereens, but you can crawl out without even a nosebleed, huh? Why in the name of heaven can't you break your neck some time?"

Lucky Lane grinned. "Give me another chance, major—maybe I will," he offered audaciously.

"You young brat! Why do you think I put out orders in this squadron? For nitwits like you to break as soon as—"

"I just got a sudden hunch, sir. I was thinking over something I saw yesterday—"

"Damn you and your hunches," howled Garrity. Then he stopped, staring at the wrecked Spad. Its wings had been riddled with bullets. An aileron had been shot to pieces, and half of the rudder was gone. "What the—" he began with a baffled snort.

"I bumped into a hot shop, all right," contributed Lucky Lane, still grinning. "I was kind of short on gas, and easing along hunting for a hole in the clouds when I saw a bunch of Boche. Funny-looking gang, too—had all-white wings, and black coffins painted on the sides."

Garrity did not speak. He gaped, his tongue for once paralyzed.

"They didn't seem to see me, and I thought here was a good chance to drop one of them and then dig into the clouds. So I picked out the leader—"

Garrity turned purple. He turned to Hick Jones. "Did you hear that? He picked out the leader!"

Hick nodded glumly. "He would."

Lucky Lane looked puzzled. "Well, it looked like a good shot. But I sure pulled a boner. First crack, the whole mob turned and started raising Cain. By Gosh, that bird must have owed them all money, or something. I never had so much lead slung at me in—"

"Oh, Lord," croaked Garrity. He threw up his hands. "One man in a million could do it—and it has to be you! You jump into the middle of the worst German mob on the Front, you write your name on a suicide ticket—and here you are with a pin-scratch on your jaw!"

Lucky Lane looked interested. His blue eyes gleamed. "Then you know this staffel, sir? I

thought maybe it was some new outfit—I never spotted that goofy insignia before."

"Take him out of here," Garrity muttered to Hick Jones. "Take him out of here before I kill him."

"Yuh heard what th' major said, kid," observed Hick. "Better come along while yore still able to use yore dawgs."

Lucky Lane looked injured. "All right, but—"

"Get out!" rasped Garrity. "Go somewhere and drink poison. I don't ever want to hear that name 'Lucky' again."

"Yes, sir," said Lucky Lane. "I don't think so much of it, either. Just because a chap uses his brain—"

Garrity choked. Hick Jones led the red-haired pilot away hastily. "Yuh better go easy, kid," he said curtly as they neared the mess. "Things ain't so good today. Tommy Deane—he just come back."

"Back—then the Boche didn't get him! Good old Tommy!"

Hick eyed him bleakly. "They got him, all right. They dropped him right here in a black coffin—just before you lit."

The grin faded from the audacious blue eyes of Lucky Lane. He straightened, and there was a different look on his face as he stared at Hick Jones.

"A black coffin—and there was a black coffin on the sides of those ships! You mean—"

"Yeah. They did it. An' I reckon they got the rest, too—though the C.O. ain't agreein' on that."

"Tommy was my hut-mate," said Lucky Lane. He gazed unseeingly into space. "And I had a chance to get even for him!"

"Maybe yore chance'll turn up again," said Hick. "That is, if the Old Man ever forgets he stuck yuh on the ground."

CHAPTER II TRACERS OF TREACHERY

"BUT I heard them, major," protested Lucky Lane. His usually audacious countenance was set and serious. "They're both spies; you better lock them up."

"You're crazy," snapped Garrity, stopping his angry pacing of the office to glare at the red-haired pilot. "This man McGinnis is just an

ordinary Leatherneck—he hasn't brains enough to be a Boche spy. As for Clark—he's just a dumb Brass Hat from Chaumont."

"I heard them talking," said Lane earnestly. "I was bent over in the cockpit of that new Bristol in the hangar, and they didn't see me. This bird McGinnis says to Clark, 'Everything is working fine. Nobody suspects a thing. Two more will go tomorrow.'"

"Well?" growled the C.O.

"That was yesterday. Today C Flight went out—on a special mission that Brass Hat doped out, didn't they?"

"What of it?"

"Two men didn't come back with the rest of the flight," said Lucky Lane triumphantly. "Rogers and Pete Maddon—both of 'em failed to get back."

"They're probably lost in this rotten weather," returned Garrity, but did not seem convinced of his own statement. "They may be down on some other field, waiting for a clear stretch."

Lucky Lane stared at him. "You never saw any Devildogs waiting around when it wasn't any worse than this, sir."

Garrity swore under his breath. "Now listen here, Sherlock," he rapped out. "I'll admit there are queer things going on when men vanish for no apparent reason. And there may be Boche around this drome—it wouldn't be the first time. But McGinnis and Clark aren't spies. They were probably talking about something else."

"I don't believe it," said Lane obstinately. "Those guys are up to something."

"Will you get out of here?" roared Garrity. Then as he saw the aggrieved look on the other man's face he added, "I know you meant to help out, Lane—but if you just keep your trap shut about what you heard and let me handle this, it'll be all right."

Lane started for the door.

"And by the way," Garrity flung after him, "you can tell Captain Jones you're to go back on the duty list beginning tomorrow morning."

Lucky Lane grinned. "Yes, sir!"

Garrity smiled oddly. "One other thing. The medico tells me you've had three small-pox vaccinations and none of them took. That right?"

Lane nodded. "I guess I'm just naturally immune," he said.

"Well, you'd better take another shot at it. The next might be O.K. And there's been some small-pox around this territory, especially up around the Front."

LANE went out. There was a puzzled look on his face. It was not like Cyclone Bill to be so solicitous of his welfare. Had the C.O. been making sport of him?

He went to his hut. Morse, his new hut-mate, looked up indolently. He was a lazy, coolly cynical fellow, but Lane had not found him bad company in the three days they had been together.

"What's up?" Morse inquired idly.

"I'm back on the flying roster," Lucky Lane told him. "I'll be hopping with you birds tomorrow."

"Must be something' special in the wind, or they wouldn't have put you back," said Morse. "This place is getting creepy. No telling who'll go next."

"You're right," muttered Lane. "The whole outfit is going goofy over it. Even the Old Man acts funny."

"How's that?" said Morse. He sat up and yawned. "Anything except the usual daily explosion?"

"He asked me if my small-pox vaccination ever took. Told me to go get another one."

Morse stared. "Didn't say anything else?"

"No, why should he? I think he was kidding me all the time."

"Maybe. Well, I guess I'll ease over to the mess, I want to eat early—there's a binge on, down at Pierre's *estaminet* tonight,"

But that night Cyclone Bill made an announcement which altered the Devildogs' plan for a binge. "No one leaves this field from now on until further orders—except on patrols," he said. "And tomorrow every pilot on this field will be ready for dawn patrol, except Captain Jones, who is going to Paris on special mission. I want every man on the line at four o'clock. I'll lead the patrol."

Lucky Lane was watching McGinnis closely. There was an almost imperceptible gleam in the man's eyes, a look that might have been one of anticipated triumph.

"I'll keep my eye on him," he said to himself.

But the next morning McGinnis was excused from the formation. Lane saw him speak to Garrity and then return to the mess, where the pilots had just warmed themselves up with draughts of steaming black coffee.

"We're on a hunt," the C.O. told them bluntly, as they gathered around him on the line, "We're looking for the outfit that dropped Tommy Deane's body on our drome—the Black Coffin *Jagdstaffel*. They've got a hidden base, that much we know. Keep your eyes peeled, and we may turn it up."

THE squadron thundered off into the gray skies. The ships fell into formation as the visibility increased, and soon they were above the Front. Lane looked about him as he saw two of the Spads move suddenly. A plane was sheering out. The pilot pointed to his motor. Lane recognized his hut-mate, Morse.

The squadron climbed steadily on. Lucky Lane turned to see if Morse had gone back. He saw no sign of his hut-mate's ship, and for a moment he thought that Morse had returned to the drome. Then he sat up stiffly, for a fleeting shape showed through the gray mass of a patchy cloud. Morse had not gone back. Nor was his engine crippled now. He was climbing steeply, behind that cloud—climbing toward the safety-man perched above the squadron.

Impulsively, Lane sheered out as Morse had done. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Garrity turn for a second and then face ahead. Cyclone Bill would have plenty to say about that later—but Lane was not thinking about that. For Morse had ripped out of that towering cloud—not at the safety-man, but straight at Garrity!

Before the safety-man could pitch into a frantic dive, Morse had rocketed through two-thirds of the distance that separated him from the Devildog leader. The Vickers on his cowl spat red and hurled their crimson tracers down at the ship at point.

Wildly, Lucky Lane whipped his Spad up to cut off the traitors fire. His guns chewed through the bottom of Morse's ship, blasting backward toward the pit. Morse's guns went dark, and he rolled violently off to the left. Lane snapped his Spad around, guns still rasping, and roled down to finish the traitor.

Then a surge of horror gripped him. For Cyclone Garrity had zoomed up and about in a lightning turn, and was driving straight in at him!

In a flash he knew what had happened. Garrity had turned a second after Morse's guns had ceased to fire, and had taken him for the traitor, instead of Morse. The safety-man might know—but there was no time for help from that quarter. For Garrity was coming in for blood!

Frantically, Lane whirled and dived for the cloud from which Morse had come. And back of him came the whole Devildog crew, with the black-hearted Morse joining in the pursuit. Bullets ripped through his wings as he slammed the Spad from side to side. The cloud loomed up before him. In a second he would be hidden in its towering gray masses.

Crash! The instrument panel shattered as a scorching torrent of slugs bit through. The rudder pounded under his feet as another burst ate into the tail. He kicked into a breathless skid as the cloud closed about him. For a second more he could see the lines of tracer stabbing into the mist. Then he was out of the skid, climbing, twisting away to the west. They would expect him to head east, thinking him a Boche, and seek a haven in Germany.

He slipped out of the cloud once, only to find himself at once in another. At 18,000 feet he leveled out and flew straight north. The cloud formations opened and he could see back and below. Far to the southeast he saw darting specks he knew were the Devildogs. A grinding bitterness surged through him. His comrades—and they were searching for him, seeking to bring him down!

Unless the safety-man had caught that swift scene, the whole squadron would think he was the guilty man. And Morse would be free to carry on, unknown and unsuspected.

LANE swore. Then his buoyant nature came to the surface. It would be easily explained. He could head across the lines, land at some Allied drome and explain to the commanding officer. Morse could be charged with the truth, grilled until he came through with an admission. And perhaps the safety-man would clear up the thing without any such roundabout action.

Lucky Lane's grin began to return. He banked around in the general direction of the Devildog drome—and then gasped in consternation.

Six Pfalzes were stealing in to cut him off!
And they lay between him and the Front!

He whirled and raced back toward Germany, hoping for a break that would enable him to duck and hide in a cloud, or outwit them in some quick maneuver. But the Pfalzes had spread out, three at his own level and climbing, the other three already above.

Streaking gray lines pierced the air beside his wing as the first Pfalz cut loose at long range. Lane flicked aside and threw a swift glance backward. They were slowly edging in, all the time forcing him deeper and deeper into Germany. In a few minutes more he would be unable to get back before his gas was gone.

He could signal a surrender—could go down and let them make him a prisoner. But Lucky Lane's eyes narrowed at the thought of that. The enemy hadn't taken any Devildogs prisoner yet—at least, none that were known. Devildogs had died. Others had come up, replaced the dead, and carried on. But there had never been one to give in!

And he was not going to be the first! He set his jaw grimly and clenched his trips. Then with a sudden swift chandelle he was up in an Immelmann, cutting out to bank onto the tail of the first startled Boche.

Spandaus flared at him from every direction. He felt the ship shake under him as their slugs cut through wings and spars. It wouldn't be long now, at this rate!

He kicked onto a darting black-crossed wing. It slipped out of his sights, then back. He tripped the Vickers, raked the Boche savagely. One down! At least he was even, though they got him the next second. He felt a fierce joy. There was a fighting chance yet, by Heaven!

Something plucked at his helmet. He felt the hot breath of death as a searing bullet cut across the cloth, just missing a stunning crease of his skull. He hurled the Spad to the right, then up and around, blasting straight into the pit of a Pfalz that swam before his guns. The Boche at the stick slumped into death, and the Pfalz went twisting down the sky.

Then they were on him like wolves, pounding, slashing, determined to rend him to bits and drop his bleeding body from the arena of the sky. He felt their vindictive fury, and knew the end was near.

Br-r-r-r-r-t-t-t-t-t! Bullets were thudding across his wing, leaping backward to his pit. In a flashing second—

But the stream of lead abruptly ceased, and a flurry of wings filled the sky. Amazed, Lucky Lane stared upward. The sky seemed filled with blood-red Spads—and the Pfalzes were fleeing desperately for the east.

Too late they fled, for the red Spads struck like furies, and each time one struck, a Pfalz went flaming down or dived off to a splintering doom.

In seconds the skies were clear. And then a startling thing occurred. Without a sign, the red Spads banked and flashed into the clouds from which they had plunged. Lucky Lane was left circling, wide-eyed, alone and hardly believing his senses.

Red Spads! But there were no red Spads on that Front—nor had he ever heard of any. They had carried no Allied markings. But they had leaped to his aid, and the Boche had turned to flee as though devils flew those blood-red ships!

CHAPTER III

THE HOUSE OF DEATH

DAZEDLY, Lane bent over his compass, to set his course for Allied lines. Then he swore in disgust. The compass had been shattered by a well-placed burst. He would have to guess his way back, and the sky was filling with clouds.

He settled beneath the billowing formations of mist and peered down to pick up some landmark that might guide him. If only he had been able to stay with those red Spads! They surely would have been heading for the lines in a short time, for this was far from the Front, and they could not cruise much farther. Off to one side he finally saw a monastery, partly surrounded by a crumbling wall. It lay near a woods, and there was a small open stretch between the wall and the winding road that led by it.

Lane looked at his map. If this wood was the one he guessed, then he was even farther in Boche

territory than he had thought. He made a quick estimation and set his course by the sun. The Spad droned on. As the minutes passed, he felt his nerves grow tense. It was an ordeal, this race against time.

He jumped as the engine began to sputter. He had finished the main tank. Hastily, he switched to the reserve. The Hispano coughed, picked up as though about to run smoothly again—and then faltered into dead silence.

Lucky Lane cursed. An empty reserve—or else a clogged valve. And he was going down in Boche territory. If he ever got his hands on his crew chief—but there was no time to waste in idle thoughts. He was forced down, but he might pick some spot that would be desolate enough to afford him chance for escape.

He glided slowly, gazing from the map to the ground. To the east there was a spot that seemed quite barren according to the map. He turned in that direction. It would take him a few miles farther from the Front, but it would make for safety.

At three thousand feet he leaned out and gazed in sudden anxiety at the ground. Straight ahead was an old Boche drome. He could see the hangars and shops clearly. It was the only mark of any size within ten miles. A highway led up to it and ended on the field. A smaller road ran by some scattered farms a mile or two away, but the whole area had a look of desolation.

He looked on his map. No Boche drome was shown there. That meant it was not in use, which was to be expected because of its distance from the Front. Once it had been a large base, he judged by the size of the field and the number of buildings. But what if there were still a few Boche there—guards, perhaps?

Lane decided it was too risky to chance a landing. He might have been seen already, but he was far enough away to land and escape into one of the many small woods. He picked out a small meadow and bumped to a landing in the rank, overgrown grass.

He climbed out and stared around him. There was not a soul in sight. A quarter of a mile away was an old peasant house. With his gun in hand, he walked toward it. Orders called for the burning of his ship, but he had another plan, and the breaking of an order was nothing new to him. If

he could reach that deserted drome, he might find a drum of gasoline that had been overlooked.

HE REACHED the bleak-looking peasant house. It was obviously abandoned. He looked around, puzzled. There were no marks of shell-fire or bombing—no sign of the ravages of war at all—and yet this house had been deserted hurriedly. He saw objects lying on the floor inside, clothing that had been dropped.

Lucky Lane went rigid. Clothing? That was not clothing! It was a cloth thrown over something like a huddled form! He advanced slowly into the room, feeling a sudden uneasiness, something that stirred his senses disagreeably. He bent over the cloth, lifted it aside. Then he backed away with a muttered exclamation. For a skeleton lay beneath that concealing cloth!

He was seized with a quick desire to be out of that house of death, with its musty odors and air of desolation. He went out into the yard and searched the dilapidated shed at the back. Here, too, were evidences of hurried abandonment. And staring about the countryside, he became filled with a weird feeling that he had been taken out of the world of war and dropped into some other world, but one that was none the less grim and sinister.

Why was this part of the country deserted? There was no answer that he could determine. He made his way on toward the drome he had seen. The path he followed showed no signs of being touched by feet in weeks, perhaps months. A tree had fallen across it at one spot. He walked around and finally came to the edge of a woods that lay adjacent to the drome.

For several minutes he stood there, straining his eyes to catch any sign of movement on the field or around the buildings. But there was none.

He kept within the shadow of the trees as long as he could, then struck across the landing area. The road lay a hundred yards to the left. He could see a signboard that had been stuck crookedly on a post, but could not read the letters at that distance.

He was within a hundred feet of the nearest hangar when he felt a shiver go down his spine. It was not the eeriness of this abandoned field in a spot far from human habitation. It was a sudden feeling that eyes were watching his every

movement, hostile eyes that were boring into him from more than one direction.

He stopped still. Had he walked into a trap? Then with a growl of disgust he strode toward the hangar.

"What the hell's the matter with me?" he demanded. "Letting this place get on my nerves—if that isn't a laugh!"

The next instant he halted, his eyes dilated as they rested on the sign that had been hastily painted on a board ten feet away—a sign that read, "*Die Pest!*"

The plague! Lane felt his blood run cold. God in Heaven, he remembered now! This was the "Small-Pox Drome." It had been stricken, and the whole area for miles around it, with a most virulent form of small-pox, and Germans had died by the scores before they could escape.

The terrified Boche had accused the French secret agents of starting that reign of terror by distributing smallpox bacilli throughout the drome and among the peasant homes. The French had vigorously denied the accusation. But regardless of the truth, the place had become one of the horror-spots of the war. It had been abandoned in a mad frenzy, the pilots fleeing in their planes—those who had not been stricken by the plague—the others struggling to escape before they became victims. And the drome had never been reclaimed. He was looking at it as the last stricken man had seen it before he died.

LANE shuddered. Did the germs of that fearful disease still linger here, or—he started. Had that been a footprint behind the door of that hangar, or were his ears deceiving him? He stared at the sign again, then set his jaw and walked firmly toward the door. But before he could reach it, the door slid silently back. Lane jumped back, his pistol raised.

But as his eyes rested on the face that appeared, he almost let the gun drop from his hand.

In the shadow that fell across the entrance, it seemed some gruesome mask of death. Glaring eyes shone fiercely from sockets deep in hideous, dark circles, as though the skin had been burned to black. And covering the face of this apparition was a mass of red splotches that struck consternation into the heart of Lucky Lane.

But if he was filled with consternation, the spectre seemed even more affected. The figure's eyes bulged as though with amazement, and his jaw fell limply open.

And then, to the horror of Lucky Lane, he burst into a wild cackle of laughter.

Lane backed away, his pistol gripped in a none too steady hand. "Get away from me!" he snarled. "Keep back there!"

The apparition gave another unearthly howl of mirth. Lucky Lane stood poised for flight. All the gasoline in the world wasn't worth the risk of catching that frightful disease.

But the spectre was speaking. And at the words which fell from his lips, Lane stood rooted to the ground in a daze. "Hick—Larry, come here, you birds! Good Lord, I'll crack a rib if I have to stand it alone another second!"

The hangar door slid back still farther. And standing there were nearly a dozen Devildogs, with Hick Jones grinning in the middle of the group.

"Look at him," shrieked the apparition, holding his sides. "Oh, my gosh, look at Lucky's face!"

"Wh-what in h-hell is this, any-way?" stammered Lucky Lane. "H-have you b-birds gone goofy?"

"It's all right, kid," said Hick Jones, grinning widely. "We wasn't expectin' comp'ny—leastwise, not one o' the gang from th' other side o' this here war."

Then he turned to the besplotched individual. "Tie a can to that yelp of yores, Pete. I seem to recall that you wasn't any too joyous when you lamped Chub in that get-up th' first time."

"Pete Madden!" exclaimed Lane wonderingly. "What in the devil—"

"Just a little lampblack and some red paint, plus my natural ability," said Pete modestly, grinning through his horrible disguise. "The idea being to throw a scare into any Krauts that might take a notion to look into this dump."

"Get inside, you birds," ordered Hick. "There ain't much chance of bein' spotted in this God-forsaken joint, but I ain't takin' any risks."

LUCKY LANE went inside, still dazed. And there, standing ready for action, were a dozen blood-red Spads!

"Holy mackerel!" said Lane. "Then you were the birds that pulled those Pfalzes off my tail."

"Well, we was sorta scoutin' around and it looked like you needed a bit of help," said Hick, grinning. Then he sobered. "But yuh shouldn't have trailedd us, kid. I don't see how yuh did it, either—"

"Trail you! Say, I never even had a look-in. But what's the big idea of all this, anyway?"

"Well, it was kinda supposed to be a secret," said Hick, while the rest of the Devildogs stood around and listened. "It was Cyclone Bill's trick in th' first place—an' he shore was peeved at yore bustin' up his chance of comin' over here."

"Me?" said Lucky Lane inelegantly. "What are you driving at?"

The Old Man was all set to spring a little kidnappin' stunt, with him as the guy to be carried off—so he could hop over here an' run' things. But yore gettin' wise to McGinnis an' Clark stuck a monkey wrench in th' works. The Old Man was scairt you'd pipe up an' spill th' beans. So he sent me instead."

"Then all this disappearance stuff has been the bunk," muttered Lucky Lane. "You birds were beating it off here and Garrity was pretending you were lost."

Hick nodded languidly. "That's it. But it ain't no bunk that we're in a tough spot if the Boche ever get wise. The boys have been pullin' some wild stuff with these red crates—an' they got the High Command sorta on their ear, I guess. The Old Man figgered that if there was a whole Marine flight to drop out o' sight all at once, it'd look kinda funny, so he doped out this here vanishin' act. The ships were already here—a couple o' G-2 guys have been ferryin' 'em over at nights, ever since the docs okayed the joint."

"You're sure there isn't any danger of the plague, then?" said Lucky Lane.

"Not accordin' to the medicos. They fumigated th' hangars an' shops. We ain't touchin' nothin' we don't have to—an' we're all vaccinated, anyhow. It's safe enough, unless some smart Heinie starts a dopin' things out."

"But what's the idea of the whole thing?"

Hick Jones sobered, and there was a reflection of his emotion on the faces of the others.

"First, it was to turn up this here Black Coffin mob. They was out to get us—an' Cyclone Bill

says we might as well beat 'em to it. But after what happened to Tommy—"

A mutter ran around the Devildogs.

"How did they get him?" Lane inquired.

"We don't know." It was Larry Brent who answered, his lean face strained and hard as he spoke of Tommy Deane. "Tommy was to contact a French agent in a field fifty kilometers from here. Of course it was after dark. Our engines are pretty well muffled, and the stacks long enough and masked so they don't let out much flare, so we figured it was safe enough. But he never came back that night. We went over next morning. There wasn't any sign of him or his ship—but when the next man came over to join us, he brought the news."

"We'll get that bunch of killers yet," growled Chubby Dexter. "They're holed up pretty well, all right. But they'll make a bust, and we'll blow them to hell and gone!"

HICK JONES looked thoughtfully at Lucky Lane. "What happened to yuh, if yuh didn't trail us?" he demanded. Lane explained. Hick nodded. "I kinda thought that Morse bird wasn't so hot, but I never figgered him for a Kraut. Don't worry about that there mix-up. I'm sendin' a message to the Old Man tonight, an' I'll wise him up. He'll grab that bird an' make him squeal. But say, I plumb forgot—yore vaccinations didn't click. Can't stay here, leastwise not longer than tonight. Won't be safe to leave till then, anyhow."

Lucky Lane's face fell. "I'll take the risk," he said. "I'd rather stick here. It's dead as the devil back on the dome."

Hick shook his head. "No soap, kid. I ain't takin' the chance. Yuh got to go back, but I'll fix it so yuh won't have to go to the field till the Old Man's got the right dope. There's a guy comin' here tonight to be taken across th' lines—G.H.Q., stuff, an' I guess it's important, too. We got a two-seater back here for that job—this dump is a reg'lar contact point for spies goin' back an' forth now. When he shows up, I'll give yuh the job of takin' him over. Stay at the Chaumont field till you get a high-sign from Cyclone Bill."

Lane nodded, a bit disconsolately. "Just my luck to drop in on a good party and get booted right out. This place is perfect."

"It shore is that," admitted Hick. "The Krauts didn't stop for much when th' plague hit 'em. We got all th' gas an' supplies we want—plenty o' beer an' Schnapps, too, if we dared touch th' stuff. Of course, me—I'm not one as ever uses it, but—"

He paused, grinning. "Th' only danger is gettin' in an' out with th' ships," he went on more seriously. "Course we keep our eyes peeled, an' we try to do most of our stuff between sunset an' around dawn. But if we get a special call, we gotta go no matter what th' time is."

"How can anybody call you?" asked Lane, startled. "You don't dare use a radio?"

"Not hardly. No, we got a better system. Th' groundwire communication set an' switchboard is still O.K. A G-2 bird in an ammo dump down the line plugged through one night on a test, an' it worked. We got connections with every drome up an' down th' Front—an' a lot of places besides. Some of 'em has got our agents in somewherese—an' if they spot somethin' good, they sneak a call through when they can. The signal's a code word, buzzed on th' switchboard: *Jawohl*."

"But that's German—it means 'yes, indeed.'"

"Shore, I know that. If one of our agents gets caught sendin' it, he can say he was buzzin' some *Kamerad* down th' line."

"It's only used in emergency," said Larry Brent. "I'm in favor of cutting it out—we'll wake up sometime and find half of the Prussian Guard on this drome."

"They couldn't drag 'em here by th' pants," said Hick. "They couldn't get out o' here fast enough when the plague hit—old Bill Kaiser himself couldn't get 'em back."

CHAPTER IV THE MAN CALLED J-39

THE rest of the day passed rapidly. At midnight Lane glanced at his watch and then looked questioningly at Hick Jones, who was working over a map in the tightly curtained office.

"When is that agent going to show up?" he demanded.

"Should have been here afore now," said Hick. "Hope he ain't run into trouble. Kinda makes yuh uneasy, this here spy business. We're a wearin' Marine uniforms, but it's a hundred-to-one shot

that if the Boche ever got us, the whole outfit'd be lined up against a wall."

An hour passed, then another. Lucky was dozing fitfully on an improvised couch, while Hick nodded in his chair, when there came a whisper at the door.

Hick jerked awake, and Lucky sat upright, instinctively reaching for his pistol. Hick picked up the compact acetylene lantern that lit the room and went to the door.

"He's here, Hick," said Chubby Dexter's somewhat tired voice. "Seems to be O.K."

Hick opened the door. A man stood there, a black felt hat pulled low over his face, which was heavily bearded in the French style.

"High soars the eagle," the agent said rapidly, in English. His sharp eyes shifted from Hick to Lucky Lane.

"May it never fall," said Hick, his eyes nonetheless sharp, and his hand hovering close to his gun.

"Number of the day, M and ten. Identity, J-39."

Hick relaxed his tenseness. "O.K.," he said laconically. "Here's the dope I was told to give yuh."

J-39 stretched his hand toward the map and the data clipped to it, but Hick shook his head.

"Not that way. There ain't any papers goin' outa here till I get orders for 'em. Yuh'll have to put that stuff in yore head, like th' rest of 'em been doin'."

"Very well," said J-39 curtly. He looked around the office and gave a little grimace. "An eery spot," he muttered. "I hope your doctors know what they are doing. It was a hell-hole—"

"Yeah, I know all that," said Hick. "Go on with yore readin' cause I ain't aimin' to stay up all night. We got a little party we aim to throw right about dawn—"

He checked himself abruptly. J-39 looked curious, then shrugged.

"All of Germany is talking about the Red Scourge," he said crisply. "Already they have a name for you and your men."

"I reckon they got several names that wouldn't sound right nice in a parlor," said Hick. "But they'll be thinkin' up some new ones, unless we find this here Black Coffin Staffel sorta sudden—cause we're stickin' till we do."

The bearded man shivered. "No one seems to know the secret of that strange squadron. I have tried to learn it, but men seem afraid to talk when you mention that name."

He bent over the map and documents. Lucky Lane began to prepare himself for the flight back across the lines. But it was almost three-thirty when the spy at last stated he was ready to go. Lucky went out into the hangar. Two of the Devildogs were waiting beside a two-seater Bristol. Lucky took the pilot's pit. The prop was jerked through, and the muffled engine throbbed into eager life.

THE sky was beginning to lighten as J-39 appeared.

"Ready?" snapped Lucky Lane, for the lack of sleep had been trying, and his nerves were beginning to go taut.

"I am ready," said the spy briefly. He climbed in. Lucky taxied out and carefully took off down the "Small-Pox Drome." They climbed in wide circles until Lucky Lane was sure he had enough altitude to cross without his point of take-off being suspected by any Boche that happened to be listening. Then he settled down to a long, steady climb on the course for Chaumont.

Drowsiness stole over him. His head dropped, and he had to shake himself to keep awake. His head was drooping again when he felt a sharp prod against his back. He turned irritably—and found himself staring into the muzzle of a Luger automatic.

J-39 smiled mirthlessly across the top of the gun, while with his other hand he eased the rear-cockpit throttle back to idling.

"Put your hands outside the plane, my friend," he said with a hint of mockery in his voice. "Don't move them unless you wish to die very suddenly."

Lane felt the spy take the stick and rudder. The Bristol began to swing back toward Germany. Lucky Lane felt a wave of fury sweep through him. This smiling devil was a spy, all right—but he was in the service of *der Vaterland*. Somehow, he managed to discover the identity of the real spy and take his place. And now they were headed for some Boche drome, most likely—to send a flock of greedy vultures after the

hidden Devildogs. Hick and the rest would be caught like rats.

He clenched his fists fiercely. At the movement of his hands, the Luger was again jammed into his back, and the engine idled to permit J-39's menacing voice to speak.

"One more jump like that, and you will jump into eternity. Keep your hands stretched out straight. We are going down—but do not think I cannot handle this plane and a gun at one and the same time."

Lane knew he meant it, knew that the spy would kill him without a second's hesitation. But his last chance would be gone the second they touched ground and Heinies took him over. He stared around helplessly, then started as something flared close to his head.

A rocket flickered out and burst. Lane gazed down and surveyed the ground with puzzled eyes. This was no drome. It was the old monastery he had seen the day before, with the crumbling wall and the break that lay by the longer structure.

But a rocket was sizzling up from the monastery garden, and shapes were moving upon the ground—shapes that came from that long, rambling structure, out through the gap in the wall. Shapes that seemed to emerge from the shadows of the wood nearby—white-winged planes that darted across the tiny field beside the monastery and sped upward with incredible softness.

Lucky Lane gazed at them with horrified eyes. Where had he seen those ships before? The nearest one banked as it swept up to join the spy. With an oath he saw the grim symbol on its' side—the sign of the Black Coffin *Jagdstaffel*.

Forgetting caution, he twisted his head about and glared at the grinning spy. J-39 smiled at him, gloating as he saw the emotions mirrored on Lane's tortured face. As though treating himself to a rare morsel of satisfaction, he slipped the throttle again and spoke.

"I see you understand, *Herr Teufelhund!* Yes—it is the Black Coffin *Jagdstaffel*, but you will never live to betray its hiding place. You will not even live to see them tear your *Teufelhund Staffel* to bits. For I do not trust you—"

He raised the Luger and grinned cruelly down the muzzle. Lucky Lane closed his eyes as though in prayer. Then with a desperate effort he kicked

with all his might at the left side of the rudder bar under his feet.

The Bristol leaped sidewise as though it had been catapulted. The roar of the Luger was an instant response, but the bullet crashed into the wing as the spy's aim was thrown off in the violent skid of the ship. Lane's fist drove in like a sledgehammer as J-39 raised the gun to fire again. The Luger went whirling to the bottom of the pit. Lane's crashing fists pounded madly into the spy's face, while the Bristol leaped and plunged unguided by either man.

Furiously, J-39 fought back to save himself. His ungloved hands tore at Lane's face, gouged at the Devildog's eyes. Blood streamed down Lane's face. He spat it from his mouth with a curse and put all his force behind one last terrific blow. J-39 collapsed, and Lucky Lane turned with shaking hands to grip the stick.

AND as he turned, his eyes beheld a sight that made his heart sink. On both sides, and at his back, raced the ships of the Black Coffin Staffel. And closing in beside him, under the touch of an expert hand, came the ship of the unknown leader. A white Fokker, bearing the grisly sign of the *jagdstaffel*, and surmounted upon that black coffin, the face of a leering skull. Black and white streamers flew from the struts, and from the helmet of the pilot himself. A gaunt, yellow face glared down from the white Fokker's pit, to where the spy lay slumped. Baffled rage showed in a furious snarl on the Boche's face as he realized what had occurred. His eyes shifted to Lane's pale face, and there was murder in their depths. He pointed down with a fierce gesture.

For answer, Lucky Lane kicked around in a savage bank and tripped the guns before him. The white Fokker zoomed like a flash, and as it went, the hand of the yellow-faced pilot lifted up in frantic signal.

As though the leap of the Bristol toward the Fokker's tail had been a signal in itself, the Black Coffin horde drove in toward the Allied ship. And as they came, Lucky Lane saw the faces that showed above the pits.

He went rigid as he saw them. Animal faces they were—features of ferocity and tigerish fury. With bared teeth they came at him, like animals about to strike and slash with ripping fangs. Not a

trace of human feeling showed in a single face he saw.

With a cry, he drove into the midst of that swarming mob, guns flaming as he came. He was going down! He was finished. But he was going down with guns blazing!

With a crash something struck his tail, and he felt the Bristol whip. A Black Coffin ship came before him as he whirled. He held fiercely to his trips and saw one lusting German die. He was falling already. They had shot off the tail of the Bristol—but they were spinning before his sights as he went down on that dance of doom.

One more! He saw the black coffin insignia on its, side crumple as the flashing Vickers raked through in the spin. The pilot froze into a diabolical glare of hate, his body filled with slugs.

Then the air was filled with screaming lead and steel, as the Spandaus screeched their wicked blasts into the falling ship. He yelled and he mocked them as he went. Mad killers—they knew he was done, but they followed him down like jackals, to tear their prey.

The earth leaped up. With a last tremendous whirl, the spinning Bristol tore through the outflung branches of a great tree, slued sidewise and struck. A deafening roar filled the ears of Lucky Lane; a blinding pain came through his eyes as something hit squarely against the side of his head. Then the roar of the crashing plane and the din of clattering Spandaus slipped into merciful darkness.

CHAPTER V WHITE POWDER

LUCKY LANE never knew exactly when he awoke. He seemed to have been conscious for hours, listening to the dull hum of voices, though his eyes had not opened. He was lying on a bed, he realized. Somehow, it seemed he had been there before. Or perhaps it had been in a moment of delirium.

"Yes, I have saved him," he heard a deep voice say close by his bed. "For the Fatherland."

There was a harsh laugh in another voice, at this. "For the Fatherland—that is good, *Herr Doktor*. He is for the Fatherland to use—but not as you might think."

"It is no matter," came the voice of the *Doktor*. "Why you should wish a blind man saved, I do not know nor care. He will live. He might even see again, if the pressure were removed from his brain. An expert, *Herr Muller*, perhaps—"

Lucky Lane lay very still. For a moment he had not understood. Then it came like a frightful nightmare.

Blind! That terrific pain in his eyes at the instant of the crash! That was it—oh, God why hadn't he been killed, instead of living on like this?

But he forced that tide of horror back. He would live. The German surgeon had said that. And there was hope—

"Your eyes are open, *Schweinhund*," rasped the harsh voice suddenly. "So I know you are not asleep, this time."

Lane lay without moving, but something inside of him went cold. His eyes were open! But only a vast darkness showed in his consciousness. Blind—and he had been an eagle flying into the sun!

"Listen to me," said the harsh voice. "You are blind. That you must already know. You are lucky you are not dead."

Lucky! Lucky! He was lucky—that was it. Lucky Lane! God in Heaven, what mockery it was now!

"You have one chance for life. Perhaps, sometime, your eyesight back. Tell me where your damned staffel is hiding."

So they did not know! He had cheated them!

"Smile swine!" snarled the other man. "Yes, you have saved them—but not for long. We will find them, sooner or later, and they will pay. You thought it clever to create the Red Scourge bit by bit, to make it look as though your accursed *Teufelhund Staffel* were still across the lines. Bah! Our agents knew or guessed it, long ago. But I waste time. Will you tell, or do you choose to die?"

"Go ahead and kill me," rasped Lucky Lane. "I'm blind, anyway. What the devil good is there in staying on?"

The German swore viciously. Lane heard him give an order to men who had evidently been standing silently nearby. He was hauled to his feet. He felt himself being lifted, half-dragged, out

of the room and into the open air. He could feel the warmth of the sun on his face.

"Stand him against the wall," snarled the one in command.

LANE felt the hard brick surface at his back. It had come swiftly. Well, it was better than to go on in the dark. But he felt a dryness in his mouth. Life had been sweet. And he was still young.

"Go ahead," he muttered. "Get it over."

There was a low conversation. Then a long silence. He felt them looking at him. Waiting for him to break. That was it. He grinned mockingly.

"You see, von Baden," whispered a quiet voice. "He is not the type. You will not frighten him like this."

Von Baden—that was the man with the harsh voice, then. Lane heard him grate out an order. There was a shuffle of feet, the click of rifles on stone. Then, "Ready," came the curt command.

Lucky Lane stiffened himself. His lips twisted into a faint smile. Lucky! Well, why not? Many pilots went down in flames—went through hell—

"Aim!"

He could hear the nervous breathing of the men in the firing squad. Again a wait that seemed an eternity. Low whispers. Von Baden's voice again. He jumped.

"Are you ready to tell, *Schwein*?"

"Go to hell," said Lucky Lane.

"Aim!" screamed von Baden. There was passion in his voice. Lane drew a long breath. Perspiration stood on his forehead. Why in God's name didn't he—

"Fire!"

Crash! The volley came like a mighty thunder. Lucky Lane's heart seemed to stand still. He was going to die!

But he was still standing. And von Baden was cursing foully at the failure of his plan. Then Lucky Lane understood, and knowing it, also knew the cruel depths of this man's being. For it had been a trick—a trick to break him. But he had not broken.

"You have failed," said someone impassively. "Now you will listen to my plan. Perhaps longer—but as sure as the sun,"

There was a queer foreign note in the voice of this new speaker. But Lucky Lane was far beyond analyzing voices. The ordeal of the mock

execution had almost unnerved him. He felt himself grow limp as rough hands carried him back into the building.

Hours later, it seemed, he heard that odd foreign voice once more. Something touched his mouth, and he felt a bitter powder upon his tongue.

He gulped. The powder burned the passages of his throat as it went down, sticking to the membranes. Then he heard von Baden's gloating laugh.

"Leave me alone with him, Li Foy!" he commanded.

"Be not too long," warned Li Foy. "Remember, it is close to the hour. Once before you forgot. I will not be responsible if you disobey my warning again. They will turn like the cobra against you—"

"Leave me alone with this *verdammt Teufelhund*," snarled von Baden.

LANE heard a door close softly. Then von Baden's sneering tones came harshly to his ear. "You chose to die rather than tell what I asked. But there are things worse than death, and you will learn it within a short time. You did not guess, but that powder you have swallowed is the secret of the *jagdstaffel* you and your stupid comrades have tried to destroy."

Lucky Lane listened, his heart beating faster. What new deviltry was back of this?

"You saw their faces—the faces of my men, before they shot you down," said von Baden tensely. "Perhaps you guessed?"

"I don't know what you're driving at," rapped Lane.

"Your courage is coming back, *hein*? But it will not be the kind of courage you ever knew before. It will be something wild, a terrified recklessness—and a strange desire to kill. To see blood run, to see men die, to do murder!"

Von Baden laughed savagely. "This powder you took—it is one only Li Foy and I know. A derivative of hashish, heroin and an opiate only the *verfluchte* yellow rascal himself knows. But no matter—he is here to prepare it when it is needed. And when once you have tasted of its power, you can never break the spell. You must have it, your body and heart and soul will scream out for it in agony, till you would murder and burn

and make the streets run red with blood to get one tiny respite from the torture of it all!"

Lucky Lane was leaning forward. There was a grim horror in his heart, and his body was trembling. For this was the truth at last! It was indeed the secret of the Black Coffin *Jagdstaffel*. Fed on this powerful drug, von Baden's pilots would easily have been led into a state where they would obey his slightest command, rather than lose the drug that had sapped their minds and souls.

And it was the answer to their demonic ferocity of attack. Under the spell of the drug, they would be fiercer than the tigers of the jungle.

"Now you know—you believe!" cried von Baden. "I see it in your face—almost it shows in your dead, blind eyes!"

Something snapped within Lucky Lane. He flew from his chair like a beast of prey, his hands clawing like talons for the throat of the monster before him. He felt von Baden's throat in his clutch. In sudden rage, he tightened his fingers till they sank deeply into the flesh.

Von Baden writhed in his grasp. He gave a frenzied lurch. Then something struck violently against Lane's head, and he fell onto the floor.

As in a dream, he heard the torrent of blasphemy pouring from the German's lips. Not even the racking pain of the blow meant anything to his wildly elated mind. For with the crash of that hard object against his skull, there had come the same gripping pain across his eyes which had come at the time of his impact with the ground. And like a lifting shadow, the curse of his blindness began to go. It was not more than a dull glow at first, but as the seconds passed, he saw the outlines of the room, the floor on which he lay, and the figure of the man who had struck him down.

But he lay without a sign, staring into space, while von Baden raved on.

"For that, you will go through a thousand hells! No man has ever before laid hands on me!"

He stood over Lucky Lane and kicked savagely, brutally at him. And still Lane gave no sign, for he knew he was not ready for that last moment when he would win or lose everything. He bent his head and gritted his teeth in rage as the Prussian's heavy boot thudded into his ribs.

Then von Baden abruptly whirled to the side of the room. A huge panel slid open at his touch and a closet was revealed. Inside was a cabinet which he unlocked hastily. He took out a square-shaped jar of white powder, muttering to himself, glancing now and then over his shoulder at the man upon the floor.

Suddenly he stopped. From somewhere outside the room had come a shrill scream, instantly followed by a veritable bedlam. The sound was hideous, and Lucky Lane shivered. Von Baden shot a nervous look at the door. Then he bent over the bottle once more.

Lucky Lane fixed his eyes on the pistol in the holster at von Baden's waist. Cautiously, he got to his feet. Before the Prussian could whirl, he was on him, and the Luger was in his grasp. Von Baden's yellow face went to the color of old parchment.

"Lieber Gott!" he whispered. "You have tricked me—you are not blind at all!"

CHAPTER VI RED DEVILDOGS

FROM the direction of the door came a clicking sound. Lucky Lane backed away from von Baden, the pistol held toward the German's heart. He threw a swift look at the door. Through a tiny aperture he saw the face of a frightened Oriental. Before he could move or jerk the gun around, the door slammed and the Chinaman was gone.

"He will give the alarm," snarled von Baden. "You will be killed."

"I won't go alone, you can bet on that," rasped Lucky Lane. All the easy audacity of his nature had turned into harsh steel and hate. Was this an effect of the drug—or only the ordeal of his past few days?

"Lie down on the floor!" he flung at von Baden.

One look at his white face, strained and grim, and the Prussian did as he was bid. Lucky Lane reached for the Bunsen burner tank in the closet laboratory. He spun the valve, struck a match. A blue flame hissed out, began to eat through the wood. Lane picked up the tube, touched it to the curtained windows, to the paper that lay in a litter

beside von Baden's desk. The dry wood of the closet burned like tinder.

With a crash, the main door of the room sprang open. A man leaped inside. Lucky Lane whirled the pistol. Then he gave an amazed exclamation.

It was Cyclone Bill Garrity! Garrity, dressed in the uniform of a German officer! Lucky Lane almost tripped backward over the Prussian on the floor.

"Garrity!" he yelped. "Good God—what are you doing here?"

"You can see again!" cried Garrity. "Hell's bells, what a break that is!"

"But I don't—"

"No time to tell much now. I got the dope on Morse, took his agent identifications and got over to Spincourt. Took me two days to follow a lead to this place. Von Baden thought I was Morse. You were unconscious—blind, they said."

"I was—this Kraut knocked me straight again."

"We've got to get out," whispered Garrity. "I just found the communication outlet on this place and flashed a code to Hick and the gang. They'll be on this place like wildcats in ten minutes or less."

Again, the maddened screaming of the Black Coffin Staffel pilots rent the air. This time it had a new note, and it was surging closer every second, coming toward the room Lane had set afire.

"Li Foy!" cried Lane. "I forgot him—he's turned them loose on us!"

Von Baden struggled to his knees from the floor, his eyes dilated in terror. "Let me go," he shrieked. "They will kill me—they will kill all of us unless they get the drug."

Lucky Lane pointed into the burning closet. The laboratory was gone. The flames were eating slowly out into the room. Von Baden turned a sickly gray. With a sudden leap, he sprang into the middle of the flaming closet. Then, too late, Lane saw that a door opened on the other side. The Prussian was gone before he could fire a shot.

"After him," roared Garrity. "It's the only safe way out of here now."

He leaped through the crackling flames. Lane held his breath. It was only a short jump, but his body was still weak.

"Here!" shouted Garrity. He reached out two powerful arms and seized the younger man in a viselike grip as Lane jumped through. "Down

these steps—they lead out into the place where they've got the planes."

THE roar of a Mercedes engine filled the chamber as they emerged into a partially roofed garden. Packed close together were the white-winged ships of the Black Coffin Staffel. A burly mechanic whirled around as they appeared. Garrity fired and the man crumpled to the ground.

Von Baden's ship was streaking down, through the narrow gap in the wall. Garrity sprang to the propeller of the nearest ship as Lucky Lane reached the pit. The engine roared.

"Get going!" roared Garrity, "I'll be all right."

But Lane had heard the hideous uproar of the drug-starved Boches left behind in the old monastery. He twisted about in his seat and saw them pour from the side entrance, the terrified Li Foy not ten yards ahead of them.

As he watched, Li Foy stumbled and fell. The pack was on him like hungry wolves. Sick at what he saw, Lane rammed the throttle open and swept out onto the field as Garrity's hastily chosen ship thundered through the gap.

After them came the Black Coffin *Jagdstaffel*, a winged mob of soulless men, following the leader who had betrayed them. Lane zoomed up after Garrity, banking off to the west as he flew. A shadow suddenly crossed his pit. He tensed. Down came von Baden. But not at the two Devildogs. Straight at the first of the climbing mob he hurled that flashing white lightning, bolt. A Black Coffin ship went pitching back in flames, to strike in the midst of the zooming mass. Von Baden struck again, and a second drug-crazed man went to his doom, at the hands of the man who had held his soul in bondage.

Then the Black Coffin Staffel was in the air—except for the burning wreckage where von Baden's victims lay. Von Baden turned to flee, hurtling off into the east.

Abruptly he turned. A red streak had flashed down from the sun. Red Spads—the Devildogs, from the Small-Pox Drome! Caught in a trap, von Baden banked toward the only way that was left. Spandaus burning the air before him, he roared toward the space where Garrity and Lucky Lane were circling in a climb.

Lane saw his face just once. It was a yellow mask of horror. Von Baden had seen his doom—

had looked into the eyes of death. Lane could see his coward lips moving in a shriek of fear that the roaring engine drowned.

Grimly, Lane met the Prussian's charge. His Spandaus probed up the Boche's wing in one wild leap of smoke and flame. From above, Garrity's guns drove in a concentrated cone of steel. Von Baden half-rose in his seat. The white Fokker pivoted slowly, and then crashed headlong into the first of the Black Coffin Staffel.

Von Baden was gone—taking with him one more of the wretched men he had bent to his will. The Black Coffin Staffel milled frenziedly above the streamered ship as it plunged to earth. Then the red-hot guns of the diving Devildogs took their eager toll.

Garrity had signaled Lane to follow as von Baden fell away to his death. The huge figure of the Devildog leader was unmistakable in the pit of the Fokker as he stood up, waving a fierce signal to the zooming ships, that charged up after them. The Red Scourge planes ceased firing. Up they came, closing in beside Garrity and Lucky Lane. Westward they coursed, while behind them the flames of the burning monastery mounted high.

"THIS here Red Scourge business is all right, I reckon," said Hick Jones. "But I ain't pinin' for any more right off." He looked across the office at Cyclone Garrity.

"What?" grunted Garrity. He had an absent look. "Say, where in the devil is Lane? He's due over here—"

A sudden violent crash from somewhere outside the office interrupted him.

"Sounds like him now," grinned Hick. He peered out of the window. "It shore is," he said. "Look at that motorcycle. It'll never be of no use any more."

Garrity sighed. As the door opened, he looked up to observe the smiling countenance of Lucky Lane.

"Do you realize you're supposed to be decorated this afternoon?" demanded Garrity. "Look at those breeches—"

"That idiot with the field tractor—" said Lucky Lane. Then he paused, grinning. "Say, I just made a discovery. I've been pretty well-named, after all."

"You're lucky," grudgingly admitted the S.C.
"But—"

"I don't mean that. My first name's Ted—
Theodore, for legal use." He edged toward the
door. "Look it up in the back of the dictionary
some time."

Five minutes later Hick Jones gaped across a
dictionary at Cyclone Bill Garrity.

"I ain't got th' heart to tell huh," he said.
"Here, take a look for yoreself."

Grimly, Garrity looked down the page. His big
finger stopped at the name, "Theodore." Then his
eyes bulged.

"Theodore," he read. "Meaning 'Gift of God'."

And the orderly, passing the door at that
moment, was surprised to hear a deep groan from
the interior of the Devildog Squadron office.