



BAT TRAP

by LESTER DENT

They were fighting hounds from Devil's Island and no man could tame them, but that was before a half-pint major named Hercules blasted them through the sky-trail that had no return.

HE WAS pint size, this Yank buzzard. His ears were tufts of gristle. Somebody had once broken his nose. There was long hair on his wrists and the tendons on the backs of his knotty hands stood out like twisted ropes. His face was something to scare babies with. But just now an infectious grin cracked it from ear to ear.

"Hy'ah, you old bar fly!" he hailed the smiling French officer behind the desk, lifting a squeaky voice above the Paris street sounds which came through the open window. "What's the idea of dragging me over here with a hurry-up call before I more'n get back in town?"

"Ah! Zee leetle gorilla is come back from Ireland!" chuckled the Frenchman. "The Irish, they have not pull out your tail feathers after all, *non?*"

"*Non* is right!" retorted the midget flyer. He planted himself in front of the desk. "I got some feathers myself. Picked me a whole chicken, in fact."

"Cheeken? I do not undairstan'! But *mon Dieu!* Three generals and one captain wait for you inside with very long faces."

If it was possible, the grin on the runt's face stretched wider.

"They're ready to hand me another lemon, eh?" he hazarded. "Let 'em wait. I wanta wise you up on the chicken business, Frenchie. Lookit!"

The Frenchman eyed the picture which was thrust into his hands. He blew out a low whistle.

"Cheeken, eh?" he asked. "She look to me like damn prettee *mam'selle.*"

"You're damn right. She's an Irish tulip. She's from a fighting family way back. Her old granddaddy's a Sinn Feiner. The old hellion hates the British like poison and thinks the Boche ought to win this fracas. And the gal thinks just the opposite. She's got a brother who's a pilot, Weldon Sullivan, in the *Groupe de Chasse 71*. They're the fightin'est——"

The Frenchman's eyebrows jerked sharply into two

inverted Vs. The little buzzard broke his recitation off sharp.

“What’s wrong with the eyebrows?” he asked.

“Leetle gorilla, I think you are soon to hear more of this *Groupe de Chasse 71*.”

“What d’you mean by that?”

The Frenchman shrugged and spread his hands.

“You had best go inside, *mon brave*.”

As the Yank entered the door, an American general rose hastily from his chair. He was a big man, solid and grim-looking, a warrior.

“Glad to see you!” he greeted heartily.

“Thank you, General Daly,” said the little buzzard.

Two other generals, one English, of the R.F.C., and one French, of the *Avions de Chasse*, came to their feet. A French captain of the *Avions de Chasse*, a great giant of a man, so swathed in bandages that he resembled a mummy, smiled and remained seated.

“Gentlemen!” General Daly introduced the undersized flyer. “This is Major Hercules Gade, the man for whom we have been waiting.”

“Major?” puzzled little Herk Gade, and eyed the uniform of a captain, A.E.F., air service, which he wore. “Since when?”

“To-day, thanks to General Gordon-Wells,” explained Daly.

“In return for your services in correcting the trouble at our naval air base in Ireland,” offered the Englishman.

“The devil!” exclaimed Herk Gade. “I mean—thanks. Thanks a lot. But that didn’t amount to much. A couple of officers in charge of the base were riding the peelots, that was all. I had a swell time up there.”

General Daly turned to the two Frenchmen.

“General André Morneau,” he introduced. “And Captain Tardieu Laval, recently in command of the *Groupe de Chasse 71*.”

“THIS is the man you need,” General Daly continued, indicating Herk Gade. “He is the original trouble buster. His efficiency along those lines is so startling that we have just loaned him to the British with most gratifying results. He can speak twenty or so languages and can whip his weight in bobcats with a few rattlesnakes thrown in. He can fly anything. At times I have believed he had only to spread his arms to take off. He has been credited with shooting down seventeen enemy planes and would unquestionably be America’s leading ace, if we had not put him to cracking our tough nuts.”

“You come highly recommended, Major Gade,”

smiled the French general, speaking excellent English.

Little Herk Gade was not afflicted with modesty.

“Oh, I must be good,” he admitted, and his grin was so contagious the serious-faced Frenchman laughed.

“You will need that goodness—and toughness as well—if what Captain Laval tells me is any indication of the difficulties of the problem we wish you to undertake. Captain Laval is the fifth commanding officer this *Groupe de Chasse 71* has had. The others gave up, but Captain Laval remained on the job until he was no longer able to walk.”

Herk Gade studied the bandaged Captain Laval, a quizzical expression on his ugly little face. The captain was a big man, and he looked as hard as brass.

“A buzzard in this *Groupe de Chasse 71* did that to you?” he asked.

“Not one—several of them, I think,” said Captain Laval with a faint smile. “They were masked, and I could not identify them. And things moved so briskly, I am not even sure of their number. Perhaps about six. They are tough *enfants*, those.”

“I will explain the situation,” offered General Morneau. “First, it is necessary that you know the type of men who make up a part of this *Groupe de Chasse 71*. They are former convicts.”

“Ex-jailbirds?” exclaimed Herk Gade.

“Exactly. No doubt you know that prisoners from our foreign penal colonies, Devils Island, for example, were allowed to enlist in the French army with the understanding that if their war records warranted it, they would be pardoned at the cessation of hostilities. Seven of these happened to have had flying experience before their conviction, so somewhat reluctantly, we permitted them to enter the *Avions de Chasse*. They were grouped together, that they might be more easily watched, and were assigned to *Groupe de Chasse 71*. They have proven to be wonderful fighters.”

“Then what’s the trouble?” Herk asked curiously.

“Discipline and, lately, something more serious. After these men had built up excellent war records, they began to lose their fear of being returned to penal servitude. One of the seven, Fritz Heinke by name, a man born in Germany, was lost over the lines some months ago, but six of the group survive. They seem to bear charmed lives. But officers have had trouble handling them. We sent our most hard-boiled officers, iron men from the Foreign Service, but these convicts, er—I believe you would say they ran these officers ragged. But, as I told you, it has lately become something more serious.”

"Why take all this trouble and sass from these particular buzzards?" little Herk Gade asked curiously. "If they persist in acting funny, why not put 'em to digging trenches?"

"It is an amazing situation," said the Frenchman. "We have no evidence against any one man, or even four or five. A court-martial for one would mean a court-martial for the entire *Groupe de Chasse 71*. As fighting airmen, these are too valuable to lose. Too, we are not exactly certain what is wrong, if anything. It is most puzzling. Captain Laval will tell you his experience with them."

The big French captain spoke crisply through his bandages.

"I took over command of the *Groupe de Chasse 71* two months ago," he said. "For a time there was no more trouble than could be expected from any reckless, hard-boiled collection of men. I flattered myself on getting along excellently. Then I suddenly noticed I had slept most soundly on certain nights and it dawned on me that some one had been giving me sleeping powders, probably with my food. After that, I was more alert. It came to my attention that some of the night patrols were making flights which were mysteriously long, to say the least."

THE French captain paused to adjust the wrappings of gauze across his nose, then continued, "Two nights ago, I followed one of these patrols, and observed a light signaling to them from the ground while they were over a portion of Belgium occupied by the Germans. Needless to say, I accused them upon returning to the drome. They were very innocent and claimed my imagination was making me see things. The following night, I was waylaid and beaten. I'm convinced, some of these flyers did it, but I couldn't prove it before a court-martial."

"You mean there's a chance they may be too friendly with the Boche?" Herk suggested.

"That is the surprising thing," declared the Frenchman. "The Germans are making strenuous and unquestionably genuine efforts to wipe out the *Groupe de Chasse 71*. They have moved their crack ace, Baron von Gruppe, and his jagdstaffel up in front of them."

"Is intelligence working on this?" Herk Gade questioned. "It sounds like a job for that bunch of snoopers."

"There are no intelligence agents on the *Groupe de Chasse 71*," interposed, the French general. "We have been reluctant to take such measures. Frankly, Major

Gade, I consider that these six men have earned their promised liberty after the war. You are to take over their command and we hope you can straighten these men out without recourse to a court-martial. On the advice of General Daly, we have already taken the liberty of transferring your mechanic friend, Edward Tinsley. I understand you work well together."

"Grease' Tinsley is already with the outfit, eh?" grinned Herk Gade. "Sure, I'll take it. You see, I got a special reason for being interested."

The French general asked a question without using words. With the widest of grins on his ugly little face, Herk Gade produced his picture.

"She lives in Ireland," he explained. "We're gonna get married when the war's over. Met her while I was on this last trip. She's got a brother in the *Groupe de Chasse 71*. Name's Weldon Sullivan. I'd hate to see the lad get in trouble."

"Young Sullivan is a good boy," offered the bandaged French captain. "One of the few I believe you can trust."

"Thanks," Herk told him earnestly. "I'm damn glad to hear that."

"My congratulations, Major Gade," said General Morneau. "Can you leave immediately?"

"On my way now," Herk assured him.

He shook hands all around, recovered his picture, clicked off a salute and left.

"I know nothing of the situation," the English general told the Frenchmen slowly when he was sure little Hercules Gade was out of earshot. "But I hope you are right about young Sullivan."

"*Mon Dieu!*" ejaculated the captain. "Why?"

"Young Sullivan has a grandfather in Ireland who is a staunch Sinn Feiner and strongly suspected by our intelligence of dealing with the Germans to secure backing for another uprising against the British," the Englishman answered. "I know Major Hercules Gade well enough to see through his flippant manner. He is deeply in love with this Irish girl, and the possibility of trouble in her brother's squadron has him somewhat worried. He is a remarkable little monkey, and I like him. I would hate to think there was a chance that young Weldon and his grandfather, and even the girl, might be shot for treason."

CHAPTER II IRON GUYS

TWENTY-FOUR hours later, Major Hercules Gade stood on the drop board of the truck in which he had just arrived and surveyed the tarmac of the *Groupe de Chasse 71*. The place bore all the earmarks of being a choice corner of hell. Patches of fresh dirt on the tarmac showed where bomb cavities had been recently filled in. The hangars, of canvas and corrugated metal, bore many perforations which spoke of strenuous strafing by German Spandau guns. From the direction of the front lines came the steady roar of artillery. Shrill whistles of passing shells drifted down from the sky overhead.

Herk Gade suddenly flipped out of the truck and under the vehicle. The driver was a shade behind him. There came an ear-splitting shriek, then a crash that made the earth jump, followed by the clatter of falling debris. The drome evidently received an occasional shell from the Boche big guns.

Herk Gade crawled into the open, dusted himself and made for a mechanic who was picking his elongated frame up from beside a Spad. The fellow was fully six-foot-six and as thin as a lath. He looked like an exceedingly slim leather sack filled with flint-hard bones. His face was long and bore a fixed expression of great gloom.

"Grease Tinsley!" Herk grinned. "Hy'ah, you cheerful skeleton!"

"I been wonderin' why I was transferred to this damned place," Grease Tinsley groaned. "Now I can guess the reason."

"There's supposed to be a mystery around here," Herk Gade enlightened him. "And we're supposed to solve it. How do you size it up?"

"The mystery is how this place manages to stay on the earth," moaned Grease. "Hell's half acre, that's what it is. The Jerries toss over a barrage every mornin' an' another in the evenin', an' in between they peg H.E. so as not to lose the range. Then Gothas lay eggs all over us at night, an' this Baron von Gruppe brings his Tripe flock over regular to practice ground strafing."

"I mean the peelots," Herk explained, after hearing

the wail of complaint through to the end. "What d'you think of them?"

Grease Tinsley shook his head.

"Toughest gang I ever saw," he muttered. "Poison mean. Some of these buzzards go around like they had a secret among themselves, I notice. An' there's an average of three free-for-all fights around here every day. Nig Keets runs things—he's big and ugly as a bull hippo."

"Fine!" Herk grinned. "I been up in Ireland, Grease, and I've learned these Irish are not the fighters they're cracked up to be."

A half hour later, the pilots of the *Groupe de Chasse 71* were assembled in the operations office.

Midget Hercules Gade was prowling up and down in front of them, grinning widely. Nobody, he decided, had exaggerated in classifying them as a tough outfit. They were hard-bitten, iron-fisted fighters, the most hell-tempered lot he had ever seen. And the runt of the collection outweighed him fully thirty pounds.

Nig Keets was prominent among them, a six-foot-two behemoth with the great, bulging muscles of an exaggerated Atlas, his head was perfectly bald and an ugly mass of scars. His upper lip had been split and had grown into a harelip in three places. His eyes were puddles of blood in black caves.

Grease Tinsley lounged in the door, picking his teeth with a soiled thumbnail and wearing his best funereal expression.

Herk Gade debated. And then somebody snickered openly.

Herk's grin turned frosty and he faced them. He had not yet announced that he was their new C.O., but they could see he was a major.

It was Nig Keets who had laughed.

"Who made that cackle?" Herk rasped belligerently. "Was it you, you bug-eyed, baboon-faced missing link?"

Nig Keets shouldered forward.

"Who the hell you talking to?" he demanded.

Herk Gade walked forward to meet him, moving stifflegged. Without answering, he slapped Nig Keets twice, the blows so close together that they made a single loud pop. The second slap splattered blood from the big flyer's jowls.

NIG KEETS gave a bull bellow and threw a fist at Herk Gade's face. Herk ducked and hit Nig in the throat with the edge of his palm. The giant staggered backward, gurgling. Herk shot forward

like a projectile. He shoved a fist under Nig Keets' unbuttoned uniform coat and rammed it into Keets' hard stomach.

Pawing desperately, Keets found a chair. He swung it. The chair turned to splintered matchwood on Herk's head and shoulders. Stunned, weaving on his feet, Herk kicked the giant three inches below the belt buckle.

Nig Keets floundered back against the wall and slid down the wall to the floor. Snarling, retching, he pulled erect on his knees. Herk Gade kicked him in the face and he lay down again.

A squat buzzard with the build of a bulldog scuttled forward. Herk faked a kick, and as the man grabbed for the foot, he hit the fellow on the jaw with his fist. The blow stretched the flyer flat on his back, quivering.

Little Herk Gade pranced over in front of the astounded buzzards and hammered his knot of a chest.

"Look me over!" he crowed. "I've heard you babies were tough. I've heard you beat up the last C.O. you had, and it took a half dozen of you to do it. Well, I'm your new C.O.! And I'll take on any six of you who want to start something!"

Nobody said anything. Several were grinning uneasily.

"You're tough!" Herk roared in a voice that said he meant nothing of the sort. "Hell! I'll fight you all!"

In the door, still as solemn as an owl. Grease Tinsley reached outside and got a stick of hardwood the size of a baseball bat which he had evidently placed there.

Nig Keets swayed to his feet. Herk Gade planted his diminutive form in front of the giant.

"Well?" he barked.

Nig cursed. Herk knocked the giant down with a terrific smash between the eyes, then hauled him to his feet as if he were a child instead of two hundred and forty pounds of bone and gristle.

"Get in line and stand at attention!" he roared.

Nig Keets snarled and stumbled away

"Wait a minute!" Herk rasped. "What do you say when you get an order?"

Nig got it out with reluctance, "Yes, sir!"

"Remember that!" Herk told him harshly. "And the next time you give me a horse nicker, I'll pick you to pieces a handful at a time."

He wheeled on the assembled buzzards. "That goes for the rest of you, too!" he roared. "By God, you may be hard eggs, but I've picked my teeth with the bones of better men than any of you. You've been running whizzers on your officers, so they sent me down here.

Let's see you run me off, you bunch of rabbits. Damn you, I'll make you think you've grabbed the club of a Spad under full gun. I'll change the shape of your ugly faces until the devil won't know you."

He threw back his head, sucked his lungs full of air and began to curse. He ran through the oaths usually in the repertoire of artillery and muleskinners and dock roustabouts and launched into a startling vocabulary of his own. He accused the buzzards of every known and imaginable vice.

"Mind now, you lovely little kiwis!" he finished in a hoarse snarl. "If you think I'm bluffing, or don't like the things I called you, just front and center and I'll take you on!"

Grease Tinsley, who had discarded his shillelagh, reached for it hastily. But there were no takers. The grins had become extremely respectful.

"Now that you know what I think of you supposed-to-be-tough guys, we'll just get something else straight. I'm here to run this nest of buzzards, and damn you, I'll do it! I'm gonna show you how to fight Krauts. That's the only thing you're here for. I don't give a tinker's hell how much you drink and souse at night, but I'll take the first one of you that shows up for dawn patrol still drunk, and I'll crack every bone in his blasted body. And it won't do you a bit of good to holler over my head, because G.H.Q. knows the kind of babies you are. You asked for it, and you're gonna get it. Now, fall out! Beat it! Get out of here!"

GREASE TINSLEY came in when they had gone. He fingered his club. "I thought you had committed suicide twice," Grease said sourly. "Supposin' they had jumped you?"

"I've got them sized as a straight-shootin' gang of buzzards," Herk told him. "They just need somebody more poison ornery than they are to handle them."

"Yeah, maybe," Grease agreed doubtfully. "Only I'd watch that Nig Keets. The others may be just tough, but he looks tough and dirty to me."

"We'll watch him. And I'll bet we can uncover this supposed-to-be mystery doing it, too. Hm-m-m! Here comes one of them back!"

The approaching pilot was a young fellow of probably twenty-two or twenty-three. He was tall, with powerful shoulders and a likable, boyish face.

"May I speak to you, major?" he asked respectfully.

"Hell—walk in!" Herk grunted.

"I'm Weldon Sullivan," explained the peelot. "My sister wrote me—that is, are you—"

"I'm afraid so," Herk chuckled. "Your future brother-in-law."

"That's great!" young Sullivan ejaculated heartily. "Say, you're just what this outfit needs. I never saw anything like it. But how is Sis? I haven't been home in four months."

"Great!" Herk declared enthusiastically. He launched into a rapid-fire recital of conditions about young Weldon Sullivan's home, knowing the lad hungered for the information. "And your Granddad Pat Sullivan still hates the British as much as ever," he finished.

The words wiped all the pleasure off the face of Weldon Sullivan. His expression became hard to read. Herk eyed him intently.

"Sore spot, eh?" he asked bluntly.

Young Sullivan flushed.

"I hate to think of one of the family being practically a German sympathizer," he said, his words rasping strangely. "Granddad is a strong Sinn Fein man, you know. And the Germans tried to help the Sinn Fein stage their uprising against the British a couple of years ago. Granddad still has hopes that they will win free of England. That makes him almost an enemy of mine."

"Forget it!" Herk chuckled. "My dad fought his own brother in the Civil War of the United States. There's two good sides to every question, or we wouldn't be mixed up in this fracas. What do you think of this outfit of buzzards?"

Young Sullivan reddened uncomfortably.

"Some of them are a little tough for me," he admitted. "I—well, along with some of the others, we don't mix with Nig Keets and his gang. Frankly, we're scared of them. They're all good fighting men, however. They have worried the Germans until they have moved one of their crack staffels, that of Baron von Gruppe, up in front of us. We had a terrific dogfight this morning, in which von Gruppe was wounded and his circus practically knocked out of the air."

"Then you don't know what kind of funny business Nig Keets is pulling on the side?" Herk hazarded sharply.

Weldon Sullivan did not register surprise. He seemed to expect the question. His head shook an emphatic negative.

"I don't know," he said slowly. "I have noticed things that seemed queer. But nothing definite enough to mention."

Herk abruptly offered his hand.

"I'd like your help," he grinned. "And I think I'm going to like skippering this outfit, if Keets or some of the others don't gun me from behind."

Weldon Sullivan returned the grip heartily.

"They're not that kind," he said. "Even Keets, the worst of the lot, wouldn't shoot another fighting man in the back. You can be sure of that. I'll help you—all I can."

CHAPTER III FUELLESS FLIGHT

IN THE ensuing week, little Hercules Gade had seven fist fights. With each scrap, he got the peelots of his *Groupe de Chasse 71* more under control. And with each passing day, he warmed to the brood of hellions. They were the outfit he had dreamed about, iron-feathered, sky-ripping eagles.

Bucketed up in a Spad, a big bouquet of daisies painted on each side of the fuselage, Herk put in more combat hours than the most overworked lieutenant among them. And it was his combat flying perhaps more than anything else, which got him the respect of the remarkable fighting group he was handling.

The German king falcon, Baron von Gruppe, was out of the sky that first week, evidently laid up with injuries. But on the eighth day, he returned.

Life then became interesting. Von Gruppe strafed the Seventy-first's tarmac in broad daylight, blowing up three hangars with bombs and destroying five planes. Herk took his buzzard flock over and retaliated with a strafing that reduced von Gruppe's *Kampfflugg* nest to such a shambles that the Boche did not even attempt to rebuild it. They moved to a new location.

A month passed. A month of roaring hell when ships were shot to pieces in the sky or came home with struts severed and wing fabric in flapping streamers.

Through it all, little Hercules Gade kept a weather eye cocked vainly for some sign of the mystery which was supposed to exist.

Then they caught him, with sleeping powder in his coffee. He awakened one morning after an astonishingly sound sleep to listen to Grease Tinsley explain that four ships had taken off on a bat patrol the night before. They had left at ten o'clock, with fuel

for two hours and a half upstairs, and had returned shortly before dawn, after having been gone seven hours. Nig Keets had accompanied them.

Herk Gade said nothing. But he came to the conclusion that some one had doped his coffee the night before; and he decided to quit drinking coffee. It was four days later that Herk witnessed an incident which afterward gathered ghastly significance. Mail had just been distributed. Young Weldon Sullivan was at a table, a pencil and a sheet of paper before him, when a puff of wind blew the paper through a window. Young Sullivan leaped to his feet and plunged outside after it.

Perhaps a minute later, when Herk Gade ambled outside himself, it was to see Sullivan and Nig Keets strolling off toward Keets' quarters, arm in arm.

A few days following the incident, Herk Gade accompanied a bat patrol over Boche territory. He had made a practice of doing that, taking off with first one flight, then another, without previously announcing his intention. This was the first time his method obtained results.

When nearly thirty miles inside German territory, and at a spot only a couple of miles from the coast of the English Channel, he discerned a pair of lights, one red, one green, flickering beneath. It looked suspiciously like a signal, but a careful watch over the crates of Nig Keets, Weldon Sullivan and two other buzzards who made up the flight failed to disclose an answer.

He made no mention of the discovery when he returned, knowing it was useless. These six ex-convicts—and the six seemed to bear charmed lives in the ugly dogfighting they had been through—were old heads at baffling detectives, and Herk did not flatter himself that he was sleuth enough to catch them. However, that did not keep him from trying, and it convinced him there was actually something mysterious going on.

The infantry drove the Boche back a few miles during the next week and life became more bearable around the tarmac of the *Groupe de Chasse 71*. The advance silenced the big gun which had been pegging shells at them. Too, Baron von Gruppe and his staffel of falcons was learning respect, and dogfights were much less frequent.

"Things are going fine," Herk told Grease Tinsley. "Now if we could just drag the black boy out of the kindling, we'd be sitting pretty. Damn me! If I wasn't convinced that Nig Keets was mixed up in something

shady, I'd say he was a good man to be put in command of this outfit."

YOUNG Weldon Sullivan had been much in the company of Nig Keets of late. Too, he seemed to be submitting meekly to Keets' bullyragging. Seeing that, Herk was more than a little puzzled.

"You and Nig seem to be rubbing noses a lot lately," he told young Sullivan, when chances threw him alone with the lad.

Sullivan's manner seemed a trifle resentful.

"If there is anything shady going on around here, I thought I might learn something about it by buddying with Keets," he said in a voice that was too casual. "You know, I'm about convinced you were mistaken."

"Thanks," Herk told him dryly, then added to himself, "I'd give a ring-tailed elephant to know just how near the truth that was."

"Been hearing from Sis regularly?" Sullivan asked, with what was suspiciously like anxiety to change the subject.

"On an average of three times a week!" Herk grinned. "In another month, I'm going to try and pry G.H.Q. loose from a month's leave for each of us, and we can go up there and see her."

"That'll be fine!" young Sullivan said huskily.

Four days after that conversation, there occurred something which suddenly demonstrated to little Hercules Gade that he was being played for a sucker. And it left him more puzzled than ever.

He had gone over the lines with another night patrol. Returning, he found Nig Keets and four of the convict flyers had taken off in his absence.

"What the bloody hell!" Herk roared. "They had no orders to take a bat hop!"

"We got a report that an infantryman had heard a Gotha flight going over, and they went upstairs to hunt for it," Weldon Sullivan explained.

Herk Gade checked on the report. Sure enough, a near-by infantry H.Q. had telephoned the information in.

But Grease Tinsley drew him aside.

"I'd swear them five buzzards was all set to hop before we got that report," he informed Herk. "It looked to me like they knew it was coming."

The remainder of the night passed without a sign of the five buzzards. At ten o'clock the next morning, after the dawn patrols had returned, in came the missing five. But they arrived in four ships, one of them a German Rumpler two-seater.

Seated at the field desk in the operations office, frozen

stiff with rage, Herk heard their story in baffled silence.

They had chased the Gotha flight back home, they explained glibly. Baron von Gruppe had met them with a skyful of Fokkers and a terrific night dogfight had ensued. Baron von Gruppe had been driven off, but two of the five Spads had been forced to come down behind the German lines, out of fuel. The others had landed beside them, but their Spads were so bullet riddled they would not carry double. So the five had returned and boldly stolen the two-seater from von Gruppe's drome, after burning the two fuelless Spads.

"I want to see the wrecks of those two Spads!" Herk roared, after making no bones about saying he thought it was a preposterous yarn.

Nig Keets led him upstairs and over the lines. In a field, surrounded by Boche infantrymen, were the blackened bones of two Spads. Returning, Keets flew low and waved an arm at two burned trucks in ditches alongside two different roads.

"I think you're a bunch of damned liars," Herk snarled when they were back, "but I can't prove it. What did you do during the five hours between dawn and the time you got back here? It took less than half an hour to fly the distance."

"We had to capture a couple of trucks and get gasoline," Nig Keets smirked. "You saw the trucks. We mixed the truck gas with the high test stuff still in our tanks, and it worked fine."

"It must have," Herk grinned wolfishly. "You've got a perfect alibi, and I'm going to recommend all five of you for decorations, just on the chance that it might be the truth. But, by hell, I'm going to watch you from now on!"

Herk sat in the operations office and swore steadily for an hour. He could smell a rat as big as a prehistoric dinosaur. Yet he had nothing definite on which to base his convictions.

CHAPTER IV FALCON PROWL

HERK GADE took a Spad upstairs to prowl and think. Flying usually stimulated his thought processes, but it got him nowhere now. Nig Keets and the five convict buzzards, and possibly some others in

the *Groupe de Chasse* 71 were mixed up in something shady. But what it was, he couldn't imagine.

He had been with the outfit long enough to become certain the Boche were making earnest efforts to wipe them out, and this made it look unlikely that Nig Keets and the others were dealing with the enemy. Herk thought of the seventh convict, Fritz Heinke, who had been reported missing over the lines some months before. Fritz Heinke's disappearance might hook onto the mystery. But how?

On Friday, two days following the incident, Grease Tinsley exploded the bombshell.

"I heard Nig Keets and young Sullivan talking," he told Herk sourly. "Keets said, 'Fritz Heinke will check up on the thing if he can.' That was all I heard, but it sounds like this Fritz Heinke is still alive."

He stopped speaking to stare at Herk and rub his jaw slowly.

"That's not all that's eating you!" Herk snorted. "What's the rest?"

"I been doin' some gumshoeing," said Grease. "Nig Keets went to a lot of trouble this morning to hide a sheet of paper in between a picture an' the wall of his cubicle. I got the paper. Here it is."

Grease produced a folded letter. It was written in the graceful, rounded hand of a woman.

"God!" Herk Gade gulped, and stared at the missive through a film of horror.

The letter was from Wanda Sullivan, the girl he intended to marry, and it was to her brother, Weldon Sullivan.

Most of the penned words finished with upstrokes of the pen. Some of them did not; and these had been underlined in pencil. They read:

Submarine Will Be Ten Miles Down Coast from Zeebrugge Eleven Friday Night with Money Aboard. Meet It.

"Damn them!" little Hercules Gade croaked horribly. "Damn their souls! Where's young Sullivan?"

"He and Nig Keets are out on patrol," Grease Tinsley replied.

Herk Gade's face had become drawn and a ghastly corpse-gray in color.

"Keep dummied up about finding this!" he mumbled. "My mother in Heaven! This can't be the answer!"

Staggering to his feet, he weaved out on the tarmac. Winking wet eyes in the glare of the afternoon sun, he crawled into his Spad and waved for a grease-ball to give him a windup.

He sent the little wagon screaming upstairs after a take-off that left those who saw it muttering in wonder. He wanted to fly and to think about the ghastly thing confronting him. Blind instinct guiding his nerveless arms and legs, he flung the Spad toward the Front.

He didn't see the wedge of Fokker triplanes high overhead. Nor did he hear the leading Tripe give a hungry roar, and slide down a sunbeam for its kill.

Herk couldn't even see the stick between his sweating palms, or the gun triggers beside his thumbs, or the altimeter that read fourteen thousand, or the rest of the squawling Spad he rode. Least of all did he see the coffin-snouted Fokker Tripe with Baron von Gruppe's hands hard on the trips of gobbling Spandaus.

He swayed in the bucket, in an agony of ghastly horror. His hands left the stick, flew to his neck and the nails spaded into the flesh of his gnarled throat. His legs were limber as strings.

Death reached out a couple of lean, smoking fingers and chewed a hole in the right wing of the Spad. Herk neither heard nor saw, for he was hearing and seeing other things. O merciful God, how he could see and hear them!

He made a whining in his nose, the whining of a man dying and yet living. Spandau lead was gnashing off clouds of splinters and scabs of wing linen as it crept toward the cockpit, but the sound it made roared and belled in Herk Gade's tortured ears as the voice of a court-martial judge advocate sentencing Wanda and Weldon Sullivan to a firing-squad death.

He twitched like a man with an opium fit.

Then those streams of Spandau slugs climbed into the cockpit with little Herk Gade. The windshield folded and came to pieces before his eyes. The altimeter jumped out of the instrument board into his lap. One of the Vickers on the cowl skewered and the breech mechanism acquired a frosting of spattered lead.

THE shock, the noise, the clawing and spitting of that flesh-hungry metal, made undersized Hercules Gade forget the thing he was seeing and hearing. It abruptly transported him out of one hell and deposited him in another. With this other hell he was vastly more familiar. He was one of its angels.

He hit himself in the belly with the stick and landed on the rudder bar with his boots. Going up and over, he disconnected the trip of the damaged Vickers.

The Fokker Tripe climbed around in the sky and prepared to pounce again. But it didn't. It hung in the bank five seconds—long enough for the helmeted iadgstafel killer in the cockpit to look at that bouquet of daisies painted on the flanks of little Herk Gade's Spad and realize he had caught himself a Tartar. It was as if he had dipped into his *Biersuppe* dish and pulled out a skeleton. That bunch of daisies was unfavorably known to *Rittmeister* Baron von Gruppe.

The Imperial Falcon thought fast, mostly about his staffel brood a-roost overhead, watching for their sire to show them how to make a kill.

That lesson would have to be postponed. In its place, they would get another, a lesson in self-preservation, proven by a first-class example. The Spandau shark clawed for his signal gun and punched out a ball of green fire that meant help in big letters.

Herk Gade peeled his lips off his teeth in a snarl that made his hard little face a fountain for the torment in his soul. He ringed the Falcon in his gun-sight and knocked linen feathers off the Maltese-Crossed wings.

The Boche whipstalled to let that bunch of daisies go shrieking past, then went hoicking ceilingward. His brood, eleven of them, came down to meet him in a whizzing, moaning wedge.

Straight at the point of that wedge, Herk Gade flung his whining Spad. The point Fokker Tripe fell out of the wedge under his clucking Vickers, the pilot's nerve suddenly gone, and he went through space it had occupied, the route of his passing marked by floating splinters and scales of fabric from his crate.

The Tripe scattered as if a ghost bombshell had burst in the midst of their formation. They looped, Immelmanned, banked, did an even half score of maneuvers to get back at midget Hercules Gade and his bullet-gashed Spad. They felt rather sure this lone buzzard didn't stand a chance, and they were not sorry. They had been waiting a long time to catch him cold meat.

But it was not one buzzard for long. It was suddenly four as a trio of Spads shrieked up out of the haze which hung over the not-so-distant English Channel.

The Tripes only scattered the more and each Heinie got down to the deadly serious business of looking out for himself. They were not fledglings and they were not afraid of a scrap. They filled a lot of sky with wheeling, darting, wabbling crates.

The black fuselage of a Fokker turned gory red and slipped down toward the earth, the Boche pilot

standing erect in his cockpit, windmilling his arms and screaming while his body burned below the waist.

For five long minutes, the sky was a vortex of darting crates and interlaced tracer ribbon. Then a Boche ran out of ammo and made sky tracks for home. It must have looked like a good idea, because the others departed in his wake, noses down, cold sweat glistening on Hun faces.

They left behind three Spads which looped and rolled and thumbed victorious noses—and another Spad which circled once before turning for the home tarmac.

Little Hercules Gade crouched in the well of that Spad, his lips still in a snarl, his eyes blazing at the trio of cavorting Spads beside him and at the men they held. Young Weldon Sullivan, Nig Keets and one of the ex-convict flyers!

HERK was under no delusions. They had saved him; he owed them his life. And that only made the thing confronting him the more ghastly. A shudder racked Herk's tough little body, a shudder so terrific that his elbows beat against the sides of the cockpit.

Why had Wanda done this thing to him? Why had she written that letter to her brother—that letter which had scared little Herk Gade until his mind went sick? And what was he going to do about it?

"O God, what would You do?" Herk moaned in a voice that was a death rattle of torment.

The sun was low on the horizon now. Near the ground, the red mists of French twilight had already arrived. The home tarmac was rocking up under the whistling club of the Spad, and without conscious thought, Herk pushed the stick into the gutted instrument board.

Flying wires made a soft moaning and loose streamers of fabric flapped like young roosters trying their wings as he tailed in to a landing as gently as a puff of smoke.

But Spandau lead had done for the undercarriage. It folded. The prop spooned up dirt and threw it back into Herk Gade's face. The shock knocked his hand from the switch before he got it cut.

Skewering, the Spad tucked its wings back against the fuselage. It nosed over. The tank split and gas hit the hot engine in a flood. Flame shot fifty feet outward and upward.

Herk Gade walked out of the blazing crack minus his eyebrows and with the stink of his burning sheepskin coat collar in his nostrils. The crash and fire bus clanged across the field.

The trio flung out of their ships, stripping off helmets and goggles.

The face of midget Herk Gade told nothing of what he thought as the three approached. His eyes were little steel ballbearings in the parboiled crimson of his face.

"I want to talk to you," he rasped at Weldon Sullivan. "Alone! Come on over to my quarters!"

"Sure," grinned young Sullivan. He followed Herk to his sheet-iron nest. Herk leaned against the door and it crashed shut. His snarl opened bloody cracks in his flame-seared lips.

"Read this!" he barked, and thrust out the letter Grease Tinsley had given him.

Young Sullivan stared, then yelped a wild oath.

"Where did you get that?" he shrilled. In the same breath, and with a voice suddenly gone false, he added, "Why are you showing it to me? Who underlined those words? What do you think I know about it?"

"You lying rat!" Herk croaked. "You dirty, carrion-guzzling traitor!"

"It's not true!" Sullivan shouted wildly. "God! I wouldn't do that! And Wanda—you don't think she would, do you?"

"I've gone nuts thinking about it!" Herk rasped hoarsely.

With palsy-stricken fingers, Sullivan scraped a match into flame and twitched it toward his cigarette. Then cunning leaped into his fear-distorted face. Herk pitched forward.

Sullivan got the match touched to the letter. They floundered across the room. Herk went down, when Sullivan tripped him. He came erect, only to see the paper burned to a curled wisp of black ash.

"You dollar-sucking, sneaking murderer!" Herk croaked insanely.

He threw a fist into Sullivan's face. The blow lifted the flyer in the air and laid him on the floor with a crash.

Teetering on his heels, sucking at his bruised knuckles, Herk Gade glared at the prostrate form.

Young Sullivan licked his lips, then got to his feet. He straightened, throwing back his shoulders. Cords stood out in his neck.

"I'll tell you again you're mistaken if you think I'm selling information to the enemy!" he amended in a voice hard with desperate resolution. "And you can't prove differently."

With that, he lunged for the door. Herk let him go. There was nothing else he could do.

Herk knew he had lied about the code message

in the letter, and knew as well that it had taken some tremendous fear to drive young Sullivan to the lying and the burning of the letter. The boy was playing for some big stake.

Hercules Gade stumbled to his cot and sat down.

What to do? The question hammered through his body while dusk swabbed the tarmac outside with darkening purpose.

He allowed the hour for the evening meal to pass and did not move. This was Friday night, possibly the Friday mentioned in the code message as the date of the rendezvous with the submarine.

He got up off the bunk and stumbled into the darkness outside. Dimly, and too late, he was aware of sudden movement in the murk. Something whistled as it descended upon his head. Oblivion.

CHAPTER V HUN GOLD

WHEN Major Hercules Gade regained consciousness, he was lying on the floor inside his cubicle.

Moonlight so brilliant as to be almost a glare, came through the window. Holding his head in both hands, he hurriedly staggered in search of Grease Tinsley. Remembering the eleven o'clock mentioned in the code message, he eyed his watch. It read twenty minutes past ten. He had been unconscious for hours.

"Anybody taken off since dark?" he demanded when he found Grease Tinsley.

"Sure," said Grease. "Nig Keets, young Sullivan and four others hopped more'n an hour ago. They went out to run down another one of them funny Gotha rumors."

"The hell they did!" Herk snarled. "Get my bus on the line and warmed up. I'll want it in five minutes."

He sprinted for the operations office. An examination of the telephone message showed a nearby headquarters had reported some one hearing what sounded like a flight of Gotha bombers. Herk called the headquarters, tracing the message.

"It came from an artillery battery about three miles from your drome," he was told.

"Thanks," Herk growled and hung up.

He saw through the trick now. One of Nig Keets' gang merely left the *Groupe de Chasse 71* drome and telephoned in a fake report of German bombing ships overhead. That gave them a legitimate excuse to take their crates upstairs.

"They're clever devils!" Herk rasped. "Too clever for their own good."

Five minutes later, Herk bucketed up in his Spad and rammed the throttle against the pin.

At seven thousand, he hit the clouds; at ten thousand he was above them. He set a course which would carry him to the Channel coast at a point inside German territory.

When the Spad drove over Ostend at sixteen thousand, he put the stick forward almost at once. Zeebrugge lay less than twenty miles beyond Ostend, and somewhere between was the place he sought, the rendezvous mentioned in the code message.

He had no definite plan, other than to wipe from his mind the last shadow of doubt that Nig Keets and the others were dealing with the Boche.

Below, a smear of dark verdure and an expanse of quivering silver made up the land and the sea. Separating them, the beach was a crawling line of dirty gray. Ahead of the plunging Spad, the gray line jiggled and indented a U in the shadowy vastness of the shore.

It was eleven o'clock, straight up. Staring, hard-eyed, Herk made out a slimy cigar of steel in the U of the inlet. Three planes were at rest on the beach, and three more droned above the inlet like lazy dragonflies.

Herk hit the throttle with a bony fist and whipped the tail toward the stars. Squawling, stacks slobbering flame, moonlight a-glimmer on the wings, the Spad ripped downward.

The submarine lengthened in front of his eyes; the seaplanes broadened and grew fat. At two thousand feet, Herb made out the markings of the submarine. It was a German U-boat.

"Damn them!" Herk Gade screamed. And suddenly he knew what he was going to do. He was going to take the only course which would spare Wanda Sullivan the disgrace and threat of a court-martial. For the six down there were proven guilty, and Hercules Gade was going to give them the justice they deserved, give it with a pair of bleeding Vickers.

His Vickers clucked and speckled the moonlight with red dots as he sent out wanning bursts with a tightening of bloodless fingers.

The three ships in the air suddenly whipped

upward. Herk ignored them. Straight for the steel decks of the submarine he plummeted, watching the craft grow fat and repulsive in the rings of his sights. Men were scurrying and rushing, fighting to get into the conning tower.

Ribbons of flame stretched from the shuttling snouts of Herk's Vickers down to the sea. He stirred gently with the stick and sawed the rudder, turning the submarine into a rattling shambles with his lead.

Men looked foolish and abruptly sat down and died, or leaped about like beheaded fowls, or literally fell to pieces where they stood. Tracer boiled on the steel deck plates in a spanging, crashing hail. Blood drooled off the fat, hoglike hull to darken the waters of the inlet. A three-inch gun on the forward deck belched a streak of green-hot flame and a gust of nitro fumes which rocked the Spad.

HERK brought the Spad up with a wrench at the stick and a kick at right rudder. The crate screwed off on a wing and stabbed at the three planes which had been on the beach.

There came a pecking and crackling and the Spad shivered and shook itself. Puzzled, Herk looked down. The water beneath was freckled with tiny star specks of fire. They came into being magically and winked out almost at once. Tracer from above was sinking into the water.

Snarling, Herk hinged his head back, expecting to see the other three Spads on his tail. He was mistaken, but what he did see made him squeal like a dog-bitten rat. For the sky overhead was suddenly crawling lousy with Boche crates.

Herk jerked the Spad upward in a stomach-tugging turn. He counted swiftly. Fourteen of them! Fourteen dappled red and black Fokker Tripes!

It was a trap! The Boche had been winging high, protecting the infamous meeting of the Spads with the U-boat. Such was Herk Gade's first thought.

The staffel dropped downstairs like a compact charge of buckshot. Markings became distinguishable. It was Baron von Gruppe and his pack of sky hounds.

The sky ran red with tracer. A Tripe struck at Herk with a rattle of Spandaus. Sparks fizzed on his right wing. Whipping the Spad into the teeth of the swooping staffel, he went through.

It was then that his hard, wind-blackened little face became warty with tightened muscles. Down below, the three Spads from the beach were clawing upward in the teeth of barking Spandaus.

It looked as if the six were also caught in the Boche trap!

Suddenly realizing there was something wrong with all his ideas, Herk flung to their aid. A Fokker spewed flame and went down. Then a Spad lurched the prop dead. It fell into a wavering lance of incendiaries which were not aimed at it at all, and the gas tank blew up. In the sudden flash, before the roll of oil smoke, Herk saw the face of one of the six convicts. The man stood erect in the inferno of flame, straddled the fuselage and slid back toward the tail assembly, making a fantastic bid for life. But the Spad lurched and flung him off into space.

Herk pinned a Fokker with his tracer, killed the pilot and fired the tank. The right aileron of Herk's Spad dangled like a slender scab. Herk fought the controls. The stick scraped the side wall of the cockpit before the crate would stay level.

Herk dropped out of the dogfight flurry, gravy for any Boche who wanted him. Two did. They came down, converging, two spotted black and red Fokkers with blazing eyes.

A metallic tornado swept the Spad, scooping off wing fabric, tearing splinters. Herk kicked the rudder, flipping the crate recklessly.

The Tripe of Baron von Gruppe bulked in his sight rings. Herk's hands went tight on the trips. The Boche leader flapped both hands to his mouth as a Vickers slug tapped him between the eyes, then jerked madly as twenty more tore through his body.

The king falcon was dead. His brood opened red eyes of rage and screamed for vengeance.

Herk's Spad lost a prop blade in the metal storm they poured upon him. The half a club wrenched and tore at the Hisso mounts. Herk reached for the switch and it vanished under his fingers as a gigantic hatchet went to work on the instrument panel, reducing it to splinters and a twisted mess of metal work. The crashpad spewed stuffing.

The Hisso died, the exhaust bellow replaced by a ghastly crashing and whacking of lead. A thousand big, singing bullwhips seemed to be picking the Spad to bits.

Herk started to twist his head, only to see his left arm flip up in front of his eyes, entirely without his own volition. A piece of the coat sleeve flew off his forearm and shredded flesh showed through. Then the arm folded between elbow and shoulder, where there was no joint. It all happened before he felt pain.

CHAPTER VI PIRATE VALOR

TWO Spads came screaming to Herk's rescue. He eyed them, as if from a great distance. Nig Keets and Weldon Sullivan! Still feeling strangely disinterested in the affair, Herk saw one of the pursuing Fokkers turn into a flamer with a funeral banner of oil smoke. Then Keets' Hisso spewed black and the club went dead. The smoke became a great sepia grubworm. Flame finally appeared.

He saw Keets stand up in the cockpit and shake hands with himself, then crouch back at the controls. The burning Spad went straight down.

Nig Keets' hand was still controlling the course it took. He was directing it toward the submarine, deliberately sacrificing a fair chance to live.

The Spad hit the submarine just aft of the conning tower and turned into a Spark-vomiting red smear against the Steel plates. The plane crashed through the hull and fired the fuel tanks of the U-boat. Nig Keets was dead, and his going was that of a fighting man.

The shock of the thing he had just seen jerked little Hercules Gade out of his coma, made him realize he was about to go to sleep on the crashpad. The earth and roaring, star-studded, plane-filled sky were changing places in dizzying succession.

At first convinced he would fall into the bay, he saw he would overshoot that and the beach as well and crash on the tree-matted shore.

The Spad came down on the timber, still slipping. A tree top wiped off the undercarriage in one swipe. The crate whipped over side wise. Amid a swish of disturbed leafage, it came to rest upside-down.

Herk Gade struggled with his serviceable arm, not at all certain he was still alive. The safety belt came free under his plucking fingers and dropped him out of the cockpit, head first.

His bullet-riddled arm hit a branch and all but wiped out consciousness. He struck another branch. It broke, but checked the force of his fall. He was too far gone to feel the shock as he hit the earth, flat on his back.

Hauling himself erect called for tremendous effort.

He tied a handkerchief about his arm, just below the shoulder, and drew it very tight to stem the blood flow. The arm had been hit three times, he saw now, instead of twice, as he had vaguely supposed.

Staggering weakly from tree to tree, he made for the beach. The wild were wolf howl of planes rampant overhead was still loud and from time to time flurries of spent machine-gun slugs spattered in the leaves.

What seemed like an age later, but only four or five minutes as the clock measures time, he stumbled out on the beach.

A smear of oil, many floating bodies, and an occasional enormous bubble rising to the surface marked the spot where the submarine had been.

There were only ten Boche ships in the sky now, darting and stabbing at the four Spads. The latter were not taking it lying down. They were pulling up a fight little short of superhuman.

Suddenly they spun out of the dogfight and powdered off down the coast for home. A few Fokkers screamed in their wake. But a rocket stitched sparks against the stars. Evidently it was a recall signal, for the jagdstaffel brood circled, droning about like lost souls as they staggered into formation. They wheeled and winged away inland.

The Boche had lost four ships, their opponents three. And the Hun king falcon, Baron von Gruppe, was among the dead. Until another Spandau wizard rose to take his place, the power of that staffel was broken.

EYES closed wearily, Hercules Gade listened to the multiple-throated roar of the Tripe flight die into nothingness. He was in German territory. In his weakened condition, the best he could hope for was to fight the rest of the war against the hardships of a German prison camp.

He essayed a few steps, then stumbled and fell on his face. The shock of agony from his riddled arm seemed to paralyze the rest of his body.

Then, minutes later, he wondered dreamily if he were actually hearing another motor moan grow loud. He rolled his head and pried his eyes open. A plane was returning from the direction in which the four Spads had gone, flying low. In the brilliant moonlight, Herk identified it as a Spad.

The crate swept a hundred feet above his head. Herk waved feebly with his good arm. The Spad swung, the motor idled and the craft came down smoothly on the beach.

Young Weldon Sullivan stood erect in the cockpit of the ship.

"Get you bad?" he yelled anxiously. "Only in the arm," Herk muttered, chewing the inside of his mouth to get his mind off the agony of the triple wound. Young Sullivan's face was bloody and hardwood splinters stuck to it like quills. He slid an arm around Herk's midriff, helped him toward the plane and started to boost him into the cockpit.

"I'm light enough that my weight won't make the crate lopsided," Herk grunted. "I'll hang onto the wing."

Weldon Sullivan peered at him intently.

"You will like hell!" he said hoarsely. "You're as weak as cider. Get in! I'll take the chance of your passing out in the cockpit."

Herk got a tight hold on his tongue with his teeth. He extended his good hand.

"The stuff I belched at you this morning don't go," he growled huskily. "I know now you birds weren't selling out to the Boche. You're a pack of fighting buzzards."

"Thanks!" gulped young Sullivan.

He crawled on the lower wing, close to the fuselage.

The Spad bumped into motion sluggishly and hammered up into the night.

Two hours later little Hercules Gade sprawled on a cot in his quarters and watched a medico collect his tools and depart. Herk's arm was dressed and in a cast.

Young Weldon Sullivan was seated on a box beside him, sweating and uncomfortable.

"Understand this!" Herk grinned at him. "You don't need to tell me a damned thing. I'm willing to be satisfied with just what I saw to-night."

"I've been a fool forty ways from scratch!" Sullivan muttered. "I should have told you. But I was worried, half crazy. You see, Granddad Pat Sullivan has become involved in a Sinn Fein plot for another uprising, and the Germans were to send them money and arms aboard a submarine. Wanda learned about it when granddad bragged what they were going to do to the British, and she wrote me, using the code we have always employed for little private messages which might have been deleted by the censors. She thought perhaps—well, I was supposed to tell you and ask you to send a bunch of the buzzards out and sink the U-boat. From what Wanda learned, we believed that if this one attempt failed, the Germans would not make another effort to back the Sinn Fein.

"But Wanda's letter blew out of the window one

night when I was reading it and Nig Keets saw it. I—I hate to say it now, but Keets threatened to expose us if I didn't help him, or if I told you of the matter. It would have been a firing squad for granddad. Keets wanted the gold which would be aboard the submarine. I wrote Wanda the truth and told her she must not mention the affair to you. That letter you showed me this afternoon was one Wanda wrote, naming the time the submarine would be in the bay. She had obtained the information from granddad.

"It was Keets who knocked you cold to-night. I didn't know about that until we were ready to go after that gold. Keets had promised to sink the U-boat after we got the loot. But Baron von Gruppe's jagdstaffel must have been guarding the stuff. The Germans had reasons to keep a close watch on all money shipments in this sector."

Herk jerked his head off the pillow.

"How come?" he demanded.

"Nig Keets had been, well—you might call it privateering, or plain banditry. He has been going into Germany and committing robberies."

SO THAT'S the big mystery," Herk growled. "And the gold and arms? Did they go down with that submarine tonight?"

"They did," young Sullivan smiled ruefully. "We had just reached the bay when you came. And I'm sure the Germans will not make another attempt to help the Sinn Fein."

Grease Tinsley appeared in the door.

"Four buzzards out here want to talk to you," he told Herk.

"Send them in!"

The four surviving convict flyers filed inside. They were nervous. One, evidently the elected spokesman, began talking.

He told how Nig Keets had thought up the scheme of robbing the Germans. The German member of the convict gang, Fritz Heinke, had been landed in Hunland some months ago. There Heinke had passed himself off as a German, feigning an injury which exempted him from military service. He had scouted out rich prizes, signaling the information to his comrades when they flew over the lines on bat patrols. The loot from these robberies had been cached in a deserted French chateau.

"We've talked it over," the spokesman finished. "And we're willing to take our medicine and turn the loot over to—well, a fund of some kind. D'you suppose it

could be fixed so these French war orphans could get the money, major?"

Herk thought for a long time.

"It's a hell of a fine situation," he growled. "If you turn over this stuff you've taken from the Germans, there will sure as the devil be a court-martial. You lads will be the goats. And I'll lose four of the best buzzards who ever got hold of a stick."

Then he grinned at them.

"The only thing I can think of is for you birds to lose your memories," he barked. "But you four have got to go into Germany and get this Fritz Heinke. Then we'll see if we can't get somebody to find the stuff in that chateau and see that it gets into a fund to take care of a few orphans. It's German money and it'll be used to remedy some of the devilment the Boche have done. God help me if I can see a better use for it."

To cover his emotion he stared at the plaster cast which swathed his arm.

"I'll straighten out this mess tonight" he snapped. "Nig Keets died in action, died like a fighting man. And it'll go into the records that way. Now, clear out of here, you gang of pirates!"

When they had gone, Herk glanced once more at Weldon Sullivan. The young fellow still looked uncomfortable and remorseful.

"Forget it!" Herk told him. "It took more guts to lie to me the way you did than it would have taken to come out with the truth. Damn it, I'd have done the same thing. Go get me three leave blanks and I'll see if we can't get away from this man's war long enough to go up and hammer some sense into the head of that old granddaddy of our'n!"