



RICHARD KNIGHT in HELL FLIES HIGH

by DONALD E. KEYHOE

*“Washington to Gray, Flight Eight . . .
Washington to Gray . . . Report your position . . .”
No sooner had that message rung across those
leaden skies when just ahead of his speeding
Northrop Richard Knight glimpsed a huge Douglas
transport roaring through the snowy blur. And as
he saw that ship he cringed. Gray had reported for
the last time. For out of that craft’s windows there
stared dilated, terrified eyes—the unseeing eyes
of the dead. And the faces from which they peered
were—a hideous green!*

CHAPTER I CORPSE CARGO

THERE WERE THREE men in the car—but one of them was dead. He lay on the floor in the rear, a sinister shape beneath a heavy robe. One ghastly hand protruded from under the robe’s tasseled edge, and on the swollen middle finger was a curious seal ring with a tiny, grinning skull for a crest.

The sedan moved slowly through the crowded street, its tire-chains crunching in the snow. The driver sat hunched over the wheel, his swarthy face dripping with perspiration, though the air was crisply cold. The tall man beside him had slumped far down in the seat, shielding his face with a gloved hand.

It was a face sardonically handsome, with a mockery of a mouth and black, Satanic brows. Strangest of all were the eyes beneath those brows. They were a weird golden color, and the glitter of their dark pupils was like the stare of a cobra.

The man glanced swiftly over the crowded street, without lowering his hand. It was but a few hours until Christmas Eve, and all Washington seemed to have rushed downtown for a last-minute shopping orgy.

Pedestrians began to weave through the slow-moving traffic. The driver looked back fearfully, then his face went white.

"*Kapeetahn!*" he groaned. "The corpse's hand, is showing!"

Not a muscle moved in the face of the other man. Calmly, he reached back, covered the exposed hand.

"Fool!" he said in a barely audible voice. "What if one of those people had understood our language?"

The driver quailed under the other man's look.

"I am sorry, *Kapeetahn*," he said hoarsely. "But the strain of all this—"

"And I asked for the bravest agent at the Embassy," the *Kapeetahn* interrupted with icy contempt. "Drive on—the light has changed.

The sedan crawled ahead, turned North at the Treasury. When they reached H Street, the driver swung left. He was almost to 16th Street when the lights turned red. With a muttered oath he put on the brakes. There was a sudden jarring impact from behind as another machine bumped into them. The black-browed man gazed through the rear window.

"It is only a girl," he said swiftly. "Go back, tell her it was your fault, and offer to pay for any damage."

The driver wiped his sweating face, climbed out. The other car was a phaeton with its top down. The girl at the wheel made an exquisite picture. Snowflakes had powdered her furs and dotted the half-length veil which hung from her smart halo hat. As he approached, she leaned around the windshield, her red lips parted in a rueful smile.

"I am so sorry, *senor*. You see, it is that I am so new—no, I mean the automobile, it is all so new to me. If I break something, I—"

She stopped, for the sedan driver had given a start.

"What is it, *senor*? Why you look at me thees way?"

"I—it's nothing, nothing at all," the man said hastily. "I thought I knew you—but I see now I was wrong."

She gave him a level glance from her dark eyes.

"Yes, I would remember if we meet, *senor*. But your automobile, if I injure it you mus' let me pay to—"

"No, no—it's only a scratch," the swarthy man mumbled. "If you're sure your car is all right . . . ?"

He hardly waited for her answer. The light had changed, and impatient motorists were blowing their horns. He ran back to the sedan, sent it racing into Sixteenth Street.

"Look back, *Kapeetahn!*" he said huskily. "See if she is following us."

The other man's strange eyes blazed.

"Imbecile! What have you done now?"

The driver shot a frightened glance at the rear-view mirror.

"That girl—I think she is an American agent! She may have been trailing us all the time!"

"*Na leva!* To the left!" said the senior man.

The sedan took the turn on screeching tires. The *Kapeetahn* looked back.

"We are not followed. Go slower . . . Now, explain this, quickly!"

"This much I know," said the driver tensely, "she is the ward of General Brett, the Chief of Army Intelligence. Her name is Benita Navarre—"

"Wait," interrupted the other. "Is she the one they called the 'Girl from Lost Valley?'"

The driver nodded.

"Yes, but we've never known how much of the story was true. She's supposed to have been descended from the Grand Duke of Navarre, who fled from Spain a century ago and was trapped with his followers in a Rocky Mountain canyon when an avalanche closed the only exit. The newspaper accounts were mixed up, but General Brett stated that the Air Corps rescued the descendants of the lost community and—"

"I know the rest—and more," muttered the *Kapeetahn*. "Our agents in Japan learned the whole story. Colonel Hiroki had established a secret air base in Lost Valley, and the Air Corps destroyed it. But there is one other point. The American agent known as 'Q'—the one who wrecked our plans in China—is believed to have been responsible for Hiroki's failure. There was a rumor that he personally saved *Senorita Navarre*—"

"But that is just what I was going to tell you!"

exclaimed the other man. "My assistants here in Washington have found that she has no eyes for anyone but Richard Knight, the American flying sportsman. Knight has friends in both the military and naval services . . . he used to be in the State department before he resigned and took up flying—"

"Knight—a spy!" The blaze had come back into the *Kapeetahn's* golden eyes. "Yes! It all fits—and that means he's also tricked us with that churf named Doyle, the ex-Marine who flies with him most of the time. By all the devils, I'll even my score with them—when this other affair is ended."

The driver swung back toward 16th Street, still nervously scanning the mirror.

"But what of the girl? If she is brilliant enough to fit herself into modern civilization within two months, she may be in espionage. Her adoption by Brett and his wife may be only to cover up the real purpose."

But the other man shook his head.

"Spies are not made in two months; it was only a coincidence, our trails crossing like that. Calm your fears—nothing can ruin our plans now."

The driver nodded slowly, and the sedan sped on toward its destination. Once, as the car swerved, the hand of the corpse knocked against the floor, as though in grim warning of vengeance. But the cheerful crunch of the skid-chains muffled that ominous sound, and the men in front did not hear.

PAST the wing of the speeding Northrop snow drove furiously, churning a white whirlwind above the thick, transparent enclosure which covered the two cockpits. Larry Doyle scowled around his crooked nose at the storm.

"And I left Miami for this!" he snorted.

Knight grinned over his shoulder at the disgruntled ex-Marine.

"Where's your Yuletide spirit? Here we are heading for a nice, white Christmas——"

"Probably in the morgue," growled Doyle. "Just because you want to see a certain senorita is no reason I got to break my neck."

Knight had turned back to the controls.

"For the hundredth time, I tell you we were ordered up here. Something's happened at Washington."

"Sure something's happened," said Doyle. "Benita's been working on General Brett to get you there for Christmas. She can twist the old boy around her finger."

"This order came from Navy," snapped Knight.

"Well, you don't have to get tough about it," said Doyle, with a snicker. He broke off as the nasal voice of an airway announcer came from the tiny amplifier under the forward cowl.

Washington to Gray . . . Washington to Gray . . . Report your position!

There was a silence, then the call was repeated. But no answer followed.

"Gray's a pilot on the East Coast Lines," offered Doyle.

"Yes, I know him," said Knight, turning the radio knob.

"He's probably set down somewhere," Doyle added. "Got more sense than certain people."

Knight listened for a second to the monotonous dot-dash buzz of a radio-beacon signal, then banked the hurtling ship. He straightened, flying east. Doyle dubiously watched the compass in the rear cockpit.

"Maybe I shouldn't mention it," he said with sarcasm, "but there's a place called the Atlantic Ocean."

Knight chuckled.

"It's full of water," said Doyle, "and it's a helluva place to land an airplane."

Knight's eyes were on the maze of instruments before him.

"Don't worry, old man. We'll pick up the center of the beam in a minute and ride it straight in."

"Yeah. Into the ground," growled Doyle. "Or maybe you forgot this bus cruises at 270 since they did her over."

Knight did not answer. In spite of his careless manner, he knew they were in a perilous position. They had made the run from Miami non-stop, and the reserve tank was getting low. He kept his eyes glued to the instruments, waiting for the change in the beacon signal.

It came—a blending of the off-course signals into long buzzes, interspersed with the identification code of the Washington station. Knight banked to hold the center of the beam. He was reaching for the microphone, to call Washington for a ceiling report, when a silvery blur loomed through the snow ahead. He jerked the throttle and hastily ruddered aside.

The blur, grew swiftly into the bulk of a huge Douglas transport. Only the fact that they were flying in the same direction saved them from instant collision. Knight held his breath as the Northrop skidded aside. For a split-second he thought their wings would tangle, then the two ships slid apart. Doyle gave a sudden shout.

"Good heavens, Dick—*look!*"

Knight shot a hurried glance at the Douglas, then a feeling of horror came over him. One of the cabin windows was broken, and a man's head was dangling outside. Gruesome stains had darkened the side of the transport, with long, ugly streaks extending back toward the tail, where the wind had tossed the man's blood.

After that first second of nausea, Knight edged the Northrop in for a closer look. The Douglas had started to pull away because of the two-seater's reduced speed. He opened the throttle a trifle, ruddered in until he could see through the driving snow.

Some of the reading lights had been turned on in the cabin. At the window nearest the door a strangely dark face was pressed against the glass. He caught a glimpse of a hostess uniform. The girl was staring out with dilated, terrified eyes. But she did not move, and he knew that she was dead. A shiver ran over him as he saw the color of her face. It was a hideous green.

"Dead!" he heard Doyle cry hoarsely behind him. "Good lord, Dick—they're all dead!"

Knight's stunned eyes traversed the length of the cabin. Most of the passengers had slumped in their seats. At the fourth window forward, an old white-haired man had twisted around so that his face was visible. Like that of the hostess, it was a horrible green, and his glassy eyes held the same look of terror.

THE Northrop rocked in the propeller blast of the death-ship. Knight lifted the two-seater slightly, eased the ship forward to look down into the pilots' compartment. One of the pilots had fallen sidewise in his seat. The other man was staring up sightlessly, his hands at his sides. His face, also, was that ghastly emerald hue, but Knight could recognize his features.

The buzz of the radio beacon signal abruptly ceased, and the voice of the Washington airway announcer spoke with an anxious note—

Washington to Gray, Flight Eight . . . Washington to Gray, Flight Eight. . . Gray, report your position . . .

Knight grimly shook his head. Gray had reported for the last time.

"Take over," said Knight, looking back at Doyle. "Keep as close as you can."

Doyle dragged his eyes away from the cruising death-plane.

"Okay," he said huskily. He took the dual controls. Knight switched on his transmitter, picked up the micro-phone. He hesitated a second, then swung the wavelength lever to a point marked in red.

"Q to B," he said into the Mike. "Q to B . . . Q to B . . . Emergency!"

He switched on the receiver. Almost at once a voice answered from the amplifier—

Received! Connecting B. Stand by!

Knight looked across at the Douglas. Doyle pointed toward a round, dark spot on the curved dural which formed the cabin roof.

"That looks like a hole burned through there. What do you think?"

"Don't know," muttered Knight. "Watch out—don't get too close."

The Northrop eased away, under Doyle's guidance, kept on a parallel path. A low-pitched, guarded voice suddenly spoke from the miniature amplifier.

B to Q. Go ahead.

Knight recognized the accents of General Brett, his main War Department contact in the hazardous game of espionage. Swiftly, he explained the gruesome discovery Doyle and he had made. When he switched back to receiving, he was startled at the tension in Brett's usually controlled voice.

It's imperative that we have a chance to examine those bodies! You say the ship is cruising on its automatic pilot?

"Yes," said Knight, "and it was evidently set after they'd picked up the beam. It's following the beam now."

No chance to put a man aboard from another ship? Brett demanded.

"It would be suicide to try it, in this storm," Knight replied. "A man would slide off before he could cut a hole in the roof or break into the pilots' compartment."

Keep the plane in sight, Brett said tautly. Follow it until its fuel runs out, and keep us informed so we can reach the wreck quickly after it crashes.

Knight switched back to his transmitter.

"Can't do it," he said. "Only about fifteen minutes' gas left. Better send a ship from Bolling Field to get on the beam and follow the Douglas. It's flying at 5100 feet, cruising speed 203, and it's directly on the beam. Our position at this moment is about fifty or sixty miles South of Washington."

I'll have a ship in the air in five minutes, Brett replied hurriedly. Keep talking at intervals, so we can check your bearing and guide the pilot to you.

"Right," answered Knight. He put down the mike, gazed back briefly at Doyle. "Notice anything queer?"

"About Brett, you mean?" said Doyle.

"Yes. He didn't give a thought to the danger of the

plane's crashing in a city—all he wanted was a chance to examine those bodies.”

“Not like him,” muttered Doyle. He stared at the corpse-ship. “That poor devil hanging out there—there's something—” he broke off, made a strangled sound in his throat.

“What is it?” rapped Knight.

“His blood!” Doyle said thickly. “It's green!”

Knight felt an icy chill go over him, though the cockpit was artificially heated. He followed Doyle's eyes to splotches on the side of the Douglas, which at first he had thought dark red.

Doyle was right. They were the same gruesome color as the face of that dangling figure.

CHAPTER II AGENT A-46031

G

REEN BLOOD!” Doyle said in the same hoarse voice. “For heaven's sake, Dick—what can it mean?”

Knight silently shook his head.

There was a horrible fascination about that weird-colored blood, but he forced his attention back to the task at hand. Picking up the hand-mike, he called the War Department station on his specially assigned wave-length. While Doyle flew, he kept up a steady conversation with the Intelligence operator who had first answered. After a minute or two, General Brett cut in—

Your position is 38 miles South of Boiling. We're checking from there and Arlington. An A-17 is taking off and will come in from behind you at 5,000 feet. Edge off when you see it.

“I'll do that,” Knight said grimly. He turned around to Doyle. “Keep your eyes open. That ship may come barging into the beam from any direction.”

The words were hardly out of his mouth when something roared above the Northrop. Doyle let out a yell.

“How the devil did they get down here that fast?”

The new arrival whirled into a vertical bank just beyond the Douglas. Knight gave a start of amazement.

“That's not the A-17! It's a Morane-Saulnier—one of those new French fighters!” Doyle's jaw dropped.

“A Frog ship over here? You're crazy as——”

Br-r-r-r-t-t-t-t-t-t! Tiny tongues of flame darted

from spots in the other plane's wing. Doyle backsticked madly as tracers shot toward the Northrop. The grim-looking monoplane lanced up after them. Another blast flamed from the Chatellerault guns mounted in its wings, then it plunged back steeply at the Douglas. As it pitched down, Knight saw the insignia on its rudder.

It was the red star of Soviet Russia!

With a swift word to Doyle, he took the controls and dived. The mystery ship was almost aligned on the Douglas when he squeezed his top stick-button. Sliding flaps shot open in his wings, and two high-speed Brownings snarled into furious song. The Morane-Saulnier leaped like a whipped horse, streaked skyward.

“Get your .50's on him!” Knight shouted back at Doyle. “I've got to keep track of the Douglas!” Doyle seized the release-lever, and his two special 50-caliber guns jerked up from their recess aft of his pit. The single-seater was twisting back, a vague shape in the snow.

“Look out!” snapped Knight. “There's a cannon built into that engine. One shell from it, and we may be blown to pieces.”

Doyle swore, and the twin .50's blazed up at the red-starred ship. The Morane-Saulnier skidded violently, dived to put the Douglas between it and the Northrop. Suddenly, it pulled out and its guns hurled a fierce torrent into the storm. Another ship had appeared—a low-wing monoplane. For an instant, Knight thought it was the A-17 from Bolling Field. Then the plane curled past in a dizzy turn and he saw what it was.

His amazement at the sight of the French-built Soviet fighter grew into stupefaction. For the second ship was a Breda assault-plane, one of the deadliest sky-weapons in the Italian Air Force!

“Am I drunk, or do you see what I see?” howled Doyle.

The answer was a venomous burst from the Breda's four Safat guns. Knight threw the Northrop onto its wingtips and cut in his wing-root .50's. The heavy guns hammered into the fuselage of the Italian fighter. The Breda pilot spun away in a lightning renverse, and his ship was instantly lost in the storm.

A shadow now flashed over the Northrop, a flitting of something gray through the snow. Engine idle, the Morane-Saulnier had seized its chance for a stealthy approach while Doyle gaped at the other ship. The Chatelleraults crashed out one quick burst, and bullets

scored the long cowl in front of Knight. He had kicked away at first glimpse of that flitting shadow. But for the instinctive motion, both he and Doyle would have been finished. He plunged under the Douglas, zoomed steeply on the starboard side.

As he twisted around he saw the Breda reappear. The Italian ship was plummeting down at the cruising death-plane. A burst from its four guns ripped dural from the transport's tail. Doyle whirled his guns, crashed out a savage reply. The Breda lurched, then its nose snapped around and the raking force of its Safat battery pounded the Northrop's wing.

KNIGHT chandelled hastily, with his right wing-tip torn and gashed. The ship still answered the ailerons, but in another second it would have been too late. He heard Doyle cursing fiercely, then the quick, hard boom of the Morane-Saulnier's cannon sounded through the din.

The Douglas staggered, nosed down in a crooked dive. Knight saw the green face of the senior pilot as the transport lunged past and down. The red-starred ship was coming in for another blast at the Douglas. Knight brought the twin-Wasp to full speed, whipped around at the grim-lined raider. Flame belched from the center of the Morane-Saulnier's prop, just as he came into range. Another shell from the Hisso-cannon smoked into the falling Douglas, then a loud concussion drowned the bellowing engines.

The corpse-laden transport seemed to dissolve in a blast of fire. Hurtling pieces of wreckage flew through the snow, and the explosion tossed the Northrop upward for a hundred feet. The glare of the blast lit up the two foreign ships, and Knight saw the triumphant grin on the face of the Soviet pilot.

With a furious shove at the rudder, he swung the nose around. The man in the red-starred ship started a frantic zoom. Knight's fingers clamped hard on the .50-gun controls. Two fiery streaks drilled through the side of the other man's pit. The mouth of the stricken pilot opened in a frightful contortion, and Knight could feel the agony of that terrible, unheard scream. But there was no pity in his eyes as he saw the dying man fall.

The Morane-Saulnier whipped around in a crazy turn, then fell into a spin. Knight looked around for the Breda, but it was not to be seen. He glanced back questioningly at Doyle as he shoved the stick forward.

"Think I nicked him!" Doyle grated. "But he got away—damn him!"

Knight stared down at the spinning plane. The explosion of the Douglas had literally blasted a hole in the storm, and the heat of the flaming wreckage had opened up a space through the falling snow. He nosed down to keep the Morane-Saulnier in sight, then for the first time realized that General Brett's voice was crackling from the amplifier.

Q! Q! Q! Brett was shouting. Why in Hades don't you answer? What's happening?

Knight snatched at the pronged microphone, cut in the transmitter.

"Douglas shot down—blown to pieces by Morane-Saulnier with red star insignia! Italian Breda 64 also in fight. Shot down first ship. The second escaped.

An uproar came from the amplifier as he switched to receiving, then Brett's voice rose above the rest.

Q! Don't make any other report! Make for Bolling at once . . . you can land safely . . . ceiling is about 200 . . . you'll be met there.

"Received," Knight answered as the jumble of words ended. He switched off the generator, gazed over the nose of the Northrop. He could see the Maryland bank of the Potomac, for part of the Douglas wreckage had struck near the water and was still blazing. As he watched, the spinning Morane fighter crashed into the river with a tremendous splash. In a few moments the flames from the wreck diminished and the curtain of snow began to close in again. He leveled out at 200 feet, following the river, which showed darkly through the pelting flakes.

Six minutes later, the Northrop circled over the hangars of the Naval Air Station and then slanted down toward the Army side of the long field. Knight dropped the wheels in position, made a quick landing. As the ship stopped rolling he turned and met Doyle's eyes. Neither man spoke for a second, then Doyle drew a long breath.

"All right, you tell me—did it happen or am I nuts?" Knight pointed out at the bullet-torn wingtip.

"But good lord!" erupted Doyle. "How could those ships get over here? What are they after?"

"One thing's plain," Knight muttered. "They were both trying to cover up the truth about the Douglas. I saw the Breda pilot fire on it a couple of times."

"But I'll swear they were firing at each other," objected Doyle.

Knight started to taxi in to the line.

"My guess," he said, "is a secret war for some huge prize. But how they come to be in America—"

HE DID not finish, for a War Department car had just braked to a stop near the line. The uniformed driver jumped down and hurried toward the Northrop. Knight nodded for Doyle to take the controls while he unlocked the special gear which held the cockpit enclosure in place. As the ship stopped, he pushed back the enclosure and stepped out.

"Mr. Knight?" said the man in olive drab, breathlessly. "General Brett wants to see you at Headquarters, sir, as fast as possible."

"Just a minute," returned Knight. "I'll have to look at this wing."

He inspected the bullet-holes, went to the small baggage compartment and unfastened the door. The driver, a timid-looking man with large tortoise-shell glasses, fidgeted uneasily.

"The General was in a terrible hurry, sir," he said.

"Does he want Mr. Doyle, too?" asked Knight, as he took his overcoat and hat from the compartment.

"Uh—yes, sir, I thought you understood that."

Knight carelessly lighted a cigarette, beckoned to Doyle, who had switched off the engine and climbed out. The driver missed the glance which passed between them. An officer and several mechanics were hurrying toward the Northrop from the Operations Office. Knight did not wait for them.

"It's Major Puller—he'll understand," he said to Doyle.

The driver opened the rear door. Doyle climbed in, and Knight was about to follow when a phaeton with its top down skidded around the corner of the nearest hangar and swung toward the Northrop. At the wheel was General Brett, and beside him was Benita.

The driver, his timid face suddenly transformed, leaped back, clawing inside his coat for a gun. Knight's left hand shot out, twisting the man's arm. The impostor gave a howl of pain and went to his knees. With a snarl, he jerked out a small blue-snouted pistol. Knight's shoe cracked against his hand as the gun blazed, and the shot went into the ground.

Doyle plunged headlong out of the Army car. Before the assassin could snatch up his fallen pistol, the stocky ex-Marine was on him. Two thudding smacks from his fists, and the man collapsed limply.

"Good work, Larry," said Knight. "See what you can find on him."

He turned as Benita and the general ran toward him from the phaeton. Benita's dark eyes were wide with alarm.

"Ricardo!" she cried. "Are you hurt?"

He smiled down into her upturned face.

"No, I'm all right, *querida*." Their eyes held for a moment longer, then he looked quickly at Brett. "This man evidently waylaid one of your drivers and took his uniform, as well as the car. He gave himself away, but we were going along with him to see what he was up to."

The gray-haired Intelligence Chief took a hasty glance at the Army tag number.

"Yes, it's Sergeant Johnson's machine. I sent him to pick you up—then I decided to meet you myself, to save time getting the details. Benita happened along at the Department just when I was leaving."

He wheeled as Major Fuller, the lanky C.O. of Bolling Field, reached the scene with four men at his heels.

"What's happened now?" Fuller said, panting.

"Oh—I didn't recognize you, General Brett."

There was a worried expression on Brett's kindly face.

"Send your men back out of earshot," he said in an undertone.

Fuller obeyed, and the mechanics drew to one side, staring at the captive. Doyle had searched the half-conscious man, and he now got to his feet with an assortment of objects.

"Gun, keys, watch, handkerchief and wallet," he enumerated the items. "No name in the wallet. Gun's a Colt .32 Special, and the watch is Swiss."

KNIGHT examined the wallet, ripped open the lining. There was a card inside, with an odd seal and several numbers stamped on it. He looked from the figures to the key-ring. There were five keys. He scrutinized the middle one, looked at Brett and nodded.

"A-46031—the number's the same as the one on the identification card."

Major Fuller gazed down, puzzled, at the bruised face of the prisoner.

"I don't understand. Who is he?"

Knight's usual expression of whimsical indolence had vanished, and his dark-blue eyes were hard.

"He's an agent of the OGPU, the Russian Secret Police," he answered tersely.

The major started.

"Then we'd better get him locked up!"

"He probably won't talk," interposed General Brett, "but take him away and see what you can do. Call me at Headquarters if you learn anything—and notify the F.B.I. that Sergeant Johnson has been kidnapped but to keep it out of the papers."

Fuller saluted. "Yes, sir. But what about the Douglas? The A-17 pilot just radioed that he followed orders but can't find the ship."

"It crashed," Brett told him. "Send the pilot word to land here."

The major looked curious, but asked nothing further. At his command, the mechanics picked up the captive and hustled him off. The man had recovered his senses, and as he was taken away he gave Knight a murderous glare. Benita shivered.

"Mus' it always be like thees, Ricardo—that some one try to kill you?"

General Brett spoke before Knight could reply.

"We can't think of that now, my child. We must get back to Headquarters."

He led the way to the War Department machine.

"We can talk better in a closed car. Doyle, will you take the wheel? Benita, I'll have one of Fuller's men bring your phaeton up later."

Knight hesitated a second, looking at Benita. She made a charming little pout.

"I know—it is that you have big, important things you not want me to hear, no?"

"Not that," said Knight. "They may be watching for this machine. But at that, you'll be safer than in an open car."

Doyle took out his automatic, laid it beside him on the seat.

"We'd better keep our eyes peeled," he grunted.

CHAPTER III THE GREEN CLOUD

A

S DOYLE SENT THE CAR rolling past the hangars, Brett turned a haggard face toward Knight.

"Now, tell me what happened."

Knight complied. Brett shook his head dazedly.

"It's a worse muddle than ever. If we only had the key to it—but I'd better start at the beginning. As you know, we keep an eye on certain embassies here. Two nights ago, we noticed a sudden activity at the Soviet Embassy. Cables in a new cipher began to fly between here and Moscow. At the same time our code men in Communications caught some peculiar messages from Rome to the Italian Embassy. Half an hour later, Germany chimed in, and within two hours France and England were flashing messages to their embassies by

radio and cable. They were all in new codes—evidently reserved for emergencies—and we haven't been able to break them yet."

"No word from our own Intelligence in Europe?" Knight asked.

"Nothing that helps. Messages from Rome and Paris indicate that our men know something is going on, but they don't seem to know what it is."

"You don't think a European war's broken out?" queried Doyle.

"No," said Brett, "our agents have several ways of getting such information to us. Beside, there'd be no need of keeping that under cover. They're desperate about something—and that something is here in the United States."

Knight gave him a keen glance.

"What about the Douglas? From the way you took my report, I've an idea that the same thing has occurred elsewhere."

"You're right," said Brett with a grimace. "Whatever it is, that same death has struck down nine people beside those in the Douglas."

"Were the others in a plane?" inquired Knight.

"No, they were a farmer and his family, at a place down in Southern Maryland. A neighbor investigated this morning, after noticing no one had been seen for a day or so. The farmer's family, his hired-hands and all his live stock were dead. The nine people had turned green, but the effect wasn't so noticeable on the cattle."

"Why can't those bodies be examined, sir?" said Doyle.

"Because they're burned up," replied General Brett. "The neighbor called the State Police, and they broadcast orders for some of their men to go to the place. When they arrived, all the buildings were in flames. They saw one of the bodies, but couldn't get it out before the house collapsed. The man who phoned the police said he heard an explosion just before the fire broke out, but didn't see any one near the place."

"No planes heard?" Knight queried.

"None. I asked particularly, because three ships were stolen last night and I thought an incendiary bomb might have been dropped on that farm."

"Were they Army ships?" asked Knight.

"One," said the general. "It was stolen from Wright Field—I've sent for the details. The others were Navy ships, stolen at Hampton Roads. A sentry and an officer were fatally wounded by the men who did it, but the officer lived long enough to say that one of their assailants was a Russian. Thus the Navy sent for you—because of the international espionage angle."

Doyle made the turn at the District pumping station, sent the car speeding toward Anacostia.

"What type of planes were they?" Knight asked suddenly.

Brett frowned.

"I don't know. The reports are on my desk, but everything has happened so fast I haven't all the details."

"Well, those ships have got to base somewhere," Doyle said practically. "Why not broadcast the theft story on a big hook-up? You're pretty sure to grab one of the birds soon. Then a little third-degree work—"

"I can grasp the idea from there," Brett said drily. "As a matter of fact, we're hoping for the opportunity very soon. A crash was reported two hours ago, somewhere in a woods between here and Annapolis. We're working with Commerce inspectors to locate it with the hope it was one of the stolen ships and that the pilot would be alive."

THERE was a brief silence, while the car rolled through the snowy street to Anacostia Bridge.

"I forgot to tell you," Knight said, "about one gruesome discovery we made.. I mentioned that poor chap who had broken one of the Douglas windows. His blood had turned green."

Benita drew a sharp breath.

"Oh, Ricardo—how horrible!"

Even Brett looked shaken. "Then whatever it is," he said thickly, "must affect both the red and white corpuscles. That means a deadly poison."

Knight slowly nodded.

"And the battle over the Douglas proves something else," he said. "The— pilots of those foreign ships obviously understand English and also our radio-beacon system. They caught my message to you and immediately dived to get on the beam, so they could bring down the transport. Either there were American pilots in those ships, or else foreign pilots secretly trained for possible action over here."

"That means spies, of course," Brett added harshly. "But why are they over here? What are they after?"

No one answered him, and a grim silence fell over the group. Doyle drove as rapidly as he could, taking the short way around the Navy Yard and along the waterfront to Potomac Park. The snowfall was lessening, but it was nearing sundown and the sky was heavily gray. Knight looked at Benita and saw that his usually gay young face was clouded.

"I'm sorry, *mi querida*, you had to hear all this," he

said to her in Spanish. "I know you must often wonder at this so-called civilization of ours."

She smiled with a trace of sadness.

"There is much I do not understand. Sometimes I think of those other days, back in Lost Valley. It was peaceful there, though we knew nothing of all this wonderful world. With so much to make them happy; it seems strange many people hate each other and wish to kill."

Despite their meaning, the soft Spanish words were like music. Knight listened, his eyes on her lovely, expressive lips. The Girl from Lost Valley . . . She was dressed in the latest fashion now—for in two months she had learned more of the art of smart dress than most women do in a lifetime. But he would always remember her as he first saw her, the girl from the past, in her quaint and colorful costume of olden Spain.

Her nearness, the faint fragrance of her hair, for a moment lessened the horror of what he had seen in the Douglas. But an exclamation from Doyle brought him back with a jerk.

"Dick! We're being trailed!"

Instinctively, Knight pulled Benita away from the rear window.

"It's the tan coupe," Doyle tossed over his shoulder. "I've been watching it in the mirror, but there's only one bird in it—don't think he'll try anything."

Knight leaned forward to look in the mirror.

"Step on it, then stop suddenly," he directed.

Drawing the .38 which he carried under his left arm, he motioned for Benita to keep back in the corner. Brett, a veteran of many battles, showed no trace of excitement. Doyle bore down on the throttle, raced for two hundred feet and then slammed on the brakes. Knight had rolled down the window. With his gun out of sight, he waited. The coupe swerved hastily when the driver saw he could not stop in time.

THE man bent over the wheel, his engine roaring, as he tried to speed on by. The rear wheels spun in the snow, and for a moment Knight saw the driver's swarthy face. He heard Benita gasp something, then the coupe's wheels took hold and the machine shot around the next turn.

"Let him go," said Knight, as Doyle started in pursuit. "I've learned all we need. His name is Vornoff, and he's one of the attaches at the Soviet Embassy."

Benita caught at his arm excitedly.

"Thees is something most strange! One hour ago, I run into that man, and he act very peculiar."

"Where was this?" Knight exclaimed.

"Up on *la calle* Sixteen and the funny one I cannot pronounce—"

"Sixteenth and H?" said Knight. "What happened?"

"I bump his automobile. A man with him—a very wicked-looking man—stare back at me and send that one to talk."

"Wait," said Knight. His voice held a suppressed emotion. "Describe this other man. What made you call him wicked-looking?"

Benita wrinkled her pretty forehead.

"Because he—he look very much like the picture of the Devil," she said candidly. She smiled at General Brett. "You know, Uncle John—the one you show me last week."

"She means my painting of Mephistopheles and Faust," Brett explained.

"Could you see his eyes?" Knight swiftly asked Benita.

She looked startled.

"Si, but that was what I do not like the most! His eyebrows, they are so very black—his eyes, they not seem—"

"Were they by any chance a queer golden color?" Knight hastily broke in.

"Maybe it is that!" said Benita. "I think at first it is only the eyebrows, they make his eyes look that way."

Knight and the general stared at each other.

"Borzec!" muttered Brett. "If that fiend is here, the stakes must be tremendous."

"Then this man, you know him?" exclaimed Benita.

Knight slowly moved his head.

"The man you saw was Nikolai Borzec, chief of air intelligence for Russia—and probably the shrewdest spy on earth."

"And to think," Doyle said fiercely from in front, "that I once had the chance to drill him!"

"We've an old murder charge we could use against him," Brett said harshly, "but the problem is to catch him."

"He may be hiding in Washington," said Knight. "If we can get word to your spotters before Vornoff reaches the Embassy—"

"We have a direct wire to a house nearby, and two men are always on duty," Brett answered. "Swing up to Constitution Avenue, Doyle—and never mind the red lights!"

Siren blasting, Doyle sent the Army car speeding along the broad avenue on which the Munitions Building was located. Fortunately, traffic in that area was

scant, as the Government workers had been dismissed for a half-holiday. The car shot across Seventeenth and raced on toward the Army Headquarters. As they drew up at the main entrance, Knight saw two of the uniformed door-guards staring into the sky.

In the same moment, the roar of motors became audible. Knight's pulses leaped as he recognized the angry bellow of ships in a furious fight. Above the vibrant roaring came a sharper sound, the pound of high-speed guns.

"Dog-fight!" yelled Doyle. "Listen to that scrap!"

A plunging shape appeared vaguely through the snowy sky. It grew swiftly into the outlines of a Breda 64. Diving furiously after it came a Boeing P-26. The Italian ship zoomed crookedly as the pilot saw the buildings beneath. Guns blasting, the Boeing shot up after it. Both planes were momentarily swallowed up in the gloom, then the Breda reappeared, wobbling down on the verge of a spin. Wings swaying, the Italian fighter dipped toward a small park beyond the Naval Hospital.

"He's going to crash!" shouted Doyle. "Come on!"

All four of them had jumped from the car. Benita sprang back inside, as Brett motioned hurriedly to Knight.

"Go ahead!" said the general. "I'll rush that order about Borzec!"

Knight leaped to the running-board, and Doyle let out the clutch. The Breda was a hundred feet from the ground when its motor abruptly caught. The pilot pulled up, but before he had climbed sixty feet the Boeing pitched down like an avenging Fury. Glowing tracers streaked through the snow. The Breda twisted on its left wing, dropped like a rock. There was a grinding crash, muffled by the roar of the Boeing.

"Straight ahead," Knight flung at Doyle.

THEY raced to the river bank, swung left into the road which bordered the stream. A quarter of a mile away, near an old bridge to lower Georgetown, Knight saw the wrecked Breda. Other cars were swarming toward the scene. The Army machine was within a hundred yards of the crash when the Boeing dived across the road. Its guns clattered, and slugs dug a smoking path in front of the car. Doyle spun the wheel and the car turned almost completely around on the slick paving. Knight jumped to the ground.

"Keep going," he ordered Doyle. "Get Benita away from here."

"No, no—wait!" the girl cried, but Knight did not stop. The Boeing had zoomed again, and his way to

the wreck was for the moment clear. The cars which had started for the crash had stopped as the Boeing unleashed its guns. A few pedestrians were running across the bridge, away from the wreck.

A limp arm was all that he could see when he reached the Breda. The rest of the pilot's body was hidden in the crumpled wreckage. He lifted the dangling hand to see if any sign of life remained. The pilot's glove came off, and the hand dropped back loosely. Light from one of the halted cars reflected from a ring on that too-limp hand.

Knight bent over hastily. Against a jet-black background, a tiny white skull was set like a crest.

"Good Lord—the *Arditi*!" he whispered.

The seal of Italy's famous Squadron of Death! It meant that the man crushed in the Breda's cockpit was one of the noted "Hundred"—those reckless ones who had offered to dive headlong with deadly loads of bombs into enemy vessels, if war came. And now, to find one of that fierce band here in the States . . .

He jumped to his feet as the rising roar of the Boeing's engine warned him of another dive. Scarlet dabs of flame played about the ship's guns as the pilot kicked around toward him. Knight flung himself down beside the battered wreck. There was a thudding of bullets into the crumpled plane, a sharp nip at his cheek as a piece of flying dural struck it, then the Boeing zoomed again. He sprang to his feet, braced himself for the attempt to lift the battered wing. The pilot was dead, but there might be some clue in the cockpit . . .

"Ricardo!" Benita's voice suddenly moaned from down the road. "Ricardo the green cloud!"

He whirled, then a cold hand seemed to close about his heart. A hundred feet away, a cloud of weird green vapor was spreading swiftly toward him!

CHAPTER IV RIDDLE OF THE THUNDER

WITH HIS HEART POUNDING madly, Knight streaked down the river bank. Perspiration was running down his forehead when he reached the car. Benita and Doyle sprang to meet him.

"I'm all right," he said hoarsely. He looked back. The sinister cloud was already fading away.

"Where in Heaven's name did that come from?" he asked Doyle unsteadily.

Doyle's homely face was white.

"It seemed to come right out of the ground. It was like——"

A chorus of screams broke in on his words. Knight spun around. Near the old bridge, another of the strange green clouds was springing up. A dozen men and women who had just left their cars to approach the wreck were fleeing desperately before that swift-spreading vapor. The greenish mass, bright under one car's headlights, swept out and engulfed all but two men in front. The cries were instantly choked off.

As through an emerald mist, Knight saw the trapped victims tumble to the ground. Benita gave a sob and turned her face away. He helped her into the car, spoke to Doyle in a low voice.

"No telling where it may strike next, and we can't help those poor wretches now."

Doyle hurriedly took the wheel. They were almost at the turn of the road when a deafening explosion shook the air. Knight stared backward. Flame geysered up from the center of the river just as he turned. It was followed by still a third blast, as fire spurted up from a point a block away. Doyle sent the car hurtling back toward the War Department building. As they stopped in front of the main entrance, the ex-Marine turned and looked, taut-faced, at Knight.

"What did it?" he rasped.

"I don't know," Knight muttered. "The explosions seemed to mushroom up from the earth—and the river. They weren't from bombs, for we'd have heard them falling."

"Those poor people!" Benita whispered as they went toward the center door. "Did you see, Ricardo? Some of them had Christmas gifts—maybe for their little ones—"

"I shouldn't have let you go with us," he said huskily.

"The damned butchers!" raged Doyle. "If we only knew how they were doing it!"

Knight's answer was cut off by the clamor of firetrucks rushing past. A police car followed, siren wailing. The inevitable crowd came in the wake of the firetrucks, some on foot, some in cars. The street-lights, flashing on, lit up the scene. Knight and the others hurried on past the excited door-guards and made for General Brett's office. They found him in the Communication Section, surrounded by a group of frantic officers. Buzzers were rasping, and three or four

Intelligence men were vainly trying to answer the flood of calls. Brett seized Knight by the arm, led him to his private office.

"We've had a dozen wild reports. What happened?"

Knight told him. Brett looked stunned.

"If they weren't bombs, then the green clouds and the explosions must have been set off by somebody on the ground."

"No one was near enough," said Knight. He lighted a cigarette, stared soberly at Brett through the smoke.

"I knew it would come sometime—and now it's here."

"What do you mean?" demanded the older man.

"A silent death weapon."

Brett ran his hands through his gray hair.

"We've got to find the answer—now—tonight!"

The Chief of Staff just called—the Secretary is on his way—the White House will be after us next."

"The pilot of that Breda was one of the *Aerie Arditi*," Knight said sternly. "The Italian Ambassador can be forced to explain."

"No, we've tried that," interrupted Brett helplessly. "State Department has called the Soviet, Italian and French embassies. They politely say we're crazy, that there aren't any of their ships or pilots over here."

"And we can't produce the proof," Knight said bitterly. "That Breda was nearly destroyed by the third explosion, and the fire will do the rest."

The general nodded dully.

"That crash Near Annapolis had been destroyed, too—by dynamite. There wasn't any sign of the pilot, but the inspectors found tracks of a car on an old road near there and blood in the snow. Evidently the man was spirited away—dead or alive."

"Probably another *Arditi* pilot," muttered Knight, "or else one of the Reds. Both sides are certainly covering up their tracks. They must be using all the agents in Washington, to move that fast."

Brett was nervously pacing the floor. "They're working together to hide the truth—but it's evident they're fighting each other at the same time."

Knight gazed into space.

"I think the prize is the secret of the silent death weapon. Whatever causes the green clouds must also cause those explosions."

"I still think they were bombs!" Brett jerked out. "The sound of that Boeing kept you from hearing them fall. I'm going to call the listening-posts at Port Myer and see if they heard any other planes."

He made the call, but before the answer came an orderly appeared from the anteroom.

"The Secretary wants to see you, General," he said.

Brett stood up, motioned to his phone.

"Take the call," he said to Knight. "And see if you can make anything out of those reports on the desk."

HE STRODE out, bracing himself like a man about to take an icy plunge. Knight looked after him compassionately, then took up the phone. In a few moments he had one of the listening-post sergeants on the wire.

"No, sir, we didn't hear nothin' but the two ships," the man said in answer to his query. "That is, nothin' except a little thunder."

"Thunder?" said Knight quickly.

"Yes, sir—we been hearin' it off an' on ever since Commerce asked us to try to pick up that Douglas. I thought it was kinda funny—thunder with a snowstorm—but th' lieutenant said he'd heard it plenty of times."

"Can you hear it now?" Knight rapped.

There was a pause.

"Yes, sir—it kinda comes an' goes, real deep. Must be lightnin' up above."

"Take a bearing on that sound!" Knight said swiftly.

"Take a bearin' on thunder, sir?" said the sergeant, incredulously.

"Yes," insisted Knight. "See if you can locate the center of it."

He heard mumbled voices at the other end of the line, then silence. He ran his eyes over the littered papers before him. The stolen Army ship had been a P-26 . . . it had been experimentally fitted for high-altitude combat . . . The Navy ships were both Seversky Demonstrators, with the same equipment.

"Hello?" he heard the sergeant exclaim,

"What did you find?" he snapped.

"That thunder's movin' around so fast we can't keep on it, sir! Seems to be everywhere. Can't spot any center at all."

"Keep trained on that sound as closely as possible!" Knight interrupted crisply. "Call Fort Washington and have them do the same. Keep both stations plugged in to Communications, and have your bearings transmitted by radio every two minutes on 236 Kilocycles."

"Yes, sir!" said the sergeant. Knight put down the phone, a strange look in his eyes. What was it that Schroeder had said? . . . A deep, heavy rumble, like thunder rolling about the sky and echoing back at you . . .

He scribbled a note, made a hasty call to Bolling

Field, and went out to the anteroom. Benita and Doyle were talking together, while distraught officers passed back and forth.

"What's up?" Doyle said anxiously.

A hurrying lieutenant stared at Knight. The free-lance agent brought a careless expression into his face.

"Nothing new. Let's go—the General said for us to take Benita home."

But out in the hall he steered them quickly toward the nearest stairway.

"Benita, I want you to take this note to the General. He's in the Secretary's office. Tell the Secretary's aide that 'Q' said it was vitally important."

She searched his face fearfully.

"You go—to risk your life, Ricardo?" she faltered.

"Do you remember the people who died in that green cloud?" he said.

She clung to him suddenly, her dark eyes pleading.

"But why must you be the one to go? There are so many others—"

Gently, he disengaged her hands.

"There's no time to explain to anyone else, *querida*. I'll be back—*manana*."

"*Manana*," she whispered, then tried to smile as he hurried after Doyle.

Outside, Knight took the wheel of the Army car. Doyle looked sidewise at him as the machine sped down the street.

"Where now?" he said resignedly.

"To a place where we've never been," said Knight, grimly. "And maybe we won't be back."

BACK in the semi-gloom of the old Munitions Building, Benita Navarre watched the tall figure of Richard Knight swing through the doorway.

"Vaya con Dios, Ricardo," she whispered, as he disappeared. "May God be with you."

She turned, went down the long corridor. There were but few lights, for most of the building was empty. Other halls, black with shadow, branched off at her left. She stopped, uncertain. This must be the wrong floor. She went back to the center stairway. As she reached the landing half-way to the next floor, a sallow-faced man came down. He was looking past her, and suddenly she heard a furtive step.

"*Teper! Now!*" a sibilant voice hissed.

She sprang aside as the man in front leaped at her. A hand was hastily clasped over her mouth from behind.

She kicked backward at her captor, and he swore in

a foreign tongue. Her struggle threw him off balance, and he fell to his knees, dragging her down with him.

She caught at the staircase, tugging with her other hand at the paw held over her mouth. She was abruptly jerked to her feet. Her vanity bag went flying, and she saw the sallow man dash after it. Something moist, oddly pungent, was pressed against her nostrils. She made a last desperate fight to free herself, then her senses whirled and she seemed to fall gently into blackness.

When she recovered consciousness, she was in a big chair in the center of a dimly lighted room. Heavy red curtains covered the windows, and the room was hazy with the smoke of cigarettes. Her head ached dully.

A sour-visaged old woman stood near the door. The sallow man and the swarthy agent, Vornoff, were in front of the chair. Through the doorway, Benita glimpsed a man seated before a radio transmitting set. As she turned her head, Vornoff took a step closer.

"Where is the note?" he snarled.

Benita made no answer. The sallow man looked nervously toward the doorway.

"Not so loud," he said hoarsely. "If he doesn't know there was a note—"

The words choked in his throat as the sinister face of Nikolai Borzec appeared beyond the woman's shoulder. Borzec's strange golden eyes fixed themselves on the sallow man.

"Get out!" he said. "I'll attend to you later."

Cringing, the other man hurried past. Borzec looked from the old woman to Vornoff.

"Well?" he demanded.

Vornoff wet his lips with his tongue.

"I may have misunderstood about there being a note, *Kapeetahn*. Knight may have told her the message for the general. I was hiding back in a side corridor and I did not hear plainly."

He came to a mumbling stop under Borzec's sardonic gaze.

"So you let her trick you! A girl who never even knew of the modern world until two months ago—and you a trained agent!"

Vornoff groaned.

"It was not in her handbag, and Luza has searched her twice. I can't understand——"

Borzec silenced him with a contemptuous gesture and turned to Benita. The weird eyes under his black brows bored into her, but she returned the stare unflinchingly. At last he smiled, and made an ironic little bow.

"My compliments, *Senorita* Navarre. You are, it seems, one of the few beautiful women who think it necessary to exercise their brains."

To her surprise, he had spoken in Spanish. She regarded him with a cool scorn.

"You will learn nothing from me, *senor*. Even if I knew what you wish, I would not tell you."

The pupils of his eyes glittered. "We Russians, *senorita*, have ways of loosening reluctant tongues. I hope I shall not be forced—"

"*Kapeetahn!*" came a cry from the other room. The radio operator sprang to the doorway, head-set wires dangling. "The War Department is relaying messages to 'Q'—he is in a plane somewhere above Washington!"

Borzec whirled, snatched the paper the man held out. As he read the words, his Satanic face darkened with fury.

"Bungler!" he rasped at Vornoff. "Knight has guessed at least part of the truth—and you let him and that broken-nosed fool slip through your fingers!"

The swarthy agent backed away in panic. "But, *Kapeetahn*, how could he suspect—"

Borzec cursed him in Russian.

"He suspect enough that two listening-posts are relaying bearings to him!"

"But it is impossible to get accurate ranges! Beside that, with the Northrop there could be no danger."

The *Kapeetahn* laughed fiercely.

"And you call yourself an agent! I have been here less than five hours, and I know that the Northrop carries the very equipment which could ruin everything. It is a Government plane equipped for espionage purposes. It was recently rebuilt with a specially-braced cabin which can be sealed tight. It has three-stage compressors—" he wheeled to the staring operator. "Call Number 11. Warn him that Knight and Doyle have taken off and will probably be in the danger area within half an hour."

The operator ran back to his set. Borzec turned savagely to Vornoff.

"It is time we were leaving. Bring the girl—if she knows the secret it would be dangerous to leave her here."

"But, *Kapeetahn*," protested Vornoff, "what if she should try to give the alarm as we pass through the city?"

Borzec smiled down sardonically at Benita.

"*Senorita* Navarre has such a lovely throat. It would be a pity to have to cut it for her."

CHAPTER V DEATH IN THE STRATOSPHERE

UNDER A FROZEN MOON, the Northrop climbed steadily. Knight gazed out into the icy void, his eyes ceaselessly searching for some sign of movement.

The altimeter hand stood at 42,500, and the Q-plane flew through an eery sky. Below, there was only a sinister blackness, but above and about them the stars shone frigidly.

They had left the snow-clouds behind at 18,000 feet. The twin-banked Wasp was now on the second stage of the supercharger, as was the special compressor which supplied air at normal pressure to the tightly sealed cockpit. Knight peered back at Doyle. The cockpit lights were off, but the moon shone down through the transparent enclosure and he could see the other man looking out into space.

The Northrop jolted suddenly, shot up on a rising air-current. For the next minute Knight battled the controls, then the pitching ended as abruptly as it had begun.

"What the devil was that?" exclaimed Doyle.

"The tropopause layer," said Knight, "Listen!"

Through the sealed cockpit came a deep, majestic rumble, muffled somewhat by the thickness of the braced cabin. It seemed to come from all directions.

"It's the echo of our own engine," said Knight.

"Doyle, we're in the stratosphere!"

The plane seemed to hang motionless in space, not the slightest quiver moving its wings. Doyle gazed out into the moon-lit void, listened for a moment to that slow, deep thunder.

"You were right!" he said in an awed voice. "The answer must be up here, after all."

"Keep watch to the left," Knight told him. "I'll watch on the right. At this speed we'd have little warning."

Doyle looked at the rear air-speed meter.

"We're still showing only 280."

Knight shook his head.

"We're making more than 500. Speed is almost doubled at this altitude."

Doyle swore under his breath.

"I don't like all this business," he muttered. "Closed up in here—it's like being locked in a coffin."

Knight inspected one of the luminous dials before him.

"Be thankful it is sealed tight. If it weren't—"

W-A-R to Q . . . W-A-R to Q . . .

The tiny loud-speaker under the cowl had broken in metalically.

. . . A second thunder-disturbance has just been picked up. Impossible to distinguish from first one now. General area about sixty-mile circle, shifting South of Washington. That is all.

"They've picked up the sound from our Northrop," said Knight.

"I still don't savvy why it sounds like thunder," returned Doyle.

"All air-motion is lateral in the stratosphere," explained Knight. "In this thin air, there's little resistance, and the sound spreads out over a wide area."

"Just about the way we'll be spread out," growled Doyle, "if anything goes wrong and this bus heads down at 500 per!"

Knight laughed, but it was a forced laugh. During the conversion of the Northrop for high-altitude flights he had conferred with stratosphere experts, and he knew their danger was far more than Doyle dreamed. The ship was now at nearly 48,000 feet, and the pressure outside was only about one-ninth of the normal air inside. If the sealed cockpit should burst from the internal pressure, Doyle and he would suffer a horrible death. In the sudden change, their hearts and lungs, built for sea-level pressure, would expand enormously and probably explode. So would most of their other organs.

He drove away the ugly thought, ran his eyes across the double row of instruments. The superchargers were now running at triple-stage, and he could feel the added power of the droning engine. The temperature outside was 69 below, but it was pleasantly warm within the cabin. Compressing the rarefied air to normal pressure raised its temperature to a terrific degree. It was necessary to bypass it through cooling fins outside to bring it down to a temperature they could stand. He had been forced to shut off the electrical heater at 22,000 feet.

W-A-R to Q . . .

The loud-speaker had again cut in on his thoughts. *. . . There seems to be a third disturbance. Cannot get accurate bearing. General Brett requests that you re—*

There was a sharp crack, and the voice ended.

"That sounded like a pistol shot!" yelled Doyle.

"Borzec's spies must have broken into the station," Knight said harshly. "We were getting too close to—"

He flung his head back, stared upward. It had been for only an instant, but something had seemed to flit across the face of the moon. He started to bank. That scudding shadow had appeared to be moving West . . .

"Dick! There's a ship!" Doyle shouted.

Knight jerked around. A small plane was racing in from their left quarter. As he spun around, faint tracer lines smoked through the icy sky. He instinctively shoved on the rudder.

The Northrop skidded dizzily—and the other plane vanished!

ASTOUNDED, Knight ruddered into straight flight. Doyle was gaping up through the transparent top.

"Lord!" he said in a stunned voice. "If we'd even ticked wings . . ."

Something shone for an instant in the cold moonlight, then the other ship reappeared. Knight braced himself, gloved fingers taut on the stick. This was not fighting—this was stark madness! At these speeds—

"Look out!" howled Doyle. "There's another ship!"

Knight took one look and froze. There was a roar, a vast blur of light, and the hurtling giant was gone. The Northrop slewed crazily in the wake of the monster. In his frantic attempt to keep it out of a dive, he had no time to look for the other ships. His first warning was the heavy pound of Doyle's .50-guns.

"Turn right!" Doyle shouted wildly. "That devil's going to crash us!"

Knight barely moved the controls, for he knew now what to expect. His safety-belt gave a fierce pull as the two-seater swerved, and he heard Doyle thud against the side of the cockpit. The smaller plane streaked by, twisting around in a turn. As it cut in parallel he saw that it was a Seversky Demonstrator. Its guns blazed, and the pilot flicked the nose toward the racing Northrop. Knight snapped the throttle back, and the Seversky's pale tracers curved off into space. In a flash, the stolen Navy ship was half a mile away.

He opened the throttle hastily, for the Northrop was squashing down in the thin air. As the ship picked up speed again, Doyle spoke in a muffled voice.

"Hold her straight a second, Dick—I've got to tighten my belt."

"Are you hurt?" Knight said anxiously.

"No—just banged my head—all set now."

The Seversky had slipped off in a turn, was

climbing to regain its altitude. Knight tripped the Browning .30's outside the arc of the prop. He could barely see the tracers, for the lack of oxygen kept them from burning fully. But they were enough to guide him as he swung toward the climbing Seversky.

The other ship started to turn. He banked to follow, and for an instant they raced—two hundred yards apart—through the frigid sky. Knight dared not rudder closer. The slightest error, and the Northrop would crash side-wise through the stolen plane.

He eased the throttle a hundredth of an inch to drop behind the Seversky. The stolen plane leaped five hundred feet ahead. He pressed the rudder pedals to rake it with his tracers. The gray phosphorous streaks bent sidewise, missing the Navy ship by hardly a dozen feet. Before he could swing back, the other pilot zoomed.

It was like black magic—for the ship was there one second and had vanished in the next. Knight pulled up, straining his eyes to see that flitting shape. There came a sudden glow, and a magnesium torch bloomed with a sickly light. The Seversky pilot had released a parachute flare.

Knight hurriedly swerved, for to hit the flare at that speed would have meant disaster. The hasty maneuver almost took the blood from his brain. He shoved the stick forward, flew level for an instant. Then above the drone of the radial came a deeper, though muted, roar. Blind instinct made him climb as fast as he could. Something flashed by on his left, and a moment later he saw a monster ship curving back in a turn.

Like two fierce eyes, guns blazed from above its control cabin. With swift decision, he skidded to pass behind it. Doyle gave a shout of dismay, and just in time he saw the Seversky plunging back to attack. He was braced on the rudder pedals for a quick turn either way. There was only one possible move. Grimly, he pitched the Northrop between their two attackers.

The gunfire ceased at once, and for a tense moment he had a clear view of the giant. It was a huge amphibian, somewhat resembling a Clipper, but he knew it at once for an Italian Macchi.

Even so, it was larger than any Macchi he had ever seen, and he realized it must have been secretly built. Four engines jutted above its mighty wing, and he knew that there must be three or four-stage compressors geared with each of those motors.

In some of the window-ports, machine-guns were swiveled, with special connections to keep the huge ship airtight. The twin-guns above the pilots' compartment

were controlled by some mechanism below, and as the Northrop shot alongside he saw the guns whirl toward him. A face glared out in baffled rage as the man controlling the guns saw the Seversky beyond.

IT WAS only a second that the three ships flew in that checkmate position. Then the Northrop vibrated under the recoil of Doyle's guns. The Seversky pilot pulled up frantically. Knight shot the Northrop up beside it to keep the Macchi gunners from blasting them from the sky. Doyle's tracers were bending behind the Seversky in a wide arc, but with an oath he struggled to bring his shots forward.

In a violent turn, the stolen Navy ship whipped away and was gone. Doyle swore fluently.

"Damn that wind! I was almost on, and I couldn't budge th' guns another inch!"

Knight had whirled back to the left. It was a desperate turn which almost blacked-out his senses, but the huge Macchi was plunging up behind them. Though his bank was fairly tight, the Northrop shot dizzily across the sky, leaving the Macchi more than a mile away.

More than a mile . . . and then they were hurtling together at frightful speed. The amphibian seemed to swell to gigantic proportions as it pitched toward them. Knight saw the flame of the swiveled twin-guns, saw the swiftly changed angle as the guns tilted up to catch them as they passed. With a shout of warning to Doyle, he back-sticked and booted the pedals.

The Northrop flung itself up and went into a shrieking skid for all of two hundred yards. The Macchi was trying to twist back before they could pick up speed. Knight nosed down, and the sealed two-seater roared down at the pivoting monster.

The Macchi's guns blazed frenziedly up at them. Knight held his breath, thinking of what would happen if the cockpit were even pierced. A bare pressure on the pedals, and the Northrop was two hundred feet clear of those pale, deadly tracers.

But in a flash the Macchi was again plunging in; and Doyle once more swung his guns and probed across at its cabin. Knight shifted the stick for a straight-on dive—and then the Seversky dropped from the heavens!

Wings glinting under the moon, it screamed in at the Northrop. Knight's hand was already pressing the gun-controls on the stick as the great Macchi slid beneath their left wing. With a shove at the rudder, he squeezed all four stick-buttons.

Four guns flamed from the wing of the Northrop. Their pallid lightning tore across the Seversky's wing and through the cockpit enclosure. The riddled wing broke off, and with a terrible roar the Seversky went to pieces, hurling the wretched pilot from the cockpit.

Fire whirled up in weird plumes as Knight dived madly toward the stricken ship.

For a hundredth of a second, it was like a plunge into a furnace. Blinded by the glare, he thought they were doomed. Then at terrific speed the Northrop shot underneath and they plunged on into the night.

It was hardly five seconds later when he pulled up into a turn. He could hardly believe his senses when he looked back. For that plummeting mass of fire which was the Seversky was thirty miles behind them!

Far across the sky he saw it as it fell, a thing so remote in that icy sky that it seemed impossible they could have been there to cause that holocaust. A strange thrill passed over him as they raced back in the glow of the moon. Speeds such as these stirred a man's very soul. They were almost beyond the power of the mind to realize.

"Good Lord!" he heard Doyle's awed exclamation. "We must be makin' six hundred miles an hour!"

Knight flicked a glance at the airspeed meter. It registered 344, their maximum speed at sea-level. Up here, with air particles thin and far apart, it did not show any increase, but he knew it must almost be doubled. The thought of the figures staggered him—688 miles an hour—more than nine hundred feet a second!

HE CAUTIOUSLY swung the Northrop in a wide circle above the falling Seversky. He thought they had lost the Macchi, then he saw it circling also, below and a mile away.

"There they are!" grated Doyle. "What are we waiting for?"

Knight stared down at the monster.

"I'm going to wait and see what they're up to. We've only a hundred to one chance of getting them this way."

Doyle watched the wheeling Macchi through the side of the Northrop's enclosure.

"It's got me stumped," he muttered. "We've no scrap with Italy. What are they doing over here, anyway?"

"I've a hunch," said Knight, "that they're not Italians."

"You mean somebody grabbed off the ship?" demanded Doyle.

"It's the most likely answer," replied Knight. He

watched the Macchi a minute longer, then reached down to the radio switches. "W-A-R must've been wrecked. General Brett might be calling from Bolling or some other station."

Doyle took the stick while he tried to pick up the Air Corps operator. There was no result. He tried other wavelengths, shook his head.

"The receiver's dead. Those violent turns probably pulled some connections or wrecked a tube."

"A fine mess," growled Doyle. "Now we don't even know where we are. The speed we're making we might be anywhere."

Knight gazed down at the huge Macchi, now barely visible below them.

"I wonder what they're waiting for."

"It can't be us," said Doyle, "or they'd be hopping up here pronto. I guess they think we lost 'em."

"They're straightening out," Knight said sharply. "I'll take over—I can see them better."

He maneuvered to keep the wings of the big foreign ship gleaming in the moonlight. The Macchi was now nosing down, and in a few moments he saw they were catching up with it. He reduced their speed, took a hasty glance at the compass.

"Due North—where can they be headed for?"

"Maybe the North Pole," said Doyle. "And if you've got any idea of chasing them, you can drop me off."

The Macchi glided North for fifteen minutes, then turned and swung straight South. Knight frowned at the altimeter. They were down to 28,000 feet. In a few minutes they would be in the snow-clouds again. But to his relief they came into broken clouds at 21,000, and there was no snow. It was harder to keep sight of the Macchi, but as they went farther South the clouds diminished until finally they were in clear air at nine thousand.

Below, stretched the lighted Washington-to-Memphis airway with its slowly rotating beacons. Almost directly beneath was one of the new intermediate fields, an L-shaped clearing in the midst of a woods. Its red, green and white lights twinkled up against the background of snow like lights on a tinsel Christmas tree.

The Macchi glided on. Knight kept behind it, but far enough not to be seen. They passed above an airway beacon, and then, beyond a second one, he saw the lights of another intermediate field. The big amphibian seemed to be heading straight for it. He hurriedly banked the Northrop, raced back toward the L-shaped field they had first seen.

"What's the idea?" erupted Doyle.

"Have to use teletype or phone to warn Brett where that ship is," clipped Knight. "They'd hear our transmitter and take off again."

"You know where we are?" said Doyle.

"Yes, this is one of the new fields north of Lynchburg. Brett can have a flock of ships down there in half an hour—and get police from the nearest towns to close in on that field."

The Northrop moaned down over the trees. Knight lowered the landing-gear, took a quick glance at the illuminated wind-sock, and kicked into the wind. The snow was not deep, as he could see from the boundary light standards. As the wheels crunched into it, Doyle let out an explosive sigh.

"Thank the Lord! I never expected to feel good old earth under our wheels again."

"I wasn't so sure of it myself," admitted Knight. He let the ship roll toward the caretaker's house at the side of the clearing. Atop its steel tower, the field beacon slowly and ceaselessly rotated, making the field alternately bright and shadowy.

Leaving the engine at idling, Knight unlocked the enclosure gear, and moved back the transparent top. Doyle came after him as he ran to the house. The caretaker had not appeared, but they had landed against the wind, thus the sound had evidently been lost. He threw open the door unceremoniously and stepped inside, with Doyle at his heels. Then they both stopped, paralyzed.

"Come inside, gentlemen," came the sardonic voice of Nikolai Borzec. "It is somewhat unexpected—but I am always glad to see old friends."

CHAPTER VI THE MAN WITH THE GOLDEN EYES

DOYLE GROANED. Knight stood motionless, trying to hide the shock of seeing the Russian. At Borzec's right he recognized Alex Vornoff. On the left was a sallow man, and farther back he saw a burly figure standing guard over the frightened caretaker. All three of Borzec's men had guns, and Borzec's right hand was hidden significantly in his overcoat pocket.

For an instant after Borzec's ironic greeting there was no sound but the clicking of the teletype machine and the low-pitched buzz of the anemometer

indicating the wind-force. Then Vornoff spoke in a fearful tone.

"*Kapeetahn!* What if they sent word to bring others here?"

"They obviously landed here for that purpose," said Borzec calmly. "They were following the Macchi, and they thought it was landing at the other field. They were afraid to use their radio."

He removed his hand from his pocket, in it was a small Mannlicher pistol.

"If you would be so kind," he said to Knight, "step inside and tell your homely friend to do the same. It is a little cold with the door open."

They had hardly obeyed when a low rumble became audible.

"It is the Macchi!" said Borzec. He gestured to the burly agent. "Take that trembling *cherf* out to the power-shed and have him stop the beacon so that it shines on the field."

The big man hustled the caretaker from the building. Borzec glanced toward a closed door at the other end of the room, then looked at Knight with an odd light in his golden eyes.

"I am glad you are here, Q—you see, I have finally penetrated your veil of secrecy. But I have still another reason. However, that can wait."

He spoke curtly to Vornoff and the sallow man, and the two agents stepped behind the captives, Knight felt the pressure of a pistol against his back. Borzec turned and raised a curtain so he could look out onto the field.

The beacon made a white swath across the snow. Knight heard the rumble of the Macchi's engines die away. Borzec stiffened, and Knight saw the knuckles of his clenched fist tighten. There was an interval of half a minute, then the giant ship loomed into sight at the farther end of the field. Its wheels had been run down into position, and Knight watched in fascination as the monster swooped toward the ground.

The huge wheels touched, left the ground, touched again. Borzec swore fiercely in Russian. The Macchi was plunging straight toward the house!

"We'll be killed!" Vornoff cried from back of Knight. Chekal has lost control!"

Knight tensed for a leap as he felt the gun relax its pressure, but the Macchi abruptly slowed its precipitous plunge and the nose swung grudgingly away from the building. It came to a stop less than a hundred feet away, its propellers flashing in the light as though angry at being cheated of their human prey.

A small, heavy door in the side of the huge ship's control compartment was hastily opened, and a gaunt figure climbed down. As the man neared the house, Knight recognized the face which had glared at him when the Seversky blocked the fire of the twin-guns.

Borzec threw open the door, and the gaunt man hurried inside. His face was sickly white, and his hands shook as he took off his gloves.

"Mad! We were mad!" he said hoarsely. "I have, died a hundred times up there!"

"The worst is over, Chekal," Borzec answered.

"But we were attacked again—" Chekal's gaunt face twisted with sudden fury as he saw the prisoners. "Nikolai! These two were the very devils who almost crashed into us! They killed Number Eleven—blew the Seversky to pieces in front of our eyes!"

BORZEC'S strange eyes blazed at Knight. "Another item to add to our score, Mr. Q!" He wheeled back to the infuriated Chekal. "They will be attended to, never fear. But we must fuel the Macchi and be off again. This time, there will be enough petrol to carry us straight to Russia—high over this damned country, the Pacific, and Japan."

"I have bad news," Chekal said harshly. "Just as we were landing, the Italian prisoner broke loose. He destroyed both master compasses."

"You imbecile!" snarled Borzec. "Without them there is no way—" he stopped, looked out of the window, then an ugly smile curled his lips. "Perhaps it was Fate that sent you to us, Mr. Knight. The compass of your plane will serve us very well."

"But they are not corrected for the Macchi," Chekal objected. "And it would take hours——"

"We can correct them in the air," snapped Borzec. "By flying along one of the raidobeacon courses, it will be simple to find the error. Once the corrections are made, we will be ready. Besides we can climb up and navigate by the stars."

"But there are hundreds of those beacons. Ivan was the only one who knew them perfectly——"

"We have an expert with us," Borzec said ironically. "Mr. Knight will help us."

"He might trick us—set the compass wrong," said Chekal anxiously.

"I think not," said Borzec. Again, the peculiar smile played around his lips. Then his sardonic face hardened. "Vornoff, get out and superintend the refueling. There is a mail-plane due over here in forty minutes and we must be away before then."

Vornoff went out. Knight looked through the nearest window and saw a large gasoline truck moving toward the Macchi. Evidently, Borzec had made arrangements with some crooked dealer or had seized the truck by some means. The main door to the Macchi's cabin was now open, and more than a dozen men were swarming about the huge ship.

The burly agent came in with the caretaker. Borzec stepped to the teletype machine, looked down at the printed words on the tape.

"They are asking for a weather report," he said sharply to the caretaker. "Answer them, but one hint of trouble here and you will be dead."

Knight stole a sidelong look at Doyle, but the sallow guard behind them instantly jabbed him with his gun.

"Stand still," he ordered in English. "Keep looking to the front."

Chekal dropped wearily into a chair, his eyes on the feverish operations outside.

"Are you sure we're safe here?" he muttered to Borzec.

"Yes, barring an accident," snapped the other. "It is Christmas Eve, and most of the bourgeois fools are at home. I selected the most remote field possible."

"I thought your message would never come," the gaunt Russian said harshly.

Borzec gave him a savage glance.

"It would have been sooner, but for your insane trick with that passenger plane. I warned you not to use the rocket-gun, especially after one of the Reggio charges fell and killed some farmers in this country during our Atlantic fight."

"I couldn't help it," Chekal said fiercely. "We were following that radio beam, trying to find where we were, and the passenger ship suddenly appeared up under us during the snowfall. They saw us at once, and I was afraid they would report it by radio. There was no time to get the machine-gunners to their posts. I trained the rocket-gun straight down and fired into the cabin."

"You should have followed it with an explosive charge," said Borzec irritably.

"I tried to, but I lost sight of the plane. I was hunting for it when I heard the man named Q report it. And then you ordered the Morane Saulnier to bring it down."

BORZEC pointed to Knight. "There is your Q-man. He and that ugly donkey nearly ruined our work. One of the Breda pilots from the Italian cruiser heard

the alarm and he jumped into the fight. Later he ran into the agent who stole the Boeing plane, and he was shot down in Washington. That's why we flashed you word to fire a rocket barrage on that point—we were afraid he might be carrying orders which would give everything away."

Chekal's gaunt face twitched.

"May I never meet another of the Arditi! They are madmen—ready to kill themselves the same as the Japanese."

"The last one has been finished," said Borzec. "And Vornoff and I covered up the crash of the one which we downed this noon."

Chekal looked at him with a grim admiration.

"You took a great chance, dropping in a parachute without knowing what was below."

"I am used to taking chances," Borzec said coolly. "And I do not need dope to bolster up my nerves."

Chekal stood up, his emaciated face a dark red. But the entrance of Vornoff cut off whatever reply he was about to make.

"The main tanks are filled," Vornoff reported. "The reserve tanks will be full in a few minutes."

"So quick as that," Chekal mumbled. "And to think if we had only a few minutes more, after that tanker finally located us—"

"Get out and start the motors as soon as the reserve tanks are filled," Borzec sharply interrupted. He turned and stepped squarely in front of Knight. "Now, my dear Mr. Q, I shall give you a chance to help us."

Knight looked him steadily in the face.

"Save your breath, Borzec. I won't do it—and torture won't change my mind."

The Russian smiled with a mirthless humor.

"I wonder . . . perhaps you will reconsider." He spoke to the burly agent, nodded carelessly.

The big man grinned, seized the caretaker and dragged him toward the closed room. Knight saw the door open, then the two men went out of his view. He heard the caretaker cry out, heard the sound change to a gasping moan.

There was an ominous thud, as of a body falling to the floor. A few seconds passed, and then the agent's heavy shoes clumped on the floor. Knight could tell he was dragging something, Borzec's smile broadened.

"This way, Kursk. I wish our friends to have a better view."

Knight's jaw hardened.

"The sight of a corpse isn't going to make any difference, Borzec!"

"But this isn't a corpse," said the Russian silkily. "At least—not yet."

Knight's head turned. Then all the blood went out of his face and he stood there, sick and stunned. For the gagged figure before him was that of Benita Navarre!

He took a stumbling step toward her, but Borzec raised his pistol.

"Not so fast, if you please. Kursk, will you remove the senorita's gag?"

Kursk jerked the binding cord away, and the wadded cloth dropped from Benita's mouth.

"Ricardo!" she moaned. "Why—oh, why did you come?"

His eyes filmed. She thought he had come to save her—and he knew they were close to death.

"Keep a stout heart, *querida*," he said in a husky voice. "We'll come out of this all right."

She tried to reach out and touch his hand, but Kursk roughly pulled her back. Borzec's golden eyes glittered, as he saw the rage in Knight's face.

"So Vornoff was right, and there is a romance here. Now, my dear Ricardo, I give you one more chance. Will you pilot the Macchi until the compass has been corrected—or shall I leave three more corpses to keep the other one company?"

He had spoken in Spanish, so that Benita could understand. Knight saw the color go out of her cheeks, though she tried to hide her fear.

"I'll do what you say," he answered grimly, "but only if you let her and Doyle go free before we start."

Borzec shook his head with a mock sadness.

"I regret that is impossible. But when we arrive in Russia, the senorita will be freed."

Knight knew that he was lying, but there was only one course he could take.

"Very well," he said. "I agree."

AS THOUGH his words had been a signal, one of the Macchi's engines broke into a low rumbling. As Knight and the others were marched out to the ship, the other engines whirled into life. The tank had been driven to one side, and most of the crew had entered the ship. The Northrop stood forlornly on the right, its engine silent.

Borzec gave an order, and Doyle and Benita were taken to the main door of the cabin. Knight looked down the muzzle of Kursk's gun, started to climb the dural steps to the control compartment. But Borzec halted him.

"One moment. Vornoff, it may be well to search our guest."

Knight's hope sank. He had prayed that they might continue to overlook that point. Borzec smiled unpleasantly as Vornoff took the .38 from Knight's arm-pit holster.

"You don't mind, I trust. Kursk, go back and perform the same service for the gentleman with the crooked nose. Lock him and the senorita in with the other prisoner and guard the stateroom door."

Kursk lumbered back to the main door. Vornoff looked toward the driver of the gasoline truck, who was staring at the huge Macchi.

"He will be taken care of before an hour is up," Borzec said meaningly. "I have planned carefully, and when this affair is ended there will be no loose tongues left to wag."

Knight caught the look of grim amusement which flitted into the man's weird eyes. He knew what Borzec was thinking. Benita, Doyle, and he were slated to die.

CHAPTER VII THE SECRET OF SILENT DOOM

STEADILY CLIMBING, the giant Macchi forged on through the blackness. Knight sat in the co-pilot's seat beside the gaunt-faced Chekal. His hands were bound to the arms of the seat, and his feet to the round dural girder on which the control yokes were fastened. Head-phones covered his ears.

The altimeter showed 4300 feet. They had run into snow almost at once and were now flying on instruments. The emaciated Russian bent grimly over the wheel, staring into the storm. There were no lights in the compartment, but the luminous hands and figures of the dials on the two-paneled board gave an eerie reflection. Knight could see Borzec's evil face dimly mirrored in the heavy glass bay before him. The senior Ogpu agent was standing in the aisle between the two seats. Now and then, Knight could hear him say something to Vornoff, who was leaning back against the closed door to the next compartment.

Chekal looked down at the two compasses of the Northrop, which had been hastily installed. Then he scowled across at Knight.

"We will correct the left one. Give me the directions." Knight's face was devoid of expression.

"Turn slowly to the right . . . now hold your course."

Chekal muttered under his breath. Knight waited until he heard the "A" signal change to a series of steady buzzes.

"The compass should read 267 true," he said curtly.

Chekal peered down at the compass card.

"An error of nine degrees East," he said gruffly, "if wind direction has not changed since we took off."

Borzec stepped close to Knight.

"If you should make a mistake, it would be most—unhealthy."

Knight gazed straight ahead. "I am not through. To make certain, we'll have to fly through the 'cone of silence' and down the other leg of the beam."

"*Kapeetahn*, this is some trick," Vornoff said nervously.

"Keep still," snapped Borzec. "He would not take the chance, while the woman he loves is on board."

The Macchi ploughed on through the murk, while Knight gave terse directions to Chekal. Between his curt orders, he let his narrowed eyes steal over the instruments. There was one device with a dummy compass, made with extreme accuracy, to duplicate the reading of the real compasses. It came to him suddenly that this was part of the control for the rocket-gun Chekal had mentioned. It was like a fire-control apparatus on a battleship. Course, speed, altitude, wind and other factors could be set on the various dials. There was a brass lever which he guessed to be connected with the rocket-gun.

"We're at two thousand meters," Chekal said abruptly to Borzec. "We had better seal the ship at this pressure."

Borzec nodded. Chekal switched on the automatic gyro-pilot to free his hands for other work. Knight watched every motion. The gaunt Russian pressed a button, and a siren shrieked through the plane. Almost at once, a green light glowed on the instrument board, then a second, and two more in quick succession.

"All four compartments sealed off!" a voice said from a speaker above Knight's head.

Chekal looked at the indicator on the heavy door through which Knight and the others had entered. Then he reached out and spun a huge valve on the lower instrument board. There was no apparent change, but Knight knew that the ship's compressors were now supplying all the air for the giant plane. From now on until the ship was unsealed, the pressure should remain the same—unless by some ill-chance the superchargers should fail.

The radiobeacon signals in Knight's phones now grew louder, then suddenly ceased. In a moment they sounded again, and he knew the Macchi had flown directly over the sending station. He waited, masking his tension, but no voice broke in on the monotonous buzz. It had been his hope that the huge ship would be heard flying over and an inquiry made which, if unanswered, would start a flood of messages over the airways system. Such a flood would not escape Brett's attention, and in connection with the note. . . .

HE CURSED himself silently. The note!

In his fear for Benita's safety, he had forgotten all else. Perhaps the note had never reached Brett. If Borzec's spies could get into the War Department radio station, they might easily have been in the building when he left Benita. . . .

"It's getting too warm," said Borzec. "Send more air through the cooling fins."

Chekal opened a by-pass valve, and the temperature in the compartment sank back to normal. Borzec looked sharply at Knight.

"Have we passed the critical point?"

Knight dully nodded.

"We're on the other leg of the beacon. Your compass variation is 13 East . . . declination in this area is about 4 West. That makes the error of 9 East that Chekal stated."

"Your estimate had better be correct," Borzec said coldly. "Vornoff, unfasten the ropes and put him back with the others."

"But shouldn't we—" said Vornoff, and stopped.

Knight saw Borzec's quick frown in the reflection on the glass bay before him. Vornoff untied his bonds, covered him as he stepped down. Borzec opened the door to the next compartment and Knight passed through. A bluish light gave a vague illumination, and he saw Kursk standing guard before the door of a stateroom on the right. There was a duplicate room on the left, and a curved, widening aisle between the two. The aisle ended with a semi-circular space just forward of the next bulkhead, and projecting up from the floor in the center of this space was what looked like the breech of a three-inch gun.

Electric cables ran from the side of the breech to a switchboard on the bulkhead. On both walls were racks containing long, sinister-looking rockets painted red, green and yellow. Another calculating device stood near the switchboard, and Knight saw a glass section in the floor. There was evidently a sliding trap in the

hull so that the weapon could be whirled around in any direction. From what Chekal and Borzec had said, the rocket-gun could be accurately fired on an unseen target. The glass section was apparently for use in aiming at visible targets.

Kursk had unlocked the stateroom door. At Vornoff's order, he seized Knight by the arm and gave him a violent push. Knight stumbled into the room, and the door slammed behind him.

Benita and Doyle were bending over a figure in a narrow bunk as he was shoved into the stateroom. They both spun around. A look of vast relief flashed into Benita's eyes. She sprang toward him with an incoherent cry. He managed a twisted smile as she looked up at him.

"I was so afraid," she whispered, "afraid that terrible one had kill' you."

"Killed!" mumbled the old man in the bunk. His bandaged head tossed on the tiny pillow. "All killed . . ." he subsided into a low muttering, his eyes closed.

Doyle met Knight's gaze.

"You were right," he said in an undertone. "The Reds stole the Macchi. Borzec hatched the whole scheme, after the Soviet found out that Italy had developed a stratosphere plane with some new, deadly weapon. *Signor Reggio* here gave us the lowdown—he's the one who invented the rockets and the green gas. Borzec and Chekal used the stuff to wipe out a mob of guards. They had their men all set, and they'd have got the ship into Russia if it hadn't been for the *Arditi*. They'd been experimenting with stratosphere fighters—closed cockpits and oxygen suits. A dozen of 'em took off and chased the Macchi into the Mediterranean. They could fly as high as the Macchi, and then they finally forced the Reds out into the Atlantic."

The old Italian inventor opened his eyes.

"*Gli Arditi!*" he lapsed into his native tongue.

"Brave men . . . they die for Italy. The Russians . . . try to turn back . . . *Arditi* fight to crash the big plane . . . they chase until their fuel is gone—then they fall into the ocean."

He shook with a spasm of coughing. Benita bent over him.

"You mus' not talk—you rest now."

The old man feebly nodded. Doyle turned back to Knight.

"There was one hell of a fight," he said in a lowered voice. "Certain Communists in France were partly in on it and ready to help. Italy radioed the German catapult ship in the Azores to shoot off a plane and try

to intercept the Macchi. England decoded the message, according to what the old man overheard—they kidnapped him to get the gas formula. But the English planes didn't get off in time to catch up."

"The Macchi must have run out of fuel," said Knight. "That would explain what Chekal said about the tanker."

DOYLE wagged his head. "*Signor* Reggio told us the whole thing. The Macchi came down a hundred miles off the Virginia coast. They'd sent a code for help, but it took a French Communist tanker almost two days to find them—they were afraid to send any message after they landed. Italy and France had both rushed out cruisers with planes, and they barged in just as the Macchi was fueling. The big bus just got off in the nick of time. It must have been in that scrap when one of the gas-rockets over-carried and dropped in Maryland. Borzec's superiors heard the police broadcast later, and flashed him word to blast the farm with incendiary rockets. They were afraid an autopsy would give away the secret of the gas."

Knight stared from him to the old Italian. "Then the rocket that over-carried must have gone two or three hundred miles!"

Signor Reggio turned his bandaged head. "They will go farther than that, much farther! From the ceiling-height of this plane . . . it is nearly eighty thousand feet . . . they will go 470 miles. There are successive charges which keep exploding . . . But that is not what these devils wished most." He waved Benita aside, pulled himself up in the bunk. "It was the secret of their silence! That fiend with the golden eyes had seen one of the tests. There is no shriek as with a shell from a gun. The air blows through tiny perforations, and once the rockets are fired they reach a speed of 3400 feet a second. The sound they make is so high the human ear does not hear it."

"I know," Knight said, with a grim smile. "One of the gas-rockets almost finished me."

The old man laughed crazily.

"The gas . . . it is my greatest achievement. It goes through the lungs . . . into the blood in only a few seconds. The corpuscles turn green—"

Another spasm shook him, and he slipped down, only half-conscious.

"He's made a swell present to the world," Doyle muttered. "That long-range stuff is bad enough. They can hop up into the stratosphere and drop rockets on a country four hundred miles away. And think of sitting

up 80,000 feet in the stratosphere and potting down gas and fire rockets on New York that don't even make a peep to warn anybody."

Knight's face grew haggard.

"I know—I've been thinking of it. That and—" he glanced at Benita and did not finish. She looked at him gravely.

"Ricardo, I have fail' you, the first time you ask me to help you. The note—I push it over the railing on the stair, when those men jump at me. I guess nobody find it down below."

"Never mind," he said. "It wouldn't have worked, anyway. We're heading the wrong way."

"What was your idea?" said Doyle. "You said something about an attack plan—"

"I wrote down a suggestion for a sort of barrage," explained Knight. "I'd guessed it was a stratosphere plane, though I didn't know what it was all about. I asked the general to have all listening-posts along the coast try to catch that 'thunder' and report straight to him. He could have Army ships standing by with oxygen equipment, and rush two or three squadrons up near the center of the sound. But I never counted on the plane's heading for the Pacific. I had a hunch it had been flown over from Europe to test some new death weapon on us, and that they'd head back across the Atlantic if they got in a jam."

"They must be scared of running into the *Arditi* again," said Doyle.

Knight nodded dispiritedly. "Probably afraid of England and Germany, too. They've also been experimenting with high-altitude ship and might be able to intercept this plane."

THERE was a pause, while they listened to the muffled roar of the speeding ship. Then their eyes met again.

"We can't stand here and wait for them to finish us off," muttered Knight. "And that's what they'll do as soon as there's no chance of needing us again."

"The trap . . . they will throw you through the trap under the rocket-gun," the half-delirious inventor suddenly cackled. "They go down to where it is safe to unseal the cabin . . . then they laugh and throw you out . . . that is what they did to my assistant."

Benita turned deathly pale. Knight glared at the old man, then wheeled back to Doyle and lowered his voice to a whisper.

"Our only chance is to rush the control compartment. That means getting Kursk—"

Doyle shook his head glumly. "The door's locked

good and tight. And he'll start shooting if we try to bust it down,"

Knight stared savagely around the stateroom. There was a small closet. He opened it, hoping to find a weapon. The closet was empty. He was about to shut the door when his eyes fell on several electric cables which ran along the bulkhead. He seized Doyle by the arm, pointed tensely.

"Holy cats!" whispered Doyle. "If they're what I think . . ."

They hurriedly set to work. Four minutes later, one of the rumbling engines abruptly went dead. The speed of the ship diminished, then the other engines revved up and the Macchi thundered on.

"We'll have to plug another one," grated Doyle.

"Wait!" said Knight. "I think they're turning back."

Benita suddenly caught at his arm. He followed her frantic gesture and saw a streak of bright light under the stateroom door. He sprang to one side, just as the door burst open. Gun in one hand, flashlight in the other, Vornoff stood in the passage. Behind him, a shadowy bulk in the bluish light, loomed Kursk.

The flashlight's rays fell squarely upon Doyle, as he spun around by the closet. Vornoff lunged through the doorway. Knight's right hand shot out and wrenched the gun away. Vornoff gave a wild shout of alarm and jumped back, dropping the torch.

The light flipped over Kursk's startled face, the gun in his hairy paw. Knight fired, and the hulking agent tottered back with a bullet through his side. With a hoarse bellow, the wounded man lifted his pistol. Flame spurted from the muzzle. The bullet ricocheted from the metal doorframe, snarled past Knight, and pierced Reggio's head.

Vornoff was fleeing madly toward the after compartments. The torch he had dropped went rolling across the floor as the Macchi steeply banked. Knight leaped through the stateroom doorway. Kursk had fallen to his knees, thrown off balance by the steep turn. Knight slammed the barrel of his gun against the man's huge head, and Kursk went down with a groan.

Doyle dived after the agent's pistol. Just as he scooped it up, the door to the control compartment flew open. Knight jammed his gun into Borzec's ribs before the Prussian could aim.

Borzec brought up one knee for a vicious blow to throw Knight off balance. But Knight jumped clear, whacked his gun against the other man's elbow. Borzec's fingers spasmodically flew open, and the half-lifted Mannlicher clattered to the floor.

Chekal twisted around in his seat. As he saw Knight, he flung one hand inside his coat. Knight hurriedly swerved his gun.

"Keep your hands on the wheel!" he rasped.

The gaunt pilot cowered down in his seat, then one lean hand flicked out to the instrument board. The shriek of the siren filled the hurtling plane. Then Borzec suddenly launched himself at Knight. Knight hastily sidestepped, and Borzec struck the door.

A gun blasted from somewhere aft but the bullet only spattered itself against the breech of the rocket-gun. There stood Vornoff, a smoking pistol in his hand. Knight fired swiftly, and Vornoff crumpled.

Doyle was shielding Benita and trying to keep Borzec cornered. Knight crashed a left hook to the side of the Russian's jaw and leaped across to the girl. Before Borzec could recover his balance, Knight had swung Benita into the control compartment.

"Doyle!" he shouted. "Get in here—keep Chekal covered!"

TWO mechanics now charged forward from the third compartment. Doyle blasted one of them with a quick shot, sprang in beside Knight. As he did so, Chekal gave the control wheel a jerk, and the violent swerve of the Macchi almost hurled Knight through the doorway. He caught at the frame, pulled himself back. He was yanking at the door when Borzec plunged through the half-closed entry.

Kursk had clambered to his feet during the battle. With three mechanics close behind him, he lurched toward the pilots' compartment. Knight made a lightning decision. There being no time to hurl Borzec out and close the door, he drove his gun into the Russian's solar plexus. As Borzec doubled over, he jerked the door shut. The lock snapped just as Kursk and the others landed against the panels.

The Macchi was now nosed down in a terrific power glide. Knight whirled. Chekal had let go the controls, was struggling to get Doyle's gun.

Knight flung a frantic glance at the compartment door. Kursk and the others were hurling themselves against it, and through the round glass window he saw more men come dashing forward. He jumped past Borzec, clutched at a numbered valve. Chekal gave a wild screech.

"Madman! You're cutting off the air in this compartment."

Knight spun the valve shut, caught the trembling control-wheel, and steadied the diving Macchi. He saw

Benita grip the edge of the instrument board to keep from falling. Doyle had dragged Chekal half-way out of his seat, and the gaunt pilot was kicking wildly to hook his feet on the cross-bar.

Another furious onslaught shook the control cabin door. Knight's desperate eyes flashed to the cooler by-pass valve. With shaking fingers he started to whirl it shut. If that door burst open now it meant they would cook to death!

The instrument panel swam before his eyes. With five of them packed in that cramped space, the air was going swiftly. Clawing fingers raked over his hand. He saw Borzec's face, distorted, ugly with terror. Then the by-pass valve closed tightly, and the frightful heat of the uncooled air poured into the other compartments.

A scream of mortal agony rang from behind the door. Half-fainting, Knight managed to turn in his seat. Through the thick glass port in the door he looked into an inferno. Heat waves were shimmering in the eery blue light, and staggering figures were slumping to the floor. A red and awful face was pressed for a second against the round glass window. Kursk's brutal eyes bulged at them like some terrible thing in a nightmare. Then his tortured visage vanished from sight.

There were suddenly no more screams, and Knight knew that only the dead rode behind them.

Through a swirling haze he now saw blazing lights ahead. The Macchi's hurtling plunge had taken it out of the stratosphere and down to a bright-lit world. A city lay ahead, and beyond it a dark mass of water. Searchlights pierced the sky, planes were swarming in the air—he now knew that Benita's dropped note had been found.

With his last bit of strength, Knight turned the valve that unsealed the bow compartment. A cold, sharp blast blew upon his face. He sucked the air deeply into his lungs, felt his reeling senses steady.

His fingers plucked at the throttles, and the giant ship lost its terrific speed.

The lights of the city swept underneath. It was

Norfolk . . . and ahead in Hampton Roads a Navy carrier was swinging at anchor . . .

WITH a snarl of fury, Borzec pulled himself free as Doyle sought to hold him back. As the Macchi leveled off above the dark waters, he clawed frenziedly at the throttles. One engine roared, and the huge plane slued around as its mighty hull touched the waves. There was a grinding sound, and the Macchi bounced from the water. But then it struck again with a jolting crash and shuddered to a stop.

Knight cut the switches, lunged out of his seat. Borzec whirled, flung open the door to the aft compartments. Kursk's body tumbled down, but Borzec leaped over it and raced through the corpse-strewn cabin.

Navy gigs and barges were speeding across the water. Knight unlocked the door at the side of the compartment, lifted Benita out as the first boat drew alongside. A two-striper with a drawn .45 stared as he saw the girl . . .

Minutes later, after Knight's hasty explanation, the three of them lay in the boat at a distance of two hundred yards and watched the now fast-sinking Macchi. A dozen searchlights were trained on the monster's hulk from slowly circling destroyers and the carrier beyond.

"Chekal was dead," Doyle muttered. "But Borzec—what's happened to him?"

The two-striper looked at him curiously.

"Whoever this Borzec is, he'll never get away now."

"You're right," said Knight. "He's trapped."

Benita shivered, and he put his arm about her. The Macchi settled lower, then in the glare of the lights which played upon it a dark-colored vapor arose. It swelled quickly, spread into a bright green cloud. For more than a minute it rested upon the water. And when it slowly dissolved, the giant plane was gone.

"Lord!" whispered Doyle. "Borzec played the game like a captain—went down with his ship!"

