



RICHARD KNIGHT *in*

DEATH FLIES THE EQUATOR

by DONALD E. KEYHOE

A haunted look came over the Admiral's face. "That lost Wapiti," he told Knight, "was found high on the beach at Crazy Day Atoll—that tiny mid-Pacific dot lying exactly at the point where East meets West, and North meets South. Underneath the island's single palm tree sat the pilot and observer. Their bodies were stark as in death—yet they still lived! Their eyes were open—but they were eyes which only stared unseeing over the broad wastes of the sea."

CHAPTER I
THE JADE IDOL

RED AS BLOOD, the setting sun blazed across Singapore harbor. The man in the leaky sampan bent farther over the stern oar, so that his wide coolie hat kept his face in shadow. His skin was brown and his ragged garb was that of a Malay boatman. But now he was nearing the docks and sharp eyes might penetrate the disguise.

Perspiration rolled down his face, but he drove the sampan on past the maze of vessels . . . high-prowed Chinese junks and dingy cargo boats—the tramps of the Orient . . . resplendent P.&O. liners . . . hulking, rusty freighters with the flags of a dozen nations.

At a float between two piers was moored a huge seaplane bearing on its dural bow the name *Australian Clipper*. A belated passenger was climbing the gangway steps. Under a big sun-helmet his face was red and homely, and a broken nose gave it a belligerent look. The boatman hid a start of recognition, then furtively scanned the dock beyond.

Humanity passed in a swarm—British, Malays, Hindus, Dyaks . . . men of every race and mixture—the East and the West at the crossroads. The boatman's eyes narrowed. In a warehouse window on the nearby shore across from the float a drawn curtain had moved. He swerved toward the Clipper's bow but a flurry of vendor's sampans cut him off. The engines were rumbling, and a white-clad Third Officer had cast off the lines.

With a lunge, the masquerader drove his sampan between the boats of two squealing Chinese. The Clipper's stubby sponson-wing was moving past. He sprang to the bow of the sampan, gave a leap and sprawled hatless on the huge plane's sponson, grasped the trailing-edge strut.

A screech sounded from behind, then something whizzed past his ear and a dark spot appeared on the sea-wing. He rolled over, snatching an automatic from under his packet. A Malay bushman was crouched in the warehouse window with a blow-gun at his lips. A second lakta dart just missed the man on the sponson as he took quick aim to reply. A shot blasted from his pistol, and the Malay doubled over, fell headlong into the water.

The pseudo-boatman scrambled up under the Clipper's massive wing, ran aft along the ribbed top of the hull. The main hatch-cover suddenly opened, and the alarmed Third Officer popped into sight. A muffled report sounded from the dock, and his gold-braided cap flipped from his head. He dived frantically down the hatchway. The other man whirled. The dock crowd was stampeding. Near a big crate he saw a vague white face behind a smoking gun. He fired swiftly. The gun-man spun half around, then he collapsed in a heap.

THE MAN from the sampan ran down the hatchway steps. Somewhere forward, a woman's scream rose above a clamor of voices. Footsteps thudded in the after passage, then the broken-nosed man dashed into view, followed by the Clipper's captain and a frightened steward.

"There he is!" spluttered the captain, "Grab his gun, Doyle!"

"Hold everything," rapped the intruder.

Doyle's mouth opened in amazement. "Dick Knight!" he howled. "What the devil—"

"Can't tell you now." Knight swung to the Clipper captain. "Take off as fast as you can, Courtney—they may try something else."

Courtney's arrogant face was flushed with anger. "I demand an explanation!" he said.

"No time for that," snapped Knight. "You're in danger—you and everyone on board."

Dismay and suspicion struggled in Courtney's eyes, then he jerked around to the steward. "Tell Mr. Parker to take off at once. I'll be forward in a few minutes."

"Yes, sir," mumbled the steward. He disappeared into the after-lounge. Courtney jabbed a finger at the staring Third Officer.

"Get in there and quiet the passengers. Tell them it was only a Malay who ran amuck—that we're proceeding on schedule."

"There's no sense in that," Knight broke in. "You'll have to land at once at the British naval base. There's something plotted against your ship, though I couldn't learn the details."

Courtney turned purple.

"I thought so! This is just another one of your tricks—you got into some scrape and did this to get clear, the way you and Doyle pulled that stunt in Manila."

"You big fat-head!" roared Doyle. "Dick's trying to save your neck—"

"Shut up!" snarled Courtney. "Mr. Lee, do as I ordered."

The Third Officer vanished. Knight spoke swiftly as the lounge door closed.

"Doyle and I are both Government agents. Let me radio Naval Intelligence at Manila and they'll confirm it instantly."

Courtney hesitated, his eyes on Knight's ragged garb.

"You can't go through the ship—there'd be a panic."

"Then get me some other clothes," Knight said impatiently.

Courtney scowled, but reluctantly agreed. "All right, you can have one of my spare uniforms. I'll pass you off as Captain Johnson, going out to Brisbane for work on the new route to Honolulu."

Knight turned quickly to the washroom adjoining the crew's quarters. As he peeled off his grimy costume the Clipper's engines went full on. A minute later he felt the huge ship lift itself from the water. Courtney and Doyle hurried into the washroom with a white uniform, shoes and accessories.

"Now, spill it!" Doyle exploded. "Why did they try to bump you off?"

"Look in my jacket," said Knight, as he finished a hasty scrubbing. Doyle took a wad of soiled cloth from one pocket. Unfolded, it revealed a hideous little jade idol with six snaky arms and a head which bore four faces. The faces were almost identical, with deep-set, shadowy eyes and the same expression of brooding menace. Some trick of carving made those shadowy eyes seem alive. As Doyle rotated the idol, each pair appeared to follow him until the next pair could take up that sinister scrutiny.

"You mean this is all they were after?" he demanded.

Knight smiled a trifle grimly.

"Four men have been killed over it."

"What's it all about?" insisted Doyle. "Where the devil have you been for the last three weeks?"

"Europe," said Knight, as he put on the uniform trousers.

"And you left me to bake in Singapore!" yelped the husky ex-Marine.

"I was watched—couldn't get you word." Knight looked at the Clipper captain. "Don't worry about your uniform—this part that didn't wash off is brown stain, not dirt."

"I've no time for humor," said Courtney, icily. "Agent or no agent, you've got to explain this business. Why were you pretending to be a coolie?"

"It was the only way I could get near this ship without being recognized. Even then, you saw what—" Knight broke off, reached for the automatic he had laid down.

Some one was cautiously opening the washroom door. Before he could snatch up the pistol, the door was flung wide open, knocking Courtney aside. Over the snout of a Tommy-gun, the steward's pale face glared at them.

"Stay where you are, Courtney! Get your hands up, you two!"

"Smith!" cried the captain. "Have you lost your mind?"

"Keep still!" rasped the other man. His haggard eyes twitched toward Knight. "Where is the idol?"

"Under my jacket," Knight said coolly.

"Pick it up," gritted the steward.

Knight stooped as though to obey, then catapulted himself at the man's legs. The steward hurtled over backward, and the gun flew from his grasp. Doyle and Courtney both dived after it, but the steward clutched the muzzle and yanked the weapon away. Knight clawed at the gun, but the other man had grasped it and jumped to his feet.

Doyle was almost upon him. He raised the gun

for a murderous blow. Doyle's big paw shot up and wrenched the weapon loose. With another, the steward jumped back, one hand inside his coat. Doyle whirled the gun down with terrific force. There was a sickening thud, and the steward crumpled to the deck. Courtney looked down in horror at the twisted figure.

"Good Lord!" he whispered. "You've killed him."

"Well, what'd you want me to do?" muttered Doyle. "Let him burn us down?"

"I can't believe it even yet," Courtney said dazedly. "Smith seemed utterly harmless."

"Look at this," Knight interrupted. He had pulled up the dead man's left sleeve. Tattooed high on the forearm were four tiny faces, an exact replica of the faces on the idol, even to their brooding expression. Underneath were several black and red dots, irregularly spaced.

"What's the answer?" exclaimed Doyle.

Knight's eyes had a hard look. "It means he was an agent of the 'Four Faces'—the deadliest secret society on earth. There are enough assassins on its roster to fill a regiment."

COURTNEY'S jaw had dropped. "A professional assassin? But what could he have been after? He's been with me a month—he couldn't have known you were coming on board with that idol."

"No," admitted Knight, "he probably wasn't warned about that until today. And that proves he was planted on board for a part in some scheme. His having a Tommy-gun ought to convince you of that."

"He got that from the tail compartment," objected Courtney. "Our mail contract with the British requires us to carry two guns."

Knight faced him, now thoroughly exasperated. "For heaven's sake, take my word for it that there's danger! We're up against the most gigantic criminal organization in the world. Turn back to the British naval base—I'll explain the rest there."

"And if it turns out to be some crackpot idea," snapped Courtney, "I'll be relieved of my command."

Knight's lips tightened. "Use your head. Would they have tried so hard to kill me if something wasn't about to happen? They think I've learned the whole scheme. I've the key to it inside the idol—but I couldn't make out the cipher. That's why I want to land at the naval base, to see the British code experts—and also because the ship will be safe there."

"I'll turn back on condition that Manila okays you," Courtney decided nervously. "But we'll have to hide Smith's body before we go up to the bridge."

A few minutes later, Knight followed Courtney and Doyle up the ladder to the control bridge. Apparently, no one but the Third Officer had realized his

transformation from the ragged boatman to a bronzed Clipper officer, and Courtney had hastily signaled the junior man to conceal his astonishment from the passengers.

As he reached the bridge, Knight glanced out to the left. Batam Island was falling astern, a blur in the swift-falling dusk, and Rhio lay just abeam. Through the glass bay ahead he could see still other small islands of the archipelago which sprawled South from Singapore and on across the equator. He looked quickly around the bridge. The First Officer sat at the controls on the right, with headphones and a “mike” for communicating with the engineer up in the cabane between the two pairs of twin-Wasps. Behind him, the radio officer sat at an instrument table. Both men stared at Knight, but Courtney gave them no time for questions.

“Reed,” he fired at the radio man, “call the Navy station at Manila and get the Senior Officer. It’s an emergency.”

“But our Singapore station’s calling—they want to know what happened,” protested the other man.

“Let them wait.” The captain turned to the pilot at the controls. “Parker, reduce cruising speed to 130. We may have to turn back.

Knight motioned to Doyle, handed him his pistol.

“Don’t let anybody come up that ladder. It’s possible the steward wasn’t the only agent on board.”

“This thing is getting fantastic,” Courtney said harshly. “In a minute you’ll be saying half the passengers are criminals.”

“It’s not impossible,” Knight retorted. “The ‘Four Faces’ has members in every part of the globe, and in all walks of life. It’s an international power—a colossal society organized for crime and the Lord only knows what else. Smith and those killers at Singapore were only minor figures; I doubt if they had the slightest idea from whom their orders came.”

Courtney jerked around anxiously to the radio officer.

“What’s the matter? Can’t you raise them?”

“Someone keeps cutting in,” exclaimed Reed. “It sounds—wait . . .” he stared up at Courtney. “He says it’s the British station at Singapore—he wants Steward Smith. But the wave-length is off.”

Knight jumped to the radio table, seized the extra set of phones, “Let me have it,” he whispered to Reed.

As he took the microphone, a voice sounded in the phones, a voice muffled by a background of steady droning.

“*Clipper!*” it grated. “*This message is vitally important. Smith’s mother is gravely ill . . . Go ahead.*”

“This is Smith,” Knight said, imitating the steward’s voice as well as he could. “What’s the message?”

But his attempt at impersonating the steward was futile. “*They’ve trapped him!*” a harsh exclamation sounded in the phones. “*He didn’t use the code signal that—*” the words were lost in a thunderous roar. Knight plucked the phones from his ears, shot a glance through the overhead glass panels. Two fiery lines of tracers abruptly appeared in the gathering gloom above. Guns blazing, a gray seaplane was diving steeply at the Clipper.

CHAPTER II THE DISCOVERY AT CRAZY DAY

COURTNEY LOOKED UP, stunned with consternation.

“My Lord!” he cried. “We’re being attacked!”

Knight seized his arm. “Where’s that other machine-gun?”

Courtney’s mouth opened and closed spasmodically. The Radio Officer dashed to the ladder. “I’ll get it—it’s in the baggage room.”

“Turn back! Turn back!” Courtney screamed at Parker.

The First Officer threw the ship into a tight bank. Tracer streaks now lanced past the bow, and the seaplane hurtled on by. Knight saw that it was a Westland Wapiti, a British air service type, though its gray wings bore no markings. He jumped to the ladder as the radio officer thrust the extra gun up at him.

“Here, take it!” the man shouted. “I’ll get the one aft—I can cover the tail through the ventilator hatch.”

“Good boy!” said Knight. He spun around, smashed out the starboard window with the butt of the Tommy-gun. The Wapiti was twisting back, its twin Vickers nose guns spurting. Cupro slugs gashed the tilted wing as he triggered his gun.

The seaplane skidded, and his quick burst smoked into space. He aimed in front of the darting Wapiti, fired again. The two-seater stood on its tail, and the man in the rear cockpit whirled his Lewis guns. A venomous blast raked across the Clipper’s wing. Knight clamped the trigger again, and the Tommy-gun blazed through the shattered window. The Wapiti gunner slumped down, his Lewises flipping skyward. As the guns went dark, the seaplane pilot cast a tense look over his shoulder. One glance at the stricken gunner and he zoomed into a chandelle.

Courtney had opened the sliding panel on the port side, and the increased roar of the twin-Wasps drowned the outcries from down in the ship. Doyle

clambered up the ladder with three loaded magazines for the sub-machine gun. As Knight snapped one into place, he heard a clatter of guns.

“Dive!” Courtney yelled frantically at Parker. “He’s trying to get under the tail. Get close to the water!”

The Clipper pitched down at a sharp angle. There was another staccato pounding from aft, then Doyle gave a shout.

“Reed drove him off—look out, he’s crossing over!” Knight jumped to the opposite side of the bridge. The Wapiti was pulling up in a dizzy climb, and its gray wings merged with the dusk before he could aim. A red rocket shot across the sky as the seaplane charged back, then a second Wapiti plunged to join the first one.

“We’re finished!” Courtney screeched. “They’re going to shoot us down.”

Knight hurled him aside, knelt at the opened port window. The first ship was slanting in at the bow, its Vickers winking like two fierce yellow eyes. He pumped a burst at the nose, but the seaplane howled in closer, and a furious blast of lead ripped across the Clipper’s rounded snout. The glass in front of Parker crashed into a thousand fragments. The huge plane lurched as the pilot threw himself backward, and Knight was slammed against the instrument board. He was up in a flash, Tommy-gun whirling to catch the diving Wapiti. The ship was almost upon them, and back of the blazing guns he could see the goggled face of the pilot. He gripped the front stock, emptied the magazine into the thundering prop. The Wapiti seemed to stagger, then with a crash both prop and engine let go. Black smoke gushed from the nose, leaving a greasy plume as the ship pitched by the Clipper, then a tongue of fire shot through the smoke, and the gray plane burst into flames. Knight saw the pilot leap up in his pit and over the side. The man’s chute whipped open, and for a moment his terrified face was visible as he tried to slip away from the falling inferno. But the white spread of silk hooked on the seaplane’s tail and the greedy fire spread over it like a mantle. With the blazing shrouds trailing after him, the doomed man plunged down and into the sea.

A hoarse cry from Parker made Knight spin about. The pilot had toppled out of his seat, holding both hands to his side. Knight and Doyle both sprang to aid him, but Courtney reached him first. Knight flung himself down at the controls on the other side as the captain dragged Parker clear.

The second Wapiti had twisted away as the pilot saw the fate of the first ship. Doyle reloaded the gun Knight had shoved at him. The Wapiti zoomed out of range, cut back at the tail of the Clipper. Knight felt

the rudder pedals vibrate, then he heard Reed open fire from the ventilator hatch in the tail. The vibration ceased, and he saw the two-seater veering off to the right. It whipped back in a sudden turn, charged obliquely toward the roaring engines. The Vickers pounded, and one of the twin-Wasps broke its steady thunder.

A terrific hail of bullets gouged the slanting top of the superstructure. Glass and pieces of metal rained down onto the floor. Knight crouched over the wheel as a burst ripped over his head. In the furious din he heard Doyle cursing, then the Tommy-gun chattered directly behind him. The Wapiti rolled clear, climbed madly. Knight looked over his shoulder. Courtney was frenziedly trying to radio for help, with half the set in ruins. Parker lay on the deck, groaning, and Doyle was jamming the last magazine into the Tommy-gun.

“*Australian Clipper* to Singapore!” Courtney screamed into the microphone. “For heaven’s sake send planes with guns—we’re being shot down—we’re just off Batam Island!”

“There he comes!” bawled Doyle.

The Vickers’ eyes flamed, five hundred feet above, as the Wapiti dived headlong out of the dusk. Doyle poked the sub-machine gun up through the riddled glass of one overhead panel. The Vickers’ bullets were smoking past the Clipper’s bow. Knight skidded, and the deadly streaks whipped off to the left. The gray ship twisted back.

“Look out!” cried Courtney. “He’s going to crash us!”

Doyle swore, and the Tommy-gun pounded frantically. The Wapiti’s tracers vanished. Knight had a flashing glimpse of the pilot’s crumpling body as the seaplane shrieked by. The man in the rear pit was wildly clawing at the dual controls, but the water was too close. Just as the nose started up, the Wapiti struck. The sound of the impact cut through the roar of the Clipper’s engines. A geyser spouted up about the wrecked ship, then the battered plane was lost in the shadows as the Clipper plunged on.

Knight drew a long breath. Twice he had thought they were finished. He looked around at Doyle.

“I think we’re safe—there’s Singapore ahead. Better see if you can calm the passengers—Courtney’s in no shape to talk to them.”

Doyle grinned crookedly.

“Neither was I, a couple of seconds ago.”

He went down the ladder. Without a word to the trembling Clipper captain, Knight headed the bullet-torn ship toward the Singapore naval base.

VICE-ADMIRAL HUGH HORNSBY put down his phone, gazed across his desk at Knight and Doyle.

“Manila confirms your statement, Mr. Knight, and their radio indicates you are fully accredited to speak for the State Department as well as the Navy.”

He sat back in his chair, behind which a huge British flag was draped upon the wall. His shrewd, kindly eyes held more than a trace of curiosity as he went on.

“This whole matter is decidedly irregular, of course, but I am ready to assist in any way possible.”

Knight started to answer, but was interrupted by the entrance of two officers—one an alert young Wing Commander, the other a solidly built captain of the Royal Navy, his tired face moist with perspiration. The admiral motioned for them to close the door.

“Captain Lefington, Mr. Knight and Mr. Doyle. . . . Campbell, I believe you know these gentlemen.”

The tired captain shook hands, and Campbell greeted both men with a genial nod. Admiral Hornsby continued.

“In strict confidence, both Mr. Knight and Mr. Doyle are secret agents for the American Government. That is how they came to be involved in this unfortunate affair.”

Lefington’s weary eyes showed a brief interest, and Campbell looked at Knight open-mouthed.

“And here I thought you were one of the idle rich, kiting around for the fun of it—you and Doyle.”

“Not rich,” said Knight, “and far from idle lately.”

The admiral cleared his throat. “What report on the Clipper’s passengers, Mr. Campbell?”

“One man was shot, sir, beside the First Officer, but neither fatally. They’re in the hospital by now, and the airline officials are handling the other situation. After your talk with the passengers, I believe they will agree to make no public statement, especially as the airline promises to pay for their silence.”

“Good,” said the bluff old admiral. “I’ve already brought pressure on the newspapers. The story will be rumored, perhaps, but it won’t be a wide open scandal. And that brings us to the subject at hand. Mr. Knight, you spoke of a cipher message which you thought would solve the riddle.”

“I have it here.” Knight took the idol from his pocket, carefully twisted one of the six arms. The head rotated through a quarter turn, and he lifted it off. A recess was disclosed in the body of the idol. He took out a tightly rolled paper and spread it on the admiral’s desk. It was covered with finely inked rows of numerals and letters.

“My experience with ciphers is limited,” he told Hornsby, “but I am sure Captain Lefington can break it.”

“Get onto it at once,” Hornsby directed the code expert.

The tired captain silently nodded, took the paper and withdrew. The admiral glanced at Knight, his rugged face clouded.

“Now that your status has been cleared up, I’ll answer your question about those seaplanes. About a month ago, six planes out of a flight of seven Wapitis mysteriously disappeared. The two planes which attacked the Clipper were obviously from that missing group.”

“You don’t mean they were stolen from this base?” Knight exclaimed.

The admiral smiled thinly. “Not quite so bad as that. They were on a tactical flight problem, operating from cruisers near the Phoenix Islands. To be exact, it was a commercial mission. You know of the new Anglo-American route from Honolulu to Australia, connecting with the present extension from Hong Kong through Singapore?”

Knight’s bronzed face sobered.

“Yes, and I think this attack tonight is somehow connected with that new route.”

HORNSBY looked at him. “That fits with— But never mind, I’ll finish about this other. Britain agreed to let your American line operate Clippers from Hong Kong, Singapore, and Brisbane, until the new Short Empire boats are ready. We also agreed to let the new Clipper line permanently use Suva Island in the Fijis, and any other of our Pacific islands for fueling stations, in return for permission for our Royal Air Force planes to use those facilities in an emergency. The new line is to go from Honolulu to Palmyra, and then to Samoa, and from Samoa to the Fijis and straight on to Brisbane, so you can understand that it will be a link with most of our Pacific islands. Extensions can be made to the Tonga group, the Ellices, Gilberts, and the rest.”

“I understand,” said Knight.

“At the time of the disappearance,” the admiral continued, “it was not determined whether the new route would go from Palmyra to an intermediate stop, or straight from Palmyra to Samoa. There are several other islands closer to the Palmyra-Samoa line, and we were to explore them as possible intermediate bases. On this particular day, the Wapitis were ordered to fly to the Ariki group—three uninhabited islands which could be used as fueling stations or storm bases.”

Hornsby paused, and Knight saw a somber glance pass between him and Wing-Commander Campbell.

“The Wapitis didn’t return,” the admiral went on in a strained tone. “Our cruisers steamed to Ariki, and pilots flew over the three islands, but the missing planes weren’t there. The search was extended to every

island in cruising distance, which took time as the ships had to carry two reserve tanks for those flights. At last one Wapiti was found. Mr. Knight, have you ever heard of Crazy Day Atoll?"

Knight shook his head. Hornsby continued with the dogged manner of a man facing some ugly task.

"It's a tiny island at almost exactly zero latitude and 180 degrees longitude where the International Date Line crosses the equator. It's an islet not two hundred feet across, only a few feet above water, and the only thing on it is one lone palm tree. That atoll is where we found the Wapiti, high on the beach."

"And the pilot and observer?" Knight asked quickly. "Were they dead or missing?"

A haunted look crossed the older man's face.

"They were neither," he answered, and there was something in his voice which sent a chill through Knight's heart. "We found them under that lone palm tree. Their eyes were open. They were sitting there, looking out over the sea, and the pilot had a book gripped in his hand. I was with the landing-party, and was the second man to reach them. There was something awful about it—those two sitting there so still, without a sign that they heard our shouts. I caught Mawson by the arm and shook him. Mr. Knight, his body was rigid as that of a corpse—but he was alive!"

"Good God!" Knight whispered. "But surely, since then . . . ?"

"Neither man has ever spoken a word," Hornsby said huskily. "Our surgeons have tried everything, but in vain. Mawson and his observer seem to be in a state of completely suspended animation. Their hearts register only two or three beats a minute, but their bodies do not turn cold. It has been three weeks since they were found, but they have taken no food nor water; their eyes never close, and it is impossible to tell whether they see or understand anything."

"It's horrible," Campbell said in a shaken voice. "I saw Mawson yesterday—sometimes I think I can see a look deep in his eyes, as though he knew—" he broke off with a shiver.

"And you've no idea what caused it?" Knight muttered.

"Not the slightest," said Campbell. "There wasn't a mark on either man, nor any reason for them to land at the atoll. There was a bit of fuel left, and nothing was wrong with the engine."

Knight looked at the admiral. "You said the pilot had a book in his hand?"

A PECULIAR expression came into Hornsby's eyes. "That was one of the strangest parts of all. It was a copy of Kipling, opened to his famous '*East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet.*'"

"Holy smoke!" said Doyle. "And they were right on the 180th meridian—the zero-line between East and West!"

"That wasn't all," the admiral said solemnly. "On the fly-leaf of the book was written: '*To all those who would wing across the rim of the world—Kismet.*'"

Knight stared at him.

"Kismet? That means Fate . . . Then it's a threat of the same fate to anyone who flies across the equator—the 'rim of the world'. But why?"

Hornsby looked thoughtfully at the idol, which Knight had placed on the edge of the desk.

"I was hoping you'd have the answer to that. You intimated you knew something about a plot—"

"I do," Knight broke in, "but not all the details. I discovered that a strange society called the 'Four Faces' was scheming against the *Australian Clipper* and probably against the other planes on the Hong Kong to Brisbane extension as well. I learned this—"

He stopped as a buzzer sounded. Hornsby took up the phone. The moment he lifted it a frantic voice was audible from the receiver.

"*Help! Come quick, Admiral—*" the words broke in a strangled cry, and they heard no more. The admiral leaped to his feet.

"That was Lefington! Something's happened to him!"

He ran to a door on the left. Knight and the others followed him down a corridor, through two empty offices. Hornsby burst into a third office, recoiled with a choked exclamation. Knight, staring past him, felt his blood suddenly turn cold.

Captain Lefington sat at his desk, the phone in one rigid hand, a look of terror frozen on his face. He did not move, and his glassy eyes stared unseeingly ahead.

"Lefington!" the admiral groaned. His blanched face turned toward Knight. "It's the same thing that struck the others."

Knight pushed by him, bent over the gruesome figure. "Captain!" he said tensely. "Tell me what happened."

Lefington made no answer. Knight shook his shoulder, felt the queer rigidity of the man's body. Campbell pulled him away.

"There's no use, Knight," he said hoarsely. "Whatever ungodly thing it is, it's got him. And your code—it's gone, too."

Knight followed the Wing Commander's eyes. Gripped in Lefington's stiffened fingers was a tiny scrap of paper. It was all that remained of the message which had been in the idol.

CHAPTER III
THE WHISPERING VOICE

AN HOUR LATER, Knight and Doyle turned quickly from the window of the admiral's office as Hornsby and Campbell came in.

"Any luck?" Knight asked.

Hornsby dully shook his head. "The surgeons are as baffled as they were in the other case."

"I've seen a condition somewhat like that," Knight said slowly. "Certain 'miracle' men—the Yogis in India—go into a trance and allow themselves to be buried alive. I've always suspected they took a strong drug."

"We thought of that," the admiral said despondently "I even had one of the Calcutta medical staff brought here to examine Mawson and Smythe. He admitted it might be a native drug, but without knowing what it was he couldn't suggest any relief."

"One thing's certain," said Campbell. "Whoever did it is still on the base."

Admiral Hornsby's face darkened. "It must have been one of the Clipper passengers," he said fiercely. "I've already investigated, and I'll swear by every officer who was in the building."

"And I," said Knight, "would swear only by the four of us—because we were in this room when it happened."

"Are you insinuating that there are criminals in the Royal Navy?" Hornsby thundered.

Knight pointed to the jade idol.

"I saw one of England's leading men turn pale at sight of that symbol. The 'Four Faces' knows no limits of rank or importance."

The admiral sank heavily into his chair. "I can't believe there's any such group," he said. "The police of our intelligence agents would have heard of it."

Knight hesitated. "You already know, admiral, that we are connected with espionage. I happen to have access to secret reports in several Government departments at Washington. We had no inkling of such an organization until about two months ago—yet I'm now convinced it has existed for at least three years."

"What evidence do you have for that statement?" said Hornsby.

"I'll explain as briefly as I can," replied Knight. He included Campbell in his glance. "You recall the case of the stratosphere plane which was stolen from Italy?"

"Certainly," said the Wing Commander. "Italy accused the Soviet. The ship crashed near Hampton Roads, Virginia, and everybody on board was killed."

"Do we act dead?" said Doyle.

Both Campbell and Hornsby looked blank. Knight made a quick gesture.

"Doyle and I were mixed up with it—but I'll omit the details. The scheme was engineered by Nikolai Borzec, who was chief of Russian air intelligence, as you undoubtedly know. But when the wreck was raised, the Navy found some code messages in a water-tight dispatch case, and on decoding them they found that Borzec was double-crossing the Soviet. He had planned, unknown even to his own men, to deliver the stratosphere ship to some mysterious criminal group which had headquarters in the Orient. One of the messages also hinted at sabotage in Manila, so Doyle and I were sent over here.

"A clue led me to Singapore, and from here to Europe. I chased all over the continent—to Paris, Berlin, Warsaw, and finally London. By that time I knew that the name of the organization was the 'Four Faces' and that it was a vast secret society with members not only in every country but evidently in every profession. I'm pretty sure that some members have been forced to join, either by blackmail or through fear for their lives."

"It's preposterous," declared the admiral. "What could be the purpose?"

Knight lighted a cigarette.

"Crime," he said. "Crime organized on a gigantic scale—on a plan so enormous that it is already a world power. I'm positive they had a hand in the great Stavisky swindle in France, all the political assassinations of the last few years, the last series of jewel robberies in Europe, and that piracy incident when the *S.S. Taku Laru* was looted. They're probably back of three-fourths of the major crimes and extortions in the world. Not only that, I think they're mixed up with espionage. They've an army of agents—I've had proof of that from the way they tracked me from London and the attempts they made to kill me."

SOME of the disbelief faded from the admiral's face. "But how has it been kept under cover so long?" he inquired. "All the police in the world can't be blind."

"The 'Four Faces' must have police on its rolls," returned Knight. "Regardless of that, they couldn't get far. It's organized on the A.B.C. system—each member in 'A' group has only three 'B' agents under him, each 'B' has only three 'C' agents, and so on. They'd need only the one system—you'll find that with only ten 'A's' it runs into five million members before you

get to the 'N' group—but I think they have separate systems for Europe and Asia and America. No matter how big it grows, a traitor can betray only the three members under him plus the one from whom he gets orders—unless he is high up and knows all the secrets. As to that, I haven't the slightest idea who controls the society. I only know that I've seen fear strike men—and women, too—in a dozen classes of life, at the merest whisper of the 'Four Faces.'"

"Say!" exclaimed Doyle. "If they're all marked like that steward on the Clipper, we could check up everybody on the base and spot the guilty one."

"Not necessarily," said Knight, "I think only the 'Killer' agents are tattooed that way, and perhaps the compulsory members—the blackmail victims. Possibly those colored dots indicate in which class they belong. I wasn't able to learn what they mean."

"How did you discover this much?" the admiral asked abruptly.

"I managed to impersonate one of their minor agents in Paris, and I was given an assignment to meet another agent in Berlin. I didn't keep the assignment, but I learned the identity of the German member—a woman high up in Nazi circles. I watched her for a week, saw her meet another woman spy, and that led me on to Warsaw and finally London. I got into a meeting-place one night, and I overheard part of a conference. I heard the *Australian Clipper* mentioned in connection with this date. I saw the idol given to a French agent to bring to some one in Singapore. I waylaid him later, but he was being followed by two others and I barely skinned through. They made two attempts to finish me, and that's why I played the boatman part to get on board Courtney's ship."

Admiral Hornsby turned to Doyle.

"Why were you on that plane? Did you have any suspicion of trouble?"

"No," said Doyle. "I was on there because Dick sent me a message to meet him in Brisbane."

Knight started.

"I didn't send you any message. I thought you were under separate orders from Washington."

"For the luwvva Mike!" said Doyle. "And we just changed our signal numbers last month. There must be another leak in Brett's office or at the Navy."

"Perhaps," muttered Knight, "but even if we found the guilty man it wouldn't help much. He'd be just another cog in the machine. If we could only get a line on the men at the top. Nikolai Borzec, of course, went down when the stolen stratosphere plane sank, though they never found his body. Navy searchlights, you see, were on that wreck from the second we hit. There were destroyers and boats all around it for two hours. He couldn't have escaped."

"Maybe he went up in that green gas cloud, when th' ship sank," snickered Doyle.

Hornsby absently drummed his thick fingers on the desk. "I'm beginning to think, Mr. Knight, that you haven't exaggerated this affair, after all. I knew Borzec. He was a cold, crafty fiend. He must have had powerful reasons for betraying the Soviet. He would have to be assured of protection against the vengeance of the OGPU, and if the 'Four Faces' can guarantee that, it must have tremendous power."

Knight's answer was cut short by the hasty entrance of Courtney, captain of the *Australian Clipper*.

"You were right!" Courtney burst out. "It's a scheme against the whole line."

Knight jumped up. "What's happened now?"

"No. 15—the survey Clipper on the new route—we just got word from a British freighter."

"Shot down?" Doyle said tensely.

"No, the message said there wasn't a scratch on it. It was found, without a soul aboard, adrift on the equator."

A strange hush fell over the room. Knight and the admiral stared at each other a moment.

"Kismet," the admiral whispered. "Then the men who were in that plane—"

His voice trailed off, and Knight knew he was thinking of Lefington's dreadful fate. As one, they both looked down at the jade idol. To Knight's taut mind, the nearest face of the four seemed to mock him with a Sphinx-like smile.

SEVERAL days later, in an odd, circular room many miles from Singapore a tall man stood glaring at the wall which surrounded him. A soft amber light shone on him from receptacles on six sides. A woven rug covered the floor, but there was no furniture, and the only break in the round and barren wall was a curved door which bore no knob and seemed to be locked from the other side.

"All I ask," the man snarled, "is a chance to appear before *them!*"

There was a brief silence, then a whispering voice spoke from some unseen source.

"*You will be given that chance sooner than you think—if you fail again.*"

A look of fear crossed the sardonic face of the man in the circular room. Then his lips twisted mockingly.

"Your mummery may affect others, but I am no child."

"*Enough of that,*" the whispering voice said harshly. "*Give me your report on Richard Knight and that other man, Doyle.*"

"Knight and Doyle are both secret agents for the

United States,” said the man in the circular room. “Knight is known as ‘Q’ to at least five departments of his government—”

“I already have that information,” the invisible speaker interrupted, “also the case history on Doyle. I wish the report covering the past twenty-four hours.”

THE MAN in the amber-lit room scowled at the barren wall. “Nothing has been received since I relayed you the report that they sailed from Singapore on a British cruiser nine days ago. That report came from G-65, on board the vessel, and stated they were steaming for Honolulu, and that the catapult planes were being equipped with extra tanks. Later, another report was begun in the same code, but it was broken off. Evidently G-65 was trapped. The cruiser’s radio has been silent since then, so we cannot take bearings, but they should be somewhere between the Marshall Islands and Hawaii.”

“One moment,” said the whispering voice. There was an interval, then it spoke again, rapidly: “In your explanation of the stratosphere plane disaster you mentioned one Benita Navarre, the ward of General John Brett, chief of American Army Intelligence. Was she also working with their Intelligence?”

A savage look crossed the tall man’s face.

“No,” he grated, “but she could easily become a dangerous agent.”

“Your report on her,” said the whispering voice, “indicates something peculiar about her history. What are the details?”

The weird golden eyes of the man in the room took on a smoldering fire.

“She is a beautiful little devil—she’s descended from the Duke of Navarre, who was trapped with a number of his colonists in an isolated canyon in the American Rockies. That was a century ago. Navarre and his wife had fled from Spain with their followers because of trouble with the king, and they took some of their treasures with them. They found gold in the canyon I mentioned, and built up a community village. But an avalanche closed the only entrance, and for three generations no one was able to get out of the place.”

“I understand now,” interrupted the unseen speaker. “That was the canyon the newspapers called ‘Lost Valley.’”

“That is it,” the man in the room said curtly. “Knight was instrumental in bringing help to the people in the valley and making it possible for them to leave there. He was the one who arranged for General Brett and his wife to take care of the Navarre girl and help her adjust herself to modern life.”

“Then she knows very little of civilization?”

“From what I saw of her,” retorted the golden-eyed man, “she has already caught up and passed the average American woman. But then she has a clever mind and the means to do what she wishes—her share of the Navarre treasure was close to a million dollars.”

“And there is, perhaps,” said the whispering voice, “some sentiment between her and Knight?”

“Yes,” said the tall man irritably, “she thinks he’s a great hero. But why all these questions about her when she’s eight thousand miles away?”

“A report has just come from Honolulu . . .” The hidden man’s whispering words filled the room for several minutes. “. . . So you see,” he finally concluded, “she has evidently been made a spy. However, these instructions about her are secondary. The other matter is of vital importance; another failure would be—unfortunate.”

The golden-eyed man stared uneasily at the wall. “There will be no failure, this time.”

A silence fell, then the whispering man spoke with a note of menace—

“A final warning: They instruct me to tell you . . . this is your last chance.”

CHAPTER IV THE S.O.S.

FOR FIVE SULTRY DAYS, the gray British cruiser had steamed directly east, its sharp prow cleaving the warm waters of the equator. Stealing out of the Singapore base at night, it had sailed north around Borneo and Celebes to the other side of Halmahera—while the whole ship buzzed with rumors.

Down in the wardroom, Doyle mopped his red face and applied himself to another whiskey *stengah*.

“Nine days out of Singapore,” he growled at Knight, “and nothin’ busted yet.”

Knight poured himself a drink.

“We nabbed that agent,” reminded the other man.

“Helluva lot of good it did,” said Doyle, “with him bumpin’ himself off before we could make him talk.”

“At least, we may have thrown the ‘Four Faces’ off the track,” returned Knight. “That’s why I persuaded the admiral to wait, after we learned about that first message. I want them to think we’re sailing for Honolulu.”

Doyle mopped his face again, looked mournfully out at the sea. The brassy sun made heat waves shimmer along the horizon.

"I've always wanted to cross the equator—but I'll be hanged if I want to live on it th' rest of my life."

Knight grinned and stretched his long legs. "Don't worry, in about twelve days we'll have to detour. South America happens to be in the way." He looked around as Wing-Commander Campbell entered the wardroom.

"We're almost to Crazy Day Atoll," Campbell announced. "Thought you might want to look at it. The ship's standing in close."

They followed him out to the forecabin. Admiral Hornsby, who had temporarily assumed command of the vessel, was standing at the rail, a pair of binoculars raised to his eyes. After a moment he handed them to Knight.

"Nothing there," he said with a note of relief. "I was almost afraid to look."

Knight focused the glasses on the tiny island. It really had a cheerful appearance, like an oasis in a desert. The waves broke lazily on the reef, and the fronds of the lone palm tree stirred in the breeze. There was nothing sinister about it. But as Knight recalled the admiral's story and the weird thing which had struck Lefington, Crazy Day Atoll took on a sudden grimness. He turned to the admiral.

"No new information from Singapore, I suppose?"

"Only routine," said Hornsby, "but the captain just told me that some unknown operator has made two attempts to raise us by radio. I ordered him to keep the transmitter shut down, no matter who called us."

Knight nodded, and for a minute they silently looked toward the tiny island.

"We must be about on the meridian," said Campbell. "Doyle, here's where the clock jumps back a day. Now if you were on that atoll, you could hop from Tuesday to Monday and back again in about three seconds."

"If it's the same to you," grunted Doyle, "I'll take another whiskey *stengah*."

HE STARTED TOWARD the wardroom, but halted at an exclamation from up on the wing of the bridge.

"Admiral Hornsby! The radio operator has just caught an S.O.S."

"Answer it! No—wait a second." The admiral wheeled to Knight. "This might be a trick, to make us use our radio so they could find our position."

"You're right," Knight said quickly. He gazed up at the Signal Officer. "Who was the call from?"

"It's from the S.S. *Argos*, a Greek tramp steamer—their position is 163 West longitude and 6 North latitude. Their set went dead before they could explain the distress call, but the operator thought he heard gunfire."

"That position is close to Palmyra Island!" exclaimed Campbell. "It's just about on the route from Palmyra to Samoa."

Admiral Hornsby roared a command up to the officer-of-the-deck, who had joined the Signal officer.

"Change course and head for that position—full speed ahead!"

"Just a moment sir," Knight interposed. "This whole thing may be a scheme to get us away from the equator. Doyle and I can fly there in one-sixth the time the cruiser could make it, if you'll let us have two of the Nimrods. That will leave two reserve planes. We can radio back if there's really trouble. We can fuel at Palmyra; and then radio where we'll fly and meet you."

The admiral hesitated only a second.

"All right. It's a dangerous flight over the barren stretch, but if you two wish to make it . . . ?"

"What about it, Doyle?" said Knight, "Want to get away from this heat?"

"Lead me to it," yelled Doyle.

Ten minutes later, Knight climbed into the cockpit of a special Hawker Nimrod. The powerful Kestrel engine had already been started, and the seaplane was quivering on the catapult car as though eager to be off. He ran his eyes over the instrument board while he fastened his safety-belt. Except for pontoons, two-way radio, and other Fleet Arm equipment, the ship was almost the same as the Hawker Fury, with which he was familiar.

The cruiser had been swung so that the catapult pointed into the wind. Knight fastened his helmet and goggles, opened the throttle. Leaning firmly back against the headrest, he signaled to the catapult tender.

With a violent lunge, the Nimrod shot forward and into the air. Knight dropped the nose slightly, then pulled up as the ship gained speed. He circled at a thousand feet while Doyle's ship was launched. Doyle climbed up to his level, and they headed swiftly on their course.

The cruiser fell astern, became a speck against the sea, and vanished. Knight kept at a low altitude so that he could watch the white-caps and check the wind. The two ships roared on above the lonely ocean. Knight kept the engine at almost full throttle, and the air-speed meter showed close to 190. Half an hour passed, then he gestured to Doyle and switched on his transmitter.

"What do you figure the wind?"

"*Must be around 25, on th' quarter*," Doyle's reply came through the helmet phones. "*That'd be about the same as a 15-mile tail wind.*"

"That's my estimate, too," said Knight.

He switched off the radio, settled back for the long

grind. The hour-hand went around the clock three times, and gloomy clouds began to pile up ahead. The Nimrods plunged their bullet-like noses into tropical rain, thundered out of it, but still under the clouds. Doyle signaled, then his voice bellowed into Knight's phones.

"LISTEN, FELLA, YOUR NAVIGATION BETTER BE GOOD! IF WE MISS PALMYRA WE'RE GOING TO BE A LONG WAYS FROM ANYWHERE."

"Cut down your transmitting power," Knight answered hurriedly. "No sense in advertising all this."

The generator hum faded, then Doyle spoke in a stage whisper.

"This all right, papa?"

Knight chuckled to himself. Doyle would probably wise-crack on his way to a firing-squad.

THE SEAPLANES raced on. Knight gradually climbed until they were flying at 4,000 feet. The lowering clouds had greatly reduced the visibility, and his face was a trifle anxious as he scanned the horizon ahead. Palmyra lay in a group between two or three shoals to the north and Washington Island to the south. But these dots on the ocean were small and well apart. It would be quite possible to miss the entire group if his compass were slightly incorrect.

They were on the second reserve tank, with enough gas for about fifty minutes of flight, when a dark cloud of smoke appeared on the horizon almost straight ahead.

Knight took his binoculars and trained them on the spot. It was a small vessel, on fire and heeled over steeply. He thrust the glasses back into their clip, nosed down at full throttle. Doyle followed, and they hurtled toward the burning craft. As they neared it, Knight could see an island about twenty-five miles beyond, and another to the south. He eased the thundering Kestrel, banked at two hundred feet above the vessel.

Flames were sweeping aft from amidships. Smoke billowed in the breeze, leaving only a tiny space on the forecastle visible. Knight glimpsed a man's body near a jagged hole in the deck. Part of a cargo hatch cover showed through the smoke, twisted around as though it had been blown open.

There was no sign of life, and even as Knight dipped lower for a second inspection the burning vessel began to sink by the bow. The stern rose high in the air, and for a moment he could see the name *S.S. Argos* in smoke-grimed letters.

The steamer hung for a second longer, then plunged for the bottom. A cloud of steam arose as the flames were snuffed out, then only an eddy of charred fragments remained upon the sea. Knight stared down

at the spot. Whatever the secret, the Greek tramp freighter had taken it down with its dead.

"What do you think, Dick?" Doyle's awed voice broke in on his thoughts.

"Looked as though it might have been bombed," Knight said grimly. "Maybe we'll find out at Palmyra."

Without troubling to gain altitude, he sent the Nimrod speeding toward the nearest island. As he neared it he saw the three lagoons which distinguished Palmyra. The first one had been connected with the sea by a wide channel dredged through the beach, so that the Clipper ships could taxi in and out. On the farther side and near the end of this lagoon stood the supply shed, the radio building, and quarters for the small groups of personnel stationed on the island.

Knight was gliding toward the lagoon when a faint pattering sound came through the roar of his engine. Doyle's voice howled in the earphones, and in the same instant a crooked line of black dots appeared on the lower right wing.

Knight slammed the throttle wide open and shot the Nimrod up in a lightning Immelmann. Three gray Wapitis had plunged out of the clouds, and the leader was diving straight on Doyle's tail. Knight's Vickers were already charged. With a furious twist, he hurled the single-seater at the first gray ship.

The gunner of the Wapiti spun his Lewises. Knight ripped a burst across the two-seater's wing, and the pilot zoomed madly. The sudden maneuver threw the gunner down in his pit, and Knight's tracers probed into space. One of the other Wapitis darted in fiercely, cowl guns blazing.

Bullets tore through the top wing, and a lift wire parted with a vicious snap. Knight renversed at terrific speed, and the Wapiti swam into his sights. He tripped the twin-guns, and a raking blast gouged the gray seaplane. The pilot cringed as tracers smoked past his head, but the man in the rear pit leaped up to pour a murderous fire into the single-seater. The isinglass wind-screen flew to bits before Knight's eyes, and hot lead spattered along his cowl.

AS HE CORKSCREWED out of range, he flung a look toward Doyle. The third Wapiti was whirling into a vertical bank, trying to shake off the enraged ex-Marine. The gunner was hanging limply over the side, his head and arms flopping with every jerk of the ship.

Bullets from two directions hammered Knight's tail. He pulled the stick to his belt, and the high-powered fighter screamed straight up for five hundred feet. He kicked off before it had lost flying speed, rocketed back down the sky. One of the Wapitis had tried to follow him in that whirlwind zoom. Knight caught it squarely

under his guns. The Vickers leaped in a thrashing recoil as the belts snaked from their boxes. Knight saw the phosphorous tracks end at the seaplane's tail. He twitched the stick, and the deadly lines swerved forward over the ship.

The gunner frenziedly spun his twin Lewises. Flame crimsoned their tips—then died out as Knight's bullets found their mark. The Vickers' crashing force threw the doomed man back and forth, as in some crazy dance of death. Pale as a corpse, the pilot stared up at the plummeting Nimrod. He whipped into a steep bank trying to keep away. Knight's feet moved on the rudder, and his Vickers' fire tore through the tilted wing.

Over the sharp pointed nose he watched that hail of slugs rip into the gray seaplane. The pilot threw one hand before his eyes, as though to ward off the awful rain of death. Smoking bullets smashed into that upraised hand, flung it back in a red ruin. But the pilot never knew.

Knight saw the man sag over his controls, then the Wapiti plunged into the sea. The Nimrod shrieked out of its dive, shot toward the other planes. Doyle was twisting desperately from side to side, caught in a hot crossfire. Vickers pounding, Knight dropped on the nearer Wapiti. It was the leader's ship, the one with the dead gunner.

The pilot rolled clear with an amazing skill, but the other pilot had started to his rescue and Doyle was free. In a twinkling, the situation was reversed. The two gray ships charged savagely at Knight, and from four blasting Vickers hot lead crashed into his plane. But for the superior speed of the converted Fury, he would have been lost. He whirled the single-seater into a dizzy loop. Both Wapiti started to follow through, then one lunged back at Doyle.

Knight spun around at the top of his climb. The man who had followed tried to track through, but slipped in the turn. His goggles flew off in the sudden side-blast of wind. He caught at them futilely, and in that instant his face was turned toward Knight.

In stark amazement, Knight slacked his touch on the trips. The man in the other ship was Nikolai Borzec!

CHAPTER V THE DEATH ROUTE

FOR A MOMENT Knight's mind refused to believe the evidence of his eyes. Borzec was dead . . . there was no way he could have escaped from the sunken stratosphere plane . . .

But the sardonically handsome face glaring across at him was that of the great Russian spy. The man's black brows had the same Satanic arch, his mouth the same twisted mockery. Impossible . . . but it was Borzec!

Numbed by the revelation, Knight missed his chance for the kill. Before his fingers could again take hold of the trips, Borzec was out of range. The Russian pitched under the Nimrod, came back in a tight climbing turn. His guns cut a bullet-path across the fuselage back of Knight's pit. Knight rolled swiftly, and Borzec's tracers feathered off to the left.

Fire spurted out two hundred feet below, and for a split-second Knight's heart turned cold. Then he saw that it was the Wapiti which had burst into flames. Doyle was zooming to help him.

One last torrent of lead, hastily aimed, spurted from Borzec's guns, then he climbed madly for the clouds. Knight went after him in a steep chandelle, with Doyle close behind. He was almost in line when the misty edge of the cloud blurred the fleeing Wapiti. He fired at long range, hoping for a lucky shot; but with a quick zoom, Borzec was out of danger and lost in the fleecy masses.

Knight motioned Doyle to swing away, fearing the Russian might dive again. He circled warily for five minutes, then signaled Doyle and turned back toward the island. The fight had carried them a mile or more offshore, but it was only a few seconds before they were leveling off at the entrance to the lagoon.

Tall coconut palms lined both sides of the lagoon. Knight taxied along near the right bank, prepared for a hasty take-off if Borzec should reappear. But there was no sign of the Russian.

The two planes came to a stop with their pontoons resting on the sandy shore of the lagoon. Knight cut off his motor, climbed onto the wing and jumped down. Doyle joined him, a dazed expression on his homely countenance.

"Did you see him?" he said almost in a whisper.

"Yes," said Knight. "I saw him all right."

"But how—Judas Priest, it can't be Borzec! You said yourself he couldn't have got out of that wreck."

“And you reminded me his body was never found.” Knight smiled drily as he pointed to his bullet-scarred ship. “That doesn’t look like a ghost’s work, does it?”

“No, but how the devil did he work it?”

“Ask me something easy,” said Knight, wearily. He took off his helmet and goggles, gazed toward the newly erected buildings. “Isn’t this place supposed to be occupied?”

“I don’t know,” muttered Doyle. “Maybe we’d better watch our step. Some more of Borzec’s mob may be hiding in there.”

Guns poised, they went toward the first building. It was the supply shed, and well filled with fuel drums, oil, spare parts, and a variety of material for the base. Just beyond was a cleared site, which Knight surmised was intended for a small hotel, of the type erected at Midway and Wake for the accommodation of passengers. He and Doyle searched the personnel’s quarters, and found them empty. As they entered the combined office, radio and meteorological building, Doyle pointed at the floor.

“Look, there’s some blood! There’s been a scrap here in the last few hours.”

“More likely murder,” Knight said in a grim tone. He went into the radio room, searched the adjoining one and came back. Doyle was outside, bending over some marks on the ground.

“They dragged something along here,” he said significantly. “These tracks lead over to the lagoon, and I’ll give you one guess why they went there.”

Knight slowly nodded.

“Borzec and the others landed here and killed the station men. They weighted the bodies and dropped them into the water.”

“Yeah, that’s it—but why?”

Knight shook his head. “We interrupted something, that’s clear. They probably have heard us talking by radio, or else heard us coming and took off so they could wipe us out and go ahead with the job.”

“But what could they want here?” demanded Doyle. “There’s nothing here but palm trees—and these buildings.”

“Honolulu might throw some light on it,” said Knight. “I’ll see if that radio set is working.”

He started inside, then halted abruptly, for the drone of engines had become audible.

“That devil’s coming back—and he’s got help!” exclaimed Doyle. “We better get going.”

They ran toward the Nimrods, but Knight stopped again. “Listen! That’s a Clipper.”

IN A FEW MOMENTS the huge ship appeared from a trifle East of North. It glided precisely toward

the island, skimmed over the surf, and came to a stop in the prepared lagoon. Engines rumbling, it slowly taxied toward the float near which the two British fighters were beached.

“Holy cats!” said Doyle. “It’s Courtney’s ship. What’s it doing here?”

Knight stared at the bow. The name *Australian Clipper* was plain to be seen, and he could also see where damage from the battle at Singapore had been hurriedly repaired. As the ship slid alongside the float, Courtney looked out in astonishment from the control compartment, then gestured for the other pilot to take over. A few seconds later, just as the engines went silent, the Clipper captain emerged from the main hatch. Knight caught the mooring lines and with Doyle’s help drew the big plane into position by the gangway on the float. Courtney ran down the steps, followed by Radio Officer Reed and a middle-aged, pompous looking passenger.

“What are you doing here?” he said hastily.

“I might ask you the same thing,” countered Knight.

The pompous man shoved Reed out of his way. “Who are these men, Courtney?” he barked.

“They’re the ones I told you about, Mr. Hull,” said Courtney. “Knight and Doyle—the Intelligence agents who—”

“I told you to keep that to yourself,” snapped Knight.

“Never mind about that,” Hull broke in. “I’m running this show, and in case you don’t know who I am—”

“I know who you are,” Knight said coldly. “But Wall Street isn’t giving me orders—not even a ‘Wolf of Wall Street.’”

Hull’s plump face reddened.

“You’ll sing a different tune, young man, when I get back to the States. I’ll have you dismissed inside of twenty-four hours.”

Knight calmly turned his back, spoke to Courtney.

“In case you’re interested, the men who were left on this base have been killed.”

Courtney turned chalk-white, and Hull’s suddenly frightened eyes shot to the British service pistol strapped at Knight’s hip.

“Don’t be a fool, Mr. Hull,” Knight said curtly. “We came here because of an S.O.S. We’re not murderers.”

He explained briefly about the S.O.S. call and what had followed.

“Good Lord,” the financier said huskily, “this is more serious than I thought.”

Courtney stared at the Nimrods. “You say you were catapulted from a cruiser near here? Then you must have had some idea this was going to happen.”

"No," Knight said shortly, "we were working on something else."

"Look here," Hull barked, "if it's anything connected with this trouble on the new line, I insist on knowing about it. I own half the stock in Anglo-American Airlines, and I'm getting tired of this secrecy. First it's an Army Intelligence agent, and then—" he stopped abruptly—"Say, is that girl working with you on this thing?"

"Nobody's working with us," said Knight.

Hull eyed him sharply.

"She boarded the plane at Honolulu, and she acts damned mysterious. If it weren't for her Intelligence credentials, I'd think there was something crooked about it."

"You mean the War Department ordered a woman agent out here?" Knight said incredulously.

"That's right," Courtney cut in. "She insisted on coming along on this emergency trip to Brisbane—said she had to reach Singapore as quickly as possible. I supposed she was sent by the government for some reason."

Knight turned to the gangway.

"I wouldn't be surprised if she were an agent of the 'Four Faces,'" he said in an undertone. "The whole thing sounds fishy."

Courtney smiled as they went up the steps.

"Anyway, she's everything they said about glamorous woman spies . . . a raving beauty—dark eyes, blond hair, a trace of an accent and—what's the matter?"

HALF-WAY DOWN the hatch, Knight had stopped as though glued to the steps. A slender girl, stunningly dressed, was at the foot of the ladder.

"Benita!" he gasped.

The girl's dark eyes widened in amazement as she saw his face, then she sprang up the steps and caught at his arm.

"Ricardo! But is it really you?"

"What in Heaven's name are you doing here?"

Knight exclaimed.

She looked at him archly from under her long black lashes.

"Oh, I just think maybe I see what is on other side of the world."

Knight tried to hide a smile. "Incidentally," he said, "what's the idea of wearing that blond wig?"

"Sh-h!" said Benita. "You make Captain Courtney think me very funny person."

Courtney was gazing down blankly at both of them, and back of him Knight saw Hull's heavy features.

"*Humph!*" grunted the financier. "So she is working with you, after all."

Benita smiled demurely.

"*Si, señor*, we are what you call the old friends."

"Tell me the truth," Knight said in an undertone. "Did General Brett send you out here?"

"Yes—but he does not know it," Benita said impishly. "One day, I see him change the two little red pins on the big map he keeps locked up, and I look over his shoulder because I know the red pins are you and Doyle. Then I ask some one, where is thees Singapore, and I think maybe I go there and give you the big surprise."

"You little rascal," said Knight. "Brett will have a fit when he finds you stole those G-2 credentials."

"Oh, I do not steal them," Benita said serenely. "I only borrow them—when I go home, I give them back to him."

"The Bretts will think you've been kidnapped, running off like this," said Knight.

"No, they think I go to New York for the shops," Benita answered. "And I really go there, too, so it will not be the lie. Then I buy thees wig, so nobody know me if Uncle John find out and have the police look for me."

"Oh Lord," groaned Knight.

Benita looked at him reproachfully. "Is that the nice way to talk, when you not see me for so long?"

"You don't understand," remonstrated Knight. "You can't go gallivanting around like this—you haven't learned enough about the world."

"If this is an act for our benefit, you can cut it short," Hull interrupted harshly. "I've no time to waste. We landed here only to see why our radio messages weren't answered."

KNIGHT CLIMBED UP to the top of the hatch and faced the financier. "Take my warning and go back to Honolulu. There's grave danger on this route."

"If you're thinking of the girl, she'll have to take her chances," snapped Hull. "She insisted on coming along, and we're not turning back."

"Do you know everything that's happened?" Knight asked sharply.

"I know that somebody is trying to wreck the line," grated Hull. "Maybe the British want to squeeze us out, now that we've established the bases. It's mighty queer that they let that Clipper be stolen."

"What Clipper?" said Knight.

"Number 15—the one that was found deserted on the equator," Hull replied gruffly. "A British destroyer found it and towed it to Howland Island—or so they reported. They said they left a few men to guard it until we could send pilots there—but when Courtney arrived there it was gone and so were the men."

"That's right," Courtney said nervously. "I was ordered to Howland at once, but Number 15 had vanished. And that's not all. Number 9 caught fire at Brisbane just before it was due to take off for a trial run to Samoa and Honolulu."

"I've evidence that the whole thing is being engineered at Brisbane," barked Hull. "And I'm going to get the truth!"

"Do you realize," Knight said grimly, "that everyone who has tried to fly this route across the equator has either vanished or been killed?"

Hull looked uneasy for a moment, then the bluster came back into his voice.

"They wouldn't dare kill me—I'm too damned important! And I'm not afraid of being kidnapped, either."

Knight coldly returned his glare. He had no power to force the Wall Street magnet to turn back, yet for Benita to leave the ship and remain with him and Doyle at Palmyra might be even more dangerous. Borzec might return with reinforcements to carry out whatever scheme he had planned. And the Nimrods were single seaters.

"Doyle and I will go along and guard you," he told Hull in a curt tone. "We can refuel them in a few minutes."

"You can't make Samoa with those ships," objected Courtney.

"We can reach Arika," said Knight. "They told me at Singapore that a gas supply had been cached on a ledge inside the bay, for emergency use. You can circle or land there while we fuel up."

"It's a good idea," said Hull. "I was about to suggest it myself."

Reed and Doyle were returning from the office as Knight and Benita came down the gangway steps.

"The radio's been put on the fritz," Reed told Courtney.

"Yeah," said Doyle, "they burned out—" his mouth popped open as his eyes fell on Benita.

"*Bue-nas dias, Senor Doyle*," she said. "You remember me, no?"

"Holy mackerel!" Doyle gulped. "Where did you drop from—and when did you turn into a blond?"

Knight interposed quickly. "I'll explain, old man, while we fuel the Nimrods. We're going to escort the Clipper."

TWENTY minutes later, as the engines of all three planes droned their readiness for taking off, Knight stood at the Clipper gangway with Benita.

"I'd give everything I own," he muttered, "if you were safe in Washington."

Her dark eyes looked up at him. "I am not afraid—Deek."

It was the first time she had ever attempted the diminutive of his name. He smiled down at her.

"*Hasta luego, querida*—and remember, we'll be close by."

Three hours afterward, as his thundering Nimrod kept pace with the giant Clipper, he remembered that parting moment.

"Thoroughbred," he said to himself. His thoughts went back to the time when he had first seen her. She had been in danger then, and in his first glimpse he had realized her fine courage. A dozen times since then he had had further proof, for fate had contrived to bring her into the tangle of espionage which was his life.

Fate. . . . Kismet. . . . his bronzed face sobered as he remembered the strange warning which had been left on Crazy Day Atoll. . . . "*To all those who would wing across the rim of the world. . . .*"

They were nearing that rim now. Arika Island now lay but twenty miles ahead, a dark, jagged shape in the thickening dusk. And Arika was four miles south of the equator. He began to search the darkening sky. There was no visible danger, yet in spite of himself a tenseness stole over him. He looked across the Clipper's tail at Doyle's ship. Doyle was flying two hundred feet from the big plane and on its port side.

Knight cast a glance ahead, then scanned the clock. They were cruising at 160, to keep back with the Clipper. In almost exactly six minutes they would be above the equator. He tightened his grip on the stick, instinctively ruddered in closer to the huge plane.

SUDDENLY, lights flashed on in the Clipper's main lounge. He had a startled glimpse of struggling figures, then Benita's face appeared at one of the windows. She raised her hand as though for a frantic warning, but was dragged back before she could finish. The next instant the muzzle of a Lewis gun smashed through a forward-lounge window, and a hail of lead tore through the Nimrod's fuselage.

Knight pulled the plane into a furious zoom. Another gun blazed from the main hatch as he whipped clear of the first blast. The engine broke its steady roar, misfired, picked up again. A third machine-gun was pounding away at Doyle. The ex-Marine jerked his ship around, and for a second his Vickers chattered fiercely.

Knight dived frenziedly to head him off. In the suddenness of that treacherous attack, he knew Doyle had forgotten Benita. Doyle's tracers abruptly swerved, and Knight saw him climb steeply above the Clipper.

From the main hatch and the after-lounge, two Lewises flamed up after Doyle's ship. As it merged with the dusk, both gunners whirled their weapons toward Knight.

The stick jumped in his hand as a torrent of bullets struck the tail. He plunged the fighter under the massive ship and dived until he knew he was out of range. As he eased the stick back, he felt the plane vibrate. The Kestrel was missing steadily, and even at full throttle he could barely hold his altitude.

He looked up helplessly at the Clipper. It was racing toward Arika, a vague shape in the gloom. He saw Doyle's ship far off to one side, flying parallel. In another minute both planes were swallowed up in the dusk.

With a stern determination, he set himself to reach the island. He was at two thousand feet, but the Nimrod was starting to settle. He held the nose as high as he dared, and reached for the radio switch. His fingers were on it when he saw the microphone. A burst had shattered it into fragments and wrecked the receiver as well.

Doggedly, he bent over the controls, as though by sheer will power he could keep the ship in the air until he reached his goal. Arika loomed ahead, gloomy and forbidding. From somewhere beyond the jutting rocks which hid the bay he caught a flash of brilliant light. The ragged outline of the cliff showed against the sky, with its gradual slope to the palm groves and the mangrove swamps at the North. Then the light vanished, and the darkness seemed to close in swiftly.

At 800 feet, the crippled fighter curved in toward the narrow entrance of the bay. Knight peered down as the Nimrod swayed between the frowning rocks. Half of the shallow little harbor was in darkness, shadowed by the high, jutting walls to the West. He banked directly over the bay and released a parachute flare. As the magnesium blazed up, he hastily surveyed the area below.

Only barren water met his eyes. The Clipper Ship had vanished!

covered the little harbor. The plane was down to fifty feet as he neared the end of that swift search—and still no trace of the Clipper or Doyle's plane.

The parachute flare was barely a hundred feet above the water, and he was not high enough to drop another. He had already seen the fuel cache—a small shed built on a ledge near the foot of a towering cliff. He leveled off and landed in the water nearby. The flare dropped into the bay, hissed and went out. With the dim glow of his running-lights to aid him, he taxied slowly toward the ledge. The pontoon grated, and he switched off the faltering engine.

The ensuing silence was oppressive. He climbed out on the wing and sprang to the ledge. He was trying to draw the Nimrod farther up on the shore when he heard a rustling noise behind him. He whirled, one hand on his pistol.

For a second, he stared at the towering cliff wall. In the rays of the red and green wing-lights the part before him seemed to tremble. In consternation, he suddenly realized it was an enormous camouflaged tarpaulin suspended over an opening in the cliff. Two sections were sliding sidewise, folding as they moved.

He jumped back to the fighter, sprang onto the wing. A bright light flashed through the half-uncovered opening, and he saw that a large cavern lay beyond. A small black yacht was moored at a narrow dock on the right, and as the tarpaulins swung farther aside he saw two Clipper planes, and several smaller aircraft farther on. A score of fierce-looking Dyaks were running toward him along the ledge, which extended into the cavern, and on a platform by the *Australian Clipper* Knight saw a smaller group of white men.

"Take him alive!" one of the white men shouted in Malay, and with a surge of fury Knight recognized Borzec.

With shrill howls, the first group of Dyaks dashed from the cavern. Knight clenched the gun-trips on the stick, with a prayer that the prop was at the right angle. The Vickers thrashed into action, and their clattering din echoed from the cliff. Three of the Dyaks tumbled to the ground, and a fourth pitched into the water. Those in the rear threw themselves flat, but the tracers had gone over the heads of the ones in front, and with triumphant yells they raced toward the plane.

Knight snatched his Webley automatic from its holster. A brown face turned into a bloody welter at his first shot. He fired again, and a second Dyak sprawled in a heap. A razor-edged kris came whizzing between the wings. Knight ducked, and the deadly blade half buried itself in the other side of the cockpit. He had let go of the Bowden trips, and now the remaining Dyaks

CHAPTER VI THE SECRET OF ARIKI

AFTER THAT FIRST MOMENT of astonishment, Knight banked toward the region which had been in shadow. The Clipper had to be there . . . he had seen the flash of its landing lights. He swept over the ragged shore, holding the Nimrod in a circle which

were charging furiously. He emptied his pistol into the horde, and they gave back for an instant.

One of the Dyaks dived from the ledge and came up under the wing. He was on the pontoon in a twinkling. Knight crashed the butt of his gun down on the man's head, and he pitched back into the water.

Borzec and three of the white men were running toward the seaplane. Knight clawed at the trips, and the Vickers responded with a deafening roar. One of Borzec's men fell with a bubbling scream. Then the emptied guns went dead.

Knight whirled to seize the kris. Something struck fiercely at the back of his head, and he felt himself falling. Above the howls of the Dyaks, he heard Borzec's raging voice, then another savage blow sent him plunging into oblivion . . .

OUT OF A BLACK STUPOR, Knight heard a vague murmur of voices, and as his senses slowly returned he realized that some one was bending over and touching him. Then he heard Doyle's worried voice.

"He's still out cold, but he'll come around okay—his heart's beating all right."

Another voice spoke with infinite dreariness. "It might be better if he didn't, poor chap."

"You think they'll kill us?" Knight heard some one say hoarsely. His half-dazed mind focussed on the voice, and then he recognized it as Courtney's. He tried to open his eyes, but was unable to move or even speak. His whole body was numb, and a dull pain throbbed in his head.

"Eventually they'll finish all of us," the dreary voice was saying, "after they get what they want from each of us."

"Oh Lord!" moaned Courtney.

"Stop yapping," grunted Doyle. "If you'd had any sense, we wouldn't be in this jam. You ought to have known Hull and those birds were up to something."

"But he's a director in Anglo-American," Knight heard the other man protest, "and who would ever guess that a multi-millionaire—"

"He's not the only world figure connected with this," the weary voice interrupted. "He's not even the top. He probably came here to get his orders."

Knight's eyes slowly opened, and he saw that the speaker was a pale, gaunt man in the uniform of a Royal Air Force major. His gaze was fixed on Doyle, whose back was toward Knight—and Courtney, a disheveled, wretched figure, sat watching them both. Knight was about to attempt calling to them when something in Courtney's face held him back. He narrowed his eyes and scrutinized the room.

The walls and floor were of whitewashed concrete.

Jail-bunks lined three sides, and a table stood in the center with heavy benches around it. The door was made of steel plates, studded with rivets, and the only other break in the walls was a ventilator grill up near the ceiling. Electric lights reflected in a glare from the whitewash.

"Terrell," Doyle said to the gaunt major, "I still don't savvy how they got your whole flight of Wapitis. Why didn't you radio the cruisers?"

"We couldn't," the major said dully. "Some one had fixed the sets so they would burn out when the transmitters were switched on—probably the same spies who worked on our guns and the fuel tank valves. When we tried to switch from our main tanks to the first reserve our engines simply stopped. Three of us were forced down almost at the same time, and the others were circling over us when their engines went dead. Then the black yacht came along and they scooped us up at gunpoint. They had pilots on board, and they made off with the Wapitis after the damaged valves were replaced. When we got here, we found the 'Waps' already being painted gray to hide the British insignia. From what you and Courtney say, they must have flown two of them to some island near Singapore, for the attack on the Clipper."

"They planted a third one on Crazy Day Atoll," Doyle muttered. "And they left two of your men with it?"

"Dead, of course?" said Terrell wearily.

"No—but they might as well have been," said Doyle, telling him how the men had been found.

Terrell looked at him in horror. "The fiends!" he whispered. "Then that was what they meant when they threatened me with a living death."

Knight, his eyes still slitted, saw Courtney shiver. Doyle glowered at the Clipper captain, turned back to the British major.

"You talk as though you had this thing doped out. I don't see yet what they're after down in this forsaken hole."

Terrell looked at him strangely.

"Do you know what they call this place?"

"Sure—Ariki," said Doyle.

"I mean this base," said Terrell. "They call it the Center. Nine-tenths of the major crimes in the world are planned right here on the equator. There is a secret cable running from here to some other island, and orders are transmitted from there all over the world, by radio or through agents of the organization."

"Hell's bells!" Doyle said tensely. "Then this must be the main headquarters for the 'Four Faces'!"

Terrell started.

"Where did you hear that name?"

“Dick Knight got onto a lot of their secrets,” said Doyle. “That’s how we got mixed up in this.”

“No wonder they were after you,” Terrell’s face had a somber look. “You may as well make up your mind to it—you’re as good as dead.”

“I’ve been closer than this and skinned through,” Doyle said with a lopsided grin. Knight’s heart warmed as he saw that grin, but he lay as though still unconscious. The homely ex-Marine scowled at the steel door, then looked at Terrell.

“Say, we may get a break somehow. What’s the layout of this dump? I didn’t get to see much after they dragged me out of my ship.”

Terrell shook his head hopelessly.

“No use, old chap, it’s worse than a prison. I’ve seen only a part of it, but I know that the entrances are barred by at least two doors, and there’s a complicated locking system controlled from some central point. Some of these rooms were blasted out of solid rock, and I think there are vaults deep under the cliff, filled with loot and important inventions they’ve stolen.”

“Phew!” said Doyle. “So that’s why they raised all the row about the new airline. They were afraid this place would be found.”

Terrell nodded listlessly.

“That’s the answer; their Center would be wrecked, and a fortune’s been put into it. They selected the most unlikely spot in the world—it’s never been inhabited, and only an expert could get through the barrier reef with a boat of any size. They even were planning to use the place as a base for some kind of air operations—and then Anglo-American picked it as an emergency station. All the trouble since then, and what you’ve told me about has been simply to wreck the line and draw attention away from Ariki.”

KNIGHT had hardly taken his eyes from Courtney while the others were speaking. He narrowed them still farther as the Clipper Captain glanced toward him.

“Maybe Knight can help us when he comes to,” Courtney said shakily. “He knows a lot about the ‘Four Faces.’”

“He couldn’t know the master minds back of this,” the major responded dully. “I don’t think even the Russian—Borzec—knows that much, and he seems to be in charge of all the flying operations. I’ve only heard them referred to as ‘They’—and everyone on the place seems to be in mortal fear of even that name. I think one of them talked to me through a dictaphone in a little round room—but he whispered, and I wouldn’t even know his voice again.”

There was a little silence, then Courtney spoke again.

“What I meant was that Knight may have guessed part of the truth, and arranged for the British or American Navy to search every island near the route.”

“No such luck,” growled Doyle. “He did have it partly doped out—that there was something on the equator that the ‘Four Faces’ didn’t want us to know about. The Limey cruiser we were on is straddling the line, but they’ll go right by here.”

“Maybe not,” said Courtney excitedly. “They might figure something was wrong. When is the earliest they could get here?”

“Not for seven or eight hours, unless they jumped up to full speed,” said Doyle.

“And you’re sure Knight didn’t leave any word about Ariki?” insisted Courtney.

Knight, staring through his narrowed eyelids, saw the flush on Courtney’s face. Doyle suddenly glared at the Clipper captain.

“Say, why are you so damned anxious?”

Courtney hastily got to his feet.

“Nothing—I was just hoping—”

“You dirty rat!” snarled Doyle. “You’re in with those butchers!”

White-faced, Courtney backed away. Doyle hurled a chair out of his way and started for the other man. Courtney gave a shrill cry, and the steel door was instantly thrown open. Doyle froze, and Knight, watching through slitted eyes, felt a dull despair.

For Nikolai Borzec stood in the doorway, a pistol in each hand, and back of him two Dyaks, armed with knives and guns.

CHAPTER VII THE FOUR FACES

UNDER THEIR ARCHED BLACK BROWS, the Russian’s weird golden eyes examined the room. Their sardonic gaze passed over Doyle and the trembling figure of Courtney, past Terrell and then to Knight. Knight let his lids close a second before those probing eyes reached him, but he could feel their intent gaze.

He heard Borzec’s boots scuff on the floor, and he knew what was coming. Without moving, he braced himself for the test. There came a brief silence, then the Russian’s boot-tip thudded fiercely into his side. Waves of agony shot through him, but he made no sound. He heard Doyle curse helplessly, then Borzec’s ironic laugh.

“I have been looking forward to this meeting,” Borzec said with sudden harshness. “You two and that

little Spanish devil ruined the work of years. I swore that night I would even the score—but I did not think it would be so soon.”

Knight cautiously opened his eyes. The pain from Borzec’s kick was still intense, but his former numbness had left him, and he knew he could act if given an opportunity.

“Fools—both of you!” Borzec was rasping at Doyle. “A stratosphere plane—and you never thought of a simple thing like an air-tight pressure suit and an oxygen helmet! There were a dozen on board, for emergency use. While you were waiting to raise the wreck, I was floating clear, forty feet under the surface, with a machine-gun to keep me from coming up. And I thought of it all in a second, when I saw the plane was lost.”

“Speak your little piece, mister,” Doyle said thickly. “Some day I’ll get a chance—and it won’t take me any ‘second’ to smash that pan of yours.”

Borzec lunged toward him, but halted abruptly as Hull appeared in the doorway.

“Have you seen Them?” he demanded.

“Yes,” Hull mumbled. “Come on—you’re to plead your own case. And they want the Navarre girl for questioning next.”

A queer, almost frightened look flashed over Borzec’s face, but he erased it and motioned swiftly to one of the Dyaks. Knight tried to catch the low-spoken words, but failed. The Dyak disappeared. Borzec thrust one of his pistols into Courtney’s hand.

“Take charge,” he snapped. “Let me know the minute Knight recovers consciousness.”

He hurried off with Hull, and Courtney swung the pistol toward Doyle. The remaining Dyak had kept Terrell covered from the instant he had entered. From somewhere at a little distance, a door closed with a metallic sound. Courtney’s expression changed to a sneering smile. With the gun carefully leveled, he reached out his free hand and deliberately struck Doyle a backhand blow across the mouth.

“First interest on what I’ve been owing you,” he said harshly.

Doyle’s hands writhed at his sides, but he made no answer. His silence seemed to infuriate the other man, for with a muttered oath Courtney drew back his clenched fist. And in that second, Knight leaped up from the floor.

One hand outstretched for the Dyak’s gun, he hurtled into the native. Courtney jerked half around, and Doyle leaped like a panther. As Knight rolled to the floor with the Dyak, he heard the smack of Doyle’s fist against the treacherous captain’s jaw. Courtney’s attempt at a shout ended in a groan.

The Dyak’s gun had slipped from his hand, but was only a few inches away. He made a wild grab at it, but the motion knocked the pistol out of his reach. Knight’s long arm flung out toward the weapon. With a sudden wriggle, the Dyak threw himself on his side, his right hand on the hilt of his dagger. Knight frantically clutched the native’s wrist as the gleaming knife whipped toward him. The dagger twisted sidewise under Knight’s impact and buried itself in the Dyak’s throat. With a broken gasp, he slumped back. A convulsive movement shook him for an instant, then he was still.

KNIGHT withdrew the dagger, got to his feet. Doyle had Courtney pinned against the wall. There was a livid bruise under the Clipper captain’s eye, and he was cringing back from the gun Doyle held almost against his teeth. Terrell had snatched up the Dyak’s pistol and was hastily closing the steel inner door, which had been left for Courtney to lock.

“Leave it open a fraction,” Knight said in a low tone, “so we can hear if anybody comes.”

He turned to Courtney, with the dripping knife raised purposefully. Courtney’s eye bulged.

“Don’t kill me!” he moaned. “I’ll do anything.”

“Where is Benita Navarre?” Knight demanded.

“I don’t know—I swear it!”

“Where are the other prisoners from your Clipper?” snapped Knight.

“There aren’t any,” Courtney said in a trembling voice. “Reed, the navigator, and Lee resisted, and Hull’s bodyguards shot them . . . Don’t look at me like that—they weren’t supposed to be killed. Borzec and the Wapiti pilots had meant to capture them at Palmyra and leave them tied up—”

“You mean they planned to sink them in the lagoon,” Knight said harshly.

Courtney’s last resistance vanished.

“It wasn’t my plan,” he groaned. “Borzec was afraid if we attacked them in the air we might hit something and cripple the ship, so he and the Wapiti pilots expected to take care of Reed and the others at Palmyra.”

“And the same thing would have happened that night after we left Singapore,” Knight said sternly. “You and Smith were going to kill the rest of the crew and land at some island where the passengers would be ‘taken care of.’”

“No, they weren’t going to kill anyone that night,” Courtney cried hoarsely. “I swear it! The Wapitis were going to force us down—I was to pretend to surrender the ship. They were going to take it and fly it here, and leave us all on the island.”

"You louse!" Doyle spat at him. "How you ever got command of a Clipper—"

"What do they intend to do with Benita?" Knight asked fiercely.

"I don't know," Courtney protested. "Hull thought she was put on his trail. He wanted to find out how much the Government knew, so we could fix up our story. We were going to say the ship was forced down near Samoa by armed planes, and that we were taken to an island and kept there until he could get word for ransom money to be paid at New York. One of his secretaries there is in on it. We were to be found on the island when the secretary asked the Navy to send a destroyer."

"So you could go on with your crooked work in Anglo-American," Knight said contemptuously. He came a step closer. "I'll give you one chance for your worthless life. You're going to take us to the place where Borzec and Hull just went."

Courtney turned ashen white.

"Not that! They would have me killed!"

Knight touched the edge of the dagger against the other man's throat.

Courtney shrank back in horror from the dripping blade.

"Don't" he moaned. "I'll do it."

Knight looked significantly at Doyle and the Englishman. "If he tries to trick us, don't shoot him. The knife will be quieter."

Courtney's shaking knees almost gave way as he stumbled to the door.

"There's a guard just beyond the turn in this passage," he said hoarsely. "He's on the other side of a door like this, and he can see through a glass panel."

Knight took a wary glance into the stone-walled passage. The turn was a few yards away.

"We're going to be at that corner," he said grimly to their captive. "You're going to order the door unlocked, and you're going to choke the guard the second it's open."

"He'll shoot me," Courtney said in a despairing voice.

"We'll jump him before he has time. But make one mistake—or let him yell—and it's your finish."

They reached the turn, and Knight and the others waited tensely while Courtney called to the guard. Knight heard the door start to open. He peered cautiously around the corner. A sullen-faced Eurasian appeared as the door swung wider. Courtney's trembling hands shot out, and the guard's startled cry was stifled.

Knight and the others were on him instantly. With calm precision, Terrell cracked the butt of his automatic back of the half-caste's ear.

TWO MINUTES LATER, with the unconscious guard left trussed and gagged in the prisoners' room, the three men followed Courtney into another passage. This one had been cut through solid rock, and for the first fifty feet was unlined, but at this point they came to a flight of steps leading down, and from here on, the walls, floor and roof of the passage were covered with friezes of Oriental design. The steps broadened, spiraled down into a space from which three corridors branched. The ones on the right and the left were decorated with friezes and illuminated by amber lights, but the center one was dark and gloomy, except for a greenish glow far at the end.

Knight's pulses quickened as he saw that eery light, for it came from an idol the size of a man, and even at that distance he knew it for a replica of the one which he had stolen. Back of the idol was a massive bronze door. He shoved Courtney forward, but the Clipper captain drew back in a panic.

"Not that way! You'd set off an alarm before you'd gone twenty feet. There is always a guard hidden inside of the idol, and if you have not been summoned by them he opens a trapdoor in the passage. We'd drop into a pit a hundred feet deep."

"Nice people," muttered Doyle.

Terrell pointed to the opening on the left.

"There's a cross corridor down that passage which leads to the circular room," he said in an undertone. "I think the room must be close to their council chamber."

Knight's eyes bored into Courtney.

"Is that right?"

Courtney shakily nodded. "Yes—but I don't know how to get from the circular room into the other. It may not have any direct connection—it's used for hearing reports when they don't want to see anyone."

"Lead the way," Knight ordered.

Courtney started on, but Doyle jerked him back as voices sounded. In a moment it was evident that the speakers were coming along the right-hand passage, which was behind them. They hurried ahead to the cross corridor, and Courtney nervously indicated the second door on the left.

"Wait!" Terrell said quickly. "When they took me to the round room, it was the third door."

Courtney quailed under Knight's gaze. "It may have been changed—it was the second when I—"

"Keep still!" Knight said in a curt whisper. "Terrell, stand at one side while I open the door. Doyle, be ready if there's anyone in there. Don't shoot unless you have to."

He flung the door open, and Doyle sprang into the room. A man was sitting before a dictaphone

recording device, with phones over his ears. A large disk record was slowly rotating on a turntable before him.

Doyle was three feet from the man before he realized he was not alone. He looked around, leaped to his feet in dismay. Doyle's big paw clamped over his lips, and the man fell backward. He made a frenzied attempt to seize his telephone, but the barrel of Doyle's gun thudded against his temple and he slid limply to the floor.

CLOSING THE DOOR, Knight motioned for Terrell to guard Courtney while he hurriedly examined the room. It was rectangular, and fairly large. On the flat desk at which the man had been sitting were three turntables, beside the one in operation, each bearing an unused dictaphone record. Metal cases along the walls showed where hundreds of other records had been filed. There was a small curved door at the other end of the room, and when Knight unlocked it he found it opened into the circular room Terrell had described.

"You see—I told you the truth," Courtney said desperately. "They brought me through this room—but it wasn't occupied then."

"There must be another entry," Terrell said to Knight. "I didn't come through here. The other door must be fitted so carefully it doesn't show."

They turned back at an exclamation from Doyle, who had picked up the earphones.

"Listen!" he whispered. "It's Borzec—he's trying to alibi about the stratosphere ship! That's what this bird was recording."

He separated the phones, handed one to Knight. As Knight held it to his ear, he heard the Russian's voice raised to a passionate note.

"—but it isn't fair to judge me on results alone. If you had trusted me implicitly, I wouldn't have failed the first time. The information leak that warned the Italians at the last moment came from one of your agents, not my men in the Ogpu. The Singapore fiasco was Courtney's fault—I was never told that Knight was on our track, or I should have known what to expect. I had to change this afternoon's plans because of the Greek freighter. We came on them suddenly out of the clouds, and I heard their radio operator start to report to another vessel somewhere that he had sighted three gray seaplanes. It was probably just a conversation between operators, but I knew the British might pick it up, so I bombed the vessel. The radio was wrecked almost at once—I did all in my power to stop the S.O.S."

A long silence followed, then an odd, whispering voice spoke.

"Reports just received corroborate your explanation of the Italian affair. You are exonerated. Now, what is the second matter you mentioned?"

"If you will only give me your full confidence," Borzec said urgently, "I can make the air division the most important of all. As it is, I am crippled—I know only the minor details of your plans. As air chief of the Ogpu, I was in charge of important schemes. You have made me nothing more than a senior pilot."

"No man is admitted to the 'A' group until he is irrevocably bound to us," the whispered answer came. "Mr. Hull can tell you that. But you are now in that category and we agree as to your last argument, we have decided to place you in the 'A' group, and to explain our major plans for the air division. The loss of the stratosphere plane is only a temporary setback; we shall have something even greater within two or three months. But before we explain fully, let me give you this warning: Even as an 'A' member, your every action will be known to us. You will be watched by other members who will not even know you are one of us."

"I understand," Borzec said in a low voice.

"You already know our laws," the whispering speaker went on. "Never forget the most important of all: An attempt to learn the identity of the 'Four Faces' will result in death."

Borzec's mumbled reply was unintelligible. Knight listened tautly as the other man continued, for there was somehow more menace in that colorless whisper than the fiercest threat would have held.

". . . From this moment, then, you are A-9. Certain secrets will be revealed to you later, but at present our main problem is that of an alternate Center. Mr. Hull, you have the map and the description?"

"Yes, I have them here." Knight hardly recognized the subdued tone of the financier's voice. "But I don't understand . . . I sent a code report on this and Project 431, to B-19, at London."

"It was intercepted by the American agent, Knight," said the whispering man. "Courtney recovered it, with the help of another member but destroyed it for fear he would be searched."

"A good thing I didn't send the map," mattered Hull. "I've put five million dollars into the place already, and it would—"

Knight hastily laid down the earphone as he saw Terrell shoot a glance at the curved door.

"There's some one in the round room!" the Englishman said.

The words were barely out of his mouth when Benita's angry voice sounded.

"Let go of me, you peegs!"

DOYLE AND KNIGHT sprang to the door simultaneously. It opened, and Knight saw Benita struggling to free herself from two uniformed white men with holstered guns. Back of them, a section of the curved wall had swung outward on hidden hinges.

Benita gave a cry of relief as she saw Knight and Doyle. One of her guards jerked at his gun. Doyle fired, and the man dropped, screaming. The other man threw Benita in front of him, trying to draw his pistol. Knight leaped past the girl with his dagger raised, and the uniformed guard dived through the opening. He slammed the door before Knight could reach it, and the next moment alarm bells jangled loudly.

As Knight whirled, he saw Courtney and Terrell struggling in the other entry. Courtney dealt the gaunt Englishman, a vicious blow in the stomach and jumped backward into the other room. The curved door clicked shut just as Doyle hurled himself against it. Knight scooped up the pistol which Terrell had dropped in the struggle.

"Fire at the lock!" he said tensely to Doyle. "If we're not out of here in a few seconds we're finished."

They emptied their guns against the door. Suddenly a white vapor poured from a concealed outlet overhead. In a second the room was filled with tear-gas. Choking, blinded, Knight threw himself against the door. He heard Benita cry out, then to his amazement the room began to rotate swiftly. Its dizzy whirl toppled him to the floor, where he lay half-stupefied by the strangling fumes.

The movement abruptly ceased. Sick and faint, Knight forced his burning eyes open. The tear-gas cloud was being sucked up through an outlet in the ceiling. The curved door which had led into the recording room suddenly opened, and four of the white-uniformed guards dashed in, their faces covered by gas masks. Two of them picked up Benita and carried her into a narrow hall which now was opposite the entry, and the others prodded Doyle and Knight to their feet.

Knight's eyes were streaming and he could barely see as he staggered through the hall. One of the guards gripped his arm, and he felt a gun pressed against his ribs. As they reached the end of the hall, his blurred eyes began to clear. They emerged at one side of a large, black-walled chamber. Bronze double-doors at one end were half-way opened, and he saw the illuminated idol beyond. A hinged section was ajar, and he saw the man who had been inside talking excitedly with Courtney.

The Clipper captain breathlessly entered the black chamber, and the bronze doors closed. Knight's captor shoved him toward the other end of the room. A green

light slanted down, covering the center of the chamber and leaving the end in partial shadow. He saw Hull and Borzec, saw Benita's pale face and Doyle reeling between two guards. All were staring toward that shadowed space. A huge judge's bench ran from wall to wall, and in the greenish gloom behind it he saw four black-robed figures. Their faces were almost identical, with deep-set, shadowy eyes, and the same expressions of brooding menace. They were so still that he thought at first they were statues—grim symbols of criminal power. Then with a prickling of his scalp he saw that those shadowy eyes were alive. Behind the ghastly masks were living men.

His last hope for Benita and the rest of them vanished. There would be no mercy here. They were standing in judgment before the dreaded "Four Faces!"

CHAPTER VIII THE MELEE

FOR A FULL MINUTE there was no sound but the faint whir of the ventilator fan which cooled the chamber. Though despair gripped him, Knight mechanically noted the scene before him. A heavy glass barrier rose from the front edge of the judges' bench to the ceiling. There was no way of getting behind it, and he knew it must be bullet-proof. On the wall behind the four robed figures was an enormous map of the world. The chairs of the four men were placed so that the first sat before the map of the Americas, the second before the section including Europe and Africa, the third before the map of Asia, and the fourth before the vast stretch of the Pacific with all the islands from the Aleutians to Australia and New Zealand.

Grimly, he realized that this symbolized the division of the four men's power. Like the snaky arms of the idol, stretching in all directions, the unseen arms of this astounding criminal empire extended all over the globe. In their strange unity, those robed figures were like a four-headed monster, watching in every direction. Small wonder that men—and women—trembled at mention of the "Four Faces." Without stirring from this secret center of their criminal web, these four men could deal death in the remotest part of the world.

The room had become hushed with a terrible stillness. Even the guards, their gas-masks dangling on neck-straps, stood with their eyes riveted on those four ominous figures. Then one of the black-robed men leaned forward. Knight saw that it was the one

who sat before the map of Europe, and with a queer fascination he realized that the man's eyes were fixed on him.

"Mr. Knight, you seem to bear a charmed life."

The whispered words filled the room, yet no amplifier was visible, nor could Knight see a microphone behind the glass barrier. Coming as it did through the motionless lips of the mask, the voice seemed to have no source at all.

"You also have displayed a genius for espionage," the masked man went on impassively, "in addition to causing us considerable trouble. Ordinarily, you would be condemned to death, but your talents will be valuable in this organization, especially with your knowledge of aviation and American Government secrets. It is the decision of the 'Four Faces' that you become a probation member, under suspended sentence."

"And what of my companions?" Knight demanded, sparring for time. One of the other black-robed figures made an impatient gesture, then a harsher whisper was audible.

"We are dealing with you alone, Mr. Knight!"

"Then I refuse," Knight flung back.

The man in front of the Western Hemisphere map reached forward and pressed a button. He nodded to the one who had first spoke, and again the impassive voice whispered.

"You will change your mind within a few minutes, Mr. Knight."

The shadowy eyes back of the mask shifted toward Benita, and an icy chill went down Knight's spine. He saw Borzec's cruel smile of anticipation, saw one of their captors shudder. In a few moments two more guards entered from a door directly opposite that which led to the circular room. They wore white uniforms with red sashes, like the others, and Knight surmised that these special guards were the only ones ever admitted to the chamber.

They brought a prisoner with them, a little Frenchman whose trembling lips kept repeating a prayer. Just before the door closed, Knight heard the sound of an engine. It was muffled, as though it came through another door somewhere, but it seemed to be at no great distance. The robed figure in front of the Western Hemisphere map turned a sharp gaze on Borzec.

"Why is that engine running? No one has been given permission to leave The Center."

"It's only a test," Borzec answered. "I ordered them to try out the engine of Knight's plane after a new distributor head was put on."

THE DOOR CLOSED, and the groaning little Frenchman went silent under the grim regard of

the "Four Faces." The man in front of the Europe and Africa map spoke a low-voiced command, and Knight's guards marched him to within a few feet of the high teakwood bench. The masked man looked down upon Knight through the dim greenish light.

"As the First Face, speaking for the 'Four Faces', I will explain what is expected of you. We shall take immediate steps to insure your implicit obedience. You will then be assigned a test-mission, under observation. If you prove your ability, you will eventually have more power than you now have as 'Q', and you will become a rich man. Once the test-period is over, you will be relatively free, reporting to The Center only on special occasions."

Knight made no answer. The First Face continued without emotion.

"You are thinking that you will pretend to agree, and then will betray us at the first opportunity. I shall prove otherwise. Guard captain, proceed with the demonstration."

One of the uniformed men opened an ebony box and took out a tiny gun shaped like a derringer. At his nod, two guards shoved the Frenchman toward the nearest wall.

"Have mercy!" cried the terrified prisoner. "For the love of Heaven, *messieurs*, have mercy!"

The men pushed him, face first, against the wall, and the guard captain calmly lifted the miniature gun, aiming it at the back of the man's neck. There was a metallic sound as of a spring abruptly released. The Frenchman stiffened, and his moans instantly ceased. His whole body shook as though in the throes of death, then all movement ended and he stood rigidly against the wall. The two guards turned his stiff body around, and Knight saw the pitiful look frozen on the Frenchman's face. Benita cried out in horror and covered her eyes. The First Face looked at Knight.

"The man is not dead, Mr. Knight, as you undoubtedly know. A hollow needle containing a powerful drug has penetrated his spinal column. He is completely paralyzed, but he can see and hear. The needle can be removed by an operation, and we have the antidote for the drug. But if the antidote is not given, a very slow deterioration sets in, and death comes after five or six weeks. This paralysis is what occurred to pilots Mawson and Smythe, and to the British captain at Singapore. The needles were fired high enough so that their hair covered the small punctures, and the poison cauterized the wounds so that no blood showed."

"You damned butchers!" Doyle said hoarsely, but the impassive figure ignored him.

"We could place you in this state of living death,

Mr. Knight,” came his whispered words. “When you were released from the effects, I think you would be glad to obey our commands. But we need certain information at once, and we know you possess it. You will either comply with our orders—or see the *Senorita Navarre*, placed in this condition.”

In spite of himself, a groan was wrenched from Knight’s lips. At a motion from the First Face, the guard captain turned to Benita and slowly raised the needle gun.

“Stop!” Knight burst out wildly. “Don’t harm her—I’ll tell you what I know.”

A look of anguish came into Benita’s eyes. “No, no, Ricardo! You must not betray your country.”

One of the guards roughly silenced her, and the robed spokesman for the “Four Faces” pointed his finger at Knight.

“Answer this question: What happened to the rocket weapon in the stratosphere plane?”

“It tore through the hull and went to the bottom,” Knight replied dully.

“What are your code numbers for communicating with your State, War and Justice Departments?” came the next whispered query.

Knight told him without hesitation. Doyle’s false orders at Singapore had proved that the “Four Faces” already knew that secret. He waited for the next question, prepared to give the truth unless it meant imperiling some one’s life. If he convinced those four grim men, he could surely work out a scheme . . .

“Who is the American undercover agent known as J-11?” the First Face demanded. “And what is his secret address in Europe?”

“J-11 is Brant Carson,” Knight invented swiftly. “He has no fixed address—he shifts from city to city.”

“We have evidence that you met him somewhere in Paris,” the masked man stated. “Where was he then?”

“At the Hotel Crillon,” Knight lied.

THE FIRST FACE bent over and spoke into a device recessed in the slanting top of the bench.

“The Crillon, on the dates already given,” Knight heard the whispered words. “Check with our Paris Bureau as quickly as possible.”

Knight’s heart sank. He had expected an interval of several hours, at least, before that lie could be learned. Trying to hide his despair, he looked around, ostensibly at Benita but in reality hoping in that hasty glance to find some means for overcoming the guards. He caught a furtive look from Doyle, then saw that the guard captain’s pistol was in his holster while he used both hands to replace the needle-gun in the ebony box. Knight’s pulses began to hammer. It was a desperate

gamble, but these men would not expect a fight with the odds so great.

He was almost set for the leap when a sharp buzzing cut the silence. The guard captain instantly turned, and Knight’s chance was gone. The black-robed man in the fourth chair had lifted a Continental type phone from prongs at the back of the bench. He listened for a moment, then slammed down the instrument and jumped to his feet.

“Borzec! Did you have the gas and explosive bombs put on the gray Clipper?”

“Yes. What’s happened?” Borzec cried in alarm.

“That British cruiser is only twelve miles from here! They’ve obviously been steaming at full speed—they must know our secret!”

“But they couldn’t know!” Courtney broke in fearfully. “Doyle would have told me—he thought I was a prisoner, too.”

“The *Australian Clipper!*” exclaimed Borzec. “Samoa must have asked the cruiser to search along the air route, after the Clipper failed to reach there. They know we left Palmyra, and Ariki is the next logical place to—”

“We’ll take no chance!” the First Face interrupted with swift decision. “If they do know the truth, they could shell the cliffs and trap us like rats. Courtney, take off, gas the vessel, and sink it—I’ll order our operators to break in on any S.O.S. messages they try to send!”

BORZEC AND COURTNEY ran to the door through which the ill-fated Frenchman had been brought. The black-robed spokesman motioned to Hull.

“Be ready at the landing-platform. We may have to abandon this base. Guard captain, take the prisoners to the first jail-block, then report to Position Two.”

Hull hurried after Borzec and Courtney. Two of the guards were carrying the paralyzed Frenchman into the same exit passage. The guard captain rasped a command, and the remaining four men herded the captives toward the bronze doors. As the doors opened, Knight flung a quick look ahead. There was no one in the black passage, but through the dark green glass at the rear of the idol he could see the figure of the man who kept watch. There was a small switchboard before him.

He shot a sidewise glance at the guard captain. The man still held the ebony box in both hands. With a leap, he knocked the box to the floor and snatched at the man’s holstered pistol. A gun roared, and a bullet creased his left forearm like a red-hot branding iron.

He lurched back, but the captain’s pistol was in his right hand. Another shot blasted, and he heard a fierce

scuffle. He whirled, saw Doyle and his guard battling furiously. Terrell's guard leaped past his prisoner to fire at Knight. A shot blazed from Knight's arm, and the man fell, drilled through the head. The guard captain had dived after the ebony box. His fingers were on the needle-gun when Benita brought her sharp heel down on his wrist. Her captor jerked her back with an oath. Terrell struck him a savage blow and he careened against the idol. He spun around to fire at the Englishman. Knight pumped a bullet almost between his eyes, and he pitched backward without a sound.

The fourth guard had sprung to help the one who was struggling with Doyle. Terrell plunged into him from the side, and they went to the floor in a tangled heap. The guard captain had retrieved the needle gun and jumped up. Knight poured three shots into him as fast as he could fire, and the half-aimed weapon dropped from the dying man's grasp. As Knight snatched it up, alarm bells jangled, then Benita gave a cry of warning.

Knight jumped back. The hinged section of the idol had opened an inch or two, and a gun muzzle was pointing through the crevice. Before he could fire, Terrell's guard hit him from behind and he went to his knees. The door to the idol flew wide open, and he saw the crouching figure inside. The man whipped his automatic downward just as Knight pulled the needle-gun trigger.

As though an electric current had shot through his body, the crouching figure stiffened. In the same moment, two reports blasted, and as Knight whirled he saw Terrell's guard slump. Though wounded, the Englishman had managed to reach the gun Benita's captor had dropped. Doyle came dashing around the idol, a smoking gun in his hand.

"Back to the other door!" he shouted.

Knight took a hasty look down the long passage. Bright lights had been switched on by the man in the idol at the same moment he had set off the alarm, and through that black corridor more than twenty Dyaks were charging.

"Here!" Knight rapped at Doyle. He thrust the needle-gun into Doyle's hand. "Take Benita—you three get to the planes—I'll follow you in a second!"

"No, no!" Benita cried wildly, but at Knight's fierce gesture Doyle seized her arm and rushed her between the bronze doors. Knight sprang inside the idol. Through the observation glass in the head he saw that the Dyaks were half-way along the passage. His eyes frantically shot over the switchboard. There were no designations. With a prayer that his guess was right, he threw the largest switch on the board.

Six feet in front of the first Dyak, a black line

suddenly appeared. The floor tilted, then a section forty feet in length whipped down on giant hinges. A chorus of screams filled the air as a dozen of the killers were hurled into the abyss. Three more, caught at the edge, tried to halt their onward plunge, then they, too, pitched headlong into that sinister darkness, and their hideous yells abruptly ended.

Knight jumped from the idol and raced into the black chamber. The Four Faces were gone. He ran into the passage which Borzec and Courtney had taken. He had shoved the guard captain's automatic under his belt, and as he plucked it out he realized there were only two bullets left in the magazine.

A ROAR OF ENGINES and a crackling of shots sounded from ahead. He rounded a curve, saw an open door and through it the gray shape of Clipper 15 as it hastily taxied by the landing platform. The bodies of two white men lay close to the exit, and by their terrible, staring eyes he knew that Doyle had used the needle-gun with deadly effect.

A machine-gun clattered, and as Knight sprang onto the platform he saw Terrell kneeling behind a swiveled Browning. Four or five mechanics were sprawled upon the platform, and others were fleeing madly toward the farther end. Doyle was helping Benita into the rear pit of a Wapiti, and Knight saw the pilot's crumpled form at the edge of the float. Just as Doyle jumped into the front cockpit, Terrell collapsed behind the Browning.

Knight dashed to the machine-gun. Bullets spattered the rock wall beyond him as he flung himself down behind the weapon. A man with a sub-machine gun was running from another exit of the base, and as Doyle opened the throttle of the Wapiti the man whirled to rake the two-seater. Knight clamped the trigger of the Browning and the killer fell, riddled.

By the floodlight which illuminated the cavern, he saw Borzec spring up into the pit of an idling Nimrod. A bullet from the Russian's pistol ricocheted from the breach of the machine-gun. Knight whipped the Browning around, and a line of black holes shot across the fighter's fuselage. Borzec dropped his gun and dived overboard a scant instant before that deadly line crossed the cockpit.

Another Nimrod roared by, taxiing furiously to overtake the Wapiti. Knight stabbed a burst at it, but the plane thundered on. Terrell had pulled himself up from where he had fallen. He clutched Knight's arm, pointed toward the other end of the float. Two Russian R-5's on twin pontoons stood there, engines running. Beyond them, Knight saw Borzec swimming toward the *Australian Clipper*. He flung a sweeping burst at

the little knot of men by the R-5's, then dropped the Browning and hauled Terrell to his feet.

"Go ahead, old chap—I can't make it!" gasped the Englishman.

Knight dragged him ahead, halting only to snatch up the sub-machine gun from the man he had shot. One of the R-5's was taxiing out, and its gunner suddenly whirled his rear-mount toward them. Knight cut him down with a hasty blast, and the panic-stricken pilot slammed his throttle wide open.

The propeller whirled a flood of water back over the platform. Terrell slipped, but Knight picked him up and toppled him into the rear of the second R-5. A spotlight abruptly focused on the Russian two-seater, and pistol shots cracked into the side of the ship. Knight emptied the Tommy-gun straight at the dazzling light, and it went out with a crash of shattered glass.

He was in the front pit, and the R-5 was roaring toward the bay before another spotlight could pick him up. Above the thunder of the engine, he heard a thin, high shriek of a siren. To his dismay, the huge camouflaged tarpaulins began to swing together. He rocked the stick, brought the R-5 onto the step. The tarpaulins almost touched the wings as he plunged the plane between them.

The transition from the lighted cavern to the darkness outside was almost blinding. He felt the plane lift free, and he banked as soon as he dared, for he knew the rocks were close on the right. Tracers, three hundred feet above, made cherry-red streaks in the night. He fumbled for the stick triggers, then saw that the shots were not aimed at them.

The R-5 gained speed, and as his eyes became accustomed to the dark he made out the ragged silhouette of the cliffs. He climbed steeply, searching anxiously for the Wapiti. Another stream of tracers lanced through the darkness, and this time a second blast instantly came in answer. He whipped around toward the two ships. The R-5 had hardly howled into the turn when from a point six miles at sea a searchlight poked toward the island.

The bluish white beam flitted over two ships. One was the Wapiti, and the other was the R-5 which had escaped. Blinded by the sudden light, Doyle turned in front of the R-5. The Wapiti was almost under the other ship's guns when Knight struck with a frenzied haste. His hammering cowl-guns tore through the dead man in the R-5's rear pit and on to the man at the stick. The pilot gave a crazy leap as that fiery torrent struck him, and the plane nosed down in a vertical dive.

KNIGHT SWERVED to avoid hitting the Wapiti. Another searchlight blazed up from the British cruiser, and he saw a massive wing fly through the lifting beam. The gray Clipper, loaded with deadly bombs, was racing toward the vessel, and close by he saw the Nimrod as it streaked past.

Behind him, the two Lewises rattled into a fierce chant. Terrell was braced against his belt, trying vainly to pick off the sleek fighter. The Nimrod shot up in a tight climbing turn, pitched back at the slower R-5. Knight shouted at Terrell and plunged on after the Clipper. There was no time to fight off the Nimrod now. The cruiser was less than two miles away and its planes still on the catapults.

A savage pounding shook the R-5 as the Nimrod's guns drilled the wing. Terrell hurled back a fiery response, and the Nimrod rolled clear. Knight bent over the stick, his narrowed eyes on the giant Clipper. A-A guns suddenly erupted from the British ship. The Clipper twisted sharply, and by the brief glare of a searchlight Knight saw into the control compartment. Courtney was crouched over the wheel, and at the opened port behind him was Hull, his heavy face twisted and white with fear.

Like a thunderbolt, the Nimrod shot down at the cruiser. One of the A-A guns went dark as its crews fell under a withering fire. The Clipper banked to pass above the vessel. In those few tense moments, as the huge ship had turned away, Knight had closed the gap. With the trips hard against the stick, he now plunged the R-5 in at the side of the Clipper.

He saw Courtney's stunned face glare out at him, saw Hull fling himself back in mortal terror, then machine guns suddenly blazed from the main-lounge windows. He crouched low, shifted the rudder. Staring over the cowl, he saw his tracers eat through the sponson wing.

Flame spurted out as the incendiaries struck the gas tanks in the sponson. Knight had one flashing glimpse of the terrified men on the bridge as he jerked the stick hard back. The R-5 stood on its tail, then a terrific explosion blasted the sky, and a frightful glare hid everything from view.

Battling the stick, Knight forced the trembling ship away from the blazing mass which had been the Clipper. Shielding his eyes, he looked down, a moment later. The flaming wreck had struck the sea, and burning gasoline was spreading over the water. By the brilliant glare, he saw another and smaller wreck. It was the Nimrod, and Doyle was circling over it triumphantly. Knight felt Terrell touch his shoulder and he looked around. The *Australian Clipper* was flitting swiftly northward, its wings gleaming in the

light of the flames. He banked after it, but the fleeing plane was quickly swallowed up in the gloom beyond. Slowly, he glided down toward the cruiser, where the Wapiti was already landing.

“AN AMAZING BUSINESS,” Admiral Hornsby said, for the third time that night. He looked around his cabin at the assembled group. “But we’ve wrecked their Center—and Terrell found the antidote for that drug, so we’ve won, even if we didn’t get the master minds.”

Knight slowly nodded.

“We’ve won—for a while. But I’m afraid we haven’t heard the last of the ‘Four Faces’ or Borzec.”

Benita’s dark eyes clouded. “Those terrible men,” she said.

“Don’t worry,” growled Doyle, “now that we’re onto

‘em, we’ll nail those birds in no time.”

“Doyle, I think you’re right,” said Flight Commander Campbell. He looked at the makeshift bandage on Knight’s arm. Better come below and have that fixed up right.”

“I think.” Benita said archly, “I go along, too. I hear all about these pretty nurses the Army have.”

Knight chuckled. “It’s the Navy, and they don’t have nurses on battleships.”

Benita tilted her nose in pretended offense.

“Oh, very well, *senor*, if you not want me to go with you. Doyle, how you like to walk on the deck with me until thees impolite man come back?”

A wide grin spread over Doyle’s homely countenance.

“Baby—I mean *senorita*—he needn’t ever come back!”

