



RICHARD KNIGHT 

HELL HAMMERS HARBIN

by **DONALD E. KEYHOE**

QUESTION MARK OF DEATH! North! North! And still farther northward over those bleak wastes of Asia flew Dick Knight. His course was uncharted—his destination unknown even to himself! Only a question mark—a cryptic crimson question mark emblazoned on a rough Manchurian map—offered a clue to the mystery of that mad flight. And that puny clue was destined to be his single weapon against—hideous meteors of murder!

CHAPTER I
WHITE DOOM

FROM THE TINY AMPLIFIER in the front cockpit of the speeding Northrop, there suddenly came whispered words: *Guam to Q . . . Guam to Q—Range. Three.*

Richard Knight bent over the special high-frequency radio, swiftly pressed a button marked "Three." There was a brief interval as the sealed black stratosphere plane droned on under a frozen moon, then the

whispering voice spoke again on the new wave-length.

Okay, Q . . . Six, two, one . . . six, two, one. Five, four, and twenty . . . Five four, and twenty . . . That's all for now.

The bronzed American agent turned, looked back under the double Plexiglas enclosure to where Larry Doyle, former Marine Corps pilot, was fumbling with a map.

"Got that, Lothario? Longitude 126, latitude 45 degrees and twenty minutes."

Doyle grunted, switched on a cockpit light to augment the cheerless moonlight. A broken nose which had healed crookedly gave his homely face a lopsided look. He stared at the map, looked up at Knight.

"That puts us sixty miles southeast of Harbin—just about over the railroad from Mukden. How do you feel?"

Knight smiled a trifle grimly. "There have been times when I've felt better," he admitted.

"Same here," muttered Doyle. "And to think four hours ago I was in the Cathay bar at Shanghai, with a bottle of Scotch and nothin' to worry about."

Knight gazed unseeingly over the wing of the Northrop, and down at the murk of massed clouds which hid the Japanese puppet state of Manchukuo. Then his glance came back to the silent radio.

"If we only knew what it was all about, it wouldn't be so bad. General Brett must be pretty desperate to rush us up here with such sparse information, and especially to send you into a tight spot like this."

Doyle grimaced. "Yeah, I kinda wish I'd learned enough Jap lingo to get by. Nobody'd ever take me for a Jap, even if I made up like one. But if I got shoved in front of a firing squad I could tell 'em to go to hell so they'd understand it."

KNIGHT switched off the automatic pilot which, after their take-off from Shanghai, had guided their ship straight over the Yellow Sea and Chosen Bay into the heart of Manchukuo.

"If Brett's going to give us those last-minute orders he'd better hurry," he said to Doyle. "We'll be over Harbin in fifteen minutes."

"You sure that G-2 colonel got it straight—the message he gave us at Shanghai?"

"Positive. He said General Brett had rushed to Guam by Clipper with word for us to stand by when we came back from Macao. I saw the Guam message myself both in code and deciphered. It had our secret

number, and Brett's the only one who knows it and the two key words before and after it. He said for us to fuel the Northrop to capacity for maximum altitude, to take off for Harbin, and then send 'Q' every ten minutes, alternating on our three high-frequency wave-lengths. He said the Guam station and the flagship at Manila would take bearings. Then Manila would radio their bearings to Guam, and the Guam operator would send us a 'fix' with the latitude and longitude figures backwards. The last sentence was 'Mission desperate, final instructions will be given on Range Two as you near goal; cruise to arrive between nine and nine-thirty.'"

"Arrive where?" growled Doyle. "I suppose we just squat down on the Harbin airport and tell th' Japs we're th' guys they've got a reward out for."

"Unless we get definite orders—"

Knight broke off as a strained voice sounded from the amplifier:

B to Q . . . B to Q!

"It's the general himself!" exclaimed Doyle. And the voice of the distant Intelligence general went on hastily:

Do not answer now! Take advice Horace Greeley. Do not settle in city, but follow advice with Seattle twist and discover a Casey Jones line. With speed of three century notes, out from center four M's, then turn right cheek two M's and a very bright emerald will take pilgrims to Plymouth Rock. Prodigal sons take word of apparent Buddha who has their number.

"Holy smoke—he's gone nuts!" howled Doyle.

"Give me the map!" Knight said tensely. Then, as he was gazing at it under the light, General Brett's voice came again, tense and vibrant:

B to Q—a repeat. If clear, send number my Washington office. If not, reverse the number. He went on with a quick and concise repetition of his peculiar message. As he finished, the Q-Agent took up his hand-mike and threw the transmitter switch. He gave the number of Brett's office, switched off the transmitter, and nosed the strato-plane downward.

"Listen, master-mind," said Doyle, "I can unscramble part of that dictionary omelet, but—"

"Remember Horace Greeley's advice, back in the '90's?" Knight interrupted. "He said 'Go West, young man'—and we're going to head West from Harbin. Seattle twist must mean northwest, and a Casey Jones line would be a railroad. There's a railroad running northwest from Harbin, so that fits. At a speed of three hundred, four minutes would cover twenty miles.

Then we turn right and fly for ten miles. Either we fire a green Very star, or look for a green light on the ground to show us where to land.”

“I got that—the pilgrims landing on Plymouth Rock,” grunted Doyle. “But what about a Buddha havin’ our number. Th’ last Buddha idol you monkeyed with turned out to have a bird with a gas-bomb inside it.”

“We’ll have to figure that out after we land,” said Knight. “The main thing is to come in over Harbin without any noise, or we’re finished before we start. According to reports, there’s a Japanese pursuit squadron stationed at Harbin and the whole place is thick with troops.”

“I still think Brett’s gone screwy,” Doyle said gloomily. “And we were twice as goofy to come up here.”

“Switch off your light,” said Knight. “We’ll be down through those clouds in a few minutes.”

THE twin-radial’s thunder had faded to a muffled drone. Knight watched the altimeter hand sink from 35,000 to 30,000 and then drop steadily as the ship was swallowed up in the solid darkness of the clouds. The Northrop finally broke through the cloud-masses into snow-filled air. A vague blur of lights appeared ahead and slightly to the right. The Q-Agent swore under his breath. To locate the railroad, they would have to go lower than he had intended. He had not expected snow, but at least it was not heavy.

He closed the throttle completely, and the two-seater descended on faintly-moaning wings. Harbin began to take on shape through the snow flurries. He had visited the city briefly before the Japanese occupation, and now he began to recognize its salient points. The Pristan or wharf district lay almost dead ahead, its well-lighted streets leading up toward the plateau where New Harbin had been built. Holding the ship to its slowest possible glide, he reached for his high-powered field glasses which were held in a clip at one side. He was focussing them on the western part of the Pristan district trying to pick out the northwest railroad, when a queer, faint shriek sounded from up in the night.

He jerked his head back. High and to the north something was flashing down at the speed of a meteorite, leaving a glowing trail behind it. The shriek grew into a terrific screech, all in a second. He shoved the throttle open, whirled the Northrop into a tight renversement. There was a blur of luminous smoke at

one side, then a blinding white flame leaped up at the edge of Old Harbin.

In amazement, Knight saw huge fragments of burning wreckage blasted two hundred feet in the air. Above the drone of the engine came a harsh, grinding roar. The weird white flame leaped up, then spread out like a gigantic mushroom. Beyond its edges he could dimly see tiny figures running frenziedly through the streets, away from where other less fortunate ones had been stricken down by the blast.

For an instant, that eerie spectacle held Knight paralyzed. The flaming mushroom was beginning to descend like a vast fountain of liquid fire. As it fell, great white tendrils of flame gushed out, setting nearby houses afire. One blazing tongue licked out for half a block, and a score of those tiny figures vanished in the white glare. Slowly the great tendrils faded, became white smoke, but where the main blast had been a holocaust was raging.

Knight tore his eyes away, stared back at Doyle. The homely ex-Marine was looking down in horror at the scene, and his face had a bloodless look in the ghastly brilliance.

“Dick!” he said hoarsely. “What in Heaven’s name did it?”

Knight mutely shook his head. He had pulled up into a climbing turn, and as the shock of that weird disaster lessened he banked the ship westward. Whatever it was, it had increased their peril. The Nipponese were certain to link the catastrophe with the Northrop, which was sure to have been seen as the strange white flame lit up the night. Intent on finding the northwest railroad. Knight held an altitude of about five thousand feet, with the radial at one-third throttle. Out of the maze of buildings and streets, he suddenly located the railroad station. He was swinging parallel with the tracks which led northwest when two anti-aircraft guns abruptly blazed beneath.

The Northrop rocked as one of the shells burst close to the left wing. He chandelled, ruddered back as other shells exploded furiously to his right. Motor now wide open, he zoomed up into the snowy night. The glare from the burning section was two miles behind, and he was nosing down to pick up the railroad again when a parachute flare blossomed out, a thousand feet above the sealed two-seater.

“Japs!” bellowed Doyle. He leaped up, snapping his gun-harness about his waist. Knight had instantly banked as the flare appeared. He shot a hasty glance upward. Three Nakajima 91’s were diving steeply at the Northrop!

A half-muffled pounding came from behind him as Doyle flipped the twin 50-caliber guns upward in their airtight turret. The leading Nakajima whipped aside, its tracers smoking into space. Two red lines shot above Knight's head, ended on the left wing-tip. He felt the two-seater vibrate from the impact of the burst. With a swift renversement, he hurled the Northrop upon the first Nakajima as it plunged past the falling flare. His finger closed on the first of three buttons on the stick. Sliding flaps whirled open in the leading edge of the wing, and two hidden Browning .30's clattered into life.

The Japanese pilot cowered over his controls as the high-speed guns riddled his cowl. The Nakajima pitched on down, twisting to the left. Knight roared the Northrop after it, fingers taut on the stick-buttons, but the other two Nipponese fighters now charged in diagonally at the tail, concentrated a lethal crossfire upon the American low-wing. Doyle was swearing savagely as he whirled the rear .50's from side to side.

Knight bent over the stick, eyes glued to the special sights which his first burst had automatically raised from their niche in the cowl. A wing with a rising-sun insignia swam before his eyes. He squeezed a button, and the wing-root .50's, duplicates of Doyle's guns, blasted with a roar. A gaping hole appeared where the rising-sun symbol had been, and the Nipponese pilot frantically tried to bank on the uninjured wing. Knight slammed the two-seater around toward the nearer of the other Nakajimas. His spouting guns were almost centered on the ship when Doyle gave a shout of dismay.

"Watch out—that first Jap!"

KNIGHT jerked around in his seat. The pilot of the crippled ship was trying to ram the Northrop broadside. He snapped the controls back, and the bullet-torn fighter plunged underneath. With a crazy chandelle, the brown-faced pilot cut back. The other Nakajimas spread out hastily, Doyle unloosed a fierce barrage at the one on his right, and the pilot flung into a vertical bank. Knight kicked away from the crippled plane, then went rigid. The third Nakajima had renversed at the same instant, was racing at him head-on!

Thin streaks of fire lanced from the fighter's cowl. Knight booted his rudder. The Northrop skidded to the left, its nose swinging toward the Nakajima. He clamped the top stick-button, and with a roar all four wing-guns flamed.

Like cardboard, the right wing of the fighter sheared off, and the grinding guns ate their way through the uptilted tail. As Knight pitched the two-seater clear, the wrecked ship fell on its side. It plummeted a hundred feet, tore off the other wing, and the pilot was catapulted into the air like a human ball. White silk flapped upward, spread out into a dome—only to collapse as the shattered wing struck it in the center. With chute and wing tangled above him, the doomed Nipponese fell swiftly away and was lost from view.

The drifting flare was by now only a short distance above the battling ships. Knight banked tightly to escape from the lighted space. Doyle's .50's hammered again, and as the two-seater pulled up beyond the flare Knight saw one of the remaining Nakajimas go whirling down in flames. The third Japanese pilot came furiously after the two Americans. Doyle raked the fighter's turtleback, swung his guns for another blast as the Nakajima went into an Immelmann. Knight leveled out with the compass pointing northwest. The two-seater was a mile away from the flare with the Nakajima lost in the snowy gloom, when another weird white flame mushroomed up from a spot near the Harbin airport.

Knight stiffened. Against that uncanny brilliance, six more Nakajimas were silhouetted less than half a mile across the sky. The Japanese planes were flying toward them, and before he could more than start a turn the fighters' guns were pounding, the six ships spreading out to hem them in.

Doyle pumped a fusillade at the first Nakajima, madly spun the gun-turret to rake another Nipponese. Knight stood the two-seater on its tail, and the superior speed of the ship carried it above the storm of leaden death.

With a lightning turn, he now pitched back at the zooming fighters. A fast-climbing Nakajima plunged back with its prop shot off. Knight rocked the rudder pedals, all four guns throbbing. Another Nipponese fighter swerved too late, flew straight into that deadly stream. Its fuselage broke in two, leaving shattered wreckage forward of the cockpit, and the luckless pilot clawed frenziedly to free himself from the smoking front section. Oily smoke enveloped him, became an inferno that further lit up the snow-lined sky.

With a vengeful fury, the rest of the Japanese pilots charged in at the Northrop. Guns from three directions gouged at the two-seater's tail. Knight flung the ship into a fast half-roll, changed direction.

Two Nakajimas loomed ahead, diving in from right and left. He kicked to catch one of them under the guns. The other was within sixty yards, and two more Japanese were darting in from the sides. Just then three bullet-nosed Soviet fighters dropped headlong into the battle. One Nakajima spun off with a crumpled wing as the first Red pilot struck. Knight had a swift glimpse of the first Soviet plane. It was a 2KB-19, gray save for the huge red stars on its wings and tail. Two guns were spitting from mounts above the Rolls Royce Kestrel engine, and two more from the wing-stubs.

The other Red fighters pounced on the startled Nipponese, and another Nakajima went whirling to earth, snowflakes eddying wildly after it. Knight pointed the two-seater for a hole between two ships. The Northrop was almost through the opening when one of the Soviet pilots ruddered alongside.

Under the transparent enclosure, the man's fur-clad figure resembled a crouching bear. Knight saw him lift his right hand, then a cockpit light flashed on. The pilot swiftly threw back the hood of his fur parka, jerked open the heavy garment. Knight started. The man wore the yellow robe and cowl of a Buddhist monk!

CHAPTER II THE SIGN OF THE FOUR FACES

NOW THE NORTHROP and the 2KB raced on side by side, leaving the last Japanese to the grim mercies of the other Soviet pilots. The man in the yellow robe flung a look down at his compass, then gazed back at Knight and Doyle. He lifted his hand again, crossed two fingers, hurriedly showed all five, then two.

"X-52!" shouted Doyle. "That's your new code number, Dick!"

Knight nodded hastily to the man in the Russian plane. As quickly as he had given the first code, the pilot gave Doyle's recognition number. Knight stared at the face the cockpit light showed. The man's features were massive, with dark, deep-set eyes under a towering forehead. Heavy black brows met above a huge, hooked nose. And a zigzag scar—white against his left cheek—ran from his temple to his chin.

As the monk-pilot finished Doyle's number he looked anxiously back toward Harbin, then gestured for Knight to swing in behind the fighter. The secret agent eased his throttle, dropped back but kept slightly above to avoid the 2KB's slipstream. He took a swift glance rearward. Searchlights were vainly probing through the falling snow. He could see a whitish glow near the airport, and another glow the color of normal flame where the buildings in Old Harbin were burning. There was no sign of pursuing ships.

He turned back to the controls. The Soviet fighter was nosing down, its lighted cockpit clearly visible against the snowy gloom. In a moment the cockpit light went out and landing-lights near the wing-tips flung two bright beams downward. Knight followed as the 2KB leveled out above a railroad. The rails and ice-covered telegraph poles swept by underneath, then suddenly the mysterious pilot waggled his wings and banked to the right. In less than two minutes a crescent-shaped clearing in the heart of the birch and larch woods became visible under the fighter's tilted lights. Knight switched on his own landing-lights, made a wider circle as the Soviet plane started to land.

At first he saw only the icy desolation of a Manchukuan woodland, then back under the trees on one side he glimpsed a log hut. Smoke came from its chimney. The 2KB sideslipped over the trees on the opposite side from the hut, leveled off, then came to a quick stop on the snow-covered ground.

Knight looked back at Doyle. "Here go the prodigal sons, Lothario. Sit down and fasten your belt—I don't like the looks of that field."

"And I don't like any of this business," Doyle retorted. "Who the devil do you suppose that bird is?"

"He's the Buddha who's got our number," Knight said drily, as he lowered the landing-gear.

"Yeah—and maybe those Japs back there have got it, too."

"They couldn't see where we went," replied Knight. "Anyway, we have enough fuel left to reach Vladivostok if things get too hot."

He dipped the Northrop into a forward slip, and the ship moaned down over the trees. Through the slanting lines of snow he saw a number of wheel-tracks in the white crust below. They were only half obliterated by the falling flakes. He looked around quickly for another ship, but he saw none. The tracks curved back toward the hut, then out again. Carefully, he brought the nose up and held the two-seater clear until he was exactly over the spot where

the 2KB had landed. The Northrop rumbled across a hummock, bounced, slowed to a stop with a flurry of prop-whirled snow. He stood on one brake, taxied in beside the Soviet fighter, and pivoted to swing the ship around into a take-off position.

Then he unlocked the gear which kept the cockpit sealed, and Doyle slid the Plexiglas dome back. A blast of icy air blew into the cockpit. Just as Knight cut off the engine the pilot of the 2KB reached the side of the Northrop.

"Switch off your lights," he said in English. His voice was deep, unhurried. "One of those Japs might still be looking for us."

Knight turned on his shielded cockpit light before switching off the others. The faint rays shone on the upturned face in the parka hood. At close range, the man's features proved even larger than they had seemed at first, and Knight knew that some glandular disorder must have brought about that strange abnormal growth.

The man's dark eyes flicked to Doyle, then back to the senior agent.

"You are Richard Knight?"

Knight nodded guardedly.

The monk-pilot smiled. "All this must seem very peculiar, I know. I'm John Creele, of British Military Intelligence. My government has instructed me to place myself at your service. But I'll explain inside—you're probably half-frozen."

"No, the cockpit was heated," said Knight, "but I'll admit you've some chilly air up here."

"Come into the hut," said Creele. "Better cover over your pit—it looks like a blizzard coming on."

AFTER locking the ignition circuit, Knight turned off the light and slid the Plexiglas shut. Doyle had introduced himself, and he and Creele were talking as Knight jumped down.

"Why, no," he heard the pseudo-monk say in a tone of surprise. "I thought you might enlighten me on that. I supposed they might in some way be connected with your mission up here."

"What's this?" asked Knight.

"I was asking about those queer explosions we saw," grunted Doyle. "I thought they were incendiary shells."

"They couldn't have been shells," said Creele as he led the way to the hut. "It's two hundred and fifty miles to the nearest border, and I don't know of any long-range gun that could send projectiles half that distance."

"What about the possibility of Soviet bombers?" queried Knight.

Creele shook his massive head. "I think I'd have known about that. I've been working closely with the Red air force lately, as you may have guessed from seeing my ship and the other 2KB's."

They had reached the hut, and now Creele lifted the heavy wooden bar which held the door closed. The wind sent snow-flurries in after them, then the hooded agent leaned against the door and dropped an inner bar in place.

Knight turned, shot a glance about the hut as he unfastened his flying-coat. A log was smoldering in the fireplace, and its dim embers cast a faint, fitful glow through the room. It was scantily furnished with a crude table, a bed, and two chairs. A tarnished gilt image of Buddha stood on the table, beside some greasy dishes. A large, dirty bear-skin rug covered most of the floor.

"Pardon the filth," rumbled the false monk. "All this is necessary—in case the Japs should get inquisitive. I'm supposed to be a White Russian who became disgusted with life after the revolution and became a follower of Buddha. I've been playing the part for a long time, but even yet they watch me occasionally," he said as he lit a candle and went over to toss another log on the fire.

Knight waited until he turned, then spoke up. "I don't understand your connection with General Brett. Is he working through Britain?"

Creele's heavy black brows went up with an astonished expression. "But that's just what I was going to ask you!" he replied. "I've been wondering about the meaning of my orders to cooperate with you."

"Then you don't know why we were sent here?" exclaimed Knight.

"No," said Creele blankly. "Don't you?"

"I haven't the slightest idea," said Knight. He and the pseudo-monk stared at each other. Doyle broke the silence with a groan.

"I knew it was screwy all the time. We've been framed!"

Consternation came into Creele's scarred face.

"Then they must be onto me, too! But how—"

"Wait," Knight said with a forced calmness, "we'll have to figure this out. When did you first hear about our coming here, and how did you get word?"

Creele hesitated, a look of vague suspicion in his eyes. Then he shook his huge head.

"London vouched for you—so you must be all

right.” He unbarred the door, peered out, shut the door again and kicked back the bearskin rug. A neatly fitting trapdoor was revealed. He pulled at the recessed handle and lifted the trap. Warm air came up from the dark space below. He took the candle, motioned the two Americans to follow. A basement twice the size of the hut became visible, fitted with a comfortable bed, a well-provisioned food locker, book-shelves, a large wardrobe cabinet, and other furnishings in decided contrast to the room above. A cheerful fire was crackling on a hearth directly below the fireplace in the hut. Knight saw an air duct from outside. It opened near the fireplace so that the draft would draw fresh air into the basement. At the opposite end of the chamber was a radio receiving set operated from a storage battery. A chart on the wall indicated various hours for listening-in on London, Singapore, Hong Kong and other official British short-wave stations.

“That’s how I received word about you,” said Creele. “It was relayed through our Hong Kong station,” he added as he lighted a gasoline-pressure lamp and blew out the candle.

“This is some layout,” said Doyle.

The other man laughed with a trace of harshness.

“And it might put me in front of a firing-squad if the Japs ever saw it. But I’ve prepared for escape, if it ever comes to that.” He pointed to the food locker. “It’s hinged against the wall, and there’s a passage behind it leading to a hidden exit in the woods. At least I’d have a fighting chance.”

“It must have been a job, doing all this alone,” said Knight, his gaze traversing the room.

“I had two Russians helping me at first,” replied Creele. “But that was several years ago. I’ve gone it alone since then, except when Soviet pilots dropped in here or one of my spies brought me a new battery or supplies.”

THE American agent lighted a cigarette, stood with his back to the fireplace. “We’d better get on to our problem. Exactly what do you know about our coming here?”

Creele tossed his parka on the bed, threw back the cowl of his yellow robe. His huge fingers absently rubbed his shaved head as he answered.

“The first message came early this morning. It was from the senior British Intelligence officer at Hong Kong, from whom I’ve received orders ever since the Japs seized Manchukuo. He said that the United States had asked secret assistance on a matter of vital

importance and that Moscow was also cooperating since the move was considered to be advantageous to Soviet interests. Both of you were named and described and your recognition numbers given. Your ship was also described, and the message stated you would be flying from Shanghai with orders from General Brett, chief of American Army Intelligence.”

“Then you haven’t heard from Brett directly?” interrupted Knight.

“No, though there’s a chance he may have called me while I was across the border at the Soviet squadron south of Lake Khanka. That’s where the second message directed me to go, so a Russian two-seater was over for me just after dusk. I haven’t dared keep a ship near here, though I was trained originally for air intelligence. But when I arrived across the border, I found that my chief at Hong Kong had arranged for me to borrow a 2KB and be ready to escort you on your mission. Those two fighters you saw with me were sent to distract attention from me and cover up the sound of my motor when I circled down to land here. It was purely a coincidence that we arrived over Harbin during that battle. When I recognized your ship from the description, I signaled the Soviet pilots to help me drive off the Japs.”

“For which we’re thankful,” said Knight. “But this leaves us in a bad spot. General Brett wouldn’t have appealed to your government unless a grave emergency had arisen. Also, he wouldn’t have been so careful to mask his instructions about finding this place, unless he thought that some one would be combing the airways even up in the ultra high-frequency bands we’ve developed for espionage work. It may be that he’s waiting to be sure we’ve had time to land here before he sends his final orders.”

“I’m due to listen in for Hong Kong in about forty minutes,” said Creele. “But we might as well have a bit of dinner while we’re waiting. I’m hungry, and you chaps must be starved.”

Knight shook his head.

“Count me in,” said Doyle. “Better change your mind, Dick. This may be the last call this side of a prison-camp.”

“Not now,” said Knight. He glanced absently at the wardrobe cabinet, watched Creele carry a bottle of wine and some food from the locker to the table. “About those strange explosions, have you any theories at all?”

“They looked like chemical fire the way they mushroomed up,” the false monk answered. “But

where could the stuff have come from? And who beside the Soviet could have done it? The Chinese up here are powerless.”

“How much information do you get on things beyond Harbin?” asked Knight. “And how close are you cooperating with the Soviet? They could be doing a lot of things under cover.”

“I get reports from a hundred sources in Manchukuo,” Creele said firmly. “As for Russia, we’ve been working with them a lot more than is generally known. If it comes to a war, we’ll probably be allied with her against Japan and Germany; that’s my main reason for being here, to help strike against the Japs when the time comes.”

Knight heard only part of the answer. His eyes were fixed on the handle of the wardrobe cabinet, and now he was sure. The handle had been turned, a fraction of an inch at a time, until now it was almost straight up and down. He slid his hand inside his coat, grasped the butt of his automatic. As he drew out the weapon, Creele halted, staring.

“Why the gun, Knight?”

ABRUPTLY there was a muffled sound from inside the wardrobe cabinet. Knight leaped aside just as the door flew open. An arm flashed up, and the lamp-light shone on blued steel. Knight fired twice, so swiftly that the roar of the other man’s gun made the three reports seem like one. Creele stood paralyzed as a yellow-faced figure tumbled out headlong onto the floor.

Knight kicked a smoking pistol from the fingers of the man he had shot. The dying Oriental tried to lift himself up, collapsed. For a moment longer, as a red stain widened on his left side, he glared up with a look of hate that encompassed all three white men. Then suddenly his tortured gasps ended, and the fury in his eyes became a glassy stare.

“Good Lord!” Doyle said hoarsely. “And to think that devil was in there the whole time. How’d you ever spot him, Dick?”

“Saw the door-handle move.” Knight looked at Creele, lowered his voice. “Your hut door was barred on the outside—so there’s only one way he could have got in here.”

The stupefied look faded from Creele’s eyes. He whirled toward the food locker.

But Knight caught his arm. “Don’t open it! If there’s anyone in the passage, he might blast us from the dark before we could see him. And those shots probably scared away anyone who might have been in there.”

“Yes, but it means they’ve discovered the secret exit!” muttered Creele. “We’ll have to escape while we’ve still time.”

“Hold on,” said Knight. “This man is not a Jap. He’s Chinese. Search him, Doyle, and see if there’s anything on him to give us a lead.”

“Even if he is Chinese,” grated the pseudo-monk, “he’s undoubtedly working with the Japs. We’d better get over the border before it’s too late. Even now—” he hesitated. “What’s the matter?”

Doyle had stopped his hasty search, had jerked back one sleeve of the dead Oriental’s coat.

“Look, Dick!” he whispered. “The sign of the Four Faces!”

Creele and Knight stared down at the arm of the corpse. Four faces had been tattooed so that they encircled the forearm. All four were identical. All four had the same expression of grim, brooding menace,

“So they’re back of this,” Knight said half to himself.

Creele looked at him with a blank expression. “I don’t understand. What does that tattooing mean?”

“Then you’ve never heard of the Four Faces?” said Knight.

“The name strikes a vague memory,” Creele answered. “But I can’t recall—”

“It’s the name of a huge criminal organization headed by four unknown men,” Knight broke in tersely. “I’ve a strong suspicion that one of the four is Lowenstein, the rich Belgian who was supposed to have fallen from his private cabin-ship over the English Channel. And I’ve never been satisfied as to the stories of Stavisky’s death or that of Kreuger, the Swedish match king. I believe those three and some other supposedly dead financier have built up the Four Faces in a quest for world power. We’ve tangled with them several times, and they’ve reason to hate us.”

“You mean this organization also exists in America?” said Creele.

“All over the world,” replied Knight. “Its members include men and women all the way from court circles down to the gutter. A great many are undoubtedly forced to serve the Four Faces by blackmail, or threat of death, though the original members seem to have been mainly from the underworld.”

“But what could they want of me?” Creele demanded.

“Probably information you’ve picked up about Japan or the Soviet. Or they may intend to use you in some way. They have forced more than one foreign

agent into their ranks, you know, and we've had proof they're interested in munitions and war supplies. I think they operate through dummy corporations headed by some of their members."

Doyle stood up, shook his head.

"Nothing on him but a little money and an extra clip for the gun."

"I didn't expect much," said Knight. "The 'killer' agents are seldom entrusted with important papers."

He glanced into the wardrobe cabinet, looked back at Creele, who was bending over the dead Oriental.

"Are all the members of the Four Faces tattooed like that?" muttered the false monk.

Knight gave him an odd smile.

"Suppose," he said softly, "you tell us."

CHAPTER III QUESTION IN RED

FOR A MOMENT the only sound was the crackling of the fire on the hearth. The man in the Buddhist robe stared at him with a look of complete amazement, and Doyle stood open-mouthed.

"I don't understand," the pseudo-monk finally broke the silence.

Knight's eyes were on the other man's now-nervous hands.

"I wouldn't try anything," he said calmly. "Doyle, come around on the left side and search him. Watch out for those sleeves—I think he has a gun up in one of them."

"You mean he's a phony?" Doyle said incredulously.

"Knight, you're out of your mind!" rasped the robed pilot. "If I'd have wanted to kill you, I could have done it half an hour ago."

"It's no use," replied Knight. "I suspected you even before your friend tried to help you capture us. And one look in that wardrobe proves you're a liar. Those clothes were made for a man half your size."

Dark blood rushed into the other man's face, and his white scar stood out like a streak of lightning.

"Very clever!" he snarled. "But it will do you no good. You're trapped, and you may as well give in now."

Knight smiled grimly.

"At least we understand each other—and don't make any mistake about this gun. I've nothing to lose by shooting you."

A glare of fury came into the captive's eyes, but he stood motionless while Doyle yanked up his voluminous sleeves. A Russian-made Nagarre revolver in a small holster hung upside-down on his left arm, with a flap to hold the gun in place.

"Nice set-up, Buddha," Doyle grunted. "Too bad you didn't have the nerve to reach for it."

"I think he's been ordered to take us alive," Knight interrupted. "Hurry up—the others may try to rush us at any minute."

Doyle ripped open the yellow robe, and a heavy flying-suit became visible. He jerked the zipper, carefully keeping to one side as he searched the prisoner's pockets in order that Knight's aim would not be blocked. The false monk's lips had set in an icy, mirthless smile, but his eyes narrowed when Doyle extracted a folded map from an inner pocket. Knight took the map in his left hand, spread it on the table as Doyle finished the search and stepped back with his pistol lifted.

It was a map of northern Asia showing eastern Siberia, Manchukuo, and the upper half of China. Well above the northern border of Manchukuo a large question mark had been drawn in red crayon. Knight turned the map over, but there was nothing on the other side.

"Any dope?" asked Doyle.

"Nothing here but a question mark," returned Knight.

The pseudo-monk gave him a sneering grin. "Shall I tell you the answer, my smart Mr. Q-Agent?"

Knight eyed him thoughtfully as he put the map inside his flying-coat.

"I wonder what you did with the real Mr. Creele. You didn't have much time to work here, or you'd have been more familiar with the food locker."

"Creele is dead," the other man said viciously. "And you'll be, too, if you don't agree to my terms."

"Which are—?" Knight queried.

"That you drop your guns and march upstairs with your hands in the air," came the reply.

"And after that, you take us to some headquarters of the Four Faces? That must mean more ships are coming here—at least one other two-seater."

Doyle looked uneasily toward the opened trap-door.

"We'd better get moving, then."

"You haven't a chance," grated the robed pilot. "There are a dozen men outside, all armed."

"Nice of you to warn us," said Knight. He motioned for Doyle to cover the prisoner carefully, then stepped to the food locker and silently began to clear the middle shelf. The false monk opened his mouth, shut it at a savage thrust from Doyle's gun. Knight stepped back, leveled his automatic, and squeezed the trigger.

The report roared through the confines of the basement, and a muffled howl instantly sounded on the other side of the cabinet. Knight had jumped aside the instant after he fired. A gun blasted, inside the passage, and wood splintered beside the hole his bullet had made. He fired again, low, and a screech of agony followed. At the same instant, a furious pounding sounded from up at the entrance to the hut.

"Pull back the locker!" Knight shouted at Doyle. "I'll cover him."

DOYLE leaped forward, but Knight stopped him with a hasty signal. Three shots crashed from the other side of the cabinet, and a crooked hole the size of a man's fist appeared in the back. A dim light shone on the other side, and Knight caught a flash of some one running into the passage.

"It's clear now!" he flung at Doyle. The ex-Marine sprang to the locker and tugged to pull it open. Knight backed toward the pressure-lamp, his eyes riveted on the tense face of their prisoner. The blows on the hut-door had redoubled in force.

"Tell them we've escaped by the tunnel!" Knight said fiercely.

The man's lips twitched into a snarl, but he did not speak. Knight's finger tightened on his gun trigger, and an ashen color spread over the prisoner's misshapen features.

"The passage—the Americans are escaping!" he cried out frantically.

Doyle swung the locker open on its hinges as he spoke, and a narrow passage was revealed. A young Japanese lay dying with a bullet through his stomach. There was no one else in sight, and the tunnel led straight ahead for a hundred feet or more.

"We'd better try the passage," Knight hastily told Doyle. "Go ahead!" He gestured at the false monk with his gun. "You're next!"

Hands lifted, the prisoner started forward. He was half-way to the passage when the hut-door crashed open. A violent draft blew down into the basement and through the tunnel. The lamp flickered wildly,

almost went out. In the sudden gloom, the captive made a frenzied dive for the dead assassin's weapon. Knight fired, missed in the crazily flickering light. Before he could aim again, a gun blazed from the top of the steps. He whirled, pumped a shot toward the trap-door, then sprang backward into the passage.

The pseudo-monk had snatched the dead Oriental's pistol, rolled to one side. Knight jerked the cabinet half-shut, dashed into the tunnel. Doyle was crouching a few yards away, trying to aim through the crevice. He jumped up, and they raced for the turn in the passage. Light abruptly streamed from the basement. Knight whirled, triggered two shots. A smallish figure tumbled to the ground, and at the second shot the gasoline lamp went out.

"Slade!" a voice cried shrilly. "Don't shoot—it might start a fire!"

"Get above and cover that exit, you fool!" came the furious response of the scarred pilot. "I'll take care of this end!"

Knight bumped against Doyle, held onto the other man's arm as they hurried into the dark passage.

"I knew he was lying—we'll have only one or two men to contend with."

"Why not duck back through the hut?" Doyle said hoarsely.

"I think our friend's going to block that way," muttered Knight. "And it can't be far to the exit."

They had passed the bend in the passage and were starting up an incline when a dull roar sounded behind them and the red glare of flames showed dimly around the curve. Doyle swore.

"The dirty rat! Now we've got to get out this way."

"Look out!" whispered Knight. "There's the end."

A wooden trap similar to the one in the hut had been left open, and by the faint glow reflected around the bend in the tunnel he could see trees and falling snow. He jerked off his helmet, raised it on the muzzle of his gun. A shot roared, and he saw a spurt of flame by a tree at the right. The flame disclosed a fur-clad figure, and Doyle instantly fired. The man dropped his gun, slid to his knees without a sound and lay with his face buried in the snow.

"Good shot," said Knight. Then he jumped up and helped Doyle onto the level ground. A flashlight was probing back and forth, two hundred feet away, as some one fled through the trees toward the clearing. The two agents followed as fast as they could, tripping now and then over tangled brush or rocks frozen into the ground. They were within a short distance of the

field when one side of the hut blazed up. The fire in the basement had quickly reached the upper floor.

Two men in fur parkas were dashing toward their Northrop. Knight took careful aim, eased the trigger back. His gun jetted flame, and one of the men stumbled. The other wheeled, flung two shots into the woods. A bullet chipped bark from a tree beside Knight. He fired again, and the other man ran desperately for the 2KB-19.

"It's Slade!" fumed Doyle.

"We've got to stop him!" rapped Knight. "He'll strafe us if he gets off!"

THEY charged for the clearing. Slade scrambled into the cockpit of the fighter, and the starter whined. The motor caught almost instantly. Both Knight and Doyle blasted shots at the unblocked ship as it lurched forward, but the pilot rammed open the throttle and was swiftly out of range.

"Come on!" Knight said tautly. They ran to the Northrop, and in another moment he was fumbling for the key to the locked circuit. He switched on the twin-radial, pressed the inertia starter button. To his consternation, nothing happened.

"They've cut the starter wires!" he shouted at Doyle. "See if you can swing the prop!"

Doyle tumbled out, raced to the nose of the ship. He was about to pull the prop when the Soviet fighter came thundering down the field. Knight whirled in his seat. The 2KB was fifteen feet off the ground. Just as he turned, the left wing dropped slightly and the nose of the fighter swerved toward the Northrop. Knight hit the release-gear at the back of his seat, clutched the spade-grip of the rear-pit .50's.

As two crimson eyes blinked on the cowl of the Soviet ship, the Q-agent tripped his heavy guns, and tracers interlaced with the fuzzy lines sprang toward the 2KB. Slade hauled back into a tight chandelle, and Knight's tracers drilled into space.

"Switch on!" bellowed Doyle. "Hurry up before that devil tries it again."

"Switch on!" shouted Knight. Doyle lunged at the prop. The engine coughed, died. Before he could swing again, the 2KB came shrieking down in a power dive. Again, Knight whirled to the .50's. Slade's tracers were stabbing into the snow-covered ground three hundred feet away. Frantically, the American jerked the double trigger. The guns tilted swiftly, blasted straight into the right wingtip of the fighter. The 2KB flipped off and dropped on the left wing, and the streaking tracer-lines

Slade had poured out missed the Northrop by a scant ten feet.

Knight let up on the trigger, thinking the fighter was doomed. But with an amazing turn Slade recovered and zoomed above the trees. Doyle jerked the prop as Knight spun around to the controls, and this time the engine caught with a welcome roar. The hut was now a mass of fire, and Knight cast an anxious look into the lighted sky while Doyle climbed into his seat.

"Where'd he go?" demanded the stocky ex-Marine.

"I think I crippled him," Knight yelled back over his shoulder. He opened the throttle half-way, sent the Northrop trundling down-wind.

The ship had almost gone far enough for a turn into the wind when Slade's fighter came diving over the burning hut. The smoke and flames had concealed its approach until the last moment.

Doyle whirled his turret, and Knight braked the two-seater into a hasty turn. The 2KB's guns blazed briefly, then the false monk chandelled, wings screaming. As the fighter lifted skyward, Knight could clearly see Slade's head and shoulders by the glare from below. He was Tearing a headset, and with one hand he held a microphone close to his lips. Knight snapped on his receiver, twirled the dial. Strange words crackled into his ears, then he suddenly recognized them as Esperanto, the adopted language of the mysterious Four Faces.

He shoved the throttle open to the take-off limit, trying to catch a few words of the comparatively unfamiliar language. A startled cry from Doyle broke in.

"Dick! Look up to the north!"

RICHARD KNIGHT flicked a glance up through the snowy sky. Icy fingers seemed to pull at his scalp. For the second time that night, something was streaking earthward at terrific speed.

There was a blinding flash, a roar that cut through the radial's thunder as though it had been a whisper. Shattered trees and fragments of frozen earth went hurtling into the air a mile beyond the edge of the clearing. The blasted debris was instantly followed by a gigantic mushroom of dazzling white flame, and Knight felt the earth shake from the force of another explosion.

The Northrop was half-way down the field, wheels almost clear, when a second blurred streak showed nearer and to the south of the field. So fast his eyes

could not follow, a bright spot in front of the blur plunged to earth and another explosion shook both earth and sky. Scorching heat swept out after the two-seater. He rammed the throttle wide-open, gasped for breath as the blazing white mushroom sent its huge tendrils snaking after the ship.

For a second he thought they were lost. The Northrop swayed, dropped almost to the ground in the buffeted air. Then the churning prop took hold again, and the ship slowly lifted into the cooler air beyond the clearing. He dragged the half-closed Plexiglas dome farther open, sucked in the cold air until his giddiness had gone. Doyle was wiping perspiration from his face, his eyes wildly dilated.

"That's twice that dirty louse has tried to burn us up!" he bawled into Knight's ear. "But what in hell are those things—and where do they come from?"

Knight made no answer. He was climbing steeply from the clearing, his eyes straining to see through the snow. Fear gripped at his heart as a third whitish blur became visible high up in the night. The blur became a streak—and again a weird flame spouted up into a giant geyser.

CHAPTER IV ABOVE THE BORDER

THE NORTHROP ROCKED in the fierce upblast, but Knight fought it safely away from the boiling currents of air. As the ship settled into level flight two miles beyond the clearing, he stared back. Four more of the strange white flame-masses had appeared, making a total of seven which roughly encircled the field. As he watched, an eighth struck almost in the center of the clearing, and the weird white fire spread out in all directions, hiding the already blazing hut and setting trees afire on both sides. The terrific heat had melted the falling snow while it was several hundred feet from the ground, and Knight could see distinctly into this oddly-cleared space. Something flitted into view at one side, and in a moment he recognized the 2KB as Slade warily circled the stricken area at a height of six hundred feet. The Russian ship swayed and tossed in the unsteady air, but the Four Faces pilot held to his dangerous altitude while he continued to fly about.

"He must be looking for us," Doyle shouted from the rear cockpit. "Let's get him!"

"No, I want to see which way he heads," replied Knight. He closed the Plexiglas, switched on the ventilating unit. "Keep your eye on him while I climb a bit higher—I want to make sure he doesn't spot us."

The Northrop spiraled up to two thousand feet, then Doyle gave an exclamation.

"He's swinging north. And is he letting that crate out!"

Knight peered through the arc cleared by his windshield defroster and saw the 2KB settle on a course of 23 degrees. He followed, nosing down slightly so that he could not lose sight of the fighter as it raced away from the lighted zone. After a minute, the 2KB made a sharp turn, circled as though Slade were making sure he was not being trailed. Knight pulled up until he could barely see the other ship, and in a few moments the fighter resumed its former course.

Engine half-throttled, Knight sent the Northrop down in a power glide, holding back until the swiftly increasing gloom all but hid his quarry. He knew then that Slade was not likely to glimpse the Northrop, even if he were not already certain that they had perished. Carefully, he edged in, keeping a trifle under the other ship until he could dimly see the flash of its exhaust. The Northrop's stacks were shielded, and he had no fear that Slade would see the two-seater.

"How far we going to chase that rat?" demanded Doyle. "We haven't got any too much gas."

"We've more than enough to get over the border to Blagoveshchensk," returned Knight. "And that town's not so far off the course he's taking. If luck's with us, we may be able to locate the Four Faces base before we cross the border."

"Then you think it's in Manchukuo?" grunted Doyle.

"It would almost have to be," said Knight. "You could hardly build a gun big enough to fire those shells from the nearest point in Siberia."

"It's got me stumped," grumbled Doyle. "What are they up to, anyway? And why did we get dragged into it?"

"Your guess is as good as mine." Knight's eyes were fixed on the faint glow of the 2KB's exhaust stacks, as the fighter hurtled on through the darkness. "Here, take this map and turn your light on it—cover it so it won't shine up through the top. See if we're going toward that place covered by the question mark."

Doyle took the map, was silent for a minute.

"Hey!" he said suddenly. "We're heading straight for the dot under the question mark. It's about a hundred and fifty miles east of Blago— whatever-you-call-it, close to a river."

"So that's it," muttered Knight. "The dot's the location of the base, and Slade put the question mark there to keep anybody from guessing, if he happened to lose the map."

"You're doing a lot of guessing right now yourself," growled Doyle. "If you ask me, we're in a bad enough spot without looking for more trouble. Maybe you think the Reds are going to give us the glad hand?"

"They won't start a row as long as we're not working against them. And I've an idea they'd like to hear about Slade's using a Soviet ship, and those other 2KB's."

"I wonder who he is," said Doyle. "He sure fooled me."

Knight answered without taking his eyes from the 2KB.

"There was a pilot named Brant Slade who did a lot of liquor smuggling by plane during prohibition. After repeal, he switched to running aliens and then suddenly disappeared. He'd made a lot of money—and a lot of enemies—so the Coast Guard supposed he'd been killed. I saw a picture of him some years ago. It didn't look like this man, except that he was about the same height. However, that doesn't prove anything, for glandular disorders could have distorted his features in that way in the meantime. One link between him and Asia is that he smuggled in a number of Chinese."

"He sounds like the kind of bird the Four Faces would get hold of," said Doyle. "But I can't figure how they've managed to build a hide-out in Manchukuo without the Japs finding it out."

"They'd have Japs on their roster, for one thing," said Knight. "But it does seem peculiar—" he stopped, eased the throttle back a fraction of an inch. The snow was getting lighter, and he could see the 2KB more plainly.

In a few minutes more the air was clear, and he was forced to drop still farther back; for now several breaks in the clouds began to appear, and occasionally shafts of moonlight shone through.

"He's climbing!" exclaimed Doyle. "We must not be near the base at all."

Knight frowned, held the Northrop to a parallel ascent. After an interval, he switched on the radio, tried each special range. But there was no sound. He

dared not use the transmitter for fear Slade would hear and discover a ship was close to him. The 2KB leveled out at about ten thousand feet, and for another twenty minutes held its course. A pinpoint of light nickered from the darkness ahead, then a searchlight swung up the sky. Almost at once, two more beams came to life; then far below Knight saw A-A batteries blaze. A shell burst well off to his right. Another flamed ahead and to the left, and before he had time to swerve, the 2KB made a sharp turn to avoid the barrage.

Slade chandelied his fighter wildly when he saw the Northrop. Knight dived under him, then zoomed. Slade's guns blazed for a moment, then with engine wide open he climbed above the bursting shells, twisting and turning rapidly. Knight took a hasty glance downward.

"We're over the border! That strip between the batteries is the River Amur."

"Then both sides are popping at us!" howled Doyle. "This is a sweet mess."

A shell from a Soviet gun exploded two hundred feet underneath the Northrop, and bits of shrapnel thudded against the wings. Knight saw a small hole appear near the right wingtip. He shoved the throttle full open, and the two-seater thundered up into the gloom. A searchlight beam flashed past, pawed futilely at the heavens. The guns fired sporadically, then abruptly ceased. Knight shot a look at the altimeter, saw they were close to eighteen thousand feet. He stared around, but there was no sign of Slade's ship.

"Well, what now?" barked Doyle.

Knight glanced at the fuel gauges, made a brief estimate.

"We've enough gas to find out what that dot means and still get to Blagoveshchensk. What do you say?"

"I say we're nuts—but go ahead."

"Seal your end of the pit, said Knight. "We'll come in high, so there'll be no chance of Slade's dropping on us."

He likewise locked his own gear, turned the compressor valves so that supercharged air would be delivered to their cockpit as well as to the engine. He climbed the Northrop to 25,000 feet, and the plane dropped on under the pallid moon, with only blackness beneath. The red dot, according to Doyle's measurement, was ninety-eight miles from the border. The strato-ship, cruising at only one-half its top speed in thin air, covered the distance in just sixteen minutes.

Knight's eyes were on the clock, and as he counted off the required time he idled the motor and started

down in a slow spiral. Far below, a faintly grayish ribbon showed under the moonlight between two drifting clouds. He took out his field-glass, made a quick inspection.

"There's the river by the dot on the map, but I can't see anything else," he said as he replaced the glass.

"And I'll bet we don't find anything when we get down there," growled Doyle. "Of all the screwy—"

He stopped, and Knight sat up alertly—for the radio amplifier was blaring out a string of words.

"Esperanto again!" Doyle exclaimed. "Can you make it out?"

"No, but the station must be close to be that loud. See if you can get a bearing on the direction-finder."

Doyle turned to adjust the did.

"Holy smoke!" he burst out. "It's movin' all over the place as though—Good Lord, Dick! Look!"

Knight whirled, went rigid. Something dark had flitted across the face of the moon so swiftly that it was gone before he could even guess at its shape. As he stared upward, a fiery streak appeared and vanished. Then the dark shape hurtled down at the Northrop!

AT THE speed of a meteor, the thing plunged down the moonlit sky. Knight had a blurred glimpse of short, thick wings. Streams of smoke eddied furiously from the rear ends of two strange-looking cones mounted on them. But there was no trace of propellers. The terrific speed of the mystery ship made a chill run up his spine.

Doyle was frantically trying to bring his .50's to bear on the diving craft, but before he could fire the other plane twisted aside. Knight tripped his wing-root guns, but the tracers went into empty air.

Wings screeching, the mystery plane skidded in toward the Northrop. Knight desperately kicked away. The other ship whirled in a vertical turn. There was a roar, and two blasts of white flame shot from the rear ends of the two huge cones. A scorching heat swept through the double Plexiglas enclosure into the Northrop's cockpit, and Knight sagged over the controls, gasping for breath. Dimly, he felt the ship whip into a spin, go twisting earthward with its motor still on. With an effort, he forced back the dark curtain which had almost descended over his senses. The ship had spun down three thousand feet. He closed the throttle, neutralized the controls, and brought the nose up. Doyle was dazedly clawing at the enclosure locking-gear. It slipped open, and cold air howled into the cockpit.

Knight looked around hastily, felt his heart constrict as the sinister black raider again pitched down at them. His icy fingers slid over the stick-buttons, and then with a violent zoom he jerked the nose of the Northrop up at the other ship. The guns pounded viciously, but in the same instant two winking red spots appeared in the rounded nose of the raider. The spots grew at tremendous speed until it seemed the mystery ship would crash head-on into the Northrop with its guns still spouting. A trail of bullet-holes suddenly ran across the Plexiglas, sent tiny bits of dural spattering down into the cockpit. Then with a deafening shriek the black raider plunged by.

Knight kicked off as the Northrop started to stall. Five thousand feet below, two blinding white flames streaked the sky, and he saw the sky monster come racing upward again. Doyle was hanging in his gun-harness, gaping downward.

"Get back into your seat!" Knight flung at him. "Snap your belt! I'm going to try to out-dive them!"

"What the devil is it?" Doyle said hoarsely.

"Rocket-ship—jet-propulsion!" Knight rapped back. He waited, crouching over the stick until the black raider was two thousand feet below and zooming at a mad speed. Then he jammed the stick to the firewall. The Northrop stood on its nose, went down with the radial bellowing. The rocket ship seemed to cartwheel in a split-second. With flames fifty feet long jetting from its nozzles, it came down after the diving two-seater. Doyle twisted around in his seat, pumped a wild burst from the .50's. The rocket-ship leaped sideways two hundred feet, flung its tail toward the Northrop. Knight stood on the rudder, and the strato-ship lurched in the opposite direction. The streams of blazing gas flamed above them, and their force hurled the raider a mile across the sky before it could turn back.

Heart pounding, Knight watched the altimeter hand. The ship was already down to 16,000 feet and he knew the meter was lagging. Directly over the nose he saw lights flicker on the ground, making a rectangular pattern, like tiny gems against black velvet. He threw a fearful glance over his shoulder. The rocket-ship was boring down at an angle from the point where it had reversed its course. But in another moment he knew that the pilot had momentarily lost sight of the Northrop, for the rocket-jets blazed and the black raider zoomed steeply.

He closed the throttle, started to pull out of the dive as the altimeter showed 10,000. The nose had barely

begun to lift when an amber-colored beam probed up and caught the ship. Knight put one hand before his eyes, bent to watch the instruments as he pulled out. The Northrop was almost at its terminal velocity of 460. It would be only a matter of seconds to a crash unless he leveled out.

Above the frightful scream of the wings he faintly heard the clatter of Doyle's guns. Scant seconds from death, his chunky partner was trying to take the black raider with them. Brilliant flame lit up the sky and the rocket-ship for the third time skidded crazily past, its blazing jets pointed toward the Northrop. This time Knight thought they were finished, but as swiftly as the jets had whirled toward them they were twitched away. The amber searchlight was flashing wildly at the black raider, and from the corner of his eye Knight saw another ship racing in.

With both hands on the stick, he lifted the two-seater's nose. The ship was almost level, fifteen hundred feet above the ground, when a hail of lead crashed through the left side of the enclosure. He jerked to the other side, saw a stream of tracer cut diagonally forward into the cowl.

The twin-radial skipped a beat, broke into a ragged rhythm. Knight swore, glared back and saw a 2KB swooping in for another burst. It was Slade's ship.

"Get that louse, Dick!" he heard Doyle groan. "My guns are empty."

Knight grimly shook his head. The tachometer hand was steadily dropping, and they were practically helpless before the darting fighter. He kicked into a slip, straightened out as Slade sent a brief fusillade past his wingtip. The rocket-ship was swooping down toward the lighted rectangle, its jet-nozzles trailing plumes of white smoke.

TWO floodlights spread bright fans on the ground, and Knight saw that the rectangle was the only open space in a vast expanse of woods save for the frozen river which lay close by. For an instant, he thought the river might offer a chance at escape, then he saw that the ice was too rough for a landing.

With a heart like lead, he turned the Northrop and glided down toward the lighted ground. Slade followed, expertly shifting from right to left toward off any attempt at escape, evidently not sure that the engine was really crippled. Knight stared gloomily over the cowl, saw hangars, barracks, and shops, dark bulks in the light from the flood-units. Men in fur parkas had swarmed out from the barracks, were

rolling the rocket ship toward a platform at the base of a launching track. A car with cog-wheel drive stood on the platform waiting to receive the rocket-ship, and in front of it at the point where the rails began to tilt upward was a smaller car on which was secured a glistening rocket-shell some twenty feet long and three feet in diameter. The track extended upward at an angle of thirty degrees, being elevated from the ground by a huge trestle-work. Knight could vaguely make out a complicated braking apparatus near the end of the rails, three hundred feet from the platform. At least fifty of the sinister-looking rocket-shells lay in wheeled cradles on both sides of the platform. One was hooked to a derrick-boom, ready to be hoisted onto the launching-car.

Knight saw all this in a quick glance as he swung into the wind and leveled off. A dozen armed men ran toward the ship as it stopped, and in a few moments he and Doyle stood outside, hands lifted in the bitter cold air. The 2KB moaned down and landed nearby. Slade jumped out, his yellow robe flapping and strode over to the prisoners. The guards, Koreans except for one dour-faced Russian, apprehensively watched the approach of the false monk. An ugly smile twisted Slade's misshapen features as he came up to Knight, goggles pushed up on his forehead.

"You're a hard man to kill—but I think I can change that," he said sardonically.

Knight made no answer, whereupon Slade turned abruptly to a fur-clad man who had emerged from the cabin of the rocket-ship. The man was thickset as a gorilla, with a red, brutal face, and a drooping eyelid which lent him a look of sly cunning.

"Gunderson," rasped the robed pilot, "I told you not to use the jets on them except as a last resort."

"I suppose I should've let them shoot us down," said Gunderson sullenly. "Maybe you think it's simple to fly that damned ship—"

"I've told you a dozen times to cut off the jets while you're ten miles from your target," Slade retorted angrily. "You can get in line, fire, and—"

"—And crack into 'em head-on!" broke in Gunderson sarcastically. "I tell you she's too fast for combat with an ordinary ship, even at one-third power. Anyway, you've got these two alive, if that's what you wanted."

"Not what *I* wanted," Slade said malevolently. "It was an order from *Them*. I think some special hell has been cooked up for these countrymen of ours."

CHAPTER V DECREE OF THE FOUR FACES

GUNDERSON SHIVERED as he heard Slade's words. "I'd bump myself off, if I ever thought They were after me."

"Well, I'll see that our 'friends' here don't have that chance," said Slade. Then he spoke briefly to the dour Russian, and the man turned to his squad of Koreans. Knight and Doyle were marched to the entrance of a thick-walled building between the main barracks and a hangar. Above the door, Knight saw a panel bearing Russian lettering. Translated it read: *Headquarters, U.S.S.R. Emergency Squadron 99.*

They entered a hall, turned, and stopped inside a large room at the opposite end of which was a ground-glass television screen six feet high and eight feet wide. Powerful Kleig lights made the entire room blindingly bright. Two men sat at a complicated switchboard on the left side of the screen.

Slade and Gunderson followed the prisoners into the room, and "the pseudo-monk dismissed all but the Russian and two of the guards. Knight and Doyle were quickly searched, and their guns taken. Slade nodded to one of the men at the switchboard, and stepped before the television screen.

"Number Thirteen reporting," he said, and his voice held a slightly uneasy note. "Knight and Doyle have been captured and are here at Base E. The stratosphere plane has also been captured, with only slight damage which is being repaired immediately."

There was a pause, then a faint humming sound. It died away, and an indistinct picture grew upon the screen. Knight stiffened as he saw four black-robed figures seated behind a high bar like a judges' bench. The picture grew clearer, and in a moment four grim faces looked out from the screen. All were identical, all had the same sunken eyes, rigid features, the same expressions of brooding menace. Though he knew the faces were masks to conceal the identity of the mysterious men who headed the criminal league, he felt the old, shuddering fear as he looked upon them. Doyle and he had stood in judgment in front of the Four Faces before, and only miracles had saved them. He knew they could expect no mercy now.

The first of the Four Faces leaned forward, and his voice sounded from the speaker behind the screen. It was so devoid of emotion as to be almost toneless, as though some mechanical man spoke:

Report in full detail, covering all steps since the last report period.

Knight stole a sidelong glance at Doyle. The ex-Marine was staring at the screen, perspiration running down his face. Gunderson and the guards were also watching with varying expressions of fear and uneasiness. Slade cleared his throat, spoke hurriedly.

"I took over the impersonation of Creele, as ordered. While I was in the air, spotting the hits of the first rockets, the Northrop appeared and was attacked by Japanese pilots."

HE DESCRIBED what had followed. The four masked figures looked at each other, conferred in whispers that the television speaker did not make intelligible. Then the First Face nodded.

Number Thirteen, the attack on Harbin will be temporarily discontinued. Our reports indicate it has, been successful, that the Manchukuan authorities believe the Soviet responsible. Tokyo has been informed. You will now carry out the second phase of our plan. Take down these orders.

Slade jerked his head at one of the switchboard men, and the First Face went on impassively.

Have the rocket-plane fueled for a flight to Tsingtao, China. There will be a ten minute interval for directing rocket fire, and then a return flight to Base E. On signal from the pilot of the rocket-ship that it is in position to direct your fire, you will launch three trial rockets to fall approximately ten miles north, south, and west of Tsingtao. As soon as corrections are received, you will then set the gyro-controls to drop twenty rockets in rapid succession in the harbor and in the area including the Edgewater Mansions House, where three hundred Americans are now assembled, The United States cruisers "Marble-head" and "Sacramento," and the destroyer "Pope" are in the harbor, to protect or evacuate the Americans. All Japanese mills and property are being burned by Chinese communists, and Japanese naval vessels are en-route for reprisal attacks. The rockets will undoubtedly be thought to be shells from Japanese battleships out in the Yellow Sea, and the destruction of the American colony and the three American warships will be certain to embrace the United States in a war with Japan, for America is already inflamed over the "Panay" incident.

"I have the orders," Slade said tensely as the First Face ceased. "But what of the prisoners?"

The First Face spoke again:

Their death has been decreed. But we intend to make use of them at the same time. A document is being prepared here which will be shown you by television in a few minutes. It will purport to be a code message from the American G-2 chief, General Brett, to Creele at his Manchukuo hiding-place, explaining certain secret plans for a sudden offensive by England and the United States against Japan. It will seem to instruct Creele to send the information to spies in Manchukuo, and across the border to the Soviet officials, who will also cooperate in the attack. It will name Knight as the senior secret agent of the United States, with authority from the White House. Have a photograph made of the document and then a handwritten copy made. This paper is to be found on Knight's body after he and Doyle are left in the Northrop.

"I don't understand," Slade broke in. Thereupon the voice of the First Face became even more cold:

Don't interrupt. I will explain everything. The Northrop is to be flown back to Manchukuo and landed at the field to the northeast of Harbin. One of the prisoners will be taken in the rear seat, drugged. The other also drugged will be taken across the border in one of your three-seater planes. Your pilots will return in the three-seater, leaving Knight and Doyle unconscious in the Northrop. As soon as your men are safely away, they will signal you, and you will relay the message to us. We shall arrange for one of our Japanese members to 'discover' the Northrop soon afterward. The prisoners will have frozen to death, and it will look as though they had lost their way and been forced down. The forged paper will give the Japanese evidence that they are about to be attacked by three powers—and the war we desire will be inevitable.

Doyle gave a strangled curse, and Knight looked grimly at the Four Faces.

"It's a smart scheme—but it won't work," he said in a savage tone. "Neither Japan nor the United States wants that war."

A sound like a dry chuckle came from the television speaker.

What they desire is not important, Mr. Knight. We have decided for them.

The pictures faded from the screen, and Slade glowered at the two prisoners.

"Too easy a death," he said harshly. "If I had my way—" he broke off, his scarred face suddenly

mocking. "Maybe I will, at that. Vornoff, lock them up with the Englishman—or did the fool die while I was away?"

THE dour Russian shook his head, grunted a command at the guards. Knight and Doyle were taken down the hall to a door which Vornoff unlocked. There was no light inside, but by the glow from the light in the hall Knight saw a man in a blood-stained yellow robe lying on the floor. There was a cut at one side of his shaven head, and his face was livid with bruises. The prisoner tried to raise his head as the two Americans were shoved into the cell. The door slammed shut, and Knight heard the man groan.

"Creele?" he said.

"Don't beat me again!" the other man cried hoarsely. "Let me die—I tell you I don't know anything else."

"We're not going to hurt you," Knight said gently. "We're prisoners."

"Prisoners?" Creele mumbled. His voice came out of the blackness, shakily. "Not—the two Americans?"

"Yes," said Knight. "Then you got the message from General Brett?"

"If you're lying, it won't do any good—I've told everything, I told you the message—"

"We're not Slade's men," Knight cut in. "We came up from Shanghai to get instructions from you, but Slade was impersonating you."

"I know—I heard them plan the whole thing," Creele muttered. "They intercepted your general's messages and then landed at my place. I thought they were Soviet pilots—I'd worked with Russia before. They almost killed me—I think they would have, but they thought I had some information I was holding back. One of Slade's pilots brought me over here in his ship—I've been in here at least six hours."

"What was Brett's message for us?" Doyle interrupted.

"It was about the rocket affair," Creele answered dully. "They had just discovered the secret plans were stolen at Guam."

"What plans?" said Knight.

"The design for the rocket-ship. I thought you knew about it—some American scientist named Chambers has apparently been working secretly at Guam for the last year."

"Chambers—the rocket designer!" exclaimed Knight. "But he was reported killed in an experiment in 1936."

"It must have been to cover up his work," Creele mumbled. "The messages didn't explain in full, but it seems that Chambers had built a rocket using hydrogen and ozone under high pressure. He was shooting test rockets out into the Pacific, with the Navy checking distances and speeds. And evidently he designed a full-sized rocket ship and was building it at his Guam station. The Four Faces learned about it and stole a copy of the plans and a rocket model, but Chambers didn't find out until two days ago when an assistant confessed he'd been blackmailed into doing it. I suppose you know about the Four Faces—your general mentioned them as though you'd understand."

"We've tangled with them—plenty," Doyle growled.

"I'd heard of the organization but never believed all the stories. They must have spies everywhere, even in the highest branches of a dozen governments. This base here," Creele went on wearily, "was built for emergency use by the Soviet in connection with the new defense plan for Siberia. Some one ordered it abandoned five months ago, and I know now that the Four Faces were back of that order. They've had men here since early Fall, building that launching-track and assembling the rockets from materials brought in by the river before it froze over. Vornoff bragged about it—I knew him at Vladivostok, the lying renegade."

"So that's how they got hold of the Soviet ships," Knight commented. "He's been playing a double role."

"That's right. He must have suspected me long ago, and had some one watch me at Harbin, or they'd never have known where to land today. Or maybe it was yesterday . . . I don't know what time it is . . . not that it matters . . ." his voice trailed off, hopelessly.

"We've still a chance," said Knight, though he knew there was practically none. "Tell me the rest of Brett's message—we may be able to work out something."

"I'll tell you—but it's no use. I was to help you reach the right Soviet officials at Khabarovsk, so you could have aid in finding where the Four Faces had built their rocket base. Chambers' assistant knew that they intended to work from somewhere east of Blagoveshchensk, with the idea of starting a world war. I don't know what side they're on—"

"The Four Faces are on nobody's side but their own," Knight said grimly. "They own munitions industries in several countries and probably stand to make a colossal fortune if another world war develops."

"And there'll be one if those rockets hit our ships and the American crowd at Tsingtao," Doyle said

fiercely from the darkness. "But we won't know about it—we'll be feeding vultures down in Manchukuo."

"The rockets may not hit their mark," Creele said in a dull voice. "It's a long distance from here to Tsingtao."

"They've already arranged for that," said Knight moodily. "They're sending the rocket-ship ahead to spot the hits and radio back the corrections. If we could only have destroyed that ship!"

"I still don't see how the rockets carry so much explosive," said Doyle. "It must take a helluva lot of hydrogen and ozone to feed th' jets over a thousand miles—and it's all of that from here to Tsingtao."

"They don't carry explosive," Creele answered listlessly. "They simply arrange to detonate the remainder of their fuel on impact—hydrogen and oxygen is about as powerful a mixture as you can create, and ozone doubles the oxygen content. I heard the man called Gunderson tell some one the rockets would reach a trajectory peak of sixty-three miles on the way to Harbin, so they must go most of the way in empty space. That means they'd coast at least half the way, with the jets shut off after the rockets gained their momentum. They must reach a speed of 1500 miles an hour once they get above the stratosphere."

"Even more," said Knight. "The rockets began to strike near your hut within five minutes after Slade reached his ship. He couldn't have signaled for them any sooner."

"Well, it makes no difference now,"

Creele answered. Knight caught the labored note in his voice. "We're finished, and we might as well admit it. But I'd die happy if I had just one shot at that devil Slade."

"So would I!" Doyle grated.

CHAPTER VI HELL'S HOLOCAUST



HERE MUST BE some way we could trick them," Knight muttered. "I wonder what Slade meant when he said he might have his way about killing us?"

Neither Doyle nor Creele had an answer. Then from out on the base the thunder of an engine suddenly was audible.

"That's our ship!" Doyle exclaimed. "They must've fixed it in a hurry—"

"It was only a clipped distributor wire," said Knight. He listened while the engine ran for a minute. It stopped, and again silence fell in the darkened cell. Creele's heavy breathing was the only sound for almost ten minutes, then Knight snapped his fingers.

"What's the matter?" Doyle said hastily.

"It may not work, but I've an idea," Knight whispered. "At the worst, it's better than freezing to death, half-drugged. Creele, I'll take your robe and pretend to be you. They won't be expecting any attack from your direction when they come in here. If there aren't too many I might be able to seize a gun and cover them."

"It's probably your death-warrant," Creele said huskily, "but we might as well go out fighting. Here—help me get out of the robe."

Knight stooped over him in the dark, felt the Englishman's hand grope for his. Creele's flesh was feverishly hot and his hand shook.

"Don't try to get up," Knight said in an undertone. "I'll get out of this flying-coat and help you put it on. You'll have to wear the helmet and goggles, too, if we're to fool them even for a moment."

The exchange took a minute or two, and when Knight had donned the robe he felt along it until his fingers touched the bloody stain he had seen. He rubbed his fingers along the side of his head where Creele had been wounded. He was just starting to give Doyle whispered instructions when footsteps sounded outside and he heard Slade's voice.

"Have the crew ready for launching the ship. I'll be there as soon as I take care of the prisoners."

"You mean you're going to pilot it yourself?" came Gunderson's voice.

"I am," snapped Slade. "I've a special grudge against the Navy ever since they helped the Coast Guard put me out of business. I wouldn't miss this show for five grand."

Knight had bent over Creele at the first sound. He lifted the wounded man in his arms, carried him across the darkened cell. He started to put him down, but Creele gripped his arm with trembling fingers.

"No, no! Put me on my feet . . . Doyle can help me stand . . . best way to pretend I'm . . . you."

"He's right, Dick!" Doyle said in a hoarse whisper. "Here—lean on me—"

Knight sprang across the room, flung himself down where Creele had been as he heard the key grate in the lock.

"—and have the Northrop started, too," Slade's voice came, close to the door. "Our friends will be ready for their little joy-hop in five minutes."

The door swung open. Knight lay doubled up, one arm partly over his face, legs drawn up as far as possible under the yellow robe so that the difference in his height and Creele's would not be apparent. Light slanted in through the doorway, and staring under his arm he saw Slade come in, followed by Vornoff and two Koreans. A flashlight beam passed quickly over him, flipped toward the other prisoners.

Like a catapult, Knight's tense muscles shot him to his feet. The nearest Korean whirled with a startled yell. Knight's fist smacked viciously under his jaw, and the man went up on his toes. Knight wrenched a gun from the guard's resistless fingers just as Vornoff spun around. Fear shot into the Russian's eyes, and he frantically snatched at his pistol. Knight leaped in desperately, clubbed his gun into Vornoff's face. The Russian tottered back, blood pouring from a gash on his brow.

A half-muffled shot echoed through the cell. Creele gave a gasping cry, crumpled to the floor. Doyle crashed a left hook to Slade's jaw, knocked a smoking automatic from the killer's hand. The second Korean carried a bottle and a hypodermic syringe instead of a weapon. For a moment, as the fight raged about him, he cringed back against the wall, then suddenly he hurtled at Doyle, the syringe needle pointed at Doyle's neck.

KNIGHT sprang over the other guard, brought the butt of his gun down on the brown man's head. The Korean collapsed without a sound, and the bottle broke upon the floor. Vornoff was staggering around blindly, eyes half-filled with blood. He tripped over the second Korean, fell headlong. Knight wheeled to help Doyle, but his aid was not needed.

His chunky comrade had the bigger man by the throat, and Slade was clawing wildly to break that deadly grip on his windpipe.

"Don't kill him!" Knight said swiftly. "We'll need him."

He scooped up Slade's gun, ran to the door and looked out. There was no one in sight. Evidently everyone else was out on the base preparing the two ships and the rockets. A horrible, choking sound made him whirl. For a second he thought Doyle had disregarded his orders, then he saw Vornoff writhing on the floor. Some of the liquid from the broken bottle had reached the Russian's gashed forehead. A terrible glare came into Vornoff's dilated eyes. His lips flew open as though for a scream of agony, but it never came. One

last tortured gasp burst from the traitor's throat, and his face froze into a red-stained mask of horror.

Knight looked grimly from the dead Russian to Slade, who had sagged to his knees, breathing stertorously. He handed Doyle Slade's gun, stooped and picked up the hypodermic needle. Slade's eyes bulged as Knight came toward him.

"No! No!" he croaked. "Not that!"

Doyle savagely hauled him to his feet.

"You dirty rat! I'd like to empty this gat right into your yellow belly!"

Slade cowered back, his misshapen face ashen.

Knight looked down at Creele's body. Perhaps it was only imagination, but there seemed to be a faint, sad smile on the dead man's lips.

"He threw himself against Slade's gun," Doyle muttered. "I tried to stop him—poor devil."

"So that's what muffled the shot," Knight raised his eyes to Slade's face, and at the look in his eyes the Four Faces' pilot cringed. "We're going out of here, Slade—and if anything goes wrong, you're going to pay double for killing Creele!"

Slade's dark eyes stared down at the syringe. His lips moved, tremblingly.

"I'll do—anything. I'll get you clear—"

Knight's gaze flicked over Slade's fur parka.

"Take that off—and your helmet and goggles, too. Doyle, see that he gets into my flying-coat and helmet while I switch."

The exchange was quickly made, for Slade seemed to be completely cowed. Knight fastened Slade's winter helmet, drew down the combination goggles and breathing-mask which left only the tip of his nose and his lips exposed behind a fine wire mesh. Turning up the hood of the parka, he picked up the syringe, also the gun he had laid down.

"All right, let's go! Doyle, put Slade's pistol in one pocket and Vornoff's in the other. Keep your hands on them—but don't draw until you have to."

Doyle nodded, and Knight looked coldly at Slade.

"Turn up that coat collar, and when we get outside keep your head down in it. Stumble along as though you've been drugged. Make one move to attract attention and I'll jab this needle into your throat."

"But what are you going to do with me?" Slade said fearfully.

"That depends on you. Now go ahead."

They went into the hall, Knight keeping close to the Four Faces' pilot, gun poised and the syringe held significantly. As they passed the door to the radio

and television room, one of the operators looked up, but Knight shoved Slade by and prodded Doyle with his pistol. The operator grinned, turned back to his instruments. Knight halted Slade when they came to the building entrance. Keeping the big pilot covered, he cautiously opened the door half an inch. Floodlights made the outside brilliant. The rocket-ship was on the launching-car, and he saw an engineer at the control board beside the platform. The crew was waiting, and beyond them a crowd of mechanics in parkas was waiting to place the rockets in position for shooting. He looked intently at the nearest gleaming projectile, saw a detonating pin in the nose. It had a safety-device to keep it from being pushed accidentally.

"Exactly what happens when one of those detonators is shoved into the nose?" he demanded of Slade.

"It releases a spring that opens the hydrogen and ozone tanks." Slade looked at him in sudden terror. "You fool! You'd kill yourself as well as the rest of us!"

Knight smiled behind the fur-lined flying mask. "And hydrogen explodes when it's mixed with more than fifteen percent of oxygen . . . I wonder how I could—"

THE sputter of the Northrop's motor quickly ended his musing. It was the sound for which he had been waiting. He opened the door as the motor settled into a steady thunder.

"Head down!" he said in a harsh undertone, and Slade hastily obeyed, stumbling along the frozen ground toward the two-seater. Several of the mechanics stared at the trio, and Knight saw their frosty breath as they exchanged comments. He held the syringe in plain sight, knowing that the plan to drug the prisoners had probably become known to everyone on the base. The Northrop was only a short distance away, and his hopes soared as he saw there were only two men beside it. One of them had just climbed from the front pit after starting the motor.

"Be ready to grab the rear-pit guns," he whispered to Doyle. "I'll stand those two off while you jump in."

The man who had started the motor turned as Knight was speaking. It was Gunderson, red face half-covered by a parka hood. He took a step forward, went rigid as his eyes flicked to Slade's bent head. He leaped back, gloved hand clawing for the gun strapped at his hip. Doyle sprang to one side, jerked the two pistols from his leather coat. All three guns blasted. Gunderson spun around, pitched into a heap on the

ground. The mechanic back of him dived for the gun he had dropped.

Knight fired, and the mechanic rolled over with a slug through his right side. It was only an instant—but in that split-second Slade whirled and raced under the Northrop's wing. Doyle triggered a shot after him, turned and vaulted into the ship. Across at the platform, the servicemen were breaking wildly for shelter. Knight saw one man sprint toward a machine-gun mounted near the main barracks. He fired, missed, was aiming again when Doyle's .50's broke loose with a deafening roar.

The running mechanic fell, riddled, and Knight sprang up onto the step of the two-seater. Machine-gun tracers shot above his head as he gripped the stick and throttle. He opened the radial and sent the Northrop plunging out into the center of the field. Doyle swerved his Brownings, raked the crew of the machine-gun which was blasting after them.

Knight bent over the controls, brought the Northrop around in a swift turn. His radial almost wide open, he hurled the ship toward the massed rockets. A furious cross-fire from three directions drove him into a zoom before he could trip his guns. He chandelled over the trees, nosed down to gain speed and to blanket the gunners' barrage. The Northrop, now a mile from the base, banked in a tight turn—and now the rocket-ship came racing up the inclined track. Half-way to the top, its jets belched out a blazing white streak, and the man-made meteorite leaped upward at terrific speed. The launching-cradle struck the braking device and rolled back, then the rocket plane screamed up into the night.

Doyle spun the rear-mount and fired, but his burst went two hundred yards behind the rocket-ship. Knight shoved the stick forward, dived back at the field. Another storm of machine-gun fire met the plummeting Northrop. He crouched, eyes fixed on the glistening rockets below. Bullets were pounding into the wings, but he held to the dive. A glare of white light reflected in the cracked cowl mirror. Slade was pitching the rocket-ship headlong after them!

With an unspoken prayer, Knight tripped the forward guns. Glowing pinkish lines stabbed down at the shining rockets. The Four Faces gunners broke and fled in panic. For an instant, Knight thought his desperate scheme would fail as his tracer lines hit the huge projectiles and ricocheted. Then suddenly a bolt of white flame shot from the rear of one rocket. He jerked the stick to his belt, and the Northrop zoomed madly.

A TREMENDOUS concussion shook the two-seater, and a dazzling glare lit up the sky. The Northrop whipped onto its side, was lifted vertically five hundred feet. Knight's senses reeled as once again a withering heat engulfed him. Dazedly he waited until stick and rudder had ceased their crazy flopping. The Northrop fell off, went into a wobbling glide from which he brought it into straight flight.

Out of the raging holocaust which a few moments before had been the base, another and still another explosion blasted, hurling masses of smoking earth and flaming wreckage high into the air. Knight stared back, and seeing Doyle slumped half-conscious in the rear cockpit, he raced away from the wrecked base.

But then something streaked across the sky at the Northrop, and the Q-agent's pulses leaped as he saw the black rocket-ship. Slade had escaped the inferno, was plunging in for a final vengeance!

Knight jammed the throttle wide open, trying frenziedly to reach the scattered clouds above. With jets roaring, the rocket plane closed the gap. Knight kicked desperately at the rudder. The Northrop skidded wildly to the left and Slade overshot. Knight's fingers closed on his stick buttons, and with another furious kick at the rudder he raked the zooming ship.

The jet flames ceased. A jagged black strip tore from the top of the streamlined cabin, then the whole upper covering of the speeding monster ripped off in the wind. By the glare from below, Knight could see Slade pounding frantically at a lever.

A thin flame momentarily issued from the jet nozzles, then a blinding flash lit up the clouded heavens. An explosion followed that drowned the radial's thunder—and the rocket-ship was gone!

KNIGHT swiftly banked to avoid the rain of blazing fragments. As he straightened out on the course back to Shanghai, Doyle sat up and gazed anxiously about the sky.

"Hey, Dick! Look out for Slade! He's around here somewhere."

Knight looked grimly down at the last falling bits of the rocket-ship.

"Yes, he's around here . . . somewhere. But," he added as Doyle stared bewilderedly, "the Dark Angel has fallen from Heaven."