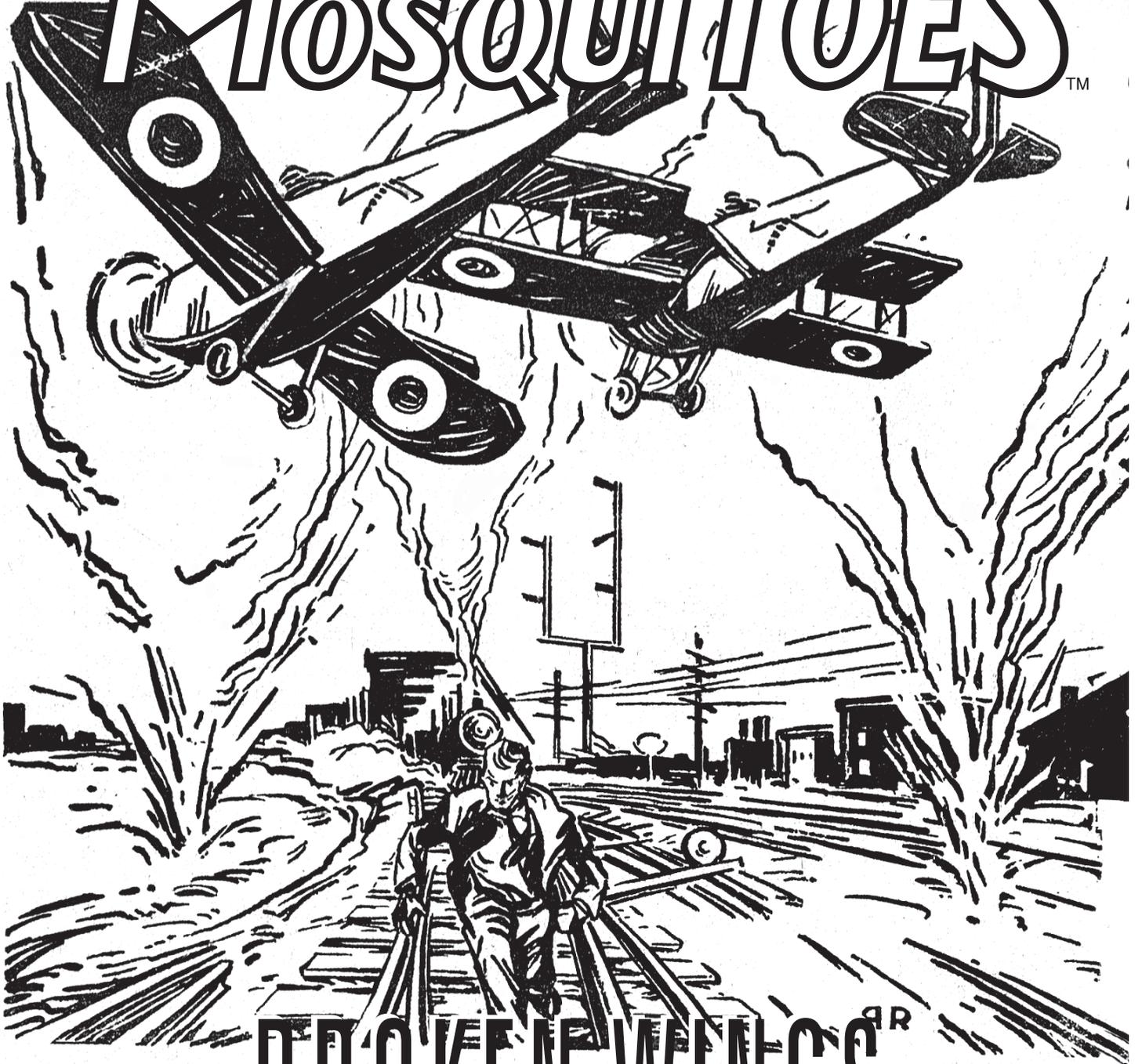


THE ADVENTURES OF

The **THREE**   
**MOSQUITOES**™



**BROKEN WINGS**™

by RALPH OPPENHEIM

*No greater engine of winged destruction ever rode the red winds of the Front than The Three Mosquitoes—then came a Boche flamer and a face in the dark to confront them with the greatest mystery of their career.*

CHAPTER I  
"ALL FOR ONE..."

**T**HE THREE SPADS PLUNGED out of the deepening blue of the afternoon sky, motors roaring. The four German Pfalzes below, cruising leisurely with the knowledge that they were well within their own lines, were taken completely unaware. The Spads came down on them like winged furies, their guns stuttering into flaming life as they flattened out of the attacking dive.

The Germans, brought to shocked realization by the tick of bullets through wings and fuselages, pulled up with sudden, frenzied haste, and confusedly sprang to the defense. At first they were amazed that three Spads should dare to attack four Pfalzes. But then, on the fuselage of each Spad, they distinguished a well-known insignia, a picture of a large and determined-looking Mosquito. The Jerries' astonishment left them, and in its place came panic and fear. "The Three Mosquitoes!" The famous, split-airing trio who laughed at all odds, whom nothing could ever stop! The Three Mosquitoes had attacked in their usual, reckless fashion!

The dogfight was hectic only for the first few moments, as all seven planes weaved in and out, guns blazing, motors roaring. The Germans were putting up the excellent defense of desperate, cornered men. But not for long. Presently, in some strange way, the Jerries seemed to relax and take the whole thing much easier. To the Mosquitoes it was virtually surrender, and taking full advantage of the situation, they closed in eagerly for the kill.

Captain Kirby, their impetuous young leader, waved to the two Spads he could only glimpse on either side of him as they twisted with him through the maze of Pfalzes. He waved the signal which meant, "Give 'em hell, fellers!" And "Shorty" Carn and the lanky Travis waved back from their cockpits: "Okay! Let's go!"

But there was something missing in their response. They had not given it with their usual full-hearted enthusiasm. Instead they had waved mechanically, their goggled faces grim and frowning, as if they anticipated the thing that was going to happen.

It did happen, soon enough. With the Pfalzes now entirely on the defensive, hardly putting up any fight. Shorty Carn, the mild-eyed, corpulent little fighter, managed to swing onto the tail of one of the Jerry ships. He was a crack shot, was Shorty, and he sat there on that Pfalz's tail, holding it framed in the ring of his sights, following its every twist and turn so that it could not shake him off. His hand closed about his stick-triggers, and he pressed them eagerly, sending out short staccato bursts from his twin Vickers.

Bits of wood and fabric began to fly from the Pfalz's tail-assembly. The German's movements became frantic as he tried vainly to shake off the stubborn leech which clung to his tail. Shorty kept closing in, and his shots were becoming more and more accurate. He could see his smoky tracers going right into the German plane now. The Pfalz began to lurch and flounder, as if drunk from the bullets which pumped it. A slow, grim smile of triumph flickered over Shorty's lips. His next burst, he knew, would make the kill!

The next burst came—but it was not from Shorty's guns! The little Mosquito swore with strange harshness as the nose of another Spad loomed into view, pointing straight at the Pfalz he was chasing. The Spad was Kirby's, and its guns were spitting jagged streaks of flame. It happened then. The Pfalz reeled off into a stalling side-slip, and a widening ribbon of dense black smoke began to trail from it. It went spinning and twisting down into the gathering dusk, leaving a great black wake behind it.

KIRBY, grinning behind his goggles, waved jubilantly as he pulled away. But Shorty did not wave back. The little Mosquito's goggled face was dark, and in his heart was a growing bitterness. He tried as always to excuse Kirby, but this time he couldn't. The thing had happened too often. It was too obvious that Kirby had deliberately snatched away Carn's rightful glory. Shorty had done all the dirty work, had gone through all the difficult maneuvers of getting on the Pfalz's tail and trapping the Jerry, only to have the prey snatched out of his hands. The credit of the victory would be marked on Kirby's score. Not that Shorty cared about credit, but——

The little man jerked his head around abruptly, as he saw another Pfalz twisting earthward in a trail of oily smoke. The Spads of Kirby and Travis were on the scene, and by their position Shorty knew at once that Kirby had played his trick again—this time on Travis! The latter had also been about to make a kill, and Kirby had snatched it from him at the last moment!

Shorty had to swing around now to shake off the sights of one of the two remaining Pfalzes, which was making a rather pathetic effort to get on his tail. As Carn banked, Travis' Spad suddenly swept up past him, and both Mosquitoes glanced at one another across the space which separated them. Each saw his own grim thoughts mirrored in the other's goggled face. Shorty made a gesture, half interrogation, half anger. Travis, eldest and wisest of the Three Mosquitoes, slowly shook his head.

At that moment one of the two remaining Pfalzes suddenly swept in front of them, and as if in tacit accord, as if they were both determined to get something out of this fight even if they had to get it together, they both sped to attack the single Jerry craft. But again, as they pursued the zigzagging, twisting German, Kirby's Spad suddenly loomed into view with its usual unexpected abruptness, and the thing happened once more. It was before Kirby's guns that the smoking Pfalz went down, though both Shorty and Travis had their sights on it!

The whole unnecessary maneuver, in which all three Spads concentrated on one Pfalz, gave the fourth and only surviving Jerry a chance for a get-away, and he took full advantage of the opportunity. Diving out of the fray with amazing rapidity, the last Pfalz made a bee-line for home and safety. The Mosquitoes did not pursue, though Kirby indicated his desire to do so. Shorty and Travis had had enough. This was not their idea of a dogfight: four Germans who were too scared to put up a decent scrap—and a comrade who hogged all the cold meat for himself, who wouldn't give them a chance to score!

Mechanically, with their minds full of dark conjectures, they swung into formation on either side and to the rear of Kirby—the usual V-shaped formation of the Three Mosquitoes. All headed for home. Twilight found them circling over the big drome of the 44th Pursuit Squadron. They got into the wind and then, with that graceful coordination which only the Three Mosquitoes could achieve, the three planes dipped as one and slanted downward, flying wires singing as the motors were cut. The field swung

up to meet them, caught their wheels, and rolled them to a neat stop before the line of camouflaged hangars. Mechanics helped the three men out of their cockpits, and the trio drew up together on the tarmac.

“Boy, oh, boy!” Kirby exclaimed, jubilantly, as he snatched off his helmet and goggles. His face was flushed with all the joy of victory, and he was totally unaware of the dark expression on the faces of his two comrades. “Three flammers in one day—that's not so bad, is it, guys?”

There was a pause before either of the others replied. Shorty seemed terribly busy filling his inevitable briar pipe. Travis lit a cigarette and exhaled slowly.

“IT'S almost too good to be true.” It was Travis who answered Kirby's question, and Kirby entirely missed the import of his words “Why,” the lanky Mosquito drawled, “it almost makes us two feel like a couple of kiwis!”

“Yeah,” Shorty chimed in thoughtfully, as he lit his pipe. “You sure have been doing all the scoring lately!”

“And the funny part of it is,” Kirby spoke with genuine awe, “I haven't even half tried! It's been so damned easy I almost feel ashamed! Somehow I always find myself sitting pretty on some Jerry—and one burst and down he goes! Either I must be damned lucky or,” he blushed with due modesty, “damned good!” He turned on his heel. “Well, come on, guys! I'll have time to chalk up this score before mess!” And he strode off toward the mess hall, with the others following somewhat reluctantly, and in brooding silence.

Most of the 44th's pilots had already gathered in the long, low-ceilinged mess hall, and were amusing themselves with cards, dice, and jokes while they waited for supper. All looked up as the Three Mosquitoes entered, and there was something in the glance they directed toward Kirby that made his two comrades wince inwardly. But Kirby did not notice it and, with every eye upon him, he strode confidently to the big blackboard which hung at the end of the hall. This was the scoreboard, where the name of each pilot was listed, and his respective score chalked up.

Proudly Kirby stepped up, erased the number next to his name, and added three to his already incredible total of victories. There was an awed gasp from the watching pilots, but almost instantly their awe seemed to change to something else, and they commenced to whisper among themselves. One of them casually

approached the Three Mosquitoes. This was Lieutenant Brown, who had just joined the squadron a week ago, but who had already distinguished himself and won acehood by shooting down five enemy planes.

He was a tall, dapper fellow, the type for whom uniforms seemed to be especially designed. His slim-waisted, graceful figure, his rather pretty face with its small, carefully-waxed black mustache, and his supercilious manner, might have won him great popularity with the ladies, but never with men. Still his squadron mates respected him for his indisputable flying skill and courage.

Kirby was the only one who openly disliked the man, though he could not say why. From the very start he had simply taken an unreasonable antipathy to this dapper, immaculate lieutenant. And now here was Brown, smiling that superior smile of amusement with which he seemed to regard all his fellow men.

"Well, well," he remarked, glancing at the scoreboard. "So it's happened, again, eh? The Three Mosquitoes go on a patrol, and Captain Kirby piles up a remarkable score!" He grew rougher in his jest. "What I'm beginning to wonder is, why have three Mosquitoes at all? One would be enough, judging from the looks of things!"

Shorty and Travis stiffened, and Kirby glared at the smiling lieutenant.

"What's the matter?" he snapped at Brown, belligerently. "You getting jealous?"

"Jealous?" Lieutenant Brown laughed aloud at the mere thought. "Am I the one to be jealous, when I've shot down five planes in my first week? And what's more," he added, significantly, "nobody helped me get them! I had to fight for them and I'm so proud of them I'm going to tie a red pennant to my tailskid! Of course the Boche will know me, but they knew Guynemer and they knew Bishop! If I had as many to my credit as you, I'd have had a red pennant on my tailskid months ago! Of course, if you are careful about—"

Kirby's face crimsoned. "Look here, Brown, if you're trying to insinuate—"

"Now don't you two get into an argument again!" It was a new voice which broke in. "Big Pete" Braddock, jovial leader of B Flight, was serving his customary role as mediator. "What the hell does it matter who scores and how, so long as the scores are made?"

"That's right!" Shorty Carn agreed, with a conviction that was just a little too forced. He seemed

to be arguing more to convince himself than anyone else. "What's the difference who actually does the scoring? Long as we all do our best."

THE short, stocky figure of the, 44th's C.O. appeared in the doorway. All stiffened to attention as the grizzled old colonel entered the hall. He nodded and spoke to various men, and finally confronted the Three Mosquitoes, who saluted respectfully. Lieutenant Brown, still smiling, stood by, watching and listening with interest.

"Well, boys," the C.O. addressed the Mosquitoes in his gruff but friendly voice, "how did you make out to-day. Any Boche?"

"Yes, sir," Kirby answered eagerly. "I managed to get three Pflazes, sir." He nodded toward the scoreboard.

The C.O. beamed his admiration. "Good work, Kirby! Congratulations. But say," he looked questioningly at Shorty and Travis, "what's the matter with you two buzzards? Is Kirby doing all the fighting in your outfit?"

Shorty and Travis glanced at each other darkly, both shifting uncomfortably. All the pilots in the room were grouping about the scene now, watching and listening in awed and expectant silence. There was something tense in the atmosphere, something ugly and unpleasant which seemed to be brewing. Lieutenant Brown's smile was peculiarly bland, almost unctuous.

Then suddenly Kirby was speaking, on behalf of his comrades. "Say, colonel, I think you're a bit hard on these two guys. I can tell you they've been doing their level best. They've come damned close to scoring lots of times, but they've just had bad luck, that's all!"

The effect of this speech, far from smoothing out the tension, brought it to a pitch. Shorty and Travis both stiffened as if struck by a whip, and the color drained slowly from their faces. They stared at Kirby more in surprise than anger. Then every one saw the blood rise back to Shorty Carn's face, until it turned crimson. They saw his lips work and then—

"Just bad luck!" he echoed, and his voice began to rise with growing emotion. "Just bad—"

"Yes, sir," Travis, the calm, stoic Travis, stopped the flood by not allowing the dam to burst. Almost immediately Shorty regained control of himself and recovered his composure. "Captain Kirby is right," the lanky Mosquito went on. "We have just had a lot of unlucky breaks."

The C.O., even as Kirby, seemed totally unaware of the drama that was going on beneath the surface of all

this casual conversation. Consequently, he too, kept making things worse. "Well, you fellers better wake up and nab a few Boche before your leader gets 'em all," he grinned. "You must be asleep on the job!"

There is no telling what might have developed had there not come an opportune interruption in the form of a freckle-faced mess sergeant, who announced loudly but respectfully: "Dinner is served, gentlemen!"

It was the usual roaring, boisterous evening meal, when the grim tension of war was momentarily forgotten, and the men relaxed and remembered gratefully that they were human beings instead of mere cogs in the big machine. But to-night, beneath all the usual jollity, there seemed to be a strange, sinister undercurrent which every man could feel. It was like a vaguely discordant note in the otherwise perfect harmony of the squadron. For the first time in the history of the 44th, which had always been like one jolly family, intrigue was rearing its ugly, viperish head.

## CHAPTER II GLORY GRABBER!

**T**HE MEN JOKED the same as ever, talked about the same things in the same way, and yet there were furtive glances, meaning looks at Kirby and his comrades, who were all three giving themselves over to the gay spirit of the mess now. Also there were whispers, especially among Lieutenant Brown and his neighbors. The dapper lieutenant seemed more affected than any one else by Kirby's remarkable scoring, and he did not hesitate to express his opinions. Nevertheless, his manner seemed merely friendly and casual as he leaned over the table to address the Three Mosquitoes, who sat opposite him.

"Pardon me, gentlemen," he said, with his bland smile, "but isn't it true that the idea of calling yourselves the 'Three Mosquitoes' was inspired by the famous Three Musketeers?"

"Sure thing!" Kirby answered cheerfully enough, for though he did not like Brown, he was in an affable mood now. "We won't deny that."

"Then you must have read Dumas?"

"I never did," Kirby confessed.

"Me neither," put in Shorty Carn.

"Well, I read him," drawled the learned Travis. "But one wouldn't have to. Everybody knows of the Three Musketeers."

Lieutenant Brown's smile grew broader. "Yes, but you see, I was wondering if you fellows had also taken the motto Dumas gave his Three Musketeers, You remember it? '*Tuus pour un et un pour tous.*'" His French was flawless.

"Why not?" Travis' voice was almost a challenge. Then, being the only one of them who understood the French, he translated it for the benefit of his comrades. "All for one and one for all. I guess you might call that our motto too."

There was a slightly perceptible gleam of cunning triumph in Brown's eyes, the triumph of a man who knows he is about to make a brilliant point. He pursed his lips.

"Silly of me to be asking all this, but you see, I thought perhaps you had possibly adopted just the first half of that motto."

Travis, the quick-witted, was the first to grasp the full significance of the irony. But then others caught on, and the wiser ones started the explanation which swept down the table like a soft wave: "He means the 'All for one' part." Some laughed aloud, others smiled tacitly, still others nodded grimly and directed meaning glances at Kirby, who looked more puzzled than anything else. Lieutenant Brown now withdrew into his former conversation with his immediate neighbors, but there was an almost smug look of contentment on his handsome face. He had achieved another one of those bon mots which had won him such favor with the ladies, and his only regret was that there were none of the lovely creatures here, to gaze at him with wide, adoring eyes and sigh, "What a brilliant man!"

Fortunately the meal ended before things went any further. The mess broke up as abruptly and noisily as it had begun. The men sauntered out into the cool quiet of the evening, where a dark, moonless sky hung low over the big drome. Most of the pilots set out immediately for the near-by village, their objective being the famous estaminet of Papa Renier. Kirby, leaving the mess hall with his two comrades, was also for going to that place of refreshment.

"I want you guys to celebrate with me," he explained cheerily. "Three flammers in one day is something that simply must be celebrated! We'll throw a binge for it, what do you say?"

They hesitated. A reluctant assent was on Shorty's

lips when Travis, his voice a trifle strained, put in. "Funny, but I don't know as I feel like drinking to-night. Got a few important letters to write and—"

"Me too," Shorty instantly leaped at the excuse. "I've been neglecting my correspondence too damned long!"

"But damn it, this is a special occasion!" Kirby insisted. "Come on—and just to make it worth your while, I'll blow!"

BUT even the offer of a free binge couldn't persuade Kirby's two comrades to neglect their correspondence, and at length, with a sort of good-natured defiance, Kirby snorted, "Well, have it your way then! But damned if I'll be cheated out of my celebration! Since you guys won't celebrate with me, I'll celebrate by myself!"

And he strode off determinedly, leaving them with a vague feeling of guilt, in spite of themselves. They walked slowly across the dark drome toward the barracks. Both were silent, but they might as well have been conversing, so clearly did their thoughts transmit themselves to one another. There existed between them that tacit communion which only the most intimate friends can achieve, and which enables them to remain silent for hours and yet not be bored by each other's company.

A sound of footsteps behind them caused the two Mosquitoes to turn, and in the darkness they dimly recognized the tall, slim figure of Lieutenant Brown. They paused as the dapper officer came up to them.

"Say, fellows," he began, and it was then that a hitherto unknown side of the man's nature seemed to come to the surface. There was no trace of superciliousness in his tone now, no aloof disdain or amused contempt for his fellow men. On the contrary, he seemed to go to the other extreme of humility, as if he were striving fervently to make friends with them, to have them look upon him as an equal and a man like themselves.

"I know it's none of my damned business," he was saying, "but—well, frankly, I just can't stand seeing you two being made such suckers any longer!"

Resentment flared swiftly in both Mosquitoes, and yet the genuine sincerity of Brown's tone, his obvious effort to be inoffensive, made it virtually impossible to take affront. Travis could only manage a mild challenge.

"Just what do you mean, lieutenant?"

"Look here," Brown argued his point. "I'm no fool.

I can see things clearly. And I know just how you feel. You've known Kirby so long that you just won't let yourself believe the truth, even if it's as plain as the nose on your face."

"Afraid I don't quite catch your drift," Travis lied, none too convincingly.

"Me neither," Shorty insisted. The little man shifted impatiently. "Well, I got to be getting in to write those letters. Coming, Trav?"

"Coming," Travis assented, and with a careless, "See you in the morning, lieutenant," he started off with Shorty again. But, to their surprise, Brown, who they knew was too shrewd not to understand such a crude dismissal, calmly fell into step with them.

"I'll walk you to the barracks," he said, and then repeated apologetically. "Yes, I suppose you do think me a busybody. But it's just as I said. I can't help seeing how things are, and I feel I owe it to you to tell you. Do you know what every one is saying? What they're thinking?" He did not wait for an answer, but supplied it himself. "They think Captain Kirby is making fools out of you, that he's deliberately hogging all your glory for himself. Oh, of course you'll deny it," he added with hasty anticipation, before they could flare up. "Why shouldn't you deny it, being his pals? But it's true, fellows, and everybody except the Old Man knows it. We've seen it for ourselves. Why, only the day before yesterday I was returning from a reconnaissance, and I saw three birds in a fight. I watched, not knowing whether to dive in or not. I saw Kirby knock off the two planes you had in your sights, and the rest escaped. Isn't that true?"

The three had paused now, for they had reached the barracks. Shorty and Travis were silent for a moment. Then—

"Sorry," said Travis, "but we really have to go in. So we'll be saying good-night."

This time the rough dismissal had its effect. "Guess that means I've been speaking out of turn," Brown said, almost sheepishly. "Well, I don't blame you for refusing to discuss the matter. It's a rotten situation all around." He became apologetic again. "I'm sorry if I said anything I shouldn't, and I do hope you fellows will just forget it and we'll still be the same friends. To tell the honest truth, I wouldn't have said a word but—well, I felt that in a way the thing has been partly my fault."

"Your fault?" Shorty echoed, incredulously, for at this surprising statement neither Mosquito could feign disinterest any longer. "Your fault?"

“Well, yes, in a peculiar way. You see”—Brown seemed embarrassed—“I suppose I’ve done a bit of showing-off myself around here. When I came here last week I wanted to make a good start. I pulled off a couple of spectacular stunts, you may remember. I suppose Captain Kirby felt as if—well, as if he had a sort of rival. He decided to show who was the real star ace around here, and he did, but at your expense. Hardly fair.” He broke off abruptly. “Well, I’d better not say any more or I’ll get into trouble. Remember, I’m sorry if I spoke out of turn. Good-night, fellows.” And, almost hurriedly, he strode off.

A FEW minutes later the two Mosquitoes sat on their cots, opposite one another, in the little cubicle they shared with Kirby. A dirty kerosene lamp on the rickety table furnished dim illumination, and in its pale glow the faces of the two men looked strangely jaundiced. Shorty was puffing slowly on his pipe, Travis sat with an unlighted cigarette dangling from his lips, he did not think of lighting it. For at least fifteen minutes they sat there, facing each other in silence, but again their thoughts were meeting, following one another grimly.

It was Travis who finally broke the silence.

“What do you think of this fellow Brown?”

Shorty took the pipe from his mouth and regarded it thoughtfully. “Well, I don’t know. At first I didn’t like him at all, he seemed such a conceited nob. But now—”

Travis frowned. “When he began talking to us out there, I thought he had a nerve to butt into our business, but what he said last changed my opinion. The fellow just feels kind of guilty, because he thinks that by his own showing-off he caused Kirby to—” He broke off, changed the sentence, “well, he feels he’s sort of started rivalry around here, and it bothers him.”

Shorty nodded, and they fell into silence again. Then Carn rose mechanically, went to the open window, and banged his pipe with unnecessary violence against the sill to empty its ashes into the night. Suddenly, with almost fierce abruptness, the little man wheeled around.

“Look here, Trav, what’s the use of kidding ourselves any longer? What’s the use of pretending we’re blind, deaf, and dumb?” His voice rose tensely. “You heard what Brown said. Everybody’s talking, everybody knows about it except the Old Man. What’s the use of beating around the bush when we both know damned well that Kirby is making fools—” He

stopped, and then, as if trying to shift the burden, he suddenly pointed the stem of his pipe at the lanky man on the cot. “Tell me, Trav, straight up and down, what do you think?”

Travis hesitated. “Well, to tell the truth, I don’t know what to think. Everything seems to point to what Brown says, and yet, knowing Kirby as I do, I can hardly believe—”

“But damn it, look at the facts!” Shorty urged, getting more and more worked up. “Brown comes to the squadron a week ago, does a couple of stunts, and right after that Kirby starts pulling off this funny stuff! And he brags about it, and tells the Old Man you and I missed out on account of bad luck, that we’ve really been trying!” he gave acrid emphasis to the last word. “I tell you, Trav, it’s happened once too often! It’s gone too far!” And he sat down on his cot with an air of finality.

The muscles on Travis’ face grew suddenly taut. He spoke low, but with firm decision. “You’re right, Shorty. The thing is getting to be a farce, a joke—and the joke seems to be on us. As I said, I can hardly believe it of Kirby, but the facts are too damnably plain.” He became brutally frank. “Kirby’s simply been letting us down. He’s lost his head and turned into a—”

“Better think twice before saying it, Travis!”

The two men jumped as the new voice came from the door. Both felt that unreasonable guilt that comes when you’re talking behind a person’s back, and the person suddenly appears. Kirby’s huge bulk loomed vaguely in the dim doorway. He strode into the room, and as the light from the lamp fell on his face it revealed a strange expression, almost a look of pain. He paused in the center of the room between the two cots, glancing from Shorty to Travis. They avoided his eyes. There was a strained silence. Then Shorty’s voice, a trifle husky.

“Thought you were down at Papa Renier’s, celebrating.”

Kirby laughed, a peculiar little laugh. “Thought you two were writing letters.”

A STRAINED silence fell. Kirby stood there, still looking from one to the other. Then, apropos of nothing, he said very casually, “About those planes I’ve shot down—I believe I told you how it happened?” He smiled, queerly. “I just found myself in a wonderful position, and I did what any pilot would do under the circumstances. This is war, you know, and the main idea is to get the Boche. I didn’t try to get those ships

—they just sort of came into my line of fire, and by luck, I happened to hit them. That’s the truth. Do you believe it?” Again his glance went from one cot to the other.

They were hasty in their response.

“Of course,” Shorty said, carelessly, and Travis gave a quick nod.

Kirby’s eyes suddenly flashed. “Like hell you do!” he burst out, with sudden vehemence. “Neither of you believe it at all! You’re lying, the two of you! Oh, don’t try to kid me! I might as well tell you I’ve been standing right outside this door all the time! I didn’t go to the estaminet. I’m no fool. I saw you were sour about something, and I decided to find out. I heard every word you said!”

They sat silent, but their faces were flushed with guilt.

“Maybe it wasn’t proper of me to stand out there listening,” Kirby went on, fiercely. “But then it isn’t proper to talk behind a fellow’s back either! Oh, I heard the whole thing. I’ve been letting you down, making fools out of you and—”

“Well, damn it, it’s true, isn’t it?” Shorty Carn had leaped to his feet. As often happens, his guilt had turned to a furious defiance, engendered partly by a desire to clear his conscience. The little Mosquito confronted Kirby, looking up at the taller man with eyes which fairly blazed accusal. The words poured from him in a hot torrent of uncontrolled emotion. “It’s true! Haven’t you been letting us down? Haven’t you been making fools of us? Haven’t you been stealing—”

“Steady!” Travis, the calm, stoic Travis, was on his feet too now, trying frantically to quiet the emotional Shorty. “You’re losing your head, Shorty! You’re losing—”

“Go right, on, Shorty.” Kirby’s voice was horribly calm. He was standing there, very still, but his fists were clenched so that the nails dug into his palms, and his face was drained of its color. “Go on. I want to hear the rest of it.”

“All right, then,” Shorty burst out, recklessly. “Since you ask for it you’ll get it! You’re right. We don’t believe your fantastic story about just happening to get those planes. Why should we believe it? It never happened before Brown came to the squadron! You went out for those planes deliberately! You took them from us at the very minute we were about to shoot them down! You stole the credit from us, just because of a rotten, petty jealousy—”

“Jealousy?” Kirby echoed, in the same calm voice, and now there was a ghastly smile on his lips. “Jealousy? So you really do believe I’d be jealous of that conceited, stuck-up, four-flushing snob—”

“Brown’s all right!” Shorty obstinately defended the dapper lieutenant in his fury. “The way you talk about him only shows all the more that you do feel jealous! And we’re sick of it, I tell you!” His voice rose with shrill hysteria. “We’re sick and tired of it! You’re not the Kirby we knew, and that’s all there is to it! You’ve gone back on your pals! You know what Travis was starting to say when you came in. Well, I’ll finish it. He was saying that you’re a glory grabber! A glory grabber!” he repeated, wildly. “That’s what he was saying! And it’s true, it’s damnably, hellishly true!”

He paused, gasping for breath, and then stood absolutely abashed by what he had said. Kirby had stiffened, and for a moment his huge frame seemed to tremble with rage. But then he just stood rigid, frozen, while a look of acute pain came over his features. Travis also stood very still, his face white, his lips just a tight line. Shorty looked down at the floor, overcome by a reaction of shame and remorse. The silence was ghastly. The three men held their poses like statues.

### CHAPTER III THE MOSQUITOES SPLIT

**T**HEN, AT LAST, KIRBY TURNED and walked across the room with a slow, heavy tread, as if his feet were leaden weights. He paused, standing for several seconds with his back to his two comrades. Then, slowly, he turned to face them again, and they saw that his eyes were glistening. But his face was frozen into a mask like steel, and his voice had a chill coldness that seemed almost deadly.

“Fellows,” he said slowly, “I guess you know what this means. I guess you know that the only reason we’ve gotten along so far is because nothing like this has happened. The Three Mosquitoes either had to be a perfect combination or—well, they couldn’t be the Three Mosquitoes. And they’re not a perfect combination now, with two of them thinking that the third is making fools of them.” His eyes grew hard. “Fellows, I’m going to end this thing right now. Rather

than let the Three Mosquitoes just peter out and become a big joke, we'll let them quietly disappear, so that every one will remember them for the great, three-plane combination they were! What I mean," he finished, with grim, flat finality, "is that we're going to call quits, right here and now!"

For a stunned moment Shorty and Travis both stared at their leader as if they couldn't quite believe their ears. Then—

"Call quits?" Shorty echoed, his voice scarcely audible.

"Yes, call quits." Kirby repeated, in that same, frigid tone. "Break up. Bust, split, or whatever you want to call—"

Shorty stepped forward then, impulsively. His voice shook.

"Look here, Kirby, I'm sorry as hell. I must have been crazy to—"

"No, Shorty." Strangely enough, it was Travis who checked the emotional Carn's efforts at a reconciliation. The lanky Mosquito's face had suddenly become as hard and stoic as Kirby's, and his tone held the same, flat finality. "No. Kirby's right. You might have lost your head, but you told him pretty much how things stand. And he's right. The Three Mosquitoes are, just as he says, washed out!"

And somehow his words seemed to seal the verdict, for in the silence which followed all three were appalled by that awed feeling which comes when something has died. They could not understand how it had happened, such a thing had never seemed possible. And yet, in just a few minutes of heat, the whole foundation of their friendship, which had taken them so long to build, had collapsed like a house of cards. Already they felt definitely separated; already a cold barrier seemed to divide Shorty and Travis from Kirby. They looked upon him almost as if he had become a stranger to them, and he regarded them in the same light. And when he next spoke to them his voice was coldly impersonal.

"Since we're splitting, it would sort of complicate things if we all stayed here, in the same squadron. Better for us to be apart. You agree to that, don't you?"

Shorty Carn, unable to take things as stoically as the other two, hid his feelings beneath a mask or sullenness.

"If you think so you must be right," he muttered tersely.

"All right, then. If you don't mind I'll apply for the transfer to another squadron. The fellows here seem

to be more in sympathy with you. So I'll just clear out. Okay?"

Travis nodded in silent agreement, and Shorty said sulkily, "Suits me."

"We're slated for a dawn patrol together tomorrow," Kirby went on. "So we must call it off and settle things to-night. The Old Man is probably in his office. If you'll come along, we'll see him now."

SHORTY and Travis nodded their assent, and then all filed out of the room, in somber silence. As they emerged in the corridor outside, they heard a sudden hasty rush of feet, and glimpsed several shadowy figures which ducked like guilty fugitives into the various doorways. The Mosquitoes were not surprised. The pilots who were in the barracks had naturally heard their raised voices, and curiosity had impelled them to gather outside and listen. Which only made the break between Kirby and his comrades more final and irrevocable. In no time the whole squadron would know that the Three Mosquitoes had split.

But it was Shorty and Travis, and not Kirby, who got transfers from the 44th to-night. The grizzled old C.O., at first incredulous, then outraged, and finally stunned into realization, had tried in vain to patch up the quarrel as the trio stood, rigid and tight-lipped, before his desk in the operations office. But something in their attitudes told the old colonel the truth. He knew men, and he knew that this trio was broken, that nothing could hold them together now. He needed the Three Mosquitoes more than ever, because the Germans were beginning to raise hell throughout the sector, and a coming push was rumored. But inasmuch as he couldn't keep all three of them, he was determined at least to keep the most valuable of them. Since Kirby ranked a captain, and since he had been doing most of the scoring lately—little did the C.O. realize the ironic significance of the latter point—Kirby would remain here with the squadron and take charge of a flight. As for Shorty and Travis, the C.O., using his phone for fully twenty minutes, arranged for their transfer to a squadron on the British Front, fifty miles south of there. He hurried these arrangements in deference to their natural desire to get things finished and settled. Yes, they could leave to-night if they wished.

And so now the Three Mosquitoes were back in their little cubicle again, Shorty and Travis hastily packing their duffle bags, while Kirby actually helped them, handing various belongings to them. But the

feeling of estrangement had grown stronger than ever. Their conversation was as impersonal as it was trivial.

“Is this your toothbrush, Travis? Here, take it.”

“I guess that shirt’s mine, Kirby. Thanks.” and so on.

The only emotion any of them betrayed was unreasonable impatience, as if Shorty and Travis could hardly wait to go, and Kirby could hardly wait to be rid of them. They completed their preparations with feverish haste, and when finally the bags were packed, and Shorty and Travis were ready, Kirby said shortly, “Guess I’ll be saying good-by to you here.” And then they all knew that the moment they had been dreading so coldly had come. The hardest moment of all, the actual parting. All were afraid they were not going to get through with it, and so they hesitated to begin. Shorty and Travis stood there, duffle bags bulging at their feet. Kirby, not looking at them, stood in front of them.

Then—

“Well,” Kirby suddenly spoke carelessly, though the grin on his face was a trifle sickly. “So long!”

“So long!” Travis answered, quietly.

Shorty’s lips trembled. He seemed to fight down another impulse to step forward and say something else. But then, again hiding his emotions under a guise of sullenness, he snapped out, “So long!”

AND that was all. There was no shaking of hands—they did not dare to do that. There were no histrionics, no tearful, heartrending farewells, with fervent “God bless you’s” or wishes of good luck and health. Just that brief, terse good-by in slang, after which Shorty and Travis, swinging their duffle bags over their shoulders, fairly fled from the room as fast as their staggering loads would allow them. They hurried out of the barracks, and as they emerged on the field a familiar figure all but collided with them in the darkness. Again they recognized the slim, graceful form of Lieutenant Brown.

“Why, what does this mean?” the dapper officer exclaimed with concern, as he noticed their duffle bags. “It can’t be that you’re leaving us?”

“What else does it look like?” Travis snapped at him, for he did not feel in the mood for conversation.

“But really I—why, that’s a shame!” Brown seemed quite put out. “Of course I can’t blame you after what’s happened, but still—”

“Oh, shut up, will you!” Shorty burst out, almost with a sob. And shoving the dapper lieutenant roughly

to the side, he hurried on, Travis following him. But Brown called after them, cheerfully: “Good-by, fellows! And good luck!”

Meanwhile Kirby, having closed himself in the room he had shared with his comrades, paced the floor, trying to pull his confused wits together. He knew that Shorty and Travis had walked out, walked out of his life, and yet he could hardly believe that they were really leaving. There were their cots, still mussed and impressed where they had been sitting. Surely they would come back to sleep in them, as they had always done. Surely to-morrow they would all go out together on their usual dawn patrol. The Three Mosquitoes couldn’t really be broken up! The idea was absurd, ridiculous! It—

A raucous, staccato bark shattered the night, to be followed immediately by another. The bark rose to a roar, and then the roar died to a gentle, throbbing purr. Two planes revving up! And as that throbbing continued, it seemed to blend with the throbbing of Kirby’s pulses. A look of horror and anguish came over his face. In sudden panic he leaped toward the door.

“Shorty! Travis!” The names tore from his very soul. But even then he heard the two planes roar once more, deafeningly this time. They were taking off! They were in the air! Slowly the sound of their motors died into the night, and Kirby’s hopes died with them. A sense of desolate emptiness swept him. They were gone—gone! The impossible, incredible thing was true! The Three Mosquitoes had broken up!

Kirby stood there, dazed, bewildered, wondering how on earth this terrible thing could have happened. His anguished eyes suddenly fell on an object which lay on the rickety table. He went over and picked it up. Shorty Carn had forgotten the briar pipe from which he was inseparable! Funny that he should have left it behind! Its bowl was still warm, and its bit was still moist from Shorty’s lips. It seemed to contradict the fact that by now Shorty was already miles away, roaring through the sky toward a distant drome. Slowly, almost reverently, Kirby replaced the aged briar on the table, and at that moment something seemed to snap inside of him, like thawing ice in spring. He flung himself down on his cot, and his huge body shook with racking, convulsive sobs. He dug his face into the pillow and beat the bed with clenched, futile fists. He was crying, crying like a kid.

ONE morning, three weeks later, C Flight, of the 44th Pursuit Squadron, droned smoothly through

the translucent sky, cruising deep within the German lines in search of trouble. From the tailskids of two planes, two red pennants stood stiffly in the breeze. But the sky was strangely peaceful to-day. There was a peculiar stillness in the air like a pall over the whole Front, a stillness which made the drone of motors seem unusually loud. It was like the ominous hush that comes before a storm, the awful quiet that soldiers had learned to dread far more than the roar and crackle of guns.

It would come any day now, any hour. The Big German Push! The Boche, sorely pressed, were rallying for a last desperate effort, a stupendous attack which remained their only hope of winning the war. And yet, so quietly had they made their preparations that, had it not been for the clever work of intelligence operatives, the Allies would never have guessed the magnitude of the project.

There had been none of the sinister rumblings, the advanced thunder that usually precedes a great push. And, strangest of all, the Germans had made absolutely no attempt to pick up information by airplane concerning Allied troop and artillery positions, the knowledge of which was essential if they hoped to strike a vital blow. German reconnaissance planes were never even seen on the Allied side of the lines! Instead, the Boche were using all their air power to keep Allied reconnaissance ships from spotting their own positions, and so practically all the aerial activity took place in German skies.

That was why C Flight, of the 44th Pursuit Squadron, was cruising deep within the German lines, which was the only place to hunt trouble now. And hunting trouble they were, with their eyes peeled for Jerry planes, and their twin Vickers yawning hungrily for prey. The feeling of the impending push, the unnatural stillness of the air, which even gave the sunny blue sky a sinister aspect, served to stir the Yankee flight savagely toward action, that would break the nerve-racking monotony, the awful quiet. They were keyed-up and alert, all save the very one who should have been the most alert of all, for he was their leader!

He sat hunched in the apex Spad, guiding his controls mechanically and mechanically leading the patrol which strung out from either side of his tail. His goggled face was so drawn and haggard, and his eyes, beneath which puffed dark baggy pockets, had such a haunted, bloodshot look, that few who had not seen him for the past three weeks would have

immediately recognized this flight commander as Captain Kirby, former reckless, carefree leader of the Three Mosquitoes. Gone was the eager, devil-may-care expression and the familiar, cheerful grin had disappeared as if a cruel hand had wiped it forever from his face. When he smiled now, and he rarely did, his smile was sardonic, bitter.

This was the change that three weeks had wrought in Kirby, for though it had seemed like three years, only three weeks had passed since the night when Shorty and Travis had hurried out of the barracks. He had not seen or heard from them since. They had passed out of his life. They might just as well have died.

In the beginning he had put up a bold masquerade for the rest of the squadron, acting with a carefree indifference which was sheer bravado, and consequently couldn't last long. Very soon the mask had fallen from him, leaving him sad and wistful, a lonely, tragic figure who touched the hearts of his squadron mates. They had thought at first that he deserved his fate, for they felt that Shorty and Travis had been justified. But when they saw how hard Kirby took it, their sympathy went out to him and that was what had made his misery complete and unendurable. Not a day had gone by but some well-meaning pilot had urged him to make up with his comrades. As if he could! As if his ears were not still ringing with that bitter accusation: "You're a glory grabber! A glory grabber!" As if he did not know that the shadow which had come between him and his comrades could never be dispelled by any apology or explanation. He could not make amends any more than they could!

#### CHAPTER IV COLD MEAT?

**T**HE UNWELCOME SYMPATHY of his squadron mates had wrought the third and final change in Kirby. He became sullen and silent, and wore such a forbidding scowl that the others hesitated to approach him. It was at this time that the dark, telltale pockets began to bulge beneath his eyes, and the eyes themselves became bloodshot. He had sunk to the depths, and all that was left was a certain self-contempt for letting the thing get him this way.

As for his flying, it had been all the more wretched during these past few weeks in contrast to his previous heavy scoring. Not one plane had fallen before his guns, and twice he had almost been caught napping and had missed death by a hair's breadth. As a flight commander he was not only showing less and less powers of leadership, but he was setting a terrible example. He simply couldn't seem to get adjusted.

Always, when he flew, he had a strange sense of something missing, as if an arm or leg had been amputated. Six Spads were at his back, but two Spads were not at his side, their pilots grinning across at him as he led them eagerly to battle. They were somewhere else, those two Spads, and he wondered at times whether their pilots felt that same sense of incompleteness. But at such times he cursed himself for a fool for thinking they could have taken it as hard as he did. After all, every one had thought them right, and they had each other's company, which must have been a great consolation. Furthermore, they had gone into new surroundings, where they could make a fresh start. Kirby had been left utterly alone, in the same old squadron, in the same old room. And worse yet—

He jerked his head back over the V of planes which funneled out behind him, and his eyes narrowed to slits behind their goggles as they came to rest on the right end ship of the V. He could only vaguely glimpse the goggled, helmeted head which protruded from the cockpit of that ship, but in his mind a distinct picture of the face took shape—the handsome, almost feminine features, the little trim black mustache, the supercilious smile. The Mosquito's scowl deepened, and into his eyes came a look of honest hate. Brown! Yes, he had come to hate the dapper lieutenant during these past three weeks. He could not shake off the feeling that Brown had had a lot to do with the split between him and his comrades, what with his gossipy tongue, his malicious little sarcasms.

And in a sense Brown had profited by the breaking up of the Three Mosquitoes, for he had now become the undisputed star of the squadron, the ace-high pilot. His pride had swelled with his score, and yet all but Kirby thought him justified. If he showed off a little, if he went in for spectacular stunts, the others could forgive him because he had never tried to grab their glory. He had never interfered with their fighting unless it was to save their tails from an angry Jerry whose guns would not have missed otherwise. Once he had removed a leechlike Fokker from Kirby's tail, and the Mosquito's humiliation was deepened by

the fact that he must be grateful to the man. It was ironic enough to have Brown in his flight, to be in command over the very man who had usurped his real throne. Yes, Fate had been kind to Brown. With the old Three Mosquitoes here, he could never have shone so brilliantly.

Kirby broke off from his musings with a start. For even as he glanced again at Brown's distant Spad, he saw its wings suddenly waggle. Other planes in the flight took up the signal, and a shudder seemed to pass through the whole formation as their wings rocked one after another. For the first time Kirby awoke with a shock to his surroundings—the still, sunny sky, the feeling of impending drama. The pilot behind him was pointing down and to the right. Kirby looked down there, swiftly.

ABOUT a mile to the right, and well below the formation, the empty sky had been filled, as if by magic, by three large, birdlike shapes which moved leisurely and slowly through the air. Black Maltese Crosses showed on their wings. They were German Rumplers, two-seaters. They looked like cold meat. In the days when he had led his comrades, Kirby would have leaped on them without hesitation.

The Mosquito's goggled eyes went upward, squinting as they peered toward the dazzling sun. An old and effective trick—slow-moving two-seaters for a decoy, and a deadly formation of Fokkers lurking in the blinding orb above. Of course there might not be any Fokkers there; Kirby could not see. But he was not going to take any chances with the whole flight. Couldn't risk his men this way, he told himself, or rather argued with himself, for something deep inside of him told him that it was not the risk which made him hesitate. It was the strange feeling of inadequacy that had come with the loss of confidence, and that made him afraid of responsibility.

He turned to glance back at the flight waiting eagerly for his signal, burning to plunge into battle. Firmly he shook his head, waved "No." Then, without looking to see their reaction, he swung his Spad around and headed deliberately for home; and as he banked he felt the formation banking with him. They were probably cursing him, but they had no alternative but to obey. And Kirby led them homeward, fighting the unreasonable shame in his heart.

"Couldn't risk the flight," he repeated aloud, almost fiercely. "Probably a decoy!"

There must have been some of the old flying

leader's instinct left, for after going just a little ways the feeling came to him that all six planes were not behind him. He glanced back, and his first glance confirmed the feeling—the right-end plane was missing! Kirby's eyes scanned the sky beyond. A sudden black oath ripped from his throat.

Far behind now, and still off to the right, the three Rumplers were cruising on, in serene oblivion. But out of the blue above them, plunging straight down upon them, diving like a streak with black smoke trailing from its exhausts, was a lone Spad! Even as Kirby looked, its guns began to spit the smoky streams of tracer, and in the next second, while the surprised Rumplers half-rolled confusedly to the defense, the Spad was weaving in and out among them like a mad hornet, its guns blazing! Brown had attacked alone where Kirby had refused to attack with a whole flight!

"The damned fool!" Kirby grated, through clenched teeth. "The conceited show-off! He'll kill himself!"

He waved a frantic signal to the rest of the flight, and they all swung around after him and, at full-throttle, raced eagerly toward the scene of the fray. Brown was still twisting madly among the three Rumplers, and as yet the destruction which Kirby had expected to see rain down from above had not appeared. Yet Brown was in frightful enough danger, trying to fight three Rumplers.

Kirby gasped, as he corrected the count. Two Rumplers now—for one of them was twisting earthward in a trail of dense black smoke! And before Kirby and the rest of the flight were even overhead of the scene, there took place the most amazing exhibition they had ever witnessed. In the space of a few breathless seconds, turning on one and then the other, Brown accounted for both remaining Rumplers! It was incredible, humanly impossible, and yet there were the two German ships, spinning down one after the other and—what was even more remarkable—both of them were flamers too, leaving oily wakes of black smoke! And Brown's Spad was climbing like an exultant, victorious bird, climbing back to join the flight. He had not only pulled off an impossible stunt, perhaps the most spectacular aerial feat of the war, but he had also made an utter ass out of Kirby, by doing single-handed what Kirby had not dared to attempt with a whole flight. There had been no lurking Fokkers in the sun after all.

SOON afterward the planes of C Flight were filing onto the 44th's drome and taxiing to a stop. As Kirby

climbed slowly from his ship he immediately caught sight of Brown, smiling and debonair in the midst of a ring of pilots who congratulated him warmly for his extraordinary feat. The dapper lieutenant suddenly saw Kirby and, breaking away from the others, he approached the Mosquito. Kirby tried hard to suppress his feelings toward the man. After all, he had to admit that Brown was a remarkable flyer.

"Congratulations!" he managed to make his tone sound sincere. Then he frowned. "But without meaning to be a wet blanket, Brown, I must remind you that it's strictly against orders to leave the formation the way you did."

Brown's smile seemed more bland than ever. "Ah yes, so it is," he murmured, as if recalling some dim and distant story. "But I believe the orders also say that we should get all the Boche planes we can?" He put it in the form of a mild query, raising his brows. "I felt that, since you refused to attack those Rumplers for no apparent reason, it was my duty—"

Kirby scowled. "Well, hereafter stick to the flight! Those planes looked like a decoy, and I wasn't taking any chances!"

Brown shrugged. "I always thought the main idea of war was to take chances," was his final comment, as he strode off, still smiling. Kirby glared after him. Why did Brown always succeed in making him so furious? What was it about the man that seemed always to rouse his blood? Was he really jealous of Brown, as his comrades had accused him of being? "No!" he told himself, fiercely. "I'm not jealous of him, damn it! It's just his way that gets me—his gloating, superior way!"

About half an hour later, after slipping out of his teddy-bear and washing up, Kirby went to the operations office to make his daily report. As he approached the unobtrusive shack a familiar figure emerged from the doorway. Brown had been there already. He must have gone there immediately after leaving Kirby, for he was still in his flying togs. The slim lieutenant merely nodded to Kirby as he passed, but on his face was an expression that was almost beatific, a look of exultant triumph which Kirby did not miss. The Mosquito, full of grim misgivings, entered the shack. The C.O. glanced up from the desk, and the instant he saw Kirby his grizzled face hardened into a mask like steel, and his eyes narrowed.

"Kirby," his voice was harsh, "I have just heard a full report of all that took place this morning. And your failure to attack those Rumplers, which were obviously cold meat, has forced me to take the action

I have been hoping would not be necessary.” His tone softened momentarily. “I’m sorry, Kirby. I’ve tried to give you every chance to pull yourself together and get back on your feet. But you’ve fallen down completely. You’ve been a poor flight commander, and a poor, flyer as well. If it wasn’t for your past record, you’d be fired right out of here. A kiwi could do better than you have.”

Kirby’s face twitched, and his lips began to work: “But sir, I’ve been try ing. I’ve—”

The old colonel’s piercing eyes bored into those of the Mosquito. “Kirby, you know you’re not used to drinking! I’ve warned you again and again!”

Kirby averted his eyes from the other’s accusing gaze. Involuntarily he bowed his head, and looked gloomily at the floor. The C.O.’s voice held no mercy. “Kirby, I regret to inform you that you are relieved of your command of C Flight, though you will continue to fly with that unit.” He paused a moment before adding, “The command goes to Brown.”

The Mosquito’s head came up with a jerk. “What?” he jerked, a flush mounting in his haggard face. “Lieutenant Brown commanding—”

“Captain Brown,” the C.O. corrected slowly. “His commission has gone through, and you must admit that his extraordinary showing to-day proves he is entitled to it.”

KIRBY was crushed. But the C.O.’s harsh voice went right on, relentlessly. “And that is not all I have to tell you. We have just received information that the Germans start their push to-morrow noon. They are going to launch a tremendous attack, and they are evidently well-prepared. The blow falls on this sector, our weakest point. It is almost uncanny that the Germans should know just where to strike, for their reconnaissance planes, as you are aware, have not been coming over here at all. But they have their information, and the attack is coming!”

Kirby tried to display an interest he hardly felt. “And can’t the Allies do anything to check it?” he asked.

The C.O.’s face was grim. “Our only hope is to delay the German attack long enough for us to get reinforcements here. Then we can check them with a counter-offensive. And that brings me to the point.” He picked up a paper from his desk, and his face looked more relentless and hard than ever. “Kirby, I want you to read this! I want you to see it for yourself!”

Kirby took the paper—

*To: Officer in command 44th U.S. Aero Pursuit Squadron.*

*The destruction of the German railway junction at Brenne, forty miles within the enemy lines, will mean the defeat of the German advance. It is estimated that one plane might get through unnoticed and by flying low, cripple the junction with bombs so that the passage of enemy troop and supply trains will be delayed. The trains are scheduled to come through at seven a.m. to-morrow. If the junction is crippled any time within two hours before that, the Germans will not be able to get through before our own reinforcements reach the Front.*

*The assignment falls to your squadron, it being in the sector. You will naturally entrust the mission to one of your ablest and most responsible flyers. Captain Kirby is suggested.*

*G.H.Q. Through: Brigadier General Saunders.*

As Kirby read the last words of the message a gleam came into his bloodshot eyes, and a spark of his old, reckless self seemed to kindle at last. Handing the paper back to the C.O., he leaned forward, pitifully eager. “Colonel, it’s my chance to make good! It’s my chance to square my self, to show—” And then he stopped, frozen by the genuine sneer on the colonel’s face.

“You fool!” the C.O. spoke in withering contempt. “Do you think G.H.Q. knows what condition you’re in? Do you think I have let them know, or let any one else know how low you’ve fallen? If they had the slightest inkling they would never have suggested you! You noticed what they said: ‘one of your ablest and most responsible flyers.’ Three weeks ago the job would have been yours without question, and your two comrades might even have gone with you. But now—” he laughed, with acrid mirth, “do you think I’d dare to place such a responsibility on the shoulders of a man who can’t even hold the responsibility of commanding a flight? Credit me with some discretion!” Again his voice came harsh, relentless. “You have no more chance of going on this mission, Kirby, than the newest kiwi out of a training school! And I guess you know whom I have picked to go!”

Kirby’s lips moved. “Lieutenant Brown!”

“Captain Brown!” the C.O. cruelly corrected again. And Kirby, his face twisted with despair and frustration, stood slouched, broken. A vision of Brown emerging from the shack with that triumphant expression on his face rose again before the Mosquito, tormenting him. No wonder Brown had been triumphant! It was his big day all right! A commission, the command of a flight, and now—

“Yes, I’ve picked Brown,” the C.O. conceded. “His

work to-day fully qualified him for the momentous job. Besides he knows that junction. He did a reconnaissance over that territory just a few days ago, and he says the place isn't any too well fortified; that it won't be a difficult job at all. But he'll get a D.S.C. for it at least, for being the one man who stopped the German advance. An enviable honor, and one which—"

"Stop, damn you!" Kirby burst out uncontrollably, in a shaking voice. "Must you rub it in like this? Isn't it bad enough? I won't stand—"

His voice trailed off into incoherent sobs, and he stood there his shoulders heaving pitifully.

## CHAPTER V "BOTTOMS UP!"

**T**HEN, STRANGELY ENOUGH, the C.O.'s grim face broke into a smile, a queer smile. "Ah, so it's gone home, has it?" His voice was almost kindly now.

"Well, I'm glad it's gone home, Kirby. It was meant to. It was meant to wake you up, to make you realize you've got to pull yourself together. Oh, I know what you are and what you can do—and so do you. It's too bad you had to break with your comrades, but there's no reason why you can't stand on your own two feet. You're a man, aren't you?" He rose, walked over to the crestfallen pilot, and placed a gentle hand on the Mosquito's shoulder.

"Kirby, during this push there will be lots of opportunities for you, perhaps not as big as this one, but big enough. Now when Brown returns to-morrow morning he'll take C Flight out, and all the rest of the squadron will go too, for a big aerial offensive to accompany our counter-offensive on the ground. I want you to fight to-morrow, Kirby. I want you to show your old fighting spirit. Now, buck up! You've got to make a comeback!"

The words had their effect. Slowly, Kirby straightened up. He wiped his tear-wet face with the back of his sleeve, snuffed a few times, and then his eyes met those of the colonel. A bit of the old determination came upon his features.

"Colonel," he faltered, "I—I guess you're right! And I'll try, I promise you! It's hell to think of Brown going

on that show instead of me, but I suppose it's my own fault. I'll try for that comeback, sir!"

Nevertheless, when evening came, sheer habit guided Kirby's steps to the estaminet of Papa Renier. The musty old cafe, with its inevitable smell of wine and onions, though whence the latter odor emanated was always a mystery, was unusually crowded to-night, with flushed young pilots binging in honor of the coming push. To-morrow they would go out in their frail craft to face danger and death; to-night they celebrated with the usual eat-drink-and-be-merry abandon. And perhaps not more than twenty miles away, across the lines, German flyers were doing the same thing, glorying in their *Biertrinkenverein*.

Kirby slouched up to the bar with his usual preoccupied manner, his scowl causing the other pilots to refrain from conversing with him. Not until he was leaning over the wine-stained counter did the Mosquito suddenly remember the good resolutions he had made in a burst of sentimentality this morning. Papa Renier, the rubicund, apple-cheeked little French proprietor, had already bounced up in front of him. The Frenchman was wearing his most obsequious "customer's smile," for from Kirby he had collected many francs indeed during the past three weeks.

The Mosquito hesitated. After all, the C.O. was right. He ought to pull himself together. What if his comrades weren't here? Damn it, he must get along without them. And the first thing to do was to stop ruining his system with alcohol. His jaw set firmly, and to Papa Renier's unhappy surprise, he turned resolutely from the bar, whereupon he found himself face to face with Big Pete Braddock, the jovial giant who commanded A Flight. Pete's big, simple face broke in a wide grin.

"Hello, Kirby, old boy!" he boomed, amiably. "I've got some news for you!" His eyes twinkled like a mischievous kid's. "I stopped in at the 69th to-day on my way back from leave."

FOR a second Kirby seemed to stiffen in every fibre, but then his face resumed its usual sullen scowl. "Yeah?" he grunted, indifferently.

"Sure thing! And guess who I saw!"

"No idea," Kirby muttered.

"Don't be a dope!" Peter was a naive soul. "You know who's in that outfit. I saw your two buddies—Shorty and Travis!"

"Yeah?" Kirby grunted again. But then, involuntarily, his hand suddenly clutched Braddock's

sleeve, and his voice was pitiful in its suppressed eagerness: "H-how are they?"

Pete frowned. "Not so good, if you ask me. They look like hell, and their work has been pretty lousy. They asked after you, by the way."

"Did they?" Again that pathetic attempt to suppress his eagerness.

"Told 'em you were not so good either, and that you missed them like the devil."

"That's a lie!" Kirby burst out so savagely that Pete recoiled in alarm. "You damned ass, what right have you to go around telling—"

"But look here, Kirby," Pete rallied to the defense, "you know it's true. And why in hell don't you try to patch it up with them?" he almost pleaded. "I broached the idea to them, and while they didn't exactly cater to it, I'll bet they'd be willing to listen to reason. All that burns them is that you grabbed off some planes which—"

He stopped, for Kirby was no longer listening. Instead the Mosquito was pounding the bar with a violent fist, and yelling in accompaniment, "Hey, you old Frog, get a move on! Where's that cognac?"

Papa Renier was flustered. "But, deed you ask for cognac, monsieur? I deed not hear—"

"Of course I asked for it, you doddering idiot! Bring it toot sweet!" The Frenchman hastened to produce a bottle and a thousand humble apologies as well. Kirby poured himself out a great tumblerful. "Come on, everybody!" he invited, and recklessly tossed upon the counter a pile of francs which almost made Papa Renier's eyes pop out of his head. "Fill 'em up! Drinks are on me and no reneging! Let's go!" He laughed wildly, uproariously. The other pilots, dumfounded by his sudden geniality, nevertheless had the presence of mind hastily to accept the invitation. Kirby raised his glass.

"Bottoms up!" he yelled, and to Pete Braddock's horror, he drained the whole tumblerful in one gulp and immediately refilled it. Pete, who drank very little, merely took one small shot and then walked away, shaking his head sadly. Kirby was a little too much for his simple mind. Crazy, plumb crazy, the fellow seemed to him.

Kirby bought another round, then another. A flush began to mount in his haggard face, and the blessed, numbing forgetfulness that alcohol brings was enveloping him. And then the door opened, and the slim, tall figure of Brown entered the cafe. Immediately the effect of the liquor seemed to leave Kirby, and his

eyes narrowed to slits. Brown was more debonair and cheerful than ever.

"Hello, everybody!" he said airily, as he walked toward the crowded bar. "Way for a drinker!" And whether by chance or on purpose, he drew up right alongside of Kirby. The Mosquito ignored him, but his scowl deepened perceptibly.

"THIS round's on me!" Brown was insisting, and next to Kirby's pile of francs he laid one that was even larger. Papa Renier began to think he was dreaming, and so did the other pilots. First Kirby, and now Brown! Brown, who was usually so snobbish, had suddenly become democratic! It was a night of miracles indeed?

Brown suddenly smiled at Kirby. "I see you have a head start on me, Captain Kirby. But if you'll give me time to catch up to you, I'll wager I can drink you under the table."

His tone was light and jocular, but it was a challenge nevertheless. A sudden, insane desire to see Brown get cockeyed drunk overcame Kirby. It was almost as if he wished something would happen to spoil Brown's triumph, to prevent him from going on that mission tomorrow! Jealousy? No, he told himself again. It was just that somehow he felt Brown wasn't entitled to all the breaks he had been getting. He turned to the debonair officer, and grinned, sardonically.

"I'd like to see you drink me under any table!" he snorted, and was just enough under the influence to add, contemptuously, "A girlish-looking guy like you!"

Brown laughed, good-naturedly. "We'll see about that," he said. "And I don't care if it takes all night. Why turn in, when I'd only have to tear myself out of bed at dawn? Easier to stay up. I've got all my maps and stuff with me anyway." He patted the breast of his tunic, where there was a slight bulge. "Well, now let me catch up to you, and we'll be off," he said, filling a tumbler and tossing it down with amazing ease. In a few minutes he had consumed as much as Kirby, and the bout was on! The other pilots watched it with interest, some, of them even drinking in accompaniment. Glass after glass was drained by Kirby and Brown, and after each one they looked at one another, Kirby scowling, Brown smiling and saying "Have another?"

But drinking bouts are mildly exciting at best, and soon the interest of the other pilots waned, and they grew tired of watching. Only Kirby and Brown seemed to take the thing really seriously. It was as if a duel of some kind were going on between them, a duel that

was far more ugly and sinister than it seemed. The night deepened, the other pilots began to yawn, and then commenced to drift out to home and bed. One after another they left, while Brown and Kirby still stood at the bar, drinking away. And at last all the others were gone, and the two contestants were alone, with Papa Renier only unobtrusively present as he kept bringing them drinks. And they turned to each other again, and Brown smiled, "Have another?"

"Damn right I will!" Kirby growled, though his eyes were a trifle bleared by now, and he was leaning rather heavily against the bar—whereas Brown stood upright, unsupported, and his eyes were as clear as ever. "Fill 'em up!"

They drained their glasses again. A few more rounds and Papa Renier, gloomy and sad because Morpheus had at last won over Mammon, and he was too sleepy to stand by any longer, confronted them, apologetically. "I am ver' sorree, *messieurs!* But eet ees ze time to close ze cafe! You weel 'ave to leave now!"

Kirby spoke thickly. "Well, I guess that calls it off, Brown." He faced the other officer triumphantly. "And I'm not under any—*hic*—table yet!"

Brown's smile mocked him. "No, but the night is still young!" He turned to Papa Renier and addressed the proprietor in his flawless French. "You can go to bed, Papa. *C'est bien.* We will behave like gentlemen if you just leave plenty of cognac around. *Bien?*"

"But, *monsieur,*" the Frenchman protested, "I cannot permit—" He stopped, an oily smile suffusing his round face as he saw the new roll of francs, the fattest roll of all, appear in Brown's hands. With humble servitude, Papa Renier took the money. He beamed, he glowed. "*Messieurs,* I beg ze pardon! Ze estableeshment eez at your disposal! Ze cognac you weel find in ze closet." He pointed. Then, coming out from behind the counter, he bowed pompously. "*Bon soir, messieurs!*" And he went bouncing up the stairs, leaving them alone in the dim barroom.

"SAY," Kirby started again, the pangs of conscience bothering him in spite of himself, "it's getting pretty—*hic*—late. Don't you think we'd better—"

"Ah, so you give up, eh?" Brown taunted. "You can't go on? Well, all right—"

"The hell you say!" Kirby burst out, defiantly. "Who gives up? I'll drink twice as much as you any time!" He wagged a finger emphatically. "Any time attall!"

"Very well," said Brown, and smiled pleasantly. "Have another?"

"Sure! Sure!" And they resumed.

The night dragged on, and still the bout continued. It was getting close to daybreak now. Kirby was beginning to feel dizzy, and the room seemed to be rocking as if it were a ship at sea. He had to cling to the bar to keep from being thrown off his balance. He wished he could go to one of the tables and sit down. But that would have practically been an acknowledgement of defeat. For Brown was standing perfectly straight and steady, without even leaning against the bar. The man was apparently hollow; he could drink like a fish. The liquor seemed to have no effect on him. And now again his bland smile seemed to mock Kirby. "Have another?"

"Damn right—le's have another!" Kirby poured half the contents of the bottle on the counter before he managed to fill his glass. He drank it down quickly, no longer able to taste it. He was getting cockeyed. And Brown was not. The thought maddened him. Brown was beating him out again as he had beaten him out in everything else! Brown was making a fool of him once more! Through a dim haze he saw that smiling, haughty face, it seemed to float toward him mockingly. "Have another?" He felt an almost uncontrollable desire to bash in those pretty features. Now the face was here again. It was going to say "Have another?" as always. But no, it was saying something else now! And the tone sounded different from usual. It was friendly, patronizing. Vaguely, Kirby listened.

"Look here, Captain Kirby." Again that other side of the man's nature which Shorty and Travis had seen seemed to come to the surface. "I know you bear me a sort of grudge, and I really wish we could be friends! What do you say?"

"Aw, go to hell!" Kirby growled wearily, as he leaned even more heavily against the bar. But the voice went on, irritating him like some buzzing insect in his ear. "Look here, when your two buddies first got sore at you, I thought they were justified. But now I think they carried the thing too far. If they had been real pals they never would have left you like this. It was a dirty trick, and I know just how you feel about it! They're just a couple of low skunks to—"

It happened in a flash. With amazing rapidity for one so full of liquor, Kirby sent his left fist crashing forth in a mighty hook, behind which he put his whole body. Flush on the side of Brown's jaw the blow landed, and Kirby felt a savage pleasure at the contact. He had bashed that pretty face at last! With a cry Brown went reeling backward and sprawled to

the floor. And Kirby, rage having cleared the fog from him and restored equilibrium to his muscles, glowered down at the other man with blazing eyes.

“You dirty, low-down hypocrite!” the Mosquito spoke through clenched teeth. “You—who helped to break us up! Call my buddies skunks, will you?” His voice rose with blighting malice. “I’ll make you eat those words! Come on! Get up and fight if you’ve got any guts! Come on!”

But Brown needed no such urging. Having recovered from the stunning effects of the blow, the bland officer suddenly displayed a temper that was surprisingly ferocious. His face livid, he struggled, snarling, to his feet, and then came at Kirby with a rush.

## CHAPTER VI “MEURTRE!”

**T**HE MOSQUITO WAS ALMOST BOWLED over by the overwhelming force of Brown’s attack. He had never expected to find such strength in the slim, dapper fellow. Brown was evidently the wiry type who is far tougher than he looks. Also he was a clever boxer, where Kirby was only a slugger and knew none of the finer points of the game. Snarling, panting, the two men fought in the dim barroom.

Brown was soon tying up Kirby’s arms, blocking his punches, and worrying the Mosquito with short, telling jabs to the face. But Kirby did not feel the blows. His fighting blood was thoroughly roused now, and he fought like a wild, primitive beast. A sudden violent jerk freed his arms, and again his fist crashed out like a ball of iron. And again Brown went sprawling to the floor, a thin trickle of blood oozing from a corner of his cut lips now. The sight of that blood seemed to rouse in Kirby a savage lust for more.

“Come on!” he taunted, with fierce eagerness. “Come on and take the beating you deserve, you dirty dog!” He laughed, contemptuously. “You think I didn’t have your number all along? You think I didn’t know that you’re just a lousy hypocrite, a dirty—”

He stopped, frozen with astonished horror, for, with an unintelligible snarl of insane rage, the man on the floor had whipped the Colt automatic from his holster!

“Hey!” Kirby yelled, in wild alarm. “Put that gun—”  
*Crack!* The shrill report crashed through the empty estaminet as flame spat from the muzzle of the revolver. A hot slug seared Kirby’s cheek as it whined past to embed itself in the wall behind him. Only the fact that Brown had fired while struggling to his feet had spoiled the aim! And now, having gotten his balance, Brown was aiming again, and in his eyes was a light of hell, the light of a killer! He meant to kill Kirby! Even now the black muzzle of his gun loomed right in front of Kirby’s face, looking as large as the mouth of a cannon. Brown’s fingers tightened on the trigger.

*Crack!* Again the estaminet reverberated with the crashing report. But this time it had not come from Brown’s revolver. The fastest draw in the service, sheer instinct had saved Kirby even while alcohol numbed his faculties. And in that last split second he had drawn his own Colt, firing as he drew—firing as he would fire at a charging lion!

A strange, choking sound came from Brown’s throat. The Colt went flying out of his hand, and the hand clutched convulsively at his chest. He staggered forward a few steps, his face hideously contorted. Then he fell face downward, and lay where he had fallen.

Dazed and shaken, Kirby stood there, staring, while the gun dangled limply from his hand, a thin wisp of acrid smoke still curling insidiously from its barrel.

Then, moving as if in a trance, he sheathed the revolver and stumbled to the inert figure on the floor. He stooped down, and as he looked his eyes slowly widened with horror and terror. The shock sobered him so completely that he could suddenly see the dim barroom in all its details; every object stood out with vivid clarity. He rose, shaking.

“God!” he croaked, hoarsely. “I couldn’t help it! He would have killed me! It was self-defense!”

Even then he heard footsteps from the floor above. Papa Renier had been roused by the shots! He had gotten out of bed, and he was coming down! Kirby would be caught like a rat! In a flash of hideous clear-sightedness, the Mosquito realized the damning evidence that was piled against him. He had killed Brown—Brown whom every one knew he hated, Brown who had usurped his place in the squadron.

Why should they believe he had done it in self-defense?

PAPA RENIER could testify that when he had last seen them, though both had been drinking considerably,

Kirby was drunk where Brown was not. Wasn't it logical to assume that Kirby, in a drunken fit of jealous rage, had turned on Brown and shot him? As for the shot Brown had fired, that had been his vain attempt to save himself from the mad drunkard's bullets!

All this Kirby saw clearly, as he heard those footsteps above. Now they were on the stairs. God, what could he do? A vision rose before him, a vision of a squad of soldiers with leveled rifles, into whose dark muzzles he was staring. The firing squad! The last possible degradation! He had sunk to the very bottom! A drunkard—and now, to all appearances, a murderer! What a finish, what a ghastly, rotten finish for the former leader of the Three Mosquitoes!

Papa Renier appeared. The stairs shook as the rotund little Frenchman came clattering down, looking more ludicrous than ever in a nightgown and nightcap. In one startled glance he saw the gruesome scene in the barroom. His eyes bulged with horror. His voice rose in a shrill cry of alarm.

*"Meurtre! Meurt—"* And the cry froze on his lips as Kirby's Colt whipped out to cover him, menacingly.

The Mosquito's eyes were ominous slits. His voice was as hard as the steel revolver with which he backed his words. "One more peep out of you," he snarled, "and I'll pump you like a rat! Now come down here with your hands up and your back against that wall! And keep your mouth shut!"

He knew that he was only further incriminating himself, only building up more damning evidence against himself, but he could not help it. He must have time to think! Papa Renier, trembling from head to foot now, meekly obeyed his commands. With his hands stretched upward as if he wanted to reach the ceiling, the fat little Frenchman came down and shrank against the wall, away from that menacing Colt. Kirby, keeping him covered, tried to gather his own confused wits. A vague thought was struggling to take shape in his mind, something he was trying to recall, to remember. Some disconnected mental association prompted him to glance at his wrist-watch. The hands pointed to ten minutes to five. Outside day was breaking. And then it came to him, and in his mind he saw once more the words of that message from G.H.Q. which he had read in the C.O.'s office: "The trains are scheduled to come through at seven a.m. If the junction is crippled any time within two hours before—" Two hours, and only fifteen minutes margin before then! Two hours in which the German push must be checked and the man who was entrusted to

check it lay on the floor of this estaminet with a bullet through his heart!

And then, slowly, a defiant, reckless gleam came into Kirby's eyes, and his features set with a determination he had not felt since the days when he was his old self, the reckless, flying daredevil whom no odds could stop. Firing squad? His teeth clenched fiercely. Not for him! There was another way, a cleaner way! A way that would leave no debts behind him, and that would more than atone for his killing of Brown! By God, he'd do it and nothing on earth was going to stop him either!

The decision stirred him savagely to action. He began to work with that lightning rapidity which only desperate men can attain. Still menacing the cowering Frenchman with his revolver, he leaped to the prostrate figure on the floor, and though the task was loathsome to him, rolled the dead man over. Swiftly he unbuttoned the tunic, and his hand reached beneath it. The maps—Brown had said they were here. As his fingers groped beneath the tunic, he heard a sudden approach of heavy footsteps right outside the estaminet, and the shouting of husky voices. Men were coming! Either they had been attracted by the sound of the shots or Papa Renier's cry, or someone else had heard the noise and fetched them!

DAMN it, where were those maps? His groping fingers found the bulky roll at last, and he pulled it out, pocketing it as he leaped to his feet. At the same instant the door burst open, and three burly M.P.s came in, swinging their clubs as if anticipating trouble. Kirby was trapped! He glanced all about furtively, like a cornered animal. His frantic eye suddenly fell upon the French window on the other side of the room. He dashed toward it madly.

By this time Papa Renier, no longer menaced, had found his voice again and was screaming in French and pointing. The M.P.s saw the body on the floor and then saw Kirby in the act of swinging open the window. They shouted at him as they rushed to stop him, drawing their revolvers. But before they reached the window, Kirby, with a berserk yell, had leaped through it like an agile monkey.

The eery light of dawn was just stealing over the sleeping village, and there was a chill mist in the air. The Mosquito, on legs no longer unsteady from liquor, went dashing down the deserted street. He did not look back, but he heard pursuing feet behind him, and repeated shouts. He doubled his efforts. *Crack!* A revolver barked, and a bullet shrilled warningly over

his head. He darted madly around a corner, out of their path for the moment. A dark doorway offered shelter. He ducked into it, crouching as still as death. Presently the three M.P.s panted by, still in hot pursuit. Kirby waited until they were out of sight. Then he came put of his hiding place and, taking an entirely different direction, headed for the outskirts of the town and the drome! Of course the M.P.s would go there themselves sooner or later, for even if they had not identified Brown or Kirby, they knew the two were aviators and that there was only one drome in the vicinity. But for the time being, and Kirby prayed that it would be a long time, the M.P.s were fully occupied with their pursuit of the Mosquito, and the drome would be the last place they'd expect him to go since he was obviously fleeing! He had a chance, a fleeting chance at least! Again his teeth gritted as he ran on. Let them try and stop him!

By the time he had reached the drome he was gasping for breath, and perspiring freely despite the chill dawn air. The big drome had a hushed, quiet atmosphere which told him that the men were all still asleep. But out on the tarmac, in the misty light, a lone Spad was squatting on the deadline like some ghostly bird. Kirby knew at once that it was Brown's ship, being made ready. The Mosquito hurried right to it. He found Brown's mechanic at work, tightening wires, looking over the motor. The grease-monkey saw Kirby and stiffened to salute respectfully.

"Good mornin', Cap'n Kirby," he grinned his recognition; and then his eyes showed surprise. "But what brings you up so early, sir?"

Kirby had been banking heavily on one fact. Brown's mechanic was an old-timer, and in the past he had been attached at different times to Kirby's plane and Shorty Carn's. He worshipped all three Mosquitoes with that peculiar hero-worship which mechanics often feel toward the men who fly the ships they themselves only prepare for flight. And being a man of simple nature, he was not apt to change his feelings. Long ago he had formed his opinion of Kirby, and the opinion stuck—even while the rest of the squadron was giving the Mosquito up for lost. To this mechanic Kirby would always remain a hero, a true knight of the blue. And it was on this that Kirby placed all his hopes. He addressed the man with that intimacy which subtly disposes of all differences in rank.

"Look here, Saunders, you've got to help me out for old times' sake. I'm taking Brown's place, but I want to do it on the Q.T. Savvy?"

Saunders was a bit startled. "But, cap'n, won't Brown come and—"

Kirby's voice was grim. "You needn't worry, Brown won't show up!" He couldn't conceal his feverish impatience any longer. "Now I've got to hurry, Saunders. You'll have to see me through! Okay?"

SAUNDERS capitulated, grinning. "I guess you know me, cap'n!" And he looked at Kirby with what was meant to be understanding, but wasn't, because he never dreamed of what had really taken place. "I never did like that guy Brown anyway," he said, and then added anxiously, "But look here, cap'n, how are you gonna woik it? The Old Man will be up to see Brown off! Soon as he hears the motor revvin', he'll come out!"

Kirby cursed. "Well, we'll have to manage it somehow," he said. "Now, is everything ready?" He glanced at the ship. The bomb-racks were full—eight small but deadly-looking missiles of steel were tucked snugly beneath the Spad's belly. Kirby regarded them with satisfaction. "Gas and oil okay?"

"Tanks extra full," the mechanic replied. "Enough gas to keep you in the air four hours."

A peculiar look came over Kirby's features. "Good! The longer she'll stay up the better! I want my fun to last awhile before I—" He broke off, and then hastily got back to business. "Now listen, Saunders, I want you to do a little errand for me first. Get my flying togs. I'd get 'em myself, only I don't want to take any chance of being seen and questioned. If they see you, you can pretend you're doing some errand for Brown. Understand?"

"I getcha, cap'n!" And Saunders hurried off to the barracks. It was growing lighter now, and the sun was a red disc behind the camouflaged hangars. Its first streaming rays were already dispelling the mist. Kirby reached in his pockets, fished out a small pad and a pencil, and scribbled hastily, "To the C.O.—" Quickly he finished the message, tore it off, and folded it. Then, on a new sheet, with a look of pain twisting his face, he started, "To Shorty Carn and Travis—" But there he paused, groping for words he could not find, for thoughts he could not express. While he was still struggling mentally, Saunders came rushing up with his flying togs. There was no more time to spare. Kirby dropped the idea of writing the second message, and pocketed the pad. But the message he had already written and folded he handed to Saunders. "Don't give this to the Old Man until I'm safely in the air,"

he instructed, and then hastily slipped into his teddy-bear. He plopped the helmet on his head, and climbed into the cockpit of the Spad. "All right!" he called.

"Start her up, Saunders!"

Saunders hesitated. "But when the C.O. hears the motor—"

"Start her up!" Kirby snapped, his patience at end; and without further question Saunders seized the prop and pulled it through compression.

"Contact!"

"Switch on!"

There was a series of deafening detonations which seemed loud enough to rouse the dead. Saunders leaped aside as the propeller whirled from his grasp. Kirby frantically killed the throttle as soon as he could, and the roar died to a purr. The Mosquito waited in mad impatience and nerve-racking suspense. He had to give the motor time to warm.

And it was not yet warm when a cry of alarm broke from Saunders: "Cheese it, the Old Man's coming!"

Sure enough, Kirby glimpsed the stocky figure of the C.O., emerging from the barracks. The colonel started walking briskly across the field. Kirby waited, waited though every nerve in his body cried at him to go, waited while the engine still revved up, and the C.O. came closer and closer. The Mosquito had pulled down his goggles and strapped his helmet now, so recognition from any distance would be impossible. He kept waiting. The C.O. was almost up to the plane now, still walking briskly. And then Kirby leaned down and spoke to Saunders, who was standing and fidgeting helplessly beside the fuselage: "All right, Saunders! As soon as I let go, pull those chocks! Hurry!" Then he grinned, warmly. "So long, Saunders!" He reached out to pat the mechanic's shoulders. "You're a damned good scout, old man!"

## CHAPTER VII DEAD MAN'S PAPERS

**S**O LONG, CAP'N—an' happy landings!" Saunders returned, more than puzzled by the strange finality in Kirby's tone. He rushed to the chocks. And even as the C.O. came right up, Kirby pulled the throttle-lever wide open, and the

engine split the air with its deafening blast. Saunders instantly jerked the chocks from the wheels, and the Spad roared forward, went bounding out across the field. The C.O., drawing to a sudden astonished halt, watched it with a blank expression on his grizzled features. He couldn't understand why Brown was taking off without waiting for his final instructions! The Spad was still roaring down the field, faster and faster, and yet reluctant to leave the ground because of the extra heavy load of bombs. For a while it looked as if the trees at the other end of the field would fatally block it, but then, with sudden abruptness, the wheels of the little plane lifted, spurned the tree-tops by scant inches and the Spad was climbing into the hazy sky, climbing toward the rising sun, toward Hunland! The C.O. kept staring after it dumbly as it faded slowly into a distant speck in the haze, the roar of its motor rapidly decreasing.

The C.O. moved at last. He wheeled furiously upon Saunders, who also stood staring after the disappearing Spad.

"Why in hell didn't he wait?" the colonel demanded. "He knew I wanted to see him off!"

Saunders shifted guiltily, a flush suffusing his face. And then, silently, he handed the C.O. the note which Kirby had left.

The C.O. took it in bewilderment. He opened it and read. His eyes widened, and his face drained of its color. He looked ghastly. He tottered, as if struck by a stunning blow.

"My God!" The gasp broke from him like a groan of agony. "My God!"

Leaning from the fuselage of his climbing Spad, Kirby watched his airdrome slowly recede below and behind him. A wistful nostalgia swept him, the feeling that comes when one gazes upon one's home for the last time. For, unbearable as it had been during the past three weeks, that drome was "home" to Kirby, the only home he knew on this war-torn continent. A lump rose in his throat as he saw the familiar field slowly merge with the rest of the blurred landscape behind. But then once more his face set with fierce, grim determination. He jerked his head around and directed his eyes straight ahead. He had climbed to five thousand feet now, and with his usual thoughtless ease he leveled off to speed straight forward. He glanced at his wrist-watch. Five-twenty! One hour and forty minutes in which to perform his duty, and then— He left the grim thought unfinished.

Must look at those maps he had taken from Brown

now. He reached beneath his teddy-bear, pulled out the bulky roll, and holding the joystick between his knees so that he could use both hands, examined the papers. He discovered at once that, in his haste, he had taken more than the maps from the dead body. In addition there were a couple of letters, written on fine linen stationery, which Brown had evidently just finished, for they were dated only yesterday. Kirby glanced through them, reading with some difficulty in his rocking, speeding plane, though the light was good now, it was full daylight, and the sun had turned from red to gold.

*Dearest Helen,*

*Do not be harsh with me, sweetheart, for not having written sooner, for you have been on my mind constantly. Always your sweet image is before me when I fly out to battle, and your love spurs me on. Silly child! How can you entertain the ridiculous idea that there is some one else, when you know you are the only woman in my life!*  
You—

It went on, rather boring and redundant, in the same vein. The second letter was much like it:

*My own Dorothy,*

*Darling, how long the days seem without you! Even the excitement at the Front cannot make me forget the wonderful hours we spent together. There can never be another like you, sweetheart. You are the only woman in my life—*

The Mosquito shook his head, and a grim smile flickered over his lips. No longer would Brown, the lady-killer, be able to trifle with women's hearts! Thrusting the letters away, the Mosquito turned to the maps. There were two of them—one of the entire sector, showing the route Kirby must take; the other of the junction itself, showing its position and contours. He took a good look at them both, until their details stamped themselves indelibly on his mind, and then he shoved them away again.

HE WAS off! He opened his throttle wide, suddenly impatient to get to that junction and finish the momentous job! The Spad, roaring mightily, sped forward, gathering speed until it was streaking through the air like a dart, trembling in every fibre. And for the first time since the days when he had led his comrades, Kirby felt the old thrill tingling through his blood, the thrill of going forth on the great adventure! This was his element, and he loved it after all! The chill rush of air which whipped at him as it sang through the flying wires was an elixir: it blew the remaining fumes of alcohol from him and cleared his head. It stung him

to such savage consciousness that he forgot he had not gotten any sleep all night. His last show, but by God it was going to be a good show! He was going to make that comeback he had promised the C.O.!

A few minutes, and he was streaking over the shell-torn, pock-marked Front, which lay strangely quiet below him, but which, he knew, would soon be seething and erupting with one of the most terrific battles of the War. The zigzag maze of cuts which were Yank trenches swept by beneath him, and vaguely he saw tiny khaki figures and bristling bayonets. Though he knew they could not see him, could hardly even see his plane way up here, he waved down toward them as he passed out into No-Man's-Land and came to the first-line German trenches.

"So long!" he called to his countrymen and to Allied territory. "So long!"

And into the enemy's sky he went streaking, speeding at full throttle with smoke pouring from his exhausts.

A full hour had passed since Kirby's hasty takeoff, and the sun was shining with its usual full morning brilliance, when, sweeping out of the sky like streaks, two Spads came tearing onto the 44th's tarmac, barely missing a crash in their furious landings. Mechanics and pilots—for by now the whole drome was awake and active—gathered around the two planes as they drew up in a cloud of dust. They watched two men climb from their respective cockpits, two men with white, haggard faces and eyes full of alarm. Two men, one of whom was tall and lanky, and the other short and corpulent. A shout of surprised welcome rose from the crowd.

"Shorty Carn!"

"Travis!"

"What in hell brings you two buzzards here?"

"Boy, oh boy, but it's good to see you back!"

Every one was cheerful, for as yet the ghastly news of what had happened in the estaminet had been carefully kept from them. But the two men who had just arrived neither seemed to hear the greetings nor to notice their former, squadron mates. With one accord, they turned and dashed straight to the operations office. They burst into the shack.

The C.O. jumped from his desk with a gasp that betrayed how raw his nerves were. He had aged perceptibly this last hour. The lines on his face had deepened, and his features looked gaunt and drawn. He relaxed only slightly as he recognized the two men, and greeted them unsmilingly.

“Got here quickly, didn’t you? I thought—”

Little Shorty Carn strained forward. “What’s happened? Tell us what’s happened, for God’s sake!”

The C.O. sat down heavily. He did not look at them as he spoke.

“Don’t know what made me send for you fellows. The thing is hopeless.” His tone was bitter with finality. “There’s nothing to be done about it. But in view of your former relationship I thought it only fair to let you know right away.” He paused, as if groping for words to express the awful thing he had to tell them. The words failed to come, and instead, he thrust a paper toward them. “Look!” he blurted. “Look at this!”

SHORTY grabbed the paper. But, as if he already anticipated its contents, his hands trembled so violently that Travis, who had been standing pale and tensely quiet, snatched it from his hands and held it so both could read. The words danced before them:

*To the C.O.—*

*I killed Brown in self-defense. But there won’t be any trouble for you, or any red tape of courts-martial. I promise I’ll do Brown’s job for him, and also that I’ll never come back.*

*Kirby.*

Shorty and Travis stood absolutely still. Stark horror stared from their eyes, but not a sound did they utter. The C.O.’s voice broke the ghastly silence at last, but his voice was toneless, hollow. “The body is in the hands of the authorities, who have already indicted Kirby for the wilful murder of a brother officer. The evidence is complete. Kirby has been holding a grudge against Brown for weeks. Also he has been in a bad condition, due to excessive drinking. Yesterday I was forced to give Brown Kirby’s position as flight commander, and also this mission which would have been Kirby’s under normal circumstances. Kirby promised me he would turn over a new leaf, but he broke his promise completely. Last night it appears, both men were drinking together in the estaminet. Papa Renier testifies that when he last saw them, both had consumed considerable liquor, but Kirby was drunk and surly where Brown was quite sober and cheerful. After—” here he faltered for just a second, “after committing the murder, Kirby threatened Papa Renier with his gun and made his escape from three M.P.s whom a neighbor, hearing the shots, had summoned to the scene. It is a clear case. The fact that Kirby has no intention of returning for a fair trial proves beyond doubt—”

“That’s a damned lie!” The words, cracking out like a whip, were all the more startling because they came from the lips of the lanky Travis. The eldest Mosquito’s stoicism had left him at last, his iron nerves had snapped under the strain. His hands were clenching spasmodically at his sides, and huge veins swelled on his neck like whipcord.

“It’s a lie, I tell you! Kirby wouldn’t kill a man without good reason! And why should he say it’s self-defense when he has nothing to lose by saying it was wilful murder?” His voice rose, shaking. “Damn it, it’s unfair! He knows everything is against him, knows he won’t get a square deal, knows that even you—”

“Stop! Stop it, I tell you!” The C.O. had leaped to his feet, eyes blazing. His nerves were pretty frayed too. “Remember you’re speaking to a superior officer! Now stop your raving and listen to me! There’s nothing to be done, do you understand? Nothing! I’m glad Kirby has had the guts to do the only thing he can to atone for the disgrace he has brought to the squadron. I have enough faith in him to believe he’ll do Brown’s job and do it well. And then he’ll just disappear—let himself be taken prisoner. When the war’s over he can try to start under a new identity, a new name and—”

A jagged, unearthly laugh interrupted him. Shorty Carn was laughing hysterically, his laughter shaken with sobs.

“Taken prisoner?” he echoed, contemptuously. “Kirby? That’s a hot one—that’s rich! Do you think they’ll ever get him alive?” There was a certain fierce pride in his tone. “Not him! He’ll go down like an ace, with both guns blazing! He’ll do this job and then stay up until they shoot him to hell, until they—”

Travis, again unable to control himself, seized the C.O.’s arm and shook it, roughly.

“Where is he?” he demanded, savagely. “Damn it, tell us where he is!”

THE C.O. was so startled by Travis’ fierce manner that he couldn’t summon his anger. Instead, he answered obediently. “He went over to bomb the junction at Brenne, forty miles in Hunland. He left over an hour ago. It’s no use. It’s too late to do anything about it now.”

Travis fell back, his hands dropping limply to his sides again. A sense of absolute helplessness had come over him and Shorty. Over an hour ago! What chance was there?

And then the lanky Mosquito slowly pulled himself

together. He straightened up, and his voice was as calm as it was firm.

"It seems hopeless, but we're going out there. We're going out there and find him if he's still alive."

"And then what?" the C.O. demanded, having also recovered himself. "Suppose you do find him? What will you do? Bring him back to face disgrace and the firing squad? Why not let him alone, let him solve the thing his own way?"

"Because," Shorty responded, and there was a note in his voice which moved the C.O. strangely, "because he's our buddy! Don't you understand? He's our buddy and wherever he goes we go too!"

"We're sticking with him," Travis added, in a similar tone, "no matter what he does—and that includes murder!" Then he spoke with frenzied haste. "Some maps, colonel! We've got to get off!"

Dazedly the C.O. passed them a couple of roll-maps. And the two Mosquitoes dashed out of the shack. The colonel sat there, staring before him, awed and bewildered. He heard two motors roar into deafening life, he saw two shadows streak past the window as the two planes sped down the field and went rocketing into the air. The C.O. shook his head.

"The fools!" he said. "The utter fools! They'll never even find him! It's hopeless and they know it!"

They did know it, even as they drove their throbbing ships toward the Front, but the knowledge only spurred them madly on. They fed their planes all the gas they could take, until the motors screamed in shrill protest. Side by side, their faces white behind their goggles, they went hurtling along the same airpath their comrade had traversed over an hour ago. An hour—such a long time in the air! Yes, it was quite hopeless! Their only hope was that Kirby had gone slowly, taken his time.

But Kirby had done no such thing. He had gone as fast as his roaring, hurtling plane would carry him. And long before Shorty and Travis had even landed at the 44th's drome, Kirby had reached his objective! He reached it at five minutes to six, and it was fully half an hour later when his two comrades took off to race after him!

His trip had been uneventful. Clear sailing through a peaceful sky which turned from amber to translucent blue, and which was empty of enemy planes. There had not even been anti-aircraft fire to molest him, though several times he was sure he had passed a battery, and he couldn't understand why they hadn't spotted him, high as he was. But he went on grimly.

The fun hadn't started yet, but it would start soon enough. He was too experienced to believe that he wasn't in for a hot time!

## CHAPTER VIII DUMMY ARCHIE

**D**EEP WITHIN HUNLAND Kirby picked up the twin, glistening lines which wove and wound their devious way through the blurred green landscape below. Railway tracks! The map had told him that they led to Brenne and the junction. He went speeding along on a parallel with them, keeping them right beneath him, following their every curve and twist as if indeed his plane were a train which ran on them. Miles of this, and then, like a brook running into a river, the single tracks turned into three tracks, and then, like the river running into the sea, the three tracks turned into a veritable maze of rails and switches which occupied a wide area. The junction!

As Kirby, keeping discreetly high, was coming over the place, his heart began to beat wildly. Sweeping overhead, he started to circle, to look things over. There was still no anti-aircraft fire. He remembered that Brown had said the place wasn't well fortified. Still they must have some defense down there!

With doubts in his mind, he piqued down and circled lower, to get a better look. Then came the first surprise. For he saw, down there, the most complete and heavy aerial-defense he had ever seen in his career! The junction fairly bristled with anti-aircraft batteries and machine guns; it seemed that a thousand muzzles, large and small, were gaping hungrily at the sky!

Swarming everywhere were tiny gray-clad figures, some of whom certainly seemed to be looking up at the circling plane overhead. Yet they were not molesting the Spad. Why? A sudden possible answer made Kirby jerk up his head to scan the surrounding sky fearfully. Was the place protected from the air? He saw no Fokkers, but there was that dazzling sun again, in which planes could so easily hide. He remembered that yesterday this same thought had stopped him from attacking those Rumplers and the memory brought a grim, feckless expression to his face. By God, he wouldn't hesitate this time! He was out to do his job no matter what the odds!

Since there was no fire from the ground, he took another chance and this time piqued so insolently low that he could see the junction in all its details. And then came surprise number two! Brown had said that the job would be easy. It didn't look easy at all! In order to prevent all passage through the junction—that is, to shut off all lines which led through to the Front—Kirby saw that he would have to score direct hits on three spots; three switches. They were not only wide apart, those three switches, but they were also small and difficult targets. They meant dangerously low flying and exact aim. And around each was a solid, seemingly impenetrable defense of antiaircrafts and machine guns.

The Mosquito's face became a grim mask. The time had come for action. He knew what he had to do and now the thing was to do it! He maneuvered his Spad into a position above the junction, so that the first of the three switches which must be destroyed lay directly below and ahead. He fixed his goggled eyes on that switch, concentrating on it as if it were the only thing down there. For a brief moment he paused, even as a high-diver pauses before plunging into the infinitesimal tank below. Then—

With a reckless yell, he shoved his joystick forward. The nose of the Spad dropped precipitously, and then the plane was plunging downward in a breathless dive, plunging with the wind shrieking through its flying wires, and its engine roaring full blast. Down, down, faster and faster, hell-bent for that switch, on which Kirby kept his eyes glued. It was looming toward him now, looming toward him together with a swarming mass of Germans who seemed confused and alarmed.

At a moment when the nose of the Spad seemed about to plunge into the ground, the Mosquito pulled back the stick with savage strength, and the plane flattened out so abruptly that its wings literally smacked the air. Scarcely a hundred feet above the junction, it went streaking right over that switch. Kirby was leaning over the fuselage now, and his hand gripped the bomb-release lever. It looked easy, too damned easy! There was nothing to stop him, no resistance. He was low enough to take perfect aim. And as the switch swept right beneath him, he jerked the release-lever, jerked it viciously.

FROM the belly of the streaking Spad a pear-shaped object of steel detached itself and went spinning and shrieking down through the hundred feet of space. *B-r-rooom! Blang!* A livid flash of fire, and then a mighty

eruption of smoke and debris which rose high in the air, and slowly settled. The concussion almost threw Kirby's Spad into a side-slip. As he streaked away, he looked back and watched the clearing smoke.

A wave of savage exultation swept him. For when the smoke had cleared, he saw that the switch was a total wreck, with twisted, broken tracks sticking up grotesquely and, all around, the mangled bodies of Jerries who had been killed or wounded by the explosion. He had scored a direct hit with his first bomb, and now only two more switches remained. Already he was driving his roaring Spad toward the second one. Brown was right after all! The job seemed easy, simple and—

At first he thought that hell itself had broken loose. His ears were split by a thunderous staccato chorus, and up from the ground came a spew of fire such as he had never seen before. The Germans had cut loose with every machine gun and pom-pom on the place, and their furious clatter was punctuated by the occasional crack of rifles and even revolvers. The Spad was lurching drunkenly, staggering from the bullets which pumped and drilled it. Dazedly, Kirby saw several lines of perforation appear, as if by magic, in the wing above him, and he heard the ripping tick of bullets through his fuselage. The air around him was thick with flying, screaming lead and steel!

In a frenzy of panic he pulled back his stick, and the Spad reared like a bucking bronco and tried to struggle upward through that crackling inferno. The Mosquito zoomed with the bullets whizzing after him, singing wildly in his ears. And no sooner had he managed to struggle to a decent altitude when the antiaircraft guns, now able to range him, joined the staccato chorus with their deeper and gruffer voices. *Grumpf! Grumpf!* The shells mushroomed out on all sides of the Spad, until the air turned black from their smoke and the little plane bobbed and tossed like a cork on the ocean.

Blindly Kirby kept zooming at full throttle, while bullets and shrapnel continued to drill his ship. At last, by some miracle, he got out of their range and the bullets and bursting shells were falling harmlessly below and behind him. High above the junction and almost a mile beyond it, he leveled out at last and circled like a dazed, frightened bird.

His face was ashen behind its goggles, and beads of cold sweat stood out on his brow. Good God, his first bomb had been a signal for every gun in the place to fire at him! And, under such fire, how was he going to

bomb those other two switches? He'd be shot to bits before he could ever accomplish his task! Even now his plane looked like a sieve; there were holes all over its wings and fuselage, and in the lower wing was a gaping rent made by an anti-aircraft shell. But damn it all, he swore grittingly, he must see this thing through! He must do it despite the odds!

There was only one strategy he could employ now, with all those guns loose down there, the dive and zoom game. Dive down for his switch, drop his bomb, and then zoom out at breakneck speed before they could get him. It looked impossible, but he must try it!

Determinedly, he straightened out, swung around, and focused his eyes on the second switch down there. Then, aiming the nose of his plane as he would aim a gun, he dived at full throttle. Down he went roaring, hurtling. The Germans were ready for him. Again every gun in the place belched forth flame and smoke. Still Kirby kept his plane aimed for that switch. He was pressing his own stick-triggers now, firing his own guns in a futile effort to scatter the Jerry gunners below, but he could not hear them in the din of all the other guns.

THE Boche fire became thicker and thicker as Kirby continued diving for the switch. *Crash!* The instrument board in front of his face was smashed to bits, and flying pieces of glass and wood cut into his face, bringing the blood. The switch—there it was now, right below him. The Mosquito pulled back his stick, pulled it all the way back to his chest, and the Spad almost tore itself to pieces as it lurched out of the dive and into a steep zoom. Simultaneously Kirby loosed his bomb, and the noise of its explosion was also lost in the mighty din.

As he zoomed up through the crackling barrage, Kirby saw to his despair that he had missed! The switch was intact; the bomb had exploded at a harmless distance from it! God, it was impossible to aim with all this fire! In fact the whole thing seemed impossible now. His only consolation was the realization that Brown, despite his boasts, never could have pulled it off either.

He came out of it again, with his Spad riddled and battered, and his face grayer but stained with red from scratches and cuts. As he circled out of range again, a bitter realization smote him. This was a job, he suddenly realized, which only the Three Mosquitoes, working with their wonderful coordination, might have pulled off! He saw at once how they could have

handled it. Shorty and Travis, diving down there with him, not only could have divided the Germans' fire, but also they could have cleared the path with their machine guns long enough for Kirby to go down there and drop his bombs. With the three of them working together that way, hell itself couldn't have stopped them! The whole thing would have been over in no time—the junction crippled!

His lips became a tight little line. Now there seemed to be only one question, and that was whether Kirby could manage to get the other two switches before the Jerries got him. That the Jerries would get him he took for granted. But if he could possibly smash those two switches first, he'd be satisfied. Hadn't he come over here to die anyway? Might as well die in the completion of this momentous, impossible stunt! Unhesitating, he banked his ship around to face that perilous junction again. And he dived once more, dived with a fervent prayer on his lips. "God, just let me hold out long enough to finish those switches!"

So began his grim race with death. Time and again Kirby plunged his protesting Spad down into that hell of ground-fire, and each time the blasting barrage smote the ship like a wall and forced it back. He had not yet dropped another bomb, for he had been unable to get his lurching plane near enough to aim accurately. His plane was being shot to shreds. Half the rudder was smashed and dangling, an outer-bay strut had splintered and the wing which it had supported was beginning to creak ominously, threatening to crack. Kirby himself had been nipped in a dozen places by the grazing bullets and shell fragments. Blood was on his face, and the taste of blood was in his mouth. He was losing that race now, and he knew it. And still he went on, stubbornly, without hope and therefore the more reckless.

Exhaustion was beginning to overcome him now. The effects of last night's debauchery, as well as the terrific emotional strain, were telling on him at last. His head was splitting with the roar of guns, his ears were ringing, and the acrid stench of powder and smoke choked his lungs. But still he struggled on, still he cursed and prayed as he dived anew toward that second switch. All direct methods having failed, he resorted to more cunning and tricky tactics.

KIRBY pretended to give up the business, and shot high into the air, above a cloud which screened him from the Jerries below. They thought he had gone, and relaxed from their grim vigil at the guns. Kirby waited

for what seemed an interminable period. Then, like a plummet, he dropped from his cloud straight for the second switch. This time he almost got to it before the Boche sprang into savage action again. His bomb missed as the Spad was literally blasted from its course.

How he kept the wounded, bullet-ridden plane in the air Kirby did not know. The controls felt wobbly, as if the wires were beginning to break under the strain. The weakened wing was creaking more and more. And yet the Mosquito went on with his suicidal work, still forcing the machine to dive and zoom, dive and zoom through that raging inferno!

As time went on, and he still had five bombs left, he began to despair at last. Exhausted and shaken, his whole body aching and his flesh stinging from a score of cuts, he realized that he couldn't possibly get those two switches before the Jerries finished him. And presently, as he hung overhead in his battered Spad, trying vainly to catch his second wind, he saw a sight which crushed his hopes entirely. In the distance, moving from the direction of Germany, were several puffs of smoke. The trains! They were coming! The Mosquito was incredulous; he must have been here a long time!

He could see the nearest of those approaching trains distinctly now. It was a troop train, with a long string of cars. It came winding across the landscape like a long, sinister snake. Kirby's eyes swept along the tracks ahead of it, and saw that they led to the third of the three switches. And then, desperate and mad with despair, he decided what he would do!

It was impossible for him to get both those remaining switches, but it was possible for him to get one of them, by deliberately sacrificing his life! Only the fact that he had tried to hold out to do both jobs had prevented him from doing either of them. But if he dived straight for that third switch, and kept on diving no matter how thick the Jerry bullets became, he would not miss it! If his bombs did not hit, his plane would! He'd send his Spad, with its remaining explosives, crashing into the switch head-on and the trick would be done! And at least he'd prevent that first troop train from going through, and partially cripple the junction. That wouldn't stop the German push of course. Other trains would get through via the remaining switch. But at least it would do some good and would enable him to go down fighting!

A wan but reckless smile came over his bleeding face. "You win, Death!" he muttered. "But you don't win the whole pot!" And again he banked his ballet-

ridden Spad around. His last dive now and it must be a good one, perfect in its accuracy and precision! He must go down in a blaze of glory, with his engine roaring its defiance and the wind screaming through his flying wires! God—a sob suddenly choked him—if only he were going down with his two comrades, leading them down there in the breathless, attacking dive of the Three Mosquitoes! But his comrades were not here and the Three Mosquitoes were no more! The places where their two Spads should be, on either side of him, were strangely empty, void.

Again Kirby had that desolate feeling of something missing, as if an arm or leg had been amputated. And in that moment he knew that his comrades had become a definite and integral part of himself, and that without them he was not complete. He was only one cog in a three-cogged machine, and the other two cogs were essential to give that machine its full power. That was why he had failed, that was why he could only partially complete this job, even though he was offering such a heavy payment as his life! It was queer: three switches—three Mosquitoes! He had been able to do exactly one third of the job without biting off more than he could chew! To do another third he had to kill himself!

## CHAPTER IX GHOST SUPPORT

**I**N HIS DESPAIR AND GRIEF Kirby sought comfort in a pitifully childlike idea. He would pretend his two comrades were with him, as they had always been with him! It would at least make him feel better, give him the zest to go through with his reckless, suicidal stunt! And he was just dazed and bleared enough by the hellish strain of all he had been through to be able to give full play to his imagination. He turned to those vacant spaces on either side of him and it was a little ghastly, how he grinned his old familiar grin at the empty air and waved signals to the blue void. With a lusty shout his arm shot upward.

"Let's go!" he gave the old familiar war-whoop, the battle-cry of the Three Mosquitoes. And in his imagination he saw two grinning pilots on either side of him wave back from the cockpits of their Spads, in

enthusiastic response. With a reckless, contented laugh he plunged his stick forward, knowing that they would follow wherever he led!

Down he shot, down into that waiting maelstrom of lead and steel and shrapnel, down a long hill of space at whose bottom was Death! Down, down, down, with his nose aimed Straight and true for that third switch, which the troop train was approaching. The hellish barrage enveloped him again, but he laughed with carefree abandon at the bullets for weren't his faithful comrades at his sides, their Spads streaking down with his? Of course they were with him—Shorty and Travis! Good old scouts, they'd stick by him! His buddies—his pals—the inseparable Three Mosquitoes! Why he could see their Spads better than ever now, despite the thickening bullets which ripped all around. He could see the two khaki ships in all their details, with their helmeted pilots grinning across at him as they—

His eyes blinked behind their goggles, and he shook his head as if trying to shake off a vision. Damn it, was he going completely nuts? Was his imagination so vivid that it could produce such distinct hallucinations? Keep steady now! Must remember he was only pretending. Those weren't really Spads there, diving with him. Just empty air. But why were they waving like that, those two pilots? Why were they waving in frenzied interrogation?

It was all a dream, of course, one of those strange last visions that come before death but at least he would enjoy it while it lasted! He waved answers to the interrogations. He pointed down at the looming switch and, using that gesticulating language by which the Three Mosquitoes could converse as eloquently as if they talked, he waved the signal which meant, "Clear the way for bombs! Strafe holy hell out of them! Let's go!" And dazedly he saw the two Spads of his dream streak past him, as they increased the frenzied speed of their dive by further inclining their noses.

Dazedly he saw them plunge upon the junction, while streams of smoky tracer rained from their stuttering guns. At once the Jerry fire seemed to decrease, for now it was divided and the two Spads with their blazing guns were succeeding where Kirby alone had failed. They were scattering the Boche gunners! And Kirby, still dazed by the whole vivid dream, plunged down in a path temporarily cleared, swept directly over the switch, and with nothing to spoil his aim now, dropped a bomb which blasted that switch right off the face of the earth! The approaching troop train, still half a mile away, drew to a sudden stop. It was stuck! It could not get through!

Zooming out of the Jerry zone of fire again, Kirby laughed and sobbed and cursed like a raving maniac. He cackled insanely. His battered face contorted itself with hysterical glee, with relief, with affection. And his hand trembled as it waved in the air toward the two Spads which were again faithfully at his side, and whose pilots were waving back with equal frenzy.

"Shorty! Travis!" Kirby blubbered like a baby. Tears dribbled down his bloody, grimy face, misting his goggles. "Damn you to hell," he cursed them profanely in his joy. "you Wasted sons of bees! You lousy, hell-fired flyin' fools!"

The Three Mosquitoes were reunited.

SHORTY and Travis, flying like the very wind, had found their leader at last! Which was unfortunate as far as the projected German push was concerned! For with this three-cogged machine back into action, the Boche's plans were doomed!

The presence of his comrades not only brought new life-blood surging through Kirby's veins, but it seemed actually to put new life into the crippled, bullet-ridden Spad he flew! At any rate he made that damaged, limping ship perform miraculously. And leading his comrades as he had always led them, he proceeded to finish the job! What they did to that junction was lamentable. Blowing the third switch to smithereens with one bomb, Kirby dropped the three remaining missiles on other choice points.

The junction was reduced to a twisted mass of wreckage, full of dead and wounded Jerries, and with hardly a track left intact. The trains crowded the distant rails in a general tie-up, a tremendous blockade which extended as far as the eye could see. The German troops and supplies could not get through to the Front now. The push was delayed and that meant it was defeated! Before the Boche could get through, the Yank reinforcements would arrive and the counter-offensive would be hurled forward against the surprised and unprepared Germans.

The Three Mosquitoes, mechanically getting into their old formation, Kirby leading and Shorty and Travis flanking him on either side and a little to the rear, soared away from that infernal spot. In gleeful triumph, Kirby led them homeward, as he had always led, them after they had finished a job. And they had gone several miles before the grim remembrance came to them with a shock, and a pall suddenly fell over their joyous spirits. Kirby was wanted for murder! He had promised the C.O., in his note, that he would

not return to disgrace the squadron! And his promise was immutable, being the promise of an officer and a gentleman. He glanced across at his two comrades, and saw his own grim despair mirrored in their goggled faces. The joy had drained out of them. What could Kirby do? The case was hopeless, and they knew it as well as he did!

Kirby cogitated, racking his brain with conjectures, while mechanically he kept leading his comrades on toward the lines. And then there came a sudden rude interruption.

The air overhead was suddenly shattered by the shrill staccato clatter of Spandaus, and out of the sun where they had indeed been hiding, four deadly Fokkers came plunging with jagged streaks of flame leaping from their noses. Straight upon the surprised Mosquitoes they dived, and their first shower of shots drilled the wings of the three Spads unmercifully.

Then Kirby, almost joyously welcoming this interruption, this chance for more breathless action, grinned and waved recklessly to his two comrades: "Let's go!" And once more forcing his damaged Spad to respond, he led them into battle! Eagerly they hurled themselves upon the four Fokkers, guns blazing!

Then a queer but familiar thing happened, a thing that had been the cause of so much trouble! The Germans suddenly seemed to become less ferocious, and the Mosquitoes knew they had the Boche in hand. And Shorty and Travis were both about to shoot down a respective Fokker when, to their utter amazement, the victim was snatched from their guns by Kirby's Spad—before which both Jerry ships went spinning and twisting down in trails of smoke!

Shorty and Travis were stunned. To think that now, after all this, Kirby would repeat his old trick of grabbing their glory! They had sworn that they would stick by him no matter what happened now, and yet they were hurt, bewildered. They did what they had formerly done under the same circumstances; both attacked a Jerry together. And they were actually surprised when they got it, saw the Boche pilot slump forward in the cockpit, while his plane plunged into a fatal spin. The fourth and only remaining Jerry was streaking away, hell-bent for home. The dogfight was over as abruptly as it had started!

And then Shorty and Travis realized why Kirby had not interfered with them this last time. The reason was simple. Kirby wasn't here! In sudden alarm they looked all about for him, and as they happened to

glance downward, their goggled eyes widened in surprise.

Kirby's Spad, a tiny winged shape down there, was landing! It was landing on a stubble clearing at the edge of a wood, where lay a vague mass of dense black smoke which must have been one of the two Fokkers Kirby had downed. Even now the wheels of the Spad touched the stubble field, and the little plane rolled to a stop close to the smoke-obscured Fokker.

Kirby seemed to have done all this deliberately, but Shorty and Travis, remembering the frightful condition of his bullet-ridden Spad, were fearful lest some mishap had forced him down. After all the spot was deep in Hunland, though it looked quite deserted. The two Mosquitoes, exchanging a brief signal, began to circle down toward the place, watching as they slowly descended. And what they saw only increased their surprise and puzzlement!

Kirby had climbed out of his cockpit. They saw his tiny bulky figure move toward the smoking Fokker, and then they saw him waving his Colt automatic in a menacing gesture. And in the next instant, emerging miraculously from the dense black smoke, another figure appeared—the Jerry pilot. How he lived in that burning inferno they could not guess. But what was still more astonishing, the Jerry pilot showed no signs of hostility or even alarm toward the Yank whose revolver menaced him, and in another moment Kirby also seemed to relax, and sheathed his revolver! The two men seemed to be engaged now in an amicable conversation! But not for long. Suddenly, unexpectedly, they began to fight—or rather Kirby seized the German by the throat and pinned him down to the ground.

SHORTY and Travis, once more tense and worried, descended a little faster, their fingers fumbling with their stick triggers. They saw Kirby suddenly leap up and, leaving the German writhing on the ground, the Mosquito leader dashed toward the idling Spad. He was just climbing in when the trees of the wood parted, and a crowd of Boche soldiers with bayoneted rifles came bursting onto the field! The Jerry pilot had struggled to his feet now, and was waving and pointing toward Kirby. The Boche soldiers instantly surrounded the Spad on all sides, before it could move!

Shorty and Travis waited no longer. With one accord, they plunged into a dive, and swooped down upon those Jerry soldiers with guns blazing, at the same time being skillful and clever enough to keep

their rain of tracers safely away from the Spad and Kirby. The Germans were thrown into confusion, scores of them dropped like flies and others scurried for shelter in the trees like frightened rats. And in the confusion Kirby's Spad leaped forward, rolled across the field, and took the air. The Three Mosquitoes had worked with their usual coordination! Kirby climbed swiftly to join his comrades, and waved his tacit thanks to them. But he was not smiling now. His face was grim and set. And, to their further surprise, he led them straight for home, at full throttle.

The three Spads came into the 44th's drome for their usual perfect landings. They taxied up to the hangars. A crowd surrounded them, and in the forefront of that crowd was the haggard and pale C.O., a colonel of the intelligence corps attached to staff at G.H.Q., a captain of the military police and two M.P. sergeants. The investigation of Brown's death had been in full swing!

The Three Mosquitoes climbed from their Spads, and though this was their first opportunity of meeting one another in the flesh, they did not exchange any greetings or handclaps. Shorty and Travis were still brooding about that dogfight and its puzzling sequences, while Kirby, apparently in the grip of some feverish excitement, dashed right up to the bewildered C.O. stiffened to attention, and snapped out a curt salute which seemed incongruous with his bleeding and grimy face.

"Reporting for the Three Mosquitoes," he clipped, officiously. "I am glad to inform the colonel that the junction at Brenne was practically wiped out, and the trains couldn't get through!"

The C.O.'s face was a study. An involuntary gleam of admiration had come into his eyes, and then pain seemed to come over his features. But quickly his face hardened into a grim mask, and his eyes narrowed to cold slits.

"Captain Kirby!" he barked, tersely. "I regret to inform you that you are under arrest for the murder of Captain Brown!"

A hushed murmur rose from the crowd, and simultaneously the M.P. captain and his two sergeants stepped forward, their revolvers trained on the Mosquito. Kirby made absolutely no resistance as they stripped him of his Colt, but as he stood there he spoke, with a peculiar note in his voice. "Colonel, when you get finished you'll realize that you're not only arresting an innocent man but—"

"What?" the C.O. exploded, in sudden anger. "Do you dare to deny that you killed Captain Brown?"

"I certainly do!"

The surprising statement, delivered with absolute conviction, fell like a thunderbolt. Shorty and Travis stared at their leader. The C.O. became flustered.

"You deny it?" he repeated, dumbly. "In other words, you didn't shoot and kill Brown in the estaminet last night?"

"Absolutely not!"

The C.O. lost his temper. "Damn it, this is no joking matter, Kirby! Do you realize your life is at stake?"

"Yes, and I still say I didn't kill Brown!" Kirby repeated, and then added grimly, "Because Brown was killed before I ever met him, when he was on his way here as a raw replacement!"

THE C.O. stared at Kirby askance. Every one stared at him. And then Kirby, his face still grim, spoke with sudden vehemence. "The man I killed last night was Baron Freidrich von Mahl, Germany's greatest spy!" A gasp went up from the whole assemblage. And then the colonel of intelligence, from G.H.Q., leaped forward, excitedly.

"Baron von Mahl!" he echoed, as if the name had some terrible significance to him.

Kirby smiled, tightly. "I thought if anybody from intelligence was here, he'd recognize the name. A slippery fellow, wasn't he, colonel? Had you guessing all the time! You never suspected he was the wonderful, brilliant ace known as Brown, did you? Well, he was, and he was not only Brown's real murderer but—"

"Now, just a moment, just a moment," the intelligence colonel cut in, keenly. "Not so fast! Now, I want you to know that, as we always do in such cases, intelligence already looked up the dead man's records. There is no flaw in the check-up, nothing to show that he could possibly be impersonating—"

"That just shows how clever he was," Kirby argued. "He covered up all his tracks so well that there wasn't a chance of spotting him."

"But damn it all," the C.O. had recovered his voice at last, "how about his record? All those planes he shot down—"

Kirby laughed, contemptuously. "He never shot down a Jerry plane in his life—and since he came here neither did I!" was his next surprising statement, and his two comrades started and looked at him as if he must be crazy. But Kirby went on, with perfect assurance. "You recall that all the planes we were supposed to have shot down were not only all flamers, but all of them fell on the German side of the lines. Well—"

He broke off, and suddenly turned toward the bullet-ridden Spad he had just brought in. The M.P.s were too dazed and bewildered to stop him, and he stooped down and reached toward the Spad's tailskid. There was the inconspicuous bit of red cloth dangling from the metal bar of Brown's plane.

"Brown said he would put this here so the Jerries would know him. They knew him all right, but not the way we thought he meant!" said Kirby grimly. "Then he bluffed me into putting one on my plane. I've figured this thing out pretty well, and I'll give you all the dope I've been able to gather."

## CHAPTER X WHEN MOSQUITOES GET TOGETHER

**I**N TERSE BUT BREATHLESS TONES, Kirby told them the strange story. When he and his comrades went into that last dogfight, Kirby had discreetly decided that, in order to avoid any further misunderstanding, he was going to just stand by and let Shorty and Travis get all the Jerries there were to be gotten.

However, the first thing he knew a Fokker streaked right across his air-path, with Shorty riding its tail. It was just like in former times, only in those days Kirby had fired at the passing Boche as a matter of course, and he had invariably been surprised when his potshots scored. But imagine his surprise when to-day, as he was deliberately withholding his fire so as to take no chance of robbing Shorty, the Boche plane collapsed before his silent guns and went down in a trail of smoke! A moment later the same thing happened with the Jerry Travis was chasing, and Kirby decided it was high time to do a little investigating.

Thus he had come to land on the stubble field, where he had seen the second smoking Fokker settle. And as soon as he jumped from his cockpit and went closer, he discovered that the Fokker wasn't burning at all! The smoke emanated from a smoke-pot, which the Jerry pilot had simply cut loose! It was then that Kirby really began to smell a rat. He whipped out his Colt and advanced toward the "burning" ship. "Come on out, Fritz!" he snapped, tersely.

In quick response, a coughing but otherwise unhurt figure in the togs of the Imperial Flying

Corps, emerged from the smoke. But instead of being alarmed, the Jerry pilot was grinning from ear to ear! He stiffened before Kirby like a ramrod and then snapped out a salute which was fit for no less than the Kaiser himself. And then he said in German, which tongue Kirby fortunately knew well, "*Mein Herr Excellenz*, I am overwhelmed! Not often has a humble pilot the honor of meeting the greatest operative of imperial intelligence, Baron Freidrich von Mahl!"

Kirby thought fast. It was quite evident that this Jerry pilot had never seen the real von Mahl, and didn't suspect that Kirby was not the latter. The Mosquito tried to play the part, in the hope of wheedling information out of the Boche. But he didn't learn much at first, not only because the German seemed to know surprisingly little, but also because as von Mahl, Kirby was supposed to know everything! And before long the Jerry pilot began to get suspicious at the continued questions, subtle and indirect though they were.

The German began to show signs of alarm, and at the same time, to his chagrin and dread, Kirby heard Jerry soldiers in the woods at the edge of the field! They must have seen the Spad land, and were coming to investigate! There was no more time to be lost! The Mosquito acted with lightning alacrity. Before the suspicious Jerry pilot had time to do a thing, Kirby seized him by the throat and pinned him to the ground.

"Now," he clipped, in his best German, while his fingers closed like bands of steel over the Boche pilot's windpipe, "you'll answer my questions or I'll kill you!"

The German was frightened enough to talk volubly, and while the Jerries in the wood came closer and closer, Kirby began his rapid-fire of questions. The Boche, prompted by the savage pressure of the Mosquito's hand on his throat, answered as quickly as he could. He told everything he knew. Von Mahl had dropped instructions to all German flyers in this sector ordering that each of them carry a smoke-pot, and that they watch out for a Yankee plane with a red streamer on its tailskid. That would be von Mahl. The German flyers were never to fire on this ship but, whenever the occasion was opportune, they were to make a show of going down before its guns by using their smoke-pots. Very soon von Mahl had amended these instructions, for mysterious reasons. Hereafter, the amendment ruled, if the pilot of the plane with the red streamer waved a white handkerchief, the Jerry in question was not to feign being shot down by its guns.

UNDERSTANDING was fast dawning in Kirby. All this he had managed to pump out of the Jerry in a few breathless minutes, and now the Germans in the wood were so close he could hear the clink of their rifles. But there was one more thing he was burning to learn. Again his fingers pressed into the squirming Boche pilot's windpipe: "And what name did von Mahl fly under with the Yankees?" he demanded.

"He killed a replacement and came to the 44th Squadron in his place," the Boche pilot gasped. "The name was Brown, I believe."

At this moment the German soldiers came bursting out of the woods. Hastily Kirby left the prostrate Boche pilot and leaped for his Spad. And thanks to the quick work of his two buddies, he got away!

"On the way back," he concluded, while the listening crowd stood gaping with awe, "I tried to put things together—and they fitted pretty neatly. The reason why von Mahl had decided to wave a white handkerchief if he didn't want a Boche to drop, was easy to figure out because of my own experience. Von Mahl, as Brown, wanted to make a damned good showing. But he found out that in a dogfight, whenever a Jerry was hard-pressed by a real Yank, he tried to escape by deliberately flying in front of von Mahl's plane, whose red streamer he had seen, and dropping as if von Mahl had bagged him. Well, von Mahl was no fool. He didn't want the reputation of a glory-grabber, so he thought up the white handkerchief idea and after that he got only the Boche planes he wanted! Whenever it meant stealing a Yank's prey, he waved the handkerchief, and the poor Jerry pilot had to stick it out with the guy on his tail, even if it meant death.

"And now's where me and my buddies come in." He glanced affectionately toward the other two gaping Mosquitoes. "For reasons I can't quite figure out, von Mahl decided he was going to bust up the Three Mosquitoes. So he kidded me into tying a red streamer to my tailskid. Then, helped by his damned malicious gossip, the thing worked like a charm! The Jerry pilots, from what this one told me, didn't dream that it was not von Mahl in my ship.

"Do you see the cleverness of that skunk? He wouldn't even let the Jerries in on his little stunt, because he knew damned well that if they suspected for a moment that a Yank flew in the plane marked by a red streamer, they'd be worried and might not dare to fly in front of its guns, even if the chances of their being hit by a passing shot were slim. And that's why

the red streamer brought me the reputation of glory-grabber, even as it would have brought von Mahl had he not used his white handkerchief! The only thing to dope out now is just what his game was. And I think I've got some evidence which might help."

Kirby reached hastily beneath his teddy-bear, and pulled out those two love-letters, which vowed fidelity to Helen and Dorothy respectively.

"I took these by accident last night, and the moment I knew Brown was a spy I figured there was something fishy about his writing letters to girls back in the States! I'm willing to bet these letters mean something."

"Here, give them to me at once!" It was the intelligence colonel from G.H.Q. who broke in. He suddenly took full charge of the situation, it being a matter of espionage now. He almost snatched the letters from Kirby's hands, and examined them minutely. The expression on his stern face became almost ferretlike; he was the detective now, the bloodhound on the scent. Suddenly he turned to Kirby's C.O. "Colonel, I think this thing will soon be cleared up very satisfactorily," he announced. "Now I'm going to rush right to intelligence with this stuff and see what they can do. In the meantime, we'll just let matters ride." And he rushed off, hopped into his staff car, and was whirled from the drome in a cloud of dust.

IT WAS several hours later. From the distance rose the mighty thunder of heavy artillery. The Yanks had started their great counter-offensive, which Kirby and his comrades alone had made possible! And a short time before, the entire 44th Squadron, with the exception of the Three Mosquitoes and the C.O., had taken the air to dust the skies in an aerial offensive of their own. It was a stirring sight, those twenty-odd Spads sweeping into the air together, in formidable array.

Kirby had gotten some breakfast into his empty stomach at last, and the Squadron doc had fixed up his scratches and cuts, which were fortunately not serious. And now the Three Mosquitoes stood reunited in the C.O.'s office. And with them and the C.O. stood the intelligence colonel from G.H.Q., who had just returned to report that Kirby's conclusions had been checked up and found surprisingly accurate. As for the letters, they were code of course, and intelligence had deciphered them with much difficulty. And here were the real messages which those tender and sentimental love-letters had concealed:

The first one, addressed to “Dearest Helen”

*To: High Command:*

*Allies have learned that destruction of Brenne junction will stop our advance. However by becoming squadron star I have managed to get assignment to bomb junction myself. Will set off fully equipped with bombs and maps to offset suspicion, and fly around junction—orders to be given not to fire on ship with red streamer—until trains get through. Then I’ll drop bombs in some deserted river and return. Our Cause is won if you go through with planned attack. I shall stall off the Allies by saying I destroyed junction, which will give attack surprise element. This might lead to my betrayal and capture, but I shall try to do one more job and then make safe return to the Fatherland.*

*Von Mahl.*

And the second letter, the one to Dorothy, revealed what this “one more job” was:

*To: German Squadrons in G Sector:*

*Am in command of C Flight at last, owing to Rumpier stunt yesterday. Tomorrow a.m., after return from Brenne, I lead the flight, which leads entire 44th Squadron, for aerial offensive. If you mass air forces in sun over Rois, I will lead squadron under you and you can wipe them out. But look out for plane with red streamer.*

*Von Mahl.*

After reading these grim messages, which would have spelled defeat for the Allies and annihilation for the 44th Squadron, the Three Mosquitoes and their C.O. stood in awed, hushed silence. All marveled at the amazing ingenuity, the cold sagacity of this crafty fiend who had not only worked one of the most daring and stupendous games of the war, but who had worked it alone, a lone wolf who devised all his own schemes and put them into practice.

Everything was clear now. Von Mahl’s motives had been twofold. To deliver information to the Germans so they could prepare for their coming push, and to make such a good reputation for himself as a Yank flyer that all important missions would be entrusted to him, a fact which was finally to put him in the position where he could save Brenne and the German advance! However, in spite of his well-thought-up plans for making a good showing, he found an obstacle when he came to the 44th Squadron, and that obstacle was the Three Mosquitoes! They were the stars, with whom none could hope to compete. They were not only a menace to von Mahl’s work, but they were a menace to his entire Fatherland.

There was virtually a price on their heads, and yet to kill them, save in a fair fight in the air, would have

been unwise, because there would have been quick reprisals: their squadron mates would have fought like demons in their desire for vengeance. But to break the trio up, to make them split of their own accord, would be a measure which would not only destroy their power, but would also strike a hard blow to the morale of other Yank flyers, who were inspired by the work of the trio.

And that was exactly what von Mahl had cunningly contrived. Once having broken up the trio, the rest was easy; he simply removed the red streamer from Kirby’s plane, and while the latter sank lower and lower, von Mahl rose to the eminence which had even caused the unsuspecting Allies to give the German spy a commission as captain!

JUST why von Mahl had gone out of his way last night to get Kirby drunk could only be surmised. From all evidence, it seemed that von Mahl must have feared that Kirby and his comrades might patch up before the morning, and that the Three Mosquitoes would be sent on the mission which it was vital for von Mahl to undertake himself! In order to prevent this, he had doubtless contrived to get Kirby so hopelessly drunk that the latter would be in no condition to do anything the following morning.

“And now I see why he pulled that gun on me,” Kirby said, thoughtfully. “I was telling him just what I thought of him, and I said I had his number and knew just what he was. I meant he was a damned hypocrite—but I guess even such a devil as von Mahl had a conscience. He must have thought I had found out he was a spy, and was about to denounce him. And he became panicky for once in his career! He wanted to get me out of the way in a hurry, so I could not betray him before he set out on this ‘mission’ to-day and finished his lousy work! So he pulled his gun and tried to plug me. Luckily,” he smiled, in grim reminiscence, “I was fast on the draw!”

The intelligence man beamed.

“I’ll say it was lucky—both for you and the Allies! And the fact that you killed a Boche spy instead of a brother officer changes the word ‘murderer’ to ‘hero.’ Funny what a difference it makes! Instead of putting a rope on you we’re going to put a D.S.C. on you! And to show you that you’re really a free man, we’re going to let you take as long a leave as you want!”

Shorty and Travis leaped forward joyously then. They slapped their leader viciously on the back, they pumped his hands, they all but wrestled him to the

floor, as they shouted with glee. It was the first time the Three Mosquitoes had really greeted each other since landing.

But when he had recovered from this friendly battle, Kirby's expression was sober, thoughtful. "I think I'm getting too much credit around here," he said, modestly. "I wouldn't even kid myself into believing I could ever put one over on a clever snake like von Mahl. To tell the truth, he was his own undoing. Yes," he concluded, "von Mahl made just one little mistake—and that's all that spoiled his otherwise perfect plan."

"You mean pulling that gun, eh?" the C.O. put in, grinning.

"No," Kirby shook his head. "It was a mistake in judgment. You see, he just sort of underestimated the relations between me and my buddies," and he glanced at them again, affectionately. "He didn't realize, foxy as he was, that the minute he tried to razz them to me, I'd see red. That was what led to it all—my socking him, my denouncing him, and then the gunplay. Well," he sighed, philosophically, "I guess it's done a lot of good all around anyway, that killing. We've put an end to Germany's greatest spy, we've stopped a German push, and best of all, I've got my two buddies back, haven't I, guys?"

"You bet your sweet life you have!" Shorty said. "You've got 'em back for keeps too!"

"And they feel properly spanked for misjudging you," Travis drawled. "I hope you can forget some of the things—"

"Don't be an old crab!" Kirby chaffed him.

KIRBY grinned his old reckless, familiar grin. "And now, guys, since we've all kissed and made up, what do you say we get in on all the fun in the air? You know," he sighed, wistfully, "I'd like to really shoot down a Jerry for a change! What do you say?"

And instantly came the eager reply, the old battlecry, "Let's go!"

"Hey, wait a moment!" the C.O. shouted, as the trio started eagerly for the door. His voice was stern. "Kirby, you can't go up again now! Why, good Lord, you've had no sleep for twenty-four hours and you've been under a hellish strain. You're half dead, and scratched and cut besides! In fact, you're ready right now for that leave the colonel here promised you."

Kirby wheeled about, and his eyes twinkled mischievously. One could never have guessed that he was in the least bit tired. He seemed full of energy, fairly bursting with exhilaration.

"Colonel," he addressed the intelligence officer, "can I have that leave right now?"

"Yes, indeed," the intelligence man assented. "I was authorized to give it to you."

"Then I'm taking it!" Kirby chortled. "And being on leave, I'm free to go where I want! Come on, guys! Up we go!"

And before the astonished C.O. could bring himself to do anything about it, three Spads went streaking off the tarmac and rocketing breathlessly into the air. Kirby had his own plane now, and there were no red tags attached to it either. The C.O. stood on the field with the intelligence colonel, watching that familiar, three-plane formation fade into the distant blue, which presently swallowed it up.

The C.O. turned to the intelligence officer, and on his face was a look of mingled awe and admiration and pride.

"The Three Mosquitoes," he murmured. "Up to their old, idiotic, hell-busting tricks, God bless 'em!"

And that was all, except that the Yankee counter-offensive was a complete and overwhelming success. The doughboys smashed right through the Kriemhild line, and the Germans began their last, long retreat into the Argonne. And the Three Mosquitoes, the bonds between them having been only strengthened by their unsuccessful separation, surpassed themselves in the aerial offensive, fighting in the breathless, lunging, swooping manner which had won them their nicknames. All three scored heavily now, but on the blackboard in the mess hall, where their separate names had stood, was now written, "The Three Mosquitoes." And any plane that any of them bagged was marked to that joint account. And if you wanted to know why they all refused individual glory, Shorty or Kirby would enlighten you, for Travis was reticent by nature.

"What?" Shorty or Kirby would say, in tones of deep contempt. "Didn't you ever read Dumas? Don't you know the motto he gave his Three Musketeers? 'Toot pawn ate pawn too!' That's French, but because you're dumb I'll translate it for you. It means, 'One for all and all for one!' And that's our motto, thanks to the late Baron Freidrich von Mahl!"

And if you said they must be crazy, you were rewarded only by a punch in the nose.