

The ADVENTURES OF *The* **THREE** **MOSQUITOES**™

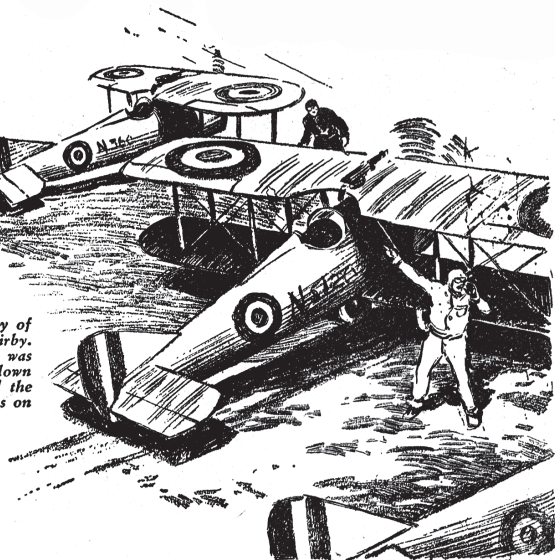
THE DYNAMITE FLIGHT

by RALPH OPPENHEIM



"Into the dugouts!" was the frantic order as that giant black Gotha hurled its death-dealing bombs down upon the airdrome. But Kirby, Carn and Travis crept across the blistering, bomb-torn tarmac toward their planes. For the grim mystery of that Gotha had to be solved. Smashing new "Three Mosquitoes" yarn.

Suddenly a sharp cry of alarm broke from Kirby. The black Gotha was heading straight down toward them, toward the little group of planes on the ground.



were belching their deadly spew into the dawn-streaked sky, barking much like enraged watchdogs will bark at trespassers. *Pow! Pow-wow-wow! Pow!* Machine guns joined the chorus with their shrill staccato *rat-ta-tat-tat*. The din became deafening. The drome, which had been so serenely quiet and peaceful just a moment before, was now a tumultuous riot of noise, a bedlam of mad activity.

THE SHRILL, PROLONGED WAIL of Moanin' Maggie, the raid siren, shattered the dawn stillness of the drome and roused every sleeping member of the 44th pursuit squadron to a shocked awakening. Those who were already up and on duty were spurred to instant action by the siren's shrieking warning. In a moment, crews were manning the anti-aircrafts, and the archies

The “Three Mosquitoes,” that famous trio of war birds, had been sleeping soundly in their cots in the little cubicle they shared together. At the first shriek of the siren, Kirby, impetuous young leader of the trio, had awakened with a start, and like most soldiers who are accustomed to being called to duty at any time, he was instantly wide awake, alert to his very finger tips. For a moment he sat up in bed, listening to the infernal racket outside. Almost at once his keen ears picked up that other sound—audible only when there was a lull in the shooting.

Mmmmmmmmm—Mmmmmmmmm— A low, intermittent hum, which rose like the drone of an immense bumblebee, somewhere overhead. A hum which seemed to be getting closer, closer—

Kirby scrambled out of bed. In the semi-darkness of the room he glimpsed the lanky Travis, eldest and wisest of the Three Mosquitoes, also getting up. “Shorty” Carn was the last to stir. The corpulent little Mosquito, lazy except when his righting blood was roused, was clinging desperately to the sleep which the noise outside was trying to steal from him. He rolled over, yawned, cursed wearily, and pulled the covers over his head.

“Come on, Shorty,” Kirby urged, as he and Travis mechanically started to pull on their teddy-bear flying togs right over their pajamas. “Get up, you damn little goldbrick! There’s a show going on and we’re going to get in on it.”

Shorty cursed again from under the covers, but finally he poked out his head like a reluctant turtle, and propped it up on an elbow.

“What the hell’s all the excitement?” he yawned.

“Must be Gothas,” drawled Travis. “Maybe if we hurry we can get a crack at them.”

“Well,” Shorty argued, “if they’re strafing us, why in hell don’t they start in and—”

B-r-roooooom! Blang-bam!

As if in diabolical answer to Shorty’s question, there came one of the most ear-splitting and terrific explosions the three men had ever heard. The mighty detonation drowned out all other sound and made the floor shake violently beneath their feet. The explosion also succeeded in waking Shorty up. The little man leaped from his cot as if hurled by a catapult. He was wide awake now all right.

“God Almighty!” he gasped. “Did you hear that bomb?”

“Did I hear it?” Kirby exclaimed.

“Holy hell, a deaf man could have heard it, and I’ve got damn good ears.”

The Three Mosquitoes looked at one another in puzzled alarm.

“Never heard a bomb like that before,” drawled Travis, expressing the thought that was in all their minds.

“Damned funny that one bomb can—”

Blang-boom! B-r-rooom! This explosion was even more terrific than the previous one. The concussion sent the three men reeling drunkenly about the room. There was a sound of shattering glass and splintering wood throughout the building. Shouts rose from all directions. Some one was yelling, “Fire!” in a hoarse and frenzied voice. There was another frightful detonation, and through the window of their room the Three Mosquitoes saw a tremendous sheet of flame shoot upwards, livid against the gray dawn. Debris showered down on the roof overhead, and again came sounds of smashing wood.

“The mess hall!” Kirby exclaimed. “They’ve got it!” Incredulity and horror threaded his voice. “They’ve wiped it clean off the drome—and with one hit. God, but that’s impossible! It should have taken five or six bombs to wipe out that building.” As he spoke he was buttoning up his teddy-bear with mad haste. “Hurry, fellers, for the love of Pete. Let’s get out of here and see if we can’t do something about this before it’s too late.”

But the other two needed no such urging. They were getting into their togs as fast as they could.

B-r-r-ooooom! Boom-brroom! Again and again those earth-shaking explosions made the barracks shudder on its foundations. They came at long intervals, but they seemed to make up for their scarcity by their terrible effect. Outside, the anti-aircraft and machine-gun crews were doing their damndest, blazing away with everything they had. But still, wherever there was a fleeting second of comparative stillness, that beelike drone in the air could be heard, continuing imperturbably, in blissful oblivion to all the guns which tried to ferret it out.

“Coming, fellers?” Kirby shouted, as he grabbed his helmet and went for the door. Travis and Carn followed, with Shorty still buttoning up. They rushed out of the room into the dim corridor of the barracks. Other pilots, sleepy-eyed, dazed and half-dressed, bumped into them as they stumbled along.

“God!” one man shrilled at them in a high, cracked voice. “This isn’t a raid—it’s an earthquake!” A jagged, hysterical laugh tore from his throat, and his eyes shone wildly. “We’re getting blown to hell.”

“Into the dugouts, men!” a stern voice barked

suddenly. "No building is safe." And a moment later the Three Mosquitoes ran into the C.O., who stood in the hallway rasping out orders. Although the light was dim, the grizzled old colonel's face was so white they could see it clearly, see the expression of mingled horror and worry written upon it. The C.O. looked at them dazedly. His voice shook.

"We haven't a chance," he blurted at them. "They're razing the whole drome. Get into the dugouts before this building is blasted off the earth. Other wise—"

Another explosion cut off the rest of his sentence. The burst was horribly close. The men were sent reeling against the wall, and had to brace themselves with all their strength. Down the hallway other men cursed as they stumbled and tried to keep their balance.

Kirby turned to the C.O. "Damn it, sir, we're going up!" His voice was fierce with determination. "We'll get those dirty Krauts. They can't get away with a stunt like this. There's something phony about it. Come on, fellers, *let's go!*"

The C.O. waved his arms at them. "You're crazy," he snapped. "You can't do anything now. You can't get into the air. Get into the dugouts." His voice rose once more to a rasping bark. "Everybody into the dugouts!" Like a captain trying to get his men off the sinking ship and ignoring his own safety, he shouted, "Into the dugouts! Into the dugouts!"

He brushed past the Three Mosquitoes, who continued to make their way towards the door of the hall. *Blang-bam!* The explosion was followed this time by a reverberating crash from the rear of the building. Some one yelled, "The roof's caving in!" and a general panic started as everybody crowded and pushed frantically to get out of the place. The Three Mosquitoes struggled through the milling crowd. At last they reached the doorway, and lurched out into the chill dawn air. Here they stood for a moment, unafraid, to take a look at the scene. Pilots brushed and stumbled past them, to dive headlong into the row of bomb-proof dugouts right outside the barracks. In the same dugouts the anti-aircraft batteries were located, sheltered by great layers of sandbags which covered everything but the gun nozzles. They were blazing away as rapidly as they could, and bright, yellowish flashes leaped from them in swift succession.

THE day had broken now, and the sun was a red glow in the east. It was getting steadily lighter, and a fine mist was drifting from the drome. Visibility

was clear enough; the Three Mosquitoes could see everything. And the scene they saw made their eyes widen in sheer horror.

Many times before the drome had been raided, but never had any raid wrought such devastating effects as this. What had been one of the largest and finest airdromes on the western Front was now virtually reduced to a tremendous, twisted heap of junk. And what had been a smooth and level tarmac, which made a take-off a pleasure, was now a small range of mountains and ravines. Though only three bombs had been spent on the tarmac itself, the holes they had torn gaped like volcanic craters.

On the opposite side of the field, four of the six hangars had been razed, together with the mess hall. The fifth hangar was partially destroyed now, for it was on fire; flames and smoke eddied from a jagged hole in one of its walls. The only buildings that still stood, though they too were shaken and damaged, were those on this side of the field—including the barracks and the operations office. Obviously the Boche were working with their customary precision. They were taking one part of the drome at a time, sweeping down each thing as they came to it, like a lawn mower.

But where were these Boche, who were able to wreak such unheard of destruction? The Three Mosquitoes had taken in this whole scene in a swift, comprehensive glance, and now they were searching grimly for the invaders. Their eyes swept upwards to the vicinity where the anti-aircraft shells were sprouting out into great white mushrooms which hung in the sky. It was Shorty who saw the thing first. He shouted excitedly, pointing upward. Kirby and Travis looked.

Right over the fifth hangar, swooping down for it now like some monstrous hawk swooping for its victim, a twin-motored Gotha was outlined in black against the light sky. It had great black wings and twin tails, and yet it wasn't one of the Giant Gothas—those lumbering monsters which are so cumbersome they can hardly stay aloft. This was a smaller ship, evidently only a three-place job. And it was fast; the antiaircrafts couldn't get near it.

The Three Mosquitoes stared at one another, absolutely mystified. "Only one Gotha," Kirby exclaimed. "And a fairly small one too. God—" He shook his head. "How in hell can one small Gotha do damage like this? Why, I figured those bombs must be so big that it would take a whole plane to carry one of them—and a damn big plane at that."

"Just what I was thinking," Shorty chimed in. "How in hell can—"

He broke off, for just then the Gotha was sweeping directly over the hangar. The Three Mosquitoes watched in awful fascination, watched as a barely visible object dropped from the big ship and went spinning down through space.

B-r-r-roooooom! Crash! The earth shook beneath the three pilots' feet. And that fifth hangar disappeared in a tremendous mass of smoke and debris which rose high into the air and then showered down in all directions. The Gotha was climbing now, obviously to get into a position to bomb the last remaining hangar. Again the Three Mosquitoes stared at one another.

"Those bombs must be small," Travis observed. "Otherwise they couldn't drop so many of them. But if they are small, how can they do damage like that?"

Kirby scarcely heard him, for at this moment his attention was focused on something else. Most of the planes had been wrecked with the hangars, but at a far end of the field, as yet untouched by the raid, four Spads squatted on their wheels. They were planes that had been brought out previously for the dawn patrol, though as yet they had not been revved.

Kirby turned to his comrades, his eyes gleaming eagerly. "What do you say, fellers?" he asked. "If we can get to those damn ships and start them, we might be able to dodge the holes in the ground and take off. Maybe we can plug that Gotha before it finishes its work. Are you guys with me, or don't you want to take a chance of being blown to hell?"

He himself knew the question was unnecessary. Eagerly, Shorty and Travis shouted, "Let's go!" And the Three Mosquitoes, living up to their reckless, dare-devil reputation, calmly headed out across the field, ran towards those four Spads as fast as they could, while the other members of the squadron, being saner and respecting the C.O.'s explicit orders, huddled in the dugouts and hoped that the Gotha wouldn't come and see if the shelters were really bombproof.

Fortunately the Jerries in the Gotha didn't notice the three men dashing across the field. But even so, the danger was terrific, as it always is when one walks out in the open during a raid. The bombs that fell anywhere near them threatened more than once to annihilate them. Each time they heard one of the missiles shrieking down through space, they hurled themselves flat on the ground and waited until the explosion was over. Twice the concussions made their very teeth rattle. Dirt and debris showered down on

them, and the acrid stench of powder was in their nostrils. But they got up and kept plunging on towards those four Spads, praying that at least three of the ships would remain intact until they could reach them.

The Gotha, having missed its attack on the fifth hangar, was now going for it a second time. The Three Mosquitoes had just reached the planes when the next explosion swept them off their feet and made all the Spads wobble perilously. The fifth hangar was gone now, and again the Gotha was climbing at the opposite end of the field. Kirby and his comrades had now chosen three of the ships, and each man was his own mechanic. With practiced hands they started pulling the propellers through compression.

Suddenly a sharp cry of alarm broke from Kirby. The Gotha had just swung around in a graceful bank, far down the other end of the field. And now, swiftly, it was heading straight this way, straight towards the group of planes on the ground. The Jerries had seen the Mosquitoes at last, seen them trying to get the ships started and they were determined that no planes should have even a ghost of a chance to pursue them.

"Hurry up, fellers!" Kirby urged in a sort of dumb helplessness. But at the same time, he pulled the prop again and jumped away as the engine of the Spad roared into life. Simultaneously the engines of his comrades sputtered and roared. The Gotha was coming closer and closer, looming into gigantic size and shape. Madly the Three Mosquitoes made for their cockpits. There was only one thing they could do and they did it.

Without revving up, thus risking the conk-out of a cold engine, they pulled out their chokes and opened their throttles full. The three Spads instantly leaped forward, smoke pouring from their exhaust stacks. Skilfully, the Three Mosquitoes rode the bucking ships over the torn-up tarmac, miraculously dodging the great bomb-craters. The Gotha came right on down, but it was attacking a moving target now, and the target was moving faster and faster. *Blang-bang!* The bomb burst far behind the three little planes, though the concussion almost made them do a wing-over into the ground. The Gotha turned to sweep over their heads again. But before it could get into a position to drop a bomb this time, the three Spads, having gathered flying speed, streaked into the air. And the Three Mosquitoes were zooming like bats out of hell, zooming into the clearing haze of the sky.

AS SOON as the Three Mosquitoes were in the air, all the anti-aircrafts and machine-gun crews ceased

firing, so they would not risk hitting the Spads. The gunners knew well that three planes were worth all the anti-aircraft guns in the world. The Jerries knew it, too. From the hunters they changed to the hunted. But they were not cowards, those Boche flyers. Instead of fleeing at once, they swerved off from the zooming Spads and went diving madly for the barracks building, determined to use the rest of their bombs before they fled.

Kirby, seeing their purpose as he was finishing the act of strapping his helmet and pulling down his goggles, cursed and waved wildly to the two ships which kept on either side of his. The three Spads, with their engines still sputtering protestingly, banked mildly and nosed for the diving Gotha, as fast as they could. But it was too late.

Five more bombs went whizzing down through space. Five more infernal explosions shattered the air and made the three little Spads rock violently. The barracks building was no more; it was blown to hell. And there were fresh craters in the field outside.

The Gotha now turned again and headed hell-bent for Boche-land. Kirby and his comrades, bent on vengeance, followed. The Gotha was fast, amazingly fast. It was gaining on the Spads now, because the engines of the Spads were not yet warmed. Furiously, the Three Mosquitoes tried to urge their reluctant ships forward, and slowly they managed to coax more speed out of them. And down below, on the wrecked drome, the men of the squadron who had not been killed or wounded crept out of the dugouts and watched the chase, wishing vainly that they could give help. They couldn't, because the only remaining plane on the ground had been blown to smithereens, and besides, only such crazy dare-devils as the Three Mosquitoes could have taken a ship off this bomb-torn tarmac.

Now at last the Three Mosquitoes were gaining. The engines of the Spads had finally warmed up, and the three planes shot forward like missiles, cleaving the air. Faster and faster, until the gap between the Mosquitoes and the Gotha was rapidly closing. Cleverly, Kirby and his comrades were also gaining altitude, so that they would have the advantage over the Jerries. Closer and closer now. The Gotha loomed ahead and below with its twin tails. Sure enough, it was a three-place ship, with the pilot and two observers sitting in the bathtublike fuselage between the two engines.

Kirby jerked his head from side to side. The planes of his comrades were in their usual places, flanking

him on either side and a little to the rear, forming the V which was their battle formation. Kirby caught the goggled eyes of Shorty and Travis. The two men grinned across at him eagerly. He glanced down. The Gotha was a full thousand feet below and just ahead. Kirby's eyes narrowed to gleaming slits. Slowly he nodded. Then his left arm shot upwards to wave the familiar signal, and with his right he shoved his joystick savagely forward.

Down he went in a thundering dive, nose pointed straight for the big black Gotha below. And down followed Carn and Travis. Kirby leaned to his sights, and ruddered until he caught the outline of the Gotha in the little ring. He was in range. His fingers closed on the stick-triggers, and squeezed them.

Rat-ta-tat-tat-tat! The twin machine guns blazed into stuttering life, and like an echo came the clatter of his comrades' guns. The tracer went streaking downwards, drawing crisscross lines of smoke on either side of the Gotha. The German plane started to roll frantically, with all the speed its size would allow. The two observers flanked up their machine guns and started blazing away at the Spads for all they were worth. Bullets whistled unhealthily close to Kirby and his comrades, but they ignored them. Flattening out of their dives, they commenced to buzz like maddened hornets about the larger Gotha. They cut in front of the bomber's path, and the Gotha, all its guns peppering away, was forced to turn. Banking sharply, it dived to get away. But the Three Mosquitoes followed relentlessly, gyrating all about it, weaving in and out as they sought to train their machine guns for a fatal shot.

Presently the three Spads were forcing the Gotha back, back—further and further into Allied territory, until they were getting close to the drome again. The Jerries, desperate, fought as only cornered men can, and their shots began to tell. A bullet grazed Kirby's cheek and ricocheted from the cowl behind him. Another splintered one of his wing-struts. Travis' top wing had a gaping hole in it, and Carn's rudder was pretty badly shot up.

But these hits, if anything, served to rouse the Mosquitoes' blood even more. They attacked the Gotha with new vehemence. They closed in on it daringly, scorning its withering fire, lunging and swooping at it in the pesky, mosquitolike fashion which had won them their nicknames. The planes were all back over the airdrome now, and down below the men watched and cheered as they saw the three little Spads slowly but surely cornering their big quarry.

And then came the beginning of the end. One of the Jerry observers suddenly slumped down over his gun as Travis' shots found him. And though the other observer and the pilot did their damndest to get along without their comrade, they didn't stand a chance.

In another moment the Three Mosquitoes caught the German ship dead in their crossfire. The Gotha lurched as if drunk from the bullets which pumped it, and began to reel perilously. Still the Mosquitoes kept firing mercilessly, with the sight of the devastated drome below spurring them to wreak full vengeance on the raiders.

The Gotha flew queerly, crazily, for a brief moment. Then, slowly, its wings drooped over and it nosed into a spin. Down it went, hurtling, with the three Spads following on its tail like buzzards. The Jerry pilot was fighting madly with his controls. But the Gotha kept spinning down, down, closer and closer to the ripped-up tarmac below. In just another moment the fatal crash would come.

But in that moment, to the admiring surprise of Kirby and his comrades, the Jerry pilot succeeded in pulling his big ship out of the spin. The Gotha's nose came up, spurning the ground, and the German plane got into a glide. The Three Mosquitoes continued to follow, holding their fire because they knew the Gotha was caught, even if it was not destroyed. Down they all swept, straight over the tarmac.

The Jerry was trying to make a decent landing, but the ground was too rough. Ironically enough, the Boche's own handiwork was now playing against him. But still, he did manage to pancake on one of the few level stretches of the field. The Gotha settled down with an impact which broke its undercarriage but otherwise left it intact.

Men came dashing out to the scene. In a moment the fallen Gotha was surrounded, and its Jerry occupants had no time to set fire to it. The pilot and the one surviving observer climbed out and raised their hands slowly above their heads in silent surrender. The other Jerry observer was dead when the men lifted him out.

While the prisoners were being stripped of their weapons, the Three Mosquitoes were landing their Spads on a fairly level road just off the drome. They jumped from their cockpits and rushed to the scene. It was morning now, and the sun was blazing brilliantly. The Three Mosquitoes pushed their way through the crowd of pilots and mechanics around the Gotha. Their comrades congratulated them, slapped them on the back. The two Jerry prisoners scowled sullenly.

SUDDENLY all the men stiffened respectfully as the C.O. appeared on the scene. The old colonel looked more haggard and worried than ever now. It was no wonder. His drome had been blasted off the face of the earth, and when the full details had been checked up, twelve men were found to have been killed and four wounded by the terrific bombing. Nevertheless, despite his worry and despair, the C.O. found time to give a word or two of gruff praise to the Three Mosquitoes.

"Good work, men," he said. "Glad you got them. And glad they're alive, because now we can find out from them what this is all about. Now," he ordered, tersely, "you three men can bring the prisoners into the operations office. Thank God, it's still standing. We'll question them there."

Kirby and his comrades nodded. They pulled out their Colts and marched the two sullen prisoners between them, following the C.O. Leaving the crowd who kept examining the captured Gotha curiously, they crossed the rough field to a spot where two buildings still stood up proudly among the ruins. One was the parts and repair shack, the other the operations office.

"Close the door!" the C.O. ordered sharply, as they all entered the latter building. Shorty Carn closed the door. The prisoners, with their hands lowered now, stood in the center of the room, their faces scowling masks. The Three Mosquitoes kept them covered with their Colts. The C.O. wheeled on them abruptly.

"Speak English?" he demanded, crisply.

The two Jerries shrugged, shaking their heads. The C.O. turned to Travis. "Question them in German," he ordered the lanky Mosquito. "Your German is the best around here. Guess you know what to ask them."

Travis nodded. He confronted the two Germans, and his face was as hard as his voice. "It will go better with you two men," he told them, resorting to the customary line used for such purposes, "if you talk. It will make your stay with us far more agreeable. Are you willing to answer questions?"

Instead of replying at once, the two Jerries looked at one another, as if exchanging some tacit message by a glance. Then, still scowling, they faced Travis again. The pilot, who seemed to be the leader of the two, said in a dull, hostile voice, "What questions do you wish us to answer?"

"We want to know what you dropped on this airdrome this morning, what kind of explosive it was that could do such unheard of damage."

Almost instantly the scowl on the Jerries' faces changed to a look of naive innocence.

"We dropped the ordinary twenty-five kilo bombs," growled the pilot, and at least part of his statement was true. The Mosquitoes and the C.O. knew that those bombs, judging from the quantity dropped and the size of the Gotha, couldn't have been more than twenty-five kilos or fifty pounds each. But—

"Those were no ordinary bombs," Travis said. "No ordinary twenty-five kilo bombs could explode like that. Now what was in them?"

"The usual high explosive," insisted the Jerry pilot.

Travis nourished his revolver menacingly. Kirby and Shorty, who had followed this conversation, though they didn't know German as well as their elder comrade, also waved their Colts. The C.O. frowned darkly and leaned against his desk.

"You are wasting time," Travis told the Germans, grimly. "And I'm warning you, we will not give you another chance. Now what was in those bombs? Was it," he hinted, "some new kind of explosive?"

"It was ordinary high explosive," repeated the German pilot, with an almost dumb stubbornness.

And that was all Travis was able to get out of him or the observer. The lanky Mosquito, losing his patience, threatened them with all kinds of dire consequences. The C.O. threatened them too, in his rather jerky German. But threats seemed of no avail against these two stubborn Boche. And at last Travis sighed and threw tip his hands.

"It seems useless," he had to admit to the C.O. "They won't talk—and I can't make 'em."

The C.O. cursed in disgust and then pressed a buzzer. An orderly appeared as if by magic.

"Get some men," barked the C.O., "and take these two prisoners outside. Hold them until further orders."

A moment later the men arrived and the prisoners were marched out. The C.O. went to his desk.

"No use wasting any more time on them just now," he said. "The first thing to do is to get in touch with G.H.Q. and give them a full report of the whole atrocity." He reached for the phone on his desk. "I hope the bombs didn't destroy the connections." But the connections proved to be all right, for in another moment the C.O. was talking earnestly with G.H.Q. For ten minutes he burned the wire, while the Three Mosquitoes waited, shifting restlessly.

At last the C.O. hung up, his face drawn. "They're sending somebody right over to investigate," he said. "They can't understand it—this raid. Neither can I."

He sighed and then sank back in his chair, looking suddenly quite old and weary. "This war isn't what it used to be, what with these new gases and explosives. One gets damned fed up with the whole bloody mess—" He broke off, suddenly pulling himself together. "Well, we haven't lost yet," he said, cheerfully. "Not by a damn sight. We'll just move into some new drome and carry on."

"If only we could retaliate," Kirby put in, furiously. "If only there were some way to get even with the dirty Krauts—"

"Well," advised the C.O. "Let's wait and see what the man from G.H.Q. has to say."

They did not have long to wait. Less than half an hour later, a staff car came swirling down the dusty road and drew up beside the wrecked drome. A tall, keen-eyed man in the uniform of a brigadier general climbed out with the unneeded assistance of two orderlies. His face was long and stern. It grew longer and sterner as he surveyed the scene of ruination about him.

The C.O. and the Three Mosquitoes hurried out to meet him, and all saluted the high officer respectfully. The general wasted no time with preliminaries. His tone was clipped and to the point.

"I'm Brigadier General Saunders," he announced. "From intelligence. Where can we talk—in privacy?"

The C.O. nodded. "If the general will come into the office—" He paused, glancing at Kirby and his comrades. "These men here are the famous Three Mosquitoes, as we call them. Since they shot down the Gotha, and since I've already taken them into my confidence in this matter, I trust—"

The general waved off the explanation. "They can come, too. I've heard of them all right. Damn good men." But in spite of the words he spoke, there was very little praise in his tone.

A moment later they were all back in the operations office. The general accepted the C.O.'s desk, and the others drew up chairs. The C.O. then proceeded to recite all the grim details of the raid, leaving out none of its ghastly horrors. The general seemed hardly to be listening; he tapped the desk with his fingers abstractedly, and his eyes had a far-away look. But as soon as the C.O. had finished, the high officer turned on him with a rapid fire of questions which were little less than a cross-examination. The Three Mosquitoes listened in silence, and in silence they sympathized with their C.O.

"Where are these two prisoners?"

"We're holding them outside, by the parts and repair shack."

"Did you search them?"

"Naturally, sir." The C.O.'s tone was just a little hurt.

"We took their weapons and their identifications."

"You didn't find any maps on them?"

"No, sir. They didn't carry any."

"What squadron are they from, according to their identifications?"

"The 46th Imperial bombing squadron. Just a moment, sir." He reached into his tunic, drew out two metal disks. "Yes, here they are. *Hauptmann* Karl von Ritter—that's the pilot. And *Leutnant* Emil Wolff—the observer. The dead German's name—"

"Never mind," the general cut him off. "Did you question them?"

"Lieutenant Travis here questioned them." Travis nodded his agreement. "But they refused to talk."

"Oh they did, did they?" The general's keen eyes narrowed. "Well, suppose you have them brought in now."

"Yes, sir," said the C.O. "But I'm afraid we won't be able to get a word out of them. They're as tight as clams."

"Clams can be opened," the general snapped, and added with faint irony, "if you know how to open them. Bring the prisoners in, please."

AND so the two Germans, still sullen and scowling, were ushered in again. The Three Mosquitoes rose to serve as guards, and covered the Jerries once more with their Colts. The general also rose to confront the two prisoners. His eyes blazed at them and his voice was like the roar of a lion.

"You Germans," he thundered, and he spoke their language flawlessly, "have a nasty habit of shooting our pilots for carrying incendiary bullets, when you capture them. Well, we have caught you using something which seems to be far worse than incendiary bullets." His tone was absolutely merciless, and so was his face. "We shall make an example of you by sending you both to the firing squad."

At this the two Jerries winced. The pilot managed quickly to recover his former poise, and stood calm and defiant. But the observer was weakening noticeably; a slow pallor was creeping into his face, and there was stark fear in his eyes.

"Have either of you anything to say," roared the general, "before we take you out and shoot you like the dogs that you are."

The pilot's lips drew up into a tight little line and he shook his head with courageous firmness. But the observer grew even paler; his face was almost ashen, sweat began to bead his forehead, and he shifted like a cornered animal. The general's keen eyes did not miss this at all, and he acted accordingly. "Have this pilot taken out," he commanded in English. "Hold him a while." The C.O., just a little bewildered by all these strange proceedings, pressed his buzzer and summoned men from outside. The pilot was marched out. He walked erect and defiant, and the Three Mosquitoes admired his guts. Before he left, however, the Boche pilot shot one significant glance at the observer, as if warning the latter not to break.

After the door had closed again, the general turned to the observer and looked at him much like a cat looks at a cornered mouse. "And you," he roared, "I suppose you have nothing to say, either! Well, that being the case we shall—"

"But wait—*Gott!*" High-pitched and shaking with fear, the words tore jerkily from the observer's throat. Just as the general had planned, the man lost all his nerve the moment his comrade was no longer beside him to bolster his morale. "You—you should not shoot us, *Herr Offizier*," the observer blurted, wildly. "We did nothing! We were just obeying orders—"

"You lie!" the general shot at him. "You deliberately came over here and dropped some new explosive on our drome. You—"

"No, not deliberately!" pleaded the frantic observer, his whole face clammy with sweat now. "We never liked the idea in the first place. We had to obey orders."

"Who would authorize such an atrocity?" the general snorted.

"Imperial staff. We did not even want to carry the new stuff."

"The new stuff?"

"The bombs—the new bombs! They brought them to our drome. It was only an experiment. We were sent to try them out. We were afraid of them all the way—because we knew how deadly they were."

There was a tense pause. The observer, was breathing heavily; he looked like some wild thing in a trap. The general was stroking his chin. The C.O. and the Three Mosquitos looked at one another in awe. The breathless little drama that was being enacted before them held them spell-bound, and they marveled at the ingenuous sagacity of this hard-boiled intelligence general, who seemed to know just how to open a man's mouth. The observer was talking now

all right—and yet he hardly realized he was talking, so cleverly did the general wheedle the information from him.

At last the general spoke again. His voice was a trifle milder now. “Well, perhaps that alters matters somewhat,” he admitted dubiously, and a light of hope flickered in the observer’s eyes. “If this is merely some experiment, and you are the first ones to try it—well, that is different. But I’m more inclined to believe that these new bombs are in current use and—”

“But no, they are not!” In his single, frantic desire to argue himself out of the death penalty, the observer went right on supplying the precious information. “They are not in current use, I can swear to you. They have just been made and—”

“Nonsense,” snorted the general, “I’m sure I’ve heard of these bombs before.”

“Not these! These are new—brand new! The explosive was but recently discovered. You must have heard of some other kind.”

“Isn’t this the stuff called teraline?” the general challenged, cleverly naming the highest explosive known.

“No—it is not teraline!” the guileless observer told him eagerly. “This is known as XXX. It is five times as powerful as teraline. You see,” he pointed out, “it really is new.”

“Well,” the general went on arguing, like a wily lawyer, “nevertheless, I still think the new bombs are in current use. How can you tell me they are not? How do you know that some of the munition factories have not released them and—”

“But that cannot be,” the observer again filled in. “Because only one ammunition factory has made the bombs. They are not to be released until their effectiveness is absolutely proved by experiment.”

“But how do you know they are just made by this one factory?”

“Because the place is near our airdrome. And when they brought the bombs, they told us.”

The general pondered a moment. Then he said, “Since your drome, according to your identifications, is at Staffletz, you must refer to the Staffletz munition works. And you say that this is the only factory making the stuff?”

“There is no other,” the observer affirmed.

The general seemed satisfied. “Well, I guess that will be enough,” he stated.

“Then—then you will not shoot us?” the observer asked, with timid eagerness.

The general looked upon him with sudden disgust, and his tone filled with contemptuous scorn. “As a matter of fact,” he said, “I had no intention of shooting either of you. We do not murder fallen aviators here, no matter what they do.” The observer looked at him with wide eyes. Then the Jerry’s face fell, as he realized at last that what had made him talk his head off was all a bluff.

“Take him out,” barked the general. And a moment later the sentries outside came and marched the crestfallen observer away. The C.O. looked at the general with unconcealed admiration. “I don’t see how you did it, sir,” he said. “You know how to make a man talk.”

The general scorned the compliment brusquely. “Most of them will talk,” he said. “It’s merely a case of not letting them think they’re talking.” He went over to the C.O.’s desk and sat down, heavily. The sternness had suddenly gone out of him, and he looked as worried and tired as the C.O. himself. He mopped his brow with a handkerchief. His voice was grim.

“To say that we are confronted with a most serious problem would be putting it mildly. You have seen this morning just what this new explosive, XXX, is capable of doing in the way of destruction. Well, try to imagine what will happen when the stuff is released from Staffletz to be used on us wholesale. Try to imagine bombs like those—and shells too—falling on our supply bases, our villages, cities.”

THE C.O. and the Three Mosquitoes nodded grimly. All too well they could imagine the ghastly things at which the general had only hinted. In vivid mental pictures they saw towns and cities being razed just as this drome had been razed, saw Paris laid waste, and London reduced to smouldering ashes. They saw advancing Allied armies being slaughtered wholesale by this explosive which was five times more deadly than the most powerful stuff yet known. And finally they saw the inevitable result of all this annihilation and destruction, saw the black future—with Germany victorious, the kaiser ruler of the world, and—

“Damn it to hell!” Kirby burst out, forgetting that he was in the presence of a high officer. He was blazing mad, as were both his comrades and the old C.O. “We’ve got to stop the dirty Krauts from releasing that stuff. And by God—” his fists clenched until the knuckles showed white, “we will! Look here—” this to the general, “if we could put that damn Staffletz plant out of commission, wouldn’t it—”

"If," interrupted the general, stressing the conjunction gloomily, "the Staffletz works could possibly be destroyed, our problem would indeed be solved. The Staffletz plant is the largest Germany has; it supplies most of the ammunition now used by the Boche. And I'm sure that if it were destroyed, together with the stores of XXX it has ready for release, the other smaller plants throughout Germany would be so busy trying to turn out the needed supply of regulation ammunition for the armies that they would have neither time nor money to install the equipment and men necessary for the production of the new XXX. In other words, it is safe to assume that by the time the Germans got around to making more of this vile XXX, either the war will be over or we will have discovered some explosive powerful enough to serve as an antidote."

"Well, then," it was Shorty Carn this time who spoke vehemently, "why can't we and maybe a bunch of other buzzards go over there in some big bombers and blow holy hell out of the place?"

"We could try, anyway," drawled the lanky Travis. And the grizzled old C.O. chimed in, with all the paternal pride he felt for his three favorite boys. "And believe me, sir, if the thing can be done at all, these three men will do it!"

But the general shared none of their enthusiasm. Tiredly, he leaned back in his chair and clasped his hands behind his head. "As a matter of fact," he said, seeming to digress, "we have been suspecting that something new was being turned out at Staffletz for the past three months. Our agents reported that an air of secrecy surrounded the place, and that it was being guarded with the most rigid vigilance. Acting on their suspicions—for they were absolutely unable to get the facts—we tried every possible means to blow up that plant, tried everything from air raids to espionage."

"We've sent as many as a hundred planes at a time to try to bomb the factory. But it was useless. The place is literally raid-proof. No planes can get near it. They have a ground defense there which can send up a barrage as solid and impenetrable as a stone wall; a gnat couldn't fly through it. And they have several squadrons of the new D7 Fokkers flying all over the place. What is more, even if our planes did manage, by some miracle, to get over the plant, it is doubtful that they could drop their bombs with sure effect. The buildings are all made of heavy concrete, and covered by layers and layers of sandbags. There are even nets stretched above the roofs to catch the falling bombs. So

you can see, the Boche have taken ample precautions to protect the plant from any bomb raids!"

The C.O. and the Three Mosquitoes shook their heads grimly. The eager hope had left their faces as they listened to this description of invulnerability. Certainly an air raid on Staffletz seemed to be out of the question.

The general now reached beneath his tunic and drew out a folder. It proved to contain several maps. He shuffled through them as he spoke. "As soon as I heard of this raid, I took out all the maps of the important munitions works, all the plants where the new explosive could possibly come from and— Ah, here it is," he announced, as he separated one of the maps from the sheaf. "A map of the Staffletz works, carefully drawn by one of our agents."

He laid it out on the desk, facing the other four men, who leaned over to examine it curiously.

"You can see now," the general explained, indicating the map with a dabbing forefinger, "that the place is as impregnable as a fortress. Located right on the river Brenne, which adds to its protection on one side, it occupies two full square miles of ground. Notice that the whole place is surrounded by a solid wall; and there is only one entrance, a gate guarded by a whole company of trusted sentries. Sentries are stationed all along the wall too, and there are high lookout towers. Anyone trying to sneak in would be instantly Spotted and shot down like a dog, even though he were a German."

"Never before has a place been so jealously guarded. Only those who have specific business in the plant are permitted to enter the gate. Even German high officers are turned away. And to gain entry one must identify himself almost to the point of displaying a birth certificate and finger prints, and any package he carries is opened and searched. One of our most clever and gallant agents was caught just that way." His face darkened in reminiscence. His masquerade as a German staff officer was quite successful, but he carried a satchel. They opened it and found the bomb inside. He was executed on the spot."

A slight chill went coursing through the Three Mosquitoes, and the C.O. shifted uncomfortably. The general continued, grimly, "Even the sentries and the workmen have to identify themselves when they go in or out. Everybody there is known. The Boche are taking absolutely no chance. You can't blame them—especially now that we know about those stores of XXX which must be in one or more of the many buildings."

"But, sir," Kirby suddenly protested, "certainly the place can't be closed up like that all the time. I mean, they must be transporting ammunition out for use at the Front. How do they do that?"

"I SHOULD have mentioned that previously," the general admitted. He ran his finger along another line in the map. "You see, here is a railway, running adjacent to one of the buildings. Here the trains are loaded daily with shells and bombs and run out, after midnight, through an underground tunnel which puts them on their separate routes for the Front. I will admit that this railroad is perhaps the most vulnerable spot on the grounds, even though it is also sheltered. If just one hit could be made on one of those shell-laden cars, the scores and scores of shells would be set off and fly in all directions. Some of them would surely find the explosives in the buildings. And once they found the XXX—well, there would be a gigantic hole in the ground where the Staffletz plant used to be.

"But," he sighed, "there is no sense wasting time with such hopeless conjectures. You men can see from what I've told you that the thing can't be done. G.H.Q. has long pondered on the matter, and they have reached the conclusion that it is a military impossibility. The Staffletz plant cannot be attacked in any way; it is invulnerable."

"But," Kirby blazed, in a dumb, futile rage, "must we just stand by without lifting a finger while they release all that XXX and start using it all over the place? Damn it, sir," he pleaded, earnestly, "we three fellers are willing to go the limit—willing to do anything to stop those Krauts!" And Shorty and Travis gave their vehement assent.

The general's tone was warm and friendly, just the opposite of what it had been when he had first arrived. "I wish we could use you three men some way," he said, sincerely. "You've done excellent work for us before, and we know we can rely on you. But this seems to be a nut nobody can crack." Again he sighed and mopped his brow. Then he glanced at his wrist watch and abruptly he stiffened, snapping right back to his former, officious self. Once more his voice was terse, gruff. "I've got to get back and make my report. In the meantime, G.H.Q. will doubtless send you directions for moving into some new drome, where you can resume work."

He rose, and the others jumped up with him. Kirby and his comrades looked almost crestfallen, and so did the C.O. Gloomily they accompanied the general

out of the shack into the dazzling morning sunshine. Across the torn-up tarmac an emergency kitchen was doing a rush business, serving coffee and rolls to the men. The C.O. and the Three Mosquitoes realized suddenly that they had not yet breakfasted. But none of them were hungry; their appetites were spoiled by the thought of that heinous new explosive which would soon be unleashed in all its deadly fury.

Kirby's glance wandered mechanically to the fallen Gotha, which still rested on its buckled and smashed undercarriage out on the field. And suddenly, as he looked at that ship, a light leaped in his eyes, and a flush of enthusiasm came over his face.

"General!" Eagerly he addressed the lanky officer, who paused to listen to him with slight impatience. "That Gotha over there—it can be fixed up again without much trouble. And we buzzards can fly that crate!" Shorty and Travis, grasping at once what he was driving at, grinned in joyful agreement. "We can fly any damn crate," Kirby boasted, proudly. "Well now, surely the Jerries wouldn't get suspicious if they saw one of their own ships passing over the Staffletz joint. All we have to do is to fly over one of those cars full of shells you told us about, and then bomb hell out of it before they get wise. It's a dirty trick, but all's fair in—" His voice trailed off into a dismal, empty silence, for the expression which came over the general's face completely crushed his hopes.

The high officer's tone was almost scornful now. "You must think our intelligence division is extremely thick," he snapped, and Kirby felt like a fool. "Otherwise you could have guessed that we considered that ancient subterfuge of a German ship long ago. Why, the Germans themselves have considered it, I might have told you before that even German ships are not allowed to fly over that plant. The Fokkers which guard the place must keep a certain distance away, and it is their duty to turn away all other approaching aircraft. If any German plane persists in trying to fly above the grounds, it will be shot to smithereens before it gets there just as if it were an Allied ship."

And, almost in disgust, the general resumed walking briskly towards the waiting staff car on the road. The C.O. walked beside him, while Kirby and his comrades, all three silent and despondent, followed in the rear. But Kirby, despite what had happened, refused to give up. Even as they drew closer and closer to the staff car his mind was racing, going over every conceivable plan, trying fiercely to work something out. Somehow he couldn't quite get that Gotha out of

his head. It stuck there, and he kept thinking about it. And it proved to be the germ of the idea which suddenly struck him like a bolt from the blue. At first Kirby was reluctant to say anything about this new plan of his, fearing that he would only win more scorn from the general. But when he saw that they were right up to the staff car now, and that in another moment the general would be whisked away, he could restrain himself no longer.

"General—" Again he spoke eagerly to the lanky officer. "This time I really think I've got something, if I remember that map of yours correctly. Won't you come back to the shack with us and hear me out? By God!" His confidence and optimism grew as the idea shaped up more and more clearly in his mind. "I'm sure I know how we can do the trick now."

The C.O. and Shorty and Travis looked at him curiously. But the general was naturally skeptical. "My time is precious," he stated, crisply. "Can you describe your idea briefly right here?"

"But," Kirby pleaded, "don't you think we'd all better talk it over in privacy—to make sure no one overhears? You see, sir, I'm sure I've struck the right hunch this time. It won't take long! I'll get it right off my chest."

The general hesitated, considering a moment. Then he said, "Well, I'll give you a chance. But," his tone became ominous, "God help you if you suggest anything as ancient as that last idea of yours!"

AND so, back into the operations office they all went. Kirby made sure this time that the door was tightly closed. They were all seated again, and Kirby once more examined the map of the Staffletz plant, scrutinized it with minute care.

"Yes," he announced, eagerly. "It's just the way I thought. It will do fine, especially with that river there. Now my idea is to use that Gotha and—just a moment, sir," he hastily interposed as the general began to look disgusted again. "Please hear me out, sir. This is what I propose." And, with increasing fervor and enthusiasm, he outlined the details of his plan. His comrades and the C.O. listened with growing awe and admiration. The general listened noncommittally, again tapping the desk abstractedly with his fingers.

"And then," Kirby was concluding, "we will be able to fly over the place after all. We will also be able to fly low enough to do some decent work. We'll hit one of those damned railroad cars, and the trick will be done!"

He paused. And he did not even see the admiring glances of the C.O. and his comrades. He was looking only at the general, looking at him as if the high officer were a judge about to pronounce sentence.

The general sat back in his chair and his brows were screwed up in a look of concentration. There was a brief silence, tense, excited. Then, shattering this silence with a suddenness that quite startled the other men, the general's fist smote the desk a mighty wallop.

"By heaven!" he exclaimed, "I do believe you've really hit on something. But—" Almost instantly his momentary enthusiasm subsided, and he became skeptical, doubtful again. "It's excellent up to a certain point. That's where you have to rely on hitting one of those shell-laden cars by a bomb. That's uncertain, because I'm not so sure you'll be able to pass over the railroad despite your clever stunt. And even if you do, a direct hit might be impossible. Furthermore," he concluded, and by this time Kirby's hopes had ebbed to zero once more, "it would mean suicide for you—they'd surely get you even if you got the plant. No," he shook his head, and Kirby almost groaned, "I'm afraid that won't do after all. But wait a moment." He rose from the desk and commenced to pace the room, immured in his thoughts. Up and down he walked, while the others sat waiting in a peculiar sort of suspense.

Suddenly the general came back to his desk. His eyes narrowed keenly as they studied the Three Mosquitoes. "How well do you three men speak German?" he demanded.

Kirby volunteered to answer the question. "Travis speaks it better than the Heinies themselves. Shorty comes next, and while he's only just learned the language, he's pretty good. I'm about the worst—but I can pass."

The C.O. came to his aid. "I'd say they all can handle the tongue pretty well, sir."

The general nodded. "Well, let's pick the two men who speak it best, first." He regarded Carn and Travis. "Do you two think you could masquerade successfully as a couple of German flyers?"

"Speaking for myself," Shorty Carn replied, "I'm sure I can do it. Speaking for Trav here, I'm damned sure he can do it."

"Good!" commended the general. "And let's see—you can wear the identifications of the two prisoners from the Gotha. That ought to get through."

"But," Kirby put in, with sudden alarm, "where do I come into all this?"

The general smiled at him tightly. "You will have the most hazardous job of the lot, captain," he announced, and Kirby's face lit up. "Well, I think that straightens out who will be who. The only things that remain now are to make all our preparations. We'll have to fix up the Gotha and add some special arrangements to it."

"But, sir," the C.O. suddenly cried, "you haven't yet told us what you have in mind. Pardon, but the general is certainly piquing our curiosity."

The general chuckled. He was in a rare humor now. "In my excitement I overlooked that little detail," he conceded. Then again he became more serious. "My plan," he explained, "is merely an amendment to Captain Kirby's excellent suggestion. We are using his stunt, but carrying it one step further to get sure results." And tersely but in full detail, he told them the idea. It was Kirby's turn then to marvel. He had thought he was pretty good to make up his little stunt, but this general was a genius for transforming a crude idea into something of absolute perfection.

"Gosh, that's great, sir!" Kirby exclaimed, and his comrades also expressed their admiration. But their old C.O. suddenly looked worried, grim. "Don't you think, sir," the grizzled colonel inquired, dubiously, "that this is a rather risky stunt? I'm not trying to be a wet blanket but"—his voice was almost fervent, "I'd certainly hate to lose these three men who—"

The general nodded, with understanding. "I admit it's risky," he said, sternly. "I admit it's the most hazardous mission I've ever assigned to anyone. But damn it, colonel, as you yourself told me before, these three men can do it! I have faith in them. And I guess you realize what it means to have that Staffletz plant blasted off the earth. However," he conceded, "it's really up to them. How do you feel about it, you three?"

And the Three Mosquitoes grinned their old, reckless grin, and chorused their old battle-cry, "Let's go!"

And at that the C.O. had to grin too, though his grin was just a little forced. "All right, boys," he told them, gamely. "Go to it! Show 'em what you can do!"

The general smiled. "Good! Then everybody is satisfied. And now, the sooner we pull this thing off, the better. We'll do it to-night, if the weather is at all suitable. Now I'm going to have a couple of trucks come up here, and a staff of mechanics who work for intelligence and can keep their mouths shut. They can dismantle the Gotha and bring it to one of our secret fields, where it will be fixed up for to-night. You men

can spend the day however you like, but report to me at 8 p.m. at the G.H.Q. building in Rois. All right?"

And again came that jubilant, eager cry, "Let's go!"

THE night was clear and starry, though moonless. On a field hidden in the midst of a dense forest, a great Gotha poised like a gigantic blackbird. Its twin motors purred smoothly as they revved up. Sparks drifted lazily from its exhaust stacks, to glow vividly in the darkness. Shadowy figures clambered about the big ship, tightening wires, examining tanks, making sure that everything was in readiness.

Near by, huddled close together, stood a group of four figures. One was Brigadier General Saunders, of intelligence. The other three were the Three Mosquitoes, though it would have been difficult to recognize them now. The lanky Travis was dressed in the uniform of a captain of the Imperial flying corps; on his neck hung a disk which identified him as *Hauptmann* Karl von Ritter. Shorty Carn had on a similar uniform, only his disk showed him to be *Leutnant* Emil Wolff. As for Kirby—the young leader of the Mosquitoes was dressed in even stranger garb. He wore the uniform of an ordinary private of the German infantry, mid in his hand he carried a rifle.

The three men were all puffing cigarettes, a trifle nervously, while they waited for the Gotha to be warmed. The general, meanwhile, was giving them some last-minute instructions in a low, tense voice. "Remember," he directed, "follow the route I laid out for you, so you won't get shot at by our own planes or guns. All squadrons and batteries along that path have been secretly ordered to let the Gotha through unmolested. Take it easy, be cause you have a good thirty miles to go after you've crossed the Boche lines. And above all," he warned, "try to work your stunt in the most natural way possible, so as not to arouse suspicion. Everything depends on that—on being absolutely natural."

The three men nodded, tacitly.

"And how about the—stuff?" the general inquired, grimly.

"It's in the fuselage of that Gotha," Kirby told him. "I've put it in a safe place."

"Good," said the general. "Remember to handle it with care. It's dangerous!"

At that moment the mechanics at the Gotha called out that the ship was in readiness. The Three Mosquitoes all took a final puff on their cigarettes, then twirled the butts to the ground and stamped them out.

"All right!" Kirby shouted. "Let's get going! We've got to keep to the schedule!"

The general nodded, a bit nervously. They all walked briskly to the Gotha. One after another the Three Mosquitoes climbed up into the single, bathtublike cockpit. It was Travis who took the pilot's seat, and reached for the wheel. Kirby and Shorty occupied the observers' seats right behind him.

"I can sit here until we get there," Kirby announced.

The others nodded. The general stood beside the ship and looked up to shout out some final advice. But his words were drowned out by a sudden, full-throated roar from the twin motors, as Travis jazzed the double-throttles on the dashboard before him. The Gotha trembled like a live thing. Travis and Shorty pulled down their goggles, while Kirby managed with difficulty to fit a pair of the glasses over his soft infantry cap.

"S'long, general!" the three men called, and again the general's answering shout was inaudible beneath the roar of the motors. But the high officer waved to them, smiling his encouragement, though his long face was strangely white in the darkness.

Travis' hand shot upwards, waving the signal to the mechanics. The chocks were pulled from the wheels of the Gotha. The twin engines roared and thundered. Slowly, the huge plane began to move. It lumbered down the field and sluggishly picked up speed, its great wings rocking. It seemed too cumbersome to rise. But then, miraculously, its tail lifted off the ground and it was taking off. And the moment it was in the air it turned from something clumsy to a thing of infinite grace and beauty. Smoothly it climbed towards the starry sky, like some great winged monster which breathed fire.

Down on the field, the general and the mechanics watched it, watched it until the night sky had swallowed it from sight. The general shook his head. "Lord," he muttered, half aloud, "I hope I haven't sent those three men, to hell!"

The Gotha, responding perfectly to Travis' expert control, moved steadily through the star-lit sky, its nose pointed for the east—for Hunland and Staffletz. The Three Mosquitoes were on their way—on their way to wipe out all the deadly XXX in the very ship which had first released the new explosive on the Allies. A more fitting revenge could not have been devised. But if they failed!

Slowly the shadowy earth swept by beneath them, in gray and black patches. Here and there a light

pin-pricked the darkness. But there were no groping searchlights or anti-aircrafts. The path had been cleared, as the general had promised. All was quiet. All was quiet until they were coming over the Front, and here the usual blazing carnival displayed itself below, them. The sky was illumined by the flashes of bursting shells, the streaming flaming onions, and the flare of rockets. But the Gotha sailed on high above, a thing apart from all the infernal pageantry.

The German lines now—and Hunland! The seething battle front receded behind them, and again the earth turned to shadowy patches. Travis was bend-over the map pinned beneath the hooded lights of his instrument board. He checked the lubber line of his compass and then changed his course a little to the south. The Gotha moved on, with its twin engines chanting their steady, monotonous drone. And again there were no molesting searchlights or antiaircrafts. The Boche gunners below, picking up the familiar, static hum of the motors, knew that a German ship was passing overhead, and were not interested.

Thus far the Three Mosquitoes had not spoken a word, partly because speech was difficult with the two motors roaring on either side, but mostly because all three were buried in thought. Each was planning how he would handle himself during the coming ordeal. An air of tension was coming over them now, as they penetrated further and further into Hunland, getting closer to their objective. The miles were passing in swift succession. Travis banked now and started to follow a tiny winding ribbon of silver which gleamed in the darkness below. It was the Brenne River, the river on which the Staffletz works were located.

On, on, on, deeper and deeper into Bocheland. The tension grew. The three men sat with grim faces, waiting. Minutes ticked past—ten—fifteen. And then suddenly Travis half-turned from his front seat and pointed below and ahead. Kirby and Shorty looked.

Far down the river, several miles distant but looming steadily closer, a great cluster of buildings was revealed by the starlight. The place was quite dark; the Boche were keeping it as dark as possible. But some of the windows were lighted, and smoke could be seen rising from great chimneys, showing that night work was going on.

The Staffletz works! Here before them was the great munitions plant which they were determined to blow up. For the first time they realized the hugeness of the undertaking. Three men, to destroy that gigantic plant!

Kirby's excited shout now rose above the engines.

"All right, fellers! It's time for me to duck now. We're getting there. I think I see some Fokkers already. Remember, do the stunt right and wait for my signals."

"We will," Shorty promised, and Travis, busy with his controls, nodded his head.

Kirby quickly unstrapped his safety-belt. "S'long then, fellers. We don't meet again until the trick is either done—or we're all in hell!"

"S'long!" Shorty shouted, and this time Travis turned to yell, "And good luck!"

ONE would have thought that Kirby intended to leap out of the ship and leave his comrades. But such was not the case; as a matter of fact he didn't even have a parachute. What he did do was to climb over the seat and duck right into the rear fuselage of the Gotha, which had been specially prepared for him. Slowly he wriggled down towards the tail of the ship. It was cramped in there, but he managed to make himself fairly comfortable by lying flat on his back. And he could move flaps in the taut fabric on either side and on bottom, and thus look out at the view whenever he wished.

In the meantime, Shorty moved over so that he occupied all of the seat which had been built for two. And Travis bent grimly to his controls. They were all set now. To all appearances, this Gotha contained only two men—pilot and observer. No one could have suspected that a third man was stowing away in the fuselage.

Travis now commenced his grim task. As the Staffletz works loomed closer down the river, the lanky Mosquito shoved the wheel a bit forward. The Gotha's nose dipped slightly, and the big ship began to descend. Down, down, with Travis slowly and carefully losing altitude. The lower he could get, the more chance there would be for success.

Suddenly Shorty gave a shout and pointed. Kirby had been right when he said he saw Fokkers. Off from the right at least twenty fleeting birdlike shapes whisked out of the murk and advanced swiftly upon the Gotha. The Mosquitoes found their nerves tensing involuntarily; it was hard for them to remember that these enemy scouts were friendly toward them now. They half expected to be subjected to a withering cross-fire of tracer. But the Fokkers merely buzzed about like harmless insects. And Travis, though he stopped descending now, continued to steer towards the Staffletz plant—not straight towards it, for that would have attracted suspicion, but in its general

direction. The Fokkers followed, as yet making no efforts, to stop the big bomber. Evidently the Gotha had not yet gotten within the limited, proximity of the munitions factory. Travis went on, determined to go as close as they permitted.

Closer and closer loomed the great munitions factory below, assuming clearer shape and outline. The wall which surrounded the place could be seen now, with its high lookout towers. And Travis was sure he could pick out the railroad, though he couldn't see the tracks beneath the long sheds.

They were scarcely half a mile from the place when the fun began. Suddenly scores of great searchlights opened like eyes all over the ground. They sent their groping beams stabbing through the darkness, and the great white bands waved around the sky like a lot of arms waving the Gotha to get away. Two of the beams fastened right on the big bomber, and the Mosquitoes blinked in the blinding glare. It was clear now that the Germans below could shoot the Gotha to shreds if they so desired; they had it spotted, and were watching it.

And now the swarm of Fokkers suddenly swept around and cut right in front of the Gotha's air path, intercepting it from the plant below. One of the Boche scouts came up right beside the big bomber, so close that the Mosquitoes could see the pilot's goggled face in the darkness. The Jerry pilot waved, indicating to Travis that he must go no nearer to the Staffletz works. Travis and Shorty both nodded and waved back their assent.

Clearly Travis could not go any closer. And so, obediently, he banked the Gotha and headed out over the river. The Fokkers continued to follow. And now Travis was gauging his distance, judging his time. The time had come! The lanky pilot jerked his head back, and shouted to Shorty, "Well, Shorty, here goes! Here's where we try Kirby's little stunt!"

"Go to it!" Shorty yelled back.

And coolly and deliberately, Travis reached forward and snapped off one of the two ignition switches.

The Gotha's port motor sputtered into sudden silence. The big ship careened crazily, one wing drooping perilously low as the starboard motor tried vainly to support the whole burden. And Travis, simulating marvelous panic, started mauling the controls furiously.

The Boche flyers swarming on all sides stared with sudden alarm. They could see clearly that the Gotha's port motor had suddenly conked out. The big ship

was disabled. Even now it was floundering, going into stalling sideslips, losing altitude steadily.

But the situation wasn't quite as bad as it looked to the Jerries around. It was true that Travis was having his hands full with the floundering ship, but he knew just what he was doing, and he hadn't lost control at all. With cool precision, he was guiding the Gotha just where he wanted to. He was making sure that all his sideslips and stalls were taking him down closer and closer to the Staffletz works. Nor did the Germans stop him now. They saw what looked like an uncontrollable ship, and they let it go wherever it tried to. And Kirby, looking from his peepholes inside the fuselage, felt a growing exultation. Thus far everything he had planned was going like clockwork. If only the rest of the thing worked!

The Germans may have been rigid in their vigilance, but just as Kirby had guessed, they were not going to stop a disabled Gotha from landing anywhere it could. And what happened next rilled the Mosquitoes with joyful confidence. The Boche below were turning some of the powerful searchlights on the grounds of the plant, lighting up a place for a landing. Other searchlights seemed to be signaling Travis to come on down.

And Travis did. He cut off his other engine and nosed gratefully into a glide. Down swept the Gotha with the wind shrilling through its flying-wires. Down, down, down until now it was sweeping over the high walls of the plant, passing over the line which no planes were supposed to pass. Even the Fokkers swerved off and soared away, though they hovered nearby—ready to dash to the scene if necessary.

Now the Gotha was right over the place, going lower, lower. Flat tops of buildings swept by, and the Three Mosquitoes could see the sandbags and the stretched, bomb-proof nets which the general had described. Off to the right were the railroad sheds, shrouded in darkness. It had been Kirby's original plan to pass over those sheds as they glided down, and to drop some bombs on them. After that, he had planned, they would switch on the falsely disabled motor and beat it away. But now Kirby and his comrades all saw that the general had been right; that plan would not have been feasible. It would have been difficult to glide over the spot in the first place, for the Jerries might have become suspicious and changed their friendly attitude. Then, too, it would doubtless have required several bombs to score a direct hit on the shell-laden cars, since the cars were obscured by the sheds. And

before they could ever have dropped several bombs, they surely would have been brought down. Even now they could see some of the mighty ground defenses—see scores of guns gleaming in the darkness. And there were those swarms of Fokkers above!

So now, having already put Kirby's plan to practice, they commenced to carry out the general's idea. Obediently, Travis headed his glide for the illuminated part of ground—a part which he noticed was several hundred yards from any buildings, and still further from those railroad sheds. But it would have to do.

The Gotha swept on down, settled, settled. Its great wheels touched the level earth, bounced twice, and then rolled along bumpily. The Gotha taxied slowly to a stop.

INSTANTLY a crowd of Boche soldiers was swarming around the ship, shouting out questions that were almost challenges. The searchlights went out now, leaving the place fairly dark again—for in war, darkness is always advisable. Travis and Shorty leaned from their cockpits. Their hearts were pounding, but they did not betray a flicker of fear.

"*Wie gehts!*" Travis called cheerily, in his flawless German. "We regret that we had to land here, but our port motor went dead and we could do nothing. It will take but a moment for us to repair the machine, and then we will get right back into the air."

One of the soldiers, a young captain, stepped up to the plane. His tone was quite friendly.

"It is fortunate that you were able to make such a safe landing," he said, sincerely. "However—" and now he seemed a little nervous. "You must hurry, gentlemen. We cannot permit things like this, for we are under strict orders. Kindly fix the damage as quickly as you can."

Shorty and Travis nodded, and hastily climbed from the cockpit. In the meantime, Kirby was not idle inside of the fuselage of the Gotha. He was working like a fiend to strap on the only part of his uniform that was still lacking—his pack. It was an amazingly heavy thing, that pack. It seemed to weigh a ton, and Kirby did not like the feel of it. But he got it strapped on behind his shoulders. Then he seized his rifle and started to hunch up in the cramped quarters. He was ready. But he mustn't start yet, he told himself. He must wait a bit longer, until he could be sure they were not watching.

Shorty and Travis were on the ground now, and were just about to go to the disabled engine when

the crowd of Boche soldiers suddenly stiffened to attention and broke aside. A thickset man in the uniform of an *Oberst* came through. His face was not a pleasant one. It was cruel-looking—the face of a stiff-backed and merciless Prussian, with little piglike eyes that gleamed in the darkness. His manner was that of a man who trusts nobody and who views everything with suspicion. The Mosquitoes at once decided that he was an officer of the German intelligence. It was stamped all over him.

The *Oberst* spoke in a harsh, rasping voice: “What is this all about?” he wanted to know. The Boche captain explained the situation to him. The *Oberst* snorted. “It is about time,” he roared, “that these dumb-headed flyers stopped landing all over the country! They make me sick!”

“Pardon me, *Herr Oberst!*” Travis put in, calmly and steadily, “But are you not a bit unjust? We cannot help a mechanical defect.”

The *Oberst* looked at him and at Shorty with a keen scrutiny which made both men feel tense, apprehensive.

“Who are you?” thundered the German high officer. “And where do you come from?”

“I am *Hauptmann* Karl von Ritter,” Travis replied. “I am from the 46th squadron.”

“Let me see your identifications,” Travis showed them. Some one held a flashlight over them and the *Oberst* looked them over carefully. He handed them back.

“And you?” he shot at Shorty Carn.

“I am *Leutnant* Emil Wolff,” Shorty replied, struggling to put no trace of accent into his German. “Of the same squadron.”

The *Oberst* looked at his credentials too. He hardly seemed satisfied. “What are you doing out at this time?” he demanded.

“We have just returned from a bomb-raid across the lines,” Travis said, meeting the other’s eyes levelly.

“What’s wrong with your ship?”

“There is something the matter with the port engine.”

The *Oberst* considered a moment. Then he snapped: “Well, hurry up and fix it! What are you standing around for?”

“You were talking to us, sir,” Travis reminded him, fighting down a hot anger against this unpleasant colonel, an anger which swept him despite his perilous predicament.

“Never mind your impertinence!” roared the *Oberst*, furiously. “That’s the trouble with all you

flyers; you have not had enough discipline and you’re a bunch of impudent jackasses! Fix your engine and clear out of here as fast as you can. I never wanted to let you land here in the first place. If you’re so stupid that you get into trouble, you ought to suffer the consequences.”

He turned savagely on his heel. “I have to attend to some business. Have that engine fixed before I return. We don’t want that Gotha around here.” And he walked away, still growling about the Imperial flying corps and its lack of discipline. As soon as he was gone, some of the soldiers shook their heads, and the young Boche captain whistled. “The *Oberst* is in a keen temper to-night,” he told Travis, with a grin.

Travis nodded. “He is a sweet fellow. Does he own this place?”

“He is in charge here, although I do not see why they put an intelligence man in charge.” Evidently, the Mosquitoes thought, this captain didn’t know about the XXX; doubtless his duties were merely to take charge of the guards out here.

“But,” Travis wanted to know, “is the *Oberst* always as bad as this?”

“He has been this way only of late,” the captain confided. “He is as nervous as a cat, and seems to be haunted by the idea of spies. The other night he caught some poor beggar prowling around outside the walls. I am sure the man was just a German drunk, but the *Oberst* shot him immediately as a spy.”

The smiles on the Mosquitoes’ faces were sickly. “A sweet lad indeed,” Travis repeated, and shrugged. “Well, I guess we had better hurry,” and there was more significance in his words than he wished to imply. “Come on, *Leutnant* Wolff! Let us fix the engine and make a hasty retreat. It doesn’t look as if we are welcome here.”

Shorty nodded, and they both climbed upon the port wing of the Gotha. In another moment Carn was holding a flashlight while Travis pretended to absorb himself in the engine.

“Do you gentlemen need any assistance?” the captain inquired, eager to help them hurry out. “We know little about airplanes here, but perhaps we can help.”

“*Nein, danke!*” Travis returned. “We haven’t yet located the trouble, but we shall not be long.”

Meanwhile, Kirby was still waiting in the fuselage for a chance to commence his grim duties. He was glad that the *Oberst* had disappeared; he had heard the previous conversation and it had alarmed him

no little. But he wished some of these Boche soldiers would also get out. How could he attempt the thing he must do with all of them hanging around, perhaps watching the plane?

Suddenly as he squatted there, he heard Travis say to Shorty, in German of course, "Ah, but I think this is the trouble, here."

That was Kirby's cue; it meant the coast was clear. Kirby peeped out through one of his flaps. Sure enough, all the soldiers were now on the port side of the plane, watching the men at the engine curiously. Kirby steeled himself for the ordeal. Then, quietly, he bent down to the floor of the fuselage. There was a handle there. He seized it. Slowly now! And gently. He slid the handle back, and a sliding door opened silently in the floor of the Gotha's fuselage—one of the general's brilliant arrangements.

Kirby took his rifle, and edged his way towards the open hole in the floor. Again he heard Travis say, "Yes, this is indeed the root of the trouble." All was safe!

WITH bated breath, Kirby lowered himself through the doorway. His rifle clinked against the ground slightly, and the sound seemed shrill and piercing in his ears. He was out then, right underneath the ship. He did not close the sliding door after him. On his hands and knees, with his back aching from the amazingly heavy pack strapped there, he crawled from under the Gotha—crawled out on the starboard side, where there was fortunately no one to see him. He got to his feet, picked up his rifle. Then he drew his first breath.

To all appearances now, he was one of the soldiers who were here to guard the grounds. The general had seen to it that he had the same identical uniform. However, he must be careful. He remembered what the general had said. "A stranger is likely to be recognized." He must watch himself.

He did not turn to glance at his comrades, whom he knew were standing on the port wing of that Gotha. He was afraid to look at them, lest an exchange of glances would attract attention. Shouldering his rifle, he marched across the grounds, an inconspicuous figure. He was headed straight for the railroad sheds some four hundred yards distant.

And Shorty and Travis knew that he was off, though they didn't turn to look at him either. They breathed a silent prayer for their leader, and then they resumed their work of having the devil's own time with that engine. They had brought out all their tools now, and their faces were grimy.

"Lord," sighed Travis, "this is certainly a stubborn job."

"You must hurry!" the Boche captain's tone was getting more and more impatient. "If the Oberst comes and finds you still here—"

"We are doing our best," said Travis, knowing that nothing was going to hurry him now, that this engine wouldn't be fixed until Kirby was safely back in the Gotha's fuselage.

Just now, however, Kirby was moving further and further away from, that fuselage. He was now walking past the building which the railroad bordered on one side. He noticed that all the windows of the concrete structure were covered with heavy steel netting. There were scores of sentries about. Yes, he thought grimly, it would be impossible to try to get into any of the buildings to do his work. The railroad was his only hope. Besides, maybe there weren't even explosives in this particular building. He could not tell. He only knew that one or more of the houses he saw about him contained stores of the new XXX.

The sentries did not notice Kirby as he passed; to them he appeared to be just another soldier going to some duty. He rounded the building, and abruptly found himself at the railroad. He paused to take a look.

A scene of bustling activity appeared before him. On a single track, running parallel to the side of this building, and protected by a shed which protruded like a shelf from the building itself, was a long line of open cars. A swarm of workmen were hustling about beneath the glow of dim bluish lights, bringing out large, pointed objects on wheelbarrows and carts. Shells! They were being loaded into the cars, packed in side by side like eggs in a crate. Already the cars at the distant end of the line were loaded—Kirby could just see them in the darkness out there. The train was being made up to go out at midnight, the Mosquito knew. It was now only ten minutes to eleven. Kirby's jaw set grimly. That train was not going out to-night—not if he knew anything about it! Nor would trains ever go out of here any more!

But as he stood there, looking about, keeping constantly on the alert to make sure he was not suspected, his hopes began to dwindle. How in hell was he going to do his hazardous work, with all these workmen and sentries about here? He had never seen so many sentries in his life.

He decided to go down to the very end of the train, hoping that he would find some spot where there were no sentries. He started out, walking down along the

line of cars, passing the sentries and workmen and tensing every time any of them looked at him. On he went, past one car after another, past the corner of the building on the other side. The cars extended far beyond the building, out into the open, though they were still sheltered by a steel shed which was supported by pillars. Kirby went on. Damn that pack on his back! Surely it would break his backbone.

Finally he reached the last car, or rather the first car of the train. There was no locomotive here as yet; evidently it hadn't arrived. And to Kirby's joy, this spot behind the train seemed to be deserted. There were no sentries here, though there were sentries damned close—on either side of the car.

Cautiously, Kirby turned and walked under the shed, onto the tracks behind that last car. He looked into it, standing on his toes. Yes, it was full—packed with shells. It would do. Any shell-laden car on the train would do, for that matter. He must hurry, get finished right away—before anyone spotted him. And he must hurry, too, because his comrades couldn't stall at that Gotha's engine all night.

Again he looked all around, to make certain no one was in sight. He glanced down the empty track behind the train. A short distance away, it declined sharply and disappeared into the black void of a tunnel—the tunnel the general had spoken about.

The coast was clear. Stealthily, Kirby drew closer to the car approaching it from behind. Suddenly he stiffened, drawing in his breath sharply.

Coming around from one side of the train was the dim figure of another sentry! He saw Kirby back there and walked straight towards the Mosquito. Kirby's heart pounded. It was no use trying to duck. He steeled his nerves and stood where he was, stood calmly with rifle on shoulder, and pack weighing down his back. The sentry paused and confronted him.

"*Wie gehts*, comrade," said the German, cheerfully enough. "Are you too on duty here at the end of the train?"

"*Ja*," Kirby shot back, almost whispering the German he hardly knew how to pronounce. "I was sent here."

"That is strange," said the sentry. "I was sent here too. Why should they send two men to guard the end of the train?"

"*Das weiss ich nicht*," Kirby answered, recklessly.

The sentry shrugged and commenced to pace back and forth, crossing and recrossing the tracks behind the car. Kirby, not knowing what else to do, also

commenced to pace, while he racked his brain with conjectures. What could he do now? This damned sentry was here to stay—and if Kirby tried to do away with him, the guards on either side of the train might hear. Then everything would be up!

Minutes passed, and still the two—the real sentry and the false—dutifully paced up and down with shouldered rifles. The straps of his pack were wearing off the skin on Kirby's shoulders now, and the searing pain of it was almost unendurable. But far greater than this pain was Kirby's fear for his two comrades. If he couldn't hurry back to the Gotha, the Boche would surely begin to suspect Shorty and Travis and there would be hell to pay.

AND as a matter of fact Kirby's fears were not ungrounded. Shorty and Travis were beginning to despair even now. They had exhausted about every subterfuge and alibi they could think of in trying to explain why it was taking them so long to fix that engine of the Gotha. The Boche soldiers on the scene were shifting about restively. And the young Jerry captain was becoming less friendly every moment.

"Come on," the latter was urging, with gruff impatience, "this is going too far. You told us it would take you but a moment to fix that engine."

"It is almost fixed now," Travis said weakly, for the tenth time.

"Well, for Heaven's sake, hurry!" snapped the captain. "After all, we have done our best—have broken our rules to let you land here to fix your ship. Now the least you can do is—" He broke off, a look of sudden alarm on his face. "*Gott!*" he gasped. "Here comes the *Herr Oberst!* He is returning!" He gave a groan. "He will murder you two when he finds you still here!"

Kirby's impatience was driving him slowly to the point of desperation. He took another chance with his German, spoke to the sentry as they both kept pacing.

"How long are you on here, comrade?"

"Until midnight," replied the sentry. That was enough for Kirby. He had no intentions of waiting until midnight to do his work. He would have to act now, and gamble on the consequences.

As his pacing brought him to that last car again, he paused and lowered his rifle to the ground, leaning the barrel against the car. He sighed, yawned, and stretched as much as the pack on his back would permit. And just as he hoped, the sentry approached him.

"Tired, comrade?"

"Ja," Kirby answered, and at the same time his left hand was slowly clenching into a fist of iron.

"I noticed you walked a trifle stoop-shouldered," the sentry observed. "Certainly your pack cannot be heavier than mine, and yet you seem to find it a great burden."

"Ja," Kirby said again, more determined now than ever to put this nosey fellow out of the way. "But my pack is really larger and heavier than yours," he said, again gambling on his German. "Look!"

The sentry stepped closer to look. Kirby gathered all his strength, and his muscles tensed.

"Let me see," said the sentry. "Turn around and—"

Sock! Out shot that fist, with Kirby's whole body and the extra weight of the pack behind it. Flush on the sentry's jaw the mighty blow landed. The Boche dropped like a log. But as he dropped, his rifle clattered to the ground, striking the metal track. *Clang! Clankety-clang!* Loud as a fire gong, the ringing noise rose in the night.

Even before he heard the heavy, running footsteps, Kirby knew that the nearest sentry at the side of the train had heard, and was coming to investigate. Furiously the Mosquito seized his rifle. The dim form of the Boche soldier appeared around the corner of the car. Madly Kirby leaped towards the figure, at the same time swinging his rifle by its barrel as though it were a tomahawk. The butt smashed into the sentry's unprotected jaw, and the man fell with a grunt. But at the same moment Kirby heard a guttural oath behind him, and he wheeled just in time to see still a third German coming for him with bayonet fixed. This must be the sentry from the other side of the train. He had seen Kirby knock the second man down, and he was making a rush for the Mosquito.

With reckless ferocity, Kirby swung his rifle again. But this Boche was on his guard, and warded off the blow with his own gun. *Crash!* The two weapons collided with an impact which sent them flying from the men's hands to the turf beside the track. Guided solely by desperation, Kirby hurled himself viciously upon his antagonist. The Boche tried to cry out, but the Mosquito managed to clutch his throat in a leechlike grip which made articulation impossible. Fiercely and silently the two men grappled behind the car of the train.

The German proved to be amazingly powerful; he wrestled with all the agility of a professional. Already he had tied up Kirby's free arm, and now he was

striving to tear the Yank's other hand from his throat. But Kirby, handicapped as he was by the heavy pack, held on for dear life, impelled by the thought that if the man shouted, a swarm of Boche would come rushing to the scene. Even now he was fearful lest the other Germans might have heard the noise, and would arrive to find him. And so he fought for all he was worth, fought even as his wind was giving out, and he knew that the Boche was going to get that hand off his throat in another moment, and yell. In a frenzy, Kirby rallied his ebbing strength. He lurched backwards with his whole body, and managed at last to pull his tied-up arm free from the Jerry's grip. Once more his fist closed into a ball as of iron. He drew it back, and then with every atom of might he had left, he sent a smashing uppercut curving to the Boche's chin. And the third sentry, like his predecessors, went out like a light. Kirby felt the man relax in his grip, and lowered him noiselessly to the ground.

The Mosquito looked about, furtively. Were there any more? He glanced around both sides of the car. Nobody, thank God! The nearest sentry was now several cars down, for Kirby had removed all the guards at this end of the train. That was lucky, anyway. And the sentries down there had evidently heard nothing suspicious, perhaps because the workmen there were making quite a lot of noise.

Walking behind the car again, Kirby bent down to look at the three Boche sprawled on the tracks in the darkness. They were out cold—all three of them. It would be a long time before they came to. But still, Kirby could not leave them lying there. Surely some one would soon come along and find them, and an alarm would go out all throughout the place—an alarm which would plant suspicion on the Gotha and its flyers. The Three Mosquitoes would never get out! Kirby had to save his companions—as well as himself.

Kirby looked all around for some place where he could conceal the unconscious men. His furtive glance suddenly fell on that tunnel again, down the tracks. That looked like the only logical place. He would have to take precious time to drag these three men down there, in the meantime hoping that nobody else came around here.

He stooped over one of the sprawled figures and seizing him by the arms, dragged him none too gently over the ties of the tracks, down towards the tunnel, still keeping that back-splitting pack on his shoulders. Into the blackness of the tunnel he dragged the man, and then hurried back for the second. Presently he was dragging down the third.

DURING the time Kirby had been going through all these hair-raising experiences, his comrades over at the Gotha were also having a nerve-racking time of it, though they were trying to use their wits where Kirby had used his fists.

When the Boche captain had announced with alarm that the *Oberst* was returning, the two Mosquitoes had to fight down a feeling of near-panic. The cruel-faced *Oberst* broke through the crowd. He was livid with rage.

"What?" he bellowed, like a mad bull. "You haven't fixed it yet? What do you think you're going to do—stay here all night tinkering with your confounded engine?"

Travis had a difficult time forcing the same old words from his lips. "We're almost finished now, sir," he said. "In another moment—"

"In another year, you mean!" the *Oberst* fumed. "You two have wasted enough of our time here with your lying promises. I'll see that you both suffer for this! I'll see to it that your squadron commander punishes you severely. Why didn't you tell us that you couldn't fix the machine in the first place? We could have called up your drome and had them send some mechanics."

"Mechanics would be no better than we are," Travis said, desperately, half-afraid that the *Oberst* might even now take it into his head to call up that airdrome a measure that would be fatal. "Well," the *Oberst* ranted, "that being the case, we shall finish this nonsense right now. You two cannot stay here any longer. I forbid it!" His voice was adamant. "You leave, this instant!" Shorty and Travis started, and the color drained from their faces. Travis managed almost instantly to retain his usual stoic calmness, but Shorty was breaking out into a sweat now. Both men knew that once outside the walls of this place, they'd never be able to get Kirby out.

Travis made a frantic plea. "But sir," he protested, "we cannot leave our ship in—"

"*Genug!*" thundered the *Oberst*. "Never mind your ship; we will take care of it!" He turned to the Boche captain. "Escort these men to the gate and throw them out. Hurry! They have intruded enough."

The captain nodded dutifully, and barked a command to his men, who stiffened and shouldered their rifles. Shorty Carn was panting heavily now, as he still stuck stubbornly to that engine. As for Travis, the lanky, wise Mosquito was acting on a last, wild idea which had instilled itself in his racing brain. He was bending over the engine now and really working like a fiend.

"Come on!" the *Oberst* thundered. "Come down' from that wing at once, or we shall have to use force!"

But even as he spoke, Travis had turned and was holding something in his hand. The Mosquito made his supreme effort.

"But, sir," he protested, "don't you see me working like the devil to screw in this last spark plug?" Again he held aloft the spark plug which he had just now managed to unscrew from its socket. "We merely have to put this back and then connect up a few wires, and the task will be done. Please, sir, give us just five more minutes," he pleaded, doubting that five minutes would be sufficient but not daring to ask for more. "Five minutes will mean little difference now—but they will save you the bother of having this Gotha here. I can promise you, sir, that we will have the engine fixed in that time." And he and Shorty waited, with drawn breath, to see whether this speech would have its desired effect. If it didn't—

The *Oberst* cursed. He was impressed in spite of himself. He considered a moment. Then, "You give me your word as officers and gentlemen that you can fix the engine in five minutes?"

"Either that," Travis returned, as the confidence flowed back into him, "or we will never be able to fix it at all."

"Well—" the *Oberst* again thought a moment, then gave a little grunt. "All right! I'll give you this chance," he said, his tone grudgingly patronizing. He took out his watch. "Five minutes—and no longer."

And Shorty and Travis again pretended to busy themselves madly with the engine—the engine that would be fixed as soon as they knew Kirby was back in the Gotha's fuselage, and no sooner. Fervently they prayed that their leader would return before it was too late. And why shouldn't he? Unless something happened to him, he ought to be able to finish his work pretty quickly.

"One minute has passed," snapped the *Oberst*, looking up from his watch. "Four more—and then you clear out!"

By now Kirby had finished the time-consuming task of concealing the three unconscious Boche sentries in the darkness of the tunnel. To be absolutely safe, however, he had used up still more time trussing the three men's arms together with some stout cord he had brought with him for such an emergency. He had then stuffed handkerchiefs in their mouths and left them, to return to the train.

Reaching the last car again, he looked around once

more. Nobody coming this way. Good! He could do his work in a jiffy.

He went around to one side of the car now and walked down to its center. Far down the train was the nearest sentry. The Boche was now walking in the opposite direction, and did not see Kirby. But Kirby must hurry, for the Boche might see him if he turned.

With swift fingers he unbuckled the straps of his heavy pack. Removing the bulky thing, he lowered it to the ground almost tenderly, despite his haste. Then he himself got down, and rolled right beneath the car, reaching out and dragging the pack and the rifle after him. Painfully, with dirt and grease brushing him and clogging his nostrils, he wriggled until he was directly beneath the center of the car. Here he stopped, and by a series of contortions managed to fish a flashlight from his pocket. He turned it on and played its narrow white beam on the dirty, dark understructure of the car. There was a place here—right above.

With much effort, because he was hardly able to move his arms in the cramped space, he lifted up that heavy pack. He shoved it on top of some horizontal steel bracing which made an excellent shelf. Nobody would find it here—that was sure!

In the light from his flash, Kirby turned the pack around until the proper side, of it was facing him. Quickly, he pulled out some of the covering cloth. A lever was revealed, fastened by a little catch. Kirby unhooked the catch. He then glanced at his wrist watch. It was exactly three minutes past eleven. He set the hands back at exactly eleven o'clock, and almost simultaneously he pulled down the lever in the pack, seeming it again by the catch.

From the inside of the pack came a faint, scarcely audible ticking. Inexorably, with a steady, monotonous rhythm, it continued. *Tick-tick. Tick-tick.*

The time-bomb, so cleverly camouflaged as a Boche soldier's pack, had been set off, and was now ticking away. Loaded with concentrated teraline, an explosive whose deadliness was only exceeded by the new XXX, it would blast this shell-laden car in exactly half an hour. Kirby had set his watch at eleven so that the time would fall at exactly half-past the hour. It was a generous enough margin, this half hour, and it ought to allow the Three Mosquitoes to get safely back in the air and far away from this place.

But—a grim smile of triumph flickered over Kirby's lips as he lay under that greasy car—regardless of what happened to him and his comrades now, they had done their job, succeeded in their hazardous

mission. In thirty minutes the shells from this whole train would be bursting in a mass which would scatter destruction throughout the plant. The XXX would be set off wherever it was stored. And the Staffletz works would be blasted forever from the face of the earth!

But now Kirby must get back to that Gotha, must get back as fast as he could. All this work under the car had taken him only a few minutes, in spite of its complicated details. Now he rolled over and, seizing his rifle, started to squirm his way out again, leaving the bomb ticking away. As soon as he had moved just a little distance from the spot, he could no longer hear the ticking at all. Good! Nobody else would hear it.

He was right under the side of the car now, and he started to roll out. But he didn't roll out.

Instead he rolled frantically back underneath again, and lay there, deathly still, listening with ears alert. Voices, gruff, guttural voices—several of them! They were right outside! Now he could hear men walking all around here, clumping over the tracks behind the train. One of them—apparently an officer—was barking, "Where can they be—those three sentries who are supposed to be on duty here?"

"I have no idea, sir," came the answer, obviously from the sentry who had been on duty further down the train. "I saw them but a while ago."

The officer's tone was outraged, "This has never happened before! Don't those men realize that the penalty is death for leaving their posts? Search for them! And meanwhile, just to be safe, put a double guard around this car here."

Kirby's heart sank. A double guard? How could he ever get out of here now? The moment he crawled from under the car, he'd be seen at once, and his movements would be enough to condemn him instantly as a prowling impostor. And if they caught him, they'd be likely to search under the car itself, and perhaps they would find the bomb. God, what could he do? How would he ever get back to that Gotha, his comrades? He was caught, caught like a rat in a trap!

THE five minutes," snapped the *Oberst*, looking from his watch, "are up!" His voice was ugly in its challenge. "Well, is that engine fixed or not?" And the Boche captain and his soldiers stiffened, ready.

Travis and Shorty, still up on the port wing of the Gotha, exchanged a despairing glance in the darkness. But then Travis seemed to come to a sudden decision. He called down to the *Oberst* in a level voice, "Yes, sir, it is fixed—just as we promised."

The *Oberst* grunted his satisfaction. "Very well, then," he clipped. "Start it going and clear out of here as fast as you can!"

Before the two Mosquitoes climbed down from the wing, however, Travis managed to whisper into Shorty's ear, "We'll start her and pretend she conks. We must stall him off as long as we can. Kirby will surely be back soon now."

"Cripes!" Shorty breathed back. "This is hell!"

The two men then descended from the wing. Travis climbed into the Gotha's cockpit. Shorty, with the help of one of the Boche soldiers who volunteered, proceeded to pull the big propeller through compression. At the given signal, Travis switched on the ignition. Another tug at the propeller, and Carn and the soldier leaped aside as the big blade whirled from their hands and the engine roared healthily, as it could have roared all during this time.

The *Oberst* again grunted with satisfaction. Travis jazzed the throttle. The roar of the engine rose and fell, finally dying to a purr as Travis let her idle at revving speed. The lanky Mosquito remained in the cockpit another moment; then he climbed out and joined the men on the ground. All stood watching the propeller turn over lazily, while the motor gently pattered.

"Good!" Travis announced. "She is going quite smoothly again."

"Ja," put in Shorty, afraid that if he didn't say something once in a while, the Boche would begin to suspect him. "It is all right now."

"Well, hurry up and get the other motor started," ordered the *Oberst*, who wouldn't rest until he saw the Gotha off these forbidden grounds.

"We'll start it immediately, sir," Travis responded. "And then we can get right up and—" He broke off, a look of naive surprise coming over his face as the engine suddenly sputtered and conked out.

A furious oath ripped from the *Oberst*. "Now what has happened?" he demanded. "I thought it was fixed!"

"It is!" Travis insisted. "I cannot understand why it should choke out like this." And Shorty, taking the cue, shook his head and also looked as mystified as he could. But as a matter of fact, both Mosquitoes knew only too well why the engine had suddenly conked out. Travis had tried a very simple trick, relying on the hope that these Germans were thoroughly ignorant about airplanes. Before he had left the cockpit of the Gotha, the lanky Mosquito had merely shut off his gas-cocks, thus closing the feed lines. The engine had continued going on the little gas that still remained in

the carburetor. That had given Travis ample time to climb from the cockpit and stand around talking, so that to all appearances he had nothing to do with the engine when it conked.

"I'm certain she is all right," Travis said, stubbornly. "Let's start her up again."

And once more they started the motor, taking all the time they could to do it. And again, in the same manner, she choked out cold.

The *Oberst* stamped and fumed. "You told me you had it fixed," he repeated, furiously. "You lied! I can see that it is not fixed at all. And," he burst out, "I am not going to give you another second. You have to get out now, and that's all there is to it."

Travis, summoning all his wits, turned to him beseechingly. "But sir, it is fixed. I am not lying! Did we not start it going, when it would not go at all before? Well," he argued, and at the same time wondered if anyone could know so little about engines as to believe his illogical stories, "It is now just a matter of getting her warmed a bit, and then she will take properly. Surely, *Herr Oberst*, you would not have us leave the ship here now, when she is all but ready to go."

The *Oberst* stood glowering. But this last argument of Travis' had swayed him considerably. It was true that there was no use having the cumbersome Gotha here, if indeed it could be flown away. And the fact that the two flyers had already gotten the engine to start seemed to indicate that they would soon get it to keep going. On the other hand, the *Oberst* was fiercely impatient to have the two men out of here. Like most Prussian soldiers, he was rigidly methodical, and would make no exceptions to the rule which forbade strangers to trespass on these grounds.

He pondered a moment. Then he snapped angrily, "I will give you just a little more time. Go ahead and get that engine started!"

And so Travis and Shorty, given another brief reprieve, resumed their wild fight for time. God, where was Kirby? Why didn't he come? Would he ever get back into that fuselage and give them the secret signal? Twice more now they had let that engine start and conk out. The *Oberst* was just about at the end of his patience. Travis dared not repeat the same old trick again. He must do something else! What? He racked his brain frantically, while Shorty glanced at him helplessly.

At last a new idea came to Travis. This time he really let that port engine keep going. The crowd of Boche and the *Oberst* watched and waited in the

usual suspense, half-expecting the motor to repeat its nasty habit of conking right out. But to their growing satisfaction, it didn't conk out. It kept right on purring. At last the flyers had gotten the thing to run.

Travis smiled as though he were actually happy. "There you are, sir," he told the *Oberst*, with triumph. "The engine is now all right. We can start the other motor and get right off."

The *Oberst* nodded, still a little dubious. In a moment the Mosquitoes had the starboard motor roaring into life. But while Travis jazzed its throttle in the cockpit, he again did the thing he had hoped would not be necessary. He had prayed that Kirby would arrive during the period it took to get the starboard motor running. But Kirby had not arrived!

Again Travis climbed out of the cockpit, and again he stood with the group, watching both propellers turning now. The *Oberst* breathed his relief. The two engines were idling in purring unison. The two pilots seemed all set to climb in and hop away.

But then, again, that port engine conked out!

A groan went up from the crowd of Boche. As for the *Oberst*, he almost broke a blood vessel. He was speechless with rage, and before he could recover his voice Travis hastily addressed him, placatingly, "Don't let that worry you, sir! It is absolutely all right. She went for such a long time now that she cannot fail."

The *Oberst* sputtered like a steam radiator. "You—you—you—" he stammered. And then, because he could not express his wild rage, he suddenly became absurdly calm. His voice was cold and emotionless. "Start that engine once more. If it fails this time, it will be the last. I do not care whether it is fixed or not. Is that clear?"

It was all too clear! Again Travis and Shorty exchanged despairing glances, as they prepared to start the engine up once more. Their hopes had ebbed almost completely. They had tried every trick they knew, and still Kirby had not shown up. They knew now that they could stall no longer. It was futile. In another moment or so the whole farce would have to end.

WHEN Kirby had found that the car beneath which he lay was surrounded by Boche soldiers, at first despair and then desperation had come over him. He must get back to that Gotha! He couldn't stay here and wait, for these Jerries had no intentions of leaving. He must move!

There was just one way he could move, however,

and that was under the train, which would conceal him from view. A dim hope flickered within him. Perhaps if he crawled back under the cars, he would finally come to a spot where there were no sentries watching.

Then he could slip out. But he must take his rifle with him so that he could again appear as one of the guards, when he was out in the open. His pack would be missing; but then many of the soldiers here were not wearing packs.

He rolled away back beneath the center of the car, where the tick of that time-bomb once more reached his ears. He got flat on his belly and, snakelike, began to wriggle forward, pushing his rifle ahead of him. The rifle, as well as his shoes, scraped and bumped against the ties of the tracks, and he lay deathly still for a minute, fearing that the Boche outside would hear. Then, trying to be less noisy, he went on. He came to the axle of the car, and barely managed to squeeze himself beneath it. Then he reached the end of this car, and peeked out, furtively. Two sentries were standing right outside, on either side. He couldn't get out here! He must go on!

The gap between this car and the next was so small that he ought to be able to sneak under the coupling unobserved. He did, and soon he was wriggling down beneath the second car. Slowly, in this tortuous manner, he kept making his way forward, looking out every now and then for some deserted spot. But as yet he could find none; there were sentries everywhere, sentries who luckily did not suspect that a man was crawling right by them under the cars.

On he went, squirming, cursing and groaning beneath his breath. Sweat was streaming from every pore in his body now, and his muscles were aching. The grease and grime were making him filthy from head to foot. Once he bumped his head on a steel bar which stunned him through his soft cap. He had to go on blindly in the filthy darkness, for he dared not light his flash now.

God, would he ever get out from under this train? He had gone under four cars now. He stopped to glance at the luminous face of his wrist-watch. Six minutes past eleven. He was amazed. Those six minutes had seemed like six hours!

Under the fifth car now. He squirmed over to the left side and looked out.

Sentries, as usual! He made his way over to the right side. The building to which the railway ran adjacent was here now. Kirby looked, and his hopes

rose. There was a space out here of about a foot and a half, between the car and the wall of the building, where they were loading the shells into the train.

Cautiously, Kirby rolled out from under the train, taking his rifle with him. With much effort he squeezed himself to his feet, between the car and the wall. Then, sideways, because he was too broad to go straight ahead, he squeezed his way towards the edge of the building. There would be sentries there, he knew—for he had seen them from beneath the train. But he ought to be able to get by now. As long as no sentry had seen him creep out from under the cars, he oughtn't to arouse suspicion.

Sure enough, as he came to the edge of the narrow alley, he saw two sentries, standing and chatting idly. There were others close by. One of them was sure to see Kirby as he came out, so he decided to make no efforts to hide himself. Instead he straightened up, and edged right out, shouldering his rifle as he got out of the cramped space.

One of the Boche approached him, looking at him with a curiosity which Kirby fearfully mistook for suspicion. The Mosquito prayed that the darkness would hide his filthy, disheveled appearance.

"What were you doing in there, comrade?" the sentry asked, pointing to the alley between the train and the car. His tone was anything but challenging, and Kirby took heart.

"Some of the sentries have been missing from their posts!" Cleverly the Mosquito used the facts he had heard at the end of the train. He was not betraying anything that was not already known. "We have orders," he went on, and his German sounded pretty ragged in his own ears, "to search for them. They are probably hiding around here and drinking—and I could think of no finer place to hide than right in there." He nodded towards the place he had come from.

The Boche sentry laughed grimly. "A clever idea," he said, and two other Jerries came over to join the conversation, while Kirby tried hard to conceal the turmoil seething within him.

"They must be *dummers* to try to hide and get drunk," one of the newcomers said, shaking his head. "They will both be shot. But they could not have picked a better spot to hide, unless they crawled under the train itself."

All three Boche laughed at the absurdity of the idea. Kirby couldn't laugh for his laugh would have sounded jagged and hysterical. But it was all right; the others

thought he was depressed by the seriousness of the thing.

"Well," the Mosquito said, trying hard to hide his frantic haste, "I must report now to—to—" He remembered the Oberst who had first accosted his two comrades, "to the *Oberst*," he added quickly. "*Auf wiedersehen, Kamaraden!* Better keep on watch for those men."

"*Wiedersehen!*" they chorused. "We will!" And Kirby, rifle on shoulder, marched off briskly. He had to fight down the impulse to run. He must get back to that Gotha. But take it easy, so as not to attract suspicion. Plenty of time yet, he consoled himself as he stole a glance at his watch. Eight minutes past eleven.

Passing the scores of sentries he had passed before, Kirby rounded the big building and came at last within sight of the Gotha, though he could scarcely see the dim form of the big ship squatting out on the grounds. But he did see red sparks coming from the exhausts of the starboard motor. He strained his ears as he walked closer. Yes, that engine was going! And even as he went on, he heard the other motor, the port motor, roar into life. A sudden dread made him panicky and weak in the knees. Did his comrades think that he was already back in that fuselage? No, they couldn't—not unless something had gone horribly wrong! But if they should leave without him—The impulse to run became almost uncontrollable now. He walked recklessly fast, taking great strides.

When Kirby had heard that engine start, he didn't dream that it had been started many times before. And now Shorty and Travis had started it for what the *Oberst* decisively stated to be the last time. No longer could they let it conk out. It would do them no good now. Either the engine went—or they went!

Travis was like a drowning man clutching any straw he could find. "We're all set now, *Herr Oberst*. If you will allow just a moment for the engines to warm up and—"

"I will not!" snapped the *Oberst*, flatly. "You told me that the disabled engine would not take until she was warmed up. Meanwhile the other machine has been running all this time. I may not know anything about aviation, but I have seen planes take the air right after they were started. You flyers," again he began to belabor the air force, "are all bluffers; you pretend to take chances and yet you won't fly until your engines have been running half an hour. Get into that ship and take it up! Break your necks if you want—but be sure you're on the other side of our walls when you do it."

He gave a peculiar little grunt. "And now I have given you the moment you asked for, anyway—while I've been talking! Hurry up—there is no excuse now."

Still Travis and Shorty, though neither of them had any hope left now, hesitated to go to that cockpit. Instead they stood there, pulling down their goggles and strapping their helmets as slowly as they could. God, how could they possibly gain any more time?

"Go on!" barked the *Oberst*. "You don't have to dress like a couple of finicky women."

Travis turned to him frantically. "*Herr Oberst*, before we go, may we thank you for all the trouble we have put you to? We are sorry indeed, and we don't blame you for being provoked with us. But I do wish you could forgive us for our error, instead of reporting us and—"

"I refuse to discuss that," the *Oberst* broke in, with harsh impatience. "Now get into the air!"

"But sir," the frantic Travis went on, as though this subject were a matter of life and death, "we could not help what we did. We tried hard to choose a different landing place. And if you could forgive us—"

The *Oberst* waved his arms madly. "Are you going to get out of here or not?" he grated. "I don't want to hear any of your speeches. I will use my own judgment in this matter."

Travis and Shorty knew then that they had come to the very end of their rope. There was absolutely nothing more they could do. They had stalled to the very limit.

BUT while all this had been taking place, an inconspicuous figure in the uniform of a German sentry had been approaching the Gotha on the starboard side—where there were still no Boche. Carn and Travis had managed, despite all their other arduous tasks, to keep the crowd of Germans interested on the port side of the ship, except during the brief moment they had taken to start the starboard motor. And so Kirby sneaked up, unobtrusively. When he was quite close he let his rifle slide noiselessly to the ground—no use taking it now, and it wouldn't matter if it was found here. He went on, stealing down beside the starboard lower wing of the Gotha. He could hear Travis' voice now above the softly purring motors. He could hear the *Oberst* shouting angrily. He was up to the fuselage. He ducked beneath it. Quick as a flash he poked his head and shoulders through the trapdoor under the fuselage. He pulled himself up, and closed the panel beneath him, locking it with a little bolt. Then, as swiftly as he could, he groped around the

cramped darkness of the interior, feeling the smoothed wooden surface of the longerons. His fingers came to rest on a small button. Eagerly he pressed it. "Well, then," Travis said, as if suddenly yielding to the *Oberst's* demands, "let us go at once, *Leutnant!* Come!" Shorty nodded, unable to conceal his joyful eagerness. For he, too, had seen a tiny light flicker on one of the port struts—a light that would not have been noticeable unless one was watching for it.

The two Mosquitoes walked briskly towards the plane, as anxious now to get into the air as they had been a moment before to stay on the ground. Now they even had to conceal their haste.

Kirby settled back in the fuselage. It was just ten minutes past eleven. In another minute they would be getting into the air, away from this infernally dangerous place. Everything had worked after all, despite a few nasty hitches. Kirby sighed his relief. Thank God it was over!

Shorty and Travis had just about reached the side of the plane when the thing happened.

Into the crowd burst a Boche officer. His face was white as a sheet in the darkness, and he was gesticulating wildly. He rushed right up to the *Oberst*, and did not bother to salute or even come to attention.

"A spy!" he almost screamed. "A spy—loose in this plant! We have just found the three missing sentries in the tunnel—tied up and gagged!"

For a stunned moment everybody, including Shorty and Travis, stood perfectly still. And Kirby, crouching in the fuselage of the Gotha, felt his blood turning slowly to ice.

The *Oberst* then showed that he had not been made a high officer of the Imperial intelligence corps without reason. His racing mind worked faster than anybody else's. A wild roar came from him. "Seize these two men! Seize them at once! Quick—take them away from that Gotha!"

Shorty and Travis, for one wild second, had an impulse to dash for the plane which was all ready to go, and try to break away. But they knew that instant death would be their only reward for such a move. By so doing, they would absolutely condemn themselves, and even if they weren't shot down before they could reach the throttles, the plane would be blown to smithereens by the scores of ground defenses before it could move. Besides, Travis was figuring, surely they would not be held long.

They both had perfect, unshakable alibis; they had been right here all the time. And yet—

The Boche captain and some of his men leaped forward, and got between the two Mosquitoes and the plane. In the next moment, Shorty and Travis were surrounded, covered by a bristling ring of rifles. There was nothing to do but raise their hands above their heads, and look outraged and dumbfounded as the Boche captain quickly stripped them of their weapons.

The *Oberst* wheeled on the officer who had broken the news. "Pull yourself together," he ordered the frenzied man. "So you can tell me about this. In the meantime—" he called out, "Captain Braun!" The young Boche captain who had just seized Travis and Carn came running over. In a low voice the *Oberst* gave him some orders. The captain nodded and, leaving his soldiers in charge of a lieutenant, he rushed across the grounds, headed for one of the many buildings.

The *Oberst* again turned to the officer who had brought the news. "Now about this business," he barked. "Where are these three sentries now?"

"In the infirmary, sir," the officer told him. He had calmed down a bit now, and his voice was more controlled. "They have all been badly smashed up. One has a broken jaw. The other two just managed to talk. They said that the sentry at the end of the train attacked them."

"What sentry is that?" demanded the *Oberst*.

"I don't believe he was one of our sentries at all," the officer replied. "The sentry I stationed there myself was one of the men who was assaulted. Surely some impostor has gotten in here, masquerading in a sentry's uniform."

"Nonsense!" snorted the *Oberst*. "How could an impostor have gotten in here, with all our vigilance and protection?" But even as he spoke, he turned and glanced straight at the Gotha.

Kirby saw this through one of his peepholes, and instinctively he flattened down against the other side of the fuselage, as if his present concealment were not enough. His heart had seemed almost to stop beating. And so had the hearts of his two comrades, who winced in spite of themselves as they stood in the ring of captors. Good God, did this *Oberst* suspect their whole game?

"Well," he was saying now, and there was a deadly calmness in his voice, "an impostor may have gotten in some how, but I can promise he will never get out!" He wheeled on the officer again. "Did you look to see if he did any damage—where the assault on these sentries took place? Did you look at that end of the train?"

Kirby bit his lip until the blood almost came. If

they had looked under that car—if, they found that bomb—

"We looked all over, sir," the officer returned. "But as yet we have found no sign of sabotage of any kind."

"Well," snapped the *Oberst*. "Look some more! Make a thorough search. Make absolutely certain that there has been no mischief done. The officer nodded and he too rushed off across the grounds. And Kirby's momentary relief vanished. A thorough search! Surely they would find the pack sooner or later. He glanced at his wrist watch and took new hope. It was fourteen minutes past eleven. Sixteen minutes left; and it ought to take more than sixteen minutes to find that well-concealed time-bomb. But—a new terror suddenly began to freeze Kirby with its awful possibilities. Suppose he and his comrades couldn't get off in these next sixteen minutes and— But no use thinking of that now!

Travis had now managed at last to gather his wits. He started to protest with outraged innocence as he stood with Carn in the midst of all the Boche. "Pardon me, *Herr Oberst*, but if it is not asking too much, we should like an explanation for this treatment. You have seized us for no reason whatever.

I think we are entitled to know—"

The *Oberst* nodded. "Perhaps I can explain," he said, and his tone was slightly sardonic. He broke through the ring of Boche and confronted the two men. His piglike eyes narrowed upon them with cruel keenness.

"To put the matter bluntly," he said, "you two men are under suspicion."

"Under suspicion?" Travis echoed, as if amazed, while his heart pounded. "But, sir, we have done nothing! We have been in your sight every minute since we've come here."

THE *Oberst* pursed his lips. Not once throughout the evening had they seen him as cool and unperturbed as he was now. He was in his element at last, in the role of a detective. "True," he conceded. "You have not been out of my sight—I made sure of that myself. But on the other hand, what are the facts?" He held up his hand, counting off fingers while he spoke. "A Gotha lands on our forbidden grounds, much against my wishes. I am uneasy as long as it is here. The next thing I know, a spy is reported loose. I tell myself that no spy could ever sneak into this place. There seems to be a connection then. The connection seems even stronger when we consider that both you

men were most reluctant to leave us, so reluctant that you made up all kinds of excuses to stay."

Shorty and Travis almost shuddered at the man's uncanny sagacity, and Kirby, over in the fuselage, actually did shudder.

"But this is all some silly coincidence," Travis insisted. "And you are mistaken, sir, about our being reluctant to leave. We were only too anxious-after the way you spoke to us. We tried our best to hurry fixing that motor."

"And then spent, as much time as you could making parting speeches to me, until I practically threw you out," the *Oberst* ridded, his eyes glinting evilly. "Well," he said, with acrid mirth, "I will now extend to you the hospitality which my duty forced me to refuse previously. You can stay with us. In fact," his eyes grew even cruder, "I am afraid that you will have to stay with us for the time being."

"May I ask how long this nonsense will last?" Travis snapped.

"Excusing your impertinence," the *Oberst* came back, "I can only say that it will last until we can see clear to release you. We are working as fast as we can. Captain Braun, whom I sent out, has orders to sound general alarms, and soon we will be checking up every man in the place. The matter ought to be cleared up shortly." Then again he became impatient. "But enough of this. I have other work to do. In the meantime, you'll have to wait."

And Kirby, over in the fuselage glancing nervously at his wrist watch, Eleven-sixteen! The time was shortening swiftly. Only fourteen minutes left now!

The *Oberst* left Carn and Travis and barked out another order. Some of the soldiers immediately came over to him. Then, quickly, they all walked to the Gotha. Shorty and Travis watched them with growing apprehension. Kirby watched too, his nerves stretching almost to the breaking point. They were looking at the plane now, the plane whose engines were still running. They were walking all around it, glancing at it from all sides. The *Oberst* suddenly left the soldiers on the ground and climbed into the cockpit. He glanced about swiftly, using a flashlight.

Then, with terrible abruptness, the *Oberst* poked his head right into the rear fuselage. In a second the bright beam of his flashlight was stabbing all around the dark interior, groping, groping. And outside, amid the encircling rides, Shorty and Travis waited in nerve-racking suspense. They could see only vaguely what the *Oberst* was doing, but the little they saw was

enough to make them frantic with fear. Would Kirby be spotted, caught like a rat in that fuselage? If he was, everything would be finished!

Up and down, and from side to side, the *Oberst* played the beam of his flash, searching with thorough scrutiny. And he saw—absolutely nothing! Nothing but an empty interior, with its wooden skeleton framework. He flashed his light down towards the tail of the fuselage. Nothing there either; just the partition closing off the tail itself.

The *Oberst* grunted and ducked out.

And Kirby, who had been in that fuselage every moment, drew his first breath since the *Oberst* had looked in. He drew his first breath, and he blessed General Saunders for his thoroughness in attending to every little detail. When Kirby had seen the *Oberst* approaching the plane, he had merely squeezed himself away back into the tail of the ship. Then he had pulled down the special flap which General Saunders had fixed there, a flap which had screened him from view and appeared to be the usual partition.

The *Oberst* climbed out of the cockpit now, and joined his little party of searchers on the ground. Shorty and Travis watched, wailing tensely to hear the results of the search. But the *Oberst* soon dispelled all their fears. "A search of your plane," he informed them, crisply, "has revealed nothing. That, I will admit, sounds good for you."

They had all they could do to conceal their frenzied relief. And Kirby, "in the meantime, crawled out of his narrow hiding place into a more comfortable position, though he was ready to hide himself again at a moment's notice. Once more he glanced at his wrist watch. Seventeen past eleven. The search of the plane had lasted only one minute, but it had been a frightfully long minute to Kirby and his comrades.

Suddenly the young Boche captain named Braun returned to the scene, panting from running fast. The *Oberst* immediately took him aside, and the captain spoke to him rapidly for a moment. Then the *Oberst* came back and faced Shorty and Travis. The mere look on his face told them that something new had come up. God, what now?

Again the *Oberst's* piglike eyes glinted at them out of the darkness. "A question !" he snapped. "Why didn't you two tell me that you were the ones sent on that special raid over an enemy airdrome this morning?"

He shot the inquiry at them so fast that they were taken unawares. Shorty jumped perceptibly, and Travis' lips clamped together in a tight, hard line.

Then, with a shock, both men remembered who they were supposed to be. Captain von Ritter and *Leutnant* Wolff—two of the three flyers who had conducted that bomb raid this morning! They remembered also that they had already planned, with General Saunders' help, a good story for just this question. Quickly Travis recovered himself. He met the *Oberst's* challenging eyes levelly.

"That is easy to answer," the lanky Mosquito said. "We were told to say nothing about that raid to anyone, until we could report back to our airdrome. We were told to hold our tongues about it."

The *Oberst* seemed impressed by this. He stepped forward, coming also into the center of the ring of Boche. He walked close to the two men, and spoke in a low voice which no one else could hear.

"In that respect you are right. This business must be kept strictly secret. Not even these soldiers out here know about it. Only our most trusted workmen who are employed directly on the—the thing, know the details." But then he stepped back, and again his tone froze into hard suspicion. "Your squadron commander says this Gotha left with three men this morning and hasn't returned to the airdrome since. Is that true?"

AGAIN the two men felt their hearts skip. They realized now what had happened. As soon as the *Oberst* had seen them, the wily intelligence man had cleverly ordered Captain Braun to call up their assumed drome, the 46th Imperial bombing squadron, and find out about them. And now, acting on what he had learned, the *Oberst* was asking questions—embarrassing questions. Both men felt the net closing slowly but surely about them. But Travis, who seemed to be made of steel, still refused to flinch.

"Yes, it is true," he said, in answer to the *Oberst's* question.

"Then where is the other observer, *Leutnant* Vogel? And why haven't you reported to your drome since the raid—which was almost eighteen hours ago?"

"I will account for that, sir," said Travis. "We raided that airdrome and wiped it out, just as we were ordered, although during the raid *Leutnant* Vogel, our other observer, was seriously wounded by the ground-fire. We returned back to our lines and—" his mind groped for some inconspicuous Boche town where there would be no telephones for the wily *Oberst* to call up—"and it was over Brenne that we developed engine trouble for the first time today, evidently our motor had been damaged by the ground-fire also. We

had to make a forced landing in the town, which was without supplies or communication to do us any good. We sent one of the townsfolk for help at the nearest airdrome, but the help never came.

"In the meantime, *Leutnant* Vogel had fallen into such a serious condition that we had him taken at once to the house of the town doctor, who insisted that he stay there under his care. Because of our crude equipment, we had to labor all day and far into the night at our disabled engine. It was ten p.m. before we got it fixed, and then, leaving Vogel with the doctor, we started out for our drome once more. On our way the engine suddenly went bad again, and we had to land here. Is that not correct, *Leutnant*?"

Shorty nodded. "That is exactly what happened," he affirmed.

And, to their joy, the *Oberst* seemed to believe their story. It was more than they dared to hope for.

"What you say," the intelligence officer stated, tersely, "seems to confirm your squadron commander's belief—that you are two of his men and that the third was lost. Now as soon as things are a bit straightened out, I think I can let you go. Meanwhile, I'll have to keep you under this strict guard. We can take no chances, you know." His tone was almost apologetic now, as if he was actually ashamed of his former suspicions. "At any rate, your ship is all ready to go, so you can get right off as soon as we can release you."

The relief which the Mosquitoes felt on hearing this almost made them dizzy. The trap which had sprung on them had been mercifully opened again. The *Oberst* was going to let them go. They waited, hopeful, expectant. But Kirby, the only one who knew when that bomb was going off, was still tense and worried. It was now eleven-twenty. Ten minutes to go! God, if only they could get off in these next ten minutes!

The *Oberst* was pacing up and down now, as if waiting for something. He was lost in thought. The seconds ticked by, in swift succession. Shorty and Travis still waited in the ring of patient Boche soldiers. When would they be freed? The twin motors of the Gotha still purred unobtrusively. Eleven twenty-one.

Suddenly the *Oberst* stopped pacing. Three newcomers had just come running up to the scene. Two of them were sentries. The third was a tall, broad-shouldered man in flying togs.

"Ah, here you are, major," the *Oberst* greeted the latter, with visible relief. "I am glad you came quickly. Now you can identify these two men of your squadron, and they can take their Gotha off at once."

A wave of absolute horror swept over the Mosquitoes as they heard these words. The German squadron commander! The wily *Oberst* had sent for him before—and he had merely been holding Shorty and Travis until they could be positively identified.

“I hurried over on a motor cycle, sir,” the major said. He was quite a young fellow, and though his face had a Prussian hardness, it also bore the stamp of reckless courage, the courage of the air corps. “I could have reached here sooner had I flown, but you forbid the planes to land here.” He smiled eagerly. “But where are my two lost eagles you say are here, *Herr Oberst*?”

“Right this way, major,” invited the *Oberst*. And straight through the crowd of Boche surrounding the two Mosquitoes, he led the squadron commander. Shorty and Travis felt a ghastly weakness in their knees. They wished that the ground would open up beneath their feet and swallow them. Instinctively they lowered their heads as the *Oberst* and the major came right up to them. But it was useless. The *Oberst* turned his flashlight right on their faces. The major took one keen look at each of them. Flat and decisive the words came from him.

“These two men are not Captain von Ritter and *Leutnant* Wolff. I have never seen either of them before. They must be impostors.”

There was a ghastly moment of silence. Shorty and Travis just stood there, frozen, their feet rooted to the ground. The jig was up. The trap had opened again, only to spring with more certain fatality. They were cornered, helpless to do a thing with the scores of rifles which covered them more carefully than ever now. And in the fuselage of the Gotha, Kirby, torn by anguished horror at what he had heard and seen through his peephole, racked his brain vainly for some scheme to save the situation. But what could he do? If he made any move, he’d only be caught too. With all these Boche around, with guns all over the place and Fokkers in the air, there was no chance for any kind of a break.

The *Oberst*’s face was satanic as he turned to the major. “So,” he said, with horrible calmness, “they are impostors. Well, that is all I wanted to know, major. Thank you.” He addressed the soldiers. “Hold these two swine a moment. I will attend to them presently.” Then he and the major broke out through the crowd again. The major now proceeded to look at the Gotha. He examined its insignias. A look of puzzlement came over his features.

“This is certainly the Gotha that was flown by

von Ritter, Wolff, and Vogel this morning. I cannot understand it.”

“I think I can understand it quite well,” said the *Oberst*, with his uncanny shrewdness. “And unless I am mistaken, the real flyers of this Gotha are in the hands of our enemies—dead or alive. Somebody has certainly tried to pull the wool over our eyes and—” He broke off, as the officer who had first reported the news of the spy now reappeared on the scene. He saluted this time.

“We have searched everywhere, *Herr Oberst*,” he announced. “But we can find no signs of the intruder. And we looked all around the end of that train. I am sure there has been no mischief done.”

AND Kirby, hearing this, felt a triumphant sense of relief despite all his anguish and fear. They had not found that bomb! They’d never find it now! Why—again the thought made him glance at his wrist watch—it was already twenty-three minutes past eleven. In only seven minutes more now the thing was going off. And he did not try to flinch from the facts. Shorty and Travis were being held here, helpless. He was helpless too, in this Gotha. That bomb was going to take the Three Mosquitoes to hell with the Staffletz works. He gritted his teeth. Better to be killed by their own bomb than by these Boche—who would also be taken to hell by the explosion.

The *Oberst* was speaking to the officer who had just reappeared. “See that the search for the intruder is continued. Don’t overlook anything!” And the officer hurried away. The *Oberst* then turned to the major, and now his tone was again impatient.

“I should like to extend you our hospitality, major,” he said, crisply, “but you are acquainted with our rules here. Hereafter I must enforce them more strictly than ever. And so I must ask you to take that Gotha, which is already warmed, and fly it away from here immediately, back to your drome. That is why I had them ask you to wear your flying clothes—in case this should be necessary.”

The major nodded in quick assent. “I shall not waste a moment more of your time, *Herr Oberst*. I’ll take this ship off this instant.” And he hurried over to the Gotha. Absolute despair descended on Kirby. Good God, in a moment he would be up in the air, flown by this major! He was not going to get killed by the bomb after all! His comrades would be left here to die while he got away. For even now he knew that once in the air his get-away would not be difficult to manage. He

would simply sneak up out of the fuselage and knock the unsuspecting major cold, then take the controls and fly the Gotha back across the Allied lines. But—tears of helplessness filled his eyes—he could not leave his comrades behind him, could not live while they got blown to hell. The major had climbed into the cockpit now. He took the *Oberst's* word that the ship was ready to go and that it was all right. He sat right down in the pilot's seat and strapped himself in. He pulled down his goggles. And Kirby, hidden in the fuselage behind him, tried in vain to think of something he could do—anything that might save his two comrades. But every scheme that came to his frenzied mind was hopelessly impossible. And now there were only six minutes left anyhow—it was eleven-twenty-four!

The major's hand went to the twin throttles. He pulled them open. And Kirby, choking back the helpless sobs that rose in his throat, heard the motors roar thunderously, felt the ship trembling from nose to tail. Now it was moving! The major was getting it off! Shorty and Travis watched the big ship thunder across the grounds into the wind. They watched it as it lifted reluctantly from the earth, and climbed towards the starry sky. The two Mosquitoes looked at one another, and both nodded in a tacit understanding. The leaving of that Gotha meant the removal of their last, possible shred of hope—but it also meant the escape of Kirby, their leader. And they were glad—glad that one of the Three Mosquitoes, at least, would return alive from this hellish mission. For they too knew that Kirby would soon get control of the Gotha, once it was in the air.

The Gotha climbed slowly. It was still over the Staffletz grounds, but in another moment it would be past the walls of the plant, beyond which the swarms of Fokkers were keeping up their steady patrol. Half a minute had passed now since the major had taken off, and Kirby's mind had raced as it had never raced before during those last thirty seconds. And suddenly, it had come to him! A wild, utterly crazy scheme perhaps—but it could make things no worse to try it. There was a chance, a fleeting chance at least, that it might work. And if it failed, it would mean that his comrades would not be blown up, without him, anyway.

But he must hurry, hurry or all was lost! Time was against him. There were just a little over five minutes left to do the thing—and he did not see how he could manage it in that short period. But a fierce, gripping determination came over him—he must! He must do it somehow!

And so, while the Gotha was still climbing over the Staffletz grounds, Kirby, drawing the Colt he had kept concealed beneath his tunic, crawled forward in the fuselage, with frantic haste. In just a few seconds he was poking his head cautiously into the bathtublike cockpit, looking over the observers' seats. He saw the broad back of the major. The German was busy at his controls; and he was keeping his eyes before him.

Stealthy as a cat, Kirby came out of the fuselage and climbed over the observers' seats. Right behind the major he crouched now, gun in hand. He did not hesitate. He was in too much of a hurry. With desperate viciousness he brought the butt of that revolver right down on the German's helmet. The German slumped right over his controls, never knowing what had hit him. At once the Gotha commenced to flounder, threatening to go into a nose dive. Madly, Kirby tugged the German from the wheel over which he had slumped, and by sitting almost on top of the man he was able to get his own feet on the rudder-bars. In this fashion he leveled the plane off and set it in neutral. It would fly straight ahead for a while now of its own accord, with no one at the controls. And it would still take about twenty seconds for it to pass over the walls of the Staffletz grounds.

Kirby worked with a breathless speed which only desperate men can attain. He unstrapped the German from the seat and with much effort, lifted him out of it. The Gotha sailed on, steady as a top. In a matter of seconds, Kirby had managed to get off the Boche's loose flying coat, as well as his helmet and goggles. The Mosquito slipped into the coat, which fit him well enough. He took off his hat and hastily jammed on the Boche's helmet. Then, with lightning quickness, he dragged the unconscious German right back into that fuselage, and left him hidden there.

Madly, he scrambled for the pilot's seat and seized the controls. The Gotha was just about to pass over the boundary of the Staffletz grounds. But before it did, Kirby ruddered over, turned his wheel, and banked gracefully around. He was headed back now—back where they had come from. He took one hand off the wheel and buttoned up his coat, then pulled down his goggles and fastened his helmet. He glanced at his watch. Twenty-six past eleven. God, only four minutes more! It looked hopeless!

But now he saw, directly below and ahead, the swarm of Germans on the grounds—and he knew this was the spot. Another few seconds and he was in the wind. He shoved the wheel forward, cutting

the throttles. The Gotha glided down swiftly, wires shrilling. Kirby meanwhile turned the collar of his stolen coat high up over his chin, so that as much of his face as possible was covered. He was still grimy, but that could not be helped.

The crowd of Germans on the ground shouted with astonishment as they saw the Gotha which had just taken off coming back again. Shorty and Travis stared at it, trying dumbly to comprehend. The *Oberst* cursed. He had been just about to confront the two impostors and try to question them, but now, for some inexplicable reason, the major was coming right down again.

IN ANOTHER moment the Gotha was bouncing over the ground. Kirby skillfully guided it to a stop right beside the crowd of Germans. He steeled his nerves for the great ordeal of his life. At the same time he pulled the collar of his coat a little higher.

Now he saw the dim form of the *Oberst*, coming up to the fuselage. And, just as Kirby had hoped and prayed, the *Oberst* never stopped to doubt that this pilot might not be the major. It was natural; he himself had searched the plane and found it empty, and he had seen the major take off. How then could he possibly dream that the major was now unconscious in the fuselage, while a desperate Yank was in his place? And so, to Kirby's great relief, he did not turn his flashlight on the Mosquito.

"What is the matter, major?" barked the *Oberst* gruffly, looking straight up at the cockpit, but unable really to see the features of the pilot who leaned out. "Why did you come down again? We cannot allow this, you know. Had you flown past our boundaries, you would have been prevented from turning back."

Kirby knew this well enough; that was why he had seen that he didn't fly past those walls. But now he must talk, must hurry the thing through. A furtive glance at his watch told him there were only three minutes left now. He formed his words with mad haste. He must watch his German now as he had never watched it before, must pronounce it correctly. And somehow, through desperation, he managed it.

"Just as I took off, sir," he said, "I suddenly recalled that I have seen these two men before, after all. I cannot remember where as yet. But I thought that if I could just take another look at them before I go, I might help you to identify them."

The *Oberst* was frankly put out. "And you mean to say, major, you had to land on our grounds again for

that purpose? Could you not have gone back to your drome, and returned here through the gate?"

"Well," Kirby argued furiously, while in his mind he could hear the seconds ticking away—hear the bomb ticking away, too! "I feared that you might deal with these men before I could come back. And I wanted to be sure there was no mistake about who they were." The *Oberst* grunted. "Perhaps you are right at that," he conceded, to Kirby's relief. "It was my intention to have them shot immediately. Well, you may look at them. Climb down and do so at once, for we cannot give you much time."

Again Kirby used all his wits. "I am all strapped in here, sir," he said, "and it will expedite matters if you just have the two men brought over here and let me look down at them. Then I will be able to take right off again."

The *Oberst* hesitated a moment. Kirby stole another glance at his watch. Twenty-eight minutes past eleven! In just two minutes now—

"Very well," said the *Oberst*. "We will do that." He turned towards the crowd of soldiers who surrounded the two Mosquitoes. "Bring those two men over here! Be quick!"

The soldiers obeyed the order instantly. Shorty and Travis, not knowing what this was all about—for they did not even recognize Kirby's voice, so cleverly did their leader imitate the major—were marched over to the Gotha. To Kirby it seemed hours before they finally got near the plane.

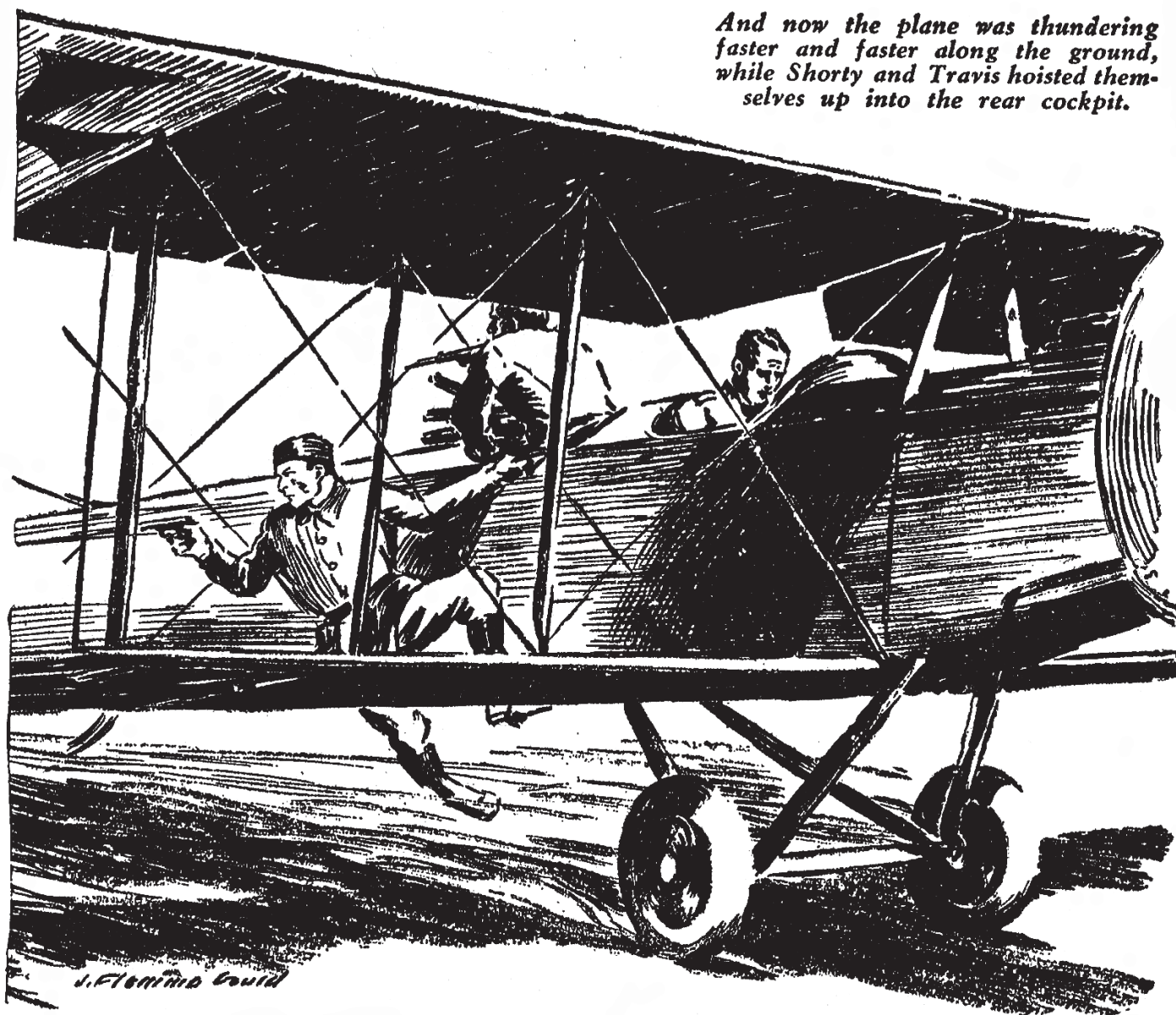
At the *Oberst's* command, the soldiers now ceased to surround the two Mosquitoes. Instead they stood behind them, while Shorty and Travis stood right below the Gotha's cockpit. The *Oberst* flashed his light in their faces. Kirby leaned over and pretended to study them carefully.

"Can you have them step a little closer, *Herr Oberst*?" he asked. God, the thing must be done now or never! There wasn't any time to spare!

The *Oberst* barked at the two Mosquitoes, "Step closer, swine!"

Shorty and Travis were right up to the fuselage now, almost touching it. Kirby would wait no longer. It was almost twenty-nine minutes past eleven now. He leaned down further over the side of the cockpit. And then he yelled at the top of his lungs, yelled in his own voice and his own language, "Hold on, fellers! Hold on, for the luvva Pete!" And at the same time he pulled the throttle levers wide open, and the Gotha literally leaped forward. And Shorty and Travis, who

And now the plane was thundering faster and faster along the ground, while Shorty and Travis hoisted themselves up into the rear cockpit.



had joyously recognized their leader's voice at once, leaped recklessly and managed to clutch the cowl of the cockpit. They held onto it for dear life.

The Germans were all thrown into momentary confusion. Just as Kirby had planned, the whole thing had taken them entirely unawares, because they had been certain that the Gotha's pilot was the major and no other. They were simply dumbfounded by the incongruous thing that had happened. And when the Gotha leaped forward several of them were knocked down and scattered by the great sweeping wings of the plane. The others didn't have the presence of mind to fire a shot at Travis or Shorty as the two Mosquitoes clung madly to the moving ship. And now the Gotha was gathering up speed, thundering faster and faster along the grounds.

The *Oberst*, almost in a fit of apoplexy, bellowed orders frantically. The soldiers at last began to fire at the Gotha, and bullets whizzed over the heads of the Mosquitoes. But the shots were badly amiss. And now Shorty and Travis had both managed to hoist themselves into the cockpit, and they were getting into the observers' seats. Meanwhile Kirby, knowing there was less than a minute to spare, gave the twin engines all the gas they would take, and cursed at the ship for not getting off the ground sooner. It was doubtless the added weight of the major in the fuselage that made the take-off so slow.

But now the Germans were getting busy at last. The enraged *Oberst* had shot up a signal from a rocket pistol he carried. Instantly the searchlights began to open up, and their beams groped for the plane, like

deadly tentacles. Machine guns all over the place commenced to stutter into blazing life. But even as the hellish barrage commenced, the Gotha had lifted from the ground at last, and Kirby was climbing her as fast as he possibly could.

Bullets began to crackle everywhere now, until the air seemed dense with flying, screaming lead. Still Kirby climbed, while his comrades sat grinning at all the bullets, so glad were they to be here at all. Fiercer and fiercer grew the barrage, and now the anti-aircrafts were contributing their deadly share. Shells began to burst on every side of the Gotha. In the meantime, summoned by signals on the ground, the swarms of Fokkers in the distance were sweeping towards her to finish the Gotha if the ground-fire should fail.

Nine hundred feet now, with Kirby still urging the big ship upwards. The barrage was growing worse and worse. In another second it must surely blow the Gotha to smithereens.

But there wasn't another second of it! For now, just as the hands of Kirby's wrist watch pointed to half-past eleven, it came! It came at first almost imperceptibly. A sheet of livid flame rose from the end of the railroad below, but the sound of the explosion was lost in the thunder of all the anti-aircrafts and machine guns.

But that first sheet of flame was comparatively a spark, a spark which had set the powder off. For now there came a series of frightful explosions which shattered all other sounds. *B-r-r-rooom! Bang-bang! Boom!* The Gotha wobbled perilously from the concussions. The shell-laden cars of the train were exploding now, one after another. Each time the bursts of flame were larger and more livid, until now the whole sky was illumined by them. Then the building adjacent to the railroad was struck. *B-r-r-r-roooooom!* In one great mass of fire it went up, and this time the Gotha almost sideslipped. Shorty and Travis were shouting joyously now, shouting with frenzied glee. But Kirby was climbing that Gotha on, on. He knew that the XXX hadn't been set off as yet—and he knew that when it was set off he and his comrades couldn't be too far away from it!

The ground-fire had ceased now. The German gunners had far more important things to worry about than shooting at the escaping Gotha. The whole place was in a mad panic. Men ran helter-skelter out of all the buildings, trying vainly to escape the destruction that was descending upon them. Everywhere, explosion was following explosion, while shells that were not aimed from guns went shrieking crazily all

over the place, to burst on every part of the plant and scatter death wholesale.

And all the time the Gotha kept nosing upwards towards the starry sky, higher and higher, with Shorty and Travis looking over the side and jubilantly watching the titanic fireworks below. In the meantime, the squadrons of Fokkers were streaking in towards the Gotha from all sides now, since the ground-fire had stopped. The Boche flyers were determined to get this big ship, since it seemed to connect in more ways than one with the terrible spectacle below. Closer and closer they swept, those German scouts—scores and scores of them!

AND then, suddenly, hell itself seemed to erupt from the earth! There rose a column of flame that was over a mile in height. The XXX had been set off! The sky became as bright as day, and in the dazzling light the Mosquitoes could see each other clearly. And then came the explosion, an explosion that shook the very heavens and all but burst the eardrums of the Three Mosquitoes. The concussion that followed literally took the Gotha out of Kirby's hands and tossed it around like a cork. The ship shivered from nose to tail, threatening to crack—and the Mosquitoes were thankful that they had taken such a large and sturdy crate for this job.

Then it was over, and a ghastly stillness seemed to come over the air which had been so full of noise. Below, a great smouldering blotch lay on the grounds that a moment before, had been occupied by the largest and finest munitions plant the Germans had. It was wiped out completely, and so was every man in it.

And Kirby turned for the first time from the pilot's seat, turned and cut down the throttles so he could shout exultantly to his comrades, "Well, fellers, we pulled it! The XXX is gone all right now!"

"You bet it is!" Shorty shouted back. "But I sure thought we were going with it!"

Suddenly Kirby gave a startled shout. "Gosh, fellers, I forgot all about the major! You'd better look back in that fuselage to see if he's still out."

Travis looked, using his flashlight.

Kirby meanwhile was straightening the Gotha and heading her, at full throttle, for the Allied lines. Travis saw the major lying in the fuselage, blissfully oblivious of everything. He was out and would remain out for a long time.

"We're doing well," the lanky Mosquito shouted to Shorty. "Not only do we carry out our job, but we bring back a souvenir."

"That's true," Shorty agreed. "And now—" He broke off suddenly, a cry of alarm coming from him.

Out of the swarms of Fokkers, about a dozen had remained intact after that explosion. And these dozen scouts had joined in one big formation, the object of which was to wreak vengeance on the Gotha. Now, taking the Mosquitoes quite unawares, they were diving straight down on the big ship, dropping on it like pellets of rain. The shrill clatter of Spandaus rose overhead, shattering the roar of the Gotha's motors. *Rat-tat-tat-tat! Rat-tat-tat-tat!* The tracer bullets drew luminous lines in the sky, on every side of the Gotha. Frantically Kirby started to roll the cumbersome ship for all she was worth, to shake off the Germans' sights. In the meantime, Shorty and Travis seized the two flanking guns in the rear, turned them upwards, and started blazing away furiously.

The Fokkers, coming out of their dives, pulled up and commenced to buzz like a swarm of hornets around the larger and more cumbersome Gotha. And the Three Mosquitoes knew then how the three Boche flyers had felt when the trio of Yanks had first attacked this same Gotha in their Spads. They were no match for the faster Fokkers, and against this overwhelming number they didn't have a chance.

Their jubilation and triumph had vanished now, and once more their faces became grim and tense. Kirby cut the throttles to yell to the other two, encouragingly, "Come on, fellers! Fight! Fight like hell! We can't afford to lose out now. I'm going to head for the lines."

The other two nodded, and bent grimly to their guns. Kirby, meanwhile, continued to head to Allied territory, at the same time half-rolling and zigzagging to dodge the streams of tracer which were coming from all directions now. The Fokkers closed in, seeking to shut off every path of escape. Everywhere now, the Mosquitoes saw those whisking bird-like shapes looming fantastically out of the darkness as they lunged in to fire their bursts. Bullets began to pump the Gotha, drilling its wings and smashing into its wood and metal parts, but the Three Mosquitoes were fighting back, fighting back in their usual reckless fashion. And as usual, they were scoring—taking their toll of their enemies. Shorty got the first German ship. A burst from his gun found the Jerry's gas tank, and the Fokker went streaking down in flames. Then Travis shot the wings off another German scout which hurtled earthward like a stone.

But now, just as surely as the Gotha had been trapped this morning, it was being trapped now. The

Fokkers were cutting Kirby off from the lines, getting in his path. Cursing, Kirby plunged on recklessly, taking them head-on. He leaned to his sights and let them have both his forward guns. And he too scored. Another Fokker plunged earthward like a fiery torch.

The Germans, realizing that they were up against three determined men, attacked with renewed vehemence. And now their fatal trap was closing around the Gotha. Thicker and thicker grew the bullets. *Crash!* The instrument board in front of Kirby was bashed in and shattered. *Ping!* A flying-wire snapped musically from its place. There was a sound of bullets ricocheting from one of the twin engines—and the motor began to sputter protestingly. The Gotha dropped a little on one wing. And the Mosquitoes realized then that they were not going to get through, that they couldn't possibly fight off this swarm of Fokkers. The lines were still almost thirty miles away. It was hopeless. They had escaped death at Staffletz only to meet it here in the air, on their triumphant return. With merciless precision the Germans kept crowding in, until Kirby could no longer make any headway, but had to keep banking and half-rolling. It was incredible that none of the Mosquitoes had been hit. But soon now they were going to get it. Soon it would all be over!

AND then, all at once, everything changed. At first the Three Mosquitoes scarcely realized what had happened. But suddenly the Fokkers were no longer closing in on them. Instead, the German scouts were breaking away frantically, trying to get back into formation.

A surge of joy rose in the three men. For now they saw. Diving out of the starry sky, coming down with breathless speed, were at least twenty trim Spads! Straight on the Fokkers they plunged, their guns stuttering into blazing life. And later, the Three Mosquitoes found out that this was their own squadron—operating from its new drome already. General Saunders, fearing that the Gotha might need help on its way back, had sent the squadron out to Staffletz, making sure that the Spads would not get there until after the place had been wiped out.

The Spads had arrived in the nick of time. The Three Mosquitoes' comrades had found the Gotha being shot to hell, and now they had come down to attack the Fokkers with a vengeance. Already the dogfight was going in full tilt, with planes dueling all over the sky, banking, zooming, diving—and every now and then a ship would go hurtling earthward.

Gratefully, Kirby pulled out his Very pistol. He fired, and a bright green rocket streaked into the air. That was the signal which General Saunders had arranged. It was a signal which would inform all Allied pilots that this was the special Gotha, manned by Yanks and not to be attacked. Little did Kirby know that the signal wouldn't have been necessary now; every pilot of the squadron knew that this was the special Gotha.

The Three Mosquitoes did not stay to participate in the dogfight. They were not needed, for their fellow pilots were beating the stuffings out of the Boche, sending down one Fokker after another. And so Kirby pulled out, and headed for home. The swarm of fighting planes was soon swallowed in the darkness behind, and the Gotha sailed on, with the motor that had been hit still sputtering, but bearing up stoutly.

Kirby turned to shout to his comrades again, "Take a look at that Kraut in the fuselage. Hope the poor bird hasn't been killed in the scrap. We've killed enough Jerries for one night."

Again Travis looked into the fuselage with his flashlight. "He's still out cold, but he hasn't been hit," he announced.

"Well," put in Shorty, "I'm all set for one helluva good sleep." He leaned forward to Kirby. "Home, James."

The binge was a howling success in every sense of the word. The squadron, gathered in the mess hall of its new drome, was doing its damndest to raise the roof of the building. And why not? A double event had to be celebrated—the moving into the new drome and the removing of the Staffletz plant by the Three Mosquitoes.

The guest of honor was no less a personage than Brigadier General Saunders of intelligence. He sat next to the proud C.O. at the head of the long table, and his eyes, like those of the C.O. were strangely blind to all the vin rouge that was being guzzled.

When the eating had been finished, and the drinking had commenced in dead earnest, the general rose to propose a toast.

"Gentlemen," he said, and his eyes twinkled, "your C.O. has just told me that he never makes a practice of praising any of his men. Says it spoils them. Therefore, since I am his guest, I cannot praise anybody here to-night. Well, it seems you have three flyers here whom you call the Three Mosquitoes. They're not half bad, but still they could be a lot better. The destruction of that Staffletz plant really means a turning point in the war, on our side.

"But it was all my idea; and the Three Mosquitoes

merely carried it out. They did nothing except land among a thousand Boche, plant a bomb, blow up the place, and fight their way out. Oh yes, I neglected to mention that they brought back a prisoner—but that doesn't count. Of course he is, as we found out, one of the greatest bombing pilots the Germans have; he has supervised most of the raids on Paris, but we can leave that out. At any rate," he concluded, shrugging as he lifted his glass, "let's try to make these Three Mosquitoes feel good, even though they are not much. We'll do them a favor and drink to them."

The rafters shook with the roars of boisterous laughter that greeted this speech. Then all save the Three Mosquitoes and a few others who were unable to move, rose to their feet and noisily drank to the famous trio. When the toast had been drunk, yells of "Speech! Speech!" came from all parts of the table, with such insistence that at last Kirby rose from his chair. The leader of the Three Mosquitoes was just a trifle unsteady on his feet. He stood there, swaying a little and leaning one hand on the table. His face was flushed—not from embarrassment.

"Sheneral," he said, huskily. "You exasherate, shir—*hic*—S'nothin' at all, shir. S'nothin' at all. And what we wanna—*hic*—shay ish that it'sh nothin' at all, shir! We appreciate shish toash. S'nothin' at all—and lesh have 'nother l'il drink—"

Here Shorty Carn, horrified, pulled him down into his chair. The little Mosquito now tried to take his leader's place. But he was a sad substitute.

"It's embarrassing," he began. "Honest, it's really embarrassing, general. I mean—it's embarrassing. It's so embarrassing that—" Tears suddenly streamed down his face. "It's embarrassing," he blubbered, whereupon Travis pulled him down, and he sat weeping bitterly.

The eldest and wisest of the Three Mosquitoes now tried to rise to the occasion himself. But for some reason or other, he couldn't rise at all. Somebody must have put glue on his chair. He sat there, immovable. But though he could not move, he did manage to talk more distinctly than his comrades.

"What we're all trying to say, sir," he told the general, "is—thanks a lot!"