



WINGED CONSPIRACY

by FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

Rusty Wade lands in the middle of white water and a snarling hail of bullets.

IS THIS THE BEST SHE'LL DO?" The voice came over the telephone to "Rusty" Wade's ears, and the suggestion that his new job was flying slowly gave him a distinct shock.

"Huh?" he grunted.

Again came the passenger's voice. "Can't you go faster? It looks like we're hanging in the air."

"It may look that way to you, Mr. Bradford," Rusty answered, "but we're doing a hundred and forty-five miles an hour."

"I suppose so, but I'm a nervous wreck already. Everything has gone wrong so far and I'm suspicious of everybody and everything. I didn't know but what you might squeeze a mile or two more out of her."

Rusty did not answer for nearly five minutes. A low ridge was rising up to meet them. He skimmed across it with fifty feet to spare, and objects became a

blur to Bradford.

"I apologize," said Bradford. "We are flying faster than I thought. But time is flying and if I don't get there by ten o'clock—" He did not finish but resumed his worrying again.

As for Rusty, he wasn't worrying. After years of knocking about the air, things were at last more to his liking. He always had been a slow starter and a strong finisher. And, after all, the finish is what counts. Rusty had recently smashed his small plane, *The Sea Scout*, in an effort to scoop a rival news reel company on a steamship wreck off the Alaskan coast. He had done such a neat job that Goldberg, the film king, had not only paid him his fee but insisted on presenting him with a new plane, even though *The Sea Scout* was being repaired.

The new job was a beauty. Powered with a nine-

cylinder, air-cooled, radial Wasp the plane could do a hundred and forty-five miles an hour at nineteen hundred revolutions a minute. Her cruising speed at fifteen hundred revolutions a minute was a hundred and fifteen. She had a service ceiling of twenty-two thousand feet and could carry over a ton useful load. Her range at cruising speed was a thousand miles and she could take off or land without brakes in less than three hundred feet.

She was special in other ways, too, for she had been designed for a quick change from wheels to pontoons. As a field of operation Rusty had Alaska, and there were rugged stretches where mountain lakes were the only landing fields. For work along the coast, pontoons were more practical than wheels. The waters were sheltered and landing fields few.

Rusty's passenger was an Alaskan, but curiously enough the old sour dough was headed for a middle-west city instead of the North. The man had offered him a thousand dollars to land him in time for a ten o'clock stockholders' meeting and Rusty seemed in a fair way to claim the money. It was purely a sporting proposition with him. If he failed he would not get a cent.

As they neared the city the clock hands were too close to ten for comfort. "How far's the landing field from town?" old Bradford inquired.

"Three miles."

"None closer than that?"

"That's the best I can do. If you want to climb out on the wing and pull the release cord of your chute, and be pulled off, I can land you in the public square. That's right across the street from where you want to go!"

"I'll do anything to beat Kepler. Yes—I'll jump off this plane, I've faced worse dangers in the North in my time. Kepler's got to be beat."

Naturally Rusty sided with his passenger in the matter, though he knew none of the merits of the fight between two groups of stockholders for the control of the big mining company.

It was five minutes of ten when they passed over the public square.

"Fly back and I'll do it! I've got to!" Bradford's voice had a ring of determination. He was no longer the nervous wreck who was afraid to fly, yet afraid not to—no longer afraid he might not make it. He had made it and he was a grim fighter ready to do battle.

Presently the gnarled hands were gripping the wing and Bradford moved slowly along. His face was gray

as death, but he did not hesitate. When Rusty signaled, Bradford pulled the ring and was jerked into space. Rusty looked down and saw that everything had been accomplished without accident. Then he landed at the field and was driven to town.

"Besides collecting my thousand," he told himself, "I want to take another look at that old boy. That's the finest bit of courage I've seen in an old man in a long time. If he'll do that to win his fight he must be right. I'll go to the devil for him if he wants me to."

At the entrance of the assembly room in the building he was stopped.

"Stockholder of the Deep Creek Company?" he was asked.

"No," replied Rusty, "but I'm delivering an important package to one of the stockholders." Before the doorman could think up an answer Rusty slipped by. The rest was easy. He merely lost himself in the crowd.

One side of the hall was crowded; the other side but partly filled, but it was evident every man had joined his own crowd. There was no mingling of the factions here. The larger crowd was made up of people whose clothing and hands indicated that they worked hard at various trades.

There was a scattering of elderly women who appeared, to be half frightened and not entirely sure of what was going on. But it was evident they believed their own fate hung in the balance. Among the men there was the same grimness of purpose Rusty had noticed in Bradford's' face.

The smaller group was composed of men who obviously lived by their wits. Their eyes were shrewd, their manner smooth and easy. They relied on strategy and trickery to win their fights. The other group was composed of the open, two-fisted type of fighter.

"Huh," growled Rusty with obvious disapproval, "I've seen that kind of tripe before. They'll spill a tear and a flower on a man's grave, then rob the widow." He looked up at the chairman of the meeting. "So that's the man old Bradford's gunning for. Another slicker."

KEPLER stood up. "The chairman and board request a vote of confidence from the stockholders and the approval of their action in closing down the mines for a year."

One of the smaller group stood up now. "We have here, Mr. Chairman, present, or by proxy, forty-nine thousand shares. I understand the minority interests have but forty-eight thousand shares. Unless they can

show strength to the contrary I move the plan to close down the mines until market conditions are better be approved.”

“Just a minute!” Bradford snapped out the words. Then he shook his fist at Kepler. “I’ve munched behind a dog team, shot rapids, traveled by steamer and flew by plane to get here on time, and I’m going to have my say. You’re surprised to see me—well, you shouldn’t be. I told you years ago that the minute you tried any crooked stuff I’d block you. And here I am.”

Kepler pounded with his gavel, but Bradford jerked out an old .44 six-gun and pounded on his own table.

“This gavel is running things for a few minutes,” he shouted. “Market conditions were never better and you know it. When you argue otherwise you’re clouding the issue. The game is this, gentlemen.” He turned to the stockholders. “The chairman, Kepler and a select group of associates who have their fingers in many pies, are not satisfied with the dividend they are getting. They want it all. To get it they want to close down the mine, let it flood, ruin machinery and force the stock down to almost nothing. Then they’ll buy it up for a song. And the little fellows are holding the sack. Do you deny it?” He flung the words at Kepler.

“I most certainly do deny it. I shall sue you for slander.”

“Go to it, I’m not worried,” Bradford snorted. “The truth is always a defense in a suit for slander. Now see if you’ll deny this. The vein is growing richer as the mine deepens. It is fifty per cent wider than it was six months ago. Have you told them that?”

It was evident that the larger group of stockholders were surprised. The poker faces of the smaller group betrayed nothing but confidence in the outcome.

“I didn’t know that!” Kepler said. “I don’t believe it.”

“Well, you should know it. Any mucker on the job in Alaska know’s it. Either you knew it and are concealing the fact, which is crooked, or else you are not fitted for your job. In either case you should be kicked off the board.”

A dead silence followed.

Again Kepler’s friend stood up. “I renew my motion that a vote of confidence be given and that the mine be closed down.”

RUSTY watched tired faces lose color. To many it seemed that a motion made was as good as carried. It would be financially impossible for them to hang on indefinitely and they knew it.

“Second the motion,” said another.

“The secretary will poll the vote.” Kepler spoke in a cut-and-dried voice.

“For the motion, forty-nine thousand shares,” said the secretary reading from several papers spread on his desk. “Against the motion, forty-eight thousand.”

“And mine bring it up to forty-nine thousand,” cut in Bradford.

“You have but nine hundred shares,” the secretary coldly informed him. He was a Kepler man and in on the steal.

“Nine hundred of my own and a hundred by proxy. Here it is!” He laid the proxy down on the table.

“The vote is a tie,” Kepler said. “Until removed by vote the present board will remain.” He could not keep the triumph from his face. “The mine will be closed down.”

“Who owns the missing two thousand shares?” some one asked.

“Mike Hagen, up on Kultus Chuck, Alaska,” Kepler answered before the secretary could speak. “And, to prevent some mistaken soul from making trouble, let me add that Mike Hagen would cut off his right hand before he would vote his stock the way Bradford votes. If Mike votes at all he’ll vote as I do.”

Bradford started to speak, then changed his mind. As the meeting adjourned he spoke to those around him in a low tone.

“Don’t worry, I’ll get out a court order that’ll stop Kepler from shutting down.”

“Yes, but the court might rule in Kepler’s favor,” some one said.

“By that time I’ll have Mike or Mike’s proxy here,” Bradford answered. “I’m in this fight to a finish. And if there are any weak sisters among you who think I’m barking up a tree, just follow me.” He walked over to Kepler. “I said you were a crook in open meeting and I’m sayin’ it now. You know the values in that mine are jumping.”

“That’s a rumor you’ve circulated to cause trouble.” Kepler snapped.

“Then what have you got to say to this. I’ll buy every share of stock you’ve got at fifty dollars above the market price.”

“I’ll take that,” Kepler answered. “Now come with me. I don’t propose to have you back out.”

Bradford gasped. He was not prepared for such an answer. He followed the man to his car and was driven several blocks from the building. Suddenly Kepler turned and smashed his fist against the older man’s jaw.

While the sour dough was still dazed, he bound him hand and foot. Then he Stepped from the car.

“Drive this man fifty miles from here, then dump him out,” he said to the chauffeur. “I don’t care where it is, just so it takes a long time to get back.”

BRADFORD had fully regained consciousness when the car stopped. They were on some deserted road with no buildings in sight. The driver opened the door and dragged the bound man to the ground.

“Let this be a lesson to lay off Kepler,” he suggested, “you can’t beat that bird’s game.”

“Maybe not,” Bradford admitted, “but I’m learning fast. Pretending to accept my offer certainly got him out of a tight place. The stockholders have scattered and most of ’em are happy, thinking I’ve bought control. Say, ain’t you going to untie me.”

“Naw! You might get back too soon.”

Bradford was left on the ground.

Ten minutes later he heard a step and Rusty Wade walked into the open. Bradford blinked.

“How’d you get here?” he asked. “Flew! I trailed you out, expecting you’d slip me a check before you rode away with Kepler. I didn’t quite make it, so grabbed a taxi and followed. I didn’t have any local address and didn’t think you had and I couldn’t see loafing around, several days, so that’s why I trailed you. Then I saw Kepler hang one on your jaw. I told my driver to put me alongside of Kepler’s car, but we got caught in a traffic jam. He seemed to be taking the highway, so I got to the plane and followed. Landed near here. What’s next?”

“A court order to stop Kepler from closing down and flooding the mine. After that—well—the last time I saw Mike Hagen we swore we would shoot each other on sight. But I’ve got to get his stock—or Kepler and his crowd will win. And you, Rusty Wade, will have to help. Can you find Kultus Chuck?”

“I know right where it is,” Rusty answered. “And it’s a tough place to reach with a plane. If it was winter and the swamps frozen over we might land there, but in summer—— Still, the main thing is to get there.”

“Yes, and get there before one of Kepler’s men does. The instant that court order is served on him he’s going to start gunning for enough stock to control. There’s a fortune in it for him if he wins.”

“And for you?”

“I’ll profit, too,” Bradford admitted, “but it’ll cost me more than I can make. I’m looking after the little fellows. You see, when I discovered the mine it was

the little fellows’ money that developed it. They stuck to me then. I’m sticking to them now.” He turned suddenly to the lanky pilot. “How much do you want, to see it through?”

“Give me ten shares of stock. It’s worth a hundred dollars a share I believe. Then I’ll sink or swim with you. Are you on?”

“Shake!”

AS THEY entered Kepler’s office, armed with a court order, a very surprised driver gasped. Not two minutes before he had reported that Bradford had been driven so far into the country it would take him a week to walk back. And now Bradford was back and his shoes were dustless. A second surprise came when he looked at Rusty. “Now where have I seen that face before?” he mused.

Bradford, Rusty and an attorney entered Kepler’s office. A few minutes later they emerged. Kepler was saying:

“Bradford, you are a fool, you can’t lick me unless you make peace with Mike Hagen, and Mike will see you in hell first. You’d better stop before I take a notion to go after you.”

“I’ll take that chance,” Bradford retorted. The three passed out of the office and Kepler turned to his driver.

The man colored. “Well?” Kepler said unpleasantly. “You messed up that job!”

“I don’t know how he got here so quick, unless that big fellow helped him out!”

“That big fellow is Rusty Wade, the pilot. He brought Bradford here from Seattle. I’m no fool and so I’m betting Bradford plans to fly to Mike Hagen and try to get a proxy. You can square yourself by locating Sanscro!”

The driver whistled and the world looked less cheerful. Sanscro was a man even the police could not find. He had taken several men “for a ride.” Instead of using an automobile he used, so it was said, a plane equipped with a pair of machine guns.

“I’ll do my best,” the driver promised.

“Your best hasn’t been much lately,” Kepler observed. “I want results. Find out where Rusty Wade is stopping. He’s broke and he might listen to reason.”

“Broke?” The driver was amazed. “He got a thousand dollars for bringing Bradford here in time.”

“I’ve arranged for that thousand dollars to be removed in a very neat manner. I think you’ll find him down at the court house.”

The driver was a man with contacts. All of Kepler’s

drivers had such contacts. Kepler often needed men of the underworld to carry out some little pet project of his. The driver lost no time in heading for the hangout of certain individuals who stood as bumpers as well as buffers between the inner circle and the public at large. He got to the point at once.

"There's a good job for Sanscro," he informed them, "if he's feeling like working."

"Kepler?" the other demanded sharply.

"Yeah! Flying job! He may have to go to the arctic, or maybe not so far—it depends on how soon he can catch the other fellow."

The man nodded. "Who is the other fellow? Rusty Wade?"

"You're two jumps ahead of me," the driver admitted, "How'd you know?"

"Been watching the play. Kepler generally needs a man when he tackles a fighter. This Bradford fights. So does Rusty Wade. I'll see the big shot and let you know, or he will let Kepler know."

THE driver headed for the court house and apparently arrived just in time. It was evident that Kepler had made good his threat of relieving Rusty of his thousand dollars, the price of Bradford's fare and all the money Rusty had in the world.

A judge was frowning at Rusty. "You, or some one in your employ, flew at a low altitude over this city shortly before ten o'clock this morning."

"Yes, sir!" Rusty said.

"Guilty or not guilty?"

"Guilty! It was an emergency and I had to—"

"I understand the emergency was not one regarding human lives, but a matter of fighting among stockholders. You risked human lives and I fine you one thousand dollars. Also I sentence you to thirty days in jail. The sentence, however, is suspended on payment of the fine."

Rusty stood for a moment choking back a violent protest. The judge, no doubt, was merely doing his duty. Rusty also appreciated that any back talk would result in further trouble.

"But it looks danged queer," he muttered, "that I'm fined exactly what I've got. Somebody's been going through my pockets."

"I'm sorry, your Honor," he said respectfully, "I thought it was an emergency." He hesitated just a moment, then laid a roll of bills on the desk.

Outside he breathed deeply. "Well, being broke is no new experience for me. I suppose Bradford should

really pay that fine. Still, why should he? My bargain was to get him there on time and that was the only way I could do it."

Rusty walked slowly to a hotel that Bradford had suggested and registered. He needed sleep before tackling the long flight to Kultus Chuck. Deeply occupied, he did not notice Kepler's driver following him. As Rusty registered the driver stepped into a telephone booth and called Kepler.

KEPLER never moved slowly. Twenty minutes after Rusty had registered the man was knocking at his door. Rusty was surprised and showed it, but he managed to keep his feeling of hostility under the surface.

"Have a chair," he offered,

Kepler seated himself. "How'd you like to make a little easy money?" Knowing the effect of real money on a man who has none, Kepler drew five bills out of a fold.

"I'm always open to making money—but I've never made any easy money yet. I don't expect to."

"You may have heard of a fight between stockholders of a mining company. You may be employed again by Bradford in your capacity as a pilot. If you could manage to have engine trouble a thousand miles from nowhere it would be worth a hundred dollars a day to me for say, twenty-five days. For twenty-five days you could fish or hunt and be paid for it." Kepler cleared his throat. "How would you like to make it?"

"How'd you like to get out of this room before I throw you out?" snorted Rusty. "I've never sold out a man yet and I don't plan to begin on Bradford. I went into this fight as a hired pilot, but I'm in it for personal reasons now." As Kepler hesitated, Rusty aided him in the take-off by a well-directed kick. Kepler made a four-point landing on hands and knees.

"I have a list of men I square accounts with," Kepler snarled. "To date every account has been paid in full. Your name goes on the list."

"Thanks for the warning, Kepler," Rusty retorted, "I hope you call in person and don't send a collector."

After Kepler had taken his departure Rusty did a little hard thinking.

"I don't suppose a diplomat would have done that," he mused, "but whoever accused me of being a diplomat? He had it coming. And I'm on his list, eh? I'll credit the cuss with being tricky enough to carry out any threats, too. It looks like you were in for an interesting time. If it's worth a hundred dollars a day for me to lay off and do nothing it's worth that to make trouble. The sooner we get to Kultus Chuck the better."

He opened a brief case in which he kept maps of Alaska. With a finger he traced the country around Kultus Chuck. The tiny line marking the stream did not begin to tell the story. Kultus Chuck meant "Bad Water," and it was.

"There are places around there where a man could land with wheels but I don't know where they are. It's pretty rocky around Mike Hagen's cabin, too. Fifteen miles at least to the nearest river bar where a man might land—and might not. I guess it's a pontoon job." He reached for the telephone and called Bradford.

"Can you start with me for Seattle to-night? I know that's the long way around to Kultus Chuck, but it may be the shortest way in the end."

"Sure! Can I sleep in the plane?"

"For a man who has never flown before, you're becoming air-minded fast," Rusty replied. "I'll fix it so you can sleep all the way if you want to. I'm going down to the field and service the ship. Be down in about an hour. And, say, bring some loose change along. The judge nicked me for that grand because I flew low over town."

A COURT order had stopped Kepler from shutting down the mine, but it did not hamper his efforts to gain complete control. Before evening Sanscro had appeared. He listened to an outline of the situation, studied maps of the district and then said: "How much?"

"What's your price?"

"Five thousand dollars!"

"That's steep!" Kepler protested, but not too strongly. The killer was never one to argue about his price. His attitude was to take it or leave it.

"That's a drop in the bucket to what you are going to make, Kepler," Sanscro answered. "And, remember, I get results."

"Very well, I'll accept," Kepler said. "I want Bradford out of the way if you can manage it. Failing in that I want the stock Mike Hagan owns."

"That's all very clear. Three thousand in advance. Balance when the job is done."

During the entire interview Sanscro had not smiled nor changed expression. His rather gray face was fixed. One eyelid drooped, giving his face a skeptical expression, as if he doubted all that he heard. His dark eyes missed nothing. His hands were not the hands of a rugged man, though he was a large man. Rather they were the well-kept hands of a woman—a woman who never worked.

It needed but a glance for the average person

to realize this man would slay without a moment's hesitation. The well-kept fingers could take down and assemble a machine gun in a dark room. Hours of practice had made him deadly. Underneath his well finished exterior he was yellow. He had never stood his ground, faced a man and shot him. It was always from behind or in a speeding car or plane.

He not only made plans of attack, but plans for the getaway as well. This to him was the most important. And he made these plans now as he prepared for the northward flight. First, there would be emergency fuel and provision caches. From the advance base he would strike, then begin the retreat, certain that all things he needed were strung along the way.

AND it was this thoroughness of preparation that enabled Rusty Wade to fly to Seattle, grab a few hours' sleep while his plane was being equipped with pontoons, then strike off in a bee-line for the North.

He followed the inland passage to Juneau, refueled and struck over the mountains for the Gulf of Alaska and Cordova. Here he loaded the plane to the limit with gasoline and oil. He added a rifle and light camping equipment in case he was forced down and had to walk back. This done he tucked the now thoroughly air-minded Bradford into the extra seat and roared up the Copper River valley.

When sufficient altitude had been gained he crossed the mountains, kept his ceiling and flew with anywhere from one to a dozen lakes in sight.

Daylight was continuous at this latitude. For a brief time the deeper valleys were filled with shadows while the sun dipped until only the upper rim was visible.

"We must be pretty nearly there," Bradford remarked. "Things look different when a man's in the air, but I see familiar country. Yeah! I recognize Bald Mountain. That lake's right around behind it. Now look off to the left. Ain't that Kultus Chuck?"

"That's her," Rusty agreed. A splash of white against the green of the country marked the river's course. A faint haze indicated the general position of Mike Hagen's cabin.

"Keep your eye out for anything that looks like a plane," Rusty suggested. "You know the rumor we picked up in Seattle that Sanscro was on the job. They might have found some place to land with wheels, though I don't think it."

"Say, there's a haze off to the left about fifteen miles. What do you make of it?"

"It may be some Indian who's killed a moose and is

signaling to his friends to pack it away. And it may be the camp of the enemy. We'll let it pass. We're—" Rusty stopped speaking.

His keen eye had caught something that always shows up quickly against a green background—the unmistakable white of a human face.

He banked and returned. Then with binoculars he studied the man.

"That's no miner, trapper or native," he announced, "that's a chechahco outfit that man's wearing." A chechahco is the Northern version of tenderfoot.

"And he's heading for Mike Hagen's place," Bradford cut in. "Say, Rusty, it's going to keep me humping to make it from the lake back to Mike's. Maybe I'd better use the chute."

"No," Rusty objected, "if Sanscro is really on the job, this is no time to divide forces. We'll land and go back together."

A few minutes later they had rounded the mountain and were dropping toward the lake. A swarm of mallard ducks rose from the marshes as the plane soared overhead and came back. A moose lifted its head, then splashed ashore and thundered through the woods. They could not hear his progress but they could see it. To him a thousand rifles were shooting at him—the big-game hunters were back ahead of time. He mowed down the brush as he ran.

THE pontoons were just touching the water as Rusty noticed a flock of mallards out of the corner of his eye. The ducks suddenly swung upward. At the same instant Rusty opened his throttle wide. From the brush stepped a man armed with a machine gun.

They could see the tracer bullets coming nearer and nearer as he began to get the range. Woodwork splintered on the edge of the cockpit. Something thudded across Rusty's shoulders, and then he rushed beyond accurate range.

"Wow! That was close!" said Rusty. "We can thank that old mallard leading the flock. She's probably seen men step from the blind a hundred times and blaze away. She instinctively zoomed upward when she spotted him. And for once I had the bird's viewpoint of a man with a gun. Get your elevation first, then guess what he's up to. Aren't hit, are you?"

"No! But the back of your flying suit is cut."

"Reach over and feel," Rusty replied. "If it's sticky I'm shot."

"You're not shot! But now what are we going to do? It is evident they knew we were using pontoons and

so they planted a machine gunner on the nearest lake. It worked, too. Somebody is heading for Mike's while somebody else is keeping us in the air. That's strategy."

Rusty was certain Sanscro was operating, from the very thoroughness of the ground work. It looked as if their only chance lay in daring, but it must be successful daring. He glanced desperately around.

"I'd land in a mud puddle if I could," he groaned. "There's a lake on that mountain, but it would take us two days to climb down to Mike's."

He roared through a gap and looked down on Kultus Chuck. Far upstream the haze marked Hagen's cabin. "If I can find an eddy we'll land," Rusty said grimly.

"You won't be able to get out," Bradford protested. "I've not only got to get Mike's proxy, but I've got to get back in time to stop Kepler dead. If we walk out—"

"The first thing is to beat the other fellows to Mike. We don't know how many there are. Sanscro seems to be pretty thorough."

"I'll get onto the wing and pull off," Bradford suggested.

"No chance here. It was bad enough over the city, but you at least had a lawn to land on. This canyon is full of air pockets. You'd be dashed against the walls or else land in the stream and be drowned."

The walls were high above them now. Each moment Rusty expected to swing around some narrow portal and find the canyon too narrow for his wing-spread. He heard Bradford's shout. The sour dough was pointing. A man was running along the river bank toward the cabin. Though he was armed he made no effort to fire upon them. Seemingly it was his business to reach the cabin first.

"The man we've got to beat," cried Rusty grimly, then dropped lower. "Get ready," he ordered, "I'm going to land in white water." The pontoons were skimming the foam now. "If we strike a rock or hit the bank, scramble out on the end of a wing and drop ashore."

Then they hit the surface. A new motion struck the plane as the pontoons wallowed down through the uneven surface to find steadier water. Wing floats and tips were smothered in foam and occasionally spray would fly over the plane.

With motor wide open Rusty fought the current. He had just headway enough to keep the plane straightened out. The stream widened and grew less swift, but the tight was by no means won. Mike Hagen, aroused by the roar of the motor, rushed from the

cabin and could hardly believe his eyes. But he was a man who thought rapidly.

He caught up a rope and ran toward a log jam. There was some slight shelter behind the jam. He braced himself against the suck of the propeller and waited, rope in hand while the aircraft grew nearer and nearer. Then as the propeller stopped spinning he tossed the rope. Rusty grabbed it and took a quick turn about a strut.

“Rusty Wade!” Mike cried. “And it’s a nervy lad you are. I’ve read of you and now I’m seeing—” His expression changed to one of sudden hatred. “You?” he snarled, facing Bradford. Instinctively his hand reached for the gun he had forgotten to buckle on in the excitement. “I’ll have none of you!” And with that he slashed the rope.

As the current dragged the plane into unprotected water, Bradford leaped overboard.

“Mike Hagen,” he cried, “you’re going to listen to me. We hate each other and we’re willing to shoot it out, but you’ll admit I’m honest and I know you are. You’re going to listen to me!”

“I’m going to kill you,” rasped Mike. “Before Heaven, I swore never to vote as you do in the company. I’ll keep the oath and I’ll kill you if I can.” As the plane, turned sluggishly, was carried into the white water around the bend Rusty saw the two old men engaged in a rough-and-tumble fight.

SANSCRO, with a sub-machine gun in his hands, stepped into the clearing around Mike’s cabin. Briefly he noted the mining operations on a small creek emptying into the Kultus Chuck. A small garden was growing among the stumps; a pair of moose antlers hung over the cabin door and a brown bear hide served as the roof of a woodshed.

Mike Hagen, his features battered, came to the door.

“What can I do for you?” he asked. “I’m here to take you or your stock to a stockholders’ meeting in the States,” Sanscro announced.

“I’ll attend no stockholders’ meeting. I’ve just finished the dead work on me claim; got the water to running in the sluice boxes, and for the next few weeks I’ll be busy shoveling in.”

Sanscro was not one to argue. The five thousand dollars he was getting in this instance would hardly cover expenses. Back of it all was his tremendous vanity. This would give the underworld and its gangsters something to talk about—Sanscro going

clear to the arctic circle for his man, and bringing him back.

The sub-machine gun swung around and covered the big Irishman. Then it shifted and Sanscro fired a burst. The bullets cut a small sapling down and as it crashed he remarked, “Even less will cut you down!” From the woods stepped a second man. Sanscro was not one to take a chance of a man going out the back way. “Search the cabin, Steve,” Sanscro ordered, “while I keep this bird covered.”

Steve emerged with a battered tin box, crammed with mining stock, mostly worthless. They gave Hagen his coat, closed the cabin door, and started for the plane.

They were three hours in reaching the spot. Hagen saw a large cabin plane which Steve piloted. A man stood guard. Near by was a wasplike job mounting a pair of machine guns.

“Steve,” Sanscro spoke tersely. “Wait until Markovich gets here from the lake. He failed to bring Rusty Wade down, but he at least kept him from landing. You men take Hagen to Kepler and collect the money. I’m going back and finish Rusty. The last I saw of him he was in a fair way to be wrecked in white water. I want to be sure of it.” Steve nodded.

Sanscro climbed into his little machine and presently took off. As he left the ground the big machine soared southward.

The gangster swung into the Kultus Chuck canyon. Two miles below Hagen’s cabin he saw Rusty Wade struggling to head his craft downstream for a take-off. Sanscro sent in a burst as he passed over. To return he had to climb out of the canyon. As he dropped down again for another burst Rusty’s machine left the water. It was evident Rusty believed his best chance was to stick to the canyon which prevented the faster machine from maneuvering. Mile after mile they roared downstream.

Suddenly Rusty banked sharply. The pontoons swung over until it seemed as if they must crash against the canyon wall. Then the plane got clear and turned up a fork. The maneuver shot Sanscro off the course. When he again straightened out Rusty was a speck in the distance. The gangster did not smile, but his face was filled with satisfaction and his eyelid drooped even lower. A seaplane—and that was what Rusty’s job amounted to at present—against a swift land plane!

As Sanscro closed in he noticed that Rusty was heading in an easterly rather than a southerly direction. This puzzled Sanscro. He knew the other

had everything to gain by keeping the southerly course. Nevertheless Sanscro continued his vicious pursuit, determined to finish Rusty as he had finished all his enemies.

AS THE gangster again overhauled his quarry Rusty dropped down until the pontoons were skimming the tree-tops. This prevented Sanscro from getting under him and shooting upward. Bradford, seeing a chance to get into the fight, now stood up in the rear cockpit and opened fire with a rifle.

Sanscro nosed down and sent in a short burst which missed. With full power on, Rusty zoomed upward and let the smaller plane pass underneath. What Sanscro did to meet this maneuver Rusty never knew. He had hardly straightened out before the plane acted queerly. Then came Bradford's voice in his ears.

"The cuss shot the pontoons clean off us, Rusty!"

"Good!" exclaimed Rusty, "now we've got a chance to get away from him. Those pontoons were a drag. I'll have the feel of this ship in a minute."

"But we'll never be able to land for fuel," Bradford groaned. To overtake Rusty the miner had ridden a log down the river and he was not only dead tired, but thoroughly soaked.

"I'll figure a way," Rusty answered. "Sanscro don't know it but he's flying into a trap right now."

The gangster stuck grimly to his task. As Bradford was armed only with a rifle, Sanscro took little chance when he closed in. Again and again he had his guns on Rusty, only to have the latter elude him. And how Rusty could fly with the machine now that he got the hang of it!

Ammunition ran low and Sanscro, chancing everything on a final attempt, closed in. A small town lay below them. Rusty was skimming the roofs now and people were running outside to see what was happening. The next instant they were running for cover—the pursuing plane had opened fire on the other.

Bullets rained down in the streets, bits of woodwork floated down from the leading plane, then they were gone. A youth picked up a note from the larger plane. It was from Rusty Wade and it explained the situation and asked that a town a hundred miles south refuel them from the air.

As the townspeople were hurrying to the telegraph office Sanscro gave up the pursuit. His guns were empty.

"There'll be trouble when I reach the States," he mused. "Rusty will probably swear out a warrant and

all that, but a good lawyer will clear me. And if not, well, the gang can usually throw a scare into some juror who'll refuse to convict."

JUST when Rusty Wade's fuel ran low he sighted a town coming over the rim of the world. As he watched, a plane took off a field and came toward him. "You'll have to do the trick," Rusty told Bradford, "and you may get drenched with gasoline, but it's your only chance to reach town in time to head off Kepler. This plane's made for refueling in air. A hose will come down from that other plane. All you have to do is to hold it over that funnel and let the gas run in."

The planes flew nearly ten miles before the pilots were ready. Bradford reached up and got the hose and presently the gasoline was pouring into the fuel tanks. Twice Bradford got a bath, but he stayed with it until the tank was full. Then came fuel oil lowered down on a rope. And with it a note which read: "Prepare to take passenger aboard."

Even Rusty was surprised, he kept his course and speed and was presently thrilled to see a man hanging to the end of a rope. Slowly he was lowered.

He dropped neatly into Rusty's plane, cut himself free of the rope and waved his hand. "I'm Constable MacLeod of the Mounted Police," he announced.

"Glad to have you along," Rusty answered. "The Mounted is after its man as usual."

"And will get him, I hope. Got enough fuel to take you through?"

"I think so!" Rusty answered. Constable MacLeod looked about. "Your plane is shot up plenty!"

"Yes! We had a lively time, but his aim was poor."

"Or your flying unusually clever?"

"That was it," Bradford cut in before Rusty could answer.

Rusty looked at the clock.

"Looks like you'll have to drop off in town, gentlemen," he announced. "That means another thousand dollar fine for me, but if we win it'll be worth it."

Bradford and MacLeod climbed onto the wing and were neatly dropped in the public square. Rusty roared on until he reached a river. "Well," he said, "you're a good bus and I hate to do it, but here goes." Then he jumped.

As the chute opened he saw the plane rush downward. With motor shut off it sideslipped and struck the stream with a mighty splash. Water and foam leaped high in the air, then settled back.

"Luck was with me," Rusty cried as he struck the ground, "I can save the motor I think."

As he landed, a car came to a stop. "Need any help," the driver shouted.

"Yes," Rusty answered, "drive me to town as fast as you can."

The stockholders' meeting was being called to order as Rusty arrived. A telephone message from Steve that he was bringing Mike Hagen had caused Kepler to hurriedly call the meeting. He was beaming as one of his men again renewed the motion that a vote of confidence be given Kepler and that the mine be shut down. Again the roll was called and the stockholders voted.

"Mr. Hagen!" droned the clerk.

"Mr. Hagen once swore he would never vote as Bradford voted," Kepler said, "and Mr. Bradford has just voted against me." Kepler beamed. "So, Mr. Hagen votes for me."

"No, I don't!" Hagen snapped.

"You swore—" began the vastly disturbed Kepler.

"Exactly! I swore I'd never vote as Bradford voted. Nor will I. We're enemies, and we've fought, but we're both square men in our dealings. When we'd fought to a state of exhaustion up there in front of my cabin after Bradford landed from the plane he explained the deal. Just the same I wouldn't vote with him—so I sold him my stock."

"Then why did you come down here?" roared Kepler.

"When a man like Sanscro has a machine gun on you, you don't argue," said Hagen sweetly. "Besides, it looked like a good chance to make a quick trip outside at low cost."

AS THE meeting adjourned the room seemed filled with officers. A man in the scarlet and gold of the Mounted Police dropped his hand on Sanscro's shoulder. Behind him stood a United States marshal.

"You are wanted in Canada for murder, Sanscro," the marshal said, "Constable MacLeod has the necessary papers."

"Murder?" exclaimed Sanscro.

"Yeah," drawled Rusty Wade. "You see, Sanscro, when one of you gangsters is killed you're a hero. But if you're tried and convicted in a hurry you don't look quite so heroic. Up in Canada they have

a way of giving a man justice, but giving it to him in a hurry. Besides, your organization isn't working up there. When you started after me I expected I'd be shot down. I wanted the act to happen in Canadian territory. Then I'd sort of hit you a lick after I was dead. Well, I got away when you conveniently shot my pontoons off.

"When you opened up on me as I slowed down to drop a refueling note your bullets killed an Indian trapper."

Constable MacLeod indicated this was the situation. Kepler had stopped to listen to Rusty. As he moved toward the door a marshal arrested him.

"You're charged with conspiracy, Kepler. We have proof you sought to wreck this mining company and to accomplish your ends plotted for the death of Rusty Wade, Bradford and others."

"I guess that's all," said Rusty, "I might as well go and salvage my motor."

"Not quite," said a motorcycle officer, "you are wanted in court, Wade, for flying low over this city."

Rusty whistled. "That's right. Another thousand-dollar fine."

"And jail also for a second offense," the officer said.

Rusty followed him and groaned as he faced the same judge again.

"Well?" demanded his Honor, "guilty or not guilty?"

"Guilty, your Honor," Rusty answered.

"Same excuse as before," queried the court, "an emergency?"

"Yes!"

"Well, the excuse is good. I've just learned a few details of what was going on. The record in both cases will show you were not guilty and the thousand-dollar fine previously accepted will be returned."

"Three rousing cheers!" yelled Rusty.

Bang!

It was the judge's gavel. "Five dollars fine, young man, for unseemly conduct in court."

Rusty reached for his pocket.

"Fine suspended pending good behavior," the judge added. "And providing you'll have dinner with me tonight and tell me some of your adventures."

"Decision accepted," Rusty answered with an impudent wink.