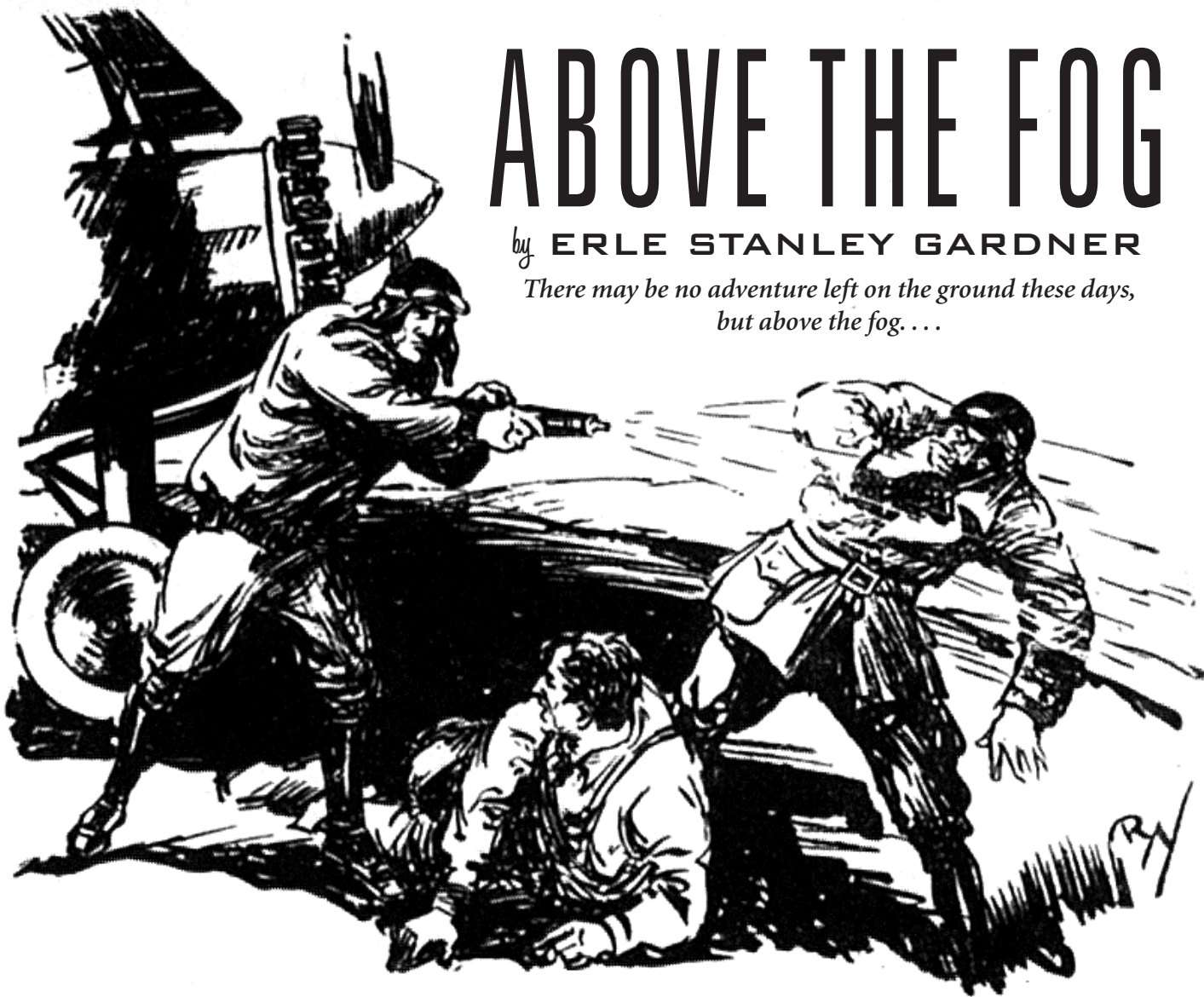


ABOVE THE FOG

by ERLE STANLEY GARDNER

*There may be no adventure left on the ground these days,
but above the fog...*



TENTACLES OF SWIRLING FOG slimed the buildings at the Oakland Airport. Arc lights were smothered in drifting vapor. The air was heavy with that suffocating sense of oppression which comes with dense fogs.

"There ain't no romance left in life," opined Sid Meyer, perched upon a desk in one of the buildings, his legs swinging aimlessly. "The West is ruined. The old cowpuncher's gone—an' it's the airplane that's done it, it an' the automobile. Personally I wish they'd go back to saddle horses an' buckboards." Dave Flint, one of the ground crew, servicing out the Boeing cabin ship for Seattle, laughed.

"And all the people you know envy you because you're an aviator!"

"Well," admitted Sid, "if I was flying one of the big ships on a mail hop instead of—"

He broke off as a car roared through the half-light of outer dawn and skidded to a shrieking stop. A single occupant, gray tweeds, slender, nervous, beady-eyed, rushed through the door.

"The Los Angeles-Bakersfield mail plane in yet?"

Dave watched him in puzzled appraisal. Sid Meyer treated him casually.

"Naw. Don't look like it's coming in, either. Fog too thick. It's due around daylight."

"I'm expecting a passenger!"

Sid shook his head.

"They don't carry passengers on that run. It's a night hop."

The man nodded as though the information was no news to him, returned to his machine and sat there. The first light of a fog-filled dawn showed him, huddled in the back seat, his face pressed against

the glass, watching the swirling cloud streamers that eddied the low sky.

The light grew stronger. A telephone clanged forth an imperative summons.

Arthur Rominger hurried from an inner office to answer it, and puckered his forehead at the news which rattled through the wires. When he had hung up he looked out at the gray air, then turned to Dave.

"Any passengers for Seattle, Dave?"

Flint shook his head.

"Nobody showed up, an' no tickets out."

Rominger heaved a sigh.

"Then if Bill wants to take off send him through. The Los Angeles plane's landed at Sacramento. There's fog clear up there. It's all over the valley."

There followed an hour of swift activity. Telephone messages were sent and received. The giant Boeing four-passenger mail plane powered with a Pratt & Whitney "Wasp" snarled down the field, turned, roared back, gave a little crow hop and vanished into the swirling mists.

THE fog became heavier, thicker. It was getting close to quitting time for Dave Flint. He finished his reports, yawned, and then stiffened to attention.

Somewhere up above the impenetrable curtain of fog a plane was flying, circling, dipping, rising, droning. It was now full light, a gray, drab monotone of dripping dawn. And the mysterious man in gray still occupied the rear seat of the parked sedan.

The fog twisted, swirled, and eddied. And in the vortex of one of the eddies a little clear air, seemingly sucked down from the blue sky above, spread until there was a funnel-shaped hole showing a patch of pale blue.

Fogwise, Dave knew the hole would be gone in a moment, nevertheless it held his eyes while he wondered whether he might see through it the circling plane above.

As he stared the streaming moisture suddenly darkened, vomited forth a great shape. Down from the upper expanse of dawn blue sky, coming in a tight spiral, hugging the edges of the fog hole, came a light plane, small, fast, powerful.

Fascinated, Dave watched.

The hole in the fog lasted a moment, then vanished, but it lasted long enough to serve its purpose. Hugging the edges of the hollow tunnel, the plane circled, sideslipped, straightened and slid to a landing.

The engine roared. The plane spun about, came

toward Dave. The engine died away from a deep throated snarl to a clicky-clack. The prop ceased to be an invisible circle and became a slow blur of lazy motion. The plane taxied up, stopped within a few feet.

Dave hurried forward.

The pilot sat in the single cockpit. Streaks of moisture and black oil daubed the plane. The sloping windshield was streaked and spattered. The helmet of the pilot was wet. And there was an air of slumped fatigue about the figure that told its own story.

"Flyin' all night. Must be all in, an' outa gasoline," opined Dave Flint, muttering to himself as he approached.

At the side of the plane he lifted his voice.

"Lucky to get down!" he yelled.

It was as though the sound-wearied ears of the pilot barely interpreted the shout. The head turned slowly, and then Dave Flint gave an audible gasp. His entire figure stiffened in surprise.

For the face that stared at him, a fatigued oval framed by the curve of the leather helmet and the collar of the flying coat was the face of a woman!

Her hair concealed, nothing showing but the features themselves, she might have been anywhere from eighteen to thirty. Dave Flint found himself staring rudely, sought to avert his eyes, then returned them to the wide blue eyes that gazed at him appraisingly.

"Where is this?" she asked.

"Oakland."

"Have you got an air map of courses to Sacramento?"

It happened Dave had. In his pocket reposed a small scale print of a flying map showing the Oakland Airport's location with reference to the larger cities of the West. He fished it out.

"You won't want to take off for a while, ma'am. It's foggy all the way. The mail plane couldn't make it in, an' that bird can feel his way in a fog."

She shook her head.

"I'll be all right. I was lost, but I saw a bit of the field through a hole in the fog and came on down to get my bearings. This map is what I want, and perhaps some gasoline. Let's see. . . ."

She withdrew a white hand from a fur-lined flying glove and pulled out a vanity case. From this she took a purse.

During all of this time the motor had been clacking over gently at idling speed. A slight backwash from the prop had whipped about Dave's garments. The fog had settled and closed the little hole which showed the blue sky above.

Dave felt a pleasant thrill, a tingling of excitement. No ordinary errand was driving this woman out into the fog, her face gray with fatigue, her plane spattered from many hours of air travel.

"I wish—" she began, then stopped. Her head was turned, the deep blue eyes concentrated to mere pin pricks of attention.

Dave followed her gaze.

A man was running swiftly across the field. He ran with the smooth grace of a trained sprinter, weight well forward on the balls of his feet, body hugging his course, with no side sway to result in lost motion.

"He wants the mail plane," said Dave. But the words carried no farther than his lips. The prop of the visiting machine had whirled into a staccato of flashing motion. The swirling air vortexed back and tore the words from his mouth. The woman's hand snapped back to the controls. The plane gathered momentum. A cloud of dust swirled in behind.

Dave could see the lips of the running man move as he shouted some order. Then the dust billowed about him in a stinging cloud. Above that cloud he had a glimpse of the plane, like a huge dragon fly, skimming upward.

DAVE'S eyes reverted to where the plane had been. It was an unconscious look, merely an automatic attempt on the part of his mind to reconcile itself to the changed situation.

But, through the light film of dust which skimmed the ground, Dave made out a bulky object. It was the purse the woman had held in her hand. She had dropped it when she flung her hand back to the controls, or else the wind of the prop had tom it from her grasp.

The man in gray was almost upon Dave now. Realizing the hopelessness of his pursuit, he was checking his stride. Dave stooped, picked up the purse and, moved by some sudden impulse, thrust it under his leather coat.

The ground thudded to padding footfalls, and the man slowed to his side.

"Was that the mail plane?" he asked.

Dave shook his head.

"What did she drop?" asked the other, his eyes locking with Dave's.

Dave laughed, but there was no humor in the laugh.

"So you were waiting for the mail plane, eh? And you had to violate all the rules by running out on the field? And you expected the mail plane was piloted by

a woman? How did you know it was a woman? You weren't close enough to see her?"

The man in gray hesitated for a moment. It looked as though he was about to burst into speech, but he controlled himself.

"The way she carried her head. . . . Say which way she was going?"

Dave nodded.

"Yes, she did."

The man's face lit up with anticipation.

"You've been mighty accommodating," he said, turning so he could take Dave's arm and stroll with him back to the main buildings. "I've got a little present here for you, just a token of appreciation. It isn't often I meet a fellow who's as accommodating as you are, and when I do, I like to show how I feel about it."

Dave felt the nudge of a hand against his side. He looked down and saw that the extended hand held a roll of bills. It was a thick roll, and Dave realized with a start the outside bill was a twenty. There must have been nearly five hundred dollars in the roll.

"Which way did she say she was heading?"

Dave struck the hand aside angrily. "Go to hell!" he blazed. "I'm not going to be bribed into giving information, and I want to know what your interest is before I say another thing. You're liable to arrest running out on the field this way when planes are landing. You might get killed."

The man laughed, a low, easy laugh. "Come on out of the wind," he said, and guided Dave in the lee of a hangar.

Of a sudden he turned, with a motion as quick as a cat's. His hand circled to his hip, glittered out with a weapon that loomed chill and cold in the fog diffused light of the gray morning.

"Be a fool if you want. But hand over what you picked up there, and be quick about it! Get your hands up. I'll take it."

Sheer surprise held Dave motionless for an instant. In that instant he read crisp murder in the eyes that glinted into his.

"Make it snappy or I'll shoot!"

It occurred to Dave that all this was too bizarre. He was standing within the buildings of the Oakland Airport. Machines were already commencing to whiz past on the paved street without. It was utterly absurd that he had greeted a mysterious lady, received a purse, that she had zoomed back into the fog filled skies, that this man was demanding of him a purse at the point of the gun, that he would shoot. . . .

And yet, as Dave looked, he knew that the other's mind had already formulated a plan. He was going to shoot, grab the bag and run, trusting that the noise of the shot would be taken as the backfire of a motor.

Dave's hands came up. He remembered reading that it was possible for a victim to raise his hands so that the left hand would sweep the threatening gun of a highwayman to one side. For a soul chilling moment he felt that he dared not try so bold a ruse, and then he had done it.

The left coming up struck the revolver. The barrel spat forth a stream of fire. A hot breath fanned Dave's temple, and then Dave's right fist crashed home.

The man staggered back, but still held to the weapon.

Dave watched him, almost stupefied by his success. He, an unarmed man, had actually beaten a hold-up, armed with a gun!

Then, too late, he realized his mistake. He should have kept the advantage of close quarters. From a distance of some six or seven yards the man raised the weapon again. No hope now for a sudden rush, a surprise motion that would sweep the gun to one side.

Dave jumped to the side, saw the welcome corner of the building, and jumped around it. There he turned, doubled his fist, waited for the man in gray to pursue him. Then he would finish the fight.

But there was no pursuit. Seconds passed. Dave peered around the corner. The hangar was empty. The man in gray had gone.

DAVE walked back to the office, his mind in a turmoil.

"See anything of the little guy that was waiting for the mail plane?"

"Yeah. He's cuckoo. Climbed in his car an' beat it."

Dave nodded slowly, inspected his bruised knuckle.

"Who was in the little one-seater?"

"Somebody that was in a hurry. Just wanted to get located."

"Gosh, it's a dull life lately. Wish I was back on the Montana cattle ranch where I was raised. There was nearly always something doing around there."

The words crystalized in Dave's mind a resolution that he would hold his own counsel. After all he had virtually nothing upon which to pin any definite charge. The man in gray had vanished. It might be possible to locate him. In that event there would be a simple conflict of testimony.

Dave slipped into an inner office and opened his vest. The large purse slipped into his hand. He

inspected it carefully. Should he open it? If he did so he might find out something about the owner. No doubt her flying license with her name on it would be inside and he could restore it to her. But it seemed prying upon her intimacy to open the purse. Perhaps she would telephone.

And the offices were filling up. The airport lost the weird atmosphere of shrouded activity which held it during the night. Men were arriving and departing, private planes were landing and taking off. Dave's shift was over. He was free to go. Yet he hung around, watching the planes, waiting for a telephone call.

The fog was still bad, but it had lifted sufficiently to allow a space for flying between the gray clouds and the somber earth. Dave looked up at those leaden skies and wondered what had become of the plane that had so bravely vanished in the murky moisture. Too well he knew how deadly those fogs could be.

He sighed, checked out of the airport and sought the rattletrap car which served him for transportation. In his room he again wrestled with the problem of the purse, and finally decided to open it and search for some address.

He made something of a ceremony about it, removing his various belongings which littered the bureau to the floor, getting a clear space upon which he could place whatever articles he might desire to inventory.

Then he released the snap.

A folded banknote greeted his eyes. There was some loose silver. Meticulously he counted the money. One dollar and ninety-seven cents. In a side pocket was a card. "*Miss Gladys Ranger, 1035 Polk Street, San Francisco,*" he read. The card with its complete address seemed to be something in the nature of a business card, yet there was no further information to be derived from it.

He turned to the other pocket. Here was a compact, a lip stick, and a brown leather wallet of the type a man might carry.

Dave fished it out, noticed that it was fat with a plumpness which hardly seemed to fit in with the polished wrinkles in the outer covering. For a moment he balanced it in his hand, then he flipped it apart.

A driver's license was held beneath a celluloid flap. It certified that one Ole Anderson, height five feet ten and one-half inches, weight one hundred ninety pounds, complexion light, was authorized to act as chauffeur for motor-driven vehicles within the state of California.

Dave grunted, opened the rear compartment. Then

he stiffened with surprise. The compartment was stuffed with money. There were three five hundred dollar bills, several hundreds, a couple of fifties and a sprinkling of twenties. There was nothing smaller.

A sudden suspicion came upon him that the girl might be married, to Ole Anderson, that she was carrying her husband's wallet. He flopped it over to look at the chauffeur's license again. He knew this should give the age of the recipient. True enough, there it was, "age fifty-two."

Surely that girl could not be the wife of a man fifty-two years of age, yet. . . .

An exclamation came from his lips. He found that he was staring at a dark brown splotch upon the leather. He moved so that the light came to better advantage. There could be no doubt. It was a spot of blood. And there were smaller blotches upon the brown leather, now that he regarded it more closely.

Of a sudden the whole affair had a disquieting significance, an aspect of menace. He thought of the Wide blue eyes, felt certain the girl could not be mixed up in any crime, but also remembered her sudden flight when she saw the man in gray coming toward her.

And what of that man in gray? What was his connection with the affair?

Dave dropped the articles back in the purse. A resolution crystallized in his mind that he would forego his sleep and seek to trace the owner of the purse.

HE SHAVED, put on a clean collar, adjusted his best tie, and started for the ferry car. He had just missed one of the big electric trains, and was confronted with a wait of twenty minutes. In his frame of mind that twenty minutes wait was hardly to be endured with patience.

He left the car station and strolled along Broadway, watching the crowds. Yet his mind was not on the passing faces, but only upon the general turmoil of traffic which served to keep his thoughts sufficiently engaged to make the wait seem less.

A hail called him from his abstraction. As he snapped back to a realization of his present surroundings, he recognized Slim Forbes, an aviator friend.

The aviator was sitting in the back of a long, shiny automobile, powerful, speedy, low to the ground. The car was in startling contrast to the stripped "bug" which Slim owned, and Dave crossed the street in response to the beckoning finger.

As he approached, he noticed that the car bore a

small E in a diamond at the extreme left of the license number, proof that it was the car of some peace officer. A swift glance at the two men in the front seat was sufficient to confirm his deduction.

Slim noticed the glance, interpreted the expression upon Dave's face, and grinned.

"Nope. I ain't arrested. And I don't want you to go bail. Car's from the sheriff's office. Plane crashed out back of the powder works, and the sheriff's making an investigation. They picked me up to give 'em technical stuff if I could. I saw you moonin' along the street, carryin' a woman's purse in one hand an' a look of foolish reminiscence in the other, and had the birds stop the car, figurin' to pick you up an' take you along. On this technical stuff two heads is better than one, even if one of 'em is a cabbage head, an' I ain't sayin' which is which. Comin'?"

Dave shook his head. For once he was swept off his poise. It had not occurred to him just how ridiculous it did look for him to be walking the streets, a woman's purse dangling from his hand.

"Gosh! He's in love an' goin' to keep a date with his enchantress," continued Slim, keeping up the conversation with a continuous running fire of comment and wise cracks which characterized him. "An' he don't trust himself alone with this here jane, so he's taking along a purse with taxicab money so she won't have to walk home."

Dave flushed.

"Quit it. I've got to go to San Francisco, on—er—business."

Slim beamed.

"Business, eh? Oh, yes. I see. You have invented a new type of woman's purse, an' you're taking the sample in to a manufacturer to see how much they'll cost in thousand lots. But, straight goods, Dave, you'd better come. This looks interestin'. The plane's a single seater, an' it was driven by a woman. The fellow that telephoned in said he'd found the wreckage of the plane but no sign of the passenger."

Dave's hand was reaching for the door before Slim had finished speaking.

"All right, I'll go," he said, and dropped the woman's purse into his inside pocket where it created a large bulge in his coat, but did not seem so conspicuously feminine.

Slim grinned.

"All right, fellows. Drive on. You've got two aviators now. We'll inspect the plane and look as wise and act as foolish as a couple of military inspectors looking

at the remnants of a dead cadet's crate. Drive on. And you don't need to bother about traffic laws as far as we're concerned. We've been left thirty minutes in the boiling water and we're hard from shell to yolk."

The two men in front grinned, nodded a casual salute to Dave. The gears slipped into mesh, the car spurted forward, and then, evidently taking Slim at his word, a siren upon the side of the car throbbed into wailing action, clearing the traffic. The powerful machine roared with constantly increasing speed through the heart of Oakland's congested district, the two aviators clinging to the swaying seat.

"That's the stuff! Open her up!" shouted Slim, when the needle of the speedometer was hovering around sixty-five miles per hour. But his words didn't carry to the front seat.

Dave welcomed the speed, the flashing kaleidoscope of swift action. It served to keep his mind occupied with externals and kept him from meditating upon the fate of the woman pilot. Had she become confused in the fog and crashed?

He looked upward. The swirling clouds of fog had thinned and blended into one monotonous gray wall, thick, but not as heavy as had been the dawn fog.

Within three miles the gray wall showed traces of light blue, and then the sun shone through, a yellow ball of weak light. By the time they reached the big powder works the blue sky had appeared in great patches. The sun was rapidly dissolving stray wisps of scurrying fog which seemed to scuttle across the sky in frenzied and futile flight.

At the powder works they picked up the man who had telephoned about the plane. He was a small farmer, excited with his discovery and the novelty of riding with the sheriffs of the county upon official business.

FIFTEEN minutes later they were at the scene of the wreck, having jolted over three miles of rough dirt road, turned into a plowed field, and bumped through it for more than half a mile.

"There it is," importantly announced the farmer as the car came to a stop.

The words were not needed. The tangled mass of struts and fabric told its own story.

"An' there's a little suitcase in front that had some woman's clothes in it," went on the farmer. "It don't seem to have been badly smashed, but some of the clothes were all pulled around. Funny how they'd do that in a fall. . . ." But Dave had moved swiftly

forward, paying no attention to the words. Slim, now all seriousness and judicial gravity, was inspecting the plane. The two deputies stood in watchful attitudes, nodding their heads from time to time to signify that they followed the conversation of the farmer, but keeping their eyes upon the wreckage.

"Funny it didn't burn," commented Slim. "Must have come down in a tail spin. Notice how it smashed right up on itself. Landing gear right under the wing wreckage . . . no sign of the pilot."

Dave pointed to one of the struts. It was splintered in a peculiar manner, and on one side of the splintered plane was a round hole. The edges of the hole were ringed with dark color, as though from sooty grease or charred wood.

Slim whistled.

"Bullet hole!"

Dave nodded.

The two men began to examine the wreckage more closely, peering at the fabric, the metal of the gas tanks, the struts. They found ten more bullet marks.

"Machine gun," grunted Slim. "No sign of blood in the pilot's seat though. She must have jumped after the plane started down. Probably wounded at that, though."

Dave pointed at the little suitcase, taking care not to touch it.

"That was opened after the plane crashed. The lock may have smashed open in the fall, or it may not, but no mere fall ever dragged those clothes out in that manner. Someone went through that suitcase searching for something."

One of the deputies moved forward, grunted assent and began carefully dusting powder over the polished leather of the suitcase, searching for finger prints.

"How high did it start?" asked Slim in a low voice.

Dave looked at the tangled mass, the size of the hole that the engine had gouged in the ground.

"Two thousand feet on a guess. Hard to tell. It was a plane capable of high speed, and it was probably stunting to get away from the attacking planes."

"Planes? How to you figure it? This is a law-abidin' country. One plane might have a machine gun and start poppin' away at a woman. But how do you figure there were more than one?"

Dave shrugged his shoulders.

"Because the girl that was handling this crate knew her stuff. She had speed and a chance to maneuver, and she had a fog bank to hide in. It took two planes to get her. They were waiting over the fog and when

she came out of it they swooped on her tail. She wasn't looking for other planes. There was just the one burst of fire, and then she lost control of the plane. Probably a bullet put the controls out of commission. With this fog we had this morning she could have dodged a hundred planes if she'd just had a chance."

Slim was watching him with a queer look.

"How do you know so much about the pilot?"

Dave indicated an oil splattered bit of cardboard in the pilot's cockpit.

"Because I handed her that air map a little after dawn this morning."

Slim whistled.

"Let's take a look where the parachute would have landed. S'pose she got away?"

"The other planes must have lost her after she got into the fog. Depends on how near the fog came to the ground. There was a light wind in from the bay this morning. The plane looks like it came straight down. Let's take a walk. Be back a little later, fellows. We want to look the ground over."

One of the deputies dragged a huge watch from his vest.

"Don't be too long. We got a burglary to look over, an' then there'll be something else at the office. Coupla finger prints on this suitcase. They may lead to somethin'."

The two aviators walked away with a nod. Finger prints were hardly in their line. Each man was reconstructing in his own mind the scene of the tragedy, the swirling fog bank running up two or three thousand feet—the early morning sunlight—Mount Diablo thrusting its peak above the fog—two circling planes, patrolling, watching—a single seater coming up out of the fog into the welcome sunlight, getting its bearings and heading on a compass course for Sacramento. The other planes slipping in behind and above, then the swoop, the burst of machine gun fire—the single seater wobbling under the blast of bullets, twisting into a tail spin and dropping like a plummet from the warm sunlight into the dark fog.

And what then? A figure bravely climbing over the side, pulling a ripcord. A crackling of silk as the parachute opened. Then a long period of drifting through the gray fog.

And the other two planes, armed with machine guns, desperate, ready to murder, dropping down into the fog, skimming the surface of the ground like questing gulls ready to snap up a careless fish.

Had they discovered the girl when she landed? Had

they been able to effect a landing and pick her up? Or had they been intent upon a more deadly errand? Had they tilted the noses of their machines downward and sent a stream of lead upon its deadly mission, finishing the task of destruction that had been commenced above the rolling fog, in the warm sunlight of a crisp dawn?

So the two aviators walked silently, their eyes searching the ground, looking for any faintest clue.

It was Dave's eye that caught the first trace of that for which they sought. A fragment of cloth, impaled upon the stiff stem of a low bit of brush caught the sunlight and reflected it as the cloth fluttered in the breeze that was springing up.

Dave made for it on a run.

Slim, over his shoulder, studied the cloth, checked upon Dave's observations.

"Parachute all right. Let's look the ground over and see how she landed. The chute probably blew on over her head. Let's take a look here. . . . Yep, you've found it, Dave. Old Eagle-eye, the scout. She landed on her feet, and she landed hard."

They looked at the twin imprints in the ground.

"Woman all right," commented Slim. "Darned small feet, too."

Dave began to make a circle of the ground, searching with his eyes.

"Whatcha lookin' for?" asked Slim.

Dave's reply was almost explosive in its brevity.

"Tracks of a tail skid," he said.

Slim whistled. Then he, too, began to circle the place where the woman's footprints had been found.

Four hundred yards away they found it. It was on a bit of fairly level ground. A plane had made a landing, turned, taxied, then taken off. The ground was too firm to show any footprints.

"Guess they got her," commented Slim. "What'll we do, tell the deputies?"

Dave paused for a moment, lost in thought.

"Listen, Slim. This woman wanted to play a lone hand. She had all the chance in the world to ask for help when she was at the field. And she's bucking some sort of a combination that's pretty powerful. There was a man stationed at the field, spying on her. I'll bet there were men posted at every field in this end of the state. . . . Tell you what, let's wait until we get back. Then we can tell 'em if we want to. I'll think it over while we're riding in. There ain't no harm in showing 'em where the parachute landed. That'll make 'em close their investigation unless we give out the other information."

Slim shrugged his shoulders.

"This is your party, Dave. You always wanted to play a lone hand when we were strafing Boches. I remember how often you used to have arguments with the flight commander. . . . Oh, well, suit yourself. Let's go."

The deputies listened to the news concerning the twin imprints of feminine feet, went to the place, inspected the bit of parachute, and returned to the car without discovering the marks left by the tail skid of the landing plane.

"Better get busy and look into that burglary affair," yawned one as they climbed in the machine. "Got those finger prints. Bob?"

"Yep. I got 'em. Where was that burglary? Out on Westlake?"

"Yep."

"Let's go. We can drop the pilots in town."

The machine jolted over the rough road. The farmer was dropped at the powder works. The siren cleared a right of way, and Dave found himself at the Key Route Inn.

"Call up headquarters and ask for Bob Bidlake if you want to know whether we get anything from the finger prints," said one of the deputies. "Let's go."

The car wailed away. Slim waved a paw at Dave. The gong of an electric train clanged, and Dave climbed aboard just as the car started for San Francisco.

A NEWSBOY thrust a' folded paper at him.

"Chronicle? Examiner?"

Dave had forty minutes of inactivity ahead. He purchased the paper mechanically, sat back in the scat and tried to lose himself in the sporting section. After a few moments he glanced at the front page.

The name "Ole Anderson" caught his eye, started a train of memory associations. Where had he seen that name before? Of a sudden he remembered the chauffeur's license, the blood spattered wallet. Instantly he raised his eyes for the headlines at the top of the column.

"CHAUFFEUR MURDERED AND ROBBED" burnt its way into his brain. "TRACKS OF MYSTERIOUS WOMAN FOUND NEAR SCENE OF CRIME."

And an involuntary exclamation came from Dave Flint's startled lips. Then he clutched the paper as though it had been something alive, trying to escape, and held it before his eyes, reading every word of the brief account of the murder of one Ole Anderson.

The victim was a chauffeur, employed by Gilbert

Everett, an eccentric millionaire who lived upon a secluded estate back of the San Marcos pass near Santa Barbara. The murder had been discovered shortly after midnight. A motorist, using a lonely stretch of unfrequented mountain road had come upon the remains of a wreck. Thinking some driver had gone off the road and might be injured, he climbed down to the tangled mass and found the body of Ole Anderson, lying clear of the wreck, a bullet hole drilled neatly through his leather coat—just over the heart.

Apparently the chauffeur had been murdered and then loaded into the car, driven to the steep grade and the car sent over, bearing the dead body. The license number of the machine showed that it was the car of Gilbert Everett. And the tracks of a woman, which were in the soft earth about the car, showed in the steep embankment leading up to the road. That woman had gone from the road to the car, circled the wreck, bent over the body, and then climbed back to the road. From the position of the footprints the authorities were inclined to believe she had made a thorough search of the pockets of the dead man. At any rate nothing of value remained in those pockets.

Because the chauffeur was known to carry a leather wallet with his chauffeur's license, and because this wallet was missing, robbery was indicated.

The car had been found on the road leading to Gilbert Everett's house, and was not over a mile from the residence itself. The searchers had sought to interview Gilbert Everett, but the wealthy eccentric was not to be found. Apparently the house had been lived in, apparently the millionaire had gone to bed that night. But something had caused him to arise and leave the place with every indication of hasty flight.

And there were things to indicate that a mysterious woman had been in the house, either immediately after Everett's flight, or shortly before. A heavy suitcase, filled with woman's clothing had been discovered thrust into a closet. The suitcase was tightly packed, had evidently been left unopened after the arrival of the woman.

The facts were meager because the news had quite evidently come in at the last minute. And it had been crowded to a corner of the front page.

Dave read and re-read the article.

Should he disclose his information to the authorities? If the woman was a murderer and had been captured, the capture had doubtless been made by the police. Therefore they would not need his information. But the police theory didn't check out very well. Perhaps she had been

captured by members of a rival criminal gang—but Dave couldn't bring himself to believe that this woman was connected with any crime, least of all a murder.

What then? Wouldn't the authorities soon become suspicious of the mysterious pilot of the wrecked plane? Surely the missing woman pilot would be connected with the woman who figured in the Anderson murder.

Plainly, it was Dave's duty to give the police his information concerning the vanity case, the missing wallet of Ole Anderson. He should have done so before. And yet he hesitated. He always liked a lone hand, and he wasn't certain yet that he shouldn't play a lone hand in this case. If he could only trace the woman, put the situation up to her, give her a chance to explain. Then he could judge. . . .

Abruptly he decided to see what information he could uncover in San Francisco before he notified the authorities. It would only take a few minutes to call at 1035 Polk Street. There he would either come to the end of his trail or else secure additional information.

THE Polk Street address proved to be a business house. Two men were in conference behind a counter, one a great, tall fellow with piercing eyes, the other a shorter man with an air of crisp determination about him.

"Can you gentlemen give me some information?" asked Flint.

The shorter man answered.

"Not until after I get my expense account approved."

Then Dave noticed a stenographer in one corner. Laughing, she approached him.

"What was it you wanted?"

"Miss Gladys Ranger."

The smile instantly faded from the girl's face.

"What about her?"

"She's employed here?"

"No."

"She was?"

"Yes."

"Where can I find her?"

The stenographer hesitated for a moment, then moved reluctantly toward a card file. From this file she took an oblong of white pasteboard, hesitated, then intruded upon the conference between the two men.

The hissing sibilants of whispers rose and fell for a few moments, then the girl again approached the counter.

"Try this address," she said, and thrust the card under Dave's eyes.

"You're the third man to ask for that address within twenty-four hours," she snapped.

"The police?" asked Dave, taken unawares.

"Not yet," snapped the girl, and turned away.

Dave shot through the door. He had an apartment address and that was all. He sensed that there would be no information forthcoming from the hostile-eyed stenographer. He must stand or fall on what he could discover at the apartment address.

That probably would be nothing. The girl had been employed at the Polk Street address, had left the address of her apartment when she accepted the employment. That had been information given to her employers in the course of business routine. After her employment had terminated she must have left the city. Otherwise it was hardly possible that she would have been bending over a murdered body in an isolated part of the San Marcos pass in Santa-Barbara County.

But Dave might find out something concerning the mysterious men who had been making inquiries. If he could locate those men he might find out something concerning the marks of that tail skid, the torn parachute.

And, more and more, Dave's old longing to play a lone hand gripped him.

THE apartment house was exactly similar to thousands of other apartment houses. North of Geary, west of Kearny, there rises a veritable city of apartments. Each has an individuality, yet each is typical.

Dave entered the ornate doors, walked in the dim light of the carpeted lobby to a small desk.

"Can you give me any information of the present address of Miss Gladys Ranger?" he asked hopefully of the woman at the desk.

His question was purely mechanical, and he had steeled his mind to accept a curt negative in answer. But he wanted to pave the way to find out something concerning those other two men who had undoubtedly preceded him.

Therefore his surprise jarred his poise when the woman casually pointed a jeweled finger at the elevator.

"Third floor. Number 356. Back from the elevator and around the corner."

As one in a daze Dave walked to the elevator without further comment or question, closed the doors and pressed the button to the third floor. So the girl was living here? She still retained her apartment, and, quite evidently, the landlady had not learned of

any absence. In fact the manner of the woman was that the girl would be found in her apartment.

The elevator bumped to a stop at the third floor. Dave opened the door, walked back down a long corridor, lined with dim doors, turned the corner to the left, and peered at the numbers. The light was so dim he had to wait a moment for his eyes to accustom themselves to the half darkness. Then he made out the number. The door at which he stared was the number he wanted. And, unless his ears were playing tricks on him, there came from behind that door the rustle of motion. It was as though moving bodies were engaged in swift preparation for something, either flight or resistance.

Dave pushed a finger against the button to the right of the door, heard the tinkle of a bell, and the sudden and instant cessation of the rustlings of swift motion that had been coming through the door.

There was the sound of a lock clicking back. The knob turned and the door swung abruptly inward.

A bent figure, swathed in dark clothes surveyed Dave.

"Pardon me, ma'am, but I wanted to find out something about Miss Gladys Ranger. She left this address with her former employers. Can you tell me where I can get in touch with her?"

The withered figure, swathed from head to foot, stooped still lower, shook as with a palsy.

"What did you want with her?" quavered a voice.

"I had some property of hers. At least I think it's hers. She dropped it. I wanted to. . ."

The bent figure stood to one side.

"Come in," squeaked the voice. "She's here."

A hand came out from under the folded garments, crooked a beckoning finger.

As Dave Flint walked into the room, his mind in a turmoil, he instinctively noticed something peculiar about that beckoning finger. What was it? His mind asked that question of itself, then pigeonholed the answer. Dave was keenly interested in seeing Miss Gladys Ranger, and the thought that he soon might confront her relegated all other matters to the back of his consciousness. Yet there hammered at his subconscious mind the recollection of that beckoning finger. There seemed to be a subtle warning connected with it.

The door clicked shut behind him. The stooped figure moving with such painful slowness as to barely inch along the floor, shuffled toward an adjoining door.

"This way, young man, this way."

The voice squeaked, broke.

Dave crossed the room in four eager strides.

Again a door swung open with noiseless efficiency.

This room was better lighted. An outside window let the cold light of a northern sky trickle into the room. A folding bed had been pushed back against the wall. A woman's intimate garments strewed the floor.

Dave recoiled.

"That's all right," shrilled the voice behind him.

"My granddaughter's just up, but she's dressed. Go on in."

"Good morning," cooed a voice, sweet with a dulcet greeting that was almost sticky in its syrupy accents.

Dave turned toward the voice.

In a corner, where the light from the window did not penetrate, sitting back of a table, was a smiling figure. One glance told Dave Flint that this was not the blue eyed woman of the aeroplane.

The hair was a bleached blonde. The face showed hard lines of grim sophistication. The mouth contained a lurking cruelty in the corners. The neck showed heavy muscles. And the face was covered with sufficient makeup to make the skin seem to crinkle under the smirk of welcome.

"You had something of mine?" Dave sparred for time.

"You're Miss Gladys Ranger?"

There was a simpering nod. The smell of cloying perfume filled the room. At the door the bent figure, swathed in folds of black, remained motionless.

"Yes, of course," cooed the voice. "I—er—had a—something—that had a card in it. I thought it might belong to you. Er—that is—I happened to have an article in my possession—something to be restored to its owner, and I saw your name on a card, and I thought that it probably belonged to you. But I see I'm mistaken."

Dave floundered through his explanation, painfully conscious now that he had merely jumped at the assumption Gladys Ranger was the owner of the purse merely because that name had been on a card. There were a hundred explanations that would account for the presence of that card in the purse without making of it an emblem of ownership.

"Grandma!" exclaimed the voice. "I *do* believe he's found my purse!"

And the bent figure before the door seemed to straighten to attention.

Once more the disquieting thought of that

beckoning finger hammered at the back of Dave Flint's consciousness. In the moment of silence which followed, the room seemed permeated with tension. While the occupants did not make visible motion there was, nevertheless, a tightening of muscles which caused a faint rustle of outer garments.

"Have you the purse?" asked the cooing voice.

DAVE moved his hand toward his breast pocket, hesitated. His eyes flickered to the bent figure at the door, the brazen beauty of the blonde, then dropped as he considered the problem.

And, as his eyes sought the floor, they rested upon an object that was obviously out of place in that room—the toe of a man's shoe.

That toe protruded from beneath a red cloth which covered the table back of which the girl sat. As Dave watched it, the toe moved.

He raised his eyes to the simpering countenance, turned to the stooped figure, then dropped his glance once more to the floor.

The girl followed his glance. The toe was hastily jerked from sight, then Dave's gaze locked with hers. He quickly averted his eyes, but not soon enough. His discovery showed in the expression of his eyes.

The girl arose, slowly, not gracefully, but purposefully. Dave thought of that beckoning finger, and, of a sudden, realized what had impressed him about it. The finger had not been the withered finger of doddering age, but was the hard, firm fleshed finger of youth, and it had been a masculine finger.

The blonde's voice boomed through the room. No longer was the tone a syrupy trill of simpering coyness. Instead a masculine voice roared forth from the bull neck.

"Watch the door! He's wise."

And the bent, stooped figure snapped into rigid menace. Black garments fluttered to the floor and a young man stepped forth, his weight on the balls of his feet.

The table crashed over and the blonde ripped off the wig, stepped over the overturned table and waded out of filmy, perfumed garments. Both men centered upon Dave, coming with the catlike swiftness of trained boxers.

Dave stooped for a weapon. A leg of the table had broken loose. With it he would have stood some chance. But, before his questing hands closed upon it his assailants were hurtling through the air.

He straightened in time to avoid a vicious kick,

caught the full force of a crashing fist and staggered back.

They were both in front of him now, coming with the weaving motions of trained boxers. Dave shook his head to clear his brain, stepped back, ducked a short hook and countered with all his strength.

His fist thudded home. One of the men grunted and fell back. The other sent a stinging left, sunk his right shoulder for a long knockout punch, pulled from his hip.

Dave gave a bellow of rage and charged. Heedless of the fact that the odds were two to one, knowing only that these men had trapped him, were waging a fight that was characterized by swift, silent cruelty, Dave sought to come to close quarters.

A wallop on the chin straightened him. A left, right, left caught him, sent him reeling back. The room seemed filled with dancing, ducking assailants, the air full of thudding fists.

These men were trained fighters, but Dave, too, knew something of the squared ring and padded gloves. He determined he would not go to defeat.

A blow crashed into his eye, and for the moment he was almost blind. But he sensed an opening, dropped his shoulder, lunged forward, measured with his left and crashed with his right.

The numbing pain that ran from his fist up his right arm was as a thrill of keen pleasure. The thudding smash which marked the fall of one of the men was music to his ears.

There remained but one. The odds were even, now.

If he could only use that right eye! But it was swelling shut, throbbing painfully. Tears from it were streaming down his cheek, and his left eye had a tendency to water in sympathy.

A blow which he had not even seen, much less had an opportunity to guard against, crashed into his temple. He staggered, recovered himself, caught a glimpse of a left arm and shoulder, braced for a blow, and sidestepped it quickly.

His left lashed out, landed. His right tensed, whizzed up and around. The figure on the floor stirred. There was the glint of light on metal.

Dave followed up his blows, head held down between his shoulders, braced, fists whipping out in stinging blows, legs held so that he had the effect of a brace, toes patting the floor.

A shot rang out from the figure that had rolled over and pointed a weapon. The bullet whistled past Dave's face, splattered powdered plaster about the room. A

chair toppled, crashed. A picture was swept from its fastenings.

Dave plugged steadily, head down, almost winded, fists working like pistons. Many of his blows missed. But many landed. His fists had half blinded the other man, whipped the aggressiveness from him. And Dave's dogged determination, that streak in him which made him want to play a lone hand, kept him fighting.

Shrieks sounded from the corridor. There was the sound of blows banging upon the door. Within, the fight raged on. Dave's right connected. He felt the man crumple. His left caught the collapsing figure, steadied it long enough for the right to whip over once more.

There was a brief pause, then the sound of a falling body. Another shot ripped through the room, packing the walls with thundering reverberations.

The outer door crashed open, smashed under the combined shoulders of men who had packed the corridors. There still remained the inner door against which that stooped figure had stood guard. But it was a much thinner door and would be as matchwood before the charging throng that was pouring into the outer apartment.

DIZZY and weak, but determined, Dave Flint took stock of the situation with that instantaneous grasp of facts which marks the mental processes of the successful aviator.

He would be held for a police investigation if he ever fell into the hands of the men outside. The police would find the woman's purse, Ole Anderson's wallet. That would link him with the murder so that he would be forced to tell his story in detail.

With that story told, the police would be searching for the woman aviator, accusing her of the crime. The murderous attack of the two men who had ambushed themselves in the apartment would be discounted and unexplained.

But those two men were there for a definite purpose. They had known that the purse was lost. That information must have come from the lips of the woman herself. It was logical to suppose, then, that these men were linked with the ones who had captured the woman. She was not a fugitive, but a captive. And why were these men willing to murder to obtain possession of that purse? Surely the amount of money in it would not be the reason. There was something else back of it all.

Could Dave tell his story to the police, get them to believe him? Could he get them sufficiently interested to cooperate in making an investigation?

Dave thought not. It was another case for a lone hand.

The door shuddered under the impact of the first to cross the outer apartment.

"What's going on in there?" yelled a voice.

"Open that door!" commanded another.

The man who had drawn the weapon while he lay on the floor was on hands and knees, getting to his feet. The light of murder was in his eye.

Dave swung toward him. The revolver flashed up. For a split fraction of a second the man's eyes squinted along the sights, taking deliberate aim.

Dave flung himself to one side, kicked out with his foot. The toe of his shoe failed to connect, but his sudden lurch of motion disconcerted the other's aim. The bullet ripped past Dave's shoulder and crashed through the door.

That door was already bulging and groaning under the weight of those who sought to enter. But when that bullet hole sent jagged yellow splinters raining down, there was a different story. Men rushed for cover. The outer apartment became silent.

The man was trying for another shot. Dave was closer now. His left eye had stopped watering so that he could see more clearly. He kicked the revolver from the other's grasp, and thrust his head out of the window.

There was a fire escape, an open window below it.

Dave reached for the iron ladder, swung out, groped with his feet, caught the window, and eased himself into the apartment below.

From the room above two more pistol shots crashed the echoing corridors in reverberating thunder. Somewhere a woman screamed.

The apartment which Dave had entered was in disarray. An open door leading to an outer room, thence to the hall, told its own story. The occupant, half clothed, attracted by the commotion on the floor above, had rushed into the hall and joined the throng that was milling about the stairway.

Avoiding any appearance of haste, Dave walked to the stairway and thence to the street, keeping his head bowed as though in thought. He had no means of knowing whether the two men had made their escape. A police siren was wailing at the corner as he emerged from the apartment house. An officer went past him, running heavily on flat feet, tugging at his belt.

Dave walked to the corner, boarded a cable car, transferred to a taxicab and gave the Polk Street address. A sudden conviction had seized him that he must play decoy if he was to unravel the mystery.

Above him the fog had cleared away and the sky shone blue and serene, save for drifting puffs of white cloud as fiercely white as unraveled cotton.

Halfway up Polk Street his eye caught a sign upon an office window, "R. B. Hayward, M. D." Dave tapped on the glass to attract the driver's attention and motioned to the curb.

"Wait here," he said, and plunged into the office building.

The white uniformed nurse who stood at starchy attention in Dr. Hayward's office was frankly skeptical. Dave's right eye had swollen completely shut. His face was bruised, his cut lip had left a smear of blood upon his face. His clothing was pulled and torn. And yet Dave insisted that he wanted to see the doctor upon a matter that was imperative, but did not concern his personal health.

At length, after some argument, Dave was admitted to the inner office.

Doctor Hayward was in the late forties. He was short, fat, bald. His eyes peered out from behind thick lenses in blinking survey of his patient.

"Ah, yes, a little patching up, eh?"

Dave kicked the door shut.

"No. I want an X-ray."

"Broken bones?"

"No."

"Well, what do you want the X-ray for?"

Dave Flint fished the purse from his coat pocket.

"I'm fightin' against time. There's something about this purse I haven't found out. I could take it to pieces, but I don't want to. I want to look clean through it and in the corners."

Doctor Hayward nodded gravely.

"And at times you have dizzy feelings, young man? Perhaps when you first get up in the morning there is the sound of bells ringing, and. . ."

Dave's fist banged down on the desk.

"Bells hell! I'm not crazy. I want action. Do I get it or do I wreck the joint?"

"I guess," remarked the medical man, a twinkle softening the stern eyes, "that you get it. You seem to know pretty well what you want. Let me see the purse."

Dave shook his head.

"I'll hold the purse. You handle the X-ray."

Doctor Hayward smiled, led the way into an inner office, rolled forward a formidable looking machine with a great blue globe in the center. A switch clicked, there was a crackling of spitting current, a sudden high pitched whine of snarling power.

"You look through the fluoroscope," he said, and handed Dave a tapering box with a felt lined opening in the small end.

Dave placed the padded opening to his eyes, raised the purse. A gray shadow appeared before his eyes. That shadow showed grotesque bones padded with an almost invisible wall of flesh, holding up a strange object that seemed to have dark curves, black circles, varying degrees of shadow.

It took him a moment to realize that the bones were those of his own hand, the arched lines the bows of the purse, the black circles the coins that were safely locked within.

For a long moment Dave studied, then shook his head and lowered his hand. Whatever secret that purse might contain apparently was not going to reveal itself through the X-ray.

Doctor Hayward stepped forward.

"Perhaps I can help. One has to become accustomed to these things in order to make a good observer. It's just like using a telescope or microscope."

Reluctantly, Dave relinquished the fluoroscope, but retained a grip upon the purse.

Doctor Hayward studied the spectacle for a moment.

"Yes, yes—most interesting—battered that hand of yours up pretty well, young man. That center knuckle shows signs of being chipped. Better take it easy for a while with that hand—and there's something under the metal in the jaws of that purse, just a little too much shadow. It's nothing but a faint line. You wouldn't notice it unless you were accustomed to looking for odd things. Let's take a lancet on that."

He switched off the current, reached into a glass lined case, abstracted a razor sharp knife, turned Dave's hand over, and deftly slit the stitches holding the feather together.

"Ah, yes, a paper," he said.

And Dave could see the faint edge of a paper, folded up into a long roll, thrust up in the crease of the grooved metal.

"Stuck up there and then the leather sewed back. Probably a woman did that job. It's neat. And I guess that's all I can do for you to-day, young man. You can see what's in that paper when you get out. Leave ten dollars with the girl at the desk. Good-by."

Dave thrust out a hand.

"Doc, you're a gentleman."

The doctor bowed gravely.

"Thank you. We professional men get so we don't pry into secrets. I haven't got your name, and I don't

want it. To me you go under the name of 'Cash.'

Dave paid the girl, disregarded her scornful look and sought his cab again.

Once within he unfolded the paper, glanced about him, and then settled back in the cushions.

The paper was covered with very fine writing. The characters were cramped, angular. The paper itself was thin and tough, ideal for the purpose for which it had been used. The message, for all its small chirography, was distinct, short, and to the point. It was addressed to a Sacramento bank.

This will authorize you to deliver to the bearer all of the proxies deposited with you in my name. (Signed) Gilbert Everett.

Suddenly scattered pieces of a puzzle began to fit together in Dave's brain. Proxies! Deliver to bearer! And the paper had been concealed.

EVERETT had given the paper to Ole Anderson. The girl had murdered Anderson and rushed north with the note. But that made the girl guilty of crime. No, that wouldn't do. Then Anderson had started with the paper, been killed, the girl had obtained possession of the message—overlooked perhaps by his murderers. That was more like it.

And probably speed was a vital factor. It was necessary those proxies should be filed in time for a certain particular meeting. A scrap was on for the control of some big corporation, and. . .

Dave's thoughts were interrupted by the slowing of the cab.

"Here we are, sir. Ten, thirty-five." Dave handed over a bill, jumped from the cab, made his way toward the lettered doorway. His mind seethed with thought. Perhaps it would not be so well to play into the hands of the others now. Perhaps he had better keep away instead of using himself as a decoy.

His thoughts were interrupted by a swirl of motion.

Two men were watching him through the glass window which fronted on the street. One of the men pointed to him. A man on the sidewalk moved up.

Dave watched him with appraising hostility.

"Lookin' for me?" he demanded.

The other nodded.

"Yeah," he said, almost casually. "Come with me."

Dave grinned, but the grin changed to a frown as the other flipped back his lapel with a careless gesture.

"Under arrest. Anything you say can be used against you."

"But. . ." Dave was hardly prepared for this development.

"Murder of Ole Anderson, an' accessory after the fact," went on the other, his blase thumb thrusting out the gleaming star which was pinned to his vest. "Come on inside an' we won't get a crowd around."

His voice was elaborately casual as though this was all but a part of the day's work. Dave gathered that arresting murderers meant nothing in the young life of this fellow.

"You're making a mistake—" he began, but was interrupted by a hand on his shoulder.

"Yeah? Maybe. Again, maybe not. I make 'em sometimes, but you can tell that to your lawyer. I'm only interested in getting you locked up where you'll be handy when we want you for trial."

The words started a panic in Dave's brain. Locked up! That would prove fatal all around.

"Look here," he said. "I want to talk. Maybe you folks can help me."

The broad shouldered fellow guided him through the door, jerked his thumb to a chair.

"Suits me. One of you guys telephone headquarters for a wagon, will you?"

"No, no! Wait until you've heard my story. Minutes are going to be precious."

The other yawned, lit himself a cigarette.

"All right, boys. Hold it for a while. Now go on and spill what you've got on your chest."

Dave talked rapidly, told of his share in the adventure from the beginning, the finding of the purse, the tracks on the ground, the secret paper, folded in the grooved metal, concealed by the sewed leather.

The detective showed his first sign of interest.

"Let's see the paper."

Dave passed it over. The detective studied it, folded it with a shrug of his shoulders and thrust it in his vest pocket.

"Guess I'll let you tell it to the judge. Sounds like a fairy tale to me."

"But we've got to do something right now. If what I think is true the girl's been kidnapped, the old man carried off and Anderson murdered. They're trying to get those proxies, and—"

"Aw forget it. You sound goofy. Give headquarters a ring, boys, and tell 'em to send out the wagon."

Dave was desperate. He sensed the futility of further argument.

"Watch this guy," announced the detective. "I'll take a look up the street an' call in my buddy. He's watchin' the car line."

He strolled to the door.

Dave straightened. One of the men was calling police headquarters. The other was anxiously watching Dave, apparently somewhat puzzled by the rapid developments in the situation.

Dave got to his feet, moved a hand suggestively toward his hip.

"I'm desperate," he informed the pair. "If you guys make a move I'll drill you."

It was a shrewd bluff. These men, he realized, would think him really guilty of murder, a desperate man. And they would hardly be armed. Business men do not habitually wear guns to work.

With his hand still at his hip, Dave moved toward the back door. The two sat stupefied, motionless, looking toward the outer door through which the detective had vanished just previously.

Dave gained the back, broke into a run, realized that would never do, strolled to the corner and stopped a Geary car.

"SIMPLE! Nothing to it!" he muttered, and then a disquieting thought possessed him. It had been too simple. After all a real detective wouldn't have acted in that manner. The first move of an officer would have been to have handcuffed him, then to have searched him for weapons. This man had maneuvered the situation so as to get possession of that precious paper, and then had stepped out. It flashed upon Dave that the fake detective had intended for him to escape.

Dave groaned, swung from the car and found a taxicab. He gave the address of a flying field where he knew he could find friends. This latest development called for swift action.

The taxicab ground through traffic, seemed pitifully slow. Seated in the cushions, Dave chided himself for a fool. He had not even bothered to study the star the other had flashed. It might or might not have been a police star. Even if it had, it proved nothing.

And he had surrendered the paper without objection, convinced by the other's lack of interest, the elaborate unconcern with which he acted.

Dave was without definite plan as he left the cab at the flying field. He knew one of the pilots, felt certain he could enlist the aid of this man and a ship. It seemed that the first thing was to get to Sacramento before the other, lay a trap to catch him as he called at the bank for the proxies.

"Ken Holly here?" he asked one of the pilots.

The other jerked his thumb. "Over at B Hangar. Just

leaving on a trip to San Jose with a passenger. Hurry an' you'll get him before he gets off."

Dave hurried.

"Ken, I'm in a jam. I want help, maybe a ship."

Ken Holly, tall, raw-boned, with a face given to but little expression, and a drawling voice, was adjusting a flying helmet.

"I've got a job on that's got to be put over. I've promised this bird to land him in San Jose in a hurry. If you want a crate take that Boeing job. It'll go anywhere. I'll be back in an hour and a half. Where you going?"

"Sacramento."

"Sacramento, eh? Guy just took off for there. Seemed in a hurry. Landed an hour or so ago, went up town and came back burning up the road."

"Big fellow, broad shouldered, gray eyed, thick lips, scar over his right cheek?"

"Yeah. Know him?"

"Uh-huh. That Boeing all ready to go?"

"Yep. Just warm her up. Hey, Bill. Dave Flint here's going to take the Boeing on a trip. Get her going. Good luck, Dave. Take care of her. She's the best of the bunch."

Dave grunted mechanical thanks. "What sort of a bus did the other guy have?"

"Waco—Curtiss OX5. You can catch him. . . . Yeah, coming right now. Had to let it warm up, didn't I? . . . Guy's gettin' sore. He's in a rush, something or other on this murder case. So long."

"Hey, wait a minute!"

"Can't, promised this guy he'd make a quick trip. Newspaper guy, some new stuff, photos of the crime and all that."

And Ken climbed into his machine, snapped the throttle open, swept down the field and was aloft.

"That Boeing's ready any time you want to go."

Dave turned to the man in overalls. "Right now!" he said.

He strapped himself in, tested the ignition, watched the dial of the thermometer. A wave of his hand, the blocks were pulled away from the wheels, the motor roared into a song of power, and Dave Flint swept down the field.

His swollen optic bothered him somewhat for a few moments while he was taking off; but, as the wheels left the ground, spun idly for a few revolutions and then came to a stop, he settled back, handling the plane almost unconsciously.

The long line of boiling surf, churning up the white sand, spread to the west. Golden Gate park showed

as a dark strip running between the gleaming white of houses. The sand hills swept below. The bay and Presidio opened up. Shipping showed startlingly clear, the white boats leaving a long white wake that stretched far astern, showing from the air as a long streamer of roiled water.

The business district came to view. Market Street with its radiating side streets. Then, abruptly, the land gave way to the blue black of the bay. Water gleamed below in an unruffled sheet, pierced by islands, dotted with boats, but tranquil, deep, dark.

A floating ball of fleecy cloud drifted below. Another loomed ahead. Dave pulled back slightly on the stick and hopped over it. Ahead, the drifting patches of cloud came closer together.

San Francisco dropped behind. Oakland and Berkeley were on the right. The clouds formed a more solid bank, merged into a high fog. Dave opened the throttle and roared through the still, cold atmosphere, steadily climbing.

Hills showed through holes in the fog, gray, tumbled hills, unbroken by roads. And then a rift in the fog showed the gleam of white houses arranged in miniature checkerboard. Port Costa and Benicia were below. The tracks of the Southern Pacific, stretching out in a fan where the trains took to the huge ferries, showed like spread fingers.

But Dave's gaze snapped ahead, held there with concentrated attention. Some two thousand feet lower, barely skimming the top of the fog bank, was a plane, winging steadily straight for Sacramento.

Dave retarded the throttle. It wasn't part of his plan to let the other know of his presence. He would follow to the landing field at Sacramento, then telephone the bank to have the man arrested when he presented the stolen order.

The fog grew gray, thinned into scattered clouds, and then the last stray wisps of moisture were burnt up in the heat of the inland sun. Rivers gleamed, rolling hills showed in soft green, golden browns. A motor highway was a black ribbon, twisting and turning about invisible hills, seeming aimlessly to depart from a straight line. A railroad track was as a ruled line, stretching straight toward its destination. An all but invisible train, crawling along the steel path, became visible as the engine sent out a succession of white puffs of steam, whistling for a crossing.

The airplane below dipped sharply, banked to left and to right, then zoomed upward. Pivoting on one wing, it swept in a great half circle, dropped a thousand feet.

Dave swung his own machine in a loose spiral, waiting, watching. Was the other plane going to land? The country was open, more level now. Clumps of oak trees showed from the air as mere patches of darker hue, concealing farmhouses, trickling streams.

Or was it possible that the other aviator was signaling some passenger on the train? That seemed the more likely for the plane straightened out again, resumed its course toward Sacramento, but was flying much slower now, barely maintaining sufficient speed to keep in the air.

Dave contemplated the advisability of going on ahead, arriving at Sacramento in advance of the other plane. But he felt sure that the other pilot would detect him if he passed over. Then there was the chance that this man might try some trick, might work some clever artifice. No. It was better to trail along and have him arrested in the very act of presenting the order.

The sun was past the meridian now. Behind was the gleaming whiteness of the fog bank. Ahead, the Sierra Nevada Mountains pierced the sky with peaks that carried perpetual snow. The air carried the tang of the high places, that bracing sharpness which comes from dustless elevations.

The planes seemed to be barely crawling across the landscape. The buildings of Sacramento showed ahead as an irregular spattering of white dots across a green landscape. Rivers twined sinuously.

Moved by some sudden impulse, Dave glanced back of him. The blazing sun, the glittering fog bank, made vision difficult. The blue black vault of the heavens showed a brazen void . . . and, even as he watched, from out of the sun came a screaming apparition.

The other plane had obtained elevation, had carefully kept between Dave and the sun, was swooping down. Something that left a trail of smoke whizzed past Dave's ear.

In a flash he knew. The antics of that other plane when it swung and banked were a signal. Somewhere beneath the shelter of the oaks was a hidden hangar. And the reinforcing plane had taken off, climbed, and swooped, machine gun stuttering a message of death.

Had he not been watching at the very moment when the attacker became visible, Dave must have been beaten to earth under that first leaden hail. As it was, he flung the machine off on one wing, spun over, around, back, down and zoomed.

His antics threw the other off his tail. But the armed machine was now between him and his goal. And the plane he had been following had twisted and was

climbing back to join in the contest. Dave caught the glitter of something being swung up over the cowl of the pilot's cockpit, and knew the answer.

Two armed planes would be fighting an unarmed machine. There could be but one answer to such a situation. Dave could either land and surrender, or stay up in the clouds and accept almost certain death in unequal combat.

Grimly he chose the latter alternative. There was little of surrender in him. He determined to make a hot and furious dog fight of it, to try to ram one of the other planes, send both crashing to the ground. If he could but smash into the machine that carried the stolen order he might keep his sacrifice from being in vain. He had a parachute he could adjust, and there was a chance he might disable the other plane without being too badly injured to escape.

The two joined in the attack. Dave flung his ship about and charged. If he could break through he would keep on and try to head the planes to Sacramento. If he could not break through he would try to ram one plane or the other. But he would not turn back, and he would not go down.

Machine guns spattered forth vicious messengers of death. Holes appeared as if by magic in the wings of the plane, swept closer to him, little holes that seemed so insignificant.

He flung the plane over, sideslipped, straightened. The attackers were right before him. He flung back on the stick, trying to foul his landing gear on the propellor of the ship ahead. Would it work? Could it be done? He had seen it done in an accident over a training field. Could he do it in actual combat?

The ships roared at each other like screaming eagles. The other pilot nosed his plane down, managed to barely scrape by. The other enemy plane was coming toward him, raking him with a merciless fire. There could be but one answer. Dave had lost the battle. His maneuver depended upon surprise, the lack of coordination of the other pilot.

A glass on one of the instruments on his dash spattered into splinters, mechanism from the box whirred out.

A bit of the cowling was flung in his face, blinding him for a moment despite his flying goggles. He swung the stick and noticed, as he did so, that something was wrong. The powerful roar of the engine was silenced. The prop whirled once or twice in glittering arc and then was still.

A fortunate bullet had smashed some vital part of

the ignition or disconnected his feed line. The other planes were above him now. He was falling sharply. By manipulating the controls he got on an even keel, started gliding to the ground.

A glance behind told him the full measure of his defeat. The plane he had been following was resuming its course with wide open throttle, headed for Sacramento. The other plane was riding him down.

Dave looked about. If he could manage to glide near a city the other airplane would be forced to take to flight. But he had lost altitude during the fight. There was no chance to make the cluster of houses near the automobile road to the north, and the wind was from the southwest. He would have to glide into the wind for maximum efficiency.

Below him and to the east was swamp, tule grass stretching tangling fingers upward. The ground was sweeping closer. Dave scanned the fields anxiously. It was going to require careful handling to pick a sufficiently level spot and miss the oak trees that dotted the countryside.

There was the roar of a powerful engine, the sweep of motion, the jar of a prop backwash, and the other plane was in front of him, leading the way down.

Dave tried turning to one side. An ugly automatic pointed back, covering him with grim threat. He swung back to the course and the menacing gun was averted. The ground was close now. Dave accepted defeat. Evidently the other pilot knew of a landing field and was taking Dave to it.

The planes both drifted, the prop of the lead plane barely turning. A dense thicket opened ahead. A high bank dropped to a sand bar, and then Dave saw something that would have escaped him from a higher elevation. A cement runway had been constructed upon that sandbar. The white of the concrete mingled with the glare of the sand.

And the direction was just right to take advantage of the prevailing wind. The plane ahead dropped, hit the runway. Dave followed, making something of a botch of landing, but suffering nothing except a few sharp jolts as the plane bounced and settled.

Without a motor he fought to hold the plane on the cement and was successful until it had almost stopped. Then it swung slightly. Try as he would, Dave could not prevent one wheel from getting into the sand. The plane swung, tilted, stopped.

The other plane kept slowly on, taxied to a position in under the oaks. Then two men came back on the run.

Dave could see that one of them was the pilot. He

still wore helmet and goggles. The other was attired only in shirt and overalls. His feet were bare, his shirt was open at the throat, and the sleeves had been ripped out. The skin was burnt to the color of rich mahogany. The man moved with a rippling grace of easy efficiency.

"Get this plane out of sight," yelled the man in goggles.

Dave was inclined to stand by, letting them wrestle with the plane. But the blunt muzzle of a squat automatic was thrust in his ribs.

"Get started!" snapped the pilot. "This plane can't stay here. We don't want to have every hick constable in the country coming our way."

DAVE gave outward semblance of lifting and tugging, retarding the operation as much as possible, braving the scowls of the helmeted man, trying to hatch up some plan of escape.

He noticed a trickle of gasoline forming on the cement. An idea seized him. He groped in his pocket, got a match, struck it, dropped it, and instantly scooped up a ridge of sand with his foot.

There was a flare of flame, a puff of black smoke. Dave kicked the sand over the red menace, partially smothering it.

"Fire!" he yelled, and reached up, into the cockpit for the fire extinguisher, which was on his side.

As he had anticipated, the sand deadened the flames. The helmeted man came running around the machine, cursing in red rage. Dave reached for the fire extinguisher, turned the handle, sent a stream of the chemical on the flames.

The pilot threw back his helmet and goggles, reached for the extinguisher. Dave tilted it; sent the stream full in the face of the approaching man.

And he followed that stream of blinding liquid with his fist. And his fist was followed by a clutching hand that grasped for the automatic.

The other man was on him now. The bronzed arm swung in a staggering blow, but Dave made no effort to parry it. His hands grasped the welcome metal, and he whirled.

"Stick 'em up!" he rasped.

And the possession of that bit of cold steel changed the situation from a kaleidoscope of flickering action into a tableau of surrender.

Hands held high, correctly interpreting the deadly glitter of Dave Flint's unswollen eye; the two remained frozen into panic stricken immobility.

"Any more in camp?" asked Dave.

The bronzed one refused to answer. The aviator shook his head. "This is all."

Dave nodded.

"Let's hope you're telling the truth. We're going to march into that camp. If anybody attacks us you two fellows are going out like a light."

The aviator fidgeted.

"I guess there ain't any more—that right, Tom?"

"You're doin' the talkin'," muttered the bronzed fellow who had been addressed as Tom.

Dave sensed that this man had little of the coward in him. He would prove dangerous.

"Forward, march, you guys. Keep your hands up. If there's a fight you two go first. If you so much as move your hands down an inch I'm going to perforate you."

"My eyes burn. Can't I rub 'em."

Dave snorted.

"Try it once and see what happens. Your eyes should burn. Get started."

They marched in slow, shuffling single file, the prisoners ahead, hands held high. Behind them, Dave Flint, his right eye swollen shut and discolored, his left eye gleaming viciously, kept up a running fire of comment.

"Keep 'em up. Remember, the first bit of motion's going to start something—don't make any noise, either. A little faster, you, there, in front."

They walked from the glittering sand pit into a clump of trees. Here was warm shade, the fragrant odors of leaves and earth. Bees buzzed droningly. Birds flitted in the branches. On the ground were two tents, painted a tree green, almost invisible.

A man peered from one of the tents, then hastily withdrew his head. The canvas billowed with motion.

"Pretty tough for you guys," said Dave.

Sheer panic seized the helmeted one.

"No, no, don't shoot! He's a prisoner. That's old Gilbert Everett. He's got his hands and feet manacled."

Dave stopped, wondering whether to believe the man or not. As he stood, eye squinted along the weapon, the canvas of the tent burst outward. There was the clanking of chains and a slender man, hair gray and towseled, face covered with gray stubble, eyes bloodshot, rolled out into the open.

His wrists were handcuffed. Balls were chained to his ankles, great steel balls that made walking impossible.

Dave grunted.

"So that's the sort of guys you are, eh? Where's the girl?"

The bronzed fellow started, half turned, lowered his hands.

"One more break like that and you won't see the sunset," promised Dave.

The bronzed arms shot up in the air once more.

"She's in the other tent," quavered the man on the ground, the chains clanking as he sought to twist and turn.

The sunburned one made a gesture with his elevated hands.

"All right. I ain't goin' to be the goat. I was runnin' a little smugglin' stuff with an amphibian, runnin' in hooch an' dope from the rum fleet. These guys nosed me out with the kidnappin' proposition. I let 'em use the camp. That's all."

Dave Flint approached the aviator.

"That true?"

The man in leather coat said nothing.

Dave advanced a step.

"I'll just search you for keys," he said.

"Top coat pocket," volunteered the bronzed fellow.

Dave's fingers patted the coat, heard the jingle of keys, lifted out a ring, tossed them to Tom.

"Unlock those handcuffs and leg irons," he said.

The barefooted one, moving with lithe, catlike grace, padded to the old man, fitted keys. There was the snap of locks and rattle of chain.

"Now put 'em on the other fellow here. And if you make a break. . . ."

"I'm finished. I've had mine. I'm a good dog from now on," remarked Tom. "Smugglin's all right, but this kidnappin' stuff gets my goat."

"And murder!" snapped Dave.

The man paused, handcuffs held open, jaw sagging.

"Murder!"

"That's right. You're in the crowd, and you'll swing with the rest of 'em."

For a second he stood, stupefied.

"Mister, I didn't know anything about any murder."

Dave grunted. "Get those handcuffs on, quick."

The bronzed individual snapped into motion. The handcuffs bit onto the pale wrists of the aviator outlaw with vicious force.

"Get me into a murder mess, will you?"

"Ouch! That's too tight. That's crushing the bone!"

The bronzed one laughed, stooped, adjusted the leg irons.

"What else, boss?"

"The girl."

The elderly man was at his side, bloodshot eyes searching him, lips writhing.

"She risked her life," he said. "I'm Gilbert Everett. The girl's my secretary. We had to get some papers at Sacramento. Ole Anderson started. They shot him, but he managed to get the car turned around and almost back to the house before he died. The car went over the grade. The girl heard the racket and made a search. The road was closed—bandits watching it, concentrating on the house. My secretary had arrived just ahead of them.

"But Gladys Ranger got the stuff from Anderson's body and started on foot over the mountains. In the dark, mind you! She got to a flying field near Santa Barbara, got a plane and piloted it up. She's been flying for a couple of years.

"Somehow they got wise to her. I tried to follow on foot and they trapped me. Carried me here in an airplane. The girl's in the other tent, tied and gagged."

Dave's eye glinted ominously.

"Hurt?" he asked.

The man shook his gray head.

"Not hurt."

He broke off. The sound of a motor droning through the blue sky caused him to raise his weary, bloodshot eyes. A great shape came roaring down from the blue, paused, straightened and swept upward.

"Hartley, back from Sacramento," muttered Tom.

"Yeah, here's where you guys sing a different tune," boasted the manacled aviator. "You forgot him. He'll size things up and then there'll be hell popping."

Dave thrust the automatic into Gilbert Everett's hand.

"Keep guard," he said.

Everett straightened.

"All right," he barked. "All my life I've gambled on human nature. Now I'm going to take charge."

The hoary coating of years seemed to slip from him as hot syrup from ice cream.

"Tom, go in there and release the girl. I'm gambling on you, giving you a chance."

The bronzed fellow looked for a long moment at the grizzled millionaire with eyes that brimmed, then he padded silently toward the second tent; stopped midway and watched Dave.

DAVE FLINT was sprinting for the runway.

There was a turntable at the other end, a chance to taxi back, but that would be deadly slow, and the wind was not very strong. That fellow up above would soon sense the situation. Seconds were precious, minutes priceless.

Dave climbed into the plane that had forced him down. He inspected the controls, primed and started the motor, turned the ship. The bronzed smuggler was padding behind him.

"I'll get the Boeing out of the way," he said, and sprinted past. "The girl can wait until later."

Dave saw the mighty muscles ripple and swell as the ship was slowly turned free of the runway. There was barely room to get by. He opened the throttle.

From above came a roar as of thunder, the screaming of air in struts and braces. The sharp rattle of machine gun fire sent a spattering hail of death sweeping along the runway.

Dave saw the sand spurt up in little geysers, heard the rattle of bullets on concrete, and then his ship moved out, along the runway. The glittering sands swept away on either side. Ahead loomed a bank with trees.

Dave hopped her into the air, pulled the stick back, pushed it forward, gave it a jerk and a push, found himself free, roaring along without gaining any great altitude.

And above him, settling into's position where it could rake him with a deadly hail of bullets, was the other plane.

Dave concentrated on that row of trees. The gunfire from above would have to take care of itself for the present. He dared not turn, a bank would have sent him sideslipping to the ground. Very apparently he would hit the tops of the trees. He regretted taking such a desperate chance.

But an air bump gave him that fraction of a foot clearance that he needed. A layer of dense air lay at the bank, against the base of the green trees. When the ship struck this denser layer of air it bounded sharply upward, held poised for a moment, and then charged at the tree tops.

So close it was that Dave was certain some of the leafy tendrils of the topmost branches rustled against his landing gear. For one breath taking instant he could look into the waving branches, down into the green depths of the shaded trees. Then the hot air of the field beyond the trees sent him settling down, but he had cleared the obstacle.

The other plane had swept over him. Now it turned in a steep bank, came crashing back. There was a brief burst of fire and then it had gone, was circling again to come up on his tail.

Dave was rapidly gaining elevation now. He dared a turn, watched his chance and swung the plane. Again

there was a brief burst of bullets, this time nearer the mark. A few holes appeared in the wings; but no vital part was touched.

The aeroplane, now going into the wind, seemed to fairly bounce upward, came to a level with the attacker. That ship went off into a climbing circle. For the space of a minute they fought to gain elevation, and then, as by mutual consent, whirled toward each other.

Dave had been inspecting the machine gun mounted on the forward cockpit. It was a permanent mounting, and the gun was synchronized with the prop. On the other hand, his enemy had only a swinging mount, disappearing when not in use. That made accurate fire somewhat difficult.

Dave turned to meet the attack, sent a burst of fire at the oncoming adversary. The plane wobbled, swung to one side, circled again. It was apparent that the other pilot had no stomach for the attack unless he could secure a considerable advantage in elevation.

The two planes were equally powered. It became a battle of skill, fighting for elevation. Each resorted to every trick known to the game.

In the end the enemy won. It was a long, slow battle. When it ended they were well above seven thousand feet up, but the other pilot, more familiar with his plane, had secured a few feet advantage, and he used that to the best of his ability.

Dave saw him coming, swinging over, saw the nose of the plane point downward, gather speed, come swooping on his tail. He flung over on one wing, cut back in and zoomed. But the other had obtained one opportunity, one last chance to deal out death. His bullets cut through the fuselage. Dave saw a bullet hole come in the dash, almost in front of him, realized that a trail of smoke was from an incendiary bullet which had barely missed his gas tank.

And then he had pivoted over on one wing tip, had the advantage of elevation and consequent speed. The other tried to get away, sent his plane in a series of twisting antics, flattened and scuttled for a fog bank.

But Dave roared up on his tail, tilted the plane until the other showed fairly within the sights and pressed the release.

Almost instantly there was a puff of smoke, a flash of flame. The plane ahead tilted sharply, sideslipped. A struggling figure, like an agonized ant, pushed and struggled against the side of the fuselage, trying to get away from the crackling flames. The plane straightened. Flame swept it in a sheet of red tongued fire, framed by wind-whipped smoke that swirled in a

thousand black eddies behind the doomed craft.

The man was free, falling through space, twisting, turning, somersaulting. Then a puff of white shot out from the back of his neck, caught a moment and became the head of a white streak that whipped upward, billowed, and exploded into a parachute. The aviator swung like a grotesque pendulum in the harness.

Dave circled his plane, trained the machine gun threateningly. The other read his purpose, flung up his hands, palms outward. Then he ripped a revolver from a shoulder holster, threw it out and away. It fell, spinning, twisting, glittering, until it was swallowed up in the vast space beneath.

The plane had gone into a twisting spin of flame-swept death, hurtling downward, nose first. The aviator continued to sway in the harness, hands held rigidly upward, face white and drawn.

Dave continued to circle.

At length Dave saw that the man would come to earth hardly more than a mile from the secret landing place. He saw, also, that there was a chance to make a forced landing on the rolling field where the parachute would stop.

"Luck's been with me so far," he muttered, as he sent the plane roaring down ahead.

The landing was nothing to pattern after, but it left the ship whole and serviceable. There had been a creaking jar, a jump, a slam, and then the jolting of slowing wheels on a rough field.

Above him the parachute was settling, softly white as a fleecy cloud.

Dave unloosened the safety belt, clambered from the machine, watched the aviator hit the ground, saw the wind blow the parachute out and over, drag the man a few feet, then collapse.

Dave walked up as the other struggled free of the harness.

"Where are the proxies?" he asked, and he asked the question with the snap of one who had unlimited power. As a matter of fact he was unarmed. The machine gun back in his plane was the only thing he had with which to enforce his commands, and that was anchored to the plane. But Dave was master of the situation, and the other was cowed.

"I've got 'em here. I'll turn state's evidence. Don't shoot!" he yammered.

Dave was quick to take advantage of the situation. One hand hovered in the vicinity of his right hip pocket.

"You should be shot like a dog. Get ahead of me,

and get going. Keep your hands in the air or I'll blow the top of your head off."

The man's hands shot upward.

"Straight to camp," ordered Dave.

It was slow progress, but it was sure. Those proxies were vital, and Dave meant to make a safe delivery of them.

It took them twenty minutes to reach the camp.

A slim girl, swift as a panther, graceful as a gazelle, came to meet them. Her blue eyes were glowing.

"It was wonderful!" she said. "How did you— Good Gracious! You're the man that gave me the air maps at the airport!"

Dave nodded, bowed.

"Dave Flint. At your service, Miss Ranger," he said.

Gilbert Everett, looking as straight as a hickory shaft, came from the shadows of the trees.

"Get the proxies, young man?"

Dave nodded.

"Can you get me there, Gladys?"

The girl consulted a wrist watch.

"I think so."

Everett nodded.

"Very well. Handcuff this man with the other prisoner. There'll be. . . . Hello, here they come now!"

A car with a red spotlight on one side of the windshield came jolting along a makeshift road. It slammed to a stop, a broad shouldered man clumped to the ground, ran flat-footedly.

"Sheriff's office. Plane was reported coming down in flames. They saw it from the boulevard."

Everett nodded.

"Take this man, murder of Ole Anderson, kidnapping, and a few other things. I'm Gilbert Everett. You'll find another in the tent there. He's already handcuffed. I'll be back to place proper charges. Right now I'm on my way to San Francisco to get some important proxies filed and take the control of a corporation away from a bunch of crooks."

The deputy sheriff looked goggle eyed, then pulled a newspaper clipping from his pocket, consulted a photograph.

"By Gosh, you are Gilbert Everett! Who are the others?"

Everett swept his hand. "Gladys Ranger, my secretary. The aviator's hired by me. Lodge your prisoners in jail. I'll have an attorney get in touch with you about the charges."

"Where's Tom?" asked Dave in a low voice.

There was a ghost of a twinkle in the bloodshot eyes.

"Tom escaped."

Dave grunted.

The sheriff, awed by the authority of the millionaire, the notoriety that would follow the capturing of the criminals, seemed dazed.

Everett muttered instructions to Dave.

"There are some angles of this I want kept out of the paper. Leave the talking to me. Get to your plane. Tom repaired it before he 'escaped.' Just a magneto wire or something shot away. It was a simple job.

"You get started. Look me up at the Palace Hotel in San Francisco when you get a chance. Name's Flint, eh? All right. I'll remember. The girl and I will take the other plane. My attorney will attend to the publicity. Don't tell any one what you know."

The Boeing was turned, back on the runway. Dave got in turned her over, taxied down the runway, spun the plane and roared back. Three figures waved their hands in farewell.

The plane rose like a live thing, cleared the clump of trees by a wide margin, half circled and climbed in a steady slant. Ahead loomed the cottony edges of a fog bank. But Dave felt fog was a matter of little moment after what he had been through.

Soon he was over it, scudding above the trailing tendrils of moisture. He could see that the fog lay in patches, long streamers. Between these he could make out the country below.

Yet it was just flying sense that finally brought him over the Oakland airport. Even then he circled for ten minutes, making sure of his bearings. Then he settled.

The fog swallowed him up. The setting sun vanished in black mists. For a moment all was a sea of water globules, black as night, impinging with stinging impact upon cheeks, lips, forehead.

Then there loomed below a gray landscape. Colorless buildings bordered a wide field, marked with the wheels of many landing planes. A cone of white cloth fluttered in the direction of the prevailing wind.

Dave settled to earth.

A figure came forth to meet him.

It was a shock to recognize Sid Meyer, to realize that Sid saw in his landing nothing unusual.

Dave shut off the motor. Sid looked at a strap watch on his wrist, grinned.

"You're ten minutes early. And you borrowed Ken

Holly's new Boeing. Gee, you must have a pull. Been joy riding around a bit, eh?"

Dave remembered that it was time for him to show up at the airport for his night shift. He grinned.

"Yep, been joy riding," he said, remembering Everett's admonition about giving out information.

Sid shook his head.

"Some folks get all the breaks. Gosh, but it's getting to be a humdrum sort of life. Think of it, nothing new to do, no excitement left."

Dave grinned and tilted his head back so he could see the wall of drifting fog. Somewhere over that drab ceiling of the sky the sun was setting in brilliant colorings, and a girl was piloting a two seater. In that plane was Gilbert Everett, the abducted millionaire, returning to file his proxies at the last minute, thwarting a gang of crooks who had not stopped at murder.

Thinking of that blue eyed girl, he removed his goggles, sighed.

An exclamation from Sid Meyer brought him back to the present.

"Say! Where'd you get the shanty?"

Dave pressed his hand to the swollen, discolored optic.

"Ran into a door," he said, ruefully.

Sid shook his head.

"Ain't it a hell of a life! No action left. A guy gets a black eye, an' he gets it running into a door! Oh, well, let's wheel the crate in. Ken Holly thinks as much of this as he does of his right eye."

Dave nodded, thought of the bullet holes. "I'll have to telephone him, too. He didn't know I was coming down here."

"Fog too thick on the other side."

Slim started the motor, taxied toward the hangars, Sid hanging to one wing tip.

"No romance left in life," he heard Sid complain, as the motor shut off.

Dave grinned as he climbed from the machine. His eyes were lifted to the swirling fog. A little hole appeared where there was an air eddy. Above it was a patch of sky, tinted a bright gold in the evening light.

"It's always all right—above the fog," he said.

Sid Meyers snorted.

"You're gettin' poetic! You an' your black eye."