

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

THE SKY'S THE LIMIT

by **RALPH OPPENHEIM**

They were known as the "Three Mosquitoes" Kirby, Carn, and Travis—and they were famous all over the Western Front as the most daring three-plane combination that ever flew over the Boche lines and engaged the enemy planes in deadly combat. Kirby, the leader, was after Kellar, the German ace called the "Flying Dutchman"—and here is the story of what happened—one of the most thrilling and exciting flying yarns ever written!
Zoom into her, gang!

CHAPTER I THE THREE MOSQUITOES

KIRBY'S INSTINCTIVE QUICKNESS was the only thing that saved him and his comrades from instant death. His right arm shot upwards, waved to "Shorty" Carn and Travis, who flew their trim Spads on either side of his, a little to the rear, making up the three-plane V-shaped formation which the "Three Mosquitoes"—for such was this famous trio nicknamed—always assumed. Instantly, the three Spads went into a long glide-dive, went shooting down a long hill of space for their lines, at full throttle.

Not until they were rushing downward, with the wind shrilling through their flying wires, did Kirby look

back up into the sky again. And when he did look, his nerves grew even tauter. The Boche were following! The big formation that he had discovered just when it was about to come down and finish him and his comrades, was still after them. Like darting dragon flies those Fokkers were on their trail, sweeping down behind them.

There must have been twenty-five of them, and now, as they loomed closer, Kirby discovered that they bore black and white stripes on their fuselages. His heart leaped. They were Keller's great circus, the "Flying Dutchman" and his crew! The best circus Germany had!

And they were gaining, creeping down behind the Three Mosquitoes, who were still streaking for home, fleeing from odds which, reckless as they were, they could not hope to face. Keller! The mere name could not fail to bring a strange thrill to Kirby. For Keller was now Germany's greatest ace, and, by his score, the greatest ace alive. He was a second only to the late

Richthofen. "The Flying Dutchman" they called him because, like the famous mariner, he seemed immune to death, as if his life were protected by some uncanny spell.

And now he was right behind Kirby and his men: doubtless, that all-black Fokker which led the others was his. And he and his crew were gaining on the Three Mosquitoes. Kirby put on more throttle, and his comrades did likewise. They were shooting through the air like missiles, streaking over a smoking, shell-torn battlefield where the Second Marne was raging.

Rat-tat-tat-tat! Kirby almost jumped out of his seat as that ominous staccato clatter rose behind him, above the roar of engines. And he looked back to see both the black Fokker's guns blazing away.

Kellar was sending a deadly stream of bullets. It came so close that Kirby ducked instinctively beneath the cockpit cowling. With a crash, half the instruments on his dash-board were shot away, and the bullets ricocheted from the cowling above his head. A strut shivered, cracked, and sent splinters ripping through Kirby's jacket, scratching his face. Another look, and his last shred of hope left him. The Fokker was only thirty yards away! His next burst must score! One of the Three Mosquitoes, perhaps all of them, were going to fall!

Kirby cursed, sobbed. God, if only he could get a chance at that cool-headed, precise fiend behind him. But it was useless to offer any resistance now. Kellar had them cold.

"Come on!" Kirby cried aloud, in hopeless resignation—though the mighty roar of engines more than drowned his voice. "Shoot, damn you! And give it to me first!" And he sat back and waited for that final burst.

A second passed. Still there was no staccato clatter. Kirby, fearful and surprised, glanced back. Then, to his intense relief, he saw. The pilot of the Fokker was half-standing in his cockpit. He was hammering with his fist at the breechlocks of his twin Spandaus. A jam of his guns had saved Kirby and his comrades! The German had to devote himself to clearing the stoppage, and the Fokker slowed down. It fell back, fell back to be swallowed up among its twenty-four comrades. But before it fell back Kellar took the time to shake his fist at the Three Mosquitoes.

However, while the danger was lessened, it was still terrific. The Hun formation was still following, keeping right behind Kirby and his men, who had at least five minutes to go before they should come

within sight of their drome. Once more they gave all their energy to keeping up their wild speed. Once more Kirby took his eyes off the Huns, and glanced ahead, to see—

The blood drained from his face, and for a second he felt faint. Looming right ahead of him, against the blue sky off there, were twenty black specks! They were headed this way, growing rapidly larger. God, Kirby shuddered, were he and his comrades going to be caught between two squadrons of Huns? They could not turn—they had to go straight ahead to keep their speed!

Then, in the next second, a cry of wild joy broke from Kirby's dry throat, and he was yelling hoarsely: "Come on, you little tons of guns! Come on, damn you!" For as those specks took on shape and color, as they loomed into clarity before Kirby and his comrades, he saw that they were not Huns. They were Americans. Spads. Usually, he would have been able to spot this fact at once, but in his dazed bewilderment and fear, and because his eyes were slightly dimmed by the tears and blood which the furious rush of wind had brought to them—despite his goggles—he had made the mistake which an experienced flyer so seldom made.

The Germans saw them coming, and at once took their attention away from the Three Mosquitoes, started to close up their formation to prepare for a possible attack. Kirby led his men on, straight toward the oncoming planes. It looked as if the American formation had already seen their plight, and were coming to their rescue.

The famous German circus was accepting the attack, for they were a fearless bunch. They outnumbered the Americans by two, and they felt that their new Fokkers could outmaneuver the Spads. So, putting on their throttles, they came rushing straight toward the Spads, which rushed toward them. The two big formations were coming at one another head-on, coming with their guns beating out a thunderous tattoo, and the drone of their engines shaking the very heavens. Down on the ground, a mile below, some artillerymen looked up from their grimy work long enough to watch them. They saw those glinting little shapes, up in the sunny blue sky, rushing right together, like two armies of dragon flies.

CHAPTER II THE FLYING DUTCHMAN

THE SPEED OF THOSE two formations had become incredible. They were coming together in a furious, breathless sweep. For a second it looked like they must certainly collide. But they didn't. Even as they were right on top of each other, the planes all spread out. And the men on the ground stared in awe as they saw those two formations literally weave in and out one another, curving to and fro as if they were performing some strange ritual, some kind of a snake dance in the sky. It was beautiful while it lasted, that weaving pattern of planes. It looked harmless, as if it were merely meant to be a pretty maneuver. And it was therefore incongruous to see two Spads of the squadron suddenly flop out of that pattern and burst into livid flame, crumpling as they spun earthward with black columns of smoke streaming behind them. The Germans had scored! Kellar's circus was living up to its reputation.

Kirby, leading his comrades through the maze of bobbing, weaving planes, saw those two Spads fall in the first flurry, and the sight of them brought his fury to the highest pitch. They must fight now, fight! They must not let this circus beat them in their first meeting! He leaned forward to his sights, and his fingers closed on the stick-triggers as a Fokkerlike shape streaked past in a flash of black and white stripes. Kirby caught the fleeting ship in the ring for a second, and he pressed the triggers, sent two long bursts clattering from his twin machine guns. Shorty Carn and Travis, on either side of him, fired too. But they did not score.

In an instant, the Fokker had half-rolled away, throwing off their sights. Kirby shook his head. Those Fokkers were too fast: they seemed always to keep out of range, and yet they were always close enough to send out their death-dealing bullets.

The orderly pattern did not last long. For, in a moment, all those planes had weaved themselves into such a tangle that confusion resulted. And in that confusion a Spad and a Fokker locked wings and went hurtling down in fatal dalliance. The others began to spread out, began to extricate themselves from the dangerous snarl. They scattered out in all directions,

and suddenly the blue sky was dense with those planes, cluttered with them.

It was a general dog-fight now, a fierce mix-up. Formation tactics were dropped: it was every man for himself, every one firing at any antagonist who crossed his sights. The planes gyrated, zoomed, banked all around each other, now flashing in the sun, now silhouetted against its glare. Black smoke poured from their exhausts, and the yellowish streams of tracer bullets drew crisscross lines in the sky.

The Three Mosquitoes, too, had been separated in all the confusion. Kirby, who was blazing away at anything in sight, like all the rest, saw his comrades off to the right, streaking up and down, their guns spitting. And as he looked, a triumphant thrill passed through him. For he saw a Fokker crumple beneath Shorty Carn's guns, saw it plunge like a flaming torch. The Americans had scored at last.

But the Germans answered that victory by sending another Spad fluttering earthward like a dead bird. And Kirby's heart sank, as he realized that his squadron was up against a stronger force. The Germans were licking them, beating them in every quarter. Kellar's circus, with their new Fokkers, were proving themselves to be superior to the Yanks.

There was a Fokker behind Kirby now, trying to get on his tail. Instinctively, he half-rolled to shake off the German's sights, and the tracer sped past several yards away. Kirby banked around, to give chase. But he didn't give chase. For as he turned, something caught his eye, way ahead.

The all-black Fokker! It was swooping down through the maze of fighting ships like a monstrous hawk, swooping straight for one of the Spads. It came down and, with a grace and swiftness which amazed Kirby, it flattened right out behind its chosen victim. Its guns blazed. And the deed was done, done in one split second. The Spad stood stock still, like a bird surprised by a sudden wound, and then it nosed over to begin the long, fatal plunge through space.

Kellar! In the general excitement Kirby had almost forgotten about the Flying Dutchman. The realisation that the great German ace was right in the midst of the fray came to Kirby like a shock. It was more than probable that Kellar had accounted for most of the Spads sent down. That breathless attack of his, the ease and accuracy with which he had swooped on his prey, proved it.

A savage rage swept Kirby, and his eyes narrowed to mere slits behind their goggles. Through his mind

flashed that grim picture of the black Fokker creeping up on him and his comrades, creeping up on them when they were helpless. And there was the even more lurid picture of that Spad being dropped like a fly, and of the other Spads which had fallen. Ace or no ace, Kirby was going to call his bluff.

The all-black Fokker was lost from his view for a second. Then again, he saw it. It was way off there now, past the rest of the planes. And it was climbing. At first, Kirby could not understand why Kellar seemed to be climbing out of the scrap. Then, as he scanned the sky off there, he saw. There was a lone Spad out there, flying away. Evidently the ship had been disabled or its guns had jammed, and its pilot was trying to pull out, make for home. And Kellar was getting in a position to dive on him, getting ready to swoop down and unmercifully slaughter that wounded ship, which went on unawares.

A searing wire seemed to tighten about Kirby's heart, and for a second he was frozen with horror. For he had caught a better glimpse of that fleeing Spad, caught a flash of its insignia. It was Travis!

Most likely those bullets which the German had pumped into the third Mosquito previously had damaged his ship, so that the added strain of this fight had incapacitated it; and now Travis was trying to get away. And there was Kellar, climbing for altitude right above the wounded Spad!

With a berserk oath that almost brought blood to his mouth, Kirby pulled back his stick, and started to zoom for the Fokker, which was beginning to level off up there. Up he went, through the maze of planes, ignoring the bullets which ripped at him whenever he passed a Boche ship. His eye was only for Kellar, for the Flying Dutchman. A grim, fierce determination had gripped him. He would stop Kellar from slaughtering his helpless comrade, stop him if it was the last thing he did.

Now Kirby was getting out of the big battle, climbing away from it. He watched the all-black Fokker. It was nosing over. Kirby put on full throttle, damning the seeming slowness of his engine, wishing he could hurl his Spad upwards like a missile. He was coming up behind Kellar, and in a second he would be in range. Hurry—for God's sake, he must hurry! He was leaning to his sights, his fingers were closing convulsively on the triggers. But he was too late.

In a cloud of black smoke from its own exhaust, the black Fokker dived! Kellar had begun his breathless swoop.

Furiously, Kirby plunged after him, went shooting down behind him. He saw the black Fokker, way down there, streaking down right behind Travis' Spad, which went on, unawares. He saw Kellar getting closer and closer. Kirby increased the angle of his dive, stretching what speed he had. Was he gaining? If only he could get in range, get there in time!

But then his hope sank. Kellar was firing. He had opened up, started to send short bursts ripping from his twin machine guns. He was right on Travis' tail, and he was creeping closer and closer. Travis must have seen him at last, for he began to go into a zig-zag course. But it was a pitiful, futile effort. And Kirby groaned in agony, as if the bullets he saw ripping into his comrade's plane were striking his own instead. He groaned, but at the same time he fought anew to make hit trembling, screaming ship go faster.

Kellar was scarcely a plane's length behind that wounded ship now. He was blazing away, and again Kirby saw his comrade's plane trembling from nose to tail as the bullets pumped it. Travis still continued to wriggle desperately, zig-zagging and rolling, but he must have realized he didn't have a chance. With his flying speed cut down because his ship was damaged, with the Spad acting as sluggish as if it bore an unwieldy cargo of lead, he was at helpless as a chicken in the presence of a hawk. And Kellar coolly went on sending out burst after burst, filled that Spad with round after round of terrible tracer. As he came sweeping down, Kirby saw once more the tiny helmeted head of the German, leaning forward to his sights, looking down between the glistening barrels of his twin Spandaus. He was so close to Travis now that he must surely score! Travis was finished! A second or two and the third Mosquito must fall.

Kirby was pulling into range at last! He pulled into range, a few hundred yards behind the Fokker. But he did not fire. A new danger had impressed itself upon him, a danger which froze his fingers even as they were about to press the triggers. It was a long-range shot that he must take if he would hit that Fokker. And since the Fokker was directly behind Travis, Kirby would be taking the extreme risk of hitting his own comrade! If his bullets went only slightly amiss, they might very well prove to be the ones which sent Travis down.

Torn by doubt and indecision, Kirby hesitated. He hesitated until he saw another stream of Kellar's lead shaking his comrade's ship, cutting Travis' rudder to shreds. And then he knew he must take the chance,

reckless as it was. It was the only course open, the only possible means by which Travis might be saved.

He had the all-black Fokker caught in the little ring of his sights now, and he sought to hold it there. Slowly, his fingers were closing once more on the stick-triggers. His hand was cold, and a little shaky, but he gritted his teeth and steadied it. He must be cool. It depended on coolness, this shot, on absolute precision and control. He must steel his nerves. A little lower now, for the Fokker was tending to drop out of the ring. Carefully. Kirby eased his joy-stick forward, and the nose of his Spad came down—to expertly handled that it moved almost by inches. The Fokker was suddenly ringed again in the sights. Now!

Rat-tat-tat! With a clatter that seemed unbearably loud in Kirby's ears, his guns blazed with the steady pressure of his fingers, spat out a stream of tracer. He watched that stream rip downwards on its smoky course, watched it in fearful suspense.

Then a cry of mingled relief and triumph broke from him. The bullets were well-aimed. He saw them going into the Fokker! Splinters of wood and fabric leaped from the German's tail-fins. Kirby was even closer now, coming right on down. The German pilot jerked his head around to see what was attacking him from behind, and Kirby caught a flash of his goggles.

And in the instant the German turned from his guns, Travis seized his opportunity. With a wave of his arm toward Kirby, he side-slipped down and away, and then went into a furious, lurching glide-dive for home. Travis was safe! Keller's prey had escaped.

But in the next second Kirby was tense, alert once more. The German, as if infuriated by this impudent Spad which had interrupted his work, was turning his attention to it. He had half-rolled, and now, with a furious speed that seemed almost to raise a cloud of dust, he was whipping around. But Kirby was already right on his tail, a wonderful strategic position, and he clung there, sending out burst after burst. He saw the Fokker shake as his bullets pumped into it, saw it lurch on the turn, stagger. . . .

But he was wholly unprepared for the thing that happened. Of all the things he had anticipated, this had never even entered his head. He couldn't believe his eyes. He could only stare with bewildered unbelief as that black Fokker, caught in the midst of its furious turn, suddenly flopped over on its back, started to nose down!

The Flying Dutchman was falling! His black Fokker, which had seemed so strong and powerful a moment

ago, was now just a fragile thing which fluttered earthward in a slow spin!

Kirby had scored! Great God, had he really shot down this German ace, who had never been shot down before?

It was impossible, he kept telling himself foolishly. It had never occurred to him that his bullets would actually send the Fokker down, that he would get Kellar with such amazing ease. His idea had been merely to divert the Fokker from the wounded Spad, to draw Kellar into a duel. And he had expected that duel to be long and fierce, a test of skill, with the best man winning.

Yet, there was the black Fokker, now several hundred yards below, spinning slowly but inexorably toward the ground. Dazedly, Kirby plunged after it, to follow. Perhaps this was merely a ruse, a ruse to throw him off his guard, so that Kellar could catch him.

And in the next second this seemed truer than ever. For the Fokker was coming out of its spin, trying to level off. But then Kirby saw that it was, indeed, incapacitated. The pilot was alive, but his plane was shot to hell. He was putting up a terrific struggle to get his ship under control again. For a second Kirby felt a grim impulse to dive on him once more, finish him. But somehow Kirby couldn't do it, couldn't dive on that helpless ship. Besides, they were far within Allied territory. Kellar had no chance to escape, with his plane so badly damaged. He would be taken prisoner.

However, Kirby continued to follow him down, feeling as excited as a kid. His cheeks were burning, his heart pounding. But, even then he suddenly thought of his comrades. Would Travis get home? And where was Carn? He glanced back up into the sky where the planes had been fighting. To his surprise, the sky was amazingly empty. The fight had ended! Doubtless the Americans, who had taken a decisive licking, had pulled out and retreated. But—the new thought brought Kirby a slight shiver—perhaps, then, Kellar's crew were up there, looking for their leader. If they should drop down and see him——

He suppressed the thought with a laugh. Certainly he would have seen any planes up there. Most likely they had gone home, assuming that Kellar had done likewise.

Then he forgot all his fears as he fixed his eyes on the Fokker below him once more. Again that ship absorbed all his interest.

Kellar had succeeded in leveling off, though his motor had gone dead on him now, and his prop hung idle. He must have realized that he was caught, for he

was trying to glide for a field below, a field on which Kirby picked out a tiny swarm of khaki figures. He continued to follow Kellar down, gyrating above the Fokker like a bee, wondering if the German could make that field. His chances seemed pretty slim, for the Fokker was lurching drunkenly, threatening constantly to fall into stalling side-slips. But it staggered on down, and Kirby swept gracefully after it.

Already Kirby had decided to land, too. He wanted to make sure that the man was captured. And he wanted even more to have a look at the great German ace.

The Fokker was almost on the ground now, streaking right over the field. Kirby saw the khaki-clad figures jumping up, running out from all directions. Recklessly, Kellar opened his guns on them as he came down. He was strafing them, even as his wounded plane fell into their midst! Furious, Kirby leaned to his sights, started to reach for his triggers. But he did not fire. For Kellar had only ripped out a few bursts, which did no more than to send the men scurrying for shelter like a bunch of frightened rabbits.

The field was practically empty for the moment, though from the trees which surrounded it some of the soldiers were firing rifles and sho-shos at the descending German, and Kirby heard their shrill *crack-crack* as he shut off his motor to glide for a landing. The German's wheels had already touched the ground, and the Fokker was rolling across the field, its wings see sawing drunkenly. Kirby glided down right after him, and managed to make a fine, three-point landing only a hundred yards away from the spot where the Fokker had rolled to a stop.

CHAPTER III ACE MEETS ACE

AS HE CLIMBED HASTILY from his cock pit, Kirby saw a goggled, figure getting out of the Fokker. The khaki-clad men—they were infantry—were running out from their shelters now, running toward the Fokker with leveled rifles. But before they got near, the figure had leaned over the fuselage of his ship. He seemed to jerk something in the cockpit, then he jumped back and walked toward the crowd of soldiers with hands held above his head.

But in the next second, as he hurried toward the scene, Kirby saw that Fokker burst into livid flames, saw it burning like a box of matches. A helpless oath broke from him. The German had cleverly succeeded in setting fire to his ship before being captured, had pulled the lever which the new Fokkers had for that purpose.

By this time the crowd of soldiers had surrounded the German, and Kirby could see him no longer. He rushed toward the throng, pulling off his helmet and goggles. His excitement mounted, the blood raced through his pulses. He was actually going to see the Flying Dutchman!

He was coming up to that crowd now, and he heard loud, excited voices.

"Cripes!" someone was exclaiming, incredulously. "It's the Flying Dutchman himself! God, fellows—"

The rest of the sentence was drowned out by angry shouts of arguing men: "Aw g'wan I saw him first. I get them souveneers! Them goggles and helmet is mine!"

"Then give me his coat, and I'll fade you for the—"

"Aw, go spit up a rope! Who saw him first? You can ask—"

Kirby pushed his way into the mob of doughboys. He wasted no words.

"I'm Captain Kirby,—the pursuit squadron. I'll take charge here."

Then men stiffened at the word "captain." Some of them saluted, some forgot to. Several looked at Kirby with admiration, for they knew of the famous Three Mosquitoes.

They made way for him. He walked into the center of the circle. The German's back was turned to him at first. Kirby saw that he was hatless, and coatless, too—the soldiers had stripped his flying togs. As Kirby came up to him, the man turned.

Kirby stood blank with astonishment. Was this Keller, this the black vulture who had swooped down on his prey with such fiendish precision? It was incredible.

For he saw before him a man as young as himself, a tall, fairhaired, blue-eyed fellow with a pleasant and sensitive face. True, there was a slight trace of bitterness in those features, of the frustrated feeling one has when he is taken prisoner. But the smile he gave Kirby was as warm and cheerful as any smile could be.

"Hello, swine," was the German's cheery greeting. His English was perfect, without a trace of accent.

Kirby was slightly taken aback, but he was quick to counter.

"*Wit gehts, dumkopf!*" he responded, just as cheerfully, though his German was far from perfect. Hearty laughter rose from the crowd of men, some of them shouting gleefully: "You tell him, cap!" But Kirby felt embarrassed, funny. He rushed on: "Damn sorry I gave you time to burn your bus."

"Tough," commented the German, with a sincerity that made the men stare aghast. This was the most unusual scene they had ever witnessed. It was their last idea of a German. "Tough. But it's only fair. By all rights, you know,"—his voice had a slight edge now, and a faint gleam came into his eyes, disclosing the other side of the man, the grim fighter—"by all rights I should have burned your ship with you in it. If I had just been able to get around, to engage you, you'd never be standing here to talk to me now. But, fortunately,"—he grinned again—"you were smeared with American swine luck."

"Cut the chatter," Kirby broke in, with sudden authority. His face was a bit red. He didn't like what the German said, especially since he felt that it was at least partly true. It was more than possible that the German *was* the better man, that in a real fight Kellar would have licked him. So he snapped: "Remember where you are! And the less you say the better for you!"

"Very well," young Kellar replied, quietly. "However, I hope you realize that you have attained the honor of being the only man who has ever forced the Flying Dutchman down."

"The honor is all yours," Kirby snorted, not to be outdone. "You're one of the few guys who has met one of the Three Mosquitoes and lived!" And the doughboys backed that not-too-modest statement with hearty enthusiasm, one of them sneering at the German: "You can't laugh that off!"

"Ah, the Three Mosquitoes," the German echoed, and he did laugh. "The term is clever. And so I may consider myself to have received a little Mosquito-bite, *eh?*"

"You may consider yourself a prisoner of war," Kirby told him, grimly. "And if you make any more cracks you won't consider yourself at all. It's S.O.S. for you, *Herr Kellar*, and as far as you're concerned the *guerre* is *fini*."

"Ah, I see." The German's smile grew broader. Then, with deliberate nonchalance, he extracted a gold cigarette case from his shirt and opened it.

"Say, where do you think you are?" Kirby demanded. "Home? It's no smoking, *defense de fumer*, for prisoners."

"That's all right, my friend," the German told him, consolingly. He opened the case and held it before Kirby. "Have a cigarette?"

Kirby hesitated. Then, with a slight grin, he snatched a cigarette from the case, stuck it between his lips. He fumbled for his matches, but before he got them the German held out a beautiful silver lighter for him. Kirby drew a light, then said awkwardly: "Want to smoke, *dumkopf?*"

"If you please, swine." The German took one, too. Then, taking pity on the doughboys, who were feasting their eyes on those fine Turkish cigarettes—a rare luxury, indeed, at the Front, Kirby passed the case around. It disappeared mysteriously. So did the lighter.

"Here!" Kirby ordered sharply. "Give back those things. I'll do all the souvenir hunting around here. And whoever has this fellow's helmet and coat, turn 'em in to me."

The men grumbled, hesitated. Then, as if by magic, the various articles were produced, and Kirby took them.

"That's right," the German commended. "To the victor belong the spoils. You might as well take all I've got. They'll take it from me anyway, and if you have it I'll have more chance of getting it back."

"How come?"

"When I shoot you down behind the German lines."

He said those words calmly and quietly enough, but something in his tone brought a strange uneasiness to Kirby. And the loud laugh the Mosquito gave was not as spontaneous as he had wanted it to sound.

"Very well, *Herr Kellar*," he taunted. "Just how you're going to shoot me down from your coop in a prison camp is beyond me, but I'll do as you say and take your junk. What's more,"—he forced himself to speak with reckless bravado—"to show you what I think of your chances, I'll carry your valuables on my person when I fly. I'll even wear your coat, helmet, and goggles. They *are* better than mine—you guys are treated swell! Now hand over anything else you've got."

"You are a brave man," the German said, though there was a faint hint of mockery in his tone. He proceeded to turn all his little odds and ends over to Kirby. A wrist-watch, a ring, and a little package of personal letters were all placed in Kirby's hands. "Please take good care of them," Kellar requested. "I hate to let them get out of my hands, even temporarily. But unless I set your plane on fire by some misfortune—thus causing these things to be burned—I shall have them back shortly." Then he

added, with mischievous innocence, "Sorry I have no important maps or official papers to leave in your care, too. Unfortunately, they burned with my ship."

Kirby gave him another furious glance. The cleverness with which the German had done away with everything that might be of real value to his captors, annoyed him, irritated him. But then he smiled cheerfully again: "Well, that's that. Now is there anything else you'd like to unload from your squareheaded mind before I turn you in?" There wasn't. Kirby paused, thoughtfully. He glanced at his plane, which squatted a few hundred feet away, its propeller still whirling—for he had left motor on. He would have liked to turn Kellar in himself, but he knew he must take that bus back to the drome. He turned to the men.

"What are you men supposed to be doing?" he inquired.

"Fightin'," a freckle-faced sergeant replied, and when Kirby stared at him, he went on: "We were supposed to move up this mornin', only the camions got stuck in the mud, and we're waitin' here. Our officers are all up on the road, about half a mile away, cussin at the trades for gettin' stuck, while some engineers is workin' to get 'em out."

"Well, then, some of you will escort this prisoner to the nearest M.P. station. You can pick six men, sergeant. We can't take any chances. Tell them that Captain Kirby sends *this*,"—he nudged his thumb at the smiling Kellar—"with his compliments. I've got to be hopping."

The sergeant saluted. The German beamed.

"Well, goodbye, swine! Or rather, *au revoir*, for we shall meet again—though it will probably be in the sky!"

"*Auf wiedersehen, dumkopf!*" Kirby flung back over his shoulder as the six doughboys, rifles pointed cockily, marched their prisoner off.

CHAPTER IV THE ENEMY'S FANGS

BY THE TIME KIRBY GOT BACK to the drome the news of Kellar's capture already had buzzed in over the wire. And Kirby, to his astonishment, found a

cheering throng awaiting him on the big field. There was relief and joy in the faces of his fellow pilots, who had taken a fierce licking from Kellar and his crew, had lost seven good men before they had pulled out of the fray. Of course, Kellar's capture didn't mean the end of his circus, even by the wildest stretch of imagination; but certainly it meant a considerable decline in the black crew's stock. For their leader was the one responsible for most of their gruesome work, and without him they might be matched more equally by the Americans.

So the men congratulated Kirby, patted him on the back, told him how good he was. It embarrassed him, that cheering welcome. It embarrassed him especially because he felt he didn't deserve it. If he had licked Kellar properly, in one of those great hand-to-hand air-duels which make champions of the blue, he might have felt differently. But the manner in which he had shot down the ace dimmed any triumph which the victory might have roused in him. It seemed merely like a lucky accident, one of those miracles that sometimes did happen.

Besides, he was anxious to see his comrades, especially Travis, to find out how they had come through all that hell. And as soon as he could break away from the crowd which surrounded him, he gathered up all the articles he had taken from Kellar, and hurried over to the barracks, went into the cubicle the three shared together. Carn and Travis were there. And Kirby found, to his satisfaction, that they were both in fine shape, unscathed. Travis bore no mark of his harrowing experience with the black Fokker.

"Well, well!" was Shorty Carn's greeting. The stocky, mild-eyed little man was just lighting up his inseparable briar pipe. Then, as his eyes left the glowing bowl and took in Kirby, he exclaimed, "Holy hell, what's all that junk you got? You look like a walking hock-shop!"

"Souvenirs," said Kirby, a little grimly. He flung them on his cot "Go easy with 'em, fellows. Don't mess them up"

"So you got that lousy sunuvagun!" Carn went on, eagerly.

"Lucky for me he did," drawled the lanky Travis, as he started to put on a tie. He was the oldest and most mature of the trio, and he seldom spoke without having something to say. "Thought he had me."

"Yeah," Kirby mused, going over to the little basin to make one of those futile efforts to wash some of the grime off his face and hands. "Damn nice chap."

"What's that?" Travis paused in the act of tying the tie.

"I said 'yes,'" Kirby told him, suddenly reticent. And he made an undue amount of noise as he poured water into the sink from a cracked pitcher.

"You mean you said 'Damn nice chap!'" Carn pointed the stem of his pipe at Kirby accusingly. "And if you ask me, it sounds as if you're either off your base or have turned one hundred per cent Heinie! Are you forgetting how that dirty skunk tried to shoot us in the back when we couldn't defend ourselves, how he tried to slaughter Travis? If he's a damn nice chap, I'm a lousy mutt!"

"Well?" Kirby insinuated, mischievously. But then he seemed terribly busy with the soap and water. He refused to argue. It had suddenly occurred to him, as Carn brought back the picture of that black Fokker, that he saw Kellar as two separate persons. One was the flyer, the cold, cruel, relentless devil who swooped down on wings of death. The other was the human being; the pleasant-faced, smiling, good-natured fellow he had met on the ground. It was strange, and a little beyond Kirby. He didn't attempt to explain it to his comrades, because he didn't quite understand it himself.

Carn and Travis were just beginning to pump him suspiciously when they were interrupted by the appearance of the C.O.'s orderly, who saluted stiffly: "The colonel sends his compliments, sirs, and——"

"Nuff said!" Kirby cut him off, for he knew very well what it meant when the C.O. sent his compliments. He reached for a towel. "Tell him we'll be right over."

A few minutes later the Three Mosquitoes crossed the big field to the headquarters shack, and entered unobtrusively.

The C.O. was seated at his desk. He was a small, wiry man with a grizzled face, iron-gray hair, and snapping gray eyes. But those eyes looked a trifle haggard just now. It is a hard blow to lose seven good men in one morning.

"Good work, Kirby," the colonel rasped at once, in that gruff yet friendly tone of his. "Good work. You've made a catch. And you've all three proved that you were right when you said you *could* fly alone. He paused. Then he went on, and now his tone was grim: "We've got Kellar now, and the next thing to do is to get that circus of his. Of course, we'll get them anyway on Saturday, when we make our drive with the French to wrest supremacy of the air. But between now and then, they are going to go right on with their work,

unless we do something about it And if we can cripple them, well have smoother sailing Saturday—less serious opposition. At any rate, this is my plan. Do you remember how we licked the Bismark *Jagdstaffel*?"

It was an innocent enough question. Yet, when the C.O. voiced it, the Three Mosquitoes stood perfectly still for a long moment. And it was Travis, the reticent Travis, who had to break that silence.

"In other words," he drawled, "you want us to play decoy?"

"Exactly." The C.O. smiled faintly. "Your work this morning has convinced me that you three can capably hold off that circus by yourselves for awhile." The Three Mosquitoes looked at one another with wide eyes, but the C.O. did not notice it. "So why not use that to an advantage? To-morrow, provided the weather is suitable, you three can fly over the lines, and hang around pretty low. The rest of the squadron will be up at twenty thousand feet, a few miles behind you. Your task will be to wait until Kellar's circus comes along, then,"—he spoke slowly, with grim emphasis—"let them drop on you. Then the other Spads can dive in and catch them cold."

He paused again, eying the three men shrewdly. They shifted, just a trifle. "Of course," the C.O. added, in a lower tone, "this is really a volunteer job. I can't *order* you to do it. And don't hesitate to say 'No' if you don't want to."

But the colonel might just as well have ordered them to do it, and the Three Mosquitoes knew it. However, they were good sports about it

"Oh, we might as well take a shot at it," Kirby said mildly. "At worst," he added trying to keep his voice level, "it might fail."

"That's the spirit," the C.O. commended. "Well, that's all I wanted to know. We'll go over the details tonight. Meanwhile, take it easy to-day—you can have the afternoon and evening off, to do as you will. Just now I'd suggest that you trot over to lunch."

They took the suggestion. And they ate heartily—for their worries never interfered with their appetites. But at the mess, all their fellow pilots, having learned what they were going to do, consoled them with a sympathy and understanding that would have made even the most fearless man feel a tremor of doubt.

"You'd better take my advice," the red-haired man who sat directly opposite Kirby, urged gloomily, in a voice which belied his flaming hair and his fighting face. For, despite his appearance, "Red" Peters was a dyed-in-wool pessimist, and he had been elected by a

unanimous vote as president of the Sadder-but-Wiser Club, an organization for pilots who had lived and learned. "Spend the rest of the day writing a few letters home."

"Aw, dry up, Red!" boomed Big Pete Braddock, the jovial-faced giant who had led the flights that morning. Just now, however, he didn't look so jovial. His left arm was in bandages, and his face was scratched and a little clouded. "Don't be so pessimistic," He spoke to Kirby and his comrades with warm conviction. "You'll pull the stunt all right. No worry about that. But if you do write any letters," he added, "I'll be glad to mail them for you."

"Say!" Kirby burst out, indignantly. "What's all this gloom about? This isn't a funeral."

Kirby and his comrades seemed quite unperturbed by this time. They had regained their usual, reckless sang-froid, and they laughed at the dangers which they knew were in store for them. And when the muddy water which went under the name of coffee was brought, and the men lit up cigarettes, the Three Mosquitoes performed one of their famous, devil-defying rituals. Kirby passed around Kellar's cigarette case, which he had replenished with his own stock, and he and his comrades all took a butt—Carn, for once, deigning to forget his pipe. Then Kirby lit a match. He gave Carn and Travis a light and then, deliberately, he held the same match to his own cigarette.

Several voices rose in excited warning: "Hey, captain, watch yourself! Use another match! Be careful! Don't light three cigarettes!"

And some of them blew across the table in a frantic effort to put the match out. For the air force were a superstitious lot, and Lady Luck was their patron saint.

But Kirby had already done the deed. And the three Mosquitoes, with perfect nonchalance, settled back and puffed away.

"Well," Red Peters groaned, "now I'd certainly get at those letters if I were you. And please don't forget to say goodbye to me before you go up to-morrow."

The Three Mosquitoes spent a good part of the afternoon at their planes. They helped their trusty mechanics patch up the bullet-holes in the fabric, and Kirby saw to it that new instruments were installed on his dashboard. They examined their motors with that painstaking scrutiny which anyone would assume when he realizes that his safe return to earth depends on every beat of that powerful engine. They cleaned and oiled their machine guns, and timed their synchronizing gear to make sure that they would not shoot off their own propellers. In short, they left

nothing undone. They worked patiently and tirelessly for several hours.

And they were still working when the news came. It came over the phone, and in a moment the whole drome buzzed with it. The very air seemed to have grown strangely tense.

It was the C.O. himself who brought the news to the Three Mosquitoes. He came walking up briskly, to Kirby. There was a grim smile on his grizzled face.

"Well, Kirby," he said slowly. "I'm sorry to tell you that your prisoner has escaped."

Very slowly, Kirby took his hands off the flying wire he was tightening, and turned around with a face gone blank. Then he echoed, foolishly: "Escaped?"

"Yes. Got it from intelligence, and also from a French squadron." And he told them the story he had been able to put together. It was a brief story, but it was exciting enough. Kellar's escape had been little less than miraculous. It seemed they had been taking the Flying Dutchman, by railroad, to some point in the back-areas. The train passed under a tunnel, and the German had cleverly gotten off in some manner which no one could explain. Then came a break in the story, a period during which the Flying Dutchman's moves were unknown. The next part of the tale told how the members of a French squadron got suspicious when a man, dressed in a set of their own flyingtogs, started to climb into a Nieuport whose owner was present. They challenged the man, but in a flash he had drawn a revolver, had shot one, and knocked two others out by a blow on the head.

Then he had taken off, and gotten away. They gave chase, and sent out a general alarm, but it was to no avail. Then came another break in the narrative. The third and last part told how another French squadron and a British squadron had each reported the loss of a plane which, to their astonished horror, had been shot down by a lone Nieuport.

It was all perfectly clear, perfectly obvious. And the Three Mosquitoes listened to the tale with grim, set faces. Kirby looked just a trifle pale. In his ears he heard young Kellar speaking again, heard a few disjointed phrases: "When I shoot you down behind the German lines—We shall meet again, though it will probably be in the air—Please take good care of—I'll get them back shortly—"

The C.O. was talking now, talking quietly: "Of course, this doesn't affect our plan for to-morrow. The fact that Kellar might be with his crew again doesn't mean the trick won't work. Maybe,"—he nudged Kirby

playfully—"maybe you'll get another shot at him, Kirby. And this time I guess you'll do a more finished job, eh?"

"Maybe," Kirby murmured, and through his mind flashed a picture of the all-black Fokker leading his twenty-four men down from the sky, down on Kirby and his comrades. "Yeah, maybe. . ."

When the C.O. had walked away, the three stood in silence for a moment. Then Kirby said slowly: "Guess I'll go in and write a few letters after all."

Travis gave him a piercing glance. "Guess you'll come with us to Papa Renier's *estaminet* and have a few drinks," he snapped, with that authority which the eldest is privileged to assert.

Kirby started to shake his head. But then, his resistance overcome, he nodded slowly.

"Guess I will."

CHAPTER V THE DUTCHMAN STRIKES

AND SO, on the following morning, the weather being suitable, three trim Spads cruised about the German sky, at an altitude of three thousand feet. They flew slowly, their engines droning lazily. To all appearances they were just sailing leisurely and benignly along, not expecting any attack and consequently not prepared for one. But in reality, the Three Mosquitoes were waiting, wary and apprehensive, for the appearance of twenty-five speedy Fokkers. They were waiting deliberately to put themselves into the hands of the terrible circus from which, only yesterday, they had fled so desperately.

The mere thought of it sent a slight chill creeping up Kirby's spine. Instinctively, he glanced around to see that his comrades were keeping close to him. They were—he saw the flashing noses of their Spads bobbing on either side of him, saw the whirl of their propellers. His eyes went upwards then, scanned the sky above. It was as sunny a sky as yesterday's, only—a stroke of luck—there were clouds in it, heavy clouds at about nine thousand feet. The puffy white banks were massed all over like great herds of sheep, and between them the pure blue sky and golden sunlight showed beautifully.

Yes, Kirby thought grimly, it was lucky that there were those clouds. They simplified the proceedings considerably. For now the other twenty Spads who were to come down as soon as the Boche was baited, did not have to stay miles behind the trio, and the risk of their being seen was lessened. They could hide above the clouds, right above the Three Mosquitoes. In fact, they must be there now, waiting, alert, ready to come shooting down. Kirby's keen eyes could not spot them, of course, but unless something was wrong they were there just the same, and they should be able to see the Three Mosquitoes, follow every move of the trio.

It was an old game, this decoy stunt, and Kirby and his comrades had played it before. But somehow, there was always terrific, nerve-racking suspense and doubt attached to it. Then was always the fear that something would go wrong in the big machine, every cog of which had to work exactly right or the whole would fail. And, as he had wondered so often before, Kirby found himself wondering if those other Spads were really up there, whether they were really following the trio right overhead. If they weren't—!

He dismissed the thought with a laugh, though it was a nervous laugh. No sense worrying. The C.O. had gone over the whole plan carefully, checking up on every detail. It was simple enough. The Three Mosquitoes were cruising around not far from the drome of the famous circus. The circus, if it followed its prescribed route—which the methodical Boche usually did—should climb this way toward the lines. Careful figuring had convinced Kirby that if he hung around this spot, the Germans should pass a few thousand feet above him and his comrades.

The whole crux of the scheme, then, hinged on a knowledge of the German squadron's tactics. It was known that Kellar's circus never broke up to attack. They were keen on formation work, and liked to move as one great unit, a giant steam-roller which crushed everything in its path. Therefore it was assumed that, spotting the Three Mosquitoes, they would all come down *en masse* and try to crush the trio—just as they had all come down yesterday morning. And when they came down, Kirby and his comrades were to keep their Spads headed toward the Allied lines; thus they would suck the Boche right under the twenty Spads which hung above.

That was all, and it seemed logical enough. Yet, the more he thought of it, the more impossible and suicidal it seemed to Kirby. Seldom before had he felt as tense and apprehensive as he felt now. And the

"souvenirs" which he had promised to carry on his person, which were now tucked beneath his shirt, seemed to lay against him like oppressive weights. They annoyed him, because they reminded him constantly of that black Fokker. They reminded him of what Kellar had said, of—

But he must not think of that now. He must keep his mind off the subject, until the big moment was at hand. Once more he glanced at his two comrades, though it was more to encourage himself than them. But if he expected to be reassured by them he was sadly mistaken. Both their goggled faces were tense, drawn. He had never seen them look so worried. He grinned at them, as cheerfully as he could. Shorty Carn managed to pin back warmly enough, but Travis' thin lips drew up into a tight little smile which made Kirby's blood run cold. Somehow the third Mosquito's expression seemed to impress upon Kirby even more fully the danger that was coming.

Minutes passed. It was getting worse and worse, this waiting, this flying up and down. Kirby's nerves were stretched taut, and he felt strangely cold. Time and again he glanced at the sky around him, scanned the clouds in a vain effort to see the twenty other Spads. Nothing in sight anywhere. Only on the ground were there any signs of activity. There was movement below; lots of traffic on the tiny winding roads, and the flashes and puffs of German long-range artillery.

In the distant west Kirby saw a column of black smoke curling high into the sky. An ammunition dump, most likely, set off by Allied shells. Funny, Kirby thought suddenly, there was no anti-aircraft fire around here. True, Archie had sent a few erratic bunts up toward them when they had crossed the lines, but the Germans in this vicinity seemed too busy hammering at the steadily advancing Franco-American lines to bother much with the planes overhead. Well, so much the better.

As soon as he took his eyes off the ground below, and his interest centered on the sky again, Kirby was startled by the strange stillness which seemed to have come over the air. It was peculiar, that silence which could make itself felt despite the drone, of engines. Yet it was there; you could almost hear yourself think. And it was hard not to think. It was hard for Kirby to keep his mind off the Flying Dutchman, the black vulture. Would he be with his crew again? Would he be there, ready to swoop down? In the awful stillness, Kirby once more seemed to hear young Kellar talking in his ear, telling him coolly and calmly—

An involuntary shout broke from his lips. He was waving his arms wildly, gesturing to his comrades, pointing. And his two eyes continued to stare through their goggles, stared straight ahead at the sight which had attracted them.

They were coming!

Out of the east, straight ahead, they climbed in beautiful formation—all twenty-five of them. Already they had more altitude than the Three Mosquitoes, who were right in their path.

In that first breathless second Kirby's muscles hardly responded. He felt cold all over. But then he acted almost mechanically, to well did he know the part he must play. He signaled his comrades, who signaled in hasty response. The three Spads, at the moment, were headed straight toward Hunland, straight toward the German squadron which was coming closer and closer. Now, led by Kirby, the three little ships began to swing around in a slow graceful curve which would finally head them toward their own lines. And in the eyes of the Germans it would look merely as if the trio, spotting the approaching enemy, were turning to retreat—to flee as they had fled yesterday.

Around they swung, which gave the steadily advancing Germans plenty of time to catch up to them. Even now the famous Boche circus was almost overhead, sweeping on with its usual breathless speed. And so far the plan seemed to be working. The Germans seemed to have decided to attack the Three Mosquitoes. The Huns were well below the clouds, thank God! If only those other twenty Spads up there were ready!

The Germans *were* overhead! Kirby and his comrades had completed their turn and were flying, at three-quarters throttle, toward their lines. Kellar's circus was getting into a position to dive directly from above. Kirby's heart pounded as he watched those planes. He strained his eyes in an effort to find out if an all-black Fokker was among them, for surely Kellar would have his new ship painted the same as the old. But in the bright glare up there, silhouetted against the snow-white clouds, all those birdlike shapes looked black. There was no way of telling, no way of knowing.

The German planes were spreading out. They were going to dive now! God, he suddenly shuddered, what a formidable force! It seemed crazy to let all those ships come right down on them. It had sounded possible before, when they had talked it over with the C.O. But now, when it was about to happen,

Kirby knew for certain that he and his men didn't have a chance. The decoy might work, but the Three Mosquitoes would have to give their lives to put it over. In less than a second those twenty-five Fokkers could easily shoot the three frail Spads to bits.

The Germans were still spreading out, still getting ready for their swoop. Kirby felt an almost uncontrollable impulse to flee, to race away as they had done yesterday instead of sticking here like fools! But he fought that impulse with all his strength, gritting his teeth. And he signaled his comrades to stick with him, to get closer. He felt them closing in on either side of him—and it was a good feeling, a vital feeling of comradeship which warmed his blood and gave him new strength. They were together anyway, and they would stick, by God, they would stick!

The moment was on hand. Looking up, Kirby saw the whole German formation tilting downwards like one great V, starting to get into the dive! Instinctively, his fingers closed on his triggers, and he waved once more to his comrades.

But in the next second he started in blank surprise. For the Germans had not dived! They had pulled up suddenly, and seemed to be closing together again!

A thousand fears assailed Kirby. Had the Germans changed their minds? Had the clever circus smelled a rat?

There was no way of telling, and now the suspense was growing unbearable. Kirby felt that his nerves must break if it went on any longer. For the German squadron continued to lurk overhead, always, it seemed, on the verge of diving. They hung there like waiting buzzards, while the three little Spads had to go right on at three-quarters throttle. Kirby cursed at those Fokkers, yelled at them to come on down and fight! His breath was coming in little gasps, and his face was covered with sweat. It was nerve-racking.

Still it went on. The three Spads huddled together like sheep in the pretence of a pack of wolves. The twenty-five Fokkers continued to lurk overhead. For a moment Kirby wondered why those other twenty Spads couldn't dive on the circus now, drop on them out of the clouds. Then, quickly, he realized that it would be useless. The Germans evidently suspected the game, and consequently they would be ready for such an attack. In a stand-up fight they had proved their superiority over the Americans. The only way the Spads could strike with sure effect would be to catch the Fokkers below.

Then, with dramatic suddenness, the circus made

another unexpected move. In beautiful unison, the whole squadron of Fokkers nosed upwards. And the blood drained from Kirby's face as he saw that formation zooming straight into the clouds! In a moment all those black planes had been completely swallowed by the puffy white masses.

And before Kirby had time thoroughly to grasp the situation, before he could stir himself to action, the thing happened.

Out of those cluds dropped a flaming Spad. Down it hurtled, twisting and curving dizzily in a slow spin, and leaving a great long trail of oily black smoke behind it.

And then at last, Kirby was waving the signal to his comrades, the signal that had been on his mind throughout this awful moment. With frantic haste, he pulled back his stick and climbed toward those clouds, and his comrades climbed with him. The whole business was hideously clear now, perfectly obvious. Kellar's circus had zoomed up and hurled themselves against those twenty Spads. They had drawn blood already, and it looked as if the Americans were simply due for another licking. The decoy was a dismal flop! The Germans had been too clever. They had turned the tables.

A savage oath broke from Kirby. Damn that black circus, damn their cleverness and precision! At least, he and his comrades would fight like the very devil to help the squadron. Perhaps they would not have to take another licking.

Then an anguished groan escaped him. Another Spad had suddenly dropped out of the clouds! It was out of control, and it wheeled and dipped like a crazy bird, though its plunge toward the earth grew ever faster. Two for the Germans!

The clouds were looming up above Kirby now, and he signaled his comrades to break formation. They must spread out so that they would not risk locking each other's wings when they went through the heavy white mists. Carn and Travis were pulling away. Kirby, feeding his engine more gas, zoomed straight up. He skirted through the cloud-edges, and then the mist was closing in around him, cold and damp and fiercely penetrating. Visibility was blotted out, and the sound of his engine became a mighty thunder which fairly split his eardrums—for such is the effect of being walled in by heavy clouds. Kirby could not see a foot ahead of him, and the thought that there might be Fokkers waiting to pounce on him when he came out above was not a pleasant one.

Then, in another second, the mists were thinning.

Light began to seen through again, and he saw the vaporish stuff drifting away under the churning blades of his propeller. Slowly, visibility returned. Through the mist he caught a flashing glimpse of zooming, circling, diving planes. The dog-fight was raging! And as the view became clearer, Kirby saw that the Fokkers seemed to be winning again. They were still in good formation, where the Spads were spread out and confused. And the Boche ships were weaving in and out, gaining steadily!

Kirby leaned to his sights. He was coming right out of a big cloud now. He was roaring through the last finger-like cloud-wisps, which caressed his throbbing plane. Now he was out, out in the clear blue sky.

And at that moment, a black shadow seemed to jump right down on him. There was an unearthly staccato clatter, and he saw two jagged streaks of flame biting out toward him. The Spad shivered from nose to tail as if a giant had picked it up in his hand and was shaking it like a rattle. And before Kirby had a chance to do anything, the universe turned upside down in a crazy kaleidoscope of blue sky, fog, and blurred earth, and he knew he was hurtling downwards, hurtling downwards in a fatal spin!

As yet he hardly realized what had happened, but his trained muscles were functioning automatically. He was struggling with the controls, struggling with tooth and nail to change that spin to a dive. The wind shrieked up at him, singing through the flying wires, tearing at his goggled face with blinding fury. The Spad lurched and sideslipped, shaking his very insides. He was hurled against his safety-belt, which strained as if it must break and empty him out into space.

Then, all at once, the Spad began to come out of the spin. It was coming out, though its motor was shot to hell, and its propeller hung idle. Frantically, Kirby fought to get it back into control. But even then that awful staccato clatter rose again—this time right behind and above. He glanced up, and then a spasm of horror went through him.

The all-black Fokker! Right on his tail, and blazing away with both guns! It was a newer and fresher looking ship than yesterday's, but otherwise it was identical with the old one. And in a flash Kirby grasped the whole thing. The Flying Dutchman had been lurking right above the clouds, waiting for prey. He had pounced on Kirby as the latter came out, had gotten his motor in one burst! And now, with Kirby's ship virtually helpless, the grim vulture was swooping down on him to finish him off!

Panic seized him. He was trying to get into a glide for his lines, but the bullets were ripping right at him, whistling in his ears, tearing up his ship. With a crash, half his rudder was shot away, and a line of perforations suddenly appeared, as if by magic in the wing surface above him. Splinters tore at his face, bullets seared his cheeks. He turned around, fearfully. The Fokker was not a plane's length away. He saw that goggled, helmeted head again, protruding between the two blazing guns.

Desperately, he kicked the Spad into another spin. It was his only hope. Down he hurtled. But the Fokker dived right after him, and continued to spray him. The ground loomed up closer.

Another stream of tracer. Blood was on Kirby's face; he felt it trickling from a bullet-cut in his cheek. The wind burned him, stung him painfully with its furious force. Suddenly, he saw a brown-gray stretch of fairly level ground looming right up at him, and the new realization crushed out his last atom of hope. He was way behind the German lines! And if he landed alive—which was doubtful—he must be taken prisoner! Tears of bitter frustration streamed from his eyes, misting his goggles. His comrades—the big air offensive—God, why not die and be done with it?

Futilely, knowing that further resistance was worse than useless, he made a last frantic struggle to head his ship for the lines. But as soon as he leveled off and tried to turn, the German, given an opportunity to take even better aim, ripped the rest of the Spad's rudder to shreds with terrible tracer bullets. The rudder controls were limp and ineffective, though Kirby kicked the bar with childish fury. He could not turn! The ground was jumping up at him with terrific speed. He was thoroughly beaten, and he knew it. All he could do now was to try to avoid a fatal crash, and to this end he gave all his attention. He pulled back hard on the joy-stick. Sluggishly, the nose of the riddled Spad began to rise, and Kirby tried to pan-cake the plane. But the staccato clatter of the German's guns still continued to ring out relentlessly.

"Must burn ship," Kirby was muttering foolishly. "Even if she crashes, must burn instruments and——"

There came a terrific blow on his head which sang in his ears. The bright sunlight turned a ghastly green, and the crazy world seemed to close in on him with nauseating swiftness. Then it seemed that he was no longer hurtling through a rush of wind; he was floating peacefully in a gray void of space. That was his last sensation, before everything went blank. . . .

CHAPTER VI
CAUGHT

VOICES DRIFTED TO HIS EARS, strange, guttural voices. Slowly consciousness returned. Something seemed to be cutting his head, and it hurt fiercely. His eyelids fluttered open. He was lying on a stretcher. In the maze above him a face appeared, came slowly into focus. It was a small round face with glinting little eyes and thin, straight lips. Kirby stirred, began to take in other parts of the surroundings. A dugout. A small, boarded and sand-bagged room under the earth, dimly-lit by a kerosene lamp which rested on an old keg. Near the doorway, where a furtive shaft of sunlight managed to seep in from above, stood three gray-clad figures. The odor of kerosene and earth was strangely mingled with the odor of medicine. Must be a dressing station, Kirby surmised.

Then he suddenly noticed that the owner of the small round face and glinting eyes was kneeling over him, taking stitches in his head, sewing away with grim but cool precision. Mechanically, Kirby began to struggle. The round face did not show a nicker of emotion, but the thin lips moved, muttered something in German. At once two of the figures at the doorway moved forward, and the next thing Kirby knew he was being pinioned down by strong, rough arms. He could not move. The doctor went on with his work. Suddenly Kirby found his voice, and let out a yell: "Where the hell am I?"

The doctor, his face still an expressionless mask, muttered again in German. The third figure at the doorway moved closer to the stretcher. He appeared to be an officer—an *uberleutnant*, Kirby decided. He was tall and thin, and carried himself with a haughty, supercilious manner. He stood over Kirby and, tapping his swagger stick against his shining boots, glanced down at the wounded man with aloof disgust, as if Kirby were some repulsive animal whose smell irritated the German's aristocratic nostrils. And somehow that glance served thoroughly to bring home to Kirby the fact that he was in the hands of a bunch of strangers who hated him and held him in contempt.

Finally the *uberleutnant* spoke, and his voice was as frigid as cold steel: "You are a prisoner." His English

was good, but there was enough accent to make the words sound strangely metallic. "A bullet grazed your head. Your Spad landed on even keel."

A pang of despair passed through Kirby. He had been unable to burn his ship! That was his first thought, even before the whole ghastly experience came back to him in a vivid flash.

Slowly, while the doctor worked on in silence, Kirby struggled to piece his confused thoughts together. One of Kellar's bullets had evidently struck him just when he was about to land, and his plane had successfully pan-caked. They had taken him out of it, unconscious, and carried him in here. And they had the Spad! Though badly riddled, that ship was a valuable prize!

Suddenly his ears picked up a distant, yet familiar sound. *B-rrr-oom! B-rrr-oom! Boom!* Shells! And bursting shells, he knew from the volume of the explosions. At once the keen soldier in him rose to the surface, began to figure. He fixed his mind on the terrain over which he had last been flying, and in which he had probably fallen. Then a great hope rose in him. He knew that there was a big drive on, and it was said that the Americans and French expected to advance their line by seven miles to-day in this, the Marne-Soissons sector. And unless Kirby was all off, he could not be more than five or six miles from the Front now!

The sound of those distant shells was like a good omen, which told him that the barrage was creeping nearer. If only he could stay here, make them keep him for the rest of the day, he would have a good chance of being recaptured by French or American troops. He would have a chance to get back to his comrades, get back in time for the big air push! True, he might be killed in the artillery barrage that would come first, but if he wasn't, he'd soon be in the hands of friends again.

But even as he thought this, the doctor, as if he had read Kirby's mind and was mocking him ironically, motioned him to get up! Kirby pretended not to understand, but then the *uberleutnant* commanded idly: "Rise!"

Kirby did some fast thinking. He knew that he was quite capable of getting up. Outside of a bad headache he was in fairly good shape again, and he hardly felt his slight wound. But he must stay here! So he groaned aloud, and his face twisted in pain.

"This is nonsense," he protested. "I'm in no condition to be moved. I fell dizzy. And I demand my rights as an officer to be kept quiet until I'm well."

The *uberleutnant's* aristocratic features hardened.

He asked some question of the doctor, and now the doctor's thin lips curled into a crafty, contemptuous smile, and his eyes glinted even more. His expression seemed to say: "He thinks he can fool me!" He spoke harshly to the *uberleutnant*, whose eyes narrowed to mere slits.

"You lie!" he told Kirby. "You are all right. Just a scratch. Get up!" Then, as if impatient, he barked a sharp order at the two men who held Kirby. With a violent jerk, they yanked the American to his feet. The *uberleutnant* looked on coolly. Kirby tried his best to act weak and dizzy; he stumbled and tottered.

Then suddenly the *uberleutnant* stiffened, snarled something at him, and struck him square on the face with the back of his gloved hand. The blow landed right on Kirby's cut cheek, and stung fiercely. Tears of rage came to the American's eyes, and his hands itched to bash in that haughty face. But they had his arms tightly, and presently they all drew Lugers, which they pressed against his body with a force that made him grunt.

"Stand up straight or you will be shot," the *uberleutnant* told him coldly. And Kirby knew he meant every word of it. From the looks of these men—the mask-faced doctor, the contemptuous *uberleutnant*, and the other two soldiers, who were stocky, surly-looking creatures with a month's stubble on their chins and a mingled odor of wine, cooked food, and unwashed flesh in their clothes—they would have been delighted to kill him. He knew how the ground-soldiers hated enemy airmen, who strafed them and bombed them from overhead. And he knew that no one would question these men if they reported: "Shot, when resisting capture."

So, his hopes crushed completely, he obeyed and stood up straight. Never before had he experienced a feeling of such utter helplessness and humiliation. He couldn't do anything. He was going to be taken to the rear, to a prison camp! And if he could only have delayed it a few hours, a few precious hours!

"March!"

Mechanically, Kirby obeyed, started to walk. They prodded him toward the doorway with their Lugers. The *uberleutnant* turned to speak a few parting words to the doctor, and they both laughed warmly together. The other two soldiers, hearing them, laughed with them. Kirby had a hard time keeping from bursting into tears, crying like a kid. He felt so miserable, so shut-out and friendless. There was a lump of homesickness in his throat, homesickness for his lines,

hit drome. True, the terrain there was exactly the same as here—all part of war-torn France—but there, at least, he would be among friends, men who would respect him as a captain and talk to him warmly, eagerly, laugh with him the way these four hostile Germans had laughed with each other.

"March!" snapped the *uberleutnant* again. They half-pushed Kirby through the doorway, prodded him up the narrow steps of the dugout. They came out in the bright morning sunlight, out on the field where Kirby had landed.

"Hello, swine!"

That pleasant, familiar voice made him start. His captors had stepped away a little, had stiffened to salute their superior officer. The tall, fairhaired, blue-eyed Flying Dutchman, smiling his same friendly smile, stood before them. Kirby saw the black Fokker squatting some distance away. Simultaneously, he saw his own Spad, surrounded by a swarm of gray-clad figures who were examining it curiously. His eyes returned to Kellar. And somehow, at least momentarily, he forgot all his rage against the other man. forgot how the other had spared no efforts to kill him. All he realized was that he had heard a friendly voice at last, and here was a man he knew!

So he responded with warm sincerity: "*Wie gehts, dumkopf!*" A grin spread across his begrimed and cut face. Silently he reached beneath his shirt, where he carried most of his personal belongings when he flew. The three German soldiers made a swift move to stop him, but at a word from Kellar they drew back, and even the *uberleutnant* looked meek and submissive. Kirby discovered that, in addition to swiping his flying togs, they had already searched him for important articles. His Colt revolver was missing, and so was a roll-map, though, thank God, it was an old roll-map which would be of no value to them. The rest of the stuff was intact. Carefully, he extracted all the German's souvenirs, proffered them to Kellar. "Here you are!"

Kellar seemed quite grateful as he took them. "Thank you," he murmured, with a laugh. He looked over his stuff. He opened the gold cigarette case, and whistled when he noted that it was full. Then he held it out to Kirby. "Have a cigarette?"

"Don't mind if I do," Kirby said, somewhat gruffly. Kellar held the lighter for him. The Flying Dutchman then passed the case to the other three soldiers who were staring at the proceedings with bulging eyes. The *uberleutnant* was the only one to refuse a cigarette, and he did to with stiff dignity, his expression proclaiming

in no uncertain terms what he thought of his higher officer's conduct. But Kellar merely shrugged, and took a butt for himself.

Somehow Kirby felt much better now. By a strange irony, the German who had brought him down, who had been as merciless in the air, had cheered him by his warm friendliness, put him at ease.

"Well," Kellar was saying. "I suppose you'd better hand over your own belongings to me, though it is little short of grand larceny on my part."

The imputation was obvious, and it brought just a slight cloud to Kirby's face.

"Don't worry about that," he laughed, though there was a strange lack of conviction in his voice which made him ashamed. "I'll get them back!"

A grave expression came over the German's features.

"But, my friend," he told Kirby, coolly and firmly, "you are laboring under a misapprehension. You *won't* get them back. However, I'll take good care of them." He took the "souvenirs" from Kirby's hands. Then he spoke with that mischievous innocence of his again: "It's most unfortunate that your little decoy was such a failure. You might have done real damage. But now we have simply beaten your valiant squadron again! A short fight it was, too, and so one-sided that I could take the opportunity to land here and meet you. Hmm," he mused, with friendly sympathy, "I must admit that your swine American luck has gone against you. Why, you didn't even manage to burn your ship!"

The cutting little speech seemed to awaken Kirby to the real facts once more, to all that had happened. And now his rage returned, poured forth in a hot torrent of words: "If you had given me the sporting chance I gave you, *I would* have burned it! But you weren't satisfied with jumping on me when I couldn't see you, when I couldn't turn around and give you a fight! You had to follow me down, too, and try to shoot me to hell when I was as helpless as an infant! A hell of a sport you are, a hell of—"

"Cut the chatter!" Kellar commanded, with exaggerated sternness, and the words sounded very personally familiar to Kirby. "Just remember where you are, and the less you say the better for you." Then, he added, in self-defense. "Perhaps I should explain that it is my duty to kill unless I see my antagonist safe in the hands of my comrades on the ground. I merely tried to perform that duty. This is not a friendly game of sport, captain. It is war, and war means killing—"

"I've learned that all right!" Kirby said grimly. "And just wait until I catch you in the sky again!"

The German shook his head sadly. "I see the bullet-scratch on the head has seriously affected my friend's mind," he observed. "Otherwise you would not make such an absurd statement. Certainly you are not thinking that you'll escape? I admit that such a thing is quite possible in your lints but," he shook his head again, "it isn't done *here*, captain."

Again the calm conviction in the German's tone brought a slight feeling of uneasiness to Kirby. Somehow, he felt that escape *would* be impossible. He would be guarded most carefully. Even now his three captors, though they stood silent and gaping, had not put away their long-barreled Lugers.

"Well," Kellar said cheerfully, "I must be getting back home now. My men have done a good morning's work. It was excellent. And," he concluded, "you will soon find out how we treat our Yankee flying friends."

"I've found out already," Kirby said furiously. "You snarl at 'em and then crack 'em in the face when they can't do anything about it, and when they're not even resisting." He nudged his thumb toward the *uberleutnant*, who had stiffened and over whose face had spread a dark flush. "This stuffed Kraut gave me a good demonstration."

To his surprise, Kellar's face turned crimson. The Flying Dutchman barked some furious inquiry at the *uberleutnant*. The *uberleutnant* shifted uncomfortably and stammered in his reply. Then, to Kirby's further astonishment, Kellar back-handed the German's face just as the latter had struck Kirby. The *uberleutnant* stood rigid, but said nothing. Kellar seemed to be giving him a lecture, and Kirby heard him mention the "Three Mosquitoes," and the word "*Kapitan*." At the finish the *uberleutnant* replied meekly, and saluted.

"So," Kellar assured Kirby, quietly. "I trust that won't happen again." His smile returned then. "Well, goodbye, swine!"

"*Auf widersehen, dumkopf!*" Kirby replied, feeling a warm gratitude toward his worst foe. "Well meet again all right!"

"We will!" Kellar agreed enthusiastically. "But it won't be in the sky."

CHAPTER VII CODE OF THE AIR

THEN BEGAN a long gruelling march through the hot July morning, a march to a nearby village where there were headquarters of some kind. Kirby's escort had been increased to six men, and they guarded him most closely. But the attitude of the *uberleutnant* had changed considerably. His eyes stabbed Kirby with venomous hate, but he did not try any more of his rough little tricks. However, Kirby knew that if he made just one slight little move, one false step, the *uberleutnant* would seize the excuse to vent his spleen. The hope that he might escape, which had flickered in him for awhile, had soon dwindled away entirely. What could he do? He might overcome a couple of these fellows, but the others would pump him like a dog! And there were Boche all over the place, swarms of them.

Finally, they reached the town, and there Kirby was given noon rations—a bowl of weird-tasting stew and some dish-waterish coffee. After a brief rest near the mess-kitchen, he was escorted to one of the few remaining buildings which stood in the former French village. He was conducted into a room full of officers, and brought up before a desk at which a gray-haired, bearded Teuton was seated. He was evidently an *Oberst*, or something even more important.

He could not speak English, but through an interpreter, he began to ply Kirby with a thousand questions regarding the strength of his squadron, their plans, their losses, etc. But Kirby, like all aviators, had been well-schooled as to what he should say under such circumstances. He did not defy them or tell them to go to hell. That would have been his own disaster. He merely made it clear that he had nothing to tell. Once, however, he almost lost control of himself. That was when a most startling question was fired at him point-blank: "Are you planning to gain supremacy of the air in a few days?"

He almost gave himself away by the expression on his face. But, quickly, he made his amazement seem like mere surprise.

"Not that I know of," he answered. "I thought we had supremacy already!"

Finally the high officer waved his hand to show that he was through. But the others weren't. Kirby was cross-examined by all sorts of military officials—intelligence men, artillerymen and infantrymen, all of whom were eager to know something which related to their branch of the service. It was a gruelling period that he spent in that chateau, and the air was hot and close. The questioning lasted well into the afternoon. Then, at last, Kirby was taken out by his escort again. But his heart sank as he realized that now, doubtless, he would be sent straight to a prison camp—way up in Germany.

But he got another surprise. For when he came out on the road, a big touring car was waiting there. Besides the chauffeur, there were three men in it, all of them wearing the uniforms of officers of the Imperial flying corps. One of these men jumped out and approached Kirby. He was a funny little fellow, short, squat, with a tremendous walrus mustache which all but hid his features. He drew himself up before Kirby with I great dignity.

"I am *Herr Leutnant Pfelftzenburg!*" he said, in English that sounded like the pop of soda-bottle corks. "It is my extreme honor to invite you, on behalf of *Herr Kapitan Kellar*, to come with me!"

Kirby stared at him wonderingly. Meanwhile the little man was hastily explaining in German to the escort what he was here for. There was some argument, but then the *uberleutnant* submitted. The little walrus-mustached man started to walk toward the car, motioning Kirby to follow.

"But say,"—Kirby found his voice at last—"what's the big idea, *Herr*—" he choked, with a grin. "I'm afraid I won't ever be able to spill out that name! But what's this all about?"

Again the little man stopped to draw himself up with pompous dignity. "It is the custom and the code!" he explained, with pride. "We take the captured aces to the aeroplanedrome with the excuse that we want to question them. Then we give them a nice big dinner!"

Slowly, the light dawned on Kirby. He had heard of this strange custom before—heard rumors of it. It was said that the German flying corps was always at odds with this regular army about the advisability of such a practice. Kirby could not help thrilling at the thought of it. He was going to be feted by Kellar's circus! And he was going there whether he liked it or not. It was an invitation, but it was also a command. Well, so much the better. Any delay in going to the prison camp was welcome!

The *uberleutnant* was giving instructions to the men of the escort. Two of the soldiers followed Kirby to the car. The other two flying officers, who did not speak English, proffered their hands, smilingly. Kirby shook them, then climbed in. He was squeezed between the three flyers, while the two soldiers of the escort, who had evidently been assigned to serve as a perpetual bodyguard, stood on the running board. Slowly the big car moved down the dusty road.

MEANWHILE, back at the American drome, a haggard-looking C.O. was addressing two white-faced men, two men who did not make any effort to conceal their anguish and suspense.

"Buck up," the C.O. told Kirby's comrades. "We might still get some word of him. I'm sure he's still alive—I just have a hunch." He paused. Then he went on grimly: "Well, they beat our game this morning, but we'll show them a few tricks to-night. One Hundred and Forty-six is going to send over a bunch of D.H. Nines to bomb that German circus in its nest, to try to wipe out every and while one can't really expect anything as extreme as that, I guess they'll do considerable damage. I'm sending some escort Spads with them." He looked up at the men, inquiringly. "Want to go?"

"We *will* go!" Shorty Carn insisted, furiously. "And we won't come back until we've raised hell!"

"Quite right," Travis drawled, though his voice shook. "We'll go!"

"Very well. We take off at ten-ten P.M. sharp. The raid comes off at exactly ten-thirty."

It was about eight P.M. when *Kapitan* Kellar, commanding officer of the *Jagdstaffel* which bore his name, rose from his chair, held forth a stein of beer, and proposed a toast which he repeated in English: "To a gallant foe, a worthy opponent, and a damn good flyer! To our distinguished guest. Captain Kirby, of the American air force!"

And two dozen officers stood up. Two dozen steins were held out. And two dozen hearty voices rang with "*Hoch!*" and "*Prosit!*" Then they all drank the health of the "distinguished guest."

The guest himself sat, flushed and slightly embarrassed, his eyes wide. He had, of course, been given the place of honor, the chair next to Kellar, who sat in the center of a long table which had been placed horizontally at an end of the big mess-hall. It was flanked on either sides by two other and longer tables—giving a sort of horseshoe effect. It was a brilliant feast, a cheerful, informal banquet. Kirby

was quite dazed by it all, and several times wondered if it was real.

It seemed so strangely incongruous to be dined and wined by men with whom he had previously exchanged deadly machine-gun bullets in relentless combat, men who had tried to kill him and whom he had tried to kill. Many and varied were the emotions which swept him that evening. True, he was acutely aware of the fact that he was a lone American among twenty-five Germans, yet somehow there was not the feeling of being hated and scorned, the shut-out friendless feeling he had experienced when among soldiers of the regular army.

On the contrary, these men seemed almost to take him in like a brother, a comrade. And they were men of the same breed, despite the difference in their appearance and manners, as the men of his own squadron; young men, most of them, reckless, impetuous youths—the pick of their country's manhood, the finest blood Germany had to give. And perhaps the very element in their character which enabled them to go up day after day on their hazardous adventures, to dare and to die in frail crafts the very flying of which was risky enough, also enabled them to admire their courageous foes and feel a certain kinship with them.

It was the code. It was the spirit of the air force, which, though it embodied the most modern form of fighting, seemed to bring into all the grimness and bloodiness of war a touch of the chivalry of old, some of the gallantry of the old knights. In the air, when these men met as foes, there could be no compassion, no consideration or sympathy. For, as Kellar had told Kirby, that was war, and war meant killing. But when the grim business of the day was done, then weapons could be laid aside and animosity forgotten.

At first, Kirby had felt a little stiff and strained among these cheerful, laughing flyers. There had seemed to be a wall, a cold barrier, which kept him from really giving himself to the celebration, from laughing with them—"letting go." Kellar and the others had tried hard to put him at ease, and had spoken to him constantly—the majority of them spoke English.

But Kirby was slightly tongue-tied and was afraid to say anything for fear of disclosing information he should not give. He could not forget that he was a prisoner—that fact hung over him like a pall which marred his spirits. He had been guarded most rigidly from the moment he had come to the drome to the time when he had entered the mess-hall, and now

his two bodyguards stood at the door, watching him. Upon his arrival this afternoon, he had been taken to Kellar's office, and there he had faced a different Kellar than the one he knew. That was Kellar the commander, a serious, earnest young man who felt the weight of his responsibility. He had questioned Kirby tersely until he was satisfied that the Mosquito had nothing to tell. Then Kirby had been confined to a room in the barracks, where he spent the rest of the day.

And to-night, at 10 o'clock sharp, he was going to be taken away and sent to the prison camp. The pretty Nuremberg china clock on the mantelpiece behind him told him that he had two hours more. And, realising that once he was taken into Germany, escape would be next to hopeless, it was natural that he kept brooding on it now. If he could possibly make a break for freedom he certainly would. It might not be the sporting thing to do, but—well, all was fair in war. Besides, he wasn't really on his honor. Not only were there those men at the door, but he noticed that all the officers wore their Lugers to-night. The reason was obvious. One move would change him from a guest to a trapped foe.

CHAPTER VIII FIGHTING AGAINST TIME

SUCH WERE HIS THOUGHTS when the squadron rose to drink his health. And somehow that toast seemed to break the ice. It was such a warm, friendly gesture that it could not help but strike a responsive chord in him. Promptly he rose from his chair, and lifted his own stein to Kellar.

"To my gallant captor! I'm sore as hell at him for jumping on me, but he beat me and that's that! So here's looking at the Flying Dutchman and his jolly crew!"

And, amid the cheers and applause of the whole squadron, he drained the stein. The beer was excellent, and it did its share in breaking his aloof feeling. He was getting warmed up. He tackled the roast pork with great gusto. He knew that the heavy German cooking would go hard with his digestion, but it tasted good anyway. The conversation became more animated now, as he began to join in eagerly. Everyone who could

speak a word of English leaned forward to chat with the American. They discussed the business of flying, and related their personal experiences. Sometimes the conversation broached dangerously close to important and official subjects, but then it was quickly stifled.

It was natural that, once in awhile, the men would try to wring from Kirby some bit of information they knew he could give them; and he asked the same kind of questions himself. In fact, while he laughed and joked and talked, he was still the keen soldier, still trying to work for his side. Already he had noticed something which struck him as strange. Beneath all the jubilation and gayety of these men there seemed to be a feeling of nervous excitement and tenseness, which they tried hard to suppress. And Kirby had a hunch that something was in the air, that the squadron was planning some "big doings." This hunch grew when, from time to time, some officer would begin such a statement as, "Well, your American friends had better watch out——" and then, remembering himself, the speaker would shut up like a clam.

But even while he was pondering over this, Kirby was gaily discussing the advisability of stunt-flying in combat.

"I think the Immelmann turn is a good maneuver," he was saying. "Even if it was invented by a Hein—a German."

"Yes, it is good," Kellar agreed. "I've caught many a man napping by that trick. But I do think looping the loop is an act of folly."

"I don't know about that," Kirby argued. "I've knocked down a few that way. If you can get over safely you often can get your man as you come down." He grinned. "Gosh, I wish I could demonstrate the stunt for you!"

Kellar smiled sympathetically. "So do I," he said with warm sincerity. Then he laughed. "I guess if we had met for a real, honest-to-goodness scrap you and I could have put on quite a show, eh, captain?"

"You bet!" said Kirby, and added in a lower and more serious voice: "We will, some time."

Thus it went on. There was a copious amount of food. There was an even more copious amount of drink. The food did disagree with Kirby, and he felt quite bloated, but the drink lightened his burdens and enabled him to forget it. The conversation became more and more lively. Time sped. The hands of the clock pointed to nine now.

During all this time, one of the officers had remained in a trancelike silence. It was *Leutnant* Pfelftzenburg, the

little walrus-mustached man who had welcomed Kirby this afternoon, and who was now seated on one side of him. Kirby soon discovered the reason for his silence. He was entirely absorbed in the business of eating and drinking. He ate like a horse and drank like a fish. He mixed beer and wine and schnapps. Bubbles clung to his big mustache, and once in awhile he wiped them off with a gesture of keen relish.

And now, with surprising suddenness, he came out of his silence, and burst into speech, as if a certain amount of liquor released a spring in him, turned on an endless phonograph record. The strangest part of it was that he always waited until his mouth was stuffed before talking. This naturally deadened the volume of his voice, which was pretty well drowned out by the loud shouts of the other men. But the little man sputtered right into Kirby's ear, so the Mosquito heard him plainly. It annoyed Kirby at first, especially since the words were often accompanied by a shower of bread-crumbs. But suddenly his annoyance vanished, and he began to listen intently.

"To-morrow," the little man had just said, in his popping way. "I will shoot myself ten *Entente* ships!"

"Good for you!" Kirby had told him. "But suppose you get shot yourself?"

The little man puffed the thought with his pompous dignity. "*Ach*, me get shot?" Then he laughed triumphantly. "Have no fear of that! The *Entente* won't have a chance to-morrow!"

It was then that Kirby pricked up his ears. He spoke out of the corner of his mouth, without turning, for if he turned he might arouse suspicion. He hoped that Kellar and the others didn't hear, and the chances favored him. The whole crowd was pretty well full of liquor by this time, and saw things through a slightly misty veil. Some of them were already drunk, and were verging close to the maudlin stage. Kellar seemed to drink sparingly, but at the moment he was talking German to an adjutant on his other side. So Kirby seized the opportunity.

"Don't kid yourself," he taunted the little man, with clever purport. "You might think you're going to show us something tomorrow, but—"

"We will show you!" the man promised, and his mustache danced as he gave another and slightly alcoholic laugh. "Ho ho ho!" It rumbled from his throat and came out with the inevitable shower of crumbs. "You think you will gain supremacy of the air on Saturday, ha?"

Kirby started, tensed. Through his mind flashed

the question that had taken him off his guard at the *Oberst's* desk. He thought fast. He must make this man talk! He would have to take a very dangerous chance. He did.

"Well, and what if we are?" he said, tauntingly.

"You think you are clever, you Yankees!" the German retorted "You think you have the great General Ludendorf beaten! But he will stop you! And you will never gain the supremacy of the air!"

Kirby suddenly noticed that Kellar was looking straight at him and the little German, lowing with narrowed eyes. Quickly he turned toward the Flying Dutchman and started to chat about some inconsequential nothing again. But his ears burned with the little German's words; his heart pounded. His hunch was right! Something big was in the air! What? He could hardly conceal his intense impatience to learn more. He could hardly wait.

Then, abruptly, the little German was sputtering in his ear again!

"Ho, ho, to-morrow——"

Kellar's voice broke in. He gave an order in German to the little man. To Kirby, it sounded as if the Flying Dutchman were telling him to do some errand. And his hope sank when *Herr* Pfelftzenburg began to rise, awkwardly, from his chair.

But as he got up, the *Leutnant* said something in German and Kellar's face turned crimson. The Flying Dutchman shifted, started to speak. The little German was laughing.

"Ho ho ho!" he rumbled again, and went on in English. "He doesn't believe me! He doesn't believe that tomorrow we will wipe the Americans out of the air! We will have to many aeroplanes that——"

It happened in a flash. Eyes blazing, Kellar suddenly leaped from his chair. He almost jumped on the little German, then slapped him smartly as if to awaken him from a stupor. *Herr* Pfelftzenburg stiffened, suddenly sobered by fright. The other officers sat back, staring. Kellar was barking something at the little man. The Flying Dutchman's nerves seemed to have become strained all at once. Abruptly, he seemed to realise that he had betrayed that fact. The rage left his face, and cleverly he collected himself.

"Excuse my irritable temper," he said to Kirby. "Nothing makes me so enraged as a drunken fool. I do not like to have my men making foolish boasts, captain, or telling drunken lies." He sat down, took a gulp of beer, and then grinned. "Well, let's forget the unpleasant incident." But *Herr* Pfelftzenburg meekly

left the room with a sadly drooling mustache, and he did not come back!

Kirby registered absolute ignorance. He laughed. "Funny little fellow," he commented.

But in reality he could hardly sit still. The desire to escape now, to get back to his lines before to-morrow, was so strong that he would take the first chance he had, reckless though it might be! For he had momentous information, which must be gotten through! The whole upshot of it was perfectly clear: it was child's play to put two and two together. The Germans, through their secret agents, had learned that the French and Americans were concentrating planes and men for a concerted air offensive on Saturday. To counteract the move, they themselves had concentrated planes with which they would fill the sky to-morrow, Friday.

It was easy to see that, by so doing, they would so cripple the Allied air forces, and gain such a strong position, that it would be impossible to shake them Saturday. Not only would they destroy scores of planes and other aircraft in the sky, but they would strafe airdromes and hangars and transports, prevent Allied reconnaissance work and clear the way for their own reconnaissance ships. In short, it was a stupendous and clever plan to crush absolutely the Allies in the air, as far as this sector was concerned. And the main reason for this effort, Kirby gathered from the little German's boasts that Ludendorf would stop the Allies, was to help pave the way for counter-thrusts on the ground.

Simple enough stuff, yet how precious! He had to get away! He glanced at the clock. Twenty minutes past nine. His eyes fell on the two soldiers who shifted impatiently at the door, rifles on their shoulders. Oh, for one little loophole, one tiny chance!

But he must control himself, must act as if he had nothing on his mind. He used all his will-power to hide his emotions. He chatted gaily. He laughed. He drank, though he drank very little now. His head already felt a trifle light, and he must stay sober, for drink dulled his thinking.

The "unpleasant incident," as Kellar called it, seemed to be entirely forgotten now. The Flying Dutchman was his old cool self, beaming pleasantly. The rest of the men were even merrier and louder. Yet that tense undercurrent seemed to be stronger now, seemed to fill the room. Somehow, the more drunken and boisterous they got, the more Kirby sensed that excitement which hung over them. The Nuremberg clock continued to click, and its hands moved so damned fast! Fifteen minutes to ten!

Some of the men were so drunk now that all restraint was cast aside. They got sloppily sentimental and they got hysterically gay. Several of them, at one of the tables, stood up on their chairs and, putting their arms about one another's shoulders, burst into song. Their voices rose in discordant and throaty melody.

Kirby pretended to be listening to them with amused interest.

"What are they singing about?" he asked Kellar.

Kellar made a grimace. "That's a rather delicate question, captain, but I'll try to answer it. The song concerns a notorious widow who was rather imprudent. It describes, particularly, one of her questionable affairs with a certain soldier whose ancestry was dubious."

Kirby laughed. "Something like *Mademoiselle from Armentieres*, eh?"

"I presume it is. I understand that is a very funny song. Won't you amuse us with a stanza or two? After all, there are no ladies present."

Kirby started to give an embarrassed negative. Then he thought better of it, and decided to assent. It would be a good way to convince them that he was in a carefree, blissful mood, brought on by the liquor. And the more "let-go" he showed, the less suspicious they would be. He rose, deliberately swaying a bit. Kellar tinkled on his glass for silence. The self-appointed "glee club" ceased its song, sat down to listen with interest. And Kirby told them, in a fairly good tenor voice, about the *mademoiselle* who had not had an affair for forty years, and who finally was beloved by a very masculine member of the marine corps. He soon had them holding their sides, shaking the very rafters with their laughter. He had just reached the point where *mademoiselle* was blessed with the birth of a bouncing boy, when he stopped short.

One of the soldiers at the door had just come up to Kellar. He saluted and spoke crisply, nudging his thumb toward Kirby. Kirby felt his hopes sink. It was ten o'clock!

But then, to his amazed relief, Kellar waved the soldier aside. The soldier went back to the door. Kellar turned to Kirby.

"Proceed, if you please," he urged.

"I trust it will make no difference if you leave us a few minutes later. We hate to send our guests away." He laughed. "And my men are eager to hear the rest of that song."

Kirby quickly concealed the relief which he had felt. He remembered again that the air corps was always reputed to be like this. A little lax about obeying

their explosions came the rasping coughs of the anti-aircrafts and the shrill clatter of machine guns. Kirby still plunged through the dark room. Figures brushed past him, bumped into him without seeming to notice him. The room seemed almost empty. The door—where was it? There it was! He started to make for it, started to run—

“Stand still, swine! I’ve got you covered!”

It was Kellar’s smooth voice which gave that command. Kirby wheeled. He saw Kellar’s figure just a few feet away, saw the Luger pointing straight at him. The voice rose again.

“Kindly lie down, my friend. You and I will stay here.”

A wave of crazy recklessness swept Kirby.

“Kindly go to hell!” he burst out defiantly, and leaped for the figure. There was a sharp crack, and a spurt of flame bit through the darkness at him. Something whined past his left cheek. Kellar had dodged his leap, jumped to the side, and now he was bringing his revolver directly to bear on Kirby’s head. In his cold, relentless way, he was taking aim, was starting to pull the trigger and—

B-rrrr-oom! Crash! The bomb seemed to explode right outside the window. The building rocked and shook on its foundations, and there was a sound of shattering glass and splintering wood. Kirby was almost knocked flat by the terrific concussion. He felt himself losing his balance, managed to steady himself just in time, just before Kellar got his footing. With a savage oath, Kirby leaped at the figure again, and this time he caught the Flying Dutchman, was grappling with him. Instinctively his hand went for the wrist which held the Luger. He got it, and clung to it, twisting with all his might.

The revolver went off again, but it was way amiss. A grunt of pain broke from Kellar, and then Kirby heard the Luger drop to the floor. The German wrested his arm free and flung himself upon Kirby with surprising force. Silently, the two men fought in the darkness while the hellish upheaval continued outside. Kirby soon realised that the Flying Dutchman was more than his match in this close wrestling; the German wrestled like a professional, tying up Kirby’s arms, tripping him.

Kirby was losing his balance again. He felt the German’s hot panting breath on his face. He struggled with all his strength, striving to pull his arms free so that he could use his fists, for he felt that he could outslug the other man. But now suddenly he heard loud shouts from the doorway, and heavy footsteps. Men

were coming back. They could not fire yet because they might hit Kellar, but in a second they’d be here, upon the two men.

Desperately, Kirby tugged and jerked in a last frantic effort to free his arms. The footsteps seemed to pause, as if the men were trying to find out just where the trouble was. Kellar gasped out some German, and at once they were rushing up. But in that same second Kirby had freed his left arm and, putting every atom of his strength into the blow, he brought a left uppercut flush to Kellar’s jaw. He felt the man sag, felt him sliding to the floor. Simultaneously, several figures leaped right upon him, overwhelming him with their strength and number.

Then came the most ear-splitting explosion of all. Kirby and all the other men were flung to the floor, scattered like helpless things all over the room. At first Kirby thought the whole building had collapsed. Showers of wood and other debris rained from the ceiling. But the mess-hall still stood, and presently Kirby heard the men getting clumsily to their feet. Hastily he started to get up himself, only to stumble over an object on the floor. The Luger! He groped for it, got it in his hands, as sprang to run toward the doorway. A man loomed before him, barked out a challenge. Kirby fired blindly. There was a low guttural cry of pain, then the sound of a body falling heavily. He dashed out the door.

A strange and spectacular sight met his eyes. It looked almost like a lavish Fourth of July celebration. The field was a blaze of brilliant light, a mighty carnival. The raiders had dropped phosphorus flares to illuminate their objective. Bombs were bursting in terrific succession, sending up great geysers of flame. Three hangars were blazing. And from all parts of the field, great searchlights were stabbing the dark air with their narrow white beams, which waved around like a bunch of arms gesticulating excitedly, like feelers groping for the danger that had attacked from above.

Kirby heard the planes clearly, and his trained ears picked up the full-throated bellow of the Liberty motors, the D.H. Nines, as well as the throbbing purr of the high-powered single-seaters. He knew they were swooping low to do their work, but he caught only occasional glimpses of them when the searchlights revealed a fleeting birdlike monster in their glare from time to time. Little did he know that his own squadron and his two comrades were among the pilots who swooped down bent on vengeance. And little did Carn and Travis know that their leader was below, as the two

Mosquitoes, in their little Spads, came shrieking down to pour tracer bullets into the searchlights and gun crews.

An anti-aircraft battery was barking to Kirby's left, its crew protected by sandbags. Suddenly, shouts rose behind Kirby, from the doorway of the mess again. Revolvers cracked. A fusillade of bullets whined unhealthily close. They had seen him! He broke into a run, trying to get off the field. But the men followed, and again there were shots behind him. They were risking getting hit by the bombs in their determination to catch him. Kirby redoubled his efforts. But then there rose a shout in front of him, and he saw five more figures rushing toward him. He was caught, caught between two advancing groups of men. He looked about furtively, like a cornered animal. There was only one possible course of flight now, and though it looked like sure death, he had to risk it.

Pausing only a second, he dashed right out toward the line of hangars which skirted the field, the place where the planes were concentrating to lay their "eggs," where he knew the men would not dare to follow. His object was to go between the buildings and thus get off the field, lose himself in the trees he knew were back there. His pursuers did keep after him awhile, however, until he was coming close to those buildings, to that zone of danger, where there were no signs of anyone save the well-protected anti-aircraft and searchlight batteries. Then the men fell back, and Kirby ran on. But he ran into the worst inferno he had ever experienced.

A bomb shook the earth to his right, then another burst on his left. He flung himself face down as a third "egg" deafened him with its rending explosion. A shower of dirt fell about him, and the stench of acrid smoke was in his nostrils. He got up and ran again, always flinging himself on the ground when he heard one of those steel-bodied monsters shrieking down through space. Progress was slow, painful. He didn't see how he would make it, how he would ever get past those buildings. And the thought of being killed by American bombs was cruelly ironic.

Now he was coming to a hangar. He stumbled, falling and getting up, and then slid unwittingly into one of the gigantic craters the bombs had made in the field. As he crawled out, a grim smile crossed his lips. He knew what those craters would mean. Kellar's circus could not take off until they were filled and the field was smoothed out again. He wondered, momentarily, what time this big offensive was going to start. Mid-morning, he guessed.

Then, once more, he gave himself to his perilous task. He was right near that hangar now, and he was setting himself to get around and past it. As he looked at the building, he recalled the wild idea that had momentarily occurred to him back in the mess-hall. He had thought of trying to take off in a Fokker the way Kellar had taken off in a Nieuport. But now he had to laugh at the ludicrous impossibility of such a measure. To begin with, the Germans themselves would not dare to take off with such an unholy strafe on, and the planes would doubtless be caught in the holes which filled the field. And even if Kirby could masquerade as a Boche pilot and persuade the men of the ground crew to come and get a ship out for him, by the time he could get that ship warmed, they would surely find him.

He looked at the hangar before him again. Then his hopes began to dwindle. Compared to the havoc that was being wrought in the immediate vicinity of that building, the disturbance out here was nothing! Bombs were bursting all over the place there; and even as Kirby looked, the hangar next to this one broke into livid flames! In the red glow of the fire he caught a glimpse of three D.H. Nines sweeping above like great winged monsters.

It was a veritable No-Man's-Land that he must go through if he wanted to get out—for any other path of escape would be covered by his pursuers. How in hell could he make it? He lay down, pausing, thinking, hoping that the rain of bombs around the hangars would subside, momentarily, at least. God, how long this raid was going on! There must have been thirty bombers up there, swooping down again and again to release their deadly cargoes. Kirby was glad they were making such a finished job of it, but he wished they'd let up and give him a chance to get through! There was no way of telling them to, however, and wishing wasn't going to help. He must get a move on! Any moment some daring Boche might come out and look for him. He must get past that hangar.

He took one more swift glance at that deadly barrage. And then he decided that the best thing to do was to throw all caution to the winds and just run like hell, run right through there in the hope that those bombs would miss him. He started to get up. He paused again, just another second. Then he leaped forward and was running as fast as his legs could carry him.

On he rushed, straight to and past the hangar. Planes roared over his head, showering down nose-

fuses. With a maddening din, the crazy earth erupted on every side of him, coughing up gigantic bursts of deadly, livid spew. Shrapnel screamed at him as it whizzed through the darkness. Clots of earth and debris pelted him unmercifully. The ground rocked and heaved beneath his feet, sent him reeling blindly. But he exerted all the strength in his two legs to keep his balance, and continued to run.

He was going past the side of the building now. Hurry, hurry! A shattering crash swept him off his feet and sprawled him on his face, a full five yards away. His body was bruised, his face cut, and the bullet-scratch in his head, which he had all but forgotten, suddenly throbbed painfully. He struggled to rise, cursing, groaning, and then staring incredulously at what, a moment before, had been a wall of the hangar beside him. Now it was just a gaping hole, and through it Kirby saw two Fokkers outlined in the bright red flames which eddied about them. A close call, that!

How he got out of it all he never knew, but suddenly he was behind that building, was rushing in through the trees. The world began to become normal once more; the bombs burst further and further in back of him. But he did not stop. He ran right on like a man possessed, ran for a full quarter of a mile, until, with the hellish racket well behind, he came to a clearing in the trees. Then he drew his first breath.

But it was a short breath. In a moment a thousand fears and doubts were assailing him. What to do? Where to flee? Already he had that hunted feeling of the escaped prisoner, the feeling that he was being pursued, that eyes were ferreting him out. He glanced around, fearfully. What was moving over there among the trees? Only a shadow! Mustn't be a damn fool and jump at shadows! He glanced up at the sky, began to study the stars.

For the first time in his career as a flyer he thanked the ground-school instructors for making him learn what he had considered a useless and painfully dull subject. He thanked them because, by studying the stars above, he was able to judge the general direction which would take him westward; and westward—though God only knew how many miles away—lay the Allied lines, the sixty-mile Front. He did not delude himself into believing that he could just walk to those lines and get through. But, until he could formulate some scheme, he would move westward.

Before setting forth, he took stock of his possessions. A dirty and shabby American uniform minus its Sam Browne belt; a uniform which, if seen, would mean his

immediate recapture. A couple of handkerchiefs. No wrist-watch, no matches, cigarettes, pencils or paper; those had all gone to Kellar among the "souvenirs." But there was the Luger, with three cartridges in it. He had carefully saved them, rather than fire them uselessly at his many pursuers. He pocketed the big revolver. Then he began to walk.

Through the long night he wandered, jumping at every sound, keeping away from all lights and human noises. Knowing only that he was headed west, he kept tramping doggedly. He went through marshes, through meadows, through fields and forests, though he tried to keep in clear enough spaces to see the stars. He climbed hills and stumbled down ravines. He waded through brooks and tore through heavy, twisted brush. His shoes were covered with slimy mud, his clothes were damp and stuck to him. God, how tired! Yet he must go on. He did. Clouds began to gather overhead, and the stars became dimmer. Rain? In one way, he prayed for it, because if it were bad enough the Germans could not carry out their plan to-morrow. But in another way, the threat of a shower terrified him because, without the stars, he would be lost for the rest of the night.

It did not rain, however. A strong breeze blew the clouds away. It was clear again. Kirby tramped on. His legs had become automatons, working without feeling. He was so tired that he ceased to feel any kind of exhaustion. His mind was so dulled that he could not think, could not make up plans to get through. Still he went on, relentlessly, stubbornly. His throat became parched and dry, and he forgot all fears of disease germs and drank out of any stream he passed, even when the water was fifty per cent mud.

CHAPTER X THROUGH ENEMY BARRIERS

THE NIGHT DRAGGED ENDLESSLY ON. Hours passed, teeming like ages. But finally, just before daybreak, Kirby unwittingly came right upon a German military encampment.

He had been in a heavy clump of brush and trees, and was trying to make for the clearing again, to study the stars which must soon be gone. The clearing was

ahead, and he moved toward it. But as he tore his way through some unusually heavy bushes he stopped short, listening.

Shouts reached his ears. The scraping of hob-nailed boots against the ground, the click of rifles, the clattering of heavy trucks. Furtively, he crawled through the thicket until he could see.

He was right at the edge of a road, a long road. Across this road, in a big field, he saw the camp in the waning moonlight. Fires were burning; their smoke curled upwards. Figures were running around crazily, waving and shouting. A bugle resounded liquidly through the brisk night air. Then Kirby saw that they were dismantling tents, breaking up camp. And further down the road he saw the waiting trucks. Men were clammering into them, and the men wore, not soft hats, but coal-scuttle helmets. They were moving up! Reserves, being sent to the Front to help resist the furious Franco-American advance.

He glanced down the opposite direction of the road. And what he saw set his mind working again.

There was a big car down there, waiting with its motor purring smoothly. As Kirby looked, the man at the wheel was just climbing out, and seemed to be greeting another soldier who stood on the road. The car was a staff car. It was one of those high-powered Deussenbergs used by high officers. Kirby's eyes narrowed. He could run that car; he could run any car, in fact!

Slowly and cautiously he moved down along the edge of the road, keeping well behind the bushes. Sometimes a twig snapped beneath him, and he lay deathly still. But, finally, he came to a point directly opposite the big car.

The chauffeur and the other figure were right in front of him, smoking cigarettes, chatting affably. At once Kirby realized that they were just a couple of casual acquaintances, both of them privates or non-commissioned officers. The chauffeur wore a soft cap—not having put on a coal-scuttle helmet yet. The other man had a helmet and carried a rifle. Kirby's eyes took in the chauffeur again. A big man, broad-shouldered, and just about Kirby's size. So far so good. He listened to the German conversation. He could not understand it, of course, but nevertheless the tone of their voices as well as a few familiar words which came from time to time told Kirby a great deal.

The chauffeur was asking a lot of questions, apparently about "*der Oberst*." It did not take Kirby long to decide that he was a new man, just assigned

to this job. Luck was in Kirby's favor! The chauffeur went on talking. Suddenly he mentioned the word: "Tarniers."

Kirby almost jumped at that name. All at once he knew just where he was, knew this road! It was the famous Road Seventeen, where there was always so much movement—the Boche used the road constantly for conveying their men to the Front. Tarniers was the sector where some of the heaviest fighting was going on, and this road led to it! An incredible stroke of fortune! Kirby knew this territory well; he had studied every foot of it from the air. And, he suddenly recalled, the C.O. had mentioned to him and his comrades that, as soon as the Three Mosquitoes had a chance, they would be assigned to reconnoiter and strafe this very road.

The soldier who had been speaking to the chauffeur was walking away. The chauffeur paced along beside his car, smoking his cigarette. He was walking up and down right in front of Kirby!

Slowly, Kirby drew out his stolen Luger. He looked out shrewdly. There were men nearby, plenty of them, but it was dark and the car would hide their view if Kirby worked fast. He must make no noise. The chauffeur was coming again. Kirby let him pass, saw him turn to walk back. He was on his way now, getting closer. Kirby's muscles tensed, as he crouched in the bushes. Nearer and nearer the German came, serenely oblivious. Here he was. Now!

Like a jack-in-the-box Kirby sprang up out of the bushes. The German wheeled, and a cry seemed to be on his lips. But before he had time to utter it, Kirby brought down the heavy butt of the Luger right on top of the man's soft hat. The German collapsed silently, and Kirby, using all his strength, pulled him into the seclusion of the bushes. The man was out, out for a long time! Kirby worked quickly, but with painstaking thoroughness. It was pitch dark, but his eyes had become accustomed to the darkness and he could see well enough. He tore off the German's uniform, started to put it on over his own. He did not want to take off his American outfit because he would have to show it later on, when he tried to get through.

The German's clothes were a little too big for him, but over his own uniform they fitted fairly. He took off his shoes and got into the German's boots. They were tight, and hurt, but he got into them just the same. The German's cap was a bit small, too, but by stretching at its band with all his might, Kirby made it fit. He buttoned himself up, and then looked over himself as

best he could in the darkness. Pretty neat. He ought to pass. He felt in his pockets; cigarettes, matches, and some papers—identification papers, doubtless.

Then he knelt down to look over the German. The man was a still dead to the world. But Kirby mustn't take any chances. By cold logic, he should kill the man, to be perfectly safe—but somehow he couldn't. It was too coldblooded and premeditated a murder. So, instead, he took off the man's shirt, tore it in two, and used it to bind his victim's hands and feet. He got out his two handkerchiefs, stuffed one into the German's mouth, and tied the other around it.

When he was quite sure that he had his man securely bound and gagged, Kirby quietly dragged him into a thick bush, a few hundred feet off the road and among a dense mass of wild, twisted growth. There he left the chauffeur. They would find him after awhile, no doubt, but by that time, Kirby figured, it would be too late.

Brushing himself off, and gratefully lighting up one of the German's cigarettes, Kirby walked through the bushes, out on to the road. Outwardly, he was calm and cool. But, inwardly, he was so tense and apprehensive that he no longer felt tired. By putting on the German's uniform he had technically become a spy. And he knew what happened to spies, when they were caught. But he wasn't caught yet!

Leisurely, he sauntered up to the big Duesenberg car, and was just about to climb in when a cold, guttural voice made him wheel fearfully.

Three figures stood in the darkness. Kirby saw them clearly enough to determine what they were. The one in the center, a tall, thick-set man who wore a spiked helmet, was the *Oberst*, the staff officer for whom the chauffeur had been waiting. The other two were his adjutant and aide respectively. It was the *Oberst* who had spoken.

Kirby had to think fast. He was in a tight corner. A break was impossible; there were men all around. But it was dark. They could not see his face clearly in the darkness, and he must try not to let them see it, must do everything to avoid arousing suspicion.

Carelessly, as if by accident, he jerked his cap down as far as it would go, at the same time tossing away his half-finished cigarette. He walked up to the officers, came to attention, and saluted the way he had seen Germans salute. After a second's thought he remembered that he was supposed to be a new man, just reporting for duty, so he took out the identification papers and handed them to the *Oberst*.

The aide instantly pulled out a flashlight, which he flashed on the papers, and then spoke to the *Oberst*. But in the next second he was bringing the bright light directly to bear on Kirby's face!

At once Kirby realized that if he ducked or made any other move to avoid that beam he would surely arouse their suspicions. He must take the chance, hazardous though it was. So he let the light fall across his face, his lips setting in a tight little line. The ordeal was short. The aide just flashed the beam on him for a brief instant, far too short a time for them to take a good look at Kirby, and then, apparently satisfied, the German turned the light off.

The *Oberst* suddenly barked something at Kirby. Kirby did not understand a word of it, and was afraid to talk. But he took another chance, and saluted once more.

"*Ja, mein herr—*" he began, and then appeared to be seized by a fit of coughing. "*Ich—*" he choked and coughed loudly.

The *Oberst* seemed to stare at him. He barked out another stream of German. Kirby stammered, choked, but was careful not to try really to speak.

The *Oberst* appeared to be extremely irritated. He began to lecture Kirby, and Kirby guessed that he was telling him to be more alert and attentive, to listen to his superiors. Kirby nodded meekly, then stiffened back to attention. The *Oberst* talked to his aides, and Kirby sensed that he was waving to them about the stupid fool they had sent him for a chauffeur.

But, luckily, the *Oberst* was too impatient to investigate matters any further. He burst into another angry speech. The aide opened the door of the car, and the *Oberst* climbed into the rear seat, followed by the adjutant.

The aide spoke to Kirby, and Kirby nodded dumbly. The American opened the front door of the big touring car and got into the driver's seat. The aide climbed in beside him. Kirby kept his face straight ahead, hoping that the approaching dawn would not give him away. He felt the aide's body pressing against his left side.

The *Oberst* barked again. This time he said something that sounded like: "*Nach Hugel Sieben!*"

The words seemed vaguely familiar to Kirby, and he pondered on them for a few seconds. *Hugel*? He thought hard. Suddenly he remembered. *Hugel* meant "Hill." *Sieben* meant seven. Hill Seven. A light of understanding came over his face. He knew Hill Seven. A hill which commanded a fine but safe view of the

Tarniers valley. This road went over it. The staff officer was evidently going to that observation post to observe and help direct the battle.

The *Oberst's* rasping voice rose again: "*Schnell! Schnell!*" and by the unconcealed impatience of his tone Kirby knew that the high officer was telling him to hurry. He nodded brusquely, then shifted the gear into first and stepped on the gas. The huge, twelve-cylinaered car responded beautifully to his control. It leaped forward. They were off!

The road ahead was jammed with the bobbing silhouettes of trucks and caissons and other traffic of war. They were all moving now, rumbling slowly toward the Front. There were no lights, for lights might give them away to any aviators whose eagle-eyes might be watching from above. Kirby honked his horn, and the vehicles ahead clumsily swerved to the side, making room for the staff car.

Kirby put on more gas, and the Duesenberg picked up speed. They started to pass the long, slow-moving column. The trucks were packed with men, who were shouting and laughing loudly. Some were even singing, but as the staff car passed each truck its occupants would freeze into hushed silence, until it was safely by. Such was the Imperial army.

Kirby put on more speed, experimentally. The *Oberst* did not object; in fact, he seemed to be commending Kirby for the move. Faster and faster the big car went, and now it was streaking by that seemingly endless column. The faster he could go, thought Kirby, the better. If he could beat the dawn to Hill Seven, which was a distance of some ten miles, he'd have things easier. Just what he was going to do he could not surmise. He had not expected to take the *Oberst* and the two aides with him. That made things pretty tight. But, at any rate, he was going to get near the Front, get there fast—which was necessary if he was to get his information in before the morning matured.

Perhaps, as they came closer to the lines, he would find a way to make a break. Or, if the road was lonely after awhile, perhaps he could ditch these men by surprise, use the three cartridges in the Luger swiftly and efficiently—though this idea seemed wildly ridiculous. His main worry now was that the day would break, and they would get a good look at his face—the aide at his side especially. And when they saw that his face didn't correspond with the description that must be on the identification papers—well, his goose would be cooked. Then, too,

there was the constant fear that they would find the real chauffeur back there, and pass the word down the road. But he tried not to think of these things, and gave the engine more gas.

They were still shooting past the long line of trucks. The aide at Kirby's side suddenly spoke, seemed to make some remark about the "*wetter.*" Kirby nodded silently. The aide spoke again, and Kirby was certain that his ignorance of German must betray him. But, cleverly, he merely grunted, as if he were one of those drivers who cannot talk while driving. The German seemed to accept this fact, for he fell into a silence and spoke no more.

Finally, they passed the vanguard of those trucks and caissons, and there was a good open stretch ahead of them. Kirby let the car out fully, and they fairly chewed up that road. But it was getting lighter! The sun was rising in the east behind them, and its hot July rays were already beginning to beat down on them. The first furtive gleams of daybreak had appeared, and were getting steadily brighter. Kirby added pressure to the accelerator. Fifty miles an hour now, along an open stretch of road. But not a lonely stretch. On both sides of them, just off the road, were scores of Boche.

In fact, the nearer they drew to the Front, the more men and signs of military movement appeared. They passed knots of resting infantry, engineers engaged in construction work, labor details, and long-range artillery batteries getting into positions. They whizzed by a space in some trees where Kirby's keen eyes picked out a camouflaged ammunition dump, from which trucks were being loaded. The surrounding country was getting more and more warlike, and the unceasing movement and activity which characterised the great struggle was showing itself more and more.

CHAPTER XI HILL NUMBER SEVEN



ON RUSHED THE STAFF CAR, stopping for nothing. Once more traffic appeared on the road ahead: field artillery, horse-drawn caissons moving up. Kirby honked his horn again, and the staff car shot past in a cloud of dust, startling some

of the horses, despite the fact that the animals were accustomed to all the noise and confusion of battle.

Lighter and lighter it grew. The early morning haze was in the air, and the sun was slowly piercing through it, turning it from gray to gold. Kirby's heart was pounding frightfully. Out of the corner of his eye, without turning, he saw the aide at his side. The man had a peculiarly sharp nose. Kirby did not like that nose.

The morning was coming on fast, as mornings do in France. It seemed inexorable, the way that sunlight kept brightening. It was something that couldn't be stopped. But Kirby still had hopes of reaching Hill Seven before they got suspicious. It could only be a few miles more now.

A river suddenly appeared at the left side of the road, followed it for a while, and then curved away again. The Aisne river. As they went on, it was sometimes beside them, and other times out of sight. Still getting lighter! Kirby taxed the car's powerful engine to the utmost, and their speed became breathless. Only such a heavy and sturdy car could run smoothly at this terrific clip. The *Oberst* still made no objections. In fact, Kirby thought hopefully, it seemed that the staff officer was now quite satisfied with his chauffeur. The man might be a fool but he was a superb driver! But there was that damned aide with his sharp nose.

Kirby's hands tightened on the big steering wheel. The landscape was rushing past like a blurred-green streak on either side. Couldn't be more than a couple of miles now, that hill!

Down the road, some distance ahead, a man was standing and waving same kind of a flag. He was signaling the car, and it looked as if he were signaling it to stop! A spasm of giddy fear seized Kirby. Good God, had they found the real chauffeur and relayed the word up here?

Desperate, he pretended not to see the signals. Perhaps it was nothing anyway, and if he could just shoot past, go right ahead—

"*Halte!*"

The *Oberst's* rasping voice froze his blood. The aide at his side was pointing at the signaling figure on the road, was telling Kirby something. They were ordering him to stop there! A wild, reckless impulse to try for a desperate break now, came over him, but only momentarily. There were too many Germans all over the place, Germans who could stop him in no time. So, his heart in his mouth, he released the pressure on

the gas as the car rapidly approached the spot where the man stood. The man jumped to the right. With a backward lurch and a grinding of breaks, the car came to a stop. Kirby glanced to the right fearfully. There was a pathway there, which curved up to a large and ancient French chateau.

The man with the flag came up beside the car. He was an officer. He saluted the *Oberst* and talked rapidly and tersely. Kirby, fearful, wondering what it was all about, sat perfectly still in his seat. He dared not move. Was he being betrayed?

The *Oberst* was answering the other officer now in his usual, rasping way. The man with the flag wheeled abruptly, in a military fashion, and walked up the path to the chateau. Kirby waited. Minutes passed. They seemed like interminable hours, for during them it kept getting lighter. The haze was gone entirely. It was clear daylight.

The *Oberst* was talking to his adjutant. The aide at Kirby's side suddenly turned and began talking to him again. Kirby, not knowing what else to do, laughed—a strained, nervous laugh. Though he did not look around to the left, he felt the sharp-nosed man staring at him, studying him in the constantly increasing glare of the sun. The aide started to talk again, and now his tone was inquiring.

But this time Kirby was saved by the appearance of three figures, who came out of the chateau and walked down the pathway. One of them was a puffed-out looking man with a florid face and lots of trappings on his uniform. Looked like a brigadier general, Kirby surmised. The two men with him were his orderlies or aides. They all came to the car. The sharp-nosed man at Kirby's side sprang out, walked around the car to get to the general, and saluted stiffly. The *Oberst* and his adjutant kept their seats but saluted also. Kirby, not knowing whether he was doing the right thing or not, did likewise. The general, assisted by the *Oberst's* aide, climbed into the rear seat of the car, sat down next to the *Oberst*. The aide got back in beside Kirby, and the other two orderlies, since the rear of the car was more than filled because of the extreme corpulence of the general, jumped on either running board. The *Oberst* barked at Kirby again, evidently telling him to start, and again mentioning "*Hugel Sieben.*"

Kirby started the car once more. At last he realized, with relief, what it was all about. The brigadier general was taking a lift to Hill Seven in this car—doubtless, because his own had been delayed or something. But while there was relief at this realization, there was also

an increased sense of helplessness and frustration. With a crowd of Boche like this, with two of them on the running board, Kirby's chances of getting out were next to nothing.

He had sense enough not to try any such reckless speed again, with those two men standing out mere, where they might easily be thrown off. Besides, he knew that fat brigadier generals are not amenable to speed. So he kept the car down to thirty miles an hour, though it was agony to do so. God, would he ever get to Hill Seven?

On they went, passing traffic as before. But the presence of vehicles on the road was getting less and less. There were plenty of men, crowds of them all over the place, but few trucks now. They were nearing the Front! And now the first signs of real war began to make themselves felt. Over the purr of the car's engine, Kirby could distinguish a dull, reverberating rumble in the distance. And it made him grateful, that ominous sound.

The sun's glare had become dazzling now: it was full, bright morning. Again Kirby had the uneasy sense that the sharp-nosed aide at his side was studying his face, looking at him shrewdly. The terrific strain of it all was getting unbearable! But he kept his eyes glued to the road ahead. Another open stretch now, over a fairly level expanse of terrain. And then Kirby's hopes rose again by leaps and bounds. In sight now, was a big rise. Hill Seven!

If he could get there before they spotted him, and discharge his passengers, perhaps he would find some way—some way to make a break. This road led straight to a forest, he knew. The Villers-Tarniers Woods. The Franco-Americans were advancing through that forest to-day. If Kirby could get there, hide there—

Suddenly, the General was leaning forward, talking to him! He seemed to be telling Kirby how to drive or how to climb the hill or something, but Kirby could not understand. He nodded stupidly, without turning. He heard the general speak to the *Oberst* then, in an angry, questioning tone. The *Oberst* replied in a low voice, and Kirby knew they were talking about *him*!

Damn that aide beside him! The man was stabbing him with his eyes, Kirby knew. And now—Kirby's heart stopped—the aide was turning around. He was leaning over to talk to the men in the rear! He also spoke in a low voice. Kirby could hardly breathe. They were suspicious! They were discussing him, though even had he heard their low voices, he would not have understood.

He almost jumped out of his seat when the *Oberst*, in an angry tone, started to rasp out questions at him! But, luckily, at that moment, a great column of marching infantry loomed up in the road ahead, and Kirby seized the opportunity to honk his horn loudly enough to make conversation momentarily impossible. The infantry—soldiers with full packs and bayoneted rifles—swerved in one beautiful wave, with the wonderful machinelike precision of the Imperial army, and the staff car went by. Kirby kept honking the horn. But as they swept back into the center of the road again, just in front of the column, he had to cease.

And as soon as the horn ceased, the *Oberst* recommenced his terse questioning! What in hell was he asking? Kirby's name, it seemed. The American began to feel panicky. In his excitement and haste, despite all the care he had taken to overlook nothing, he had forgotten to look at those papers for the name of the chauffeur! There was no chance looking now. They were testing him, trying to trap him. They knew the name. He tried again the trick of being unable to drive and talk at once, but the *Oberst* kept barking, and presently the general growled with him.

There was no mistaking the suspicion in their voices now. Kirby knew he was cornered, felt that the dig was up. The hill was still about three quarters of a mile away. He couldn't stall them off any longer! And now the aide at his side was stirring, as if he meant to reach for his revolver. Kirby, desperate, started to stammer incoherently. And at that moment it came.

A terrific, unmuffled roar of engines close overhead! A shrill of flying wires in the wind, a whirl of propellers. Somewhere behind—in back of the car. Somewhere—

Rat-tat-tat-tat! Machine guns! Their shrill clatter rose above the roar, rose higher and higher. They seemed to be right on the road back there. *Rat-tat-tat!* The *Oberst* and the general were shouting frantically at Kirby. They were yelling out crazy directions. He knew they were telling him to put on full speed. Mechanically, he was stepping on the gas. But the car was careening a little, swerving from one side of the road to the other, and the soldiers on the running board were holding on for dear life. Kirby was no longer watching where he was going. Though he knew they might see his face, he had turned around to look back there. At first, he could see nothing. The men in the rear of the car were half-standing, their knees on the seat, peering back and continuing to shout wild orders. And then, suddenly, Kirby saw them.

CHAPTER XII THE MOSQUITOES STRIKE

TWO LITTLE PLANES. They were quite some distance away, but they were right on top of the road. They were ground-strafting the column of infantry which the staff car had just passed, swooping down to pour machine-gun bullets into the ranks of the Germans. And what had been a neat, orderly column of soliders was now just a mass of terrified men, scurrying in all directions, throwing themselves flat on the ground to escape those monsters which had come down out of nowhere. Now both planes were shooting up and around in Immelmann turns, to dive again on the confused men. As the ships winged over, they flashed in the sun, flashed with their tri-colored markings, their—

Kirby's heart leaped, and he had all he could do to suppress the wild shout of crazy joy which rose in his throat. For as he saw those insignias, he knew, knew for certain. His two comrades! Carn and Travis! A thrill of warm affection surged through Kirby, giving him fresh life-blood. It seemed ages since he had last seen those planes, though in reality it had been only some twenty-four hours.

During this breathless second, he had all but forgotten that he was driving the car. But the aide at his side, with frantic haste, had seized the wheel and was keeping the auto to the road. Kirby automatically kept pressing the accelerator. But in his intense excitement he was no looger aware of his surroundings. All he realized was that his two comrades were right here, right up in those trim Spads which flashed in the sun. At first it seemed like a miraculous coincidence, but on second thought it wasn't so strange. For the C.O. had told them that he wanted this road strafed at the first suitable opportunity. Doubtless, after determining that Kellar's circus would not be able to take off so early this morning—because of the damage done last night—the two men, anxious to reap all the vengeance they could on the Germans, had set off shortly after

daybreak to attempt the job. They had dropped out of the sky on that infantry column, and they were making a sorry mess of it! Several men had been dropped like flies, and others were writhing on the ground, wounded by the awful tracer bullets which rained down unmercifully.

Suddenly, Kirby became acutely aware of his surroundings once more. The staff officer and the general and everyone else in the car were yelling at him. The aide was shouting in his ear in a peculiarly high-pitched voice. Again he knew they were telling him to hurry, try to get away from here. But in the next second the general in the rear let out an almost terrified roar: "*Halte! Gott im Himmel! Halte!*"

It was the aide who jerked on the emergency brake. The car skidded to the side of the road, lurched and stopped, throwing the two men on the running board to the ground. The other Germans were confusedly trying to get out of the machine. The reason was obvious. One of the Spads had zoomed up overhead and was getting in a position to dive right for the car from in front! It was Shorty Carn. He had spotted the important personages in the Duesenberg and was coming down to make a rich killing. Brigadier generals and staff officers were cold turkey to aviators.

Already the Spad was nosing over, right above. And then Kirby was working like a fiend, unbuttoning his German coat, snatching off his cap. The plane was diving now! Down, down it came, with breathless speed, and the wind shrilled through its flying wires as Shorty throttled his engine. It was almost right on top of the car. The Germans, trying not to be caught like rats, were jumping to the road. The aide at Kirby's side was on his feet, a ghastly grin on his white face.

Rat-tat-tat! A stream of sulphurous tracer came streaking down. There was a whistle of bullets in Kirby's ears, and at the same moment the aide seemed to leap into the air and fall out on the road, and he lay where he fell. *Rat-tat-tat!* And the general, clumsily trying to carry his fat body out of the car, crumpled with a bullet through his skull. The other men had gotten out and were throwing themselves on the ground, rolling half under the car for protection. The plane was scarcely fifty feet above, and it was still firing. Bullets were tearing through Kirby's clothes, nipping him, but he paid absolutely no attention to them. He knew that Shorty's keen eyes were looking straight down through the ring-sights, and that was all he wanted. With a crazy shout, he leaped to his feet, tearing open the German coat and exposing the khaki

beneath. He took his cap and, using it as a flag, began to wave frantically, began to wave every unmistakable signal which the Three Mosquitoes had invented for the purpose of communicating with each other.

He kept his face turned upwards, and he was screaming at the top of his lungs: "Shorty! It's me, Shorty!"

Hysterical sobs shook his voice. He jerked frantically at his German coat, trying to show more of his uniform. He shouted anew, bellowed, praying that just a hint of his voice would reach the pilot above. With his motor throttled, and in the brief periods when his gun was not firing, there was a fleeting chance that Carn might hear. "Shorty! It's Kirby! For God's sake, old fellow, don't you recognize me?"

But as yet Shorty gave no evidence of having heard. He was flattening out right above and in front of the car, and jagged streaks of flame bit from his twin guns again. Bullet-holes suddenly appeared in the cap Kirby was waving, but he kept right on waving it, kept right on shouting frantically. Carn was so close now that he must see his comrade's face, must recognize the gesticulating figure whose American uniform showed clearly.

He did! Abruptly, the Spad's guns ceased their clatter. Carn passed right over Kirby's head and, banking his ship, leaned out of the cockpit and waved with frantic excitement. Then he was behind the car again, and was firing Very rockets to signal Travis, who was still busy strafing the infantry.

But as soon as the Spad's guns ceased, a new danger faced Kirby. The *Oberst* and the other three men who had not been struck suddenly jumped up on the road. Kirby had given himself away entirely; and they saw the American uniform beneath the German coat. The adjutant had his Luger out in a flash, was bringing it to bear on the Mosquito. Desperately, Kirby whipped out his own Luger and fired point-blank, without waiting to take aim. The adjutant lurched forward, his face twisted grotesquely. The other two orderlies were jumping on the running board. Kirby fired again, shooting one through the heart. In almost the same instant his left fist crashed out to the other's jaw. and sprawled the man on the road.

The *Oberst* was dancing around confusedly, was still looking for his gun, and still barking stupidly at Kirby. Kirby watched him, hesitating to use his last cartridge unless it was absolutely necessary. The Mosquito was hastily jumping back into the driver's seat, reaching for the wheel. But then he noticed for

the first time that the front of the car was nosed right into a pile of high rocks which had once been a fence at the edge of the road. He would have to back up to get out! Quickly, he shifted the gear. The car started to lurch backwards.

It had not moved a foot before Kirby saw that he was cornered. Some of the infantry men, having won through the barrage of lead from the planes, were right behind him, running toward him and leveling their rifles. The *Oberst* was among them; he it was who had set them after Kirby. Simultaneously a machine gun suddenly stuttered into life across the road; they had set it up to shoot at the planes. Bullets pelted the car, tearing through it with loud sounds of ripping metal. He was going to be caught! And he was backing out right into the hands of those Boche!

And then Carn and Travis were with him! The two Spads were roaring down from above once more. Shorty went for the men running up behind Kirby's and Travis made for the machine gun. Their twin barrels blazed. With their wonderful flying skill, the two Mosquitoes were clearing the way for their leader. The machine gun across the road stopped clattering. The infantry men fell back, leaving some of their comrades lying inert, riddled with bullets. Kirby, having backed out sufficiently far, shifted the gear again and then, with thoughtless frenzy, jammed the accelerator down as far as it would go.

With a roar the car leaped forward, down the road once more. The Three Mosquitoes were together again, though in a strange way, indeed! The two Spads zoomed skyward, keeping right over Kirby, but staying far enough away so that they would not cast suspicion on him, in case he was going to continue his masquerade. He didn't know whether to do so or not. Would the Germans ahead let his car pass freely, if they saw he was in a Boche uniform? Or would they have gotten word, relayed by field telephones or other means of communication, and try to stop him?

Well, it wouldn't make things any worse to try to get by. As he went racing along, chewing up the gap between the car and Hill Seven, he took one hand off the wheel to button up his coat and put on his cap. Then he saw the aide's helmet lying on the seat beside him and, with the thought that it might prove more suited to his future needs than the soft cap, he put it on instead. It was big and it almost jogged around his head. But it was also thick and heavy, and that's what counted.

Without glancing up, he was aware of his comrades,

some thousand feet in the sky, hovering overhead like birds of mercy, gyrating and circling to keep pace with the car which, though it was tearing along at almost seventy-five miles an hour, was only a tiny, crawling thing to them. The Duesenberg rushed on, and Kirby fought to get up even more speed as he neared the hill. So far, apparently, he was getting by. There were men on both sides of the road, he knew—he saw the blurred figures streaking by. Suddenly, men loomed up ahead of him, men working apparently to smooth out some holes in the side of the road, doubtless made by chance shell-hits. Kirby honked his horn wildly, and they jumped aside, let the staff car shoot past. Nearer that hill now; scarcely a quarter of a mile away.

More men looming up ahead! And these men were not working! They were crowding the road, pointing rifles at the car which approached with breathless speed. The news had been relayed down! They were out to stop Kirby. The American went right on. The line of rifles cracked, and a stream of bullets whizzed over his head. Instinctively, he ducked way down in his scat, crouched over the steering wheel.

Crash! The wind-shield was shattered to bits, and flying pieces of glass showered down on him. But only a few scratched his face; the rest were stopped by his iron helmet. However, now the blast of wind which whipped at him head-on was terrific. It flogged him with relentless fury. Still he went on, at top speed. Nearer and nearer to that line of blazing guns. God, they must surely get him!

But then the other two Mosquitoes, their sharp eyes taking in the situation, suddenly dove. Down they shot, cleaving the air like swift arrows. They plunged right on top of the soldiers in the road, before Kirby was getting there. Once more the Mosquitoes' guns blazed. The mass of Germans parted neatly in two, as if two giant hands had pushed them apart, shoving each half to a side of the road. Confusedly, they tried to reorganize themselves and, getting half to their feet, fired blindly at the oncoming car. But Kirby rushed through that opening and went racing on, though the bullets threatened him shrilly and the rush of wind brought tears to his eyes. It was hard for him to see clearly now.

Now his comrades, seeing that the game had been discovered, did not zoom skyward, but stayed down on the carpet, right overhead. The hill was getting closer and closer, but like all hills appear to the eye of the approaching driver, it seemed to be moving steadily away, an elusive mirage. Kirby knew that the

opposition would get worse and worse as he went on; the Germans further ahead would have time to put up impassable barriers. But if he could get over that hill, if he could get near the Villers-Tarniers Forest and then abandon the car, he'd have a chance. A new fear suddenly seized him. Was he pursued? He could not suppress the wild idea that cars speedier than his were creeping up behind him.

They weren't, though; there was nothing in sight behind. Not much traffic around here. But God how many men! They were rushing across fields to get to the road, to fire at him. However, Carn and Travis were not idle. Each Mosquito took one side of the road, and kept strafing hell out of everything in sight, silencing machine guns and rifles which threatened Kirby, clearing the way for their leader. It was a strange spectacle; those two monstrous birds helping that big car crash its way through.

Suddenly Travis' plane shot ahead, its motor roaring wide open as it streaked down upon the road again. Kirby at once saw what the third Mosquito was after. Some Germans were trying to build a barricade. They were dragging a couple of old, useless caissons out on the road, and flanking them with machine guns. Travis plunged down on them with screaming fury, spitting lead. He kept molesting them, lunging at them in the insistent fashion which had won the trio of flyers their nicknames. And he stopped their work, prevented them from blocking the road. Kirby swerved a little to the side and got through, though a sputtering of bullets sounded against the body of the car.

The hill now! Keeping the accelerator jammed down fully, he raced the Duesenberg up that steep incline on high. Up, up, up. . . . The twelve-cylindrical motor roared as if in protest, the car started to slow down. The hill curved—a long, sweeping turn. He was going around it now, and he must keep the car in high to get all the speed he could. His comrades—were they still right above? They weren't! Both of them were racing ahead this time.

And then Kirby saw, as he rounded the curve. A real barricade, this one, right in the center of the hill, where the wily Boche figured they could get the car as it struggled upwards. They had succeeded, despite the planes which were molesting them, in dragging an old wagon across the road. And they were sticking stubbornly to their posts, training a score of guns on the car climbing toward them, slower and slower now.

Kirby glanced at both sides of the barricade, furtively. On the right was a broken wall of stones;

no passage there. On the left was a pretty bad ditch. But he would have to chance it. Carn and Travis were doing their best to confuse and scatter the men at the barricade, and their bullets were scoring. The barricade was looming up right ahead of Kirby, and jagged streams of flame spat from it. Again Kirby ducked. Again he heard the lead and steel tearing through the car. Closer and closer. If they hit a tire or some other vital spot—

With a furious twist of the wheel, he swerved way to the left. The car careened crazily, lurching and bumping in the ditch. It slowed down frightfully, almost stopping, and Kirby knew he would have to shift gears to go any further. The bullets were whistling all about him, the Germans were rushing toward him. But Carn and Travis worked like fiends to drive the Boche back, worked with such stubbornness that they succeeded for the moment. Hastily, Kirby shifted gears and, exerting all his strength on the wheel, managed to jump and bounce back on the road again, behind the barricade.

Once more he was going up the hill, but God, how slowly! There were men trying to stop him, scores of Boche seemed to converge like waves from both sides. But again and again Carn and Travis strafed them from every quarter, rained lead down on them, checked them.

The crest of the hill now! He was up! There was a level stretch again, then the steep descent. Another shift of gears, and he was tearing along once more on high, with his comrades still whipping down to protect him. To the left of the road, he saw that the hill went up steeply. Up there was the famous observation post, with walls six feet deep, where the men who stuck pins in maps could watch the battle in safety.

And the battle was now in view. Kirby was suddenly surprised to find himself so close to its terrific din. His blurred eyes, burned by the wind, took in the seething panorama which spread in the valleys and forests below. There was a war going on there, scarcely a mile away! Black smoke rolled across the face of the earth in great ugly layers. The puffs of bursting shells appeared all over. But Hill Seven was not being shelled; evidently they had not ranged it. The Allies seemed to be concentrating on the German artillery placements, the 77s which were thundering further below.

Kirby was drawing to the other crest of the hill now, getting ready to descend. The Villers-Tarniers Forest abruptly came into his line of vision! It was not far from the bottom of the hill. Could he make it?

The car rolled over the top, and he was going down. Down, down he rushed, at full speed, hell-bent. The car, heavy as it was, began to stagger and lurch perilously. It was almost flying down that steep hill, shooting like a streak. Kirby was bounced all around in the seat, but still he kept the accelerator jammed down. The blast of wind seemed almost to be tearing his head off, but still he went on. Down . . . down.

CHAPTER XIII ON THE WINGS

AND THEN THE BLOOD FROZE within him. For the third time his comrades had raced ahead. And Kirby saw, at the foot of the hill, a barricade so formidable that he knew at once he could never get past it! It was made of two old wagons, reinforced with logs and other miscellaneous objects. And it was a veritable fortress. There were scores of Boche defending it, partially concealed in its shelter. The two Mosquitoes were trying vainly to drive them out. As a matter of fact, the Boche were all but driving the planes out! They had pom-poms down there, which they had opened up at the ships. And since the Spads flew low, they were pretty big targets! Kirby's comrades were in danger, too!

Evidently the Germans were willing to spare no efforts to prevent enemy spies from escaping. Already machine-gun bullets were tearing up at Kirby as he came streaking, hurtling down in a cloud of dust, closer and closer to the barricade. No swerving around the side of that fortress, he saw at once. For, at the left, the Aisne river was running directly beside the road again! The road itself was raised there, and on both sides sloped down into precipitous banks. The bank at the river's edge was the steepest. The one on the right side of the road was not as bad, but Kirby realized that even if he could descend it, he could never climb it to get back on the road again.

Below this right bank, however, stretched a big wheat-field. And across this wheat-field, several hundred yards opposite the road, were trees—dense trees! A forest! The wood seemed to connect itself, in the distance ahead, to the Villers-Tarniers Forest. A wild gleam of hope flickered in Kirby as he continued

to plunge down that hill. If he could jump the car into the wheat-field, drive to the edge of this wood, and then abandon the machine and run into the trees—

Recklessly, he started to jam on his brakes—both the foot and hand brakes. He must slow up for that sharp turn. He must slow up, even though by so doing he would make an even better target for the men at the barricade. As the brakes sought to take hold there was a rending shriek, a terrific grinding, and at first Kirby was fearful that the brakes were going to burn out because of his mad speed. But they held, efficiently. The car skidded a little, then started to slow up as if a strong force were trying to drag it backwards.

At the same moment, there came such a fusillade of bullets that Kirby thought he was done for. They almost shook the huge car as they tore into it. One of them ricocheted—actually ricocheted—from Kirby's iron helmet. Splinters flew at him again, scratched his already scarred and cut face. It was incredible that both he and the car weren't vitally hit. The barricade was almost right in front of him. His two comrades were bending every effort to protect him.

The wheat-field was on his right! He must turn. With bullets shrieking all around him, clattering through the car, he pulled the steering wheel around. The nose of the Duesenberg seemed to plunge almost vertically, and the car all but stood on its head. It rocked and careened crazily, balancing on each successive one of its four wheels. Kirby had all he could do to hold himself in his seat. *Bump! B-rump!* He was down on the field. He stepped on the gas, was heading for the forest.

Then it happened. Another terrific hail of bullets from the barricade. Another sound of ripping, tearing metal. With a triumphant shriek, a stream of machine-gun bullets tore through the hood of the Duesenberg. The twelve-cylindrical engine choked, struggled valiantly. Then, with a last sputtering gasp, it died!

Frantically, Kirby was trying to coast across the field, hoping against hope that the heavy machine would roll to the edge of the forest. The men at the barricade were rushing out in one great swarm—running gray-clad figures with coal-scuttle helmets and rifles. Carn and Travis, seeing the way things stood, were upon them like vultures, roaring over their heads, concentrating on them. But they could not stem the tide. A crowd managed to keep running after the car. And the Duesenberg was slowing down! The wheat on the field was not very high, but it was high enough to slow the coasting, bullet-ridden staff car.

Slower and slower it rolled, and the Germans began to gain on it, began to creep up. The car was going to stop. It was stopping.

Kirby hesitated a second. Then, desperately, he leaped from his seat, jumping to the ground. He got his footing and started to run as fast as he could. He was trying to make for the trees. But the Boche were heading him off! More of them seemed to be pouring from the trees in front of Kirby. Carn and Travis strafed them anew, drove them back, but only for a second. They were closing in upon Kirby. He turned, started running the other way, crossing the field toward the road on a diagonal which would take him away from the Boche. But when he saw still more Germans pouring onto the field from that direction, too, he knew he was trapped. He was caught, caught for sure this time! Almost everywhere were Germans heading him off, spreading to surround him. He ran crazily, this way, that way, like a chicken without its head. God, where could he go?

Then a shrill of flying wires rose right above him once more, and he glanced up to see Shorty Carn gliding down, apparently to make a landing! At first this only heightened his bewildered fear. He was afraid that Carn's ship had been hit, and was forced to descend.

But the Spad didn't act as if it were incapacitated. Gracefully it swept down over the field. At the same time Travis flew as no pilot was asked to fly in his effort to hold back the Germans. From swarm to swarm he raced, using all the ammunition he had.

The Spad's wheels touched the field, bounced hard. The plane was rolling to the spot which was farthest from all the Germans. It stopped, though its motor still roared impatiently. It was about fifty yards from Kirby. Dazedly, Kirby saw Carn waving at him, motioning him to come over. Then at last he understood. He started to gallop toward the plane, made a mad dash. The Germans were closing in, hampered but not checked by Travis. Kirby stumbled, fell, and his helmet rolled off. Never mind it now! He picked himself up and ran again.

The plane was just a couple of yards ahead now. He almost leaped for it, and at once Carn started to open his throttle, and the ship began to move, black smoke pouring from its exhaust stacks. Kirby, with all his remaining strength, lifted himself on the wing and got beside the fuselage. Gripping a strut for support, he took a half-standing, half-crouching position right out on that wing, close to the cockpit. It was the only way a tiny single-seater could carry another passenger.

Shorty Carn's goggled face was grinning at him, and the little man's gloved hand reached out to give him an encouraging pat. The plane was moving faster now. But the Germans were so close, on every side, that they were waving for the aviators to surrender honorably or be shot! Travis tirelessly kept after them. The plane was gathering up speed, bounding along the ground. Bullets whizzed at it, ripping through the fabric.

"Hold on, old fellow!" Carn's voice rose above the roar of the engine. He seemed to have just discovered that voice. "Hold on! All set?"

"Hell, yes!" Kirby yelled back.

There came a rush of wind which almost pushed him off the wing. The ship fairly leaped into the air. Despite the fact that he was a veteran flyer, Kirby sickened in the pit of his stomach as his frail platform of wing surface lifted him into space. He gripped the strut convulsively. Bullets zipped upward at the plane, once more tearing through the fabric. The rush of wind was getting more and more terrific. Care was climbing hastily, but also gently, so as not to endanger Kirby's position. Upward the plane soared. The hail of bullets grew thinner, started to subside. The men on the ground were still firing, but the plane was high enough now to make the range difficult.

Above the crowded Spad, Travis hovered like a mother-bird guarding its young. Keeping fairly low, the two planes headed straight for the lines. The ground-fire was pretty hot, and Archie the anti-aircraft barked at them ominously, but it was better to stay low and risk this desultory fire than to go up where enemy aircraft might spot them. Kirby, clinging to his precarious position, knew that if any Boche planes appeared, Carn and he would be virtually helpless. And out on the wing, he'd be plugged like a rat.

But presently, this fear ceased to bother him. All at once, now that he had been lifted out of the extreme peril, the reaction set in. Kirby was thoroughly exhausted, physically and emotionally spent. God, he could hardly keep his eyes open! His strength seemed suddenly to have flowed out of him. He could scarcely cling to the strut. He became dazed and bewildered, and the furious rush of wind blinded him. Vaguely, he heard Shorty's voice, as the latter cut the throttle so he could yell: "Want my goggles and helmet, old fellow? Might be able to get them on— Or maybe we can change places— You get in and drive and I'll——"

"Don't . . . talk!" Kirby shouted back, between the blasts of wind. "Get . . . home . . . quick!"

Then the steady, deafening roar of the motor again. And Kirby, rocked and shaken on the frail wing, only had spells of lucid consciousness to his surroundings. These usually came at times when, by chance, his eye would glance down past the wing into the dizzy drop of space below. Then he would always sicken, shudder. What in hell was matter with him, getting air-fright after so many months of flying? He must hold on! He gritted his teeth and kept repeating that thought, like a refrain, until it was drilled into his dulled brain. Hold on! His hands were stiff and his fingers were growing numb. Hold on! His clothes were being torn to shreds by the wind. Hold on!

Several times Shorty reached out hastily with his free arm to grab at him, as if he were fearful that Kirby was going to drop. But he didn't drop. Dazed, muddled, half the time not knowing where he was, he kept clinging to the strut for dear life, kept clinging until, with a sudden, surprising shock, he felt his platform lurch backwards, rock, and then settle and become strangely stationary. They had landed! They were back at the drome! Kirby almost fell off the wing, and for the moment would have had a difficult time standing had not his two comrades held him up.

Men were rushing across the field, awed by the spectacle of a Spad landing with a man on the wing, a man in tattered gray and khaki. Carn and Travis were talking to Kirby, telling him to brace up. They were asking a thousand excited questions, voicing a thousand incredulous exclamations.

"Man!" Shorty was saying. "But that was close!"

"You don't know the half of it," Kirby murmured wearily. And then, all at once, a startled, excited cry broke from his lips. Suddenly, he seemed to come entirely out of his daze, to awaken with a shock. Once more his feverish excitement was clearing his mind, forcing his muscles to stir themselves into action. Pushing his amazed comrades aside, he ran wildly toward the headquarters shack. Carn and Travis followed, as did several other pilots. Across the field Kirby dashed in his tattered garments. He burst right into the C.O.'s office, saw the colonel at his desk, and did not bother with any preliminaries.

"Germans planning to—" he began, and stopped short. The C.O., grizzled veteran though he was, had almost jumped to the ceiling, had suppressed a startled cry. He stared at Kirby as if the Mosquito were a ghost.

Carn and Travis entered the small room, and the other pilots after them. The sight of more men seemed

to put the C.O. at ease His features relaxed, and he laughed heartily.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he exploded "Where in God's name did you come from, Kirby?"

"Never mind where I came from!" Kirby shouted at him. The Mosquito seemed to have forgotten his rank, forgotten whom he was addressing. "I'm trying to tell you the Germans are going to fill the sky with planes this morning.

"What!" The C.O. almost spat out the word. Then he echoed, foolishly: "Germans going to fill sky—?" Slowly the words sank home. And at once the C.O. became the skeptical, hard commanding officer. "Is there any authority for that statement, captain?"

"Got it straight from Kellar's drome last night!"

"Kellar's drome!" Shorty repeated. "Hell, were you at Kellar's drome? And we raided that dump! Were you there then?"

"I guess I was!" Kirby told them. Then again he became furiously impatient. "Damn it, why talk about such unimportant rubbish now? What time is it?"

"Ten after seven," came several surprised voices.

At first it seemed incredible to Kirby that it could be so early, but then he realised that, though the hazardous experiences he had gone through beginning with daybreak seemed to have lasted interminable hours, they could not have taken very long.

"Good!" he stated, as though he were the C.O. instead of the colonel. "That ought to give us time! I'm telling you, colonel, you'd better get busy. They're going to fill the sky!" And, in terse words, he told them the facts he had been able to put together.

The whole thing was so convincing, when everything was taken into consideration—as, for example, Kellar's reaction to *Herr Pfeltzenburg's* words—that the C.O. could no longer be skeptical. His stern face seemed to grow haggard and gray, and the lines in it deepened. But quickly he pulled himself together, became the man of action, the leader. He yelled for his adjutant, barked out orders, and seized the phone. For twenty minutes he burned that wire, buzzing one place after another. The Three Mosquitoes and several other pilots remained in the office, listening tensely. The squadron's doctor was there, too.

"Go to your room," he urged Kirby, "and I'll fix you up and—"

"Go to hell!" Kirby blazed at him.

The doctor, however, insisted on looking him over. He forced Kirby to sit down, and while the Mosquito listened to the C.O. and paid no attention to anything

else, the doctor, having brought in the necessary supplies, swathed his scratched face and plastered up a few cuts.

Finally the C.O. turned from the phone. He looked even more worried.

"We'll have to do the best we can," he said. "We're not quite ready to launch our drive for supremacy—planes and pilots are still lacking. But,"—he banged his fist on the table—"we've got to stop those squareheaded sons! Three British squadrons in Brenelle, where there isn't much doing, are sending their S.E.5s and Bristols to this sector to help us. They'll stick with us this morning, and to-morrow the French will relieve them."

He jumped up, and his tone became officious, rasping: "Tell all the men to be on the field, ready to take off as soon as possible! The new replacement men will have to fly to-day—that is, all the kids who have the nerve! Get out every machine and pilot! Hurry!" An orderly rushed out to relay the command. So did all the other pilots, save the Three Mosquitoes and the doctor. The C.O. continued to bark out order after order to his adjutant. Then his eyes fell upon Kirby, and a faint gleam of admiration came into them.

"Good work, captain!" he said gruffly. "You've brought us something big. Staff headquarters said they'd be delighted to transform you to intelligence."

"Intelligence be hanged!" Kirby replied. "Tell 'em I'm dumb. And now, colonel, if you'll give me my orders—"

"Give you your orders? Yes, yes. You go to your coop and lie down and sleep. You've earned the right to a good long nap." He turned to Carn and Travis. "You two will fly with the rest."

"Lie down and sleep?" Kirby was echoing, furiously. He had forgotten all about being tired, so keyed up he had become. "Lie down and sleep?"

"You bet!" the doctor told him. "You're grounded for to-day."

If he had just been sentenced to be stripped and sent to Blois, Kirby could not have looked any more crestfallen. He suddenly realized that he was a captain, and the C.O. was a colonel, and the doctor's instructions were irrevocable. Nevertheless, he pleaded: "But, sir, I'm all right. Feeling fine. I want to lead my men up and join this show!"

The C.O. became impatient. "Don't be nonsensical. You heard what the doctor said. You're in no condition to fly."

Then Kirby's eyes blazed defiantly. Again he forgot his rank.

"Damn it, I'm going up!" he burst out. "I don't care what anyone says! What the devil do you think I broke my neck trying to get back for? To lie down and sleep? I've been wanting to get in on this show for days and, by God, I'm going to get in on it!"

The C.O. was taken aback. In spite of his efforts to appear stern and angry, a faint twinkle came into his eyes. The doctor stared. The other two Mosquitoes hardly dared to breathe. Finally the colonel spoke, slowly: "Kirby," he said, "you're the most insolent, undisciplined sonuvagun under my command. You ought to be courtmartialed, and you ought to get a medal. And you can get the hell out of here, and break your neck leading your men this morning if that's what you want to do!" Then he added, as an afterthought: "I'll give you a slip for a new Spad."

Kirby beamed. And, a few minutes later, he and his comrades were hurrying across the field to the barracks. The doctor followed, shouting angry protests.

Already the drome was buzzing with activity. Mechanics were dragging ships out of hangars, working on their motors and wires. Pilots were rushing to and fro, puffing nervously on cigarettes. There was a drone of engines, which was rising steadily louder.

An orderly approached Kirby, saluted stiffly.

"Sir, shall I bring you some coffee and—"

"Coffee hell!" Kirby barked at him. "Bring me some good strong likker!"

CHAPTER XIV TRACER HELL

BY NINE O'CLOCK the whole squadron, thirty strong, was in the air. Through the clear sunny sky they climbed, straight toward the lines. There were five flights of them, spread out in formidable array. Every plane on the field had been seized and put into use. And several of the pilots were raw replacement men, going over the lines for their first time! However, though inexperienced, they were as eager and determined as the veterans of the flights. In fact, the news of the Germans' plans, far from frightening the Americans, had had just the opposite effect. They were all out

to show the squareheaded sons who was going to be supreme in the sky!

The Three Mosquitoes, together once more in their usual V-shaped three-plane formation, flew in the rear and above the other flights, and looking down, Kirby could see the twenty-seven other Spads spread out beneath—a thrilling sight. Their wings flashed in the sunlight, with the bright red-white-and-blue circles, and the tiny helmeted beads of the pitots could be seen protruding from their fuselages.

Kirby's new Spad had his old insignia, and the picture of a big, grim-looking Mosquito, on its fuselage. Jake, the squadron's mechanic-artist, had hastily painted it on, and the colors were still moist, making the thing stand out with startling brightness.

During the first five minutes in the air, Kirby had almost fallen prey to exhaustion again. The cognac he had gulped down before taking off had had more than its effect, but the monotonous drone of the motor, and the detachment with which he had learned to fly, had almost made him doze off. But now, as they neared the lines, his excitement began to take possession of him again. After all, he was a strong man, with amazing stamina, and he was getting his second wind.

On swept the thirty planes, and now Kirby, looking about, was suddenly amazed to discover that the sky all around was filled with ships. Everywhere were groups of glinting specks, moving swiftly toward Hunland. A squadron of French Nieuports, beautiful white little ships, crossed their airpath scarcely a mile ahead. Never before had Kirby seen so many planes at once. The sky was just cluttered with them. There were all types; everything that could fly and carry guns or bombs had been commandeered and sent up. There was one flight, which they passed, composed entirely of those ancient and cumbersome two-seaters known as Flaming Coffins. A hoarse cheer for the courageous pilots and observers who flew them rose in Kirby's throat. That was spirit! Going out to fight Huns in those rickety crates!

The whole mass of Allied planes—separated, of course, by miles of space—proceeded steadily and smoothly to the lines. And there, over the seething battleground, with shells bursting below, they began their patrols. And it was a strong wall they built to stop the Huns from invading their skies!

The fear that his report might not prove to be true bothered Kirby considerably. He waited in suspense for the host of planes which *Herr* Pfelftzenburg had promised the Germans would send.

And he did not have to wait long. Presently, in the eastern sky, appeared scores of new and ominous specks. Westward they roared, growing in number and size.

The first Germans to encounter the squadron with which the Three Mosquitoes flew were sixteen little, slender-nosed Pfaltz scouts, though "encounter" is hardly the word. For as soon as those Pfaltzes got a good look at the thirty Spads, they turned tail and retreated as fast as they could. Their pilots had no intention of deliberately committing suicide.

The thirty Spads roared on, their twin machine guns glinting at if they were hungry for prey. At a signal from the plane at the apex of the big formation—it was Big Pete Braddock again, his arm having healed—they all began to climb so that they would have an advantageous position. Up they climbed, moving as one, higher and higher, though they stayed below the stray cirrus clouds which floated in the sunny blue.

And suddenly they found themselves right above a big enemy formation! Attracted by the wagging of wings of the planes in front, Kirby glanced down and saw them. And as the sun flashed on them his eyes gleamed, and a thrill tingled through him.

Kellar's circus! There they were, those same black-and-white striped ships! There were more than thirty of them to-day! They outnumbered even the big American squadron! At once Kirby realised the shrewd sagacity which Kellar had shown last night. In order to keep the American guest ignorant of the additional pilots, he had allowed only the usual twenty-four to come to the mess. Perhaps there would have been even more planes down there if it had not been for the raid last night!

Smoothly, like darting dragon flies, the great German circus moved on below. They seemed ignorant of the American formation which lurked above. They appeared to be headed for something else; a French formation which was climbing several miles distant, and was well below the Huns.

The Americans did not hesitate. With another exchange of signals—a waving of arms and a wagging of wings—they plunged over as one and went screaming down on that circus. Sixty machine guns stuttered into blazing life, two from each nose, and the din of them mingled with the din of engines. The Spads pounced on the Huns with a vengeance, and in the first flurry three Fokkers fluttered out of the formation and went spinning earthward. Then the dog-fight raged. The Germans came out of their

confusion and started to fight with their usual deadly precision. But they were facing determined men this time, men who would not give them an inch of quarter.

The Americans, enraged at the thought of taking two fierce lickings at the hands of this circus, fought as they had never fought before. It was superb flying, and wonderful courage! Raw replacements, inspired by their enthusiasm and determination, fought like veterans; veterans fought like the greatest aces. A Spad was sent down in flames, but there was quick reprisal. Three Fokkers paid for it. Kirby and his comrades, fighting together in their usual coordinated style, were responsible for one of them, which they ripped to pieces in their deadly cross-fire.

In only a minute of fighting it became clear that the Americans had the whip-hand. They were beating the Flying Dutchman's crew! They were breaking up this deadly circus! Guns blazing, eyes glued to sights, they whipped down on the black-and-white striped planes. No longer did the Fokkers seem like vultures; the vultures were the gray, red-white-and-blue marked Spads, except for Kirby and his comrades, who were living up to their nickname of "Mosquitoes," though they were very deadly mosquitoes.

Led by Kirby, who seemed as fresh as ever, they were everywhere in the maze of planes, lunging insistently at Boche ships, biting with stingers of flame. The seventh Fokker collapsed under Shorty's guns; Travis got the ninth, out of control. It was gruesome scoring.

For awhile, in their attempt to follow Fokkers with their sights, the Three Mosquitoes had become separated again. Finally, Kirby spotted his comrades once more, off to the right. They were both trying to trap a Fokker. Kirby banked around, started to fly toward them. Suddenly, as he happened to glance out through the maze of planes, something caught his eye, something which brought him up in his seat with a shock.

Quite far from the fight, a Spad was twisting earthward in flames. It had evidently been trying to make a break for home for some reason or other, but it had been caught as it left its comrades. And climbing in the sky above it, climbing away from this victim, was the all-black Fokker of the Flying Dutchman!

Once more a gleam came into Kirby's eyes, and his blood tingled. Kellar—flying alone! It was the chance Kirby had been praying for! He glanced around, once more searching the maze of fighting planes. Presently

he picked out his comrades again. They were evidently looking for him now, while at the same time they continued to shoot at any German planes which came near them. Kirby smiled, a little guiltily; he'd have to slip away before Carn and Travis caught him, slip away so that he could fight Kellar alone!

Swiftly, he opened his throttle full, pulled back his stick, and started to zoom out of the fight, straight for the Fokker which was climbing, off there. Despite the fact that his circus was being crushed, Kellar was working with his customary cold precision. He was climbing high, where he would perch until he could pick out another suitable victim. Then he would swoop down, and the execution would be swift and relentless.

Up Kirby roared, hoping to get good altitude before the Flying Dutchman spotted him. Already he had left the swarm of fighting planes far behind and beneath. And now he was getting nearer to Kellar, approaching the all-black Fokker from an angle below. His nerves tensed, but pleasantly, and he leaned forward to his sights with keen anticipation. It ought to be a real fight this time!

Suddenly the Fokker was flashing around, in a beautiful bank. As it turned, the sun struck its black wings, upon which there were two squares of white to serve as a background for the Iron Cross markings. Kirby went right on toward the Fokker. The German plane was around now and, gracefully, its nose started to dip. In a second it was roaring right down at Kirby. Kellar had seen him and was attacking him!

Even now Kirby saw red flames spitting from either side of the Fokker's nose, spitting right toward him. A rain of tracer streaked down. He half-rolled defiantly, and then he answered that rain with his own guns, sent two bursts at the Fokker in front of him. It was Kellar's turn to half-roll now. Kirby crossed controls and hung in a shivering stall. The Fokker swept past like a streak, though Kirby caught a vague glimpse of its helmeted, goggled pilot once more. He waved to Kellar eagerly. The Flying Dutchman waved back, in recognition. Thus the two fighters greeted each other before really entering the ring.

Now Kellar's furious dive for Kirby had carried him well behind the Spad. Both planes banked vertically to confront one another. The two aces were face to face. Twice, in the last two days, they had met before, but as yet they had not really fought one another on equal terms. And the honors of their two clashes were almost exactly even. Each had shot the other down more by

luck than by skill alone; each had captured the other, and each had escaped in a miraculous fashion. True, Kellar had burned his plane where Kirby hadn't, but on the other hand Kirby had wrested important information during his capture. Now each seemed determined to see which of them was really the better man. Each seemed willing for a fight to the finish—alone. And somehow Kirby felt that they were going to settle their score once and for all; that this third meeting would be their last.

Face to face, they rushed toward one another with a roar. Again Kirby leaned forward to his sights, placed his fingers on the stick-triggers. The two ships swept into range, and the fight was on!

And it was a fight indeed! Never before had Kirby engaged in a more thrilling or spectacular combat. Both he and the German were employing every trick of the game, every breathless turn and twist and maneuver. They shot around each other in terrifically close banks, they Immelmanned one after the other to gain altitude, they dove and zoomed with furious speed and yammering engines.

The bright sun flashed on their wings as the trim little planes gyrated in the sky, each trying to train his sights on the other. They fought each other all over the place; they chased each other up through the clouds, where they played hide-and-seek for several seconds, and then they drove each other almost down to the ground, down over the battlefield, right on top of a big advance—in which a long line of tanks were rumbling like clumsy monsters into the German outposts, with a huge formation of O.D. running behind them, their bayonets fixed. Men stopped to look up in startled awe at the two monstrous birds which were holding combat right over their heads, so low that their swift-moving shadows were cast upon the ground by the bright sun.

For several seconds, though shells were bursting all around them, the two pilots whipped around each other in roaring fury, their guns blaring, and then, in one accord, both of them zoomed upwards again, and the men, squinting at them when they got a chance, saw them fade into tiny glinting specks way up in the sky.

All this time the match had been exactly even, with neither man seeming to gain advantage. It had been a game of chess in which each checkmated the other's moves. But now, slowly, Kirby's exhaustion was beginning to return. He was just as eager and determined as ever, but his "second wind," which

had come to him after his return to the drome, was beginning to give out. Even the strongest man could not expect to keep up to snuff after going through the terrific emotional and physical strain which Kirby had gone through during the last twenty-four hours. His muscles began to protest, responded more slowly. He was getting off his guard. A stream of tracer, whistling dangerously near, told him that.

When, in aerial combat, one pilot sees another begin to weaken it usually gives him the necessary impetus to blaze his way through for a quick finish. Suddenly, Kellar's plane seemed to become swifter, more efficient and graceful than ever. Now he was getting on Kirby's tail, and invisible drum-sticks seemed to beat a vibrating tattoo on the Mosquitoe's tail-fins as the German opened up anew. Kirby felt himself slipping, losing ground more and more steadily. He rolled hastily, trying to shake the other man off. But Kellar clung, and his bullets were beginning to score.

Then, suddenly, a gripping determination came over Kirby, a determination which fought against his exhausted spirits. He was going to beat Kellar, tired or not tired! After all, the Flying Dutchman must be tired, too, on account of that raid last night. It was no excuse in war. And Kirby, in one stupendous effort, rallied his strength again, threw himself into the conflict with new fury.

Up he shot, for a breathless Immelmann turn, tighter than even the trim little Spad was meant to do. Kellar at once whipped around, trying to force him on the outside arc. But Kirby, guided by his desperate determination to bring the fight to a close, got over. Down he came, with Kellar now at a disadvantage. He was coming straight down on the Fokker's tail. He pressed his triggers, and his guns began to clatter. He sent out a few short bursts. Then he pressed the triggers again, for a long burst.

But this time, to his horror, the guns did not clatter! Though he pressed with all his strength, the twin barrels were ominously silent. His guns had jammed! Hastily, he threw the Spad into a side-slip, trying to slide away to give himself time to clear the stoppage. He half-stood in the cockpit, straining against the safety-belt, hammering at the breech-locks with his free fist. A forced feed. He was trying to clear it.

But then the blood drained from his face. Sometimes, in cases like this, in a hand-to-hand duel, when one saw his adversary's guns jam he would hold his fire and wait for the other. It was part of the code. But Kirby

might have known that Kellar would do no such thing. The German was as good a man as any, but he placed his duty above everything else. Seeing Kirby at a disadvantage, he pounced at once, determined to finish him!

The Fokker whipped down on the Spad, guns blazing. With the tracer streaking right past his face, Kirby desperately side-slipped again, at the same time working like a fiend on the guns. But Kellar kept right after him, and his bullets began to tell. The Spad trembled under that hail of lead. Struts began to shiver.

Vainly, Kirby tried to get away. Vainly he worked on those guns. The Fokker kept making breathless, deadly swoops from above. And each time came a stream of tracer.

"Damn you!" Kirby cried, as he had cried so many times before. "You lousy skunk! God, if only I can get these guns fixed I'll——"

Crash! The Spad see-sawed drunkenly, and Kirby, looking out in terror, saw that a big piece of his lower right wing was gone! The rest of the wing was straining, its fabric tearing off. The Spad was lurching precipitously. In a moment, under another burst of fire, that wing must break, and Kirby would go down!

Desperately, he got into a glide-dive—not daring to spin, for the wind would tear the broken wing to pieces. As it was, the Spad flew at a crazy angle, with the good wing drooping horribly low. But now Kirby was beginning to get results in his work with the guns! He had discovered the root of the trouble, and with a numbed hand was working as swiftly as he could. But so was Kellar! Again the Fokker came swooping down. Again its guns blazed. *Rat-tat-tat!* The fabric on the wing tore off more, the other wing drooped lower. A strut broke, dangled in its place. God, just a few seconds, just a few seconds until Kirby could get those guns going again!

There came a sharp, stabbing pain in Kirby's left shoulder. Hit! The pain shot down his left arm, almost paralyzed it. But he had to keep using it on the stick, so he could use his right on the guns. The agony of it brought tears to his eyes, and he groaned and ground his teeth. Kellar had zoomed way up now.

Relentlessly, the Flying Dutchman was nosing over for a final death-dealing dive. He knew he had Kirby, and he was coming down to finish the job! Down he came, faster and faster, closer and closer. The tracers streaked again, thicker now Kirby knew he was done for. Hit ship was being shot to bits!

CHAPTER XV
JAMMED GUNS

A CRY OF FRENZIED JOY broke from his dry throat. In this last split second, even while his plane staggered and lurched beneath the streams of Kellar's bullets, Kirby had fixed his guns! The stoppage was cleared, and the Mosquito was back in his seat! Fear changed to rage, a deadly volcanic rage against the man who had tried, again and again, to plug him when he was helpless. And Kirby forgot his wounded arm, forgot his exhaustion, forgot that his plane was flying with such difficulty. His thoughts were only for Kellar, who was right overhead. With a savage jerk, Kirby pulled the joy-stick of the Spad way back. The plane lurched, groaning and shrieking in protest, and more of the wing surface cracked. But the nose came up! And the powerful Hispano-Suiza engine was faithful. The little ship, threatening constantly to break and go into a fatal spin, was rising upwards nevertheless!

And now, as Kirby pressed the triggers, the twin guns stuttered into new life, and the tracer ripped up toward the black Fokker. Kellar at once tried to Immelmann, started to shoot up. But, somehow, Kirby made that Spad of his do what he wanted it to do. Recklessly, guided solely by rage, he opened the throttle full, kicking on right rudder, and using right stick.

The little Spad staggered around, and so well did Kirby keep it in hand that he was forcing Kellar on the outside arc of the turn, where Kellar had failed to force him before. The Fokker was half-over, pivoting around, when Kirby caught its black belly dead in his sights! He shot as he had never shot before. And he poured two streams of sulphurous lead right into that belly.

Kellar never finished that Immelmann turn. Caught half over, the Fokker reared like a frightened steed, lurched, staggered. . . . Then, suddenly, a ribbon of flame broke from its fuselage, went licking greedily along its flanks, until the whole ship was a mass of fire and dense black smoke. Slowly, the burning Fokker turned over on its back, and was spinning slowly downwards in a smoky trail.

And right after it the disabled Spad, its wing cracked too much under the strain of that last breathless maneuver, plunged like a plummet, with Kirby struggling like a madman at its controls.

Fate brought the two ships down close together, on a barren stretch of ground, far within the Allied lines. Kirby's Spad struck first. But it was not a fatal crash. In the last second the Mosquito had gotten it sufficiently into control again to keep its nose up when the crash came. The Spad literally fell apart, but Kirby came out of the wreckage unhurt. He was just getting to his feet when the ground shook with a deafening, splintering boom. The slower-falling Fokker had struck, and a tower of flame proclaimed its landing.

Staggering across the hundred yards or so which lay between the two wrecks, his arm burning in pain, his mind dazed and his emotions spent, Kirby hastened toward the flames. As he approached there was a sharp crack, and a bullet whined right past his side. Furiously, Kirby whipped out his Colt. But it was unnecessary, he saw in a second.

Kellar, sprawled in a heap some distance from the flames, his face bloody and burned and strangely twisted, flung his Luger away with a debonair gesture.

"Stupid of me!" he said weakly, as Kirby came over him. "Can hardly see to aim anyway." A grin broke out across his bloody face. "Well—" his voice had that peculiar harshness that pain brings. "Hello, swine. . . ."

Kirby stared with wide eyes at the pitiful broken semblance of a man below him.

"*Wie gehts, dumkopf.*" His voice was slightly hoarse. Must have caught cold from the rush of wind. "W-what's the idea of trying to plug me?"

"A—a last gesture." Kellar seemed to have more and more difficulty in speaking. "But it didn't work, did it? Well—" A shaking hand reached beneath his torn flying clothes, drew out several objects, held them forth. "Here you are! You get all the stuff!"

Kirby's right hand reached for them. It trembled as much as Kellar's. That was funny. He had been hit in the left arm!

Kellar gave him everything except the sold cigarette case, which he retained for a moment. With much effort he got it open, held it out. "Have a cigarette?"

"D-don't mind if I do." Kirby took one. Kellar took one, too. Kirby lit both of them with the lighter.

The Flying Dutchman took one weak puff, then let the cigarette dangle aimlessly from his lips.

"Well," he went on haltingly, "it was a damn good fight, anyway. Guess you and I have given each

other quite some excitement these last three days, eh, captain?" Kirby nodded foolishly. The Flying Dutchman continued, and now the pain in his voice was more than physical. "Looks like my crew is sunk. But they went down fighting! Guess you've licked us in the air now. Spoiled our plans." A slight sob tore from him. But he fought with himself, and managed to bring back the cheery grin once more, even though now there was a strange rattling sound in his throat, and his voice was trailing off. "Well, Captain Kirby . . . you beat me fairly. Thought I'd get you at first, when your guns jammed, but you got me. . . . And I won't escape this time. . . . You can keep my stuff forever. . . ."

Kirby shifted. His voice was gruff.

"Don't talk rot," he said, though without conviction. "You'll be all right. And at least you can take it easy for the rest of this *guerre*."

"Oh, I'm done," Kellar stated, decisively. "I'm going fast. . . ." The rattle in his throat increased. He propped his head up a little, with tremendous effort. "Well, good-bye, swine! Perhaps we may even meet again—who knows?—in hell or—Valhalla!"

Kirby coughed with peculiar violence. There seemed to be a lump in his throat. That was funny, too. He had not tried to swallow anything lately.

Kellar seemed to be waiting for him to speak. Kirby couldn't seem to find his voice. The light was fading out of the Flying Dutchman's eyes.

"Goodbye . . . swine," he repeated, as if it were a cue.

"*Auf—auf wiedersehen, dumbkopf*," Kirby choked. "And maybe——" He stopped. The Flying Dutchman had fallen back, and a glassy stare was in his blue eyes. Kellar had gone the way of his glorious predecessors, the way of Boelke and Immelmann and Richthofen.

From across the barren ground excited shouts suddenly arose. A bunch of doughboys were rushing over.

Back at the drome again, his arm in a splint. Once more hearty congratulations, hands patting his back: "Hurrah for you, cap! Got the weasel! Great stuff! Boy, that was sweet flying! A flamer, too! Well binge to-night, fellers, well get drunk as lords! We've got supremacy of the air! We've got 'em licked!"

And the jokesters: "I hear you shot down a German, captain, eh?" and "The colonel will get a medal for your bravery!"

And Red Peters, the pessimist: "Well, we'll all get killed sooner or later. We can't live forever."

And the C.O., gruff but kindly: "Good work, Kirby. Guess you rate Paris on this whole affair. A good rest—"

Dazed, bewildered, and wondering why he was feeling so down in the mouth, Kirby heard all of it as if from a great distance.

Not until he found himself alone with his comrades did he seem to realize what it was all about.

"Well!" said Shorty Carn, puffing his pipe with unusual relish. "So you got him once and for all this time!"

"Yeah," Kirby grunted.

"Man, but you look like the last rose of summer!" A note of anxiety suddenly came into Shorty's tone. "You must be tired as hell!"

"Yeah. . . ." Kirby seemed to ponder a moment.

"Guess I'll go take a little walk."

Travis glanced at him suspiciously.

"Guess you'll go and take a long sleep so you'll be able to join the binge tonight."

Kirby suddenly looked very, very weary.

"Guess I will."

