

PILOTS WANTED— FOR FLYING COFFINS

by ANTHONY FIELD

Hate, treachery and those murderous pills were blasting disaster from within the hell-winged Black Sheep, while the Boche blasted from without—and Captain Quinn didn't like his role as fly . . . to be strangled in this black web of poisonous intrigue!

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CHAPTER I

QUINN, boiler-maker Jack Quinn, skipper of the notorious Black Sheep, glanced around the smoke-fogged estaminet with a jaundiced eye. His crew of Sky Devils had taken over the joint for the night—and as in everything else—a fight, a feast or a friendship—they went all the way. Enough hard liquor flowed to float a battle ship. Enough cigarettes were smoked, which, if laid end to end, would have reached from Paris to Berlin. Enough choice expletives crackled in the air to have shamed Old Nick, himself.

But it was not all this that soured Captain Quinn's usually robust disposition. With a movement of impatience he shoved the bottle of Scotch from him, ripped off a generous mouthful of cut-plug and squirted a yard or so of tobacco juice at the nearest cuspidor.

"Bulls-eye," said Sergeant Solomon who shared the table with him.

"Nuts," growled Quinn and continued his survey of the room. Behind the bar on a high stool by the till, sat Raymond Duplese, the proprietor of the estaminet. He had a fixed smile on his lips, a *Croix-de-guerre* on his breast and a pair of blue-lensed glasses over his eyes. He was quite blind. He never tired, of telling how he had earned them both—the medal and the glasses. Single handed he had charged a machine-gun nest, annihilated the German crew—and then, with the glory of his deed shining in his eyes, a hand grenade had burst in his face. . . . A shrug . . . an expressive gesture of one hand . . . "*oui, oui . . . c'est la guerre.*"

Duplese's brother, Pierre, a stolid, sullen individual, tended bar. He poured stingy drinks into dirty glasses and held every franc note up to the light before dropping it into the till.

On the surface, there was nothing in the familiar scene which should have jarred on Quinn's nerves. But below the surface . . . he banged his empty glass on the table and scowled. Keenly sensitive to the spirit of his sky-devils, he checked the signs—a burst of laughter that had a shrill note in it; brimming glasses in hands that trembled just a trifle; the potent liquor consumed avidly, eagerly; a shuffling of feet here and

a nervous drumming of fingertips there. Quinn saw, and diagnosed the signs correctly. The first warning symptoms of hysteria.

With explosive violence he spat out the wad of mangled cut plug. *En route* to the cuspidor, the dripping chunk passed perilously close to a pair of immaculate puttees.

"Bah!"

The owner of the puttees hastily back-stepped, then with ill-concealed annoyance marched stiffly up to the table.

"Filthy stuff!" he dipped out. "If you must indulge in such a vile habit, Captain Quinn, I suggest that you. . . ."

Quinn looked up, surveyed the indignant officer before him with a jaundiced eye and growled: "Nuts."

SERGEANT SOLOMON, deemed equally unimpressed. He wrinkled his nose as though a distasteful odor had suddenly assailed it, scraped back his chair, mumbled an excuse and eased off through the crowd.

The recipient of this hearty welcome colored, stiffened to the full of his slender height. Captain Moyer, the dapper personnel officer of the squadron—was far from popular with the pilots and he knew it. He glared now after the retreating back of Abe Solomon, coughed, cleared his throat.

"Captain Quinn," he snapped, "it's your fault that there is no discipline in this outfit. Your familiarity with the men makes them high-handed. Now, if I were you. . . ."

Again Quinn cut him rudely short, again he used the same inelegant but highly effective retort. "The answer, Captain Moyer, is still—nuts."

Suddenly he half rose from his chair, leaned across the little table and jabbed a stiff forefinger at the Personnel Officer's belt buckle. "Listen, Moyer," he said heavily. "I'm running this outfit. If you don't like the way I handle the job, you can go running to G.H.Q. and crawl up to some fat Major and tell him all about it. You've done it plenty times already."

Captain Moyer drew in his stomach to avoid the jabbing finger, colored hotly, opened his lips for an angry retort. Then, apparently thinking better of it, he relaxed, flicked one end of his neat little moustache and raised a supercilious eyebrow.

"Your language, Captain," he drawled. "Please. And anyway, you're quite mistaken, I assure you. It isn't at all necessary for me to carry tales to Headquarters. As a matter of fact, your escapades are the talk of the

sector. Quinn and his infamous Black Sheep are the subject of conversation in every dugout and trench and shell-hole on the Western Front."

It was Quinn's turn to flush. Moyer's words were true enough. The Black Sheep were hell-raisers. They raised hell with the Boche airmen, all right—but they also raised hell with discipline and regulations. But Quinn was not to be side-tracked. "Maybe you're right," he admitted. "But rumor don't travel *that* fast. *Somebody* reports to the Brass Hats behind the lines—yeah, and to Colonel Tremaine's office—too. You're not kidding me, Moyer. Nor the rest of the Black Sheep, either. So your dignity is upset because the men don't salute you, eh? Hah! You'll be damn lucky if some dark night your dignity isn't knocked for a row of ash cans. Don't say I never warned you."

Captain Moyer maintained his nonchalance with an effort, flicked an imaginary bit of dust from his spotless tunic. "Thanks, old man, for the advice. It's exactly what one might expect from Boilermaker Jack Quinn. A fit shepherd for this flock of Black Sheep, all right."

A growl rumbled deep in Quinn's throat. He got up, stalked around the table, then deliberately hit below the belt, so to speak, at Moyer's one sore spot. "Why, you damn Kiwi . . . you, you chair-warmer. . . ."

The Personnel Officer flinched as though he had been struck. His face went sickly white. His easy manner dropped from him like a discarded cloak and his eyes suddenly blazed venom.

But in the split second before the explosion came, a slender figure materialized at his side and a low, sweet voice cut the tense atmosphere.

"Please—please, *mes capitaines!*"

BOTH men turned abruptly. Then they relaxed and their anger evaporated. It was a girl who had joined them—a slender vision of smiles and tawny curls and melting brown eyes. Moyer recovered first. He clicked his heels together and executed a smart bow.

"Ah, it is Mile. Gabrielle," he said suavely. "The angel who has come to this mudhole to cheer our boys with her golden voice. Will you join us, my dear, for a little drink?"

He pulled out a chair and as she seated herself, beckoned to Pierre at the bar. Quinn grunted, sat down, folded his arms on the table top.

Gabrielle Fontaine studied him for a moment from beneath long lashes. Then impulsively she placed a tiny hand on his muscular forearm, looked appealingly

toward Moyer and said wistfully: "I am afraid *le Gapilaine* Quinn, here—he does not like me."

Quinn took her hand, covered it with his own huge paw. "Listen, sister," he said. "You got all the Black Sheep jumping through hoops already. You only been here a week and the whole squadron acts like love-sick calves mooning around you." He grinned. "Me? Sure I like you. I love the ladies—all of them—bless their hearts."

Gabrielle shook her head, pursed her lips up into a tempting pout. "I do not think so. No. You do not speak to me . . . you do not. . . like the others. . . ." She blushed prettily.

Quinn's barrel chest expanded an extra three inches. For an instant he had misgivings, wondered why—with half the outfit nuts about her already—this delectable creature should go out of her way to flirt with him. Then with natural enough egotism, he dismissed the thought. After all, women were women. They all liked he-men with hair on their chests.

"You mean," he jerked his head deliberately at the sartorial elegance of Moyer, "that I don't bow like a monkey on a stick or make pretty speeches, eh? Well, that ain't my way, sister. Me—I don't fool."

He squeezed her fingers. She winced, but smiled. She turned her face up invitingly close to his, hitched closer to him.

But a discordant laugh from across the room jarred on Quinn's ears just then. Once more he became aware of the strange tension in the estaminet that night, caught that unpleasant suggestion of hysteria in the atmosphere. He dropped Gabrielle's hand suddenly into her own lap, reached for the drink Pierre had set before him. Tossing it off in a single gulp, he said gruffly: "Forget it, sister. I got something else on my mind tonight."

It was a curt rebuff and for an instant Gabrielle's eyes sparkled dangerously. She bit her lower lip. Then with a shrug she turned to Moyer and left Quinn alone with his bitter thoughts.

They weren't nice thoughts. He was conscious of a presentiment that something was due to happen—something decidedly unpleasant. But he did not know from what quarter it would come. He shifted uneasily in his chair, half-turned so that he faced the door and could watch the whole room before him.

HE WAS just in time to see the portal bang open and a familiar figure swagger across the threshold. It was Lieutenant Steve Arden. And Lieutenant Steve

Arden was obviously very, very drunk. Quinn watched from moody eyes as the young pilot tripped, steadied himself, looked around the cafe and then lurched forward again. A reckless, devil-may-care flyer, if ever there was one, thought Quinn as he watched him. Then he amended the thought. Young Arden had been a reckless, flying fool. But for the last few days, for the last week, now. . . .

As Arden drew near their table, Quinn saw that his eyes were wide, the pupils flared, a haunted desperation in their depths. He staggered up to the table, gripped the back of Gabrielle's chair to steady himself.

The girl looked up. Quinn saw her catch her breath, color faintly. Then her face instantly became a set, emotionless mask. "Oh," she said evenly. "You."

Arden seemed oblivious to the presence of his two superior officers. He had eyes only for the girl.

"Gabrielle," he mumbled thickly. Then with a pleading, urgent note he repeated: "Gabrielle!"

Quinn was torn between disgust and sympathy. He liked Steve—a man after his own heart—who had downed eighteen German planes and had once broken a bottle of Scotch over a general's head. This last endeared him to the heart of Captain Jack Quinn. But to see him now, pleading like a lovesick schoolboy. . . . Bah!

Quinn was fascinated by the change that came over the girl. Even as he watched the little scene, her face hardened and she appeared to age—a matter of years—before his very eyes. Her lips were drawn into a thin, hard, cruel line.

"Please—you go away," she said coldly.

Arden's knuckles tightened on the chairback until the cords stood out white beneath the bronzed skin. The desperation flared like mounting flames in his eyes.

"You can't turn me down now," he said urgently. "You can't refuse me—you *can't*—I say!"

A breathless hush fell in the vicinity of the table. Captain Moyer toyed nervously with his moustache. Quinn's hands clenched into impotent fists. He felt like grabbing Gabrielle, shaking her. He had seen the girl singer make a play for the handsome young pilot. She had deliberately used all her wiles, all her blandishments, all her feminine bag of tricks to ensnare the Britisher. She had succeeded, all right. But now—this.

Never before had any of the men seen Gabrielle Fontaine as she was now. Coldly, unemotionally, with calculated cruelty she raised one slim shoulder and stared evenly into Arden's flushed face.

"Can you not see, *mon ami*," she asked, "that we are finish? Must I tell you that I have not need of you—no longer?"

The explosion—that Quinn's psychic hunch had warned him of before—came. Lord only knew what will power, in his befuddled state, young Arden had exerted to control himself thus far.

Now he went berserk. With a snarl like an animal he seized the girl and yanked her roughly to her feet. Before anyone could interfere he shook her violently and there was that in his face that brought a swift blench of fear to her own.

Then, even as Quinn's chair scraped back, Moyer bounded around the table. His fist lashed out, connected with a sharp crack that echoed through the room.

IT WAS a neat trick—if not a fair one, for he had given no warning. Arden was too furious at the girl to see him coming, too drunk to have protected himself if he had. He never knew what hit him. He sent chairs clattering as he spread-eagled to the floor. And Quinn, whose nerves and temper were already badly frazzled, saw red.

"A dirty Kiwi trick!" he bellowed, as he surged at Moyer.

The little cafe became a bedlam as they tangled.

Those who had seen the blow that felled Arden growled their rage. The rest, delighted at the prospect of Moyer going up against the sledge hammer fists of Jack Quinn, whooped with glee. Chairs and tables crashed over. The scuffle was over almost as quickly as it had started. There was a flurry of blows, then a resounding whack as Quinn's ham-like fist connected flush with Moyer's jaw. A crash—a duller thud as the Personnel Officer was neatly laid out cold beside his erstwhile victim.

Quinn blew tenderly on his bruised knuckles. The cheers of his flyers rang in his ears but the scowl remained on his face. But though he was oblivious to the din around him, the gentle touch of a hand on his arm made him start as though he had been stung.

Gabrielle—the same old Gabrielle, again—with a rueful smile peered anxiously up into his face.

"I am most, most sorry," she said softly. "Most very sorry."

Quinn stared at her. Again she was the angel who had come to brighten this dark corner of hell with her golden voice and tender smile. For an instant his heart softened—but only for an instant. At his feet, Steve

Arden stirred, groaned, raised a feeble hand to his head.

The hot tide of remembrance and anger swept through Quinn. Before he could stifle the impulse, his hand came up, lashed out.

"Why, you dirty, little. . ."

With a sharp crack his open palm struck Gabrielle's cheek. Then his hand fell away, leaving the imprint of five fingers across the flesh.

There was a breathless hush in the cafe as she shrank back. She did not cry out. Instead, her eyes blazed with a tigerish fury. So intense was the hatred mirrored in their depths that Quinn felt an icy finger trace down his spine.

He shrugged it off. "Nuts," he growled under his breath.

Then stooping, he slipped a brawny arm under Arden's limp one, heaved the groggy pilot to his feet and got a firm grip on him to steady him. Without a backward glance at Moyer, still out cold, or at the girl, he half-marched, half-dragged his companion toward the door. The clink of a glass and the scrape of a chair sounded loud in the stillness as they headed for the door.

CHAPTER II

DAWN—the following morning. Quinn cursed as he kicked his way across the soggy tarmac in the teeth of a biting east wind. There was a wrack of low flying clouds overhead and a spit of rain in the air. A hell of a morning to go upstairs, he thought. It was on mornings just like this that. . .

A heavy fist jabbed him playfully in the ribs. Quinn jumped, whirled; his guard came up.

Killer Dake grinned at him crookedly. "So you got the jitters, too, eh, Skipper?"

Quinn growled. "Yeah. What the hell's come over this outfit? Everybody's jumping out of his skin."

Dake pursed his lips, placed his little finger in his ear and jiggled his elbow. "What do you expect? One minute the boys are riding the lightning in heaven and the next minute they're shoveling coal in hell. They've got their belly's full. They've had too much."

Quinn snorted contemptuously. "You mean to

tell me this bunch of Black Sheep can't take it? You're screwy, Dake!" A sullen, baffled look clouded his eyes and his sledge hammer fists knotted at his sides. There was a roaring blast from the ships lined up at the starting line before the canvas hangars. The acrid odor of burnt castor oil was heavy on the damp air. One by one, shuffling, dispirited, the members of A Flight straggled across the tarmac. "Look at 'em!" snorted Quinn. "As much fight in 'em as a bunch of girl scouts. They're breaking up, one by one, like busted alarm clocks. But by God, Dake, you can't tell me they're yellow—that they've had enough—that they're quitting. Look at Twist, there, and Nordstrom and Arden. . ."

"Yeah," said Dake dourly. "Don't talk so damn much and take a look at Arden."

Quinn's eyes whipped across the tarmac to the third plane on the line. Whereas the other pilots seemed weary, dispirited, huddled in the lee of their ships against the bite of the wind, Arden was pacing before his ship with a feverish energy. Even from where Quinn stood he had a wild, disheveled appearance. By his side walked Moyer, the personnel officer. Moyer had him by the elbow. Moyer was talking earnestly to him.

Watching, Quinn saw Arden impatiently shake off Moyer's hand. "I don't trust that mug, Moyer," he growled. "I'll fix that."

He was seething inside. He was glad of the opportunity to give vent to his pent-up feeling of baffled rage. With long strides he hurried across the field to the number 3 crate. "What the hell's going on here?" he demanded.

The two men halted in their pacing. Arden chewed an unlighted cigarette into tatters. Moyer turned his head, glared at Quinn, said venomously: "You keep out of this."

Quinn's cold blue eyes became twin agates of hate. He took a long step forward.

Moyer grabbed Arden by the arm, spun him around. He shoved out his open palm to the flyer. Lying on it was a crystalline white tablet. "Here—take this," he ordered. "Quick, you damn fool."

"Hold it!" snapped Quinn. "What the hell are you giving him?"

Arden hesitated. His eyes seemed haunted, sunk deep in his skull.

"Take it!" rasped Moyer.

Quinn leaped forward to knock the pill from Moyer's hand. But Arden was before him. With one movement he snatched the pill, tossed it into his

mouth, swallowed. Then with a wild, hysterical laugh he vaulted into his crate.

Quinn trembled with wrath. "By God, Moyer . . ." he began.

MOYER caressed the ridiculously small moustache that decorated his upper lip with the back of a finger. His lips twisted. He was on the point of saying something—changed his mind—turned on his heel and walked away.

The repressed breath exploded through Quinn's lips with a rip and a snort. He tore a gnarled fist through the tangled mop of his hair—hair that had grayed perceptibly in the past two weeks. He could have murdered Moyer, cheerfully. By God, some day he would! What was Moyer's game? What was the pill he had given Arden? Why hadn't he smashed Moyer? Was he slipping, too, along with his men?

He glanced around. His Sky Devils had witnessed the scene and were now standing uncomfortably before their crates, shifting from foot to foot. It suddenly struck Quinn, that they, too, thought he was slipping. The hell he was. He'd show them.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" he bellowed. "Come on, you buzzards. Hit those crates. Get 'em off the ground—get 'em off the ground."

Quinn was in a savage mood as he led his flight winging into the East. He was spoiling for a fight and nothing would have done his soul more good just then than to have tangled with the Boche. Only action—blood, bullets and swift death could have eased the rapidly mounting tension that was gripping him. He tried to analyze himself—his feelings and emotions. Was he going hay-wire, too? Were his nerves snapping? Had he seen too much of death and were his guts turning to water?

He laughed at that, hoarsely and with an impatient hand dashed the splattered oil from his goggles. No, it wasn't that. He wasn't afraid of any German flight that ever raided the skies. Nor his Black Sheep either. It wasn't what would happen to them upstairs—a quick death from a Spandau burst or a mad plunge to oblivion on the shell-pocked earth below—that had them on the ropes. It was what was happening to them on the ground . . . in the mess shack . . . on the tarmac . . . at St. Omer.

Quinn thought of what had transpired at the estaminet the night before—the scene Arden had made over the girl, Gabrielle, and Moyer's actions at the time. And now Moyer was feeding Arden—God

only knew what. Come hell or high water, thought Quinn, he would have to have it out with Moyer soon.

He sighted a German patrol but it was already a diminishing handful of specks headed for home. Sixty kilometers up the front to San Suplice they arrowed their way. But there was no Jerry flight to challenge their course that morning. The patrol back home was equally uneventful. Quinn cursed his luck as a few minutes later he led his flight over the Black Sheep 'drome. He banked to come in against the wind, glanced over his shoulder to check on the ships behind him. Then he stiffened at the controls. His eyes narrowed. An acute feeling of apprehension rose up from the pit of his stomach and gagged in his throat.

His Flight had banked with him, all in perfect formation—all but the number 3 crate—the crate piloted by Steve Arden. He watched. He saw the number 3 ship wobble, dip one wing. Then his eyes widened and an inarticulate cry rose to his lips. A figure was crawling out of the cockpit—the wild, disheveled figure of Arden. He clung to the cowlings a moment, steadied himself against the blast of the slip-stream. Then he straightened slowly, worked himself from strut to strut to the edge of the wing. He hesitated a moment as if making his last peace with God and man. Then suddenly he flung up his hand in a final salute to the Black Sheep banking around him—and dove deliberately, head first, out into space.

Three thousand feet up in the air, Quinn was sure he felt the thud when Arden landed. He, Quinn, felt sick. He wanted to retch.

CHAPTER III

ASOMBER pall hung heavy over the drome of the Black Sheep that day. From a crew of swashbuckling, hell-raising Sky Devils the Black Sheep had been transformed into a group of sullen, embittered men. Comrades of a score of dog fights, jumped at each other like caged tigers. Casual words were snapped up and made an issue. Bit by bit throughout the day the tension built up until an explosion was inevitable.

It came at mess that night. The food had been left untouched. A final toast had been quaffed to the

departed soul of Steve Arden and the glasses smashed. There was an awkward silence for a moment. Quinn felt the sweat pop out on his brow, glanced nervously about the board and tensed his muscles for action. He was due to pop at any moment but from which direction—from which one of his Black Sheep it would come, he did not know.

Of only one thing was he sure—it would be directed at the kiwi personnel officer, Moyer. He shot a swift glance in Moyer's direction. Moyer was lolling back in his chair, a mocking, sardonic smile on his lips. There was an ominous undertone in the room, like the sound that comes in that second before a mob breaks into violence.

And then a chair crashed back to the wall, shattering the silence like an exploding bomb. Major Nordstrom was on his feet. The blue steel of an automatic glinted in his fist. But the glint in his implacable gray eyes was even more deadly. He pointed the gun at Moyer's chest. His finger constricted slowly on the trigger. Moyer didn't move—not a muscle. He read death in Nordstrom's eyes.

Quinn, too, read death there. He was fascinated, paralyzed to act while he watched the Major's finger constrict slowly on the trigger. Then the spell that held him snapped. He had time for nothing else. With one continuous motion he whipped out his gun, fired from the hip . . .

With wide, unbelieving eyes Nordstrom watched the blood spurt from his wrist, watched the heavy automatic trickle from his nerveless fingers, fall with a metallic clatter to the floor.

"Nice shooting," commented Killer Dake dryly.

There was a concerted, long-exhaled breath from a score of throats.

With one hand Quinn waved his still smoking automatic wildly, tore at his hair with the other. "God," he wailed, "has everyone in this outfit gone nuts?"

Nordstrom eyed him coldly. "Maybe," he clipped. "But I'll owe you for that one, Quinn."

"I saved you from . . . from murder!"

Nordstrom's iron self control snapped suddenly. "So what?" he screamed. "Are you going to stand by and see him murder us all?"

"Silence!" roared Quinn.

But Nordstrom would not be silenced. "To hell with silence. We all saw what he gave Arden this morning. If you were any kind of a man. . ."

Quinn got up from his chair, walked over to Nordstrom, grabbed him by the slack of his tunic. His

face was white, his eyes deadly. "Once before, Major," he said with icy politeness, "I showed you what kind of a man I was. By God, I'm still boss of this man's outfit. When I say silence—I mean silence! Now sit down!"

THE eyes of the two men clashed almost audibly. Then Nordstrom wavered and he sank slowly into his chair. For the space of five long seconds there was not a sound in the room. Then Quinn said quietly: "Sorry, old man, I know how you feel."

"Forget it," muttered Nordstrom.

"We're going to have a little talk with Moyer right now," continued Quinn in a deceptively mild voice. "A little friendly talk." He turned slowly, confronted the personnel officer. His voice hardened. "And get this, kiwi, you're the one who's going to do all the talking. Get going—talk fast—and it better be good."

Moyer had yet to move a muscle. The only sign he gave of the emotion that was surging through him were the twin spots of color that flamed in his ashen cheeks. With an effort he dragged his eyes from Quinn's—let them roam up and down the ring of sullen faces hemming him in. He saw no mercy there—only an implacable hate.

He wet his lips with the point of a dry tongue. "Arden's nerves were shot to hell," he said quietly. "I gave him a sedative, that's all."

Quinn sneered. "Yeah. And your sedative made him so calm that he committed suicide. Think again, bright boy."

Moyer shook his head. "There isn't any more. That's the truth."

Quinn stepped forward, placed the muzzle of his automatic beneath Moyer's chin and snapped up his head. He looked long and steadily into Moyer's eyes. "If you're lying, Moyer," he said at last . . . "if I catch you in one more phony move, I'll do what Nordstrom wanted to do to you. Do you understand?"

Moyer stared back at him, unblinking. "I say to hell with you, Quinn," he said evenly. "Shoot and be damned."

There is no telling what would have happened then, if a new voice—an irritatingly cool and insolent voice—had not projected itself into the proceedings. It came from the doorway. It said: "I say—this is a hell of an outfit. I've heard a lot about the Black Sheep but. . . ." The speaker shrugged.

Quinn turned slowly. His face twisted into a sour scowl of contempt as he surveyed the elegant figure in the doorway. The man was tall; his uniform was

immaculate and his boots were polished to an insulting degree of lustre. The silver bars of a Captain gleamed on his shoulders and a spread of wings was emblazoned on his tunic. It was not all this—bad as it was—that aroused Quinn's instant antagonism. It was the man's insolent attitude as he lounged negligently in the doorway—his superior attitude—his condescending smile as if he had surprised a roomful of ill-mannered kids in a brawl.

"And who the hell are you?" demanded Quinn.

The newcomer tamped a cigarette on a manicured thumbnail. "I'm your latest replacement," he said blandly. "The name is Darcy."

A sudden hushed silence greeted his words.

Darcy lit his cigarette, tossed his match carelessly on the mess-room floor. "Maybe some of you buzzards have heard of me?" he drawled.

Aye, indeed. Who in that room hadn't heard of Dandy Darcy? Dark, ugly things. That he was hell on wings when he was in the air, no one doubted. But there were a hundred and one stories, rumors, suspicions about him, up and down the line. The best of the rumors had it that he was a German agent. It was reported, variously, that he had been cashiered out of the Belgian army; that he had deserted from the British, taking a Colonel's wife with him; that through a hushed up scandal in the French army, he had escaped a firing squad.

AND here he was, turning up in the uniform of the U.S. Air Force, shoulder bars, wings and all.

Quinn stepped across the room to him, thrust out his chin belligerently. "Sure," he said slowly, "we've heard of you, Darcy. And nothing to your credit. You're a Black Sheep, all right. You've come to the right outfit."

Darcy blew smoke towards the ceiling. "Thanks, old man," he purred. "Nothing like putting your cards on the table. Nothing like knowing where you stand. I think I'm going to like you . . . Boilermaker. That's what they call you, isn't it?"

"My pals do, yes," said Quinn. "But that don't go for you, yet."

"Oh, sorry, Captain," said Darcy and Quinn knew that he was being laughed at.

"Listen punk," said Quinn. "You got a name that stinks up and down the line. But that doesn't mean anything to me. My name doesn't smell so good, either. What gets by in this outfit is what you are on the tarmac and up in the air. Fair enough?"

Darcy nodded. "Fair enough."

"Good. That's one side of the story. Now here's the other. One step out of bounds here and I—me personally—will take you apart bit by bit—ship you out of here in a coffin. Got it?"

Darcy nodded absentmindedly. "That's straight enough. Thanks for warning me."

From outside and overhead came the droning roar of motors. Quinn stuck his head outside the door and squinted aloft at the darkening sky. "Well, the Bats are in," he announced with satisfaction. "All hands coming down."

"That's something," remarked Darcy conversationally. "Does it happen often?"

Quinn looked at him sharply. "What do you mean by that crack?"

"Skip it," said Darcy.

Quinn grunted and in the lead showed the way out of the mess shack. Overhead the Bats were slanting down swiftly towards the tarmac. The cherry-red flashes from their exhausts were like flaming comets. Quinn's eyes kindled as he watched the ships come in. Bang-up flying, that. Reckless, devil-may-care maybe, but that was the way he wanted his Black Sheep to be. Each man knew his stuff and when it came to the fine points of flying a winged coffin or getting the most out of a machine-gun, there was little he could teach them.

He could make out the outlines of the flight, now—ebon shapes against the blue-black sky. The red flashes from the exhausts were like burning beacons, each following the other with neat precision and exact distance.

Quinn exhaled a deep sigh of relief. It had become a habit with him, and it made him realize how habitual worry had become of late. Then suddenly the sigh strangled in his throat. His heart leaped upward, then plunged in a sudden violent drop toward the pit of his stomach.

One of the black wings, silhouetted against the sky, had sheared off. The plane quivered an instant in mid-air, then the glowing exhaust made a scarlet arc as the ship fell off on one side.

A wild babble of voices broke out behind him—the rest of the Black Sheep had seen it, too. Someone ripped out a string of blood-curdling oaths. Then as one, with a pounding of feet, the little group raced for the tarmac.

THEY stumbled as they ran, for their eyes were held fascinated by that drama transpiring in the dark

skies above them. The doomed ship spun crazily, its propeller churning the air, as the desperate pilot tried to break his mad rush earthward. The rest of the patrol broke their perfect formation, circled helplessly and futively about their stricken comrade.

With a prayer in his heart, Quinn realized that nothing could be done. Lights flashed on the field. The ambulance bumped by, siren wailing eerily. Quinn was vaguely aware that his legs were flying under him, vaguely aware that he was out-distancing his companions.

The doomed ship headed for the field. In his imagination Quinn could see the horror on the face of the Black Sheep pilot, in his imagination he wrestled the controls even as the pilot did, frantically trying to bring the crippled plane down to the field—and his one slim chance of salvation.

Down it came—growing larger and larger—at a dizzy speed. And a longer pair of legs than Quinn's pounded past him in the gloom.

It was as though the earth rose to meet the ship. In the glare of the lights Quinn saw the crippled crate, saw for a brief instant the white mask of a face in the cockpit. Then with a dull roar, a geyser spurted up and blotted both from his view.

Quinn's heart threatened to burst as he put on a last final burst of speed. But even as the mud and wreckage rained down about him, there was a second deafening explosion. And before he could take another step, a sheet of flame sprang up before him.

He recoiled, throwing his arms up to protect his face from the sudden searing blast. Shielding his mouth and eyes that way, holding his breath to keep from scorching his lungs, he fought his way forward. Someone turned a chemical extinguisher on the blaze—then another—and another. Hissing clouds of steam rose from the wreckage.

But Quinn knew he could never make it to that cockpit. Coughing, choking, sobbing, he fell back before that blazing heat. Then, with a despairing oath, he turned and joined the ring of men who had gathered about the pyre.

To Quinn, Time had ceased to exist. It seemed hours—eternity—since that moment when he had seen the wing of the patrol ship shear off, up there in the sky. As a matter of fact—the tragedy had transpired in a matter of breathless minutes and seconds. He had hardly given up his fight against the flames when a hoarse cry rose from the throats of the assembled men.

Quinn turned. His jaw sagged. The curses died on his lips. For out of that seething holocaust staggered a blackened form. Not one—but two, for the one figure supported, carried, another!

As one man, the assembled flyers and mechanics converged on the pair, dragged them safely out of range of the flames. It was Captain Quinn who took the limp body of Jim Brady from the arms of his rescuer, carried him tenderly toward the waiting ambulance.

THEY never put him in the wagon. At a word from the Doc, Quinn stretched his burden out on the ground, knelt down beside him. The doctor needed but a glance, shook his head.

With a hard lump in his throat that he could not swallow, Quinn slipped an arm under Brady's shoulders. "For God's sake," he mumbled, "what happened?"

The pilot's lips were twisted with pain. He tossed his head feverishly from side to side. "I—I don't know," he answered through clenched teeth. "The wing . . . it just went . . . to pieces . . . like tissue-paper . . . tissue-paper. . ."

His lips clamped shut, tight as a vise. It was obvious that he tried to keep from crying out. His whole body stiffened. He shuddered once, convulsively. Quinn felt weak and nauseated, watching the death agony. He turned to appeal to the Doc for something to ease the dying pilot's last moments, saw that the doctor was attending to the man who had rescued him. Then, for the first time, Quinn realized who it was who had dashed before him into that seething inferno. With a mixture of emotions, he stared at the smoke-blackened face of Dandy Darcy!

Gradually he became aware that the figure in his arms had relaxed. He turned back to Brady, looked down just in time to see the grimace of pain wiped from the pilot's lips by an unseen hand. A half-smile lighted the flyer's face, froze there. A last faint breath—and another Black Sheep pilot winged Westward. Captain Quinn bowed his head in silence.

CHAPTER IV

IF THE BLACK SHEEP HAD BEEN sullen and moody before, they were now sunk into the seventh pit of the seventh hell. First, in the morning, Arden had taken the Dutch out. As calmly as you please he had thumbed his nose at the world and from an altitude of five thousand feet, stepped off into space. Next, at night, coming in to a perfect landing, Brady's crate—for no apparent reason at all, had disintegrated in mid-air. He had died in Darcy's arms. . . .

"No matter what they say about this Darcy guy," said Solomon to Quinn, "you got to hand it to him. It took guts to crash that burning crate."

"Yeah," agreed Quinn, rolling a cigarette. "That mug's got me stumped. How do you figure him?"

"If you ask me," said Solomon, squinting off into space, "that bolo spy stuff is a lot of horse feathers."

"Meaning?"

Solomon spat at a crawling ant, scored a bulls eye. "Meaning Intelligence. Counter espionage stuff."

Quinn snorted. "What the hell would he be doing here at the Black Sheep?"

Solomon looked at him with a disdainful eye, spat disgustedly again. "And of all people, you're asking. Hasn't the outfit been going hay-wire the past two weeks? Didn't Moyer give Arden a pill and didn't Arden take the Dutch out? Ain't that something?" He prodded a stubby forefinger into Quinn's navel. "Didn't the wings of Brady's ship just fold back and go sailing off into space? Ain't that something?"

Quinn's face hardened; his eyes became bleak. "By God," he muttered softly, "maybe you got something there." He ran a gnarled fist around the stubble on his chin. "So you think it's Moyer, eh?" he said, more to himself than to Solomon. "Maybe I shouldn't have stopped Nordstrom this afternoon, after all. . . ."

There was a discreet cough in the darkness behind them. Quinn whirled, reached out a long arm and collared Captain Darcy. He scowled darkly. "So you were eavesdropping?" he challenged.

Darcy shook himself free, patted his tunic into place with irritating calm. "Eavesdropping is a nasty word, Quinn, I just happened to overhear, that's all."

"Yeah? Well, since you heard— what do you say?"

Darcy blinked mysteriously. "I'm saying nothing. I just wanted to find out the shortest road into St. Omer."

"The far side of the tarmac," growled Quinn. "The road to your left. I don't care how potted you get tonight. But remember, you're taking a ship up in the morning."

"You don't have to worry about me," smiled Darcy. "You see, I don't drink. And tomorrow I intend to show you gorillas some real classy flying."

Before either Quinn or Solomon could think up an answer to that one, Darcy stalked away.

Solomon spat after he had gone. "Whether he has guts or hasn't . . . whether he's working for Intelligence or not—I don't like that guy," he said.

Quinn followed Darcy's retreating back across the tarmac. "Neither do I," he answered. "Now why in the hell was he eavesdropping and if he doesn't drink why in the hell is he going into St. Omer?"

There was no answer to that one.

THE dawn came bringing with it a steady downpour of rain. All planes were grounded for the day and Darcy didn't have an opportunity that morning to give the Black Sheep a lesson in the fine points of flying.

But the day's release from the relentless business of "kill or be killed" ten thousand feet above the battle scarred earth, brought no surcease to the dark and troubled souls of Quinn's Black Sheep. If anything, it gave them more time to brood over their troubles, real and imaginary. It was a case of mass hysteria. Some one started the story that they were all jinxed—doomed. The story spread, grew in conviction with each telling.

And through it all, of all the men in the outfit, Moyer the Kiwi and Darcy the Dandy, were the only two who seemed unaffected, untouched by the dread that gripped the squadron. If anything, thought Quinn, those two mugs seemed damned pleased about something.

Halfway through mess that night Quinn grunted, shoved back his plate, scraped back his chair and stalked out of the shack. As he lit a cigarette on the board step outside, Killer Dake joined him. Quinn proffered a crumpled pack of Camels.

"Me, too," said Dake as he took one, scratched a match.

"You, too—what?" grunted Quinn.

"The jitters," said Dake between puffs. "I see Brady taking his last ride . . . and Arden . . . hell, I can't eat."

Quinn snorted like a bull and twin streams of blue smoke jetted from his nostrils. "Something," he said heavily, "is decidedly screwy some place. I've racked my brains till I'm groggy. Hasn't anybody else in this outfit got any ideas?"

The door of the mess shack banged behind them as Jerry Twist emerged.

Quinn raised his voice, pointed his finger at the newcomer. "You, for instance. Jerry—what's going on in this outfit?"

The tall, thin, blue-eyed pilot stared back at him. As one of the original Black Sheep, Jerry Twist had been the life and wit of the squadron. Easy going, good-natured, always calm—a dependable man in a pinch. But now the laugh wrinkles were gone from around his eyes. They were narrowed, suspicious as he stared at Quinn.

"Meaning?" he asked sharply.

Quinn was a bit nonplussed at Twist's manner and reply. His hand dropped to his side. He shrugged. "I'm just asking you. You got eyes—this outfit's going to hell in a nose dive. What's wrong? Got any ideas?"

Twist laughed, suddenly, harshly. "Yeah, I got ideas. Plenty of 'em." He took a step forward, his nostrils flared, his pupils narrowed to pinpoints. "So what?" he demanded belligerently. "You're the bright boy—you're the boss of this outfit. If you think something's wrong with me—or the rest of the bunch—well, figure it out for yourself." And with this jeering challenge, he stalked past them.

A low growl rumbled in Quinn's throat. His cigarette snapped in a glowing arc through the air. His huge fists clenched and he took a long stride in Twist's wake.

BUT before he could catch up with the pilot and whirl him around, Dake reached out and dragged him back.

Quinn tried to shake him off. "Let me go," he demanded, glaring after Twist's retreating back. "I *am* the boss of this outfit. And by God, I'll show that son of a . . ."

"Lay off—lay off," said Dake hurriedly. "Can't you see?"

Quinn hesitated. "See what?" he growled.

Dake shook his head, waited until the tall pilot was headed for his own quarters, and well out of ear-shot, before he continued. And when at last he did speak, there was a note of excitement in his voice.

"No—you wouldn't see. But me—Killer Dake—I should of wised up long ago. I been a gangster—a

gunman . . . hell, Jack, I even used to peddle the damn stuff."

"Peddle what stuff?" said Quinn. "What the hell are you talking about?"

Dake looked off in the direction where Twist had disappeared. "Yeah," he said softly. "I've seen snow-birds before."

For a moment Quinn did not understand. Then suddenly he got it. His momentary anger evaporated. Instead, he felt an icy chill in the vicinity of his stomach.

"Dope," Dake went on. "I been watching Jerry, there, for the last couple of days. Sometimes his hands shake. Sometimes his eyes are wide and dull-looking. Then all of a sudden the pupils close to pinpoints. Sap that I am—I should of wised up long ago."

For a long moment a heavy silence hung between the two men. So Jerry Twist—laughing, easy-going Jerry Twist—was taking dope! Had anyone else suggested that, Quinn would have hauled off and socked him. But Dake—Killer Dake—wise in the ways of the underworld—would not be mistaken.

Quinn's shoulders sagged under this newest burden. He felt old, tired. "I suppose you're right," he said slowly. "But I never suspected it. Who'd have thought Jerry was a hop-head. He's been with us a long time—I picked him myself when I organized the Black Sheep in the first place. How's been getting the stuff all along?"

Killer Dake raised an eyebrow at this last question. "Now you're asking something," he said softly. He scowled at the flaming sunset on the far horizon, but he did not really see the shifting colors. He chewed savagely at his lower lip. His face screwed up in a grimace as his tnmemory sought something that eluded it.

Then suddenly he whistled sharply between his teeth. He snapped his fingers, whirled on Quinn.

"Jack! Listen!" His voice was edgy. "Remember the night Steve Arden raised a rumpus in the cafe? Do you remember how he looked—and how he acted?"

Almost mechanically, Quinn screwed up his face, too. Swiftly he recalled the events of that hectic night. Then, as the full implications of Dake's words filtered in on his mind, he too grew excited.

"You mean Steve Arden had been taking the stuff, too! By God—you're right. That's what wrecked him, then. That's what made him bail out over the side of his ship. Then it wasn't just because the dame—Gabrielle—had turned him down cold. I guess that didn't help any. But his nerves must have been ragged. Probably he realized that he was taking a short cut to hell, either way, and decided to get it over with."

DAKE nodded. But his mind was far ahead of Quinn's. "If I'm right about Steve—and I know damn well I am—you realize what that means? Hell, Jack, it's not likely you had two junkies in this squadron. Jerry Twist hasn't been taking the stuff all along. No, Jack. Somebody's been feeding it to them . . . somebody's been getting to the pilots and starting them on the habit. . .

Quinn swore—a dreadful, bloodcurdling oath. And the thunder-cloud that settled on his face and the lightning gleam that flashed in his eyes—boded no good for that "somebody."

"So Jerry Twist called me 'bright boy,' eh?" he said grimly. "Told me to find out for myself. Well, I will. I'll get the dirty rat—whoever it is—if it's the last thing I ever do. So help me."

He stared somberly off in the direction in which Jerry Twist had disappeared. With grim relish he thought of what he intended to do to the dirty rat who was slyly feeding dope to his best flyers, making jittery wrecks out of them, driving them to suicide. But before he could have the great pleasure of carrying out those threats—well, he would have to catch the rat, first.

It would be futile, he realized, to comfort Twist and demand the truth. The flyer's attitude had made that plain. There was only one other way—to shadow Jerry and wait patiently until the flyer led him to the rat's nest.

Quinn glanced at the sky. The sun had just dipped below the horizon and the orange and vermilion of the sky was already turning to purples and mauves. Even now faint violet shadows crept out from the walls of the hangars and gathered in pools on the tarmac. He nodded abruptly to Dake.

"Well, you've given me something to sink my teeth into, anyway," he said. "I don't have to say—keep your mouth shut. I'll be seeing you."

Apparently Dake divined his intention. "Want company?"

Quinn shook his head, stepped down to the ground.

"Well—good hunting," Dake called softly after him, as he headed in the general direction of the flyers' quarters.

CHAPTER V

IT WAS PAST TWELVE that night when Jerry Twist slid cautiously out of his cubicle and glancing once swiftly about him, cut across the tarmac and headed for St. Omer. His chin was sunk deep into the collar of his coat and he walked with a long, nervous stride as if he were in a hurry to get somewhere. As a matter of fact he was in such a devil of a hurry that he failed entirely to note the dark figure that shadowed him.

Quinn, ever keeping to the shadows had no difficulty in keeping Twist in view. The trail led straight to St. Omer. But there, instead of turning down the main street and heading for the brightly lighted estaminet of Raymond Duplese, Twist cut across the square and flattened himself in the dark doorway of the white-washed, three story house that stood on the far corner.

Just in time Quinn dropped behind a convenient watering-trough and watched. Save for one window on the second floor, the house was dark and shuttered. He recalled now, with heightened interest that some one had once told him that this was the house occupied by Gabrielle Fontaine.

Again the girl with the seductive smile had entered the scene. Arden had wanted to strangle her. Arden had committed suicide instead. Now here was Twist, come sneaking up to her door in the dead of night. Had he come to strangle Gabrielle, or to beg her, as Arden had done, for more dope.

Quinn's eyes were hard and bitter. If the girl was the one responsible for making hop-heads of his men—God help her. For as surely as he was Boilermaker Quinn—for as surely as he was boss of the Black Sheep, her sex would not save her.

From narrowed eyes he watched Twist. He thought that he heard a discreet knock. Then there came the creak of hinges, the door opened and Twist disappeared inside.

Quinn waited a moment behind the watering trough, then darted into the heavy shadows along the side of the house. He made a swift circuit of the building. There were no lights but the one that showed in front on the second floor. The rear windows, too, were tightly shuttered.

But Quinn had determined to gain entrance to the

house and no such flimsy thing as an ancient shutter was going to stop him. Inserting the blade of his knife between the slats of the shutter he felt for and found the hook that held it. A moment later he was cautiously prying up the sash.

It protested dully and his pulse pounded heavily under the fear that he would be discovered. He waited, tense, expectant. Nothing happened. He pried up the sash another six inches, just enough for him to get his bony skull through. He dared not risk any more.

It was a struggle, a tight squeeze but he made it at last, dropped silently on cat's paws into the room beyond. He waited a moment until his eyes became accustomed to the Stygian darkness, then worked his way along the wall to a door.

He turned the knob so slowly that his muscles ached. Outside the room the going was easier. The darkness was diffused by a glimmer of light that seeped down the well of a flight of stairs from the floor above. Quinn did not hesitate. Gun in hand he proceeded cautiously up those stairs, testing each tread before he put his weight down on it.

At the top he found himself in a broad, central hallway. Light shown out from an open door at the far end. Voices came from the room—the high-keyed, agitated voice of Jerry Twist—the mocking voice of Gabrielle Fontaine.

Quinn tiptoed down the hallway, took up a position of vantage behind the drapes that hung at the door and peered into Gabrielle's sitting room.

GABRIELLE, wrapped in some flimsy negligee, was draped negligently in a chaise-longue. A cigarette in a long, ivory holder drooped in her languid hand.

Twist, his hair disheveled, his eyes wild, was pacing restlessly before her. Abruptly he came to a halt facing the girl.

His lips twisted and his hands clenched into fists at his sides.

"You're a devil," he said harshly. "A she-devil."

Gabrielle laughed mockingly, blew a ring of smoke towards the ceiling.

"But a lovely she-devil, you must admit, *mon ami*."

Twist's eyes were anguished. "I didn't come here for that."

"No?"

"No. You know what I came for."

Gabrielle rose slowly from the chaise-longue, walked over to Twist and draped her arms around his neck. "But of course," she said with a smile.

Twist babbled in his eagerness. "Then—then you'll give me more of the stuff?"

Gabrielle laughed. "But have you forgotten our bargain?" she asked mockingly.

Twist cursed savagely. "You have no right to make such a bargain, damn you. Haven't I paid enough? I've brought you information for the last time. I've sold out my pals to you for the last time." His voice rose in a frenzy and his hands—like two claws—trembled at Gabrielle's white throat. "You've made a traitor of me but before I go to hell altogether, I'll see that you're there first."

For a moment Quinn thought that he was going to leap at her. But Gabrielle did not move. From level eyes she stared into Twist's distorted face. "You have forgotten something," she said calmly. "I have made of you something else besides a traitor. I have made you a slave to drugs. My! You dare not kill me."

Twist's clawed hands trembled wildly. He panted. Then he cracked, dropped to one knee, grabbed the girl's hand in supplication.

"Yes, yes—I'm your slave now," he babbled. "I'll—I'll do anything you say. Just give me another shot." Gabrielle straightened to her full height and there was a gleam of triumph in her eyes.

Quinn was sick at heart and his soul revolted within him at the pitiful spectacle Twist was making of himself. He could stomach no more. Victim of a dozen conflicting emotions he retreated down the hall, crept down the stairs and fled from the house. He was suffocating. He needed air.

Ten minutes later the door to Gabrielle's house opened and Jerry Twist stepped out into the night. His stride was steady now and the pupils of his eyes narrowed to pin-points. He had taken but twenty paces when Quinn moved out of the shadows and grabbed him by the arm.

TWIST scowled and he tried to shake himself free. Quinn's fingers dug deeper into his arm, held him there.

"What do you want?" snarled Twist.

An all-consuming anger flamed in Quinn's veins. "So you're her slave, huh?" he sneered. "You know what I would call you . . . a rat!"

Twist's lips went white. He was suddenly limp in Quinn's grip. "What . . . how . . ."

"I was there," said Quinn bitterly. "I followed you. I broke in the rear of the house and took in the whole dirty scene. Twist, you're lower than the lowest thing

that crawls. I should shoot you like a dog. I should. ...” Then his anger evaporated and a great compassion filled his heart. “Good God, Jerry,” he pleaded, “you and I are pals. Why didn’t you come to me? Lord, man, I’d put my hand in the fire up to here for you and you know it. Why—why didn’t you come to me?”

Twist did not answer. The fire had faded from his eyes and he hung his head.

“You’re right, Jack,” he said in a dead voice. “I am a rat.”

“Forget it,” said Quinn. “I didn’t mean that. You’re not responsible.”

“But I am,” said Twist, still dead of voice.

“Forget it,” snapped Quinn. “I’ll send you away to a hospital, somewhere. They’ll fix you up and in a couple of months you’ll be back busting the skies wide open with the rest of the Black Sheep.”

Twist shook his head.

“No one will ever know,” persisted Quinn.

“You’re a good guy, Jack,” said Twist. “But it’s too late. I would know. I would never be able to forget. It’s bad enough when a man sells out his country. But there’s no hope for him when he sells out his pals. I sold you out, Jack—sold you out for a lousy shot of hop. It’s just as well it’s ending this way.”

If Boilermaker Quinn had been susceptible to tears he would have cried. “What way, Jerry?” he asked.

For answer, before Quinn could stop him, Twist yanked the automatic from his hip, jabbed the muzzle into his mouth and fired.

For an anguished moment Quinn stood helplessly over the body of his dead friend. He was stricken as a father might be on seeing a favorite child struck down. He stopped swiftly to pick up the limp body. Then the shrill blast from a M.P.’s whistle on the far side of the square, arrested him. Not stopping then to analyze his reasons or his emotions, he muttered a “so long, pal,” and melted into the shadows.

Hurrying back to the squadron Quinn had a chance to think, to co-ordinate the wild tumult of thoughts that raced through his brain. First, he was glad that he had left Twist lying there, that he had not appeared on the scene. Jerry Twist was dead and there was nothing more he could do for him. But it would be much easier for him, Quinn, to avenge that death, if he continued to keep in the dark. He had work to do—dirty spy work—and only too well he knew that that kind of business is carried on far more effectively in the dark.

HE WAS shocked by the scene he had witnessed in Gabrielle’s sitting room, followed so swiftly by

Jerry Twist’s suicide. The chances were that half his outfit had been seduced by the girl. Surely Arden. He suddenly recalled the scene that had taken place immediately preceding Arden’s final take off. Moyer had forced a white pill on Arden, had compelled him to take it. Was that the dope? Was Moyer acting as agent for the girl?

Quinn longed to have a final showdown with the kiwi personelle officer. But wisdom dictated that he should not show his cards prematurely. Moyer could not escape him; nor the girl. Much as he hated the thought of permitting them to continue furnishing dope to his Black Sheep, he decided to give them a little more rope in the hope that they would lead him to others in the ring.

There was a great stir of excitement in the outfit when word of Twist’s suicide got about, it subsided as quickly as it had risen—subsided into a sullen muttering that put Quinn’s teeth on edge. However, he said nothing and when at sunset the following afternoon, tape were played over Jerry Twist’s grave, he knew that he was sitting on a keg of T.N.T. and that Gabrielle had already lighted the fuse.

After the funeral he returned to his shack in a vain effort to seek solace and a course of action from a bottle of Scotch.

At the second drink Dake pushed his way through the door, unannounced, uninvited. Killer Dake’s face was an unemotional mask, as usual, but from the manner in which he tossed down his drink, Quinn knew that he was upset.

The two men drank in silence for a while. Then Dake said: “He was a good guy.”

“Yeah,” said Quinn noncommittally, squinting through his glass.

“Well?” said Dake.

“You were right,” said Quinn. “Dope.”

Dake eyed him narrowly. “Well?” he challenged again.

Quinn heaved a shuddering sigh. “He pulled it right in front of my eyes. I couldn’t stop him.”

“Go on. What else. What happened before that?”

“Nothing,” said Quinn.

“Nuts!” said Dake. “So you’re clamming on me, huh? Well, you can’t kid me. To hell with you.”

He slammed down his glass, started for the door. Quinn was on the point of calling him back, then changed his mind. He knew that he could trust Dake but he was afraid the Killer would take things into his own hands. And he was not quite ready for the kiss-off. Not quite.

Quinn's thoughts became bitter, heavy with a fatal foreboding. If Killer Dake was jumping out of his skin, what must be the condition of the other men?

CHAPTER VI

THE BLACK SHEEP HAD MADE plenty of records in the past but now it seemed that they were shooting at a brand new one. Two suicides in as many days.

And all, thought Quinn, because of a pretty face, come-hither eyes and a pair of legs. Quinn rumbled profanely in his throat. All dames were poison. This one, especially—this Gabrielle—damn her treacherous heart—he'd, twist her pretty neck for her—he'd snap her spine into a dozen pieces.

He started up from his chair at the impulse, then sank back again. Gabrielle was clever; she knew how to play her infamous game. But in the bolo spy business a man usually stood behind a woman. He had to get that man.

Pondering the problem Quinn asked himself a hundred questions to none of which he had the answers. He was sure of only one thing. His outfit—the Black Sheep—the toughest squadron along the lines—was being shot to hell by an insidious woman and insidious dope.

Dake had been the first one to tip him off and again he was tempted to let the Killer in on the secret of the girl. Then, on second thought, he changed his mind. Less chance of a slip-up if he played it alone, at this stage of the game. There would be plenty of chance for Dake to take a hand at the showdown.

And to hasten that showdown, Quinn arrived early that night at the estaminet in St. Omer. He smelled heavily of liquor. He lurched wildly as he barged through the door. He staggered across the room and gave a beautiful impersonation of a drunk as he weaved to the bar. He banged loudly with his fist on the counter.

"Whiskey," he roared thickly. "Whiskey, you frog eating son of a frog."

Duplese, always by the till, turned his blue-lensed glasses on him. "Oh, so it is the Captain Quinn, no?" he asked.

"Me in person," said Quinn.

The sullen Pierre placed a drink before him. Quinn snatched it up, downed it at a gulp and banged the glass down on the bar. He made a wry face. "What rotgut you sell, Duplese," he growled. "What robber prices you charge for it." Quinn winked, leered at Pierre. "Come on, Frozen-face, fill it up again."

With the second drink in his hand he leaned back against the bar and surveyed the smoke-fogged room. It was crowded, as usual; more so if anything. And the dozen or so men from the Black Sheep Squadron were drinking harder than customary. Poor devils, thought Quinn; he didn't blame them.

At a small table at the end of the bar, near the stairs that led to the rooms above, he spotted Gabrielle. She was entertaining a group of his own men and in contrast to their hang-dog faces she seemed more vivacious and radiant than ever. She bestowed smiles, intimate glances, swift touches of the hand with equal charity.

She was good. Quinn had to admit that. He noted for the first time how the tightly fitted lines of her dress, accentuated the sweep of her breast, how the murky lights made alabaster of the skin of her bare arms. Beneath the table the seductive curves of her legs were clad in the sheerest of silk.

After the mud and the filth of the war—after the harsh brutalities of an inhuman struggle where death was the only winner—it was no wonder the men fell for her. After living on the brink for days, they were avid for life—avid for the life that could be found in Gabrielle's arms.

LOOKING at her, smiling, laughing, it was hard to believe that she was a thing of evil; that she had betrayed her country for God knows what reason. It was hard to believe that she was the girl who had sent Jerry Twist to his death with a cynical shrug of her shoulders.

And yet he had seen . . . he had heard . . .

Quinn tossed down his drink, flung a hundred franc note on the bar and ordered a bottle of Scotch. Then, dangling the bottle in his hairy fist he weaved across the floor to Gabrielle's table. He sat the bottle before her, pulled up a chair. "My contribution," he said thickly.

Gabrielle flashed him a smile, placed her hand lightly on his arm. Beneath the table he felt her knee brush against his. "A celebration, *mon capitain*?" she murmured.

"Yeah," said Quinn heavily. "I'm celebrating a funeral—the funeral of a pal."

Gabrielle looked sympathetic. "Ah—that is too bad. This war—will it never end? But to die on the field of glory . . . that is where you gallant men have the better of us poor women. No? You die like heroes."

Quinn laughed drunkenly. "This one didn't. Maybe you knew him, baby? A guy named Jerry Twist. Blew out his brains on the Rue Pellerines this afternoon."

Gabrielle drew in her breath sharply, veiled her eyes and nodded her head. "Ah, yes," she said. "I think I remember him. A nice boy. This war—it is terrible. It does things to people. It is too bad—too bad."

Quinn filled up the glasses and they all drank. Then Quinn had two more snorts in quick succession. His voice became louder—he started to sing bawdy songs—he threw his arm around Gabrielle's shoulders.

She laughed at him, scolded, pouted—pretended to be shocked. Then after a little while she got up. She leaned over to whisper in Quinn's ear. The firm roundness of her breast pressed against his shoulder. "I must go now. I'll be back. Wait for me," she said.

Turning swiftly she disappeared up the stairs.

With a silly grin on his face, Quinn shuffled to his feet. . . . He winked broadly at the men, started after Gabrielle, then turned and recovered the bottle. With it swinging from his fist again, he started up the stairs after her.

The stairs were dark, narrow and musty. They smelled foully of stale beer with subtle overtones of the intriguing perfume Gabrielle had been using. That made the trail easy. Quinn stopped playing the part of a drunk and climbed cautiously into the darkness above. He came out on a narrow landing that gave onto an even narrower hallway. A smoking oil lamp hung from a bracket at the far end. By the side of it he made out three doors.

He pressed his ear to the first—to the second. Nothing. Behind the third door he heard the clink of glasses, the scrape of a chair, then Gabrielle's laugh. It sounded brittle, a little forced, thought Quinn. He listened intently. Some one growled something—a man. He couldn't catch the words or recognize the voice.

But it was enough for Quinn. Gabrielle the Temptress was entertaining. The chances were, one of his own men. Okay, he would do a little entertaining on his own.

KEENLY aware of the game he was playing and the danger it entailed of a knife slipped between his ribs, he tiptoed carefully back to the landing, then staggered and banged his way along the wall to the third door.

Boldly he tried the knob, heaved with his shoulder. To his mild surprise the door burst inward and he staggered into the center of the room.

Quinn didn't know who was more surprised at his abrupt entrance—himself, or the four people who whirled to face him. Gabrielle was there, of course. She seemed annoyed. She was biting her under lip and breathing a little faster. Quinn took in the other three with a swift, all inclusive glance. Moyer was one. That was bad. He was leaning back in his chair, one leg hooked over the arm. A glint of a smile flitted across his face.

Darcy was number two. Immaculate, supercilious as he breathed on his finger nails and buffed them against the sleeve of his coat. There were vast possibilities in the combination. Moyer and the girl-spies. Darcy—Intelligence; counter-espionage.

And the third man present was Sam Steele—one of the original Black Sheep and a particular pal of Quinn's. He had a sullen, angry expression on his face. He stared doggedly at the floor and Quinn noticed that his hands trembled. Quinn looked at him sharply, swiftly and read all the signs. He, too, was going the same way Jerry Twist had gone.

It took a supreme effort for Quinn to restrain himself. To hell with this spy business! It wasn't his style of fighting. He wanted to bust things wide open then and there. Instead he waved the bottle, grinned foolishly.

There was a constrained silence for a moment broken by Darcy's mocking voice.

"Welcome, Captain. Another hero come to pay court at the feet of the lovely Gabrielle?"

Quinn looked at him stupidly. "Huh? Yeah. Sorry for busting in like that." He winked obscenely. "I didn't know the little girl had company." He laughed raucously, lined up the glasses. "Three of you. What a girl—and here I was thinking I was papa."

"You're drunk," accused Moyer.

"The hell I am," said Quinn indignantly. "Come on, Kiwi, have a drink on me. You're not such a bad egg after all."

Moyer sneered. "Now I know you're drunk."

Quinn pretended to become sore. "Oh, so you won't drink with me, huh? Too good for me, are you? Well, the hell with you. Sammy Steele will have a drink with a pal. What about it, Sam?"

Steele did not reply; he still continued to stare at the floor.

"Well, the hell with you, too," growled Quinn. "How about, you, Darcy?"

"I don't drink with drunks," said Darcy coolly.

Quinn blustered belligerently. "The hell with all of you guys," he growled. "I didn't come Up here to drink with any of you, anyway. I came up to have a drink with doll-face." He threw his arm around Gabrielle's shoulder, drew her close to him. "How about it, baby?"

She struggled in his embrace, shook herself free.

"I think you had better go, Quinn," said Darcy slowly, studying the tips of his polished nails. "The lady says—no."

"To hell with her," muttered Quinn. "To hell with all of you." He tossed off his drink in one gulp, waved the bottle wildly. "If my liquor ain't good enough for you, I'll drink it myself," and with the words he slumped heavily down in a chair.

NO ONE talked but Quinn. He babbled on endlessly but from beneath his shaggy brows he studied the faces of the other four persons in the room. Only Sam Steele's was easy to read. The others were enigmatic. Moyer was amused. Darcy was bored. Gabrielle's face was an empty mask of beauty. It was a stalemate. They all realized it.

After a few minutes the girl flashed them all a smile, said sweetly, "I think, now, that you had better go. All of you." She stretched her arms over her head, arched her back, yawned prettily. "Is it that I am so tired. And as for you, my bad boy, Captain Quinn. . . She fluttered her eyelids seductively, ran her hand down from the white column of her throat to her hip . . . "Maybe some other time Gabrielle will drink with you."

CHAPTER VII

ON THE WAY BACK to the 'drome with his three companions—Moyer, Darcy and Steele—Quinn continued to play the part of a drunk. But once he had seen Moyer and Darcy safely in their cubicles he became suddenly sober. He hooked his arm under Steele's, said gruffly: "Come along, bud, you and I are going to have a little talk."

Steele hung back. Quinn increased the pressure on his arm, said threateningly: "Better come." Then his pent up emotions exploded. "What the hell, Sam, you and I are pals, aren't we? You can talk to me. You're in a jam and I want to get you out of it."

Under the light of the pale moon, Steele's face was white and drawn. His eyes burned feverishly in their sockets. "Then you're not drunk—you weren't drunk? It was all a gag?"

"All a gag," echoed Quinn grimly. "I saw that tramp go upstairs so I followed her. Busted in on you and the others. Come on into my shack. We'll talk it over."

Steele's voice was hollow. "It's no use, Jack," he said hopelessly. "I'm through."

"The hell you are," said Quinn. "Not without a fight, you're not." Forcibly he led Steele to his cubicle, propped him in a chair, poured a drink for him. Steele downed it greedily, sank his chin in his hands for a moment, then jumped up and started pacing the floor. His movements were jerky. He chewed at his under lip until the blood came.

Quinn watched him from pained and stricken eyes. His pal! One of the best flyers in the outfit. Now a jittery shell of a man. A murderous rage rose up within him. It was bad enough that his lads had to check out with a burst of Spandau lead in their guts. But this way. . .

"Well?" he said gruffly.

Steele checked his nervous pacing, flung out his arm in an impassioned gesture.

"What do you want to know?" he asked. "What are you rubbing it in for? You know the answer. Dope."

"Yes," said Quinn heavily. "I know that. You and Arden and Twist. And God knows how many of the others." Steele grabbed him by the slack of his tunic, thrust his face within an inch of Quinn's nose and bared his teeth.

"Yes, dope," he screamed. "And I got to have it, I tell you." His voice rose on a high note of hysteria. "I've got to have it and you nor anybody else is going to take it away from me."

He was working himself up into a maniacal frenzy. There was only one thing to do. Quinn did it. His heavy fist moved with lightning precision through six inches of space, clipped Steele behind the ear and knocked him cold.

"Sorry, pal," muttered Quinn a few minutes later, as he brought Steele back to consciousness. "Sorry, but I had to do it. Now maybe we can talk sensibly. No hard feelings."

"No hard feelings, Jack," replied Steele. "You better kick me out of the squadron. That's the best thing."

"I'm kicking you into a hospital," growled Quinn. "But first I got to find out things. The girl started feeding you dope, huh?"

Steele nodded, then grabbed him by the arm. "But you got to know how it was. I didn't know it was dope. I had just seen Butch Holden shot down that day. I was a bit busted up. She said it would calm me down—make me sleep. . . ." He laughed harshly. "Damn her soul to hell, I haven't had a minute's sleep since."

HE broke off, shuddered.

"Go on," urged Quinn.

"Well, she played me for a sucker—led me on and on—all the time feeding me the junk until I couldn't live without it. . . ."

"And then?" prompted Quinn.

Steele hung his head. "And then she propositioned me. Either I brought her information or I got no more dope. I held out for a week. I was going nuts." His voice dropped. "Tonight I could stand no more." He lifted his head, looked Quinn full in the eye. "Kill me if you want, Jack. I don't blame you. I went there tonight to sell you out—to sell the Black Sheep out." He took out his automatic, placed it on Quinn's knees. "Go ahead. Do your stuff."

Quinn picked up the automatic and tossed it on his bunk. "But you didn't sell us out," he said. "Moyer was there—and Darcy—and then I busted in."

Steele nodded.

"Forget all that," said Quinn. "That's all in the past. I'll see that you're cured, Steele. What I want to know now is who stands back of the girl?"

Steele laughed mirthlessly. "Haven't you tumbled to that?" An insane glint came to his eyes. "I'll tell you but you got to promise me you'll wipe him out—for me and Arden and Twist. You'll take no chances. You'll shoot him down like a dog tonight. Promise, Jack."

Quinn nodded. "Take it easy, pal," he said. "I promise. Who is it?"

Steele rose to his feet, shook his clenched fist at the ceiling. "The rat behind the girl is . . ."

His words were snapped off by the sharp explosion of a gun. A third eye—a third red eye had appeared suddenly in the center of Lieutenant Steele's forehead. He swayed a moment, his teeth bared, his fists still raised in that last accusing gesture. Then he buckled at the knees, plunged forward on his face.

The acrid odor of burnt powder wafted in from the open window. But by the time Quinn reached the door of his shack, the company street was empty.

The whistle of the guard shrilled off to his left. Loud, excited voices rose from the adjoining cubicle. The squadron came to life with a roar.

Heavy of heart—Quinn had aged years in the past five minutes—he crossed slowly to Steele's body. He looked down at the crumpled figure with a deep compassion. "Happy landing in hell, old man," he said softly. Then he brushed the back of his hand across his eyes, straightened his shoulders. His face became hard as granite. "It's still a promise," he said. "I'll find him and when I do, he'll die like a dog."

CHAPTER VIII

IT WAS LONG HOURS AFTER, when the excitement had died down somewhat, that Quinn finally crawled into his cot. He was dog tired, yet he could not sleep. He tossed restlessly from side to side on his pillow, the ruby tip of an endless chain of cigarettes, marking the slowly crawling minutes. His shack seemed haunted—haunted by the soul of Lieutenant Steele, murdered there a few short hours before.

In the darkness Quinn seemed to see his dope ridden eyes boring into his own. Still ringing in his ears was Steele's last impassioned appeal. If only he had named the man—before that murderous shot from the window.

As he lay there, sweating in the darkness, Quinn made a vow . . . that he would not rest until he had tracked down the rat responsible for the deaths of his three companions. And he was acutely aware that he had to do so soon. At the rate things were progressing, he would have no outfit at all within another week.

He had his finger on the girl. The girl had led him to Moyer and Darcy. Was one of those two the traitor? Quinn sat up in bed. By God, what if they were working together! That was a new angle.

Quinn wasn't the only one having difficulty wooing sleep that night. It was close to four o'clock, when in one of the cubicles a hand threw back the covers on the cot. A silent figure eased his weight to the floor. He was fully clothed save for his boots and now picking these up he tiptoed to the door. He paused here a minute, examined his automatic, saw that it was in perfect working order.

Then stealthily he crept out of the shack and keeping ever to the patches of dark shadow made his way swiftly towards the hangars.

A moment after he had disappeared, a second door of a second cubicle was opened cautiously and a second mysterious figure emerged. He looked quickly up and down the rutted street, then headed off in the direction the first prowler had taken.

The moon peeked out from behind a bank of clouds for a moment and glistened coldly off the blued steel of an automatic clutched in his fist.

At the far corner of the hangars, the first prowler halted. A moment later a muffled figure emerged from the shadows. It was the sullen faced Pierre Duplese, brother of the proprietor of the estaminet at St. Omer. The two men put their heads together. Their words were hurried, urgent. And so preoccupied were they with what they had to say, that they failed to note the ominous shadow that crept closer and closer to them. And in the hand of the shadow there was still clutched the blue-steel automatic.

Quinn's thoughts would give him no peace, as he still tossed on his bed. Over and over in his mind two names spun dizzily. Moyer . . . Darcy. Which one? He could stand the suspense no longer. At the risk of uncovering his hand, he had to have a showdown then. Action—anything but this laying in bed waiting for something to happen.

With a muttered oath he kicked his feet over the side of the cot, flung himself into his clothes. A minute later he was knocking at the door of Moyer's quarters. No answer. He knocked again. Still no answer. He went in—struck a match. Moyer's bed had been slept in but it was now empty.

Quinn's nose dilated and a pulse beat dully in his throat. So! More funny stuff, huh?

HE LEFT the shack hurriedly, hastened down the row and rapped at the door of Moyer's shack. Again no answer to his first and second knock. Again, when he had entered and struck a match, he found an empty bed, still warm.

He was standing there, in the center of the room, trying to put two and two together, when the shot came. It rang out sharp and clear in the still night air and galvanized him into action. With one leap he was out of the shack. From the sound of it, the shot had come from the hangars. Blindly he tore through the night in that direction, as for the second time that evening the squadron erupted into life behind him.

At the far corner of Number 1 Hangar, Quinn stumbled over the body. The man lay on his face, his right leg doubled up under his body, his left arm

outflung. A curse ripped off Quinn's lips as he dropped down beside him, then a grunt of relief as he saw that the man was not in uniform. None too gently he rolled the body over, knew that his hands were sticky with blood. He fumbled for a match. It exploded like a bomb in the blackness of the night. And by its glare he stared down into the distorted face of Pierre Duplese.

Pierre was dead. It was written plainly in his bared teeth, his wildly staring eyes. No need to feel for a pulse or heart beat. A scowl made a deep V between Quinn's brows. What the hell was Duplese doing on the tarmac—dead or alive? Who had killed him—and why? The answer to the last question was fairly easy . . . Moyer or Darcy. Both of them had been on the prowl. But why—that was the baffler.

The flickering match singed his fingers, went out. Behind him from the mess shack came excited voices—shouted questions and answers. Quinn struck a second match and wasting no time in futile speculation, began to search the clothes of the dead man.

He found the usual assortment of odds and ends—a few francs, a key, a sack of tobacco. Innocent-looking stuff, surely. And then his eyes glinted. Sticking from the top of Duplese's boot, he felt something hard. It was the neck of a bottle. He yanked it free, but no liquor bottle, this.

Carefully he pulled the cork. Acrid fumes assailed his nostrils; made his eyes smart and water. Hastily he rammed the stopper home again. From its evil smell, the concoction in the bottle was compounded of every vile chemical in the laboratory. What its purpose was, why it had been hidden in the boot of the dead Duplese, he did not know. But for no good end—that he was convinced. He would have it analyzed and then. . . .

There was a swift and furtive movement behind him. Quinn sensed, rather than saw it. He smelled danger, too. He whirled to meet it, flung up his guard—but too late. Something hard crashed down on the back of his skull. A bomb exploded in his brain and a weird display of purple lights danced before his eyes. A wave of blackness rose up to engulf him. There was a steady roaring in his ears—it grew louder—louder. . . .

Then the roaring, the lights and everything else went out as he hit the ground.

Quinn came to a short time later, gagging over a slug of whiskey. He opened his eyes, sat up, spluttered. Half the outfit were gathered anxiously about him. He

felt about him on the ground. "Where's that bottle?" he demanded thickly.

DAKE pressed the bottle of Scotch to his lips. Roughly he brushed it aside. "No—not that bottle." Then he began to curse, fluently, savagely. It was plain to see what had happened. Someone else was interested in that bottle. That someone else had damn near split his skull to get it. His profanity reached perfection.

"Listening to that," said Killer Dake drily, "I guess the Skipper's okay. What happened? Did you plug Frenchy, here? And who sapped you?"

"I wish to God I knew," said Quinn, climbing to his feet. "I didn't plug Frenchy. But my guess is that the guy who got him—got me." He glanced around at the faces hemming him in. "What do you say, Moyer?" he flung out.

Moyer toyed with his moustache. "I wouldn't know," he said.

Quinn snarled, turned to Darcy. "And what are your ideas on the matter, Dandy?"

Darcy grinned insolently. "It couldn't have been me," he said, "for if I had socked you over the head from behind . . ." he shrugged.

"I don't guess it'd be any use examining the guns of you muggs," said Quinn sullenly.

"Not a bit," agreed Darcy blandly. "You were out a full twenty minutes. And during that time, the killer had plenty of time to clean and reload his gun. Too bad, Skipper. Better luck next time."

Dake whistled through his teeth. "He's one of these smart guys, Jack," he said. "Shall I take him over?"

"No," said Quinn. "I'm saving that job for myself—later. After we get this stink cleared up." He strode over to Darcy, grabbed him by the slack of the coat and juttied his pugnacious chin into Darcy's face. "I don't suppose," he said, "there's any use asking why you were prowling around tonight?"

"Of course there is," drawled Darcy. "Simple. I heard somebody sneak down the duckboards past my shack and I went out to investigate."

"Yeah? Like hell you did," sneered Quinn. "Took time out to get dressed first, I suppose." He whirled on Moyer. "And what's your song-and-dance?"

Moyer kicked at a clod of dirt. "Darcy's story is as good as any," he said.

"You're both liars," said Quinn. "Okay, bright-boys, have your fun. I'll get to the bottom of this yet. And when I do. . . ." He grabbed Moyer's nose between

thumb and forefinger, twisted. Moyer paled visibly and his eyes were agate balls of hate. But he said nothing.

"Go ahead," taunted Quinn. "Make something of it."

For answer, Moyer turned on his heel and stalked away.

There was no more sleep for Jack Quinn that night. The strange death of Duplese, the knock-out blow that he himself had received, the loss of the bottle all bothered him. Particularly the latter. He would have given a year's pay to get his hands on that bottle again.

He groused about it to Dake until the Killer yawned frankly in his face and advised him to sleep it off. Then he went back to his own quarters and proceeded to pace the floor. His head throbbed dully; he could not have slept if he wanted to. When the weary dawn came at last, Captain Quinn had a vile headache and a nasty temper.

WHEN he reached the field, the first faint pinkish glow was lighting the east. A chill wind touched his face with damp, ghostly fingers. Mechanics, looking like gray phantoms, moved in and out of the hangars. Quinn saw Moyer, a dapper figure even at that hour, heading for the mess shack. And he saw Dandy Darcy, negligently leaning against a hangar as the grease monkeys trundled out his Spad.

Quinn growled, deep in his throat. One or the other of those two men, he told himself, was at the root of all his troubles. But which one? With growing irritation Quinn hoped that the guilty one would show his hand, betray himself. Well, thought Quinn, Darcy would be with him on the dawn patrol. Very well—he would keep an eye on Mr. Darcy.

One of the mechanics signaled to him. Strapping on his helmet, he walked slowly over to his ship, climbed stiffly into the cockpit. He fussed with the controls a moment, cursing his aching head. The roar of the motor made his ears ring. If he had an ounce of sense, he told himself bitterly, he'd have had Dake take over the patrol, while he indulged himself with aspirin and a bottle of Scotch. With a grunt he yanked the throttle open.

The big gray ship roared down the field. He pulled back the stick, cleared the trees at the far end and climbed. Behind him, the rest of the patrol came to life, one plane after the other, streaking across the tarmac and then clawing up into the misty skies.

Quinn circled and they fell into formation behind him. For a moment his headache and his worries were forgotten as he glanced back over his shoulder.

He would never have admitted it, but always he got a thrill out of that familiar sight—a perfect V of fighting ships, their motors chanting a whining crescendo of power, steady hands on the controls and death-dealing guns ready to spray lead and steel at the touch of a finger. The first golden rays of the sun slanted over the horizon, glinted off struts and guy-wires. Watch out, Jerry—the Black Sheep are coming for you!

The last of the trees, the last of the deserted farms far below, gave way to the shell-torn earth of the battlefield. Flying high, the dawn patrol of the Black Sheep passed over the criss-cross scars that were the trenches, winged out over the drab stretch that was No-Man's-Land. The motors throbbed in steady rhythm. Quinn's ear caught no stutter, no break in the even roar of the trim Spads. It began to look as though the flight would be an uneventful one. Good. He thought again of the aspirin and, longingly, of the bottle of Scotch.

And then he saw the Fokkers.

Black specks in the distance at first. But specks that grew swiftly, spread out as they headed straight for the oncoming Spads. If Jerry was afraid of the terrible Black Sheep, he showed no signs of it. Then, as the specks sprouted wings and became ships clearly outlined against the morning sky, Quinn grunted. Small wonder they showed no fear. The Fokkers came in two flights, outnumbering the Yanks almost two to one!

Quinn waggled his ailerons in signal and the V spread out behind him. Let 'em come!

High over No-Man's-Land, engines thundering, enemy charged straight at enemy. With breathless speed the gap closed between them until it seemed as though the string of Spads would crash headlong into the whirling propellers of the onrushing Fokkers. Then simultaneously the formations were broken and the sky was filled with plunging, climbing, spinning planes. Quinn's plane tossed and pitched like a rowboat on a storm-lashed sea. He jerked hard back on the stick and clawed for the ceiling. He was just in time, for his right wing cleared a diving Fokker by a matter of feet. He had a swift glimpse of a white face and eyes covered by glinting goggles, then his rush carried him into a clear space.

GLANCING over his shoulder, he saw that the Jerry pilot turned his dive into a steep climb, swung his ship around in a neat Immelman. He was coming back—he had marked Quinn's ship as his prey.

There was no time for Captain Quinn to look after the rest of his Black Sheep. It was every man for himself—and a landing place in hell for the loser. He spun his ship around on one wing and went to meet the Fokker.

The German ship made a black target in his ring-sights. His finger licked out, wrapped around the trip of the Vickers. Red flame flickered from the muzzle and the belts ran upward through the breeches of the gun. The acrid odor of powder filled his lungs.

The Spandau of the Fokker chattered back at him. A hail of bullets whined through the air about him. One struck the cowl, whined off at a tangent. But Quinn's aim was the surer. The burst from his Vickers raked the length of the black-crossed ship. Wires snapped and then with a flutter of fabric, one wing ripped apart.

The Fokker fell off to one side. Frantically the pilot wrestled with his crippled ship. Quinn circled above him, holding his fire. His face was set, emotionless, as he saw that the Jerry airman was fighting a losing battle. Suddenly the Fokker's tail spun madly and the doomed ship started earthward. Quinn followed its crazy progress toward the shell-pocked terrain below.

But he did not see the final crash. For a new hail of lead and steel splattered about him. His head whipped up and he looked over his shoulder.

Hard on his tail rode another Fokker. It was close—so close that cold beads of perspiration broke out on Quinn's forehead. Automatically he threw the Spad over on one wing. But the Fokker clung like grim death itself to his tail.

There was nothing for Quinn to do but keep churning in a tight circle. If he broke away, he would be a point blank target for the death-dealing Spandas behind him. Even now, the short, hammering bursts were raking his tail assembly.

His throbbing head threatened to split his skull. A reddish film gathered before his eyes. His mouth felt hot and dry. There was no escaping that Nemesis behind him—and he knew it. Soon another Black Sheep—the Skipper himself—would join those gallant pilots who had made history on the Western Front. Join them—in hell.

And then a gray phantom dropped like a thunderbolt from the sky above them. There was a single chattering burst of fire—a new note in the grim combat. And the hail of bullets that had plagued Quinn ceased abruptly.

He flung a glance over his shoulder, then drawing a deep breath he straightened out. The Fokker was

diving frantically and a trim Spad was riding it down from the heavens. Jack Quinn had just time to glimpse the pilot who had rescued him. Dandy Darcy!

But he had no time to wonder or marvel just then. Two more Fokkers darted down to pursue the pursuer—to blast Darcy and his lone Spad off the tail of the Jerry airman. And it was Quinn's turn to come to the rescue. With gun blazing, he tore into the two Fokkers, sent them clawing for safety.

BELOW, Darcy's bullets found their mark. Smoke jetted from the black-crossed ship that had been Quinn's Nemesis only a few moments before. Like a spreading black plume it spiraled out from the Fokker as the ship went into a nose-dive and plummeted screaming toward the earth.

There was a dull roar, and a geyser of rocks and mud sprayed up from No-Man's-Land. Darcy's plane rocked violently from the concussion. As he turned his dive into a climbing spiral, the wreckage of his victim burst into flame and became a funeral pyre far below him.

Instinctively, as Darcy climbed up to meet him, Quinn's hand went up to his helmet in a salute. Here was a flyer after his own heart. The newest member of the Black Sheep had proved himself. On the ground he might strut, he might be insolent. But in the air—well, Quinn could ask for no more.

As if by instinct, the ships of the two turned back side by side into the dog light that still thundered over No-Man's-Land. Together they charged the circling Fokkers and by neat team-work, sent another black-crossed crate gliding toward the German lines.

Then as suddenly as it had started, the combat was over. The Boche leader signalled and the remaining Fokkers broke free of the melee. In ragged formation, with all the speed of their powerful motors, the Jerry ships turned tail and raced for home.

For a split second Quinn wondered whether to pursue and harry them. Swiftly he counted. Four of the German planes would never return. And of the Spads that circled about him—there had been two more when he had started from the drome.

Quinn sighed. Two more gone. That was enough, for one day. He gave the signal, turned the nose of his ship into the west. The Black Sheep had given a good account of themselves, out-numbered as they were. But his heart was heavy as he thought of the two who would never fall into formation behind him again.

On the way back across the lines, his mind was free

to consider his own narrow escape and rescue that morning. He glanced back once over his shoulder, saw Darcy grin at him, and grinned back. Surely his prayer had been answered. Moyer or Darcy—he had suspected them both and he had prayed for some clue, some lead that would tell him which was the dirty snake at the root of all the trouble.

Not Darcy—that was a cinch. For Darcy had dared death in his reckless charge after the Fokker, had saved him—Quinn—from the tightest spot of his flying career. Quinn was glad that it was not Dandy Darcy. Darcy was a flyer—the real goods—a daredevil of the air. Such a man could hardly be a lousy Jerry spy!

It was Moyer, then. The damn Kiwi!

Quinn's head cleared and ceased to ache as his problem grew simpler. He was very sure, now, that he had the right man. Now there remained only to pin it on him—catch him red-handed.

The drome of the Black Sheep slid into view as Quinn completed his plans. He would work through the girl—Gabrielle. She was his best bet. And he would start this very night.

CHAPTER X

QUINN APPROACHED THE HOUSE in which Gabrielle was living, cautiously from the rear. Even though it was a woman he was up against he didn't make the mistake of underestimating her. Full well he knew that a woman can kill. And he knew equally as well that the lovely Gabrielle would not hesitate to empty an automatic into him. Her story would be ridiculously simple and she would get away with it. Quinn had become too ardent in his advances—to save herself from a fate worse than, death—hah!—Quinn laughed at that—she had shot him.

Yes, that would be her story. They would believe her.

He came to a halt before the rear of the house, paused and listened. The stillness of the night was accented by the distant booming of the big guns somewhere behind the lines. Far off to his right a dog howled dismally. Then a wind came from nowhere, rustled in the dead leaves of a tree and was gone.

A splatter of rain fell on Quinn's face. He grunted with satisfaction a moment later when the rain streamed down with a steady persistence. It rattled hollowly against the slate roof of the house, ran down in gushing torrents to splash noisily into little pools beneath the eaves.

The experience he had gotten when he had first broken into the house now stood him in good stead. He was becoming quite expert at house breaking. Under cover of the rain he easily forced the window. Silently he leaped up, straddled the sill and dropped down into the room beyond. He paused there a moment, poised on the balls of his feet. No sound but the rattle of rain against the window pain.

Probing the darkness before him with his gun, he moved forward, found the door, the stairs and proceeded quietly up them. At the end of the hallway on the second floor light flooded out from the open doors of Gabrielle's sitting room. The sound of a woman's sobs came to his ears.

Quinn was a sentimentalist at heart—a sucker for a woman's tears. But now as he listened to Gabrielle crying, he was moved by no compassion. Rather, he was stirred by a grim satisfaction. No matter what she was crying about, her tears showed that she was vulnerable—that she could be hurt.

Thinking that she was alone he was about to move forward when a man's voice arrested him. It was cutting, sibilant with repressed venom. "Your tears won't help you, you little fool. Why don't you speak?"

Though Quinn could not place the voice, there was something decidedly familiar about it. His muscles tensed for action. He moved forward, wormed his way to the position of vantage behind the portieres and peered into the room.

Gabrielle was lying face down on the chaise-longue. Her svelt body was wracked with sobs. Standing over her—and here Quinn received the surprise of his life—was Raymond Duplese. But Duplese was no longer blind. The blue-lensed glasses no longer covered his eyes. They were blazing now with hate and contempt as he glared down at the girl.

"Bah!" he snarled. "You women are all alike. Tears—tears, when all else fails you. I tell you my little cabbage, they will not move me." He spat contemptuously. "Nor that lovely body of yours with which you made such fools of those stupid Americans."

GABRIELLE did not answer. Her sobbing became louder.

"*Oui*," said Duplese. "A woman thinks that that is all that is necessary—to have a tantalizing pair of lips. But when it comes to brains . . ." He reached down, grabbed her by the shoulders, shook her roughly. "Didn't it ever occur to you, my little stupid one, that these fool Americans speak of honor—of Country . . . that they hold some stupid loyalty to what they call their 'pals'?"

Gabrielle groaned, rolled over and lifted a tear-stained face to Duplese. She tore the lace handkerchief in her hand to shreds.

"Where have I failed you?"

"Fool! Your game is up," spat Duplese.

"But why? The Americans—a dozen of them were my slaves."

"Yes," said Duplese bitterly. "*Were* your slaves. But you were too sure of yourself. You were not content to get the information we desired. No; that was too simple. You must make them grovel at your feet—beg you; a man will beg only so long."

Quinn listened to the scene with avid interest. Just what it was building up to, he did not know. He was stunned to realize that Duplese was a key figure in the spy ring.

The Frenchman was talking again, excitedly. "You ruined everything when you permitted that Lieutenant Twist to kill himself on your doorstep. Now that fool of a Captain Quinn is suspicious." He grabbed the girl by the bodice of her dress, yanked her to her feet. The flimsy material tore, fell away from her white shoulder.

Her face white, panic flaming in her eyes, Gabrielle stared at him.

Duplese was frothing at the mouth. He gave Quinn the impression of a mad dog. Quinn sensed that the climax to the scene was rapidly approaching.

"And last night, my little fool," continued Duplese venomously, "because you blundered and aroused the suspicions of Captain Quinn—Pierre—my brother Pierre—was killed. Do you hear?" he screamed. "Killed."

Gabrielle nodded her head. "Yes, Raymond," she breathed, "I hear."

Duplese was suddenly calm—the calm that comes with a final resolution. "The rest I could forgive you, fool. You have been useful. But that you should be the cause of Pierre's death. Name of a name—that is too much to forgive."

As if by magic an evil looking dagger sprouted in his fist.

Gabrielle's eyes flew wide in horror. She took an

involuntary step back and her clenched hands flew to her mouth.

"No, Raymond, not that," she begged. Her eyes were riveted on the blade. "Anything but that. In the name of God . . ."

There was no mercy in Duplese's face. Quinn read the implacable purpose there. His soul was revolted. He was torn between two emotions—pity for the girl trembling in horror before that naked blade—hate of her for what she had done to his men. If he interfered now he might lose his one and only chance of wiping out the spy nest. And after all she was getting no more than she deserved.

Duplese was speaking again. There was a sardonic smile on his lips, a Satanic lash to his words. "But before you die, my little cabbage, I am sure that you will be glad to hear that our plans are completed. We strike tomorrow night to the greater consternation of our enemies—to the greater glory of the Fatherland."

THE words were engraved indelibly on Quinn's brain. And even while he was considering them, Duplese lunged at the girl. The knife flashed up—swept down in a vicious arc.

Quinn's gun snapped up. His finger tensed on the trigger, then relaxed. Prompted at the last moment, by God knows what chivalrous impulse to save the girl—he was too late. She swayed a moment, eyes staring. Her lips worked but no words came. Then she coughed, her hands flew to her mouth and she crumpled back on the chaise-longue.

With a harsh laugh Duplese bent over her. He picked up one limp arm, felt for a pulse that was not there, then tossed the hand across her sprawled body. Callously he wiped the blade of his knife on the hem of her skirt.

Quinn had watched the scene with a growing revulsion. Even though she had been a spy, he despised himself for having stood by while she had been murdered in cold blood. His mouth was hot and dry and a pulse pounded dully in his head.

Then something hard and cold jabbed into the base of his spine. A guttural voice behind him said: "The Captain will please to drop the automatic." Quinn stiffened. He saw Duplese's head snap up in startled surprise. Then before he knew what had happened, something heavy collided with his skull. His automatic sailed from his hand as he staggered forward into the room. He was out on his feet. He would have fallen if Duplese had not grabbed him. From glazed eyes,

helpless to defend himself, he saw the Frenchman raise the knife again. In another moment it would bury itself deep in his throat.

Then he was vaguely conscious that the guttural voice had spoken again. Reluctantly Duplese lowered the dagger, snarled an oath and released his hold on Quinn. Quinn's knees buckled, he slumped to the floor. Duplese stood over him a moment, spat, then kicked him savagely in the stomach with the point of a hard shoe.

Quinn was convulsed by an excruciating pain. Then he was conscious that someone was pouring something down his throat. He gagged. His head spun, then the world blacked out like a snuffed candle.

CHAPTER XI

FOR A LONG TIME NOW, Quinn had been living in a nebulous half world that was made up entirely of pain. It assailed his body like a perpetual torment. Every nerve and muscle ached in protest and with each stroke of his heart a brass gong beat inside his skull. He had the queer illusion that he was alive and in hell and that if only he could open his eyes to see the torments that assailed him, he might have some chance.

But his eyelids seemed sewed together. They would not function.

In the end, it was the staccato explosion of an automatic that pierced the depths of Quinn's subconsciousness and snapped the spell of dope that had held him chained for the past twenty hours.

His eyelids opened. He struggled up weakly to a sitting position. Darkness pressed in on him like a solid wall. His head felt like a balloon and his mouth like a ball of cotton. He would have given his right arm, then, for a glass of water.

The explosion of the gun still reverberated in his ears. But it was not until he smelled the pungent odor of burnt powder that he realized it. A gun—someone had fired it—someone at close hand.

He tried to puzzle this out, then in a swift wave of returning recollection, he remembered the events that had led up to the blow on his head. Had it all happened an hour ago—a week ago? He did not know.

He remembered, too, suddenly, the boastful words

of Duplese spoken just before he had killed the girl, Gabrielle. . . . Their plans were ready . . . they were ready to strike. . . . Sweat broke out on Quinn's face. Was he too late to prevent whatever infamy Duplese and his accomplices planned? Was his squadron—were the Black Sheep already wiped out?

Muffled voices came to him. He struggled up from the floor, staggered to the nearest wall and felt his way along it until he came to a door. With no plan of action in mind—not knowing and caring less what he would meet beyond the door, he twisted the knob and yanked the portal wide.

A blaze of light assailed his eyes and blinded him momentarily. When sight returned he found himself on the threshold of Gabrielle's sitting room. Weakly he leaned against the casing of the door and with stupid, drug-fogged eyes took in the tableau before him.

A sheet covered a pitiful mound on the chaise-longue. That must be Gabrielle, he thought. In the center of the floor, face down, lay a man. A pool of blood was widening slowly from beneath his body. Standing by him, his face distorted with fury, was Raymond Duplese.

And dominating the scene from the other doorway, was the Kiwi, Moyer. In his fist was an automatic, a wisp of smoke still drifting lazily from its muzzle.

"Moyer!" croaked Quinn. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Moyer laughed mirthlessly. "Stick around and you'll find out. I thought I'd find you here."

"Yeah?" asked Quinn stupidly. "Yeah. But I thought I'd find you dead—instead of doped. You were always lucky, Quinn."

"You seem to know all the answers. What's it all about?"

"You came to just in time to see the end of a couple of dirty spies. I would have preferred to have done this job cleaner but your butting in crowded my hand. You mean well, Quinn, but you have no brains."

Quinn took an unsteady step into the room. "What are you talking about?" he rumbled.

"I'm Intelligence," said Moyer. "I've been working for months to get little Gabrielle and Duplese. I'll finish Duplese now. Then we'll go back and get the other."

COLDLY he raised the automatic. Quinn didn't have time to consider the import of Moyer's words. There was another, more urgent matter to attend to. "Hold it," he called hoarsely.

Moyer lowered his gun a trifle, glanced at him.

"How long have I been here?" asked Quinn.

"You disappeared from the drome last night."

"Last night? And what time is it now?"

"Around eight o'clock."

Quinn's heart leaped within him. Sanity returned to his eyes. "Then we've still got time!" he panted.

"Time for what?"

"Before this rat murdered Gabrielle," explained Quinn hurriedly, "he boasted to her that his plans were completed. That tonight he and his crew were going to strike some devilish blow at the Allies." He strode across the room, knotted his fist in Duplese's coat. "Come clean, now, you rat," he snarled. "Spill it."

Duplese's lips curled in a sneer.

Quinn's fist smashed into his mouth.

Duplese spat blood.

"That's just a sample," said Quinn. "Are you going to talk?"

Duplese folded his arms on his chest, stared straight before him. Quinn's fist shot out again. Duplese sagged to one knee and Quinn yanked him erect again.

Moyer walked slowly across the room, jammed the muzzle of his automatic deep into the Frenchman's stomach. "Well," he said. "How about it?"

"Raymond Duplese does not talk," replied Duplese arrogantly. "Why should I? I shall die anyway. Shoot and be damned to you."

Quinn realized that the man was right and in his heart he found a grudging admiration for him. Spy he might be, but Raymond Duplese was no coward. When the time arrived for him to cash in his chips, he would not crawl or beg for mercy. Yet some way had to be found to make him talk. Before he, Quinn, and his Black Sheep could act, he had to know what deviltry the spy had plotted. In his mind he turned over a score of plans—torture—the promise of escape—dope . . .

Then Moyer said flatly: "Let me handle this. I've got an idea." There was a peculiar, metallic quality to his voice that arrested Quinn's attention. Slowly he raised his hand to the pocket of his tunic. It came to light again holding a bottle. Quinn's eyes widened as he recognized it. It was the identical bottle that he had taken from the boot of the dead Pierre Duplese.

Calmly, with unhurried movements, Moyer pulled the cork with his teeth, let it drop to the floor.

Glancing at Duplese, Quinn saw that his face was bathed in sweat, saw that his eyes were wild and staring. Duplese might not have been afraid of the sudden, explosive death in the automatic but his soul

crawled before the menace of that innocent appearing bottle.

MOYER was talking. "I've had this stuff analyzed, Duplese," he said quietly. "It's a fiendish concoction of muriatic and hydrochloric acid. It's strong enough to eat away the struts and wires of a plane. . . ." Quinn started. "Yes, that's why your crates crashed, Quinn—that's why their wings sailed off." He shook the bottle, agitated the liquid until it was boiling. Pungent fumes hissed out of the neck of the bottle. "If the stuff is strong enough to eat away wood and metal, what do you think it would do to your skin, Duplese . . . to your eyes, Duplese—applied drop by drop?"

Duplese's face was gray. He took a hasty step backward. "No—not that," he said in a strained voice.

"Talk then," said Moyer.

"Shoot me," begged Duplese. "Be done with it."

Moyer raised the bottle threateningly. "Talk or . . ."

The sweat rolled down Duplese's face. His lips twisted. "Shoot me, in the name of God but don't. . . ."

Moyer's face was a relentless mask, unyielding. There was no hint of mercy in his eyes. "I'll give you five seconds," he stated flatly. "Then I shall begin. Hold him, Quinn."

Quinn leaped forward and pinned Duplese's arms behind him. The Frenchman struggled violently but he was no match for Boilermaker Quinn. Moyer shook the bottle until the acid was boiling furiously. Slowly he advanced on the helpless Duplese. "Yes," he continued as if considering the matter, "I'll start with your eyes, first. Just a drop—a drop in each eye."

"No! No!" screamed Duplese, in a frenzy of fear. "I'll talk . . . I'll talk."

"I'm waiting," said Moyer coldly. Duplese had cracked completely. He babbled wildly and as Quinn listened to the details of the plot, his blood pounded savagely in his head. With the breaks and a little luck he might still be in time.

So absorbed was he and Moyer in the words that drooled from Duplese's lips that they failed to see the furtive movement on the floor. The man who lay crumpled there, face down, rolled over. His right hand, which had been concealed beneath his body, came slowly into view. It wavered beneath the weight of a heavy Luger. With an effort he steadied it.

There was a loud explosion. Duplese gagged suddenly on his flow of words, spun around and pitched to the floor.

There was another shot. Moyer staggered and

stepped back, steadied himself. His automatic kicked and roared. The Luger slipped from the spy's hand—the hand convulsed once into a fist and then went limp.

"Nice shooting," said Quinn. "Did he get you bad?"

Moyer turned a white face to him. The muscle along the line of his jaw stood out like whipcord. "What the hell's the difference?" he clipped. "You heard. What are you waiting for? You still have time. Get going."

He crumpled suddenly and pitched to the floor. In a hissing stream the contents of the bottle sprayed over the body of Duplese and the other.

Quinn tarried no longer. There was a lump in his throat as he muttered. "Dead or alive, Moyer—I won't forget." Then he was barging out the door.

CHAPTER XII

QUINN'S BREATH WAS COMING in labored gasps when finally he broke through the woods and emerged onto the tarmac of the Black Sheep. No alien sound broke the serene quiet of the night and he breathed a prayer of thankfulness. He had arrived in time. For if the first necessary step in Duplese's plan had been accomplished, the tarmac would have been in a turmoil.

He shortened his stride, regained his breath, moved swiftly towards the Administration shack, while his mind swiftly evolved a plan of action.

But a moment later, that plan of action was shattered to a thousand bits. From the starting line came the sudden blast of a motor and the whirring scream of a spinning propeller. The plot was under way! The first move in the spy game was taking place.

And to counteract it, Quinn swerved in his course and raced towards the roaring plane. Swiftly, silently as the shadow of doom, he sped. Full well he knew that he was charging Death. But that did not matter, if only he prevented that ship from leaving the ground.

He was twenty feet from the crate. In a sweat of anguish he made out a shadowy figure preparing to vault into the cockpit. He shouted hoarsely—the figure spun around. Then lances of flame leaped from his side and lead whined angrily past Quinn's ear.

Quinn did not stop his charge.

Straight into the maw of that spitting gun he plunged. And in that instant, the mysterious flyer made his first—and last—fatal mistake. Instead of vaulting into the plane, ripping the throttle wide and making good his getaway, he continued to squeeze lead at Quinn.

Death plucked at Quinn's sleeve. A bullet stung him in the shoulder and blood ran crazily down his arm. He stumbled—gathered his last ounce of reserve strength and launched himself head-first through the air. In a flying tackle he crashed into the pilot and the two of them went down. But once Quinn had his hands on his man, the struggle was short and sweet. With one gorilla fist wrapped around the pilot's throat, he pressed him to the ground. With the other gorilla fist, he battered him into unconsciousness.

Quinn was not aware until the racing motor died and he looked up, that the squadron had come to life at the sound of the first shot. Now a dozen excited Black Sheep hemmed him in. "It's Quinn! It's the Skipper!" shouted a dozen excited voices.

Killer Dake focused a flashlight on the battered face at Quinn's feet. A concerted indrawn breath went up from the men.

"By God—it's Darcy—Dandy Darcy!" said Dake.

"Yes," said Quinn bitterly. "And one of the spies who's been raising hell with this outfit." Then an exultant note came into his voice. "Listen, you guys. You got work to do tonight. Important work. Work that'll knock Darcy's plans all to hell. Listen."

SWIFTLY he told them of the death of Gabrielle and of Duplese—and how Moyer had saved him. Then he went into the details of the plan that Duplese had disclosed to them. "It's this way," he said hurriedly. "A big flight of new German super-bombers are coming over tonight. They're loaded with enough bombs to blow this sector off the map. Darcy was just about to take off to meet them, ten thousand feet above San Suplice. That was the rendezvous. Then with a special light he had rigged on his ship, he was to lead them to Marigny, where they'd drop their eggs. Do you get it? They would have blown the big Government Ordnance plant off the map. No more big guns. It would have put the Allies back six months."

There was no need to elaborate further. The men knew only too well what havoc the destruction of the Ordnance plant would work on the Allied cause. A low angry rumble rose in their throats. Then above the din Solomon's voice rang out.

"By God you're right, Jack. He has got a special light rigged on the tail of his plane."

"Of course I'm right. I got it straight from Duplese."

"Well, what do we do?" asked Nordstrom impatiently.

"Plenty," said Quinn grimly. "I got it all figured out. Listen." He pounded himself on the chest with a stiff thumb. "I—me—I'm going to fly Darcy's crate tonight. Get it? I'll meet those Jerry bombers—I'll give them the phoney signal. If they want to be led—I'll lead them. But not to the Ordnance Plant. I'll lead them into as neat a trap as was ever sprung. And you Black Sheep are the jaws of that trap. Instead of to Marigny—I'll lead them up the Voise river. Off St. Etienne, hanging in the clouds, you guys are waiting.

"From then on, it's every man for himself. And if one of those Jerry bombers escapes, I'll bawl the hell out of you."

The Black Sheep were enthusiastic over the plan. Now that the fight had come out into the open—now that Darcy, Gabrielle and Duplese had been unmasked—a change came over them. Faces that had been sullen became eager. They talked excitedly; slapped each other on the back enthusiastically. Quinn surveyed them with an uplifted heart. His Black Sheep once more—a crew of hell-raising sky-devils.

Then he held up his hand for silence, issued a series of terse orders. Darcy was to be held prisoner, pending the squadron's return. Two grease monkeys started off for St. Omer on the run, to bring back Moyer. The other mechanics, aided by the impatient Black Sheep, trundled the crates from their hangars.

Quinn waited until the last cherry-red flame from the last exhaust of the ships had disappeared in the north. Then with an exultant shout, he vaulted into the cockpit of Darcy's plane, waved his hand to the mechanics and the chocks were pulled away. He ripped the throttle wide and the Spad leaped forward.

Quinn gained altitude rapidly, in a steep angling climb. His heart was pounding strongly and there was a song on his lips. The whip of the slip-stream, the triumphant song of the motor, the whine of the wind through wires and struts, were like strong drink to him. This was his game—a man's game—a fighting game. He was through with spy business—through with crawling around on his belly.

TEN thousand feet below him, dull red flashes marked the opposing trenches. Beneath his right wing tip, an occasional light marked the winding course of the Voise River. He eased in right aileron, put the

throttle down a notch and arrowed straight for the rendezvous at San Suplice.

It was just twelve o'clock by the luminous dial of his wristwatch when, at ten thousand feet, he banked and slowly circled the sleeping town of San Suplice. The German bombers should be along at any minute. There was a frozen grin on Quinn's lips.

Then from out of the East—faint at first—fading away—then swelling louder—came the insistent drone of many motors. Quinn's pulse kicked out a faster beat. He whipped his plane around to face the sound.

Then he saw them. Pinpoints of red on the distant horizon. Twelve of them. They grew in size, along with the roar of their motors.

The thunder of the advancing bombers filled the sky. Quinn could make out their vast spread of wings, like ghostly bats. They were bearing down on him like an irresistible avalanche. With a pounding heart but a steady hand, he realized that the moment had arrived. Swiftly he threw in the switch on the instrument board and a dull red light glowed at the tail of his ship. He whipped his plane around, slapped on all the sauce he had and headed north above the gleaming band of the river. In perfect formation, the bombers took their positions behind him. They had snatched at the bait!

Though he knew full well that the Jerry pilots could not hear or see him, Quinn screwed around in his seat, waved his arm invitingly at the bombers and yelled: "Sorry, fellows, it's got to be this way. But you started it."

For the next ten minutes, all unsuspecting, the flight of German ships kept in perfect formation over Quinn's tail. Quinn led them into the trap he had set.

Then abruptly, without warning, all hell broke loose. The sky rained leaden death. So sudden, so furious, had been the onslaught, as the Black Sheep dove down with spitting guns, that for a moment even Quinn was stunned. He recovered quickly and with an exultant shout, snapped off the treacherous light on his tail, whipped his crate around in an Immelman turn and leaped at the nearest bomber. The heavy German ship rolled over like a bird shot on the wing, spun crazily down the skypath.

Like a flock of angry hornets, the Black Sheep were striking with everything they had, their guns giving expression to the hate that had been building up within them for the past three weeks. Along with them, Quinn became a flying, fighting maniac. His Vickers leaped from one staggering Boche to the other, ripping out deadly bursts.

A falling ship was plunging down the sky, a comet of death. Then all, of the Twenty-First Sector seemed to go berserk. A battery of searchlights pierced the sky, darting in bewilderment into the tangle of Spads and bombers. Ground Archies thundered into action. The sky became a madhouse of gyrating ships, bursting Archie puff-balls and sweeping cones of light. Suddenly the very heavens shook. A bomber with its deadly cargo had exploded in midair. Quinn was deafened by the concussion and his Spad was tossed about the sky like a feather in a tornado.

HIS eyes half blinded, his throat closed tight, his breath congealed in his lungs, Quinn dove down into the madhouse of action again. His goggles were smashed against his eyes by the force of the slipstream. His body was pressed back against the seat. He could feel a red smear being built up within his brain by the dive's terrific pressure.

His eyes were riveted on a bomber with the squadron leader's markings and he went hell-bent for it, his thumb on the trips, his right hand pumping air into the tanks, oil pressure in the c.c.

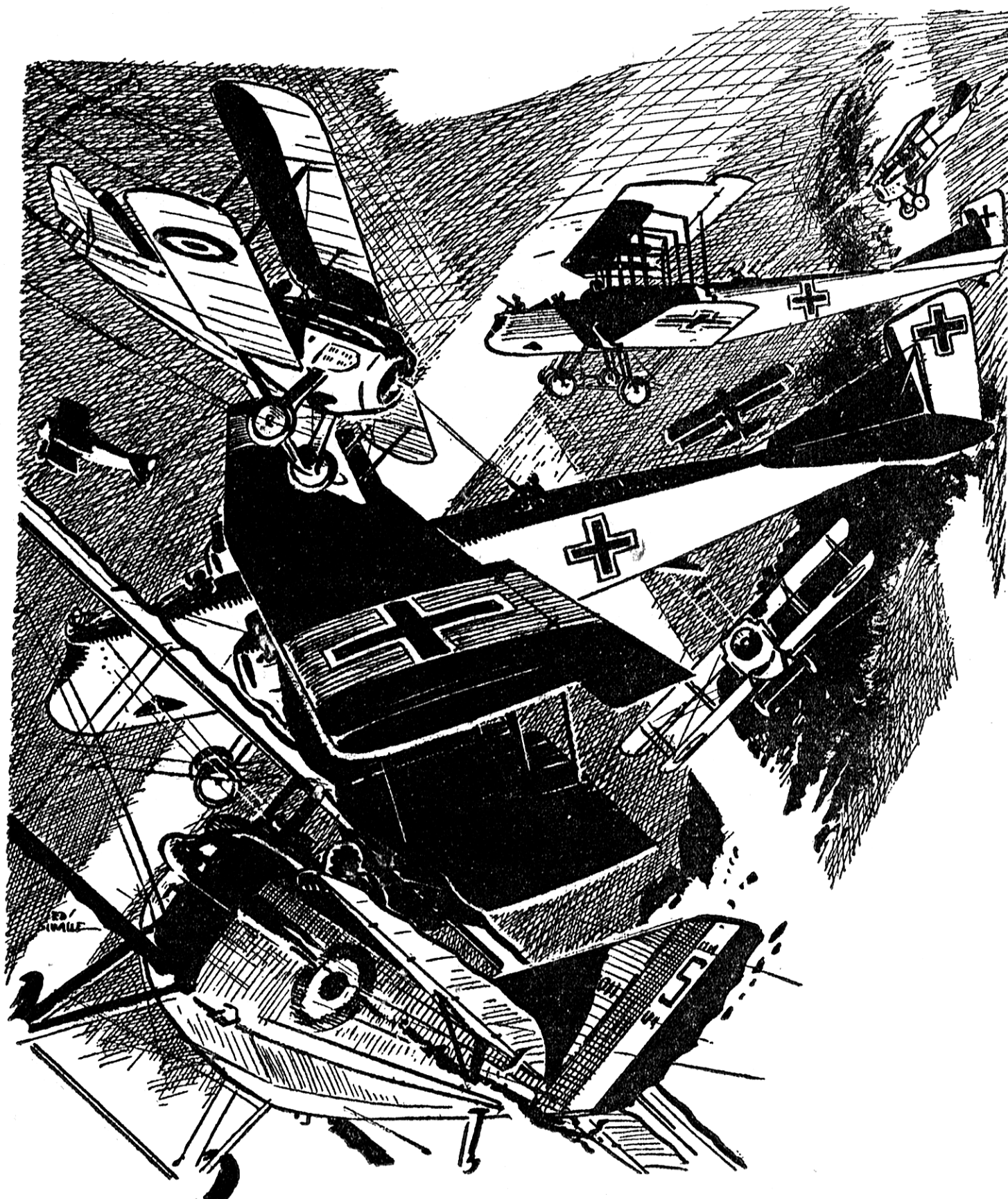
It was like a jerky motion picture. Crazy snatches of action. A black shape whipped between him and his target. He ripped a burst at it and hurdled the barrier. He saw the German pilot banking steeply under reverse controls to meet him. Then they were head to head and the Vickers were stuttering. Streaks of red and green flame stabbed from the twin muzzles. Recoil wracked fabric of the Spad.

The bomber zoomed, went away with a wing down, rolling for a better position. Quinn's arm pulled against the iron pressure of the flippers, came back slowly and took the Spad out of the headlong plunge. The wings shuddered under the strain. The linen cracked and the dope peeled. The wires were suddenly sagging as the landing wires took up the strain.

The motor note changed. The Hiss sobbed. But the crate held together, leaped forward, went over on its back still under full gun, came out and dived a second time. Quinn did not miss his target twice. His guns raked the black bomber from prop to stern.

Somehow, Quinn had the impression that he had been fighting for ages. But in reality the carnage had been as brief as it had been complete. The last German ship had been knocked from the sky. Of all that deadly armada not one would return to the home 'drome to tell the story of what had befallen them.

Suddenly weary, Quinn ripped the VV pistol from



its pocket and fired a blazing flare into the remote, untouchable heaven. Limping and battered, the Black Sheep fell into formation behind him. But though

their motors coughed and sputtered, there was a song of triumph—of release in their hearts as they headed for St. Omer.

With the outfit gathered around his cot, propped up by pillows and a bottle of whiskey conveniently at his elbow, Moyer told his story. It was all very simple indeed. For a long time Intelligence had suspected that there was a spy nest in the vicinity of St. Omer. He had been sent to the Black Sheep to track it down. It hadn't taken him long to tumble to the game that Gabrielle was playing, but even as Quinn, he was convinced that she was taking orders from someone higher up.

BUT she had played her cards carefully. Moyer had been unable to put his finger on the master-mind and that is where Darcy entered the picture.

"Yeah," growled Quinn, "what about him?"

"All the rumors you heard about him are true," said Moyer.

"I can believe that now," said Quinn. "But if Intelligence knew all along that he was a spy, why did they let him run loose—why did they send him to us?"

Moyer smiled. "I had him sent here."

"You did? But—why?"

"Simple," said Moyer. "We knew what Darcy was and we used him—like bait. A man was always on his

trail. And all unsuspecting he has led us to more than one spy nest. Best of all, he helped us uncover Duplese, who was one of the Key figures in the German spy system. Don't you see, he was far more useful to us alive than if we had put him up against a brick wall."

Quinn scowled darkly. "Well, you won't be able to use him again."

Moyer shook his head. "No. After tonight, his usefulness is ended. Darcy has about played out his string."

"So you're the one who had that rat shipped to the Black Sheep," muttered Quinn. "Well, I'll be damned. The reason he saved my life that time was to keep me from suspecting him . . ." Quinn became silent then. A grim memory seemed to harden his features momentarily, but the shadow passed as abruptly as it had appeared. Perhaps he had thought of Twist . . . and Arden . . . and Steele . . .

He suddenly slapped his thigh and got to his feet.

"Well," he smiled around at his men, "maybe now the Black Sheep can get back to the business of winning the war."