

THE ACE OF DIAMONDS

by STANLEY WAGENEN

"Major Chatterton, commander of the Border Patrol, dares you to try and cross the American boundary at noon tomorrow." Thus ran the message, and thus began the gamest scrap the air has known!

FIVE MINUTES BEFORE Howard Morry was to take off from the San Antonio airport with the north-bound mail, Bettner, the chief pilot, called him into the inner office and discharged him. He made public no reason, but Burr Scott, coming in from Dallas, and Roudy Williams preparing for his Houston-New Orleans hop, said it could be no small matter. It meant Bettner would have to take the north-bound himself, and he had just come in from a six hours jump

All sorts of rumors were afloat, varying from larceny to smuggling. While Scott and Williams were agreed that larceny was out of the question, they were not so sure about the smuggling charge. For months the news had come seeping through of a powerful international diamond smuggling ring. Outwitting the border patrol had become a habit with them. Chatterton, the longfaced, impulsive, quick-shooting leader of the patrol was licked. He refused to admit it, even to the "office," but the contraband kept flowing through.

Howard Morry, a high strung product of post war flying, had become fed up on the tame round of air mail jumps. He had not said so, but while loafing about waiting for his dispatches, he would fondly tinker with his silver winged monoplane. It was of no particular make, but his own assembly of everything good. With Morry at the controls it could outrun and outfly any one hundred and fifty horse powered crate in government service.

All his spare time and money went into his plane, and when not busy on the rounds of duty, he would fuel-up and disappear for hours at a time. The international boundary was only a distance of a two hours hop away.

Morry said nothing. He calmly fueled his plane, settled his field accounts, said his good-byes, and headed south. No one questioned him, for he had come to be known as a man long on action and short on words.

Two hours later the inhabitants of Laredo heard the beat of a propeller turning its maximum twenty-seven hundred. Looking into the burning Texas sky they saw a silver winged monoplane speeding across the international line.

Seated in the fuselage of the monoplane, Morry glanced at the instrument board. He was holding about fifteen hundred, and cruising at about one-twenty-five. The inverted Packard motor was smoothly sawing the air, power in repose. Looking below him, he saw the Rio Grande slipping behind like a gigantic snake. His lips were set in a determined line, but there was a smile in his keen grey eyes. The great adventure was on!

With that characteristic of the natural born flyer, he allowed his mind to go back to those few brief words in Bettner's office, although at the same time perfectly controlling the ship. "Morry," Bettner had said, speaking loudly to be heard above the idling motor of the north-bound, "word has just come through from Washington. Do you still want to try it?"

"I said I'd take it," he had replied.

"This is nasty business, Morry," he had continued. "I would never forgive myself if anything happened to you. You know, you don't have to take this hair-brained assignment. It's not in the regular line of your duty. If the border patrol can't handle that gang of smugglers, it's their own funeral, not ours."

"I'll go," he had answered.

"Kid," Bettner had gone on, "you'll be all alone, you understand that. Not even Chatterton is to know that you're getting this special assignment. No one here is to know; you'll leave in disgrace.

"Somewhere, somehow, news is leaking out, of every move the border patrol makes, before they make it. They haven't a chance. All the office knows is that the smugglers are sending diamonds over in one hundred thousand dollar lots."

"What's the plan?" he had asked.

"Nothing definite," his chief replied, "it's up to you. The idea is to fire you without making the reason known. In the mail service a pilot is fired for only two causes, crookedness and cowardice. No one will ever accuse you of the last, so perhaps the news will go across that you were dischrged for theft, or worse!

"You'll fuel up, and apparently make for Mexico City. On the way you'll have a forced landing at, or near, Saltillo. If you cruise about and get the lay of the land, that's about as much further as one fueling will take you. It is at Saltillo, or nearby, that the gang has its Mexican headquarters. The "office" leaves the rest up to you.

"The idea is to try and work things so that you get invited in on the racket. After you have established yourself by bringing a few loads through for them, you'll have to trap them in whatever way seems best at the moment. And it will have to be sprung on this side of the border!" He had paused a minute, and then gone on.

"Well, it's up to you Kid, and any angle you figure it from, it's a job that I wouldn't care to advise any of my boys to take. They asked me to reccommend a man, and I gave them your name as the one man suited for such an undertaking, but you don't have to do it."

"It's O.K. with me," he had answered.

"Kid," he had been irritable in that moment, as though a second thought had shown him the fallacy of the first. "I wish you'd tell me to wire them to go fly a kite. It means mixing in a bad mess and getting no protection. If you do get in with them, you may be shot down by the border patrol.

"Chatterton is red-headed and out for a capture. He'll get whoever comes over alive, if he can, but he'll get 'em. On the other hand, if the gang gets wise to you, they'll save Chatterton the job. Do you still want to go?"

"Sure," had been his reply.

"All right, Kid, I have no choice," Bettner had said in tones which told plainly he thought he was sending his best friend to crashing death.

"You're fired." He had grasped his hand and looked away.

MORRY WAS BROUGHT out of his thoughts by the sudden dipping of his plane's nose. He pulled back on the stick, but continued to lose altitude. The waterless mesa seemed to reach up for him greedily. He gave it the gun and after a drop of four hundred feet, finally began to climb again. He pulled up to three thousand before leveling off. Even at that altitude the air was hot and rough.

For two hours he followed a zig-zag course that lead steadily southward. Several times he slowed down and circled a landmark, impressing its features thoroughly in his mind. Finally, realizing that his gas was getting low, he headed due south. For fifteen minutes he kept the plane in the air, and then the gauge registered empty.

A few minutes later the motor coughed, kicked the propeller over unsteadily, and stopped. Already his trained eyes had picked out a landing, near a group of buildings a mile ahead. They were the first signs of habitation he had seen in the last hour's flight.

Slowly he pushed the control lever forward and went into a long glide. Nearing the buildings at about two hundred feet altitude, he pulled the stick back and then to the front and left. The veronical bank killed the speed and he gently side-slipped in for a perfect landing. As the machine rolled to a stop, a girl's figure appeared in the doorway of the house. For an instant she paused in surprise, then glancing at the sky, rushed forward. She reached the plane as he climbed out.

HE TURNED to speak, and pulling off his goggles gazed into the frightened eyes of the girl. She was unmistakably American. "I beg your pardon," he mumbled, just a trifle embarrassed, "for dropping in so unexpectedly. The old bus ran out of gas before I could make a town."

The wide eyes of the girl sparkled and her cheeks glowed with heightening color. Then with a sudden change, she was on the defensive. With a quick glance into the sky, she spoke hurriedly. "You're from the States?"

"Well, yes and no," he replied. "I have been in the States, but now I am heading for South America where I hope to find work."

His eyes scanned the hacienda. It had seen better days. Apparently no attempt was being made to operate it now. The land was barren save for giant cactuses and Spanish dagger plants. Here and there a rubber tree struggled for life.

She noticed his rapid scrutiny, and to his question, "Is this your home?" answered:

"Yes, my home and my—I mean my father and I live here. If you will come into the house, I know that he will be very glad to welcome you. He has been confined to his bed for nearly a year now."

Morry studied her face for a moment. Her delicately moulded features seemed to speak so clearly of some fearful thing that was bothering her, frightening her. Poor thing, she must be starving for friendship down here, he thought, for she was speaking hurriedly, as though relieved to be able to talk to someone, and yet anxious to say it quickly.

"You see we—dad and I, came down here from the States on account of Dad's health. We bought the property, sight unseen, and of course it was a swindle. Just as we had about given up hope a man called Butch Carson came along and offered to rent the land for a landing field; he said he was establishing a passenger service between Mexico City and the States.

"Before we realized what his business really was we were involved. We tried to back out, but Butch threatened to make dad the goat. And what with dad so ill, there was nothing to do but stay. Oh, if we could only get back to—" She wanted to say more, but the sound of a drumming motor high in the afternoon sky stopped her. Both looked up.

From the south, and heading towards the hacienda, he could clearly discern a speeding biplane. The pilot checked the plane's onrush above the field, and descended within two hundred feet. He circled several times as though undecided whether to land. Finally he ran down wind, banked, and came back. A minute later he scudded across the field and taxied to a stop behind Morry's monoplane.

Instantly Morry was aware that the biplane was not an ordinary machine. It was painted a dead black, and mounted just ahead of the observer's seat, was a semi-rotary machine gun. His eyebrows raised just perceptibly. The girl drew back in fright as two men alighted and came forward. The shorter of the two carried a snubbed nose automatic before him.

"What d'you want here?" he growled. "What's your name and what's your business? Speak up!"

Morry studied the swarthy face a moment before answering, and then drawled, "I'm out of gas, had a forced landing. I have no business at present; I'm barn-storming to South America. My name is Morry, Howard Morry. The sooner I get fueled and on my way south, the better I'll like it."

The short man seemed undecided as to what to do next. His partner, who had piloted the black plane, called him aside and they spoke in whispers. After a few words he again turned to Morry. "Gotta pilot's card?" he asked.

"Sorry, I left rather hurriedly and neglected to put it in my pocket," Morry answered.

"Keep him covered," the pilot of the mystery ship said. "I'm going to have a look at his plane." He

climbed into the control seat and carefully looked about. Turning to the other seat, he unfastened the canvas covering and prowled about the few bags Morry had stowed away. He was about to get out again when his attention was attracted by a container about the size of a hand fire extinguisher. "What is this gadget for?" he asked.

Morry thought fast. He wasn't ready to reveal the nature of that gadget, yet. Something about the defensive attitude of the men, and the war-like aspect of their plane, told him that he had accidentally stumbled upon those whom he had set out to find. "Oh, you mean my pump," he said. "That is a force oil feed I fixed up for steady runs."

The man evidently took his word for it. He alighted from the plane and pulled the short man aside. After another whispered conversation, the short man said, "My name is 'Butch' Carson, this is 'Speed' Holeman, my pilot." He replaced his automatic in the holster beneath his arm.

"Hey you, Anne," he shotted at the already frightened girl, "get into the house and get us something to eat. We want to talk to this fellow." She hurried away with downcast eyes.

"Morry," Butch continued, "you were a member of the air-mail service until this forenoon. You ducked out just in time to save your neck. As it was, the commission cancelled your card. Am I right?"

"I haven't heard about losing my card," Morry replied. "How does it happen that you heard about me, so soon?"

Carson smiled showing an even row of white teeth. "It is my business to know things pertaining to the air service," he answered. For several minutes the men stared into each other's faces, trying to read what lay beneath. Finally Carson said, "Morry, if you want to delay your hop south, perhaps my partner and I have a proposition that will interest you. It is rather late this afternoon to go to Saltillo for gas anyway. What d'you say?"

"Well there's no one waiting at the other-end," Morry answered. "Who is the girl?"

"Don't worry about her," Holeman said. "She'll do what she's told, and like it. If it wasn't that I brought a Doc out from Mexico City once a month, her old man would of been dead a long time ago, and she knows it. Don't need to worry none about him either. He's sick in bed, lungs gone bad."

"O.K. I'll stay," Morry replied.

Two hours later as Anne was clearing away the dishes from dinner, Carson finished his proposition. "There's nothing to it, my friend," he was saying. "All you have to do is deliver the package at a place Holeman will show you on the other side. If you want to get in on it, it means a thousand dollars a trip for you.

"As soon as you get the lay of the land, Holeman will pull off that run, and take the one from here to Vera Cruz. That's where he picks the stuff up after it comes through Havana," he added by way of explanation.

"I need money bad enough," Morry answered cautiously, "but you never saw me before. How do you know I wouldn't double cross you?"

"Not a chance," Holeman hissed, and patted the revolver holster slung over his shoulder. "In the first place, if you attempted to head south on us, we'd mow you down with our machine gun before you'd gone five miles. I'll escort you to the border when you go through, and once on the other side, you'll have to run for our hide-out to save your neck from the border-boys."

Butch Carson cut in, saying, "My boy, by throwing in with us, you can be safe and make some real dough. What d'you say?"

"Fair enough; count me in. Just wanted to know where we stood," Morry replied.

That night "Speed" Holeman took him over to get the lay of the land. Also he delivered the shipment he had wired was coming, while he had been in Saltillo.

FOR THE NEXT two months the border patrol on dark nights heard the whirr of a strange motor. High up, and fighting through a storm, used to cover up his flight, the unknown would be through again. Always Chatterton and the circus gave chase. Always the unknown was too wary.

He was nameless, his plane was nameless, but on one night when the moon had unexpectedly peeked from behind a cloud, it had flashed on silver wings. The wings sparkled like jewels, and jewels he carried—a hundred thousand dollars worth a trip. They dubbed him, The Ace of Diamonds.

That night Chatterton swore to get him, and also to find out whether the Ace had any fighting blood.

Early the next forenoon while Morry was going over his motor, Butch Carson handed him a package of gems. "Get the old can tuned up," he said, "you are going over again tonight." He slapped him on the back. "You sure have been delivering the goods, man, and

that's some little bird you've got there. Speed's taking me to Saltillo, so's I can tip off the hideout to be on the look-out for you. Don't let those diamonds out of your possession, and keep your eyes open." Holeman wound up his plane and took off.

As his plane became a speck in the sky, Morry's attention was arrested by the drumming roar of a strange motor, and saw another speck in the sky coming from the opposite direction to that which Speed had taken. He recognized it at once as belonging to a Curtiss Hawk. The plane dropped to within a hundred feet of the field and circling, headed into the wind. A small tube was dropped at Morry's feet. Quickly he picked it up and unscrewed a cap. He pulled out a piece of paper from inside and read:

To the "Ace" of Diamonds,

Major Chatterton, commander of the Border Patrol, dares you to try and cross the American boundary at noon tomorrow. If you are half the man your flying implies, and not a sneaking dog working under cover of darkness, meet me at noon.

Major Chatterton
In Command

Morry smiled quietly to himself, and showed the message to Anne.

Two hours later Carson read the note. An oath escaped his lips. "Wouldn't it be just like that yap to wash us out?" he snapped out. "Now we'll have to lay low for a few days until this blows over. It's too late to tip off the other side to-day. Speed and I'll have to go in town first thing in the morning. You're grounded with that stuff until I give you the word."

A deep furrow appeared between Morry's eyes, as he made a minute inspection of the gadget he had told Holeman was an oil pump. Chatterton had unknowingly helped him to set a trap. Who would be caught in its vicious jaws remained to be seen.

EARLY THE FOLLOWING morning after Butch and Speed had left for Saltillo, Morry walked into the kitchen where Anne was at work. "Anne," he said, "get your father ready. I'm taking you back to the States in half an hour." She stared at him incredulously.

"Howard," she exclaimed, "I couldn't let you risk your life for us. Speed would shoot you down before you reached the border." And then she remembered Chatterton's note. "The border patrol will be up to-day too, Howard. I can't let you do it."

"We'll have to chance it," he replied, with his lips setting in a thin line of determination. There was more at stake now than even a government's orders. He urged her to hurry. The success of his plan depended on its being timed to the second.

Twenty minutes later he carried her father to the plane and placed him in the front cockpit. The attack would be from the rear in both cases. He helped her in beside him and buckled a safety belt tightly about the waist of each. "I may have to do some stunting," he said. "Don't be afraid, and hang on tight."

He noticed that a light wind had sprung up. He would have to take off down wind unless he taxied to the other end of the field first. Time was growing short though, and already he saw a tiny speck in the sky that told him that Speed was returning. He decided to risk it.

Grasping the propeller, he called out to Anne, "Off?"

"Off," she repeated.

He pulled the propeller over to compression. "Contact," he called.

"Contact," she repeated after him.

Smartly he snapped the propeller down and stood clear. The motor picked it up with a low pulsation. He sprang into the cockpit, fastened his life belt, and slowly gave it the gun. The plane taxied forward and gained speed. At fourteen hundred revolutions, he brought the control lever slowly back.

The ship climbed uncertainly due to a cold motor and its capacity load. Holeman was close in now, and Butch was signalling him to land. Morry leveled out to pick up speed. The motor was still throbbing unsteadily, but he knew that once warm, he could outrun them. Outrunning them, however, was not his plan.

Steadily the pursuing plane shortened the distance between them, and Holeman attempted to ride him down by coming in on his tail. Morry pulled his ship's nose up into a zoom, stalled, and then fell by the head into a nose dive. He let it ride until within two hundred feet of the ground then pulled up sharply. He was successful in losing Holeman for the moment, but as he climbed again Holeman was tailing in close.

SUDDENLY SOMETHING smacked into the right wing, and above the roar of his motor he heard the crackle of Carson's machine gun. He looked behind him. and again he was signalled to land. The first fire had only been a warning. Again he nosed down with the black plane riding his fin.

As he gained speed, he banked sharply and gave his Packard full gun. It picked up speed with rapidity.

Carson, seeing that he had been tricked, opened fire in earnest, but Morry had already gained altitude and was out of line for the moment.

Careful not to let his pursuers know that he could outrun them, he held a distance of about two hundred yards. Occasionally he would lose speed or drift, so that they might creep in on him. Then he would bank or dive to avoid the spray of lead. For three quarters of an hour he spiraled, circled, and zoomed, ever drawing them closer to the border. Towards the end, he let them come in closer. They seemed worried, and their machine gun drilled nervously, at every chance.

Suddenly, upon sighting a preconceived landmark, he reached over and jerked out the handle of the gadget. A thin vapor of smoke streamed out from his exhaust. Gradually it thickened to a cloud-like formation, and sifted below, obscuring the ground. It also acted as a screen, blotting out for the black plane anything ahead.

He was not too soon, for stretching out ahead of him he saw a glistening thread which he knew to be the Rio Grande. He cut his motor down to its lowest possible flight speed, and a fusillade of bullets penetrated the cloud. He nosed down as they drew in close.

Glancing below he saw the border circus coming up to join in the battle. Two miles over the border he reached over and closed the smoke screen. The pursuing plane realized too late that it was trapped. Holeman, seeing Chatterton dropping from the sky to pounce upon Morry, decided to run for the States hide-out. Morry could not see Chatterton, as the sun was behind him, and he was still high up near the ceiling.

Holeman figured without the speed and maneuverability of the Curtiss Hawks. Their orders had been to bring down any escort Morry might have. They went into the death grapple with full motors and machine guns spitting fire.

Realizing that it was a fight to the finish, Carson turned his gun on a machine diving in from the right. Having the advantage of a rotary swivel, he got in the first shots. They were good, for the plane did a wing-over and zig-zagged dizzily towards the ground.

Before Holeman could gain altitude the squadron leader hopped upon his tail. In a wild effort to elude him, he side-slipped to the left, but the leader caught him in the line of fire and poured a stream of lead into the front cock-pit. Butch Carson crumpled up and the machine gun went dead.

Holeman nosed down, but a third plane coming up from beneath riddled his gas tank and then zoomed. Flames burst out and reached greedily back as he kicked free of the rudder bar and loosened his life belt. He took off via the silk chute route as his plane whirled to the earth in a flaming mass.

Chatterton was bearing down on Morry like a hawk after its prey. At a hundred yards he opened fire, but Morry zoomed to safety, pulled up into a stall, and then went into a spinning nose dive with Chatterton trailing.

Jamming the control hard over, Morry executed an Immelman turn. After flying upside down for a minute, he went into a loop and came right side up on Chatterton's tail. Almost before he knew what had happened, Chatterton effected an aerial skid and completely reversed his machine, pouring a volley of lead directly into his face. Instantly Morry shoved his stick forward, and gave his motor the gun. As he went into a dive he felt a sharp pain in his shoulder. His left arm was helpless.

Chatterton again pounced upon him, but this time Morry outwitted him by going into a vertical bank and then flattening out again on his tail. Although Chatterton circled, spiraled, dove and stalled, Morry dogged him ever closer to the earth.

The ground was dangerously near. Giving his motor full gun Morry dove straight for Chatterton's cock-pit and forced him lower still. As Chatterton tried to zoom, Morry spurted and blocked his rise. Chatterton, facing a bad crash, flattened out and scudded for the field with Morry hovering close. Both planes grounded and taxied to a stop together.

Morry was the first to alight, and ran to meet him. Chatterton climbed out of his Hawk, and in an instant both were surrounded by field men and pilots of the circus. Morry managed to jerk free of the hands that reached out to stay him, and whispered a few words in Chatterton's ear.

A half hour later, Morry, Anne, and her father sat in Chatterton's office. A telegram had just been received by the flight commander in answer to an urgent request. It was brief. Howard Morry was listed as secret operator number forty-seven. Howard passed the slip of yellow paper to a pale faced girl who read it through once, and then again. A weary smile lighted her face.

"Well Morry," Chatterton said, arising from his chair, "you may be number forty-seven to the office, but you'll always be the ace of diamonds to me."