

Blind Aces

A Three Mosquitoes Adventure by Ralph Oppenheim

Without each other they were helpless, together they were the greatest destructive force in the air. When the menace of enemy cunning tore one of them from red skies they flew to meet the man who was the Allies' greatest enemy—and in whose hand lay the secret of the Three Mosquitoes' might.

DEEP within the enemy lines, a lone Spad roared through the translucent morning sky, penetrating deeper and deeper into Germany. In its cockpit, Captain Kirby, impetuous young leader of the famous "Three Mosquitoes," peered tensely through his goggles at the approaching landscape below. He was nearing his objective now, drawing closer and closer to the stretch of terrain he had been sent to reconnoiter. His mission was as dangerous as it was unusual.

Allied intelligence had learned, through its mysterious channels, that Doctor Ludwig von Grantz, the famous German scientist, was conducting secret experiments to discover a new poison gas which would be more devastating than any yet known. And Kirby had been chosen to fly right over the doctor's estate to see whether the place was well protected, which would indicate that something extraordinary was going on.

His two comrades, "Shorty" Carn and the lanky Travis, had not been permitted to accompany him, because the three-plane formation of the Three Mosquitoes would certainly excite attention and ruin the whole project. And so, shortly after dawn, they had reluctantly waved goodbye, while their leader, who so seldom left them behind, soared away from the drome of the 44th.

And now, as the sun rose to its full morning brilliance, and the relief-map earth became clear and distinct in every detail, Kirby at last distinguished the wide, rambling estate for which he had been watching so tensely. It was looming

toward him below and ahead, coming closer, closer, until now he could see the neat, white mansion which stood proudly on the smooth grounds. The mansion of Doctor Ludwig von Grantz!

The Mosquito urged his throbbing Spad on, his eyes straining now to catch any sign of activity down there. But he'd have to risk going lower if he hoped to see anything. Gently he shoved his joystick forward. The little Spad dipped, piqued downwards. The mansion below loomed into larger shape and focus. And the Mosquito was just getting his first real look at it when suddenly the air behind and above him was shattered by a shrill staccato clatter which brought him bolt upright in his cockpit.

With frantic instinct he pulled up the nose of his Spad, and at the same time jerked his head back over his shoulder. He looked up, to see a speedy, coffin-nosed Fokker thundering down on him, diving out of the blue with jagged streaks of flame leaping from its twin forward Spandaus. And as the sun flashed on that Fokker, revealing it in its bright glare, Kirby saw that it was painted a dazzling blood-red, from nose to tail. The Mosquito's heart leaped, and a strange thrill went tingling up his spine. There could be no mistake about it! Even the dumbest kiwi would have recognized that scarlet, blood-red ship!

The "Red Devil"! Germany's latest and greatest ace, the terror of the skies whose fancy monicker had already become legend throughout the Western Front. The Red Devil, who inspired awe in the hearts of all pilots because of the mystery which surrounded him. No one knew who he was, or what *jagdstaffel* he led.

All sorts of wild conjectures had grown about him.

All, including the Yankee warbirds, feared and respected him. He was the chief topic of every mess, the gloom of every binge, and the cause of

most sleepless nights. The Three Mosquitoes themselves had all longed recklessly for a chance to meet this devil of the heavens, but they had left that to fate, or luck.

And now, when Kirby least expected to meet him, the Red Devil was coming right down on him, and already the German's smoky tracers were beginning to draw zigzag lines on either side of the Spad. Skillfully, Kirby half-rolled to throw off the Jerry's sights.

The Mosquito was banking eagerly to meet the attack. Here at last was the chance he had always wanted! But then he reminded himself with a shock that the Red Devil's *jagdstaffel* might well be lurking in the numerous banks of clouds which floated lazily above, and also that he was a full thirty miles from the Allied lines.

There was no time to dally about it. And so, though it broke his heart to do it, he pulled into a steep, roaring zoom just as the Fokker flattened out behind, peppering away.

The Mosquito's unexpected maneuver had already taken him out of range, and now, opening his throttle wide, he turned tail and hoiked for home as fast as he could! Glancing back, however, he saw that the Red Devil was following him, following with motor wide open! The Mosquito forced more and more speed out of his roaring Spad, and, having gotten a good start, he managed to keep a safe gap between his tail and the coffin-like nose of the pursuing Fokker.

On they both raced, one after the other, faster and faster. The chase continued until they were both streaking hell-bent over the scarred, pockmarked battlefield, out over No-Man's-Land, with the Fokker still a few hundred yards behind the Spad.

WITH a surge of joy, Kirby realized that the Red Devil was indeed alone, that none of his *jagdstaffel* was with him! Why should the Mosquito hesitate now, with the Allied lines so close ahead? With sudden, reckless abandon, he whipped his Spad around in a breathless skid-turn which seemed almost to raise a cloud of dust. The German, taken by surprise, was unable to pull up his racing Fokker until sheer momentum had already carried it past the Spad. The German was already turning to come back. The two planes were momentarily face to face. With a mighty

roar they flew upon one another like two infuriated birds, both their machine guns stuttered in blazing unison.

Kirby and the Red Devil had clashed! Ace had met ace!

It was one great warbird against another, a Yankee buzzard against an Imperial Eagle! In the first few seconds of maneuvering, as both jockeyed furiously for position, Kirby knew that he was up against the toughest antagonist he had ever met. The German matched him in every trick of the game, every breathless turn and twist and maneuver.

The sun flashed on their tilting wings as they banked and dipped and soared high above No-Man's-Land.

Minutes passed, and still the mad tail chasing continued. Deadlocked! It seemed they were going to keep it up until the pilots or their planes broke down from the terrific pace—but suddenly, unexpected, fate intervened!

For a second it had once more been the Red Devil's turn to gain enough speed to fire one of those random bursts, which had been so ineffectual. But this time, even as Kirby had pulled safely out of range again, the Mosquito heard a shrill musical twang, like that of a snapped mandolin string. He knew at once that it was a flying wire, struck and broken by a chance bullet. But in the next instant, there came a lashing blow across his face. It whipped the goggles right off his eyes and left a numbing, blinding sensation.

Dazed and stunned, he jerked his head in an effort to shake off the terrific effect of that blow. The whole world had turned suddenly black. Cursing, he wiped his eyes with the back of his fist, and the unexpected pain this brought made him cry out in sheer agony, and grind his teeth. But the blackness remained, and though he knew his eyes were wide-open and straining, he could not see a thing!

Slowly the horrible realization came. Good God, that flying wire had lashed up under his goggles and struck him right across the eyes. He was blind—blind as a bat! God, what a ghastly predicament! To go blind in mid-air!

Rat-ta-tat-tat! Somewhere in the black void which surrounded him the clatter of the Red Devil's machine guns rose ominously shrill. Kirby

heard the sizzling whistle of tracer bullets past his ear. And then sheer panic overcame him as he realized the full horror of his predicament. God, he had not only gone blind in midair, but he had gone blind during a dogfight with Germany's greatest ace, who was even now fiercely determined to send him crashing to hell!

Frantically he mauled the controls of his plane, but he had no sense of direction now, had no idea whether he was right-side up, whether he was heading up or down! A roar rose in his ears above the powerful roar of his own engine. *Rat-ta-tat-tat!* There was a ripping, groaning sound as the bullets plowed through the fabric and wood fuselage of the Spad, and drilled through its wings.

Kirby felt the Spad lurch, as if a giant hand had picked it up and was shaking it like a rattle. With bullets singing wildly all about his ears, the Mosquito cursed and yelled in a frenzy.

"For God's sake," he cried into the blackness, "can't you give a man a sporting chance? Can't you see I'm blind?"

But he knew, even as he cursed, that the German had never heard his plea. His voice had been more than completely drowned out by the roar of motors and guns. He didn't even have a chance to appeal to the Red Devil's mercy, if indeed the German, known as a relentless killer, had any mercy! There was no hope now! A few seconds more and Kirby would be shot to ribbons!

He heard the roar of that other ship again, rising somewhere in the blackness. It was coming upon him again, but he did not know which way it was coming! He became insane in his frenzy. Wildly, futilely, his trembling fingers found his own stick triggers. With a berserk yell he pressed them, heard his twin Vickers stuttering into life. He kept pressing them, pressing them while his Spad floundered crazily, pressing them until he felt the twin machine guns stop vibrating, and knew he had exhausted every round of ammunition.

THE sudden silence which followed Kirby's dying guns only filled him with greater terror, for he knew now that his roaring engine had conked out! A terrific rush of wind flogged his wounded, sightless face painfully. And he felt a growing nausea in the pit of his stomach. He did not need

his eyes to understand these horrible sensations! He knew his Spad was hurtling downwards in a dizzying tailspin, plunging, twisting, tearing down toward the earth! The massive machine had suddenly gone amok and was crashing down to destruction while a blind man sat strapped in its cockpit, unable to guide it!

Instinctively the blind Mosquito tugged at the joystick in his hand, and his feet groped clumsily at the rudder-bar. God, if only he could see just a little bit, just enough to have a ghost of a chance!

Suddenly Kirby sat up in his seat with a start! Some sixth sense, some instinct born out of years of flying, made him stiffen, every nerve tense, alert. He could not at first understand the strange sensation he had. It was just a feeling—a feeling of the earth rising to meet him! Blind though he was, he could feel the ground so surely that he might almost have seen it! He could feel how far it was beneath him, and at what rate it was rising toward him, until presently he had gotten back his sense of direction completely, and knew the relation of his own position with that of the earth!

He did not hesitate, did not question this phenomenon. Acting on sheer instinct, he pulled back the joystick with all his might, pulled it against his chest, where he held it while he half-stood on the rudder-bar with both feet. He felt the Spad lurch violently, felt himself hurled against the safety-belt with a force which almost broke the strap.

There was a rending impact, a shivering crash—then silence, dead silence. After such infernal noise the stillness seemed ghastly by contrast.

Slowly Kirby managed to gather his wits. It took him a full moment to take stock of the situation, owing to his blindness. Then he realized that he was still in his cockpit. He had made a safe landing, blind though he was! He had gotten out of the spin and avoided a fatal, head-on crash by pancaking! But then, again, alarm swept him. Where was he? In Allied territory or Hunland? And what about the Red Devil? If he should come down to ground-straft

The thought stirred him frantically to action. His fingers groped for the safety-buckle, found it. Before he could move, strong hands seized him; he was lifted to the ground. Then a voice came out of the blackness.

“Yuh all right, buddy? Yuh okay?”

A wave of frenzied relief swept the blind Mosquito. Yanks! Thank God!

BRIGHT sunlight slanted through the French window of the clean white room in the base hospital at Remiens. It was shortly past noon, of the same day. On the cot, his head propped up by pillows, his sightless eyes covered by a bandage, lay Kirby. And beside the bed stood two Yankee warbirds, their faces white with anguish and horror, their eyes misty. One of them was short and corpulent, the other tall and lanky. They were Kirby's comrades. They were Shorty Carn and Travis, eldest and wisest of the Three Mosquitoes.

“Well, fellers,” Kirby's voice rose, cheerful but strangely tense, from the cot, “what did the doc tell you outside? Come on, give me the verdict!” In spite of himself his voice suddenly trembled, and a note of horror and fear crept into it. “Am I gonna be blind for life? Am I, fellers?”

Shorty and Travis looked at one another in helpless anguish.

It was Travis, the calm, stoic Travis, who forced the reassuring words from his throat.

“Don't worry, you'll be all right in no time, old boy!” he drawled, though his drawl was a trifle husky.

Shorty laughed, almost hysterically.

“Sure, you're going to be okay!”

Kirby's voice was pitiful in its eagerness.

“And I'll be able to fly again?”

Once more Shorty and Travis looked at one another, and this time each saw his anguished guilt mirrored in the other's eyes.

“Sure you'll be able to fly!” Travis insisted, his voice more and more husky.

The relief which came over Kirby's bandaged face was almost too painful to see. But then a slight shadow of doubt crossed his features.

“You wouldn't kid me, guys, would you? Cause if you did”—his tone changed strangely—”I'd never forgive you, I swear I wouldn't! Now, is what you're telling me straight?”

Fortunately, at this moment, when Shorty and Travis felt that the strain was getting unbearable, there came a timely interruption. The door opened, and a tall, stern-faced major of the medical corps strode into the room. He was the doctor in charge here. He seemed to be highly

excited, almost elated, although a shadow crossed his face as his glance went to the blind man on the cot.

“Boys,” he cried then, instantly recovering his former good spirits, “I've got news for you that'll knock you off your feet. We've got the Red Devil!”

“What?” The blind Mosquito almost jumped out of the cot. Even Shorty and Travis gave an exclamation of surprise.

“I thought it would surprise you all,” the major chuckled. “But believe it or not, the Red Devil's here, right here in this hospital!”

“But—but—” Kirby stammered in awe, “how in hell does the Red Devil come to be—”

“I don't know the details,” the major replied. “They say his motor conked out and he made a forced landing right near the lines. They captured him and brought him here; he had a bad shoulder. We've just been fixing it up.” His smile widened. “And, Captain Kirby, he asked to be allowed to visit you!”

“Me?” Kirby was incredulous.

“You mean—”

“I thought the idea of a visit from the Red Devil might appeal to you men,” the major said. “He's been such a confounded mystery.”

“I'd be interested,” said Shorty, with sudden and surprising vehemence, “in seeing the Red Devil in hell, where he belongs!”

“That goes for me too,” said Travis, with equal bitterness. For both of them felt, though they knew their feeling was not wholly justified, that the Red Devil was the cause of Kirby's predicament. They hated the mere mention of the German.

But Kirby felt no such resentment. He spoke cheerfully.

“By all means, bring him on,” he urged. “I sure would like to see—”

He corrected himself with a laugh which again made his comrades' hearts bleed for him, “I mean I'd like to hear him!”

“Very well, you shall!” the major decided. He went to the door, opened it, and barked out an order. A moment later there rose a tramp of feet outside. All save the blind Mosquito turned their eyes to the doorway, expectantly.

THROUGH the doorway, marching in front of two husky privates who kept their hands healthily close to their gun holsters, came a tall figure in the tight-fitting gray uniform of the Imperial Flying Corps. And at the sight of him neither Shorty nor Travis could conceal their amazement. For they saw a young, fair-haired, blue-eyed fellow with a cheerful, rosy face and an infectious smile. It seemed incredible! Was this blue-eyed youth indeed the dreaded Red Devil, the most feared and hated enemy ace, the terror of the skies who had spelled doom to almost every Allied flyer who had the ill luck to meet him? But as they looked at him more closely, they saw that his face, with all its youth and rosiness, also bore the stamp of reckless courage and an indomitable will. And his smile did not altogether conceal a certain, hostile bitterness, the bitterness of being a prisoner in the hands of his enemies.

He walked straight to the cot and leaned over the man who lay there with his eyes bandaged.

“How do you do, Captain Kirby?” he said cheerily, in English that was flawless, though slightly metallic.

Kirby at first did not know just how to react. But then a slow grin came over his bandaged face.

“*Wie gehts?*” he murmured.

The Red Devil spoke with warm sincerity.

“Allow me to express my regrets, captain. Our fight was the best I have ever had. If I had only known what happened to your eyes I should never have continued the encounter. But even so,” his tone became more sober, “I must bow to you. Captain Kirby, as the victor of our strange encounter, for though you were blind, you brought me down!”

Kirby gasped.

“I—I brought you down?”

“I wish I could deny it, it is not much to my credit,” the Red Devil sighed. “But it is true. Just before you went into that spin, you hit me in the shoulder, and the same burst shot away half my controls.” Even as the German spoke, Kirby’s mind flashed back to that hectic, insane moment, when he had blindly fired his guns into the black void which had closed about him.

“I tried to limp back to my lines,” the Red Devil continued, “but I was forced to land in Allied territory. So here I am. And I should like to have the honor of shaking hands with the only

man who was clever enough to down me, even though now I know he was blind when he did it!”

Kirby’s grin returned.

“Sure!” he said cheerfully, “Shake!” And his hand groped from the cot. The Red Devil seized it, and they gripped warmly, the warm, sturdy handclasp of two strong and courageous men. Shorty and Travis frowned their disapproval but were silent.

The Red Devil straightened up and walked over to the major.

“Doctor,” he said, politely, “without meaning to intrude, may I ask just how serious Captain Kirby’s condition is?”

The major was slightly taken aback, but then, in a low voice that would not carry to the cot, he answered the question.

The Red Devil was stunned, shaken.

“What?” he cried out. “Do you mean, doctor, that he’s permanently blind?”

Too late did Shorty and Travis jump toward him, their faces crimsoning with frenzied rage. Instantly Kirby was straining from his cot.

“What’s that?” he shouted hoarsely. “What’s that he was saying?”

“Nothing—it was nothing!” Shorty blurted, wildly.

“You’re lying, damn you!” The words tore from the blind Mosquito in a frenzy. “I heard him, I tell you! I heard him! Permanently blind! Oh, God!” His whole body shook with racking sobs. Then suddenly his voice rose in a high cracked scream.

“No!” he cried. “No! No! No! I can’t stand it; I can’t be blind for life! I can’t—”

Wildly his two hands clutched at the bandage which covered his eyes, and started to rip it off. With a gasp of alarm the major leaped to the cot to stop him. Shorty and Travis were right behind, and all three caught Kirby’s arms, held them tightly, fiercely.

Kirby struggled like a madman, as they tried to pinion him down.

“Let me go!” he shrieked. “Let me out of here, damn you! I won’t stand it! I won’t stand it! I won’t stay blind like this! Please, fellers—”

His voice trailed off into incoherent sobs, as, exhausted, he fell back at last, panting and gasping. Shorty and Travis were also breathing heavily, and sweat covered their faces, as they

kept holding their leader firmly down against the pillows.

CHAPTER II "LET'S GO!"

THE two guards who had brought in the German stood pale, shaken. And the Red Devil stood with his head bowed, a look of mingled remorse and sympathy clouding his youthful features. Shorty and Travis were trying to quiet their hysterical leader now. Travis' drawl rose soothingly, gently.

"You're okay, old man. Just take it easy now. You're okay. Just lie back and rest."

"Don't leave me, fellers!" Kirby was plaintive now, like a child terrified in the dark. "For God's sake, stick by me, will you?"

"We're right with you, old man!" Travis assured him. "Don't worry, we're sticking!"

"Shorty, you'll stick too, won't you, Shorty? You won't leave me alone in the dark. Shorty? Shorty—"

"Hell," Shorty choked. "Ain't I your buddy? We're both right here with you! Don't worry!"

At last, after several more reassurances from his comrades, Kirby managed to regain some control over himself. And he seemed to be ashamed because he had broken down in the presence of a German prisoner and a rival flyer.

"I'm okay now," he insisted, forcing a weak smile to his lips. "I'm all right."

The major was speaking to the two guards now, quietly.

"Well, no use keeping the prisoner here any longer." He wiped his brow, "God, I never expected this or I wouldn't have had him here in the first place." His voice rose, officiously. "Take him out!"

The guards moved toward the Red Devil. But the latter held up a restraining hand.

"Just a moment, I beg you." He turned abruptly to the major. "Doctor," he said, with deep conviction, "if this man here were a German in our country we would never give him up for blind. No, indeed not!"

Shorty and Travis glared at him from the cot. The major stiffened with indignation. "Do you mean to insinuate that your German surgeons are superior to ours?"

The German's smile was ironic.

"No, although that is also true. But it is not what I meant. I meant," he explained, confidently, "that in our country there is one doctor who could certainly operate on a case like this—and cure it!"

The major smiled skeptically.

"And who is this most remarkable doctor, may I ask?"

"Doctor Ludwig von Grantz!"

Everyone, even the despairing Kirby, started at the familiar name. And it was Kirby who spoke wonderingly.

"You mean the chemical expert, where I was doing that reconnaissance today?"

"Yes, the chemical expert," the German replied, "and also the world's greatest surgeon. Doctor Ludwig von Grantz—my father!"

This last fell like a bombshell on the surprised men in the room. For the identity of the Red Devil had been one of the great mysteries of the war ever since his scarlet Fokker was first seen streaking through the skies! All stared at him, with new interest.

Travis, despite his resentment, said dazedly, "You are the son of Doctor Ludwig von Grantz?"

The German spoke with just pride.

"Erich von Grantz is my name." He turned again to the dazed major. "You, doctor, must know of my father's reputation. Before the war, people traveled from all over the world for his treatment."

The army med was forced to agree, though he did so grudgingly.

"Yes, Doctor von Grantz is a pretty fine surgeon, perhaps the best alive."

"You'll admit that he could perform this operation successfully?" the German said, confidently.

The major shifted uncomfortably.

"Well," he conceded, at length, "perhaps he could. But I'm sure any other doctor would deem the operation fatal. I do admit that Doctor von Grantz has performed what seemed like miracles before, and perhaps—"

Then he shrugged suddenly, as if he had humiliated himself and his colleagues sufficiently. "But what's the use of such a conjecture, anyway?"

“What’s the use?” Shorty Carn chimed in, vehemently. “A great deal! At least after the war we can take Kirby to this doctor and—”

But the major’s look of absolute negation stopped him short.

THE army med spoke without reserve now, since it was no longer necessary to conceal the facts from Kirby. “It would be too late then, even for Doctor von Grantz,” he added, with involuntary irony. “This operation, this one tiny chance of curing his blindness, would have to be performed within the next twenty-four hours, before the permanent blindness sets in.”

“God,” Travis muttered, “if only there were some way to—”

The major waved him off.

“It’s no use. Lieutenant Travis. Nothing can be done about it. This is war, and Doctor von Grantz is an enemy, a very great enemy, owing to his work with poison gases.”

The Red Devil nodded his slow agreement.

“Yes, it is one of the ironies of war,” he sighed. “A cruel paradox. For though there is a man on this very continent, not very far from here, who could save Captain Kirby’s eyes, that man is inaccessible!”

But Travis, and Shorty too now, were not listening to these hopeless statements. From the moment they had heard that this Doctor von Grantz could cure their comrade, they had seized on the fact like drowning men clutching at a straw. And it was Travis who suddenly leaped to his feet, his eyes lighting up eagerly.

“Look here,” the lanky Mosquito cried, “certainly Kirby’s eyes are valuable to the Allies. He’s the best flyer we have. He is just as valuable to us as having the Red Devil a prisoner here. In fact,” he insisted, “he is more valuable, for you’ve got to remember that Shorty and myself are with him, and the Three Mosquitoes are really one!” He paused a moment, but only long enough to see that this last argument had made an impression. With growing confidence he resumed then.

“Well, why not make a sporting agreement? Return the Red Devil to Hunland intact if he agrees to persuade his father to operate on Kirby, and then let us bring Kirby safely back. We can fly the two of them over and—”

He broke off, the enthusiasm going out of him and leaving him with a vacant feeling inside as he saw the expression of absolute refusal on the face of the major, and also on the Red Devil’s face!

“Impossible! Unheard of!” the major snapped, with firm decision. “Didn’t I tell you this is war? Such an arrangement could never be sanctioned by us! And I’m sure the Germans wouldn’t consider it either!” And he turned, half inquiringly, to young von Grantz.

The Red Devil smiled sadly.

“I should like to deceive you,” he said, “so I could get my liberty. But since it is a sporting proposition, I must tell you that my father would never dream of consenting to it. True, he loves me more than anything else in the world; I am his only son, and his only consolation since the death of my mother.” His tone had become wistful for a moment, but now again his features hardened. “But he is a German of the old, militaristic school and to him the Code would mean more than the liberty, more even than the life of his own and only son!”

The major now said that the prisoner had remained there long enough.

The Red Devil nodded and again approached the cot. Shorty and Travis moved away, as if unable to stand his close presence. The German once more leaned over the blind Kirby.

“Well, I must bid you farewell, Captain Kirby.” His tone became deeply sympathetic. “Allow me once more to express my regrets.” He resorted to American slang, which seemed more than anything else to bring out the sincerity of his feelings. “It’s tough, captain—damned tough!”

Kirby made an effort to smile, but this time he was unsuccessful. He could only blurt:

“Thanks. It’s okay.”

The guards were getting impatient.

“Well then,” the German concluded, hastily. “Goodbye, captain.”

“So long,” Kirby murmured.

The Red Devil straightened up. Again he bowed to Carn and Travis and again they ignored him. Then, under his two guards, he marched slowly from the room. The major, excusing himself to attend to other business, also went out. Left alone with their leader once more. Shorty and Travis settled themselves on the edge of the cot.

“WHAT gets me,” said Shorty, vehemently, “is the idea that only thirty miles from here, in Germany, is a man who can fix up those eyes, and just on account of a lousy war we can’t do anything about it!” He lapsed into bitter silence again. Kirby made no reply, for inwardly he shared these same feelings. There was another hopeless pause. And then, suddenly, Travis started out of his musings, and again a wild gleam came into the lanky man’s eyes.

“Damn it, fellows,” he spoke low, confidentially, but there was a tense undertone of excitement in his voice. “If you’re willing to take a long chance, especially you, Kirby; I have an idea! Yes, by God, I have it! Now listen!” He glanced about the room to make sure that they were alone and in privacy, and his voice dropped to a tense whisper. “When you flew over that von Grantz place today, did you get a good look at it, Kirby?”

“I didn’t have much time, but I saw it pretty clearly,” the blind Mosquito replied, wonderingly.

Immediately Travis began to question him about the details of the place, and Kirby answered the questions with growing eagerness. Soon both Kirby and Shorty were catching their lanky comrade’s reckless spirit; the Three Mosquitoes were putting their heads together, planning, scheming in their usual daredevil way! They grew more and more excited, and Kirby’s former cheerfulness returned as his hopes rose jubilantly.

“Then we’ll try it tonight,” Travis was concluding, in that tense whisper, “because we’ve got only twenty-four hours to do the stunt in. Now don’t forget, Kirby, you’ve got to be all ready for us.”

“Don’t worry!” Kirby’s voice was the vibrant, cheerful voice of the leader of the Three Mosquitoes. “Just you two guys do your part and never mind about mine!”

That evening, having been fed his dinner, Kirby sat in a wheelchair down in the general ward, dressed in his full uniform, though the bandage still covered his sightless eyes.

He gave a start, as his keen ears heard the sound they had been listening for so tensely. It was a steady, beelike drone rising somewhere overhead, rising higher and higher until it was quite clear above the noise of the suffering men in the room. Presently, as Kirby kept listening with

ears frightfully alert, the drone rose to a roar, full-throated and powerful for a moment, and then died out abruptly. Kirby waited with feverish impatience, his air-trained mind following a ship as it glided silently down for a landing. He waited, counting the black minutes.

Nor did he have long to wait. In a surprisingly short time two familiar voices were greeting him, eagerly.

“We’ve got the bus right on a field near by.” It was Travis who whispered the important news, leaning close over the blind Kirby. “And we have our flying togs and yours out there too. We didn’t want to wear ‘em coming in because we can’t take any chance of attracting suspicion. They mustn’t even associate us with flying just now!” His tone changed, became grim, earnest.

“Well, are you still willing to try it, Kirby, to go through with it?”

Kirby grinned, his old reckless grin. “Let’s go!” he said, giving the familiar war whoop of the Three Mosquitoes. “I’m all set.”

“Cheese it!” Shorty Carn broke in, nervously. “The major is heading this way!”

Sure enough the army med was approaching across the crowded room. Travis whispered, hastily:

“Now don’t let him see we’ve got anything up our sleeves. Leave this to me. Ah, good evening, sir!” His voice rose urbanely as the major drew up by the wheelchair. “Lieutenant Carn and myself were just about to hunt you up,” Travis went on, trying to sound as casual as possible. “We wanted your permission to wheel Captain Kirby out for a little fresh air.”

“It’s such a lovely night outside!” Shorty added, with far too much feeling, and Travis shot him a vicious glance.

The major eyed all Three Mosquitoes shrewdly.

“Well, I guess it won’t do any harm,” he said, “provided you bring him right back.”

“Of course!” Travis promised, while Shorty and Kirby grew more and more tense.

WITHOUT further hesitation Travis stepped behind the wheelchair, seized the handles, and commenced to wheel Kirby across the room. Shorty walked beside him, and both he and Kirby whispered for Travis to hurry. But Travis had no

intention of rousing further suspicion. He wheeled the chair leisurely, calmly, as though he had all the time in the world, out of the doorway, and down the steps of the hospital. They reached the road, and pushed on.

Travis continued to wheel Kirby leisurely down the dark road, until the hospital building was a safe distance behind them. The lanky Mosquito looked around furtively.

“Okay!” he whispered. “No one seems to be about! Let’s go! Hold on, Kirby!”

“I’m with you, though I don’t know where the hell I’m going!” came the cheerful reply.

Travis no longer kept up his manner of leisure. With Shorty again helping him, and the two almost running, they pushed the chair right off the road and onto an adjacent stubble field. Kirby gripped the arms on either side of him, as the wheel chair lurched and bounded across the rough ground. It did not last long. Another moment or so, and they stopped.

Before them, on the dark field, a huge D.H. 9 squatted, its propeller turning over lazily and sparks flickering from its exhaust stacks as its engine idled.

“I’ll take the controls,” Travis said.

“Shorty, you can hold Kirby on your lap in back!”

The other two gave a quick assent as they got quickly into their teddy bears and helmets. With one of them taking either arm, they guided Kirby to the idling plane. Shorty hoisted himself up into the rear observer’s cockpit. He leaned down, reaching over to seize Kirby’s up stretched hands. Travis boosted the blind man from below, and together they got him up into the cockpit.

Travis, with a lusty “Here goes!” to his comrades, jerked the throttle lever wide open. The engine of the D.H. rose in a thunderous, deafening roar. The big ship lurched forward, lumbering down the dark field. Slowly, like some winged monster with its exhausts breathing fire, the huge plane climbed toward the starlit sky.

At eight thousand feet, Travis leveled off the big D.H. and consulted the map pinned beneath the hooded lights of his instrument board. Kirby had adjusted himself on Shorty’s lap now, and outside of the fact that the little Mosquito was almost squashed, both had settled themselves for the long flight. They were off to take their blind

leader to the only doctor who could cure him, even though that doctor was a German, living in Germany!

The huge plane roared through the night, its wings swaying slowly. And before long, Kirby’s uncanny flying instinct again came to the surface. Suddenly, to the amazement of both his comrades, he exclaimed, “Well, we’re getting near the lines now, eh? We ought to be crossing them in a minute!”

He was right! Even as he spoke the big D.H. was winging its way over the battlefield. It was quiet now, marked by only occasional livid flashes down in the murk. A moment later they saw the white calcium zigzags which marked the German trenches. They were crossing the lines now! As they swept into Hunland, all Three Mosquitoes, even the blind but instinctive Kirby, began to grow tense, alert.

They went on, penetrating farther and farther into Hunland now. And now Kirby, blind though he was, commenced giving detailed directions to Travis, pointing out the route he had learned this morning, recalling landmarks from his mind’s eye. Travis obeyed these directions implicitly, without question. Presently, as they droned on, they knew that they had crossed another boundary; from Hunland, that is to say captured France, they had swept over Germany itself! They were in a new land, a new nation!

“Look for a river now, Trav!” Kirby shouted. “Ought to be right ahead!”

Travis obediently peered into the murk ahead and below. Nor was he surprised now, having grown used to Kirby’s uncanny sense of the terrain, to see a tiny winding ribbon of silver which gleamed in the darkness. Kirby told him to follow it. Travis promptly banked the D.H. again and proceeded to fly on a parallel with that winding silver line, keeping it beneath him.

ON, on they went, deeper and deeper into Germany now as the huge plane droned through the starlit sky. And at last, through Kirby’s accurate directions, and also from his maps, Travis knew they were reaching their objective! Out of the dim, blurred landscape below and ahead appeared the vague form of the large, spreading building which Kirby had seen this

morning. Slowly it loomed toward them, coming into clearer shape and outline.

“Gosh, what a place!” Travis cut the throttle to shout back. “Why the hell would a man want to live in such a big house?”

“Probably it was a private hospital before the war,” Kirby replied. “I noticed that this morning, and from what the Red Devil told us it’s quite likely.”

They were drawing closer to the great estate now, and already Travis was looking keenly for a possible place to land.

It seemed to be deserted down there. Travis piqued down a little more, his goggled face grim and tense now. It was not going to be easy, this landing by dim starlight. It was damned risky, but it had to be done. Travis was circling into the wind now. He jerked his head back, to shout.

“All right, fellers. I’m going down now! Are you all set?”

And both Kirby and Shorty answered with the old yell. “Let’s go!”

Travis hesitated no longer. Gently, he pushed the joystick forward, and his other hand closed the throttle lever. The nose of the big D.H. dipped into the wind, and the plane glided downwards. Down, down, down, with the wind shrieking through its flying wires, seeming so loud and piercing to the three men that they feared it would rouse the whole neighborhood. Travis kept his eyes on the clearing. It was looming toward him now, faster, faster. In the next second the vague outlines of tree tops were sweeping right under the D.H. The ground rose to meet the big ship. Its wheels touched, bounced gently, and it rolled to a stop.

“Sweet landing, Trav!” Kirby’s voice rose in the sudden silence which had followed the stop. “I could feel it and it was perfect! You’ve never done a better one!”

“Thanks!” drawled Travis. “And now let’s see what’s what!” As he spoke he glanced all around, into the dense darkness of the trees. Nothing there; those things that seemed to be moving were only shadows.

Travis switched off the ignition and jumped out of the plane. With Shorty helping him from the rear cockpit, they lowered their blind leader to the ground. Carn came down himself then, and

stretched his aching arms and limbs gratefully. Again they all stood listening.

“Well, let’s get going!” Kirby said. “You guys’ll have to sorta lead me, but anyway we must try to work fast. The quicker we act the better chance we’ll have. Come on, to the house now! Take my arms, fellers!”

They did. Then, with Kirby supported between them, they started gingerly through the trees toward the von Grantz estate. Progress was slow, painful. Several times Kirby’s feet stumbled blindly over the rough ground, and at the noise they all paused tensely.

“There’s a light in one of the windows!” Shorty whispered, pointing out to Travis an oblong of yellow in the otherwise dark wall of the building.

“Which window is it?” Kirby wanted to know.

“Ground floor,” Travis supplied. “On this side of the house, which would be the left side from the front.”

Kirby nodded. “That must be the laboratory,” he said, “I noticed it this morning. It was the only thing I got a real squint at before the Red Devil jumped my tail. I figured it was the laboratory because it’s got the largest window, to let in plenty of light.” His voice lowered tensely. “He’s probably in there now, if there’s a light.” They decided to gamble on this conclusion.

MOVING very slowly and cautiously now, sheltered only by the darkness as they piloted Kirby across the open lawn, they began to sneak up toward that lighted window. Kirby felt his footing carefully now before each step, so as to make no further noise. Closer and closer now, foot by foot, step by painful step.

“We’d better be careful, fellows!” Travis whispered. “There are probably plenty of sentries about and I guess the doctor has a whole army of servants and assistants! Let’s hope to hell there’s no one with him now!”

“There shouldn’t be,” Kirby argued. “If he’s keeping his experiments so damned secret, as they say he is, he’d most likely work alone.”

They were close to the window now, so close that Travis whispered, “You two guys wait right where you are until I have a look!”

He found himself looking into an immense and brightly lighted white room, full of strange-

looking retorts and test tubes and apparatus. The walls were lined with shelves, all stacked with bottles. But also visible was an operating table and a glass closet full of surgical instruments. Yes, this place had been a hospital once all right, and this room must have been the operating room.

In this great white chamber, at a flat worktable, his back to the window, stood a short, stocky figure with an immense shock of gray-white hair. He wore a long, stained smock, and he was completely absorbed in the work of pouring fluids from one test tube to another. But what was even more comforting to the tense Travis—he was quite alone, with no assistants! The lanky Mosquito slipped away from the window to rejoin his two waiting comrades.

“He’s in there all right; it must be he!” Travis whispered excitedly. “Now listen, fellers. I’m gonna try to get in that window.” The other two did not exactly approve of Travis’ taking this risk alone, but they realized that it was the wisest possible course. To move Kirby anywhere required too much time, and quick action was vital!

The lanky Mosquito cautiously tried the window. It yielded to his first push, opening inwards. Travis kept pushing, gently, ever so gently. The hinges of the window suddenly creaked, the noise seeming frightfully shrill and loud in the stillness.

Fearfully Travis whipped out his Colt automatic, gripping it tightly. But as yet there was no cause for alarm. The creaking hinges had not disturbed the figure in the room from his introspective study.

Travis steeled his nerves. He drew a long breath. Then, silent as a cat, he climbed through the open window. He was in the room now, revolver in hand. Some sixth sense must have warned the figure at the test tubes now. Suddenly, almost taking Travis unawares, the man wheeled around—and the two were face to face! Instantly, even before he really could have seen the intruder, the German’s mouth opened to give a cry of alarm.

“*Ruhig!*” Travis’ voice, speaking flawless German, was as cold as the steel Colt with which he menaced the surprised Jerry doctor. “Not a sound! Put up your hands!”

The doctor was dumfounded. He stared incredulously at this man in a Yankee flying uniform who seemed to have dropped out of the sky into his private room! Slowly, more confused than frightened, he raised his hands as he found himself looking into the big black muzzle of Travis’ forty-five. He was a man in his fifties, Travis saw now, but very vigorous and healthy for his age. His features bore some resemblance to those of the Red Devil, though the doctor’s were harder and sharper, and his eyes, instead of blue, were dark and seemed to burn like live coals. Suddenly he spoke, in a voice high-pitched, almost staccato.

“*Wer sind sie?*” he demanded, shrilly. “Who are you and what do you want? What—”

“Silence!” Travis snapped. The lanky man’s eyes had narrowed to ominous slits. “If you make one false move, if you try to summon help in any way, Germany will lose its greatest scientist! Keep that in mind!” Then, keeping the doctor covered with the menacing Colt, he turned to the open window.

“All right, guys!” he called softly. “Come on in!” Shorty and Kirby were ready for that cue. It took some time, but Carn managed to pilot his blind comrade through the window, into the room. Shorty, after closing the window behind him, covered the German doctor, emulating Travis.

CHAPTER III TWO CARRY ON

THE doctor’s eyes bulged as he watched the three come into the room. He stared askance, doubtless wondering if this wasn’t all some crazy, lurid nightmare.

“*Was verlangen sie da?*” he blurted again, dumbly this time. “What do you want?”

Travis’ tone suddenly changed, though he still kept his automatic trained unwaveringly on the German.

“Doctor von Grantz,” he said, almost politely, “I am sorry we had to employ such extreme measures to get this appointment with you, but we are in trouble, and you must help us out. We are not here as Allied spies or under any false colors.”

The doctor was more confused than ever by these words, and, instinctively, his glance swept

nervously about the room with its test tubes and apparatus.

“Don’t worry,” Travis hastily reassured him, “if you have any secrets we are not interested in them. We are here for an entirely different reason. Allow me,” his tone was quite formal now, “to introduce myself and my comrades. We are the Three Mosquitoes. Perhaps you have heard of us?” The doctor stiffened, a look of mingled hate and anger coming over his sharp features.

“Yes, I thought you may have heard of us,” Travis said quietly. “Now, doctor, we had heard, through the lips of your own son—”

“My son!” The doctor’s whole expression had changed, and he was unable to control his emotion. “Where is he?” he exclaimed, with pitiful eagerness. “What has happened to him? *Gott!*”

“You did not hear then?” Travis spoke gently. “He was taken prisoner today, but he is safe and practically unhurt, I assure you. You need have no fears.”

The doctor could not conceal his intense relief on hearing that his son was alive. But then, almost immediately, he stiffened again, with indignation.

“Well, what do you want here?” he demanded for the third time, but this time firmly, as though he had taken himself well in hand. “What is it. Why have you come?”

“*Herr Doktor,*” Travis said, softly, “our captain here”—he nodded toward Kirby, standing there with the bandage over his eyes— “has been pronounced incurably blind by our surgeons at home. They can do nothing for him—”

The doctor’s glance went to Kirby, and the healer in him could not help being interested. In spite of himself, he spoke, almost professionally:

“What seems to be the matter with him?”

“His eyes were struck by a flying wire from his plane,” Travis supplied, his heart beating eagerly.

For a moment instinct got the better of the doctor, the instinct of his profession. Without quite realizing what he was doing, and unheeded of the guns which menaced him, he walked over to Kirby. His trained fingers moved to the bandage which covered the Mosquito’s eyes. Kirby stood discreetly motionless. The doctor lifted the bandage expertly and, standing on his toes, peered down beneath it, squinting his eyes. He shook his head.

“It is bad,” he sighed, as he let the bandage fall back into place. “An internal hemorrhage in both eyes. It is very bad. But possibly —” He broke off abruptly, coming back to his senses with a shock. Rage seized him. His dark eyes blazed.

“How dare you?” he burst out. “You cursed, Yankee swine! How dare you come into my country, my house, like this, with one of your *verdammter* flyers, the worst of the lot!” His tone changed to a sneer, and he laughed with acrid mirth. “Why, you are crazy! You are out of your heads! You will be captured, made prisoners! This house is full of my servants and guarded by soldiers!”

“*Herr Doktor!*” Travis warned, his Colt again carefully leveled. “You forget what I said. If anything happens to us, you die!” But then his manner became almost pleading. “Look here, doctor, certainly you must have some sporting blood. We have come to do no harm. We have come merely to bring you a patient, whom you can cure. You are the only one who can cure him. Surely, in the interests of science—” He paused, significantly.

THE doctor was more impressed than he wished to admit. In spite of his hatred, he felt a sort of grudging admiration for these three reckless Yanks, who had gone to such lengths to see him. But, as his son had said, he was a German of the old school, and he remained adamant in his patriotism.

“There is only one thing you can do,” he snapped, decisively. “You can leave this man here, as a prisoner of war. Go back yourselves or try to, for I don’t deny that I shall summon help as soon as I have the slightest opportunity. But you leave this man here and I’ll try to cure him before sending him to prison camp.”

On hearing this, Kirby spoke up at once.

“I think he’s right, fellers,” he said, for he welcomed anything that would spare his comrades further danger on his account. “It’s the best thing to do!”

“Not on your life!” Shorty broke in, vindictively. “We brought you here and we’re gonna bring you back!”

The doctor’s features set stubbornly.

“Then I refuse to do a thing! I shall not lift a finger! No use pointing guns at me either! You

cannot force me to perform an operation, especially one like this!"

"Doctor," Travis argued keenly, "your son is a prisoner. If you do this for us we'll see that he is treated decently and—"

"I love my son," the doctor confessed, with suppressed emotion. "But I love my country even more. No," he shook his head, decisively. "I refuse!"

Travis' face grew suddenly lean, almost wolfish. His revolver snapped up.

"Then you die, Doctor von Grantz!"

The doctor did not flinch.

"I am not, and never was, afraid of death," he said, calmly.

Shorty and the blind Kirby were beginning to despair. The doctor's stubbornness was maddening. But Travis still had one more desperate argument left, and he put it forth, eloquently.

"You say you are loyal to your country, doctor? Well, you yourself know just what value your life is to your Fatherland, probably far more than this man's eyes to the Allies." He said this last with his tongue in his cheek. "Have you stopped to consider that?"

It was a well-aimed shot. The doctor's vanity, perhaps his one weakness, was touched. He faced Travis, his eyes level.

"You win!" he said tersely, like a man who knows how to accept defeat. "It seems you have me cornered!"

The Mosquitoes' hearts leaped with joy. But Travis, outwardly, was still grim, sober.

"You will operate at once?"

The doctor hesitated.

"With guns trained on me?" he asked, with a sneer.

Travis smiled, tightly. "Not if you give us your word to make no attempt to betray us until after the operation is finished."

The doctor considered a moment.

"We shall make that truce," he agreed, slowly. "I promise you that while I am the surgeon I shall see that there is no interference. But after ward—" His face hardened, and his eyes gleamed with a cold light. "I am doing all this against my will, I warn you. Does that not mean something to you? Suppose," he suggested, in a tone which sent a

slight shudder up the blind Kirby's spine, "my hand should slip?"

Shorty's gun came up fiercely. "If it does—" the little Mosquito burst out.

"It won't!" Travis spoke coolly, with absolute confidence. "Not if I know anything about doctors. No, your hand won't slip—not if you can help it!"

The doctor cursed with peculiar harshness. Again the wise Travis had hit the mark. As a surgeon the German could not help doing his work as well as he could, even if it were on a swine Yankee! But he still tried to hedge.

"I'm not sure that I have all my instruments," he began.

"You must have them somewhere about," the confident Travis insisted.

"It is too plain to see that this place was once a hospital, and this room the operating room."

THE doctor sighed, as if realizing that there was no use trying to deceive this shrewd, lanky Yank. Then, with surprising intensity, he plunged right into business. He went to the French window, locked it, and drew together the two heavy portieres. He then went to the door which led to the other parts of the house, a heavy sliding door, and locked that too. As he moved about, he peeled off his dirty, stained smock and flung it carelessly across the room. All this Shorty and Travis watched tensely, their eyes following the doctor wherever he went.

The German moved now to a basin in a corner, and proceeded to wash his hands and face. For several moments he splashed about, then dried himself with a clean towel and, taking a clean white linen coat from a closet, put it on.

"I ought to have one or two of my assistants," he said, as he buttoned up the coat, "but I don't want to rouse them. It might interfere with our—er—agreement. You two will have to give me whatever help I require." Shorty and Travis readily agreed. "All right," the doctor said, "bring the patient to this chair here." And while Shorty and Travis maneuvered their blind leader to the chair and got him seated, the doctor brought out a strange-looking apparatus.

"This is what we call an ophthalmoscope," he explained. "It's just a light with a special lens and a powerful reflector for this kind of work."

The German was leaning over the blind Mosquito, whose head he had gently forced back over the top of the chair, after removing the bandage. The doctor bent close, turning Kirby's head this way and that, viewing the blind eyes from various angles, and murmuring briefly as he looked.

"A very serious case. I don't know if I can do it, frankly. But I shall do my best!"

Kirby, who had remained passive and relaxed to give the doctor full leeway in his work, now spoke hoarsely.

"You gonna give me ether, doctor?"

"*Was ist?*" The German had a little difficulty with the English. "Oh, ether. I'm afraid not. It would disturb your system and its results might spoil the operation." His tone became strangely gentle. "It is difficult, I know. But it must be done under a local anesthetic."

Kirby's body grew rigid in the chair. "You mean I'll be conscious all the time while you're doing it?"

"It is difficult," the doctor repeated, kindly. "But you must be brave. Your eyes depend on it. *Gans gut?*"

With an effort Kirby forced himself to relax, forced a game grin to his lips.

"Okay, go to it, doc!" he said, huskily.

"All right, now," the German directed the tense Shorty and Travis. "Get some of his clothes off." He turned from the sterilizing table now. There was an instrument in his hand. At the sight of it Shorty and Travis stiffened. It was a hypodermic, with a long, slender needle. The doctor spoke again.

"Bring him over to the operating table and put him on it."

The tense Mosquitoes obediently helped Kirby out of the chair, and guided him to the table. He went gamely, without hesitation. Gently, his two comrades lifted him onto the table, and placed him down on his back. The Mosquitoes waited, every nerve keyed up, stretched taut.

"NOW I am going to hurt you a bit this once," the doctor spoke as if to a child. "You must not struggle or move though—or all will be lost. *Verstehen sie?*"

Kirby forced out a hoarse, "Okay, doc."

The doctor, however, whispered to Shorty and Travis, "You had better hold him to make sure. Just his arms and shoulders. Tightly, though."

They moved close to obey. Kirby protested as he felt their grip.

"Say, don't hold me, guys! I'll be all right!"

"We're not holding you!" Shorty said. His voice was trembling slightly. "Just standing by to see that everything is okay."

"Silence!" the doctor commanded tersely. Then in a whisper, as he lifted the hypodermic, "Hold tight now!"

Shorty and Travis tightened their grip. The glinting needle descended, swiftly; they turned away, unable to watch. And then they both had to hold their leader down with all their combined strength, as they felt his muscles strain and bulge against them, felt his legs doubling up. He made no loud outcry. He merely groaned, but his groan was so excruciating that it pierced his comrades' hearts like a knife.

"All right, all right!" the doctor was saying now, reassuringly. "That was brave, my good man. Now, it will not hurt any more. Do you feel the anesthetic taking effect?"

Kirby spoke with effort.

"It's like the whole front of my face is freezing up!"

The doctor chuckled, good-humoredly.

"*Mein Gott*, what an imagination! Now we have a little more of this unpleasantness, but it should not hurt now. I guess you do not have to hold him so tightly." Again Shorty and Travis turned away as the glinting needle descended. But this time Kirby did not move.

"*Gut!*" the doctor grunted his satisfaction.

"Well, why don't you jab me?" Kirby asked tensely. "I'm waiting!"

"What?, You didn't even feel it this time? The man has no feelings," he laughed, jocularly. Shorty and Travis were beginning to feel a warm glow toward the German. It was wonderful how his infectious good humor seemed to take the nerve-racking edge off the whole ghastly business. No wonder he was such a popular doctor!

"Now we shall let you alone a while, my good man," he was informing Kirby. He turned and began to remove instruments from the sterilizer, drying them and lining them neatly on the stand.

“I want one of you men to hand me the things I ask for,” he ordered. Shorty volunteered. The doctor made him wash his hands in the basin, then gave him a pair of rubber gloves from the sterilizer. The German was already drawing on a pair himself. Shorty clumsily got his on, and then moved his fingers doubtfully. He was surprised to find his hand as flexible as ever beneath the thin rubber.

“How long is it going to take?” Travis inquired, tensely.

“*Ich weiss nicht*,” the doctor grunted. “It all depends. I cannot hurry.”

“No, I’m not trying to hurry you, doctor,” Travis quickly assured him, and his own words reminded him of the situation, perhaps discovery would come before the operation was finished! But he must not hurry the doctor! God, no!

THE German returned to the operating table, a clamp-like instrument in his gloved hand.

“And now, my good fellow, I’m afraid I must annoy you once more.” He was speaking English now, with a strong accent which made his words all the more humorous and cheerful. “I’m a very annoying person when I get started, no?”

The banter had its effect.

“I’ll say you are, doc,” Kirby countered. “Then, anxiously, ‘Is it gonna hurt—much?’”

“Not really,” the doctor said. “It is just annoying. But you must not move now.” He nodded tacitly to Travis, who now had to take the job of holding Kirby alone. Then, to Kirby, “How do your eyes feel now?”

“Can’t feel them at all.”

“*Gut!*” The doctor proceeded to place the clamp-like instrument on Kirby’s eyes. It proved to be a device to keep the lids open. The German jerked his head back toward Shorty.

“The second instrument from the right now—*schnell!*” Shorty shuddered as he handed over a small, steel scalpel. Travis tightened his grip on Kirby, and again both he and Shorty looked away. But they heard the soft scrape of the knife, a sound which made their nerves raw. Kirby began to groan, and again his muscles strained. Travis had to hold on for dear life. The doctor kept speaking, soothingly.

“Steady, steady, now—I am not hurting you. Steady!” Kirby’s face was covered with clammy

sweat now. The doctor took another instrument from Shorty.

“Steady now,” his voice rose again, soothingly, reassuringly. “I won’t annoy you much longer. Steady, steady now!”

Thus, in this room deep within Germany, in the very house where Allied intelligence wanted to know what was going on, this weird scene took place! A German doctor who hated the “swine Yankees” was operating, with all his skill, on one of them—while two others stood by to help him! Never in all the war was there a more ironic happening.

A hushed stillness had come over the room now, for the doctor had reached the critical part of the operation. He did not say so, but by his sudden silence—where before he had been so jocularly conversational—the others all sensed it. The crisis! The test which would determine success or failure, blindness or sight! The silence seemed ghastly.

And then, suddenly, with startling abruptness, the doctor’s head came up from the table with a jerk.

He bound a fresh bandage over Kirby’s eyes. Then the doctor was removing his rubber gloves and Shorty followed suit.

Tensely, with silent inquiry, the two Mosquitoes looked at the German. The doctor faced them. His features seemed strained, tired, as if it had been quite an ordeal for him, too.

“The operation,” he announced, quietly, “is finished.” Then instantly his face hardened. “And as soon as I have explained whatever there is to explain, I cease being the doctor. Remember that! Now, have you any questions you would like to ask?”

It was Kirby who voiced the one question that was in all their minds, voiced it before his comrades could open their mouths.

“Am I gonna be cured?” he demanded, with pitiful eagerness. “Will I be able to see?”

The doctor hesitated.

“To be frank,” he replied, “I cannot say for sure. I have done my best.” He sighed, and again that strained, tired look came over his features. “It was difficult, the most difficult case of its kind I have ever encountered. Fortunately I think we caught it in time; by tomorrow it would have been too late. As it is, I have no way of telling the

condition of the optic nerve, but with the proper care, I think it can be saved.”

The Mosquitoes clutched at this hope fervently. Then Travis spoke tensely.

“Can you tell us whether it is safe to move him, whether he can walk?”

The doctor’s eyes narrowed.

“That is a difficult question,” he said, evasively.

“But you can answer it as a doctor.”

The German bowed his head.

“I must answer then that if you are careful not to jar him it is safe to move him. But the sooner he is put to bed where he can get plenty of rest and relaxation, the better. And now that I have answered your questions—”

He made a sudden, swift movement. A cry of alarm broke from Shorty, but before he or Travis could do anything, the doctor had whipped a long-barreled Luger from a nearby table, where it had been resting all the time.

CRACK! The report of the doctor’s Luger crashed against their eardrums. There was a spurt of flame, and Travis ducked with wild instinct as a bullet sang past his cheek and imbedded itself in the wall behind him. But then Shorty, with a savage oath, had desperately hurled himself upon the doctor, and in the next second Travis joined the struggle.

The two Yanks soon overpowered the enraged Boche, twisting his wrist until the Luger clattered to the floor. Kirby, meanwhile, had strained to a sitting posture on the operating table, fear and horror on his unseeing, bandaged face.

“Better luck next time,” Travis told the panting and fuming doctor, who had literally undergone a Jekyll and Hyde transformation.

“You cursed swine!” The doctor’s face was livid with hate. “You shall not get away! You shall be caught and—” He stopped, his eyes lighting up with sudden unholy glee, like a man who sees his prophecy come true. Shorty and Travis had stiffened, horror coming over their faces.

For in that moment the whole house had become alive with noise! The sound of the doctor’s shot had awakened the whole household. Help had come! Knocking on the door grew violent, and now voices rose on the other side of

the door, inquiringly. Mechanically, the doctor made a move to respond.

“Stand where you are!” Travis commanded grimly, flourishing his Colt. “Don’t move!”

The doctor laughed, with blighting malice.

“No use, my friends!” he sneered, “You are caught now! They will break down the door if I fail to respond soon, fearing that something has befallen me. You have no chance. Might as well surrender. You could never get him”—nodding toward Kirby, who was straining blindly on the table—“back to your plane’s hiding place before my men catch you! Ah, yes,” he added, as Shorty and Travis paled, “I have guessed that you have a plane. How else could you have come?”

The two Mosquitoes looked at each other in anguished despair, realizing too well the logic of these words. What could they do? The knocking on the door was growing more and more insistent, louder and louder. Someone was turning the handle furiously. Someone else out there was shouting “*Doktor! Dokter!*” with increasing alarm. God, the Mosquitoes must act quickly if they were to act at all.

“Well,” the blind Kirby suddenly burst out, sitting up on the operating table, “what’s the matter, guys? Grab my togs, give me a hand, and let’s get out the way we came—through the window! I can run, I promise you!”

Shorty and Travis were stirred to instant action. There was nothing else to do. They must chance it! But even as they moved toward the table, the doctor’s crisp voice stopped them,

“One moment,” he smiled, grimly. “I shall have to tell you in spite of myself that if you hurry this man and make him run, my fine work will be undone, and frankly that would grieve me very much! I told you he must not be jarred!”

His words came like a final blow, crushing their last hopes. They knew he was not lying. Even if he were they could not take the chance. They stood helpless.

The men outside the door were getting impatient now. The big sliding door began to shake as they started to force it. Several voices were shouting now, in confused alarm.

“*Doktor*, why do you not answer?” *Doktor! Doktor!*”

Then Kirby spoke with sudden resolution,

“Listen, fellers,” he cried, hastily. “The main thing I was worried about was my eyes—and I’ll thank the Lord and this Heinie, too, if I get them back! Now from what the doc says I simply have to stay here; I’m trapped like a rat. No reason why we should all be caught, though. You two beat it through the window; they haven’t come there yet! You can get a good start and get away!”

But such an idea was the furthest from their minds. They both refused stubbornly, even as they had refused before. Kirby began to argue, with growing fervor, though the noise at the door became so loud now that conversation was difficult.

“You’ve got to go!” he insisted, and he spoke in the commanding tone of their leader, the tone they had never yet failed to obey. “Don’t you understand? Better that two of us go back and fight for the Allies than all three of us be put away for the duration of the war! Now hurry, they’re gonna bust down the door any minute now!”

CHAPTER IV IN THE DEVIL’S CAMP

AND Travis and Shorty could not help realizing that Kirby was right in telling them to go. Yes, they ought to carry on!

“Go on, guys, please!” Kirby pleaded, frantically. “Beat it before it’s too late!”

Travis reached swift decision then. “All right, Kirby,” his drawl rose huskily, “we’ll go. Guess you’re right; it’s the best way. We’ll try to carry on!”

“And,” Shorty spoke to the doctor, backing his words with his menacing revolver, “mind that you take care of him, do you hear? Otherwise we’ll be back, by God, and we’ll send you to hell!”

“Beat it fellers, will you?” Kirby yelled, in near panic, for he could hear that sliding door beginning to crack and lurch on its tracks now. “Hurry, for God’s sake!” By this time Shorty and Travis had backed to the window, their leveled Colts still holding the scowling doctor at bay. Travis unlocked the catch, opened the window.

“Goodbye, Kirby!” he shouted, huskily, and Shorty, his eyes dim, echoed, “Goodbye, old man!”

“So long, fellers!” Kirby spoke cheerfully from the operating table. “We’ll meet again all right—

apres la guerre! And the next time we meet I hope to hell I can see you!”

The two Mosquitoes leaped out through the window, into the night. Instantly the doctor rushed to the sliding door and unlocked it. It burst open, and into the laboratory rushed a large group of servants and soldiers. The doctor shouted to them excitedly, pointing to the window.

Kirby, still lying blindly on the operating table, and feeling a desolate helplessness such as he had never known before, heard them springing confusedly to the pursuit.

He heard the staccato voice of Doctor von Grantz now, speaking apparently over a phone. The doctor was spreading the alarm! Soon, Kirby knew, all Hunland between here and the lines would be alive with the pursuit! God, he prayed fervently, let them at least get into the air, so they’d have a chance, a fighting chance!

The din outside had become almost deafening now. But even as it seemed to rise to a mighty crescendo, it suddenly subsided! The shooting had stopped, though the listening Mosquito could still hear sounds of running and yelling. The doctor’s voice rose again, evidently addressing someone who had just come in.

“What?” Kirby heard him roar, savagely. “They got into the air before you could stop them?” He cursed heavily, while Kirby sobbed in his frenzied relief. They still had the night on their side, with its sheltering darkness! They had gotten away! They were gone!

Gone! The thought suddenly brought a strange pang to Kirby as he lay there in blackness. His comrades were gone! For the first time he felt the desolate sense of the separation! He was left alone and unprotected now, alone in the hands of the enemy! The Boche could do with him as they willed. He was helpless! He was just a blind dummy who could not move unless they chose to move him.

Even as this cruel thought tormented him, the voice of Doctor von Grantz sounded close beside him, grim and firm.

“I am sorry I cannot keep you here, to take charge of you personally,” the doctor informed him, “but I have too many other things to do. You are a prisoner of war, and can go into the interior to a prison hospital. I am going to send for an

ambulance now. You will be well taken care of, and will soon know if my operation is successful.”

And on hearing this Kirby sank again into abject despair. To be taken away into the interior! It meant the finish all right! It meant he was absolutely through, as far as this war was concerned! But he had no right to kick! He ought to be thankful that the doctor had performed this operation, thankful that there was a chance of getting his eyesight back again! And so, aloud, he answered gamely.

“All right, doc, I’m not complaining. But,” his tone became anxious, “you’re sure they’ll take care of me in that prison hospital?”

This set the doctor to thinking.

“Well, of course they have many others to look after,” he mused, his voice growing suddenly uncertain. “Of course if I personally kept you in my care my operation would have more chance of coming out a success but—” He hesitated, brooding.

And then, to Kirby’s intense joy, he suddenly snapped with peculiar harshness, “All right, I’ll keep you here a day or two so I can see whether or not the operation has turned out well. It’s irregular and I should not do it, but I guess there will be no harm. But as soon as we know how you come out, one way or the other, you will have to go to the interior.”

Kirby’s voice was sincerely grateful. “Thanks, doc, that’s sure decent of you!”

THE doctor brusquely ignored Kirby’s thanks, and turning to some of the servants who had come into the room, barked out a terse order. Presently two alert attendants brought in a stretcher. A moment later Kirby felt their strong but gentle arms lifting him from the operating table, and he relaxed as the taut canvas of the stretcher met his body and held it. He felt himself being carried along then, and by a sudden sharp tilt of the stretcher, knew he was being taken up a flight of stairs. Along a level stretch again then, a corridor, he surmised. There was a sound of an opening door; they were evidently entering a room. The door closed behind them, Kirby felt himself lowered, and then the efficient attendants were helping him to his feet. Silently, without a word, they proceeded to strip off his clothes. He felt a trifle embarrassed as they undressed him like a

baby and got him into a pair of pajamas. He was lifted into a large and comfortable bed, then the pillows were adjusted under his bandaged head, and the covers tucked in.

He felt nimble fingers adjusting the bandage over his eyes.

“You just rest easy now, my good man,” he recognized the voice of Doctor von Grantz, speaking again in that comforting, professional tone. “You have a fine room; it used to be reserved only for very important people, when this was my private sanitarium. You would gasp if I told you some of the names which had graced this room! Now relax, it is the only way you can help the cure.” And with these instructions he went out with the two attendants.

After the door had closed behind them, Kirby tried to relax against the soft pillows, vaguely wondering what the room he was in looked like, whether it was still night, and above all, how his two comrades had made out. Sleep was out of the question. His restive mind, coupled with the racking pain which had now returned to his eyes, for the anesthesia had worn off, kept him tossing, wide awake, nervous. His mind formed half-conjectures, jumping from one to another. Would he ever be able to see again? This thought began to assume chief importance once more, became his greatest worry. God, if only he got his eyesight back!

Thus his feverish brain went on, thinking, worrying, conjecturing, until, to his surprise, he felt a strange warmth on his bandaged face and his left hand. It was a full moment before he realized that what he felt must be the morning sunlight, streaming in upon him from a window. His face and hand were outside the covers, and consequently exposed to that sunlight. He laughed, acridly. It was a strange thing to feel sunlight instead of see it! The night had passed; it was full, bright morning! It must have been in the small hours that he had been put to bed. He lay there, grateful for the sun’s warm glow, which seemed restful, healing. It enabled him really to relax for the first time.

Presently there were footsteps outside, and the sound of the opening door. Then the voice of Doctor von Grantz, speaking again with that professional concern.

“Well,” the doctor was bending over the bed, “how is the patient this morning?”

Kirby smiled wanly.

“Not so hot!”

“Much pain?”

“It was pretty bad at first, but it seems to be better now.”

“*Gut!*” the doctor grunted with satisfaction. He had moved the bandage a little now. “The wound is still pretty bad,” he observed. “We will have to wait.”

Kirby’s voice was tense.

“When will you know for certain?”

“I cannot say. But the best thing for you to do is to stay relaxed, giving the wound every opportunity to heal.”

He put some soothing drops into Kirby’s eyes, replaced the bandage, and then left.

THE day dragged on. Kirby obeyed the doctor’s orders, kept relaxed on the pillows, for he wanted to do everything he could to cure his eyes. But as he lay there, trying vainly to keep track of the passing hours, he became suddenly aware, strangely enough, of a peculiar odor which seemed to be rising through the house, an odor at once nauseating and choking. It grew stronger and stronger, until Kirby actually began to cough from it. And then, as mysteriously as it had come, it faded quickly, was gone! And it was only then that Kirby remembered something he had forgotten completely during these last hectic hours. Doctor Ludwig von Grantz—chemical expert, poison gas!

Kirby’s mind raced back to that reconnaissance which had led, ultimately, to his blindness. A grim realization struck him. While Shorty and Travis had been here, on their mission last night, they had been honor bound not to spy. But he was not honor bound now! There was no reason why he should not find out all he could! And something certainly seemed to be going on, what with that strange odor. But then, again in despair, the Mosquito laughed bitterly at his own conjectures. What could he hope to find out, in this condition? How could he spy when he had no eyes to see with? And as soon as he could see, if he ever could, he would be carted right off to prison camp! No, he didn’t have a chance to do a thing, not even the ghost of a chance!

Before the Mosquito realized it, the arrival of evening was heralded by the entrance of the attendant with his dinner—a dinner which surprised Kirby by its magnitude. There was soup, roast beef, some delicious strudel, and the best beer he had ever tasted. He ate heartily, finishing everything to the coffee and cordial. And he wondered whence this strange feast had come, and what wizard of a chef von Grantz had who could prepare such a meal. Was it possible that these Jerries ate like this every night? He couldn’t believe it! Only a special occasion was worthy of such a royal meal.

After Kirby had finished this heavy German dinner, the attendant spoke to him politely.

“The *Herr Doktor* says he will be in to see you tomorrow morning. He advised that you get a good night’s sleep, for sleep will help a great deal now.” And putting out the light, he left so that Kirby might follow the prescription. Kirby was more than tired; he had not slept for fully thirty-six hours. And so, despite his fears and worries, he soon fell into a light but restful slumber.

But he did not sleep long. Suddenly he woke up with a start, and instantly he was full awake, alert to his very fingertips. His keen ears grown so sensitive since his blindness, were listening, listening tensely.

And he soon knew what it was that had roused him. For now he heard the strange sounds, evidently coming from the lower part of the house. Sounds of revelry, of throaty German voices, raised in laughter and shouting! Something was going on down there! What? Kirby strained his ears, but could not hear distinctly enough to tell. A burning curiosity, prompted chiefly by a strange sense of duty to his country, made him wildly reckless. God, he must find out what was going on around here once and for all!

He decided to take a long and desperate chance, knowing that it might not only mean the ruin of his chance of recovery, but also his immediate removal from here, or perhaps even death! Flinging off his covers, he stirred, putting his legs over the edge of the bed until his bare feet came in contact with the cold smooth floor. Awkwardly, blindly, he managed to rise, standing barefooted and in his pajamas.

Tentatively, then, he moved the bandage which covered his eyes. A pain which made him groan was his only reward, otherwise, even when he knew his eyes were uncovered, everything remained as pitch black as ever. No use. He could not see any better with that bandage off. Better not to touch it.

He started to step forward, gingerly, his hands outstretched and groping for a wall. Suddenly he tripped over a chair, upsetting it noisily and then falling himself with a heavy thud. He cursed as the impact bruised and jarred his whole body. Then he lay deathly still, listening. Had the noise been heard. Was anybody coming? No. No sound except that revelry downstairs.

KIRBY did not get to his feet this time, but on his hands and knees commenced crawling through the black void of the room. *Bang*. Something crashed against his head with stunning force, and blind though he was he saw a myriad of spinning stars. He almost cried out in the pain which followed, and then, in a frenzied panic, he tried to struggle to his feet, his arms flaying the black air crazily. Then he realized that he had merely bumped into the leg of a table, and he breathed his relief.

He started again to crawl on his hands and knees, but this time more cautiously, carefully feeling the space before him. God, the doctor had said that he must not be jarred! His head ached frightfully now, and he felt dizzy, sick. But those sounds of revelry downstairs spurred him on! He had started the thing, so he might as well finish it now!

At last he came to a wall; his groping hands felt its smooth surface before him. Hugging it blindly with his body, he commenced to edge along it, crabwise. He came to a corner, turned with it, and went on. He was searching for the door. He had no idea where it was, no idea of direction at all, but he knew if he followed the wall long enough it must eventually lead him to it. He went on painfully, slowly, inch by inch. He was not so clumsy now; he had grown more accustomed to this blind crawling, learned better how to go about it. Still, now and then he bumped into unseen objects, and each time he lay deathly quiet until he was sure the noise had not been heard. Damn it, where was that door? It seemed to

him that he had already gone all around the room, turned corner after corner. But he hadn't, for presently, as he kept feeling his way along the wall, he found that door at last!

Feeling it with his hands, he rose to his knees before it, and groped up for the doorknob. He found it, and his fingers closed around it, tentatively. Was there any one outside? The house was full of the doctor's servants and attendants, he knew. Well, he'd have to take the chance. He turned the knob gently, tried the door. It was unlocked; they had never thought of locking him in, for they knew he was utterly helpless, knew that even if he should, by some miracle, get out of the room, he could not go far in his condition without betraying himself, being spotted and caught. Blindly he opened the door a little ways. It opened inwards. He managed to put his head to the opening, listened.

No sound out in the corridor, but the revelry below seemed louder, closer now. He still couldn't make out what it was all about, but now and then the whole house seemed to ring with "*Hoch!*" and "*Prosit!*" and the clink of glasses. He became more reckless. He got the door all the way opened now, and commenced to crawl through the doorway, feeling both sides to keep clear of them. As he crawled out of the room his sense of feeling, which, together with his ears, had become so highly developed to compensate for his blindness, made him aware that there was a light out in the corridor. He did not know how he sensed it; it made no difference to his bandaged, sightless eyes, and yet he was sure that this corridor was well illuminated! The thought jerked his nerves all the tighter. God, if any one should happen to come or even look this way, they would see him clearly; he would be fully exposed in the light!

Outside his room now, he paused on his hands and knees in the corridor, again listening to the noise from below. Carefully he noted the direction whence it seemed to come, and decided that the stairway leading downstairs must be there. But should he take the risk of creeping away from his room, blind though he was? How would he ever get back?

He gritted his teeth. Damn it, he was going to find out what was going on downstairs if it was the last thing he did! He had a hunch, and his

hunches were invariably correct, that something of momentous significance was taking place down there! Steeling his nerves, he began to move once more, cautiously, furtively. Keeping to the wall of the corridor where he knew his room was located, he commenced to sidle along it, moving in the direction from which the sound seemed to rise.

He passed another door, went on. The noise was coming closer now, rising louder, louder. The Mosquito's heart was pounding, and he was breathing rapidly. He knew that he was getting farther and farther from his room, knew that at any moment he might be seen, caught helpless out here! Still he went on, edging along the corridor wall.

SUDDENLY the direction of the sound, which had risen quite high now, seemed to change. It seemed to be off to his side now, away from the wall he was following. He now took the biggest chance of all. He left the wall and, guided only by the noise, crawled out into the open space of the corridor. He was more cautious than ever now, feeling the floor before him carefully. But not until his hand bumped against the top of a banister did he know that he had come to the head of the stairway. The bump was not violent this time but the noise of it, seeming to him as loud as a cannon in the silence, made him crouch down as still as death. It was all right; they had not heard!

He paused to get his bearings. He was at the top of the stairway now, right behind a banister head. He must remember just how he had come here, so he could get back. Behind him should be the wall of the corridor. Then, to the right of him along this wall, a door, before the open door of his own room. He mustn't forget!

The sound of revelry rose directly from below the stairs now, and as Kirby crouched right by the banister he could hear at last. There were several voices down there, all talking eagerly, rapidly, and now and then laughing with great exuberance. The pop of corks mingled with the clink of glasses, and there were gurgling sounds of liquids being poured. Suddenly there was a lull, the murmuring of voices died abruptly, and then a single voice, deep and booming and carrying authority which identified it with some high personage, rose in the silence.

"And now, having drunk to our great project, let us drink to the man whose genius, whose wonderful sagacity, has placed in our hands the means of carrying this project out! A toast, gentlemen"—the voice boomed mightily—"a toast to our great scientist, chemist, and surgeon—*Herr Doktor Ludwig von Grantz!*"

And the very floor beneath Kirby shook with the thunderous chorus of "*Hoch!*" and "*Prosit!*" Then, as before, there was a babble of voices, talking and laughing, as the celebration continued. Nor did it take the listening Mosquito long to figure out what was going on; his ears told him all that his eyes could not see. A Victory Dinner! One of those strange banquets the Boche gave before carrying out a great project, celebrating their victory before they achieved it to show how confident they were and, what was perhaps the deeper motive, to raise their own morale.

Yes, they were having a Victory Dinner down there, and now the shrewd Mosquito realized why he had been able to enjoy such a wonderful meal before! Hadn't he thought that such a meal was only prepared for special occasions? He had merely gotten the first sample of this banquet.

And his conclusions were correct. Down below, in the big reception room of the mansion, beneath a brilliant chandelier, was a long table laid out for lavish festivity, bedecked with food and drink. And at this table sat a score of men, all of them high officers, all in their full-dress uniforms and in a holiday spirit. The man Kirby had heard propose the previous toast was no less than a general, a stern-visaged, gray-haired old Teuton with a Kaiser mustache. The others were members of his staff, all save Doctor von Grantz, the honored host. But even the doctor was in a uniform, for he was an honorary colonel of the Imperial Army. The uniform made him look a trifle incongruous as he sat at one end of the long table, his dark eyes glowing, his shock of gray hair shaking as he laughed modestly at the praise given him.

All this Kirby could not see of course, as he crouched blindly at the top of the stairs, trying to visualize the scene from its sounds. The celebration seemed to grow more and more boisterous; the champagne flowed more and more freely, as Kirby could tell by the decreasing intervals between the familiar pop of corks. The

Mosquito kept listening, trying frantically to piece together the snatches of speech which were audible in the confused babble of conversation. God, what did it all mean? What were they planning to do? Kirby had to find out!

He had been crouching so long behind the banister now that his muscles were stiff and aching. But he was hardly aware of his discomfort, so completely consumed was he by his burning curiosity to learn the cause for this great Victory Dinner!

SUDDENLY there were cries of "Speech! Speech from the *Herr Dokter!*" and again the voices died to a lull. This time the staccato voice of Doctor von Grantz rose in the silence.

"*Mein Herren.*" The doctor was on his feet. "I am overwhelmed by all this praise. But I do not deserve to be honored this way. I have merely done my duty. If my humble services bring victory to the Fatherland, I shall be the happiest man in the world. But I shall not bore you with talk about myself. Rather let me go over once more the great project we have in mind." Kirby strained forward now above the stairs, his heart pounding. It was coming out now, the thing he had been waiting for!

"At last," the doctor was continuing, "we have found a way to crush our enemies! And that way is—"

And here, just at the crucial part of the announcement, there came a sudden, unexpected interruption.

"*Vater!*" Kirby heard a new voice shout excitedly, a voice that seemed vaguely familiar. "*Mein lieber Vater!*"

A cry of mingled surprise and awe broke from the whole assemblage, and the doctor's voice rose with incredulous joy.

"*Mein Sohn!* Why I—I thought you were a prisoner!"

Kirby was stunned, dumfounded. He knew now why that voice had sounded vaguely familiar! And yet it was incredible, preposterous!

Down in the brilliant room below, Erich von Grantz, otherwise known as the Red Devil, grinned as he faced his surprised father and the others at the table. The young ace was as cheerful and reckless-looking as ever, with his arm no longer in a sling, now. And as a dozen tense

inquiries bombarded him from all part of the table, he explained, quite casually, his miraculous return. Half of the thrilling story was lost to Kirby in the cheers and incredulous exclamations which broke in at every climax, but the Mosquito managed to grasp the essential facts.

"And so," the Red Devil was saying, "they took me to a room to be questioned before I was sent to prison camp. I saw my chance and leaped through the window. They pursued, but I eluded them." Cheers drowned out the story for a full moment, so that when it was resumed it was much further on.

"Concealed in the shrubbery, I watched the airdrome until they warmed up a ship. It was a Sopwith single-seater. I waited until the path seemed clear. Then I made a wild dash and was in the ship and off the ground before they could stop me." More cheers. Then, "Landed at my airdrome just about an hour ago, though my alert comrades almost shot the Sopwith to bits before I could land her. I washed, got into a clean uniform, and came right here in my staff car. And here I am," he sighed, with deep content, "home again!"

There followed a din of congratulations and even Kirby could not help feeling thrilled by this incredible escape. The Red Devil was a devil indeed to pull off such a reckless, hair-breadth stunt!

Someone was proposing a toast to the new arrival now, and then the overjoyed Doctor von Grantz was speaking eagerly.

"This was the one thing needed to make this celebration a complete success for me! Sit down, my son, and join us!" A shrewd smile suddenly came over his face. "And now that you are back, you can conduct that little experiment which we were talking about!"

The Red Devil was surprised.

"You mean you have managed to—"

"Ah," his father chuckled. "Much has happened during your brief absence, my son. That is why we are celebrating this great Victory Dinner tonight!"

The Red Devil's face clouded strangely. "Then you are actually going through with this plan?" he asked, slowly.

"Is it not wonderful?" the booming voice of the general put in. "Thanks to your father's

remarkable work, we shall be able to accomplish the impossible! Our plan cannot fail now!"

CHAPTER V LIGHT OF LUCK

THE Red Devil began to speak, and at his first words a gasp of astonishment rose from his hearers.

"Gentlemen," the young flyer addressed the table, "I know you are all my superiors, and Doctor von Grantz is my father—and yet I must stand here and tell you that this goes against the grain with me. I don't approve—"

"What?" The incredulous voice of his father broke the surprised silence which had now descended over the others. "You don't approve? You mean to stand there and say—"

"That it isn't right," his son finished, his voice rising with fervent conviction. "It isn't fair fighting. If we start to use such tactics so will our enemies. What will be the result? Humanity will simply wipe itself out! The world will be destroyed!"

There was an ominous strained pause. No one moved.

"You talk this way?" All the joy at seeing his son again had gone out of the doctor's voice, and in its place came a tone of utter contempt. "You, my own son? Why, you *verdammter* impudent—"

"One moment!" It was again the general, who spoke with officious authority. "Let us have no family quarrels here." His tone was stern. "*Hauptmann* von Grantz, you are young, you have yet much to learn. The object of war is to defeat the enemy. There can be no such word as fair."

"The general need not tell me the object of war." The Red Devil was openly sarcastic, and his outspokenness made the others stiffen tensely.

"Perhaps you have forgotten that I have shot down over fifty enemy planes, that I have killed without hesitation or mercy. I have never given quarter to our enemies. If you think I do not know my duty as well as you—"

"Stop." roared his father, beside himself with rage. "Is this what you have come back for, to disgrace yourself before your father's eyes? How dare you use such a tone to his *Excellenz*, the general? Have you forgotten your rank?"

"I did not mean to be rude," the Red Devil modulated his voice with an effort. "I merely meant to say that there is such a thing as going too far, even in war,"

"You had best leave that to wiser judgments than your own." The general too was losing his patience now. "Do you not realize that if we don't employ these tactics the enemy will?"

"Well, I object to them with all my heart," young von Grantz could not keep his indignation from rising again. "Killing people wholesale like that! Why, I wouldn't do it to a bunch of rats! Mankind—"

"That will be enough!" the general suddenly snapped. "You are not going to start preaching to us about mankind! You're just a young fool who doesn't know what he's talking about! You exaggerate the whole situation, surround it with your crazy sentimentalism. There is too much softness among us Germans, with all our militarism and Spartan training. It is a disease which I have noticed especially among our younger men. Youth, with its scatter-brained ideals!" He gave a contemptuous snort. Then suddenly his fist crashed down mightily upon the table.

"What we need," he thundered, "is a hardness and strength which shall have no room for squeamishness! That is courage!"

"The general then considers it courageous to release upon an unprepared enemy a chemical, one drop of which will snuff out a hundred people?"

A wave of chill horror went coursing through the listening Mosquito at the top of the stairs. His head swam. God, what diabolical plot did these Germans have? Even as he wondered, with growing horror, he heard the voice of Doctor von Grantz again now, rising above the angry murmur which was beginning to come from all the other men, the same men who had been cheering the Red Devil only a few minutes before.

"*MEIN Herr* General." the doctor spoke with humiliation, "allow me to apologize for my son's disgraceful behavior. I am ashamed of him, ashamed to hear him talk this way, especially since he alone knows the strain I have gone through to work out my formula for this new gas. For weeks I have labored, risking my own life

here in my laboratory, playing with chemicals which could destroy me if my hand so much as trembled!

“But I am not complaining! My work has been well rewarded, for this morning I discovered the formula at last! A tiny bit of the gas escaped from my test-tube, and it was so powerful that its odor filled the entire house. Against such a chemical no gas mask will avail; our enemies will be helpless. Before they can possibly combat it,” his voice rose with shrill triumph, “we shall win the war—win victory for the Kaiser and the Fatherland!”

Kirby shuddered as a lusty, bloodcurdling cheer thundered from the table, a cheer which froze him to his very marrow. Then the doctor spoke again, resuming the subject from which he had digressed in his enthusiasm.

“The other day I suggested to my son that, in the event I work out the formula, he conduct a little experiment for me—that he fly over the lines with a bomb containing the gas and drop it on the accursed Allies, to watch its effect. But evidently,” his tone became acrid with contempt, “the idea is too strong for his sentimental, chicken-hearted nature, for it has upset him to the point of losing his head completely!”

“I tell you I can’t do it!” the Red Devil protested fiercely, and suddenly Kirby felt for the man an admiration which almost amounted to affection! Here at last, in this gruesome war which had made all the rest so blood-thirsty and vicious, was one who still clung stubbornly to some code of fairness, of humanity. “I can’t!” the Red Devil was repeating. “I would rather face a court-martial for insubordination than drop that foul stuff from my plane!”

“Then, by Heaven,” his father roared, “you will face it! You should have stayed a prisoner among the swine Allies! Because, son of mine though you are, I’ll see you stripped of your uniform, thoroughly disgraced, before—”

“Wait!” the general once more interposed. He had recovered his former calm. “Under ordinary circumstances, I fear it would go hard with you, young von Grantz. But just now your country needs you. You are our greatest pilot, and your squadron depends on you for guidance. You must have known this, else you would not have risked your life to escape from the enemy’s hands and return here. You have always done your duty, and

I trust you will continue to do so. I cannot understand your refusal to carry this gas, but since you feel so strongly about it, we shall get someone else to conduct the experiment.”

“I must advise the general against that,” the doctor put in, and now he too seemed to have cooled down. “Rather than entrust anyone else with the gas before we are ready really to spring it on the Allies, we shall dispense with the experiment altogether. It really is not necessary. I merely wanted to see whether we should also use planes to spread the gas; I already know for certain what can be done with it on the ground. We can’t afford to take any chances, or all our painful precautions to keep the whole thing secret will be wasted.

“As you know I have worked out the formula in absolute privacy and as yet no one else has even been permitted to see it, which is what the High Command instructed. There is but one copy of it, and I keep that safely on my person. Not until the day after tomorrow will I give the formula to the waiting chemical plants, which are all prepared to manufacture the gas at rush speed. They have all the ingredients, and the gas will be at the Front by noon. At which time,” he concluded, and again his voice rose with shrill triumph, “it can be released simultaneously with our great offensive, our stupendous surprise attack against the enemy!”

Kirby all but cried out, so beside himself was he with horror. Good God, a big push coming off the day after tomorrow, and with it this horrible gas which would wipe out the Allied armies wholesale! Despair shook him. In his grasp was this momentous information, and he could do nothing about it! But damn it, he told himself in a growing panic, the Allies must be warned! Like a grim refrain that thought commenced beating against his tortured brain. The Allies must be warned! They must be warned!

“THE Allies will certainly get a big surprise!” As if ironically to mock Kirby, the general’s booming voice rose below, and its gloating confidence filled the Mosquito with a futile, impotent rage which made him clench his fists until the nails dug into his palms.

“Yes, they will be surprised all right,” the general went on, triumphantly. “Even as they are astonished by the unexpected offensive, even as

they are stunned and gaping, that gas will sweep over them like a flood, wiping them out completely!”

It was too much for Kirby. In a frenzy of rage and panic he struggled blindly to his bare feet, and then his heart leaped to his throat as the floor beneath him seemed to slide away, and he was tripping, falling! He had tripped over the top step, and was starting to tumble helplessly down the stairs! With wild instinct his two hands clutched out into the black space, trying frantically to grasp something. The passing banister crashed against his right hand, almost breaking the wrist. He groped at that banister desperately, caught it just in time to check his fall. Hastily then, but quietly as he could, he was crawling back to the top of the stairs. At the same time, to his cold horror, he heard the voice of the Red Devil speak in sudden alarm:

“What was that?”

“What?” it was his father who responded.

“That noise. Did you not hear it?”

“No, I heard nothing.”

“Neither did I,” put in the general, but some of the others concurred with the Red Devil that there had been a noise.

“It seemed to come from the top of the stairs,” the Red Devil said. “But there doesn’t seem to be any one there, as far as I can see.”

But the doctor was alarmed now.

“From the top of the stairs?” he echoed. “Could it be—no, certainly it is not that Yankee.”

“Yankee?” The word burst from the surprised general. “What do you mean, Yankee?”

The doctor’s tone was embarrassed. “It is a prisoner, *Herr* General. I have kept him here because I—” he faltered. “Well, you might say it is in the interest of science. I have operated on his eyes and—”

“Why, then it must be Captain Kirby!” the Red Devil broke in, with keen excitement, as realization came to him. Evidently the thing struck him as funny, for he laughed. “Well of all things! Those Yankees certainly took me up, as they would say, when I described your skill to them, father!”

“Let me grasp this clearly!” The general’s voice was ominous now. “Do I understand, doctor, that you have a Yankee running around here in your house?”

“He is not running around, I assure you, general,” the flustered doctor insisted. “He is quite helpless. I don’t think he has caused this noise some of you claim to have heard. He would not try to move, would not take the risk of jarring himself. He is not that foolish; he wants to get back his sight. And as soon as I know the result of the operation I intend to send him straight to the interior.”

“Well, see to it that you do, without delay!” the general warned. “This is most irregular, doctor, I must say. In fact I am very much surprised. I hate to suggest it, but in spite of your undeniable patriotism, doctor, it seems you too have a soft spot in your nature.”

“You mean, general,” again the Red Devil could not control his emotion, “that my father has a heart even like me, his son. After all he is, first and foremost, a doctor and—”

“That will do, Erich!” the doctor snapped with almost exaggerated gruffness. “It is not from me that you inherit your sentimentalism! Do not try to shift the blame.” His voice rose vindictively. “Believe me, if that Yankee is up to any mischief I’ll have him shipped away instantly, regardless of his condition!” He paused, as if listening. “You’d better run upstairs and see, Erich!”

KIRBY’S heart seemed almost to stop beating. God, he could never hope to find his way back to his room in time, even though now he had started frantically to move toward the wall of the corridor again. He drew in his breath sharply as he heard young von Grantz’s step at the bottom of the stairway! But there, to the Mosquito’s momentary relief, the Red Devil paused to address the men at the table once more.

“Gentlemen, I—I want to apologize,” he blurted. “I know you think me a sentimental fool, as the general said. Maybe I am, but I assure you I merely lost my head, and I hope you’ll forgive me. I have never yet shirked my duty, and do not intend to shirk it now. I shall not question your tactics any further. As long as I don’t have to employ this gas myself, I shall cooperate with your plans in every other possible way!”

They commended him on this. But Kirby did not hear much more because now, desperately, knowing that as soon as young von Grantz finished speaking he would climb the stairs, the

Mosquito was trying to get back to his room. He had found the wall of the corridor at last, was groping along it, wondering fearfully whether he had kept his sense of direction, whether he was heading the right way. Where was that second door he had passed? Ah, here it was. Thank God! The next should be his room. He crawled on, as fast as he could, but careful to make no sound. Suddenly he heard young von Grantz's footstep at the bottom of the stairs again. The Red Devil was coming! In another moment he would be up here, and Kirby would be caught cold in this lighted corridor! The Mosquito doubled his efforts to hurry as he heard the German swiftly ascending the stairs.

The open doorway—his room at last! Here it was! Blindly Kirby was squirming into it. Young von Grantz had just reached the top of the stairs now. Inside the room, the Mosquito groped madly for the door—found it and pushed it gently shut behind him. He heard the Red Devil out in the corridor then, and was crawling frantically through the black void of the room, his hands clawing as they searched for the bed.

"It's all right!" young von Grantz's voice called down to his father below. "There is no one out here!"

The doctor's voice rose firmly.

"Look in his room to make sure! It's the second room there!"

God, where was that bed? The Red Devil's footsteps approached the door, were right outside. Kirby, in a wild panic, rose to his feet and stumbled blindly through the room until he collided with the bed and fell over it. He got in, pulled the covers over himself, even as the door opened. Kirby tried to control his panting breath, tried to simulate the deep breathing of a man asleep. He heard the Red Devil come in, heard him pause close to the bed. A moment passed. Then the German's footsteps retreated, the door closed gently behind him. Kirby drew his first real breath. Good Lord, what a close shave!

Young von Grantz had gone, unsuspecting. Again Kirby felt a warm admiration for the young German, who had such a revulsion to the idea of this horrible poison gas. And at the same time he thought it strange that the doctor, who had worked so conscientiously to save a human being's eyes, and a Yank's eyes at that, could fiendishly

contrive to wipe out human beings by the thousands!

He did not even try to sleep now. He lay tossing feverishly, and more and more his utter helplessness assailed him. God, the Allies must be warned! Again that mad refrain was beating futilely against his brain. The Allies must be warned! He could think of nothing else. He forgot about his eyes, forgot that he had perhaps ruined any chance of their recovery! All he knew was that he had in his mind information of such importance that it completely overshadowed his personal troubles, his very life. The Allies must be warned! Even if they were warned, the thing still looked hopeless from what Kirby had heard. But at least if they knew they might be able to take some measures against it.

THE night passed swiftly. Time seemed to race, as it always does when one is trying to work out an impossible problem within a certain limit. Already now the sounds of the banquet below, which had continued to drift desultorily to Kirby's ears, had subsided altogether, and the house was silent. And again, before he knew it, the Mosquito felt sunlight on his face. Morning, the morning of the day before the big German push, and that release of gas! Tomorrow—

He heard the door open, and there was a light but firm step across the room.

"How do you do. Captain Kirby. Can you guess who I am?"

And in spite of his inner tenseness, Kirby grinned under his bandage.

"Sure—*wie gehts?*" he murmured, and then, remembering that he was supposed to have been asleep in his room last night, he added shrewdly, "I don't know where the hell you came from, but I'd be willing to bet my last cent that you're the Red Devil!"

"Right you are!" came the German's cheery response. "Well, my friend, I bring you news. In a few minutes my father will be here, and then we shall know for certain whether his operation was successful or not!"

Kirby's body suddenly went rigid. "You mean, he'll know if I can see again?"

"So he says. And he's as excited as a child—hardly able to await the outcome. I don't think he could stand it if his operation failed, it would be

such a disillusionment to him. He's confident that your sight will be restored."

"Gosh, I hope he's right!" Kirby breathed fervently. But he knew that the doctor had assumed that the patient had not been jarred, and that he was basing his confidence on that! The Mosquito was gripped by a cold suspense. He had an almost uncontrollable impulse to snatch off his bandage and find out for himself if he could see. But even as he felt that he could not wait any longer, the doctor arrived! The elder von Grantz joined his son beside the bed.

"Well, my good man," his tone was as genuinely kindly as ever, and again Kirby wondered how this same man could have had the heart to invent that frightful gas. "I think now we shall learn the truth. You have been a good patient and have been wise enough to obey my instructions implicitly. Due to this relaxation and rest you ought to be quite well now. How do you feel?"

"Pretty good!" Kirby managed to breathe, for the doctor's words had filled him with cold dread.

"Well, we shall see." The doctor turned to his son. "Pull down the shade, Erich." Young von Grantz hastened to obey, and Kirby could feel the sunlight being cut off from his face and hands. The doctor addressed him quietly.

"Now I am going to remove your bandage. Do not be surprised at any sensations you may have, but describe them to me. *Verstehen sie?*"

Kirby nodded blindly. The doctor commenced undoing the bandage. The Mosquito's heart began to pound like a sledge hammer, and he held his breath. And he could sense that the doctor and young von Grantz were also tense, expectant!

It could not have taken the doctor more than half a minute to unwrap that bandage, yet in that fleeting period Kirby seemed to live a whole lifetime. All kinds of thoughts and emotions swept him, and in his mind rose strange pictures. He saw himself cured, saw himself seeing once more—and how blessed it was, just to see, just to be able to look at people and things and light! But then, with a shudder, he saw himself blind for life, forever groping in a black void, a helpless, broken man who could never be independent, who could never be the free, reckless daredevil which he had become from years of flying in the wide blue sky, with its streaming golden sunshine! Blind for life!

What could he do, he whose life depended on sunshine and light?

Still looking inwardly, he saw himself walking along the streets with a cane, tapping the sidewalks, holding out a cup and a sign—"I am blind!"

And then all thought stopped! The doctor had lifted off the bandage.

CHAPTER VI DESPAIR PATROL

"WELL?" The voice of Doctor von Grantz actually trembled with excitement. "Please describe your sensations. Do you feel anything now? Do you—why, what's the matter?" he broke off, for Kirby's face was white with anguish and horror. The Mosquito's heart had sunk like a leaden weight. His voice broke in a sob.

"I—I can't see anything," he choked. "Not a damned thing!" And it was true. Everything was as black as ever! He had to use all his will power to keep from crying like a kid. God, to be blind for life, to go forever without that light or sunshine!

A groan of despair broke from him, a groan which changed suddenly to a cry of surprise, even as the doctor spoke again, his voice now high-pitched and shrill with excitement.

"Well, do you feel anything now?"

For a moment Kirby could not gather his wits to answer. Never before had he experienced such an amazing sensation. Suddenly, he knew not why, everything had changed from black to white, a strange, dazzling white!

"Well?" the doctor's voice was almost frenzied. "What do you feel? Speak, man, for God's sake, speak!"

Kirby found his voice. It also rose excitedly.

"Everything is white!"

"Dazzling?" the doctor cried, in the highest pitch.

Kirby assented. And it was only then that he realized what had happened. The doctor had pulled up the shade a little, letting light into the dark room. That was what had made the change! Now he was pulling up the shade still more, letting the sunlight flood the room.

The dazzling white before Kirby began to increase in brilliance, kept increasing until Kirby

felt he could not bear it any longer—and then suddenly it seemed to burst, and simultaneously pins and needles seemed to stab into the Mosquito’s eyeballs, making him cry out in agony. The pain itself seemed to turn into a color, and the color was red, blood red.

Then, all at once, swimming toward him out of this sea of red, were two dark, bulky forms. As in a dream they kept moving vaguely toward him, strange and distorted. The red mist was beginning to fade now, slowly. The two forms became more distinguishable; he knew that they were the forms of men. They were like blurred silhouettes now, and they fringed with every color of the rainbow.

And then the colored fringes and the red mist seemed to evaporate, and simultaneously the two figures came into focus like a moving picture, until, to his frenzied joy, Kirby really saw them. He saw them only dimly but well enough to make out their faces, saw them as they both stood before him at the bed!

And he knew he was looking at Doctor Ludwig von Grantz and his son, the Red Devil, for the first time since his operation! He could see!

Even now the room itself was growing visible. The white ceiling appeared above his head, the white clean walls around him, the large window with its streaming sunshine at his side. He could only see within a very limited radius, he realized, but it was enough to be thankful for! Fate had been kind to him, after what he had done last night!

All this had taken place in a few breathless seconds, much more quickly than any telling of it could be. The doctor and young von Grantz were both waiting, waiting tensely for Kirby to speak. The Mosquito, cheerful and eager, opened his mouth to announce the good news—and then realized suddenly that as soon as it was announced he’d be shipped to prison camp! He must delay his removal from here as long as possible! Somehow, he felt that as long as he was here, there was still a tiny shred of hope. It was as if he would not really be finished, absolutely through, until he was taken away.

KIRBY reached his decision swiftly and once more he became the shrewd soldier, playing the game of war. Fortunately he had not betrayed his joyous relief, the pain in his eyes had kept his

features taut and grim. He now tried with all his will to look blank, to fix his eyes on a point in the space before them.

“Everything is still white,” he lied, recklessly. Then, with sudden panic, he realized they must have seen him looking at them, and he added quickly, “I do see two blurs, though—but they look like shadows.”

The doctor’s face fell. “What?” he cried, incredulously. “You cannot see us standing here? You can’t see the room?”

Kirby shook his head. The doctor was more surprised than disappointed. He bent over and peered right into the Mosquito’s eyes. Kirby had to employ all his will power now to retain that blank stare. By a superhuman effort he curbed the reflexes which his eyes were automatically straining to make. Somehow he managed not to blink as the doctor’s fingers came horribly close. God, surely the German was too shrewd a surgeon to be deceived! Surely he would find out that Kirby was lying!

But to his relief, the doctor suddenly rose to his feet. He shrugged.

“Well, perhaps it is just that your eyes have not yet become accustomed to the sensation of light. The fact that they have reacted at all convinces me that the optic nerve has been saved! We’ll just leave off your bandage now and keep the shade up. In a few hours surely you ought to be able to see.” And he moved to the door, which was beyond the Mosquito’s range of vision, so that it seemed as if the doctor vanished like some spirit in the grayish murk. Young von Grantz lingered behind, however.

“I thought I’d stay and keep you company a while,” the Red Devil said, affably. “That is, if you want company.”

Kirby was not so keen on the idea, for it meant that he had to keep pretending he could not see, while all the time his eyes were growing stronger and stronger. But he grinned and tried to make his voice sound eager.

“You bet I do! It’s no fun being alone in the dark! But of course if you have anything else you want to do—”

“Not a thing,” the German assured him. “For the present I’m a gentleman of leisure, taking a long needed rest.” And he drew up a chair beside the bed. An attendant soon brought Kirby’s

breakfast, and though he could easily have eaten it unaided now, the Mosquito allowed himself to be fed as usual.

The Red Devil proved to be excellent company. And Kirby, though he was finding it more and more difficult to fight down his inner panic as the time slipped by, could not help responding to the German's friendly spirit. Before long the two men had become quite chummy. The war was momentarily forgotten, as far as enmity went. One would never have thought that just two days ago these same two men had been trying relentlessly to send their tracers into one another, to send each other crashing to hell! They chatted about this fight of theirs, discussing it with an almost impersonal detachment, as if they had merely seen it instead of participated in it.

"We seemed to be well matched," the German said. "It was strange, but all throughout I had the feeling that we were so exactly equal that neither of us was ever going to win or lose!"

"Me too," Kirby agreed, still trying to keep that blank stare. "I felt we'd just go on chasing each other's tails forever, unless Lady Luck intervened. And it was certainly a draw until she did, don't you think so, Erich?" They had become very friendly.

"Yes, it was only by that unfortunate accident that the fight came to an end." The German sighed wistfully, "Too bad we can't do it all over again and really fight it out to a finish! I should like to know which of us really is the better man, even if we had to stay in the air until our fuel and ammunition were exhausted!"

"Hell, we could go down and refuel and then come back and continue," Kirby said, almost forgetting his predicament now as his imagination played with the wild idea.

"Why, that's right!" the German laughed. "We could have rounds, like a prize fight and fight to a 'no draw' finish. Like your old American pugilists, those fellows whose endurance never gave out, John L. Sullivan and the rest."

THEY went on talking, growing more and more extravagant in their planning of this remarkable battle which both knew could never be! And because their minds were full of airplanes and the air, neither of them noticed at first the familiar sound that was rising somewhere

overhead. Not until the beelike drone was filling the very sky, growing louder and louder, more and more intense, did both of them start abruptly.

A strange wild hope suddenly came over Kirby's face, and the drone seemed to merge with his throbbing pulses. Young von Grantz had leaped up tensely now, was looking out of the window. Kirby half-rose to a sitting posture on his bed so that he could look too, but he could not see for more than fifteen feet. Outside the window everything merged into a blur. Only then did the Mosquito remember that he must not let young von Grantz see that he wasn't altogether blind, and since he could not see through the window, anyway, he quickly lay back on the pillows. The Red Devil had not noticed him. The German was absorbed in looking out of the window himself. He had opened it, and was craning his neck, peering upward.

The drone was so loud now that the house seemed to vibrate with it. And then a surprised exclamation broke from young von Grantz.

"*Gott*, it is two Spads! They are evidently trying to get here!" He cursed, wistfully. "I wish I had my plane so I could go up!"

Kirby could not contain his frenzied joy. He shifted with wild excitement on the bed. He wanted to shout and laugh and cry as he knew that his wildest hope had come true! He did not have to see those planes; the knowledge that they were two Spads was enough. For who else could they be? Who else but those two hell-fired buzzards, Shorty Carn and Travis! His comrades! His buddies! Good old scouts! They had come to rescue him! They had come on the mere hunch that he was still in this place! They had come to get him somehow and take him home!

"Say," a sudden pang of doubts made his voice rise harshly, "they make a lot of noise for two Spads, don't they?"

"Oh," the Red Devil replied carelessly from the window, "that is because they are surrounded by twenty of our Fokkers. After what happened the night before last, when your comrades landed unseen near here and then got away, we are taking no chances. We patrol the whole neighborhood day and night."

"But," admiration came into his voice, "they are bravely trying to break through, anyway! They

are going to their deaths, but they do not seem to care—”

He stopped as, turning his eyes from the window, he noticed Kirby's face for the first time.

Over the Mosquito's features had come an expression of such anguish and horror that the Red Devil's heart was strangely touched.

“*Gott!*” he cried, as realization brought remorse, “how stupid of me! Of course! They are your two comrades of the air, the other two Mosquitoes! I should have spared your feelings.”

“No,” Kirby spoke tensely now, his features suddenly rigid. “Please keep watching as long as you can, and tell me what happens! I want to know.” His teeth clenched fiercely. “I've got to know!”

And young von Grantz understood. The German again peered out of the window, and in terse words commenced describing what he saw to the man who could not see it for himself. “They are putting up a great fight, a wonderful fight!” he was exclaiming. “They are all nearly overhead, you can hear the guns now.” He paused, and above the mighty, vibrating drone of motors the staccato sound of machine guns drifted vaguely down. “They are fighting like madmen now!”

And they were! Up in the sunny sky, high above the great estate, Shorty and Travis were putting up the most stubborn and hopeless battle of their hectic careers. The two Mosquitoes had gotten home all right the night before last, though their D.H. had been badly shot up. And they had been severely reprimanded by the grizzled old C.O. of the 44th Squadron when, in tones of despair, they reported the true story of their wild trip with Kirby across the lines.

The next day they were grounded, owing to a few slight wounds they had received in the getaway. But today, against orders once more, they had flown out in the wild hope of finding and rescuing Kirby, if he were still on the premises. Just how futile this idea was, how hopelessly impossible, they had soon found out!

BEFORE Shorty and Travis had gotten near the estate some half dozen Fokkers had dropped on them out of the sun, and started peppering away. The two Mosquitoes, flying like bats out of hell, had gone on nevertheless, while the Fokkers

clung to their flanks, and more Fokkers began to join them, attracted like flies from every direction.

Now, though they had fought their way almost overhead of the estate, they found themselves entirely surrounded, hopelessly outnumbered and trapped like rats!

Already the score of Boche planes had cut them off from the estate, forcing them to retreat or to fly through a maelstrom of lead which even a gnat couldn't hope to get through alive! Only then did they admit that they were beaten! Only then did they give up hope of reaching Kirby and try to get out of the trap which was closing about them. Slowly, relentlessly, the Jerry planes were crowding in on them from every side, seeking to wall them in a fatal prison of criss-cross fire.

Their Spads began to lurch as if drunk from the bullets which pumped and pumped them. But viciously they fought back, as cornered men will. They answered the Germans' fire with their own stuttering Vickers, and went on stubbornly, trying to force their way back to the Allied lines now.

And down below them, in a room of the mansion they had failed to reach, lay their helpless leader, only able to follow their frenzied movements because Germany's greatest ace was describing them from the window! Beads of sweat stood out on Kirby's face now, and his nerves were stretched to the snapping point. God, his comrades were so close and yet they might have been hundreds of miles away, so hopelessly were the Three Mosquitoes separated!

“They are trying to go back toward the lines!” the German's voice was tense with excitement now. “The Fokkers are cutting them off from every side. The two planes seem to be hard-pressed. They are trapped!

They cannot get through! They—”

He broke off with a cry, and simultaneously the panic-stricken Kirby heard a wail above the din of motors and guns, a wail which rose to a ghastly, prolonged shriek, then, muffled by distance, a reverberating crash!

“*Gott!*” the German's voice trembled with emotion. “It is one of our Fokkers. They got it! It dropped like a stone!” A sob of relief escaped Kirby. “Now they are both moving, they have cleared the path for a moment by downing that Fokker! They are trying to break through! But they are both limping now, those Spads! I can see

them limping! Now the Fokkers are closing in furiously. They close in. They are all firing their guns, burst after burst! The two Yanks are still trying to move. They limp more and more. Wait! I think—yes, one of them is falling!”

Kirby’s whole body seemed to strain forward. Veins stood out in his neck like whipcord. “Yes?” he burst out, frenziedly reaching from the bed and clutching the German’s sleeve. “Yes, go on! Damn you, go on!”

“He is in a spin. *Gott*, here he comes! Down, down, faster, faster! He is out of it! He levels off! It was a ruse! Ah, he is clever! His maneuver forced our planes to separate their attack! Now the two Spads have again cleared the way for the moment. They are flying like fiends! They are limping toward their lines! Our planes close in again; they swarm around from all sides! Now they are all moving toward the lines! They are moving out of sight—” he was craning his neck from the window. “I can’t see them anymore! They are gone!”

“God, if only they get back!” Kirby cried out, involuntarily. “If only they make it!”

“If they do,” the Red Devil spoke grimly, “they will be more than lucky! For they are both badly crippled already!”

Kirby shook his head, in despair.

“What fools!” he cried. “What fools to come over like this! They should have known! They should have realized it would be useless!” But at the same time he knew that their coming was the one thing he had been hoping for. Somehow he had felt that they were going to get him out of this, as they had invariably gotten him out of other tight predicaments! But their efforts had been frustrated! If they even got home alive now, they’d be damned lucky! Hope was utterly gone!

THE Red Devil had left the window now, to return to his chair by the bed. Fearfully Kirby remembered then that he was supposed to be blind, that he had been moving his eyes mechanically during all this excitement. Had the Red Devil noticed? No, apparently he hadn’t! He had been too absorbed in the fight to watch Kirby. And now the Mosquito again lay back with that blank stare in his eyes, though now he was inwardly in a state of sheer panic. The German’s cheerful efforts to make conversation now only

got on his nerves, maddened him. Time was racing, racing! The period between now and the coming offensive to-morrow was dwindling with breathless rapidity! Damn it, was there no way to warn the Allies? Was there no possible way?

The Mosquito’s eyes were getting better and better now. His range of vision was increasing, so that soon he could even look out of the window and see the sunny lawn, fringed by trees. But he knew he was as helpless as ever. He knew there was no escape. Even if his eyes were entirely well again, he was trapped here on this estate full of Jerries, trapped in a room where he lay unarmed and clad only in pajamas, miles and miles from the Allied lines!

By the time evening came he felt that he’d burst if he had to stay there any longer. Doctor von Grantz made his reappearance to examine him once more. The light was on in the room now, night had fallen outside. The Mosquito could see almost normally now, though his eyes still felt weak and painful. But again, though he had no hope now, he desperately tried to delay his removal from here by deceiving his captors. This time, however, he was shrewd enough to report some progress, otherwise he’d surely betray himself!

“When you’re right up close like this, I can see you,” he admitted to the doctor. “But only very dimly. Now I can’t see you at all—” this as the crafty doctor unobtrusively moved back a little. “Pretty near everything is that same sort of white!”

By the time he had finished the examination, the doctor was frankly suspicious.

“It is very strange,” he said, slowly. “Very strange indeed!” He frowned a moment, a grim look coming over his hard features. Then, as usual, he gave a shrug. “Well, I suppose I shall have to be patient. However,” he added, quite casually, “I am going to place guards under your window and out in the hall. Not that I distrust you, but I should hate you to hurt yourself. And tomorrow I am afraid you’ll have to go to prison camp whether you can see or not!”

Kirby was crushed, crestfallen. But he remained silent. The doctor smiled, tightly. He then turned to his son, who stood nearby.

“Erich, when you go out of here you will lock the door behind you. I’ll leave a key in the lock.”

And with this parting shot he left. The Red Devil was the guileless one this time. Not being a doctor he did not share his father's suspicions, and he spoke half-apologetically to the Mosquito.

"I don't know why you have to be guarded, since you cannot see yet, but I trust you won't take it in an unfriendly spirit. My father is peculiar at times." Then he grinned. "Well, my friend, I'm afraid I shall have to say goodbye to you now."

"Goodbye?" Kirby echoed, in surprise. "You're not leaving, are you?"

"Yes, I'm sorry to say. I have to get back to my squadron before tomorrow morning." And Kirby well knew the reason! The German air force, of course, was going to pave the way for that offensive tomorrow. Some time before noon the Red Devil would be leading his crack circus into the sky.

"When do you leave?" the Mosquito asked.

"Oh, shortly before dawn—whenever my staff car comes for me."

"Well then, why say goodbye now?" Kirby grinned. "Before you go, drop in and wake me so I can wish you luck! I'd sure like to have your company once more before I'm carted off!"

Young von Grantz agreed cheerfully, and changing "Goodbye" to "Goodnight—*auf wiedersehen*," he left.

KIRBY heard a key turn in the lock when the Red Devil left; he was obeying his father's instructions.

Presently the Mosquito heard a steady tramp of footsteps in the hall and outside the window there rose the crunch of heavy shoes in the gravel path below. The guards! They had taken their stations! Locked in, with sentries watching the window and the door, the Mosquito was more hopelessly trapped than ever! And yet, somewhere in the back of his feverish mind, the vague germ of an idea had insinuated itself.

He shook his head. No use even thinking about it yet. He must wait, wait until shortly before dawn. The best thing to do was to get some sleep. By sheer will power he forced himself to relax, and for the first time since he had gone there, he slept soundly.

Nor did he stir until a hand gently touched his shoulder, and he awoke with a start to find the

Red Devil standing at his bedside. It was still pretty dark, but Kirby knew that the darkness was not the fault of his eyes, for he could see the tall German ace quite plainly in the furtive gray light of dawn which came through the window. The Red Devil had come to say goodbye, as agreed.

"Afraid I'll have to make it brief, though," he said. "My staff car is waiting in front of the door."

On hearing this, Kirby was gripped once more by the wild idea which had been formulating in his mind. Even while he still lay there with that blank stare in his eyes, smiling his cheerful farewell, his brain was racing like an engine, figuring, figuring. He was alone in this room with the young German standing next to his bed, a German who thought the Mosquito could not see yet, and who was therefore at his ease, expecting nothing. But also the German had treated Kirby like a friend. The Mosquito was torn between conflicting emotions. As if unable to decide for himself, he suddenly spoke, and his voice was not as casual as he tried to make it.

"Look here, Erich, do you agree that all's fair in war?"

Instantly he regretted asking the question, for young von Grantz misinterpreted it! Naturally the first thing the German associated it with was his father's poison-gas project, and he gave Kirby a keen, suspicious glance, as if he realized that the Mosquito must know something after all!

However, he answered the question. His face grew suddenly stern and long in the dim gray light, so that he no longer looked young and cheerful. He spoke with terse candor.

"Yes," he said, "to be frank, I do!"

"Glad you agree," Kirby said softly. And then, like a flash, he acted!

With a panther-like spring he leaped from the bed, pushing the covers in front of him and flinging them right over the surprised German's head! The Red Devil, taken completely unawares, struggled confusedly as the Mosquito, now out of bed, was upon him. But very soon the German recovered from his surprise, and displayed a strength and fury which became more and more overwhelming. The Mosquito, in his weak condition, was hardly a match for him. As they struggled in the dim light the Red Devil got the covers off his head, and tried to catch his breath to shout for help. In a frenzy Kirby managed to

cover his mouth, and the two grappled wildly, furiously.

The Mosquito, who was no wrestler, was trying to get into a position where he could use his fists now. But the German, wrestling like a professional, held him close, tying him up. Suddenly the Red Devil's right hand, momentarily free, squirmed down to his side. In a flash he had a revolver out of its holster, was bringing it up with a savage jerk.

Kirby felt the sudden cold pressure of the steel barrel against his chest, and in sheer desperation he managed to free his left arm at last. All in that same instant he drew it back and, putting every atom of his strength into the blow, sent a short but crushing left hook flush to the German's jaw. He felt the man sag, felt him sliding to the floor, where he sprawled—out for the time being.

PANTING and gasping, the Mosquito set to work with that lightning speed which only desperate men can attain. The whole hectic scuffle had only taken a minute or so, and had not made enough noise to attract attention. But he must hurry now. It was growing lighter and lighter. He stooped over the prostrate German, and in a matter of seconds had stripped off his trim gray uniform. Kirby proceeded to get into it, putting it right over his pajamas. It fit him all right, though a little tightly.

But he had to get into the German's socks and boots too. At first he thought he would never get the boots on. They were several sizes small. He put his foot into each of them in turn, and stood in it with all his weight and strength, pushing, pushing, until at last he managed to squeeze in. It was painful, but it would have to do. Buttoning up, he surveyed himself as best he could in a mirror which hung on the wall. He ought to pass. He looked neat and trim enough for a German officer. But if they looked at his face! He got the German's visor cap and put it on. Thank God, it was plenty large! And it helped a great deal. Yes, with luck, he ought to get by, if it was still dark enough!

Sheathing the Red Devil's revolver, a Luger, he returned to the German, who lay still inert on the floor, clad only in his underclothes now. The Mosquito's features twitched strangely as he regarded the prostrate figure. But then his face

instantly hardened again. Grimly he stooped down and, with some effort, lifted the limp German and carried him to the bed.

Using the sheets, Kirby tied him to both ends of the bed by his hands and feet. Even as he was securing the knots, the German suddenly stirred, his eyes fluttering open. Dazed and stunned as he was, he quickly grasped his predicament, and again he opened his mouth to shout for help. But Kirby, with savage haste, stuffed that opening mouth with a handkerchief he had found in his pocket, and fastened the gag securely. The German looked up at him then, looked up dumbly, with an expression which made Kirby wince, made him feel as if he had cheated in a game of fair play. The Mosquito spoke hoarsely, his voice strange and unnatural.

"I'm sorry, Erich. I just had to do it, that's all. You yourself agreed that all's fair in war!" And leaving the German squirming and writhing futilely, he strode to the door without looking back. But at the door he paused, steeling his nerves. He must appear cool and confident now. He pulled the German's visor cap as far down as he could, almost over his eyes. Then, without further hesitation, he opened the door and, trying to imitate the little he had seen of von Grantz's confident stride, he walked right out into the hall.

The corridor was well illuminated by a naked electric bulb screwed into the wall. And pacing up and down, a rifle on his shoulder, was an alert German private. He paused and turned as Kirby came out of the room, and the Mosquito held his breath, at the same time averting his face from the soldier as best he could. Promptly, with due respect, the Boche clicked his heels together and presented arms. Kirby merely nodded carelessly, knowing how these Jerry officers usually acted toward mere privates.

The Mosquito closed the door behind him. There was a key in the lock. He turned it, knowing that the Red Devil would have turned it on coming out. But also, surreptitiously, he took the key from the lock and put it into his pocket. He must do everything he could to delay discovery!

CHAPTER VII
 "SCHNELL!"

IGNORING the unsuspecting Jerry guard, who had now resumed his pacing, the Mosquito walked straight down the corridor to the stairway. He descended the steps confidently and well able to see, though the room below was in darkness save for the furtive streaks of daylight which came through its windows. The darker the better, thought the Mosquito grimly.

He reached the foot of the stairway now, and was in the room where he knew that Victory Dinner had taken place. There was the front door, a large, heavy door of oak! Swiftly, but silent as a cat, the Mosquito went straight for it. Then a sudden noise at the other end of the room made him stop in his tracks, and his hand darted furtively to the Luger in his holster. A shaft of brilliant light suddenly slanted into the room, grew wider, wider. It was a full moment before the Mosquito realized that this was caused by the opening of a sliding door which led to another room. The laboratory! In the opening, silhouetted against the light, he saw the squat, shock-headed figure of Doctor Ludwig von Grantz!

"*Mein Sohn!*" the doctor's voice rose eagerly. "You are leaving now?"

Kirby fought down an inner panic. It was all right, the doctor could not see him clearly as he stood out here in the darkness. He drew a deep breath and then, making every effort to imitate the resonant voice of the Red Devil, he replied.

"*Ja, mein Vater.* I was just about to stop in and say goodbye to you." Even as he spoke a new idea was glimmering in his mind. Suddenly he had remembered a snatch of the doctor's speech of the other night—"There is but one copy of it, and I keep that safely on my person."—By God, as long as Kirby had gone this far, he might as well go still further!

Recklessly, he moved closer to the lighted doorway, but he made sure not to move close enough for his face to be seen.

"*Mein Vater.*" he said, trying frantically to keep his voice steady, "are you certain you have the formula for the gas safe?"

The doctor gave a snort. "Why, of course, Erich!" His tone suddenly became ironic. "And

what makes you suddenly interested in this gas you so greatly condemned?"

Careful now! Must remember he was the Red Devil. Mustn't arouse the doctor's suspicions by not acting true to character. He framed his words slowly.

"I am not thinking of the gas, of which I still do not approve." It must be said to his credit that his voice sounded every bit as proud and firm as the Red Devil's. "I am merely thinking of you, *mein Vater.* I know it would go hard with you if you should lose the formula."

"Lose it?" The doctor laughed at the absurdity of the idea. "Why, you foolish boy, how can I lose it when it is all right here!" The Mosquito leaned forward tensely. But the doctor merely tapped his shaggy head. "Every figure of it is stamped indelibly on my brain!"

A wave of frustration swept Kirby. He could hardly conceal his disappointment.

"You mean you have no copy of it, to give to the chemical plants?"

"*Gott im Himmel,* what has gotten into you?" The doctor suddenly lost his patience, seemed about to move from the doorway. God, had Kirby gone too far? The Mosquito's hand moved again to the Luger at his side. But then the doctor was adding, more softly, "Of course. I have made that one copy of it. But, more important, I have preserved it in my mind."

"Well, you must take good care of that copy, *mein Vater!*" Kirby knew he should not try to continue this wild farce. He should get out of here now, while he still could. And yet the knowledge that the doctor did have a copy of that formula forced him to stick stubbornly to his guns. He made one last desperate effort, ready to risk betrayal now.

"Are you sure the place you keep the copy is safe?"

"Of course it is safe!" the doctor snapped. But then at last, to Kirby's frenzied joy, it came! The doctor tapped his breast. "It is safe in this locket here, around my neck."

"Then hand it over, doctor! And make it snappy!"

Low and terse, the words clipped from the Mosquito as, stepping swiftly forward, he whipped out his Luger and poked its barrel right into the surprised doctor's stomach. The doctor's

face blanched as he saw Kirby's features for the first time. With wild alarm he opened his mouth.

"QUIET!" Kirby almost whispered to the doctor. The guard upstairs must not hear! "Not a sound out of you! And don't think I can't see as clearly as ever. I was lying about that!" The doctor's face crimsoned on hearing this, and he glared at the Mosquito with murderous realization. Again Kirby felt like a sneak, but he went on grimly.

"Now are you gonna hand over that locket peacefully, or do I have to take it from you by force?"

He stopped short, and at the same time an expression of wild relief came over the doctor's features. Someone was coming! Someone was coming from another room! In a near panic Kirby prodded the Luger viciously into the doctor's stomach.

"Get into that room! Hurry up!" And he forced the doctor back into the laboratory.

Just in time Kirby got him in, and closed and locked the sliding door behind them. One of the doctor's servants had just come into the other room. Von Grantz had been taking no chances. He had ordered his servants to keep a constant watch to see that no harm befell him.

The servant glanced toward the closed door of the laboratory. Everything seemed to be all right. He went out again.

Meanwhile, in the lighted laboratory, the doctor was still backing away before the Mosquito's menacing Luger. But now the sudden brilliant light had affected Kirby's eyes, almost blinding him for a moment. His eyes danced again as if needles and pins were sticking into them. He still kept the Luger steady, trying not to betray his momentary plight, but the keen doctor must have grasped the situation. The German's hand suddenly darted toward a table.

"Stop!" Kirby cried, for at that same moment his eyes had cleared again, and vision had returned.

"Stop or I'll—" He broke off, staring in awe.

Doctor von Grantz, his face wreathed in a venomous scowl, his eyes burning like live coals, was standing there with his right hand raised above his head. And in that hand, glinting as it caught the light, was a small glass vial!

"Put that down!" the Mosquito warned, a strange presentiment chilling him to the very marrow. "Put it down or I'll shoot!"

The doctor laughed, with blighting malice. "Go ahead and shoot!" he sneered. "But if you do, you die yourself! Do you know what is in this vial? Well, let me tell you! It contains the most deadly gas ever created, a gas that will soon wipe out your swine countrymen! If this vial should break you and I both would be snuffed out like flies! And all it has to do to break is to fall out of my hand!"

The blood drained from Kirby's face as he realized his sudden helplessness. God, the doctor had turned the tables! Even if Kirby shot him dead that vial would break! But the Mosquito refused to give up yet.

"You think you can bluff me?" he burst out, fiercely. "You're not going to commit suicide just to stop me!"

A light of hell seemed to shine from the German's eyes.

"I am going to stop you from taking the formula, or even from warning the accursed Allies! And if I have to lose my own life it will not matter. My countrymen will find this locket on my body! They will have their formula!"

"You're crazy!" the desperate Mosquito cried, though he was only stalling, stalling while he tried to find some loophole, some tiny, fleeting opportunity to defeat the determined German. "Why, if you let that gas out it will go through the whole house! It will kill your own son and all your servants and—"

"Save your breath!" the doctor sneered. "Do you think I don't know what I am doing? The window of this is open, the door closed. The gas will only be fatal to us in here, and it will only stun the others a little. The air will clear it away in a few minutes! But," his insane cackle sent a shudder through the Mosquito, "we shall both be corpses, corpses with our lungs burned away!"

KIRBY reached his decision then. Deliberately, he sheathed his Luger, and let an expression of bitter resignation come over his features.

"All right," he said, pretending to relax, while in reality he was gathering all his strength and nerve, measuring his distance, judging his time. "I

guess you win, doctor. You've got me stopped with that gas. But still—"

Straight into the air he leaped, making the wildest jump he had ever made in his life. An enraged cry broke from the doctor, and even as Kirby was coming down on him his hand opened, letting the vial drop!

But it did not drop far. As it fell Kirby's desperate hand caught it, caught it as gently as he could. The doctor flung himself savagely upon the Mosquito then, and old as he was his rage lent him an amazing strength. Kirby was almost thrown off his balance. Desperately he clung to the vial, trying frantically not to squeeze it in his hand, for the glass felt frightfully brittle and delicate!

Somehow, in the mad scuffle, he managed to reach over to the nearby table, managed to lay the vial down on it safely. Then he gave all his attention to the snarling Boche who was grappling with him like a madman. The Mosquito hated to fight with the older and weaker man, but as long as he had to he would make short work of it! Again he drew back that powerful left arm of his. And again he lashed out with a crashing hook to his opponent's jaw. A grunt came from the doctor, and he dropped to the floor like a log.

Quickly the Mosquito stooped over him, his fingers searching for that locket. There it was, right under the man's coat. He seized it, ripped it right off the chain in his haste. He looked at the doctor. No need to bind and gag him. He was out cold. Be a long time before he came to.

The Mosquito rose to his feet. His eye went to the table, where the vial of glass still lay. Should he take that too? No, he couldn't risk carrying it. The formula was enough. He shoved the locket into an inside pocket of his German tunic. Then, quickly, he went to the door, and opened it furtively. All right. He passed out into the other room again, closing the sliding door behind him. Even as he did so a sudden step close by almost made him jump out of his skin. The servant again! But it was dark in here, thank God! Once more the Mosquito imitated the resonant voice of the Red Devil.

"My father says he does not wish to be disturbed," he said shrewdly. "You will see that no one bothers him!"

The servant was all respect. "*Ja wohl, mein Herr!*" he said, and went out. Kirby hesitated no longer. He went straight to the front door now, opened it, and walked out into the chill dawn air. It was still quite dark, but in the east the sky was streaked with red.

Right in front of the door, standing on the road with its engine idling, was a big open Mercedes touring car. An alert chauffeur sat at the wheel, while another soldier, obviously an aide, stood by, waiting.

Pulling his visor cap down a little farther, the Mosquito walked straight to the waiting staff car. Outwardly he was calm and cool, but inwardly he was frightened as a rabbit. The aide at the car wheeled and snapped out a precise salute. The chauffeur stiffened at the wheel. Kirby prayed that it was still dark enough to conceal his features from them! Determinedly he went up to the rear of the car. The aide respectfully opened the rear door, assisted the Mosquito into the comfortably cushioned seat. For a moment the tense Kirby was afraid the aide was going to climb in beside him, in which case he'd surely see the Yank's face! But to his relief the aide climbed into the front, taking his place next to the chauffeur. Both waited silently, and it was a moment before Kirby realized what they were waiting for. He leaned forward, and again imitating the Red Devil's voice, spoke crisply.

"To the airdrome, *schnell!*" he ordered, though he didn't have the slightest idea where it was!

THE big car fairly leaped forward, down the road. Quickly it gathered speed, until it was racing along the dirt highway, its engine raised in a smooth and powerful purr. How far did they have to go, the Mosquito wondered tensely.

And as it grew lighter, the Mosquito found that his eyes were still pretty bad on distance. But damn his eyes! He could not think of them now! His only thought was that if it got much lighter these Jerries in front of the car could see he was not young von Grantz! And if they did not get to that airdrome soon, surely someone back at the house would have had time to discover either the Red Devil or the doctor, and would have spread the alarm in every direction! The staff car would be stopped, either on the road or when it reached the drome, and Kirby would be seized! The

thought filled the Mosquito with such panic that he could not conceal his frantic haste. Again he leaned forward.

“*Schnell!*” he yelled, above the purr of the motor and the wind. “*Mach schnell!*”

The chauffeur obediently stepped on the gas, pushing the accelerator pedal almost down to the floorboard. The Mosquito’s recklessness increased. Again he forgot his endangered eyes. Again he shouted madly. “*Schnell!* For God’s sake, hurry! I’m late enough as it is!”

Faster and faster went the big staff car, tearing along hell-bent now as it raced with the rising sun, though its chauffeur did not know it. And then suddenly, to Kirby’s dismay, traffic loomed in the road ahead. A long line of artillery caissons, supply lorries, infantry. The Mosquito cursed as the chauffeur slowed down and commenced to honk his siren imperiously. But then, to Kirby’s astonishment, he saw all that traffic pull to the side of the road with surprising speed. They were clearing the path for the staff car. The Mercedes quickly picked up speed again, and a moment later was shooting past the long line of heavy traffic. Kirby caught vague, passing glimpses of men in coal-scuttle helmets leaning from the side of trucks, of huge steel cannons, of horses straining against reins. The Mosquito suddenly realized the reason for all this traffic. The push! The Boche were moving up toward the Front!

And then, even as the sun itself appeared, a dim red ball which glowed slowly brighter, there came a sight which filled Kirby with relief. The smooth wide grounds of a flying field, lined with camouflaged tent-hangars, had come into view on the right side of the road. The airdrome, at last! The Mercedes slowed down once more and, turning off the road, went bounding right across the tarmac of the Jerry drome, where it gradually came to a stop.

Mechanics and pilots came to meet the machine, gathered around it eagerly. The aide jumped out and opened the rear door, waiting to help Kirby out. The Mosquito had now pulled his visor cap even lower over his eyes. He was glancing around, furtively. It was still dark enough, he decided, if he hurried! His glance went out across the wide field, which was just within his present range of vision. There was only one ship out there, a Fokker, squatting like a

ghostly bird in the dim morning light. It was evidently revving up, for its propeller was ticking over slowly. But it was gray in color. It was not the all-red plane of the Red Devil—and Kirby had to go on being the Red Devil if he wanted to get by at all!

RELUCTANTLY Kirby let the aide help him out of the car. The group of mechanics and pilots all stiffened like ramrods and snapped out a salute. They all seemed elated to see the man they believed to be their leader, looked as if they were about to greet him enthusiastically, wring his hand, pat his back! Kirby, knowing that such a demonstration would lead to swift betrayal, checked them with a cold, crisp voice.

“Get my ship warmed up at once! Hurry, it is a matter of vital importance! Not a second can be lost!”

It worked! It threw cold water over the whole bunch of them, made them sober, earnest. Already some of the mechanics had rushed to a nearby hangar. Kirby waited, his heart pounding. He jumped as a voice spoke near him, but the voice was full of respect,

“Some coffee, *Herr Hauptmann*, before you go?”

“*Nein, danke!*” Kirby refused, though he could have well stood a hot bracing drink. “I must get right up without delay so that I shall be back in time to lead the squadron,” he lied convincingly. “Time is precious and—” He broke off, giving a sigh of satisfaction as he saw the mechanics wheeling a Fokker from the hangars now, a Fokker painted a dazzling scarlet from nose to tail. They were bringing out the Red Devil’s plane, pushing it toward the deadline!

Someone brought Kirby a helmet and a pair of goggles then, and the Mosquito reached for them gratefully. They would help conceal his face, save him from being seen in the growing light! But before he could start to put them on someone else was holding a heavy fur-lined coat for him, and he had to get into it. Finally he got the coat on and was drawing on the helmet at last. His fingers trembled as they strapped on the headgear, and then he reached for the goggles. But before he could pull them down it happened!

A sudden shout rose from across the field, and out of a shack which was evidently the

headquarters office, burst an excited, white-faced officer. Wildly he came dashing toward the group around Kirby, at the same time gesticulating with his arms and yelling at the top of his lungs.

“Seize him! He is a spy in our captain’s uniform! They telephoned from the house! Seize him!”

For a moment Kirby’s knees felt giddy beneath him, and he was too frozen with horror to move. Wildly, like a cornered animal, he glanced around. The red plane was on the deadline now, but the mechanics had not even started to pull its propeller through compression! And now there came a sudden enraged shout from the Boche who stood before Kirby, as they saw his face for the first time and grasped the meaning of the alarm! Kirby saw them start to draw their Lugers, start to move savagely toward him. But simultaneously the Mosquito also saw that other Fokker, the lone gray ship which was revving up on the field! A wave of crazy recklessness swept him.

With a berserk yell, he spun around and dashed wildly toward that plane. The Germans, with a roar, rushed after him.

Crack! A revolver barked and a bullet whined right over the Mosquito’s head warning him to stop. But it only stirred him to more frenzied efforts. He hurled himself forward, spurting toward that plane. Suddenly a mechanic blocked his path. The Mosquito whipped out his Luger and fired blindly, pointblank. The mechanic dropped, but at the same time another man was rushing toward Kirby. The crowd of Boche behind him were so close now that they no longer fired; they thought they had the mad Yank trapped. But the Mosquito once more called upon that powerful left arm of his. As the Boche in front of him came right upon him, he met the man with a crushing left hook. The Jerry dropped like a log.

Then, with the agility of a monkey, the Mosquito was getting into the warming Fokker, climbing into the cockpit. The German pilots and mechanics rushed up, surrounding the plane and yelling that they would shoot to kill unless Kirby surrendered. But the idea of surrender was the furthest from the Mosquito’s mind. Once more he became the reckless daredevil who laughed at all odds, who knew no obstacles. Ducking low in the cockpit, he found the throttle lever and, with a savage jerk, pulled it wide open!

CHAPTER VII NO-DRAW DUEL

THE Fokker’s idling engine rose in a deafening roar. The trim little plane leaped forward, jumping right over its chocks. In a mad rage the Germans commenced firing at it, blazing away as fast as they could. The Fokker, amid a fusillade of bullets, was bounding across the field now, faster and faster.

The Mosquito was still crouched low in the cockpit, and was guiding the Fokker with his usual innate flying skill, even though it was a strange ship. Wider and wider he opened the throttle, while bullets sang shrilly all around him. The tail of the Fokker was lifting now, then the wheels. He was getting her off! *Rat-ta-tat-tat!* His blood went cold as the sudden staccato clatter rose above the roar of the engine, and he heard a rain of bullets tick through the fuselage. They were opening up on him with machine guns now!

But then, like a graceful bird, the Fokker was sweeping into the air. Kirby, pulling down his goggles with a reckless yell, zoomed the Jerry ship straight into the lightening sky. The machine guns kept peppering away at him from the ground, and presently anti-aircrafts joined in with their raucous bark, and shells burst close enough to rock the zooming Fokker. But then Kirby was getting out of range, even as he steered his climbing ship west by the compass on the dashboard, heading hell-bent for the Allied lines!

Looking down, he saw the Jerry drome receding beneath him, and only then did his eyes remind him of their weak condition once more. For though it was full daylight now, and the sun was almost dazzling, the Mosquito was still unable to see for any great distance. Already the drome below and behind seemed to be blurred and distorted, and covered with a strange, growing haze.

But even as he looked, he saw a birdlike shape suddenly come sweeping out of that blurred haze, saw it climbing after him in hot pursuit, its motor at full throttle, and black smoke belching from its exhaust stacks. And as the first rays of the rising sun caught that plane, they showed it to be all-red in color. At once the tense Mosquito realized. Someone had started up the Red Devil’s plane,

taken it off to come after him! And doubtless, as soon as the mechanics could wheel them out, more Fokkers would be joining the chase!

The Mosquito gritted his teeth. By God, they weren't going to stop him! He was going to get back, with his momentous information! He stopped climbing, eased the joystick forward and leveled off the Fokker. He raced straight forward now, at full throttle, making a beeline for home. But glancing over his shoulder, he saw that the red Fokker was gaining on him, coming right after him! The Mosquito opened his throttle to the widest notch, feeding the Fokker's engine more gas, until she began to choke in shrill protest. The ship sputtered forward, and then it was streaking through the air like a missile, trembling and shaking in every fibre now, as if the strain would break it to pieces.

Kirby was gaining on the red Fokker, he saw, as he looked back over his shoulder. But not for long. To his dismay the red Fokker, flying like the very wind, began creeping up again, creeping up slowly but steadily!

The Mosquito cursed and fought to get still more speed out of his engine. He drew upon all his skill as a pilot, coaxing the unfamiliar Fokker like a jockey coaxing a racehorse. And again he managed to increase the wild pace, again the red Fokker was falling behind. It became a mad race then, a race between those two Fokkers. Hell-bent, with the red ship behind the gray, the two went streaking on toward the lines, while the sun rose in the sky, and it became full, bright morning,

KIRBY had managed to keep a safe gap between that pursuing red plane and his own. He had been forced to steer solely by his compass, since the landscape below had become more and more hazy to his eyes. And now, suddenly, his eyes really began to grow alarmingly weak. A gray cloud seemed to appear before them, came moving toward them mistily. Kirby blinked and wiped his goggles. Still the cloud kept coming. In a growing frenzy the Mosquito pushed his goggles off, and then cried in pain as the furious wind smote his eyes and blinded them entirely. He drew the goggles down again, straining his eyes to see. For a moment everything was black, and sheer panic overcame him. Then, hazily, visibility

returned. He saw all kinds of dancing colors, circles of which spun in all parts of the sky. God, was he going blind again.

Suddenly the haze cleared a moment, and he jerked back his head.

The blood drained from his face. The red Fokker was right behind him, so close that he could see its glistening machine guns, see the helmeted head leaning between them. The Mosquito, due to his failing sight, had lost speed! The Fokker was creeping right up on his tail!

Frantically the Mosquito again bent to his controls, and once more drove his ship savagely ahead. The mad chase continued. But now the Mosquito's eyes were growing worse and worse. His whole head seemed to be splitting, and the colored circles seemed to be bursting around him now; he could almost hear them bursting inside his head! The compass on his dashboard, his only means of guidance now, seemed to recede from him until it grew vague, then out of it came several more compasses, until the whole dashboard seemed full of them. The Mosquito cursed and yelled in a frenzy. God, he was cockeyed, dizzy! He was getting blind all over again!

Rat-ta-tat-tat! The shrill staccato clatter burst upon his dazed ears, right behind him, and simultaneously a smoky line of tracer bullets went snaking right past his side. Fearfully, he jerked back his head, strained his goggled eyes. In a sort of drunken haze he saw the red Fokker then. It was right on his tail, and its forward guns were spitting flame! Madly the Mosquito commenced to zigzag and half-roll to throw off the Jerry's sights, but the red Fokker clung like a leech.

All at once, as he looked back, the haze cleared a moment from Kirby's eyes. And in that moment of clearness he saw, in the cockpit of that red Fokker, a face which, even beneath its goggles, was unmistakable.

It was the face of Erich von Grantz, the Red Devil!

A strange chill went coursing up Kirby's spine, as if he had just seen a ghost. It seemed incredible, impossible! How had the Red Devil, whom he had left bound and gagged in his bed, gotten to the airdrome so quickly and taken off in his red Fokker? And yet now that Kirby knew it was the Red Devil, he was not really surprised.

Who else could have followed him at such a breakneck pace, who else could have crept up on his tail like this, to pepper away at him?

Rat-ta-tat-tat-tat! As if in grim confirmation, that deafening clatter shattered the air behind him again, and vaguely, in the wing, surface above him, he saw a long line of perforations appear as if by magic. His momentary clear vision had passed again, again he was bleary and half-blind. And then it was that sheer panic overcame him. God, was that ghastly story of the other day only going to repeat itself? Was he going to find himself blind and helpless before the Red Devil's withering guns?

He must get back! That was the refrain which now hammered against his brain, which beat with his heart, which throbbed with his racing engine. He must get back! Let him be shot to hell, let him be killed, but he must get his information to the Allies! He went on stubbornly, went on as the German's bullets started ticking through his fuselage now, started drilling his ship. He went on, and his eyes got worse and worse, and he thought his head would burst from the pain. Every now and then he would find himself in a total blank now, a black cloud would seem to enclose him for a long moment, during which he almost lost control of the ship, and then it would pass and he would struggle on drunkenly. And all this time the Red Devil clung relentlessly to his tail, his twin guns firing whenever he could draw his sights on the zigzagging plane before him. And soon Kirby began to realize that it was hopeless. There was no escaping from that red plane behind him. Before he could possibly get back he'd be shot to hell! Wild sobs tore from him. He had failed, failed after coming so close to success! Having escaped with all that information, having succeeded in getting a plane, he had been thwarted, finally, by the very man he had used as a means of escape! What a cruel irony, what a grim, revengeful justice!

IT was coming again, a withering fusillade from the plane behind him. Some of the bullets smashed into his instrument board, and then, with a cry of horror, he saw his compass break into a thousand pieces of flying glass and metal, some of them cutting him painfully! He was done for now! Having had only that compass to steer by, how

was he now going to head in the right direction? Every last shred of hope was gone! He was through, finished!

And then it was that the miracle happened. Then it was that a curtain seemed to part in front of Kirby's eyes, a curtain which revealed a scene as clear as crystal. He saw an endless panorama of landscape below, stretching out in patches of greens and browns. As if in a joyous dream Kirby's eyes greedily took it all in, and with even greater joy noticed that directly below was the quiet but scarred face of the battlefield! He was almost over his own lines! He began to weep like a frightened child.

But it was all true, and like most miracles it was not so unnatural at all. What had happened was easily explained. All the time, though he had not known it, his eyes had been growing better, stronger and less sensitive to jars. But then, as he had taken off from that drome, the brilliant morning sun had come out in full strength. It was the first time his newly recovered eyes had been exposed to such a light and their reaction was only natural. Just as they had been dazzled by the electric lights in the doctor's laboratory, now they had been dazzled by the brilliant sun, which can temporarily blind even normal eyes. But all this time they had been recovering, fighting as organs of the body will to throw off the thing that was hurting them. And now, when Kirby needed them most, when his compass had gone haywire, they had suddenly recovered their full power. And the Mosquito knew then, knew for the first time, that he was cured! He knew that he would be able to see again as he had seen before all this happened. He knew that the danger was past!

A whistle of smoking tracer stirred him back to savage consciousness of the red plane which was still behind him, blazing away. He jerked his head back. There it was, so clear now that he could see it in every detail, see the almost invisible arc of its whirling propeller, see its bobbing, coffin-like nose. And between the blazing guns was the goggled face of Erich von Grantz, a face which he now saw was contorted with almost insane rage and malice, a face whose goggled eyes gleamed with the light of a killer!

Then Kirby did a strange thing. He burst into a laugh, and it was the old reckless laugh he always gave when he was about to plunge into daredevil

action! And he shouted lustily, though he could hardly hear his own voice in the drone of engines.

“All right, Erich, old boy! You’re asking for it, and by God you’ll get it! The fight we were talking about yesterday is on! Let’s go!”

The only response to this unheard shout was another burst of lead from the German’s guns. It went hopelessly astray, for Kirby, with a wild yell, had suddenly jerked back his stick and shot up to pivot around in a breathless, Immelman turn. The Mosquito’s newly recovered eyes were gleaming too now, with a strange light, and his blood tingled with exhilaration. Even as he Immelmanned, he leaned forward mechanically to trip the loaded Spandaus mounted before him. The red Fokker had whipped around now, and was trying as usual to force the other plane on the outside arc of the turn. But there was no stopping the flying demon which Kirby had now become. He got over, and banked swiftly as the German zoomed like a red streak somewhere to his right. Again, the two aces found themselves face to face.

ONCE before, four days ago, they had clashed almost in the same place, right over the battle lines. There, luck had interfered with their fight, and they had not known which of them was the better man. Now both were determined to fight it out to a finish, to settle the score once and for all! They ought to be more evenly matched now than ever. Both flew the same type of plane, so there could be no question of a superior ship. Both were between their respective battlefronts, over No-Man’s-Land, so that neither had the advantage of location. And, above all, both were impelled by an equally strong motive—Kirby to get through with his information, the Red Devil to stop him. The stage was truly set for this duel of duels.

Simultaneously, in thunderous unison, their guns blazed forth—and the fight was on!

And it was a fight which would go down in history’s flaming pages as the greatest and most spectacular single aerial combat of the whole war. Never before had two men fought each other so hard and fast. They broke every rule of orthodox flying, performing split-airing stunts which even the most reckless pilots would never have dared to attempt. They shot around each other in terrifically close banks which made their wings

actually graze, they Immelmanned one after the other to gain altitude, they dived and zoomed with furious speed and yammering engines. The bright sun flashed on their wings as the trim little planes gyrated in the sky, jockeying endlessly for position. They fought each other all over the place. They chased each other up through the clouds, where they played hide and seek for several seconds, and then they dived each other down almost to the ground, down over the battlefield, right on top of the trenches, whose mud-stained occupants, Germans and Yanks, stared up in startled awe at the two monstrous birds which were holding combat right over their heads, so low that their swift-moving shadows were cast upon the ground by the bright rising sun. It was incongruous to see two German Fokkers engaged in such a mad fight. It was even more incongruous to see how completely they were deadlocked, unable to gain any advantage over each other. For several seconds the two ships whipped around one another right above the ground, in roaring fury. Then, with one accord, both of them zoomed upwards again, and the men in the trenches, squinting, saw them fade into tiny glinting specks way up in the sky.

On they fought, with increasing fury. Time passed, and still they remained hopelessly deadlocked. It was beginning to look as if their joke about the fight lasting forever was another one of those truths that are spoken in jest. It was beginning to look as if they were both so evenly matched that neither was the better man!

And then Kirby began to realize that the German did have one advantage over him after all, and that advantage was time! The sun was rising higher and higher in the sky now, and the Mosquito knew that he had to get back with his information at least a couple of hours before noon if he hoped to give the Allies time to take measures against the Jerry push! And the way things looked, he was never going to get back within that time! Both he and the German still had plenty of gas and ammunition—they could keep this up for hours!

The Mosquito began to force the fight now, began to attack that red Fokker in the swift, insistent lunging fashion which had won him and his comrades their nicknames. But the German matched every maneuver with a countermove,

always slipping out of the range of Kirby's guns like an elusive eel.

HOW long was it going to last, Kirby was wondering grimly. Would they go on like this until either they or their ships gave out? He did not feel that he could stand the strain much longer. He was growing more and more tired, so that it became a sheer effort to operate the controls of his ship. But, by God, he would not be the first one to break! He'd wear out the Red Devil first!

And in the cockpit of the scarlet plane, strangely enough, the same thought was crossing the mind of the German. He was not going to give out before the Yank! He'd hold on until Kirby weakened, come what may!

Their determination lent them new energy. As if they had both gotten a second wind they attacked one another with fresh fury and speed. They circled madly. A burst from the German's guns clipped the trailing edge off Kirby's right wing. But a burst from Kirby's guns drilled an ugly line of holes through the German's rudder! The Mosquito was coming out of a half-roll now, to meet the red Fokker's next move. But to his sudden surprise, the red Fokker was not there to meet him this time! Apprehensively, the Mosquito looked about. A surprised exclamation broke suddenly from his throat.

He saw the red plane sliding off to one side on its wing. The helmeted Jerry pilot was standing up in the cockpit. He was hammering away furiously at the breech-locks of his twin guns. Realization came to Kirby then.

The German's guns had jammed!

Luck had intervened again, and this time it had turned against the German. With his guns jammed, the Red Devil was suddenly helpless, at Kirby's mercy! The Mosquito could shoot him to ribbons without the slightest difficulty! And since this was war, he ought to do so, for the Red Devil was the greatest menace to the Allied air force! Certainly, if he now had Kirby in this helpless position, he would not have spared the Mosquito.

And yet, Kirby told himself, that would have been different. The German could not have afforded to spare him, because then he would have gotten through with his information. But now, certainly, he could afford to spare the

German. He could just leave him and take that information back.

Kirby reached his decision. He leaned from his cockpit, and his arms shot upward to wave a signal of farewell.

"So long!" the Mosquito shouted, though again he knew his words were drowned completely. "I like a fair fight too! Hope we meet again, when there's more time!"

And he banked away from the other ship, opened his throttle and started on for home. But he did not go far. Suddenly the loud roar of an engine rose above his own, and a shadow streaked right down over his head. Instantly it occurred to the amazed Mosquito that some of the Red Devil's comrades had followed the chase, come down to finish the Yank whom their leader was now helpless to combat! But as he looked up with apprehensive haste, he saw, to his wide-eyed astonishment, that this was not the case!

There was no other plane in the sky except his own and the Red Devil's. The red Fokker, having zoomed up over his head, was now diving straight for him, its guns silent. Good God, was the German crazy? Was he trying to commit suicide, attacking without any guns?

Dumbly, Kirby pulled up in a shivering stall. The red Fokker shot past him.

The Mosquito's face grew lean and hard. He had no alternative now but to resume the battle, even though his opponent had no guns with which to defend himself. The red Fokker was banking in front of him now, banking in a breathless skid-turn. Grimly the Mosquito leaned to his sights. His fingers pressed the stick triggers. A stream of hissing tracer spat from his guns. His face twisted strangely as he saw the bullets going right into the German ship, saw flying bits of wood and fabric leap from its fuselage.

"You fool!" he cried, wishing frantically that his shout could reach the ears of the crazed German. "Don't you see you're only committing suicide? Why don't you pull out—"

He broke off, the blood suddenly draining from his face, and his heart stopping. The red Fokker had turned in front of him, until its nose was facing his. And now, at full throttle, that red ship suddenly came straight toward him, head on! God, the crazed German was coming to ram him, to send them both crashing to swift and terrible

destruction! Just like his father, he was perfectly willing to sacrifice his own life to stop this reckless Yank from getting through with his information!

IT was too late to get out of the red plane's path! Even now, as it came right on with a breathless rush, it was looming right in front of Kirby's face, growing gigantic!

In sheer desperation the Mosquito fired, as a man would fire at a charging lion. His guns thundered in one long continuous burst, and again he saw his tracers going straight into the Jerry plane. But the red Fokker came right on with a rush!

Down below, in the trenches, the Germans and Yanks alike stood frozen, with awed horror on their faces. They saw one Fokker heading straight for another, saw them coming together in what was sure to be a fatal, head-on collision.

Then a roar rose from the tense onlookers, for even as its nose was about to tear right into the other plane, the red Fokker suddenly lurched, like a bird surprised by a sudden wound. Its nose dropped, but it did not drop enough! Crash! The shivering impact shook the very heavens, and again the watching soldiers gave a cry.

The two planes had collided, but it was not a head-on collision, which would have crashed them both to pieces. Shot off its course by the desperate Mosquito's bullets, the red Fokker had sideswiped the other ship's lower wing. But its propeller had cut through that wing like a knife, causing it to snap and buckle horribly. And now both planes were hurtling earthward, a gray Fokker dropping like a plummet, the red one coming down in a slow, tight tailspin, while a ribbon of flame leaped from its nose to go licking greedily down its flanks.

Fate brought the two ships down close together, on a barren stretch of ground, well behind the Allied trenches. Kirby's plane struck first, but it was not a fatal crash. In the last moment, as he fought like a madman with the controls, the Mosquito had managed to pull up the Fokker's nose just before the crash came. The plane literally fell apart, but Kirby came out of the wreckage unhurt. He was just getting to his feet when the ground shook with a loud, splintering

boom. The slower-falling red Fokker had struck, and a tower of flame proclaimed its landing.

Dazed and exhausted, his emotions spent, Kirby staggered across the few hundred yards of rough ground which lay between the two wrecks. The flames which crackled and roared around the Red Devil's ship were slowly subsiding now, and as Kirby approached the fire a muffled groan came to his ears. Something seemed to clutch at his heart then.

"Erich! You're still alive—Erich!" he rushed right into the smoke and fire, searching wildly.

"Erich!" he called again, though the smoke choked him and brought blinding pain to his eyes. "Erich, for God's sake, where are you?"

There came another groan, at his side now. He plowed madly through the smoke. Another moment and he reached down, was lifting the limp figure of the German gently but swiftly. Madly, as fast as he could, he carried the Red Devil out of the flaming wreckage and laid him on the ground a safe distance away. Then, with a strange white look on his face, he was bending over the prostrate figure, looking down at the pitiful, charred heap which had been Germany's greatest ace.

THE German's eyelids fluttered, he stirred, and then he looked up at the Mosquito. Recognition came slowly, and slowly the Red Devil's charred, blackened face broke in a wan but cheerful smile.

"Hello, Captain Kirby." His voice had the strange harshness that pain brings. "Well, it looks as if—you win."

Kirby laughed, but his laugh was a little jagged, unnatural.

"You ought to know better than to say that, Erich. Neither of us won that fight. It was a draw. We just seem to be an even match!"

The German's smile grew a little wider. "We do, don't we? But—always Dame Fortune—she interferes."

"Yes, this time it was your turn to have the tough luck. But still, you almost got me. You sure must have felt desperate to try to ram me that way."

"I—I guess I lost my head," the German gasped. "I—was determined—to stop you."

Kirby sighed. "You sure were! How did you ever get out of that bed and to your drome so damned fast?"

"I got off the gag—they answered my yell—a motor cycle I have on the place. I raced to the drome while they spread the alarm. But," suddenly there was a different kind of pain in his voice now, the pain of cruel frustration, "I have failed! I could not stop you."

There was a strained silence then, as once again the grim war rose like a barrier between them. A gust of wind swept some of the burning wreckage from the Fokker almost dangerously close to them. It lay smoldering and burning.

The Red Devil spoke again then, still in that bitter, frustrated tone.

"Now, you have your information. And," there seemed to be actual horror in his eyes now, "you have that fiendish formula!"

Kirby started. He had forgotten all about that locket he had taken from Doctor von Grantz. Now, instinctively, he reached beneath his flying coat to make sure he still had it with him. Yes, there it was. He drew it out quickly. Then, realizing that he had not yet examined its contents, he opened it with swift fingers. There was a small folded paper within. He unfolded it, held it before him. Unintelligible ciphers and equations met his eye. He stared at them curiously.

And he was so totally unprepared for the thing that happened that it was done and finished before he could make a move! Suddenly, as if rallying every last ounce of energy which remained in his weakening body, the Red Devil had half-lurched to his feet. His hands had clutched up wildly, snatching that paper right out of Kirby's fingers! And even as Kirby's face crimsoned and a shout of surprised rage came from him, the German flung that paper into the little flaming heap of wreckage which had blown nearby. The flame caught it instantly, and it crumpled in a flash, completely destroyed!

"Damn you!" Kirby burst out, overcome with panic and fury. "You dirty skunk! You dirty—"

"All's fair in war, my friend!" The German had relaxed on the ground again, but now his voice seemed stronger, as if this last triumph had fanned the spark of life into a brief and final flame. "All's fair in war!"

"Fair, hell!" Kirby cried, a frenzied sob choking his voice. "Fair, when you yourself said you didn't approve of this lousy gas! I was only taking this formula to the Allies so they could use it to check you damned Huns! If the Allies had the formula, neither side would make the stuff. They'd both be checkmated! But you—" his voice rose wildly, "you had to spoil it, you dirty, murdering Boche! You—"

"Wait! I beg you to wait!" the German pleaded. "You don't realize! You don't know that I was working toward the same end as you! I too wanted to checkmate both sides!"

Kirby's anger only increased.

"You liar! Do you think you can fool me? Your father told me he had this formula safe in his head! Now he can go right ahead and make the stuff, while we—"

Something in the German's expression stopped him. The Red Devil was slowly shaking his head.

"You are wrong, my friend," he said.

"Wrong?" Kirby echoed dumbly. "What do you mean?"

The German's face was pitiful to see.

"My father," he spoke softly, almost in a whisper, "is dead."

Kirby gasped, and a strange pang went through him.

"God," he cried, "you don't mean that I—"

"No, you did not kill him," the German explained, and then suddenly his voice came rapidly, and with intense vehemence. "It was that gas of his, that foul, rotten gas which I knew could bring us to no good! From what we could gather he must have upset a table on which lay a vial. It fell to the floor and he was snuffed out before we could get near him; the fumes kept us away until the air cleared them. I took only the time to look at him, and I noticed that the locket he always wore was missing. Then I came after you."

KIRBY was awed, stunned by this news of the doctor's death. Clearly he was able to put the whole thing together. The doctor must have recovered consciousness from Kirby's blow, and in trying to get to his feet had upset that table. By a cruel irony of fate, the gas he had created had destroyed him!

“Expiation.” The German voiced the very thought that was on his mind. The Red Devil was growing weak now, and he seemed to gather all his breath for a last speech. “So you see that, between the two of us, we have stopped that gas after all. The formula died with my poor father. But,” he shook his head, “it will not end this frightfulness, this blood-lust which is making madmen out of everybody. I am tired of it all.” His voice was beginning to gasp again now, growing weaker and weaker. “And—I—am glad—to leave it.”

“Hell,” Kirby laughed at him, but again his laugh sounded jagged, hollow, “you talk as if being a prisoner means you’re through altogether! Why, you’ll be all right again in no time, and after the war—”

“No, my friend.” the German smiled weakly, even as the light began to fade in his eyes. “I am—too well acquainted with death—not to recognize its approach. I am so very tired, you see.”

Kirby swallowed a lump that seemed to rise in his throat. His eyes became strangely misty. Funny! There was nothing wrong with his eyes now. Why should they start swimming like this?

“Well, my friend,” the German once more managed a faint smile. “Let me say goodbye. I go to join—my father.”

“But you’re not gonna die, I tell you!” Kirby insisted wildly, his voice suddenly shaking. “Don’t you see, you’re gonna get well now, gonna take it nice and easy?” His tone took on a pitiful, childlike eagerness. “And I’ll come to keep you company, just like you did for me! We’ll have a swell time, Erich, we’ll have—” He stopped, his voice freezing into awed silence, while a look of terrible realization came over his features. And then, slowly, he stiffened to his feet and his hand snapped up in a salute—a salute to the bravest man he had ever fought, the only man whom he could not say he had beaten in the air!

Slowly, dazedly, he turned away from the sprawled figure on the ground then. And then his features hardened grimly. This was war; things had to go on! He had to get back now, with his information, for the Allies must still be warned of the Germans’ coming push. He looked around swiftly. Not a soul in sight. This particular area

was deserted. Well, he would simply have to walk until he found signs of life!

But even as he started off, there was a sudden roar over his head, and he looked up to see two Spads sweeping right by, side by side. And at the sight of them a shout of hysterical joy tore from his dry throat. Shorty and Travis! They had gotten away after all, yesterday, had gotten home! Now they were setting forth on their usual morning patrol.

But they were flying pretty low, and surely they ought to spot the wrecks down here. They did! Even as they circled right overhead like curious birds, Kirby waved at them wildly, enthusiastically. And they recognized him, despite his Jerry uniform! In less than a minute the two Spads had circled into the wind. They came gliding down, to make perfect landings on this rough field.

Shorty and Travis leaped from their cockpits, and as Kirby rushed to meet them they fairly flung themselves upon their leader.

“Kirby!” Shorty almost sobbed. “You got back! You got away! And you can see! You’re not blind any more!”

“How did you ever do it?” Travis wanted to know, and then the lanky man’s eyes fell on the figure which lay on the ground nearby. “Good God, the Red Devil!”

Kirby’s voice was suddenly harsh.

“Damn it, why do you stand around like a couple of gaping kiwis? I’ve got information that has to get through, you idiots! Now one of you stay here to get some men to take care of—” he made a gesture, without turning, toward that figure on the ground. His voice trembled slightly.

“He—deserves a decent burial anyway! You stay, Trav. I’m gonna take your plane and fly like hell to G.H.Q., so I can deliver the goods!” Even as he spoke, before the others could protest, he was leaping into Travis’ plane. “So long. See you both at the drome!” And with a roar, the Spad was streaking off the ground!

IT was late afternoon, of the same day. The Three Mosquitoes, all of them, stood before the desk of their grizzled old C.O., in the headquarters shack. Kirby’s eyes were as clear and bright as they had been before his blindness now. The

squadron doc had merely put some drops in them and pronounced them completely cured.

In the distance rose the dull but thunderous booming of heavy artillery. A one-sided battle was going on. For Allied G.H.Q., on learning of the Germans' plans from Kirby, had instantly launched a surprise attack of their own, before the Boche were even ready to begin! If the Germans had had that deadly gas to use, it might have been a different story. But now, all along the line, the fighting doughboys were forcing the surprised Boche troops back, back, in a retreat which was destined to take them into the Argonne forest.

"Well," the C.O.'s voice was gruff and stern, but his eyes twinkled as he looked up at the three Yanks before him, "you three men have broken about every regulation there is. You've violated every code of war, taking Kirby across the lines and then going after him. You've busted up our whole routine. But on the other hand," his eyes went to Kirby, and now they gleamed with frank admiration, "you've stopped the use of a gas which would have wiped us all out, you've checked a German advance."

"Not to mention giving us the location of the Red Devil's circus, so that we can now raid that drome at last," Shorty put in, eagerly.

"And," the lanky Travis added, "not to mention downing Germany's greatest ace, the Red Devil himself!"

Kirby's smiling face suddenly changed. His voice was grim.

"Leave that last one out, Travis. I want everybody to know that I didn't get the Red Devil. He got himself, when he tried to ram me. It was only my luck I'm still alive!" He shook his head slowly. "I'm not a modest guy—I even brag about all the Jerry aces I shot down. But there was one man who was too good for me, and that's all there is to it!"

And though they stared at him in awe, both his comrades and the C.O. knew that he meant what he said.