

Fate Flies the Breda

A Coffin Kirk Adventure by Arch Whitehouse

It was just an ordinary tin can. But before the day was done, that innocent-looking red container was destined to cause a lot of trouble for Coffin Kirk.

CHAPTER I SINGAPORE BOUND

IT HAD BEEN rather simple getting away from Kabong on the eastern shore of Datu Bay. There, Kirk and Tank refreshed at the District Commissioner's office and their plane had been substantially refuelled for the hazardous trip across the South China Sea. Kirk figured on anything, of course, but since his route was dotted with small islands that still flaunted the flag of the Netherlands, he expected no real trouble.

The high-speed Breda was still giving her revs and turning out the mileage as per catalogue. Her 1,000-h.p. Fiat engine was ticking over with little or no effort. They had their cockpit hatches back to get a little real air into the pit, and on the whole things did not add up too bad.

They had to keep cool, for they were carrying something mighty important that had to be in Singapore within a few hours and in the hands of Rear-Admiral Jessop of the American Asiatic Squadron now berthed inside the harbor of Singapore.

It was the red can Tank had snatched from the water not an hour before that had Kirk more worried than all the possible hindrance the Japs might provide.

They were ramming on at about 4,000 when the thunderclap of opposition hit them. It was sudden and unexpected, and Tank was somewhat to blame for it all. He had been snoozing aft in the back seat under the spell of the speed and the blinding glare of the tropic high noon.

The Japanese Navy Kawasaki fighters were on them before they knew it. The first burst spanged into their wing and beat a hellish Highland fling

on the dual panels before Kirk sensed what was up.

He yelled at Tank, and that muscular worthy swung around hard and somehow managed to get the rear guns out of the domed cover of the fuselage. He went through the motions of loading with slow and deliberate movements. Kirk reacted with all the electric snap of a master swordsman. He brought the Breda around on a wing tip and went hell-for-leather smack-bang into the center of the Japanese formation and split them wide while his Breda-Safat guns screamed and slashed into the blunt-nosed Kawasakis. Kirk treadled his way through, and his quadruple jets of death sprayed and slashed with venomous hatred through struts, radiator shutters, and bellies of the Jap jobs.

Tank managed to get his weapons chattering, too, as they roared through the winged menace formation. He simply held the trigger-release down and let the laws of ballistics take their course.

With so much lead being spattered off, something had to go. Two Kawasakis grunted through their ports, gushed a belch of flame and smoke, and then exploded with a dull metal-muffled roar and scattered their parts in all directions.

Kirk brought her over hard again, was on the tail of another in a few seconds, and again his guns snapped and jetted out blinding flame, and drew lines of yellow hate across the sky. He yelled over his shoulder at Tank, who was still blasting away with his guns in any direction he could see Japs.

"Take it easy," yelled Kirk. "Don't waste 'em, Tank, old fellow!"

The gunner guy held off dumbly and then started in again when they were ramming full tilt through the broken Kawasaki formation.

TANK WAS the distinct opposite to Kirk. He was squat and broad. He had long arms that reached below his knees, and his clothes seemed to have been selected from a masquerade costumer's. He had the face of an ape. It was heavy and broad and alarmingly wide across the frontal bone. There were strange tufts of hair under the eyes. The nose was practically Mongolian, with heavy, red-rimmed nostrils. There was a strange unreal pinkish glow across the cheeks which somehow seeped down into the beard line of the lower jaw.

They slashed in and out and then tried to run for it because Kirk was smart enough to know that there is a law of averages somewhere.

"Just hold them off, Tank," he said. "I'm getting out of this until we get rid of that red can."

Kirk hammered the Breda through and tried to run for it. The Japs reformed and rammed after him, their front guns slamming leaden hail all across the sky. Kirk made the most of his speed and skill with the stick, while Tank sprayed the opposition with everything in the belts.

But as Kirk feared, the law of averages caught up with them. A long-range burst caught their wing tip, trickled across the panel, and pounded a short drilling of lead into the wing-root. Kirk tried to get her over, but the damage was done. The wing-root spurted fuel as though some strange power was putting the pressure on the tanks, and it came out in a honeycombed stream.

Kirk looked around and saw that the red can was still securely laced to the framework near the cockpit ventilator lower. It was there to keep cool, because inside was mighty susceptible to heat and cold. If it got too hot—well, it was all over.

He hurled the Breda through a series of wild gyrations while Tank peppered away in shorter bursts. The gunner guy sniffed and peered out over the cockpit and saw the spraying fuel going over the tail assembly.

He grabbed Kirk's shoulder and pointed and made strange noises to show his anxiety.

"It's all right. We got a little left in the other side, Kirk explained. His expression was good enough for Tank who sniffed again and went to work with what was left in the belts.

Kirk glanced about and saw that he was fairly close to several small islands, but he decided to try and make one that looked somewhat larger

than the others. He gave a quick glance at his chart and figured it was the larger of the Tambelan group, which was about 300 miles east of Singapore.

Below, the South China Sea was a blue stew of Equatorial commerce. There were a few sluggish freighters, a line of four native copra vessels, and far off on the horizon the black smoke of a Blue-Funnel Line steamer.

Kirk twisted back and forth and decided to make a last stab at getting away. He knew how much fuel he had available and intended to run his luck to the limit now.

First he swung around and bashed the Breda suddenly at the three Kawasaki fighters that were trailing half-heartedly. He poured out several long-range bursts and made them turn. Then he stalled, brought the nose up, and let her fall off. The Breda started to spin and went down slowly in a series of slow gyrations. The Japs turned back and saw the Breda going down trailing a plume of black smoke. Each thought either of the other two must have put in a telling burst, and perfectly satisfied with the result they swerved off and headed north.

Kirk waited, and when he was down to within 500 feet of the water he brought her out carefully, rammed her nose around for Tombelan, and set a course for the eastern shore of the larger of the group.

They contacted the island in about twenty minutes and Kirk took the long chance again and cruised up and down on the last few quarts left in the remaining wing tank. What they saw was none too enticing. There was a beach of sorts littered with debris, rotting logs, and all the rubbish of a tropic shore. There were a few clearings here and there where strange heavy timbered houses seemed to be teetering on massive stone bases. They were decorated in gaudy native colors, but the roofs which were high and steep-pitched were covered with very modern galvanized sheet iron.

Kirk selected a stretch of beach near this compound, brought the Breda around into what wind there was, and worked her down to a landing position. He was just setting her for a glide-in when suddenly a series of shots echoed from the rim of the village.

Kirk instinctively banked to clear, but it was too late. The last gasp had been drawn from the tanks and she conked cold.

“Hang on, Tank!” Kirk ordered. “Hang on!”

He drew the Breda over and stuck a wing-tip down. He was wondering where those shots came from and why, when she hit with a sideslipping motion like a great broad-bladed knife slashing at the sand. The machine dug in, cartwheeled over and over, and came up with a clatter of metal and hollow boomings. Kirk remembered reaching for the red tennis-ball can and then passed out cold.

Tank, who was tossed clear like a shapeless ball when the Breda cart-wheeled, somehow landed on his feet and began to snuffle and thump at himself in a wild rage. He jammed his comical hat down lower over his head, and with heavy ponderous stride he rumbled forward toward the piled-up Breda.

WITH LOW, throaty growls and strange whinnying noises coming from his broad nostrils, Tank went to work on the wreckage to get Kirk out. With his hairy hands he ripped a great chunk of dural wing panel away and hurled it across the sands. Then he clambered across the shattered wing-root and pawed over the battered fuselage which was already flickering with flame and being obliterated with black smoke.

He wrenched at metal H-section stuff and twisted it as though it had been hot toffee. He pulled and battered until he had an opening. He screamed, bellowed, and ripped man-made framework to shreds until he was able to get at the man he worshipped.

“Take it easy!” Kirk yelled from his uncomfortable position.

The gunner guy peered in, saw that Kirk was apparently okay, and began to rip the fuselage apart. He was frantic and wild in his gestures even though he could see that Kirk was still alive. The flame was still licking out from somewhere up from near the engine, but it was not a very serious fire, because Kirk had somehow pulled the emergency fire extinguisher which was smothering the flame with a sudsy mess that was frothing from the firewall bulkhead.

Still, Tank continued to struggle and growl as he fought to take the Breda apart. Kirk finally rammed himself into a sitting position and raised

his arms so that he could pull himself out. He rested amid the wreckage while Tank tugged to get him clear.

There was a strange gleam in Kirk’s face as he leaned down again and fumbled around in his cockpit. The flame gushed up once more and a belch of smoke seemed to douse it all. He ducked down again inside the wreckage and then clambered out.

The fire had consumed itself, but the Breda was a total wreck.

By this time a motley gathering of brown-skinned natives was swarming out of the compound, over the sand dunes, and from out of the nearby jungle. They were strange, sleek-haired men with heavy breech clouts around which were drawn decorated *kris* belts from which hung bangles made from leopards’ teeth. Some wore leather bands about their foreheads decorated with amulets and wisps of tiger hair. They were none too tall or inspiring as physical specimens. They came up in small batches, clacking and excited. They moved in closer and Tank clambered out of the tangle of wing to move forward and inspect them. He was sniffing loudly, making low crying noises, and his long fingers clenched and unclenched with strange pulsating emotion.

“It’s all right, Tank,” Kirk said soothingly. “Take it easy.”

Then suddenly out of the tangle of men and the garish glare of native costumes, there appeared a chunky man in European tropical whites. He wore a dirty pith helmet and had a heavy unshaven face that presented nothing that might be interpreted as friendliness.

He came up with a dull swagger, looked the wreckage over and then gave Tank a real up-and-down. Tank in turn looked as though he would relish the opportunity of tearing the intruder apart.

“I am the Dutch government Controleur here,” the man said directly to Kirk. “You have reason for landing?”

“One of the best in the world,” came from Tank’s direction. “We crashed.”

The Dutch official stared at Tank as though he could hardly believe his ears.

“I was not speaking to you,” he scowled. “I was asking a question of your master.”

“If you’re a Dutchman, you must have lived many years in Hamburg. You certainly have a

Hamburg docks accent,” the gunner guy seemed to say.

The Dutchman trembled under his baggy coat and appealed to Kirk. “We do not expect lack of respect. You are foreigners?”

“No. Just Americans,” said Kirk, piercing the man with his cold eyes. “We were on our way to Singapore.”

“Singapore?” the Dutchman repeated. He seemed to tremble again. “If you were going to Singapore, I shall have to inspect your machine for contraband.”

“We’re carrying nothing you would drink,” came from Tank’s direction.

Actually, it was Kirk saying all these things, because Tank was an ape and Kirk was a skilled ventriloquist. He often used this method to study his man, and this time it was certainly working.

“Before you do that,” said Kirk, “I have an official complaint to make. We were fired on while landing. That caused us to crash! Do you know anything about that?”

“Of course not. But I must get on with my inspection. I’m sorry to bother you.”

“You’re not bothering me,” smiled Kirk. “You’re just wasting your time. You won’t find what you want.”

The Dutch official turned and stared at Kirk as if he were unable to understand just what it was he had said.

“Go ahead,” taunted Kirk. “You’ll find the tin, but it won’t contain what you think.”

CHAPTER II MITSUBISHI MENACE

THE DUTCHMAN clambered up through the wreckage and made his way into the cockpit with the air of one who knew just what he was doing. In a few minutes he came out with a charred can about nine inches long. It had once been painted red, but flames had scorched the paint to a brownish black.

He stepped back and inspected it and watched Kirk’s eyes as he twisted the lid.

“We have to search for contraband,” he said again.

He took the lid off and peered inside.

“Melted, eh?” smiled Kirk. “It got too close to the fire.”

The man peered inside again and held the tin so that the sun shone inside and disclosed a brownish melted substance. He put the lid on, smiled grimly, and tossed the can back into the cockpit. “I was afraid it was opium,” he said, his eyes in adder folds, “but I guess it was just some sort of wax, eh?”

“Looked like it, didn’t it?” Kirk agreed. “Now what about this shooting business?”

“I’m afraid that was some of the natives. They must have been frightened by the sight of your plane. They fire at anything.”

“Do these natives have German-type machine guns in their belts?”

“German guns?”

“Most certainly. Here’s one of the slugs. That’s from a German weapon, isn’t it?”

Kirk held out a battered slug he had taken from the wreckage of the plane. The Dutchman picked it out of his hand with fingers that had nails in mourning and inspected it closely. Then he dropped it back with an air of disdain and said: “Looks like an old Martini-Henry bullet to me.”

“I suppose you’d take a 9-point-2 for a Winchester 30-30, if you were in the mood,” Kirk said. “That’s a Rheinmettal-Borsig slug and you know it.”

“I know nothing of the sort. I’m the Controleur here and I object to any criticism of my administration. I know these natives well and I know they have very few weapons of any kind—except knives.”

Kirk sensed that there was no use arguing with this man. He wasn’t Dutch at all. He was obviously German and he was on the island of Tambelan for something more than a holiday. He had gone straight to the crash for the red tennis-ball can, and he was satisfied that he had found it and that the wax record he believed to be inside had melted in the short blaze. That meant he was most certainly in touch with Koji Yasui, the Japanese Secret Service agent who had sworn to prevent that can and its contents from reaching Rear Admiral Jessop.

“What do you intend to do now?” the Controleur demanded.

“Can I contact Singapore?”

“Of course not. There’s a war on and we can’t use the radio here.”

“You are supposed to have an ocean telegraph connection with Dutch Borneo or Sumatra.”

“That was cut weeks ago by a German raider.”

“How do you get mail out?”

“On the supply steamer. It gets here about once a month—when it’s running. I doubt whether it will arrive for another three weeks.”

“Well, I’ll get to Singapore somehow, if I have to rebuild this boiler,” said Kirk stolidly.

“You could wait for the steamer. There’s no particular rush, is there?”

Kirk knew he was simply saying: “Since you have lost the dictaphone record, what can you want to go to Singapore for in such a rush?”

“I’ll get the radio set out of the ship and try to re-rig it here and get a message through. I guess they can get someone here for me in time.”

“In time?” the Controleur asked curiously.

“I have to get out of here fairly quick. You see, I’m afraid—my government has called me up for service and I want to be on hand in case any soft jobs are going.”

The natives had moved in closer now and Tank was studying each one in turn and fingering their decorations while they stood stock still, peering into his ugly mug.

“Won’t you come up to my hut and rest?” the Controleur suggested. “You must be badly shaken up.”

“I’ll go up and have a look around,” said Kirk. “I’ll leave my man here to guard this mess until I decide what to do.”

“That’s a good idea.”

“You have examined it all you care?” asked Kirk.

“Oh, yes. Just a routine, of course,” the Dutchman explained lamely. “I believe you understand.”

“That’s right. I quite understand,” smiled Kirk as he started to follow the man up the beach. “You stay here, Tank. Keep an eye on that mess.”

The ape apparently replied: “Watch that Dutchman! He has dirty knees and doesn’t go to Sunday School!”

The official frowned and stared at Tank, but finally managed to assume a pose of disdain and started off.

Kirk said: “You mustn’t mind him. He has a strange knack of presuming the worst in everyone. Sometimes, however, he’s right.”

“He’s an insolent oaf.”

THE DUTCH Controleur led the way through the strange Tambelan village which was composed mainly of teak and rushwork houses set high off the ground on heavy timbers. The main street was paved with gigantic slabs of stone and there were ceremonial platforms and sacrificial altars every few yards. At the far end, facing down the main courtyard, was a larger structure which had at one time been the house of some chief, or it might have been a temple years before the white man had taken over. The lower story was ranked with a series of heavy wooden columns and inside were a number of stone seats and platforms. The Dutchman led Kirk up a ladderway staircase into the second floor which was walled off with gayly decorated panels and slabs of mahogany that carried fantastic carvings. Around the walls were planks set shoulder high which had a series of wooden pegs beautifully carved and decorated.

“These are where the Tambelans used to mount the heads of their enemies,” explained the man. “We have tried to clear all that up and bring civilization here.”

“Civilization backed up with Rheinmettal-Borsig machine guns,” taunted Kirk with a grimace.

“You still believe you were fired on from here?” the Dutch official demanded.

“I know I was, and you know it too.”

“I’m sorry if you feel that way, but I must insist that you have made a mistake.”

“Look! We were fired on a short time ago by some Japanese naval planes and I happen to know all about their Nambu guns. I know a German slug when I see one, and I heard the gun fire.”

“I’m afraid you are quite upset. Come into my office and I’ll get you a drink.”

The Dutchman stood aside and pushed a heavy door open. Kirk went through, seeing a normal office with a desk, tables, and gaudy chairs over which bright lengths of hand-woven tapestry were thrown. Kirk sensed too late that this was a trap, but before he could turn or make a move to defend himself something exploded a mine on top of his head.

Lights flashed out and then a dull leaden cloak of darkness settled down as he sensed he was

going to his knees. He tried to recover but the blow had been a cruel one and gradually the motive power in his muscles and limbs oozed out somewhere and he lay there in a numb spell, subconsciously realizing that his hands and feet were being tightly bound. The effect of the blow gradually bathed him into a nerve-throbbing sleep and he slipped away into the Land of Black Dreams.

The Dutch official had two of his Tambelan natives drag Kirk into a large closet where he was stowed away, and then he opened a carved teak cabinet behind his desk and disclosed a very modern radio panel. He snapped a battery switch, selected a call letter from a card hanging from a hook, and began to tap a brass key. He continued tapping for some minutes and then listened intently for a reply and confirmation.

“They’ll all be here before darkness,” he muttered. “Now to go back to the beach and take care of that other ruffian.”

But Tank, who had taken Kirk’s order with an animal’s sense of intuition, had watched Kirk move away and disappear with the Dutch official into the maze of huts that made up the village. He stood near the wrecked Breda for several minutes after his Boss had left and then began mooning up and down, glaring into the groups of puzzled natives. He knew something was wrong but he was not able to sense exactly what it was. The years he had been with Kirk—since that memorable day when they had both escaped from the zoo in Berlin where Kirk’s father had been shot down in cold blood by German Intelligence officers—Tank had somehow been able to tune his intuition with that of Kirk.

This strange mental telepathy they had developed had often worked at the right time or when things seemed the blackest. This time, though, Kirk was out cold and trussed up in an old closet and he was unable to fret and fume consciously.

Tank, however, continued to glance at the wreckage and then at the natives. He sensed that they were beginning to see the humorous or comical side to him and were openly amusing themselves at his expense.

Finally, he could stand it no longer. He suddenly let out a growl, moved like a panther, and grabbed one around the waist. He raised the

unfortunate one high and then hurled him with terrific force into the scattering group ahead. Then with a bellow he started running, rapidly for the village.

The natives ran before him and he waddled up the beach pathway with a pugnacious grimace on his broad mug. He sniffed and snorted aloud, then began to whine and gulp choking sobs as he entered the near end of the broad paved courtyard that ran between the two rows of native huts.

He stood there and stared about, uncertain just what move to make next. But he sniffed and picked up the trail of Kirk and started up the paved street. He was nearly half-way up when the Dutch official came out of the carved entrance to his own quarters. Both Tank and van Gelder, as he was known, eyed each other across the distance that separated them.

Instinctively, Tank knew that since van Gelder was alone, something had happened to his Boss. The Dutch official drew a heavy gun from his holster and began to fire point-blank at Tank.

The ape, knowing only the theory of offense, crouched low and started for his enemy. Van Gelder fired three shots but they all missed at that distance. He saw the strange formidable creature approaching him and realized that he was not dealing with a cringing native. Tank lived up to his name and continued to lumber on, and at last van Gelder turned and retreated into the heavy piled building.

Tank did not change his stride, but his jungle instinct warned him not to approach directly. He skirted through a small building, picked up a chattering native, and hurled him out of the raised portion of one of the thatched round houses. The native screamed as he went out.

Tank blazed into the building, lumbered through a room, and then climbed out of a side window. He edged along a teak runway and clambered down a carved pole. He was in a side street now. In a minute he decided on his course and rumbled on through a lot of dank piles and disappeared under another building, all the time making his way toward the chieftain’s place with a series of zigzags which offered cover and gave him time to riffle the mental matter.

Eventually, Tank reached the lower portion of the Dutch official’s building and he moved like a jungle animal among the heavy timbers and

through the maze of foundation uprights that had been woven into a supporting pattern. He waited for several seconds in the semi-darkness and sniffed again. He could hear voices and the thud of bare feet scurrying above.

He kicked off his rubber-soled sneakers, worked carefully up the side of the building, and reached a supporting member that ran under a series of screened windows. With a low growl he ripped them out with a quick, powerful movement of his paw and clambered up. He huddled there for a minute or so and then dropped inside silently. He waited and listened and sniffed.

Overhead, a new tone caught his ears and he went to the window again and saw several planes racing in from the north. They began to circle and come down lower and Tank was worldly wise enough to know that they meant more trouble.

THE ARRIVAL of the Japanese bombers brought new courage to van Gelder. He crept out of his small but solidly built office and peered about. He glanced over at the heavy closet door that shielded his captive and then risked going out to the veranda of his compound house. He watched the planes circling for their landings along the beach and then decided to maintain the dignity of his office and await the arrival of the men who had come at his request. He sent a native orderly down to present his compliments and his official invitation to visit him at his official residence.

He was very satisfied with himself and lit a long cheroot and poured a drink. He rearranged his jacket and looked at himself in the mirror, and then satisfied that he was presentable he sat down behind his desk to await developments. By this time he had practically forgotten about the strange creature he had been firing at in the village street.

So engrossed was van Gelder in his pleasant thoughts, he did not see Tank move past a window and work along the precarious ridge that ran around the side of the building. As a matter of fact, he never knew what happened when the ape leaped.

Tank hit van Gelder from the window in the far corner. The massive bulk of animal brawn, bone, and muscle shot through the room like a hairy thunderbolt. Tank's hands hit the Dutch official full across the throat and the man's head went

back with a leaden crack before he could suck in his breath to let out a yell. . The electric waves of muscular action were switched off as though a broadsword blade had cut off van Gelder's head. He simply went limp and rolled over into a corner. Tank got up from a cruel crouching position and stared at the man. He reached forward and yanked van Gelder's head up, and then by animal reasoning realized that he would shoot at him no more.

Then Tank stood up again and glowered about the room. He sniffed and let his beady eyes draw into blue-steel slits. He moved his massive head slowly, listened to the clatter of planes and the chatter of villagers outside, and then suddenly made a dart for the closet. He practically tore the door off with one jerk and with a wail of jungle despair saw his Boss trussed up inside.

He dragged him out and went to work on the bonds that held him. In a few seconds, by using his teeth and long, steel-spring fingers, he had his Boss completely released and his cold palms were methodically soothing Kirk's face and neck. In a minute Kirk pulled out of it and stared about from a sitting position. His eyes first saw the heap that had been van Gelder. He looked up at Tank and back again at the shapeless heap of humanity—and, somehow, it all clicked suddenly in his mind.

The throb of pain that made his head seem as large as a pumpkin could not erase the reasoning as to what had happened. He patted Tank's shoulder, scrambled slowly to his feet, and then made his way around the desk. Tank began whimpering again and looked out of the window with an anxious grimace on his mug.

"What's up, Tank?" asked Kirk, glancing quickly at his wrist watch to try to tie up the time brackets. "What's going on?"

He tottered to the window and steadied himself against the ledge. The window fronted on the wide courtyard, and below he saw a group of Japanese Naval officers approaching the ceremonial steps of the building. They were being guided by two natives in gaudy sarongs and headman headdress.

Kirk stepped back and watched. He tried to figure it all out, but another Mitsubishi bomber hammering over the pile of huts brought into full focus the realization of what was taking place.

That at least set his time bracket for him. He'd been out for nearly an hour!

"Get moving, Tank," he ordered. "Climb into this guy's clothes. We're going to play dirty Dutchmen."

CHAPTER III A SIGNAL TO SINGAPORE

HE GRABBED van Gelder up and ripped off his white linen jacket. This he shoved at Tank and with a glance indicated that he was to put it on. He retrieved the pith helmet and rammed that on the ape's head and then pushed him around to the Dutch official's seat behind the desk. He buttoned the jacket, wrapped a light silk scarf about his throat with a stock knot, and placed him in an imposing position behind the desk.

"Now sit there and don't move until I tell you," ordered Kirk while he somehow mustered enough strength to drag van Gelder into the closet he had just left himself.

Then Kirk did a strange thing. First, he took a chair and placed it with its back to the wall not far from where Tank was sitting at the desk. He took van Gelder's machine pistol and put it on the chair. Then he sat down over the weapon and wound a length of heavy cord about his ankles in such a manner that his feet appeared to be securely tied. He placed his arms behind his back, and by a dexterous movement with his fingers managed to wind another piece about his wrists. The loose ends he tucked under him.

Then, with their stage thus set, this strange pair waited for the Japanese invasion.

There was a rattle of metal and clank of officialdom on the stairway below. The door was opened respectfully by one of the native headmen who stood back to allow the first contingent of Jap officers to step inside. The first one in was Koji Yasui, stiff with black leather and pomposity. He leered grimly at Kirk and then bowed at the figure behind the desk.

"Very fine work," he said in precise English to Tank. "This is *Herr* van Gelder, I presume!"

"Who the devil did you think it was?" came the unexpected answer. Tank's nose was twitching with anticipation and his face gave off the expression of one who spoke with little interest in the proceedings.

"Of course! Of course!" Yasui agreed, somewhat puzzled by the lack of respect he had expected. "You managed to intercept the container?"

"Went all over the wreck, but it apparently was damaged in the fire that broke out when he crashed. There's the tin."

That apparently came from Tank again and Yasui was so eager to grab the evidence he sought that he did not notice the lack of movement in Tank's mug.

He took the seared can, wrenched the lid off, and peered inside. He looked again and sniffed and his face somehow underwent a change.

"You see, it has melted," came from behind the desk.

"So it appears," said Yasui, with a gleam of hate at Kirk. "Well," he went on, "you rather overreached yourself this time, friend Kirk."

"We can't win all the time," said the American.

"This time you have lost and you are not likely to go around presenting bouquets to your enemies. We intend to take you to Tokyo and see that you experience Oriental justice."

"When?"

"After we have taken care of your friends at Singapore. Since they do not have your treacherous British-American plan, they will simply sit there in the harbor where we shall take care of them."

"When does that come off?" asked the figure behind the desk.

"At once, of course. We intend to waste no more time. It will be very simple tonight. Most of the vessels in Singapore harbor will be undermanned. They have conveniently arranged a special ceremony for the opening of the new dry-dock there and most of the crews will be ashore for the ceremonial ball and dinner the British are so fond of arranging for their American hirelings."

"But you can't get into the harbor. They have it blocked off with anti-submarine nets," came from behind the desk.

"Of course. But fortunately for us, neither the British nor the Americans seem to be able to tell a Filipino from a Japanese. It will be very simple to have the nets lowered at the proper time, since we have the right people in the right places."

KIRK'S MIND raced in spite of the throbbing from the blow he had received. He recalled that a very important flotilla of American warships had recently been sent to Singapore as a friendly gesture. If they were caught cold in Singapore harbor, it would mean almost certain loss of the British naval and air base there and, above all, Japan would have a predominance of power in the southern Pacific. This had to be stopped by some means. "It has also been carefully arranged that anything that happens to the American ships there will somehow appear to have been due to rank carelessness on the part of the British, who already may feel that American naval strength is greater than the English deem necessary. This, I believe, comes under the head of Fifth Column activity," Yasui beamed at Kirk. "We, too, have our methods, Mister Kirk."

The officers behind Yasui beamed also, and Yasui spoke something to one of them who took out a note pad and stood waiting expectantly.

"I will dictate a message, *Herr van Gelder*," he said to Tank. "My Flag Officer here will code it and we will use your radio set to advise our South China Sea flotilla. Is that satisfactory to you?"

"Certainly. Make yourself at home," nodded Tank.

A Japanese officer took out a lead-covered signal code book and stood waiting. Yasui glanced about the room and then decided that the radio set was set in the wall behind the panel. He went over and slid one half of the door back and peered inside.

Kirk knew all he wished and he was anxious to get going now. He gave Tank a signal, let out a low cry, and kicked himself free from the loose bonds.

Tank picked up Yasui quickly and hurled him with tremendous force at the four amazed Japanese officers. The five of them went down like nine-pins. Kirk had the lot covered at once and grabbed one by the jacket and ripped him to his feet. He made him bind the others carefully and then made sure of that one himself. They were all shoved into a corner and Kirk took possession of the lead-covered secret code book.

"The U.S. Navy boys can use this, until you can think up another," he grinned.

Yasui was hurt and slid to the floor when his knees buckled under him. Kirk let him fall and

kept Tank away when the ape wanted to charge in again. He removed all their arms and swords with which they had encumbered themselves and then went over to the radio set. He studied it for a minute or so and then snapped the switches. He drew the wave length lever over to the Singapore RAF station. In five minutes, he had given them a suitable warning concerning the submarine nets and advised them to call off the dry-dock ceremonial until he could contact them later on.

"I think I nailed you in time, Yasui," he said to the unconscious Jap. "I fooled van Gelder with that English toffee tin, but I knew you would have spotted a few letters of the words 'Mackintosh's Toffee.' They gave me that when I left Borneo and I figured it might come in handy, in just such a case as this."

He threw the can down on the floor at Yasui's feet and laughed. Tank nearby was stuffing the guns in his big jacket pockets.

"WELL, what now, Tank?" Kirk asked his ape pal. "We may have saved the Navy guys at Singapore, but we still have to get that can there."

Yasui came to, stared about, and then glanced at the tin at his feet.

"You . . . you can't get away with this," he muttered. "You can't get away from here. You do not have the dictaphone record, so what is the use of taking needless risks?"

"We love taking risks, Yasui," taunted Kirk, "Wouldn't be any fun if it was always as easy as this."

"But you can't fool all the men we have guarding the bombers. You can't expect to get away with one of them."

"Your men would die for you, wouldn't they, Yasui?"

"That is our tradition."

"Swell! We'll give them a chance to and see if your tradition gag works. If it don't, you fry!"

Kirk went over their bonds again and then added gags to make it more certain. He tied them all up tightly and then sat them up against the wall and left them staring at him while he went back across the room and hammered most of the tubes and connections out of the radio set.

"And when your friends come to rescue you, Yasui, they'll find the real van Gelder in that closet. *Herr van Gelder* unfortunately broke his

neck trying to wrestle with my talkative friend here. Still, you might like to stay on and give him a suitable burial; he's entitled to that much. You might also take time to plant a double-cross over his grave. He was a Nazi, of course."

And with that, Kirk nodded to Tank and the two slipped through a side door. They made their way down a piling and crawled along a heavy teak beam. Kirk sent Tank on ahead and then halted him while he carefully put a match to some of the dried-out palm fronds that reached down from the tall sloping roof. They waited until the thatch under the corrugated iron roof was well ablaze and then scurried away to a nearby hut and set that on fire.

Tank tangled with one or two natives who tried to interfere. They were simply grabbed by the wrists, tugged forward smartly, and then snapped like a gigantic stock whip handle and hurled screaming through the air. They set fire to three fairly large huts as they worked their way around the village and then came out at the far side and were able to creep unseen through the low jungle vegetation to the beach where the Japanese bombers were lined up.

The beach was in an uproar. The natives who had crept down to gaze on this new display of thunder birds were attracted by the blazes in the village. They scampered madly through the jumble of machines and went screaming up the dunes. Gradually, the Japs left in charge cut their forces somewhat and left in small groups to go to the rescue. Kirk gave a signal to Tank and pointed to a machine that stood in the clear, and the ape began to crawl carelessly down the slope.

Kirk ran along the beach top, stood high on a dune, and yelled that the village was afire and that their officers were trapped in the Controleur's hut.

Then he dropped down as if he were on his way back to the fire. The Japs, realizing for the first time the seriousness of the situation, then all scrambled off in the general direction of van Gelder's place.

Kirk turned when he was behind the dunes and raced back to where he had left Tank. He cut down the furze and low palms and was soon racing after the ape who was struggling with an unfortunate Japanese sentry. Tank socked him over the head with the man's own pistol and threw the weapon into the jungle.

CHAPTER IV THE JOURNEY COMPLETED

IN NO TIME they were aboard a free Mitsubishi bomber and trying to get the engines started. The planes had much the same general layout as a Douglas B-18 and Kirk soon had the Japanese engines ticking over. There was a flurry of shots from somewhere and a Jap Nambu gun spat at them.

Kirk suddenly remembered the Breda wreck which was still some distance away. He darted out of the cockpit, down the bomb bay, and through the cabin door. Under a crazy fire from a Mitsubishi, he zigzagged his way toward the wreck and scrambled at it just as an incendiary bullet found a gas tank. The tangle of wreckage gushed with a festoon of wild flame. A mushrooming vortex of smoke belched at him and drove him back, but he tried again from the other side and finally crawled over and rammed his head and shoulders into the battered cockpit.

"Cripes!" he gasped. "I fixed old Yasui up with a smoke-box and get into a worse one myself!"

He had to struggle against the flame and smoke but finally reached what he was getting at. Well inside, he flipped up the breech flap of the drift-flare tube and drew out a bright red can. It was that which contained the all important dictaphone record which carried the code formula of the war plans of the Pacific Fleet.

The can was cool in the drift-flare breech because that portion was built and insulated like a gun breech to protect the flare cartridges, and Kirk had thought of all that when he hid the all-important can away.

He tucked it in his shirt front, crawled through the smoke, and made as much use of the cover afforded by the wreckage as possible. Then he waited and started running again. The Japs began to fire from a nearby Mitsubishi, but before Kirk had taken twenty steps it suddenly subsided. He twisted and squirmed and made for the one they had selected and then saw what had caused the respite. A man, screaming and floundering, came hurtling out of an open gun turret. He went high in the air and came down starfish shape on the ground with a sodden thud. Another followed quickly.

Tank was at it again!

A covey of flying Japs tormented out of the Mitsubishi as the ape man cleared the cabin. They ran bellowing in all directions. Kirk got back to the ship he had selected and began to whistle in a strange low tone, but it was enough. In a second or so Tank caught the call and came cantering along the wing of one Mitsubishi and leaped wildly to another avoiding the desperate attempts someone was making to get him before he reached cover.

He came thundering into Kirk's ship with a grimace on his mug that came as near to being a smile as his boss had ever seen.

"Nice going kid," beamed Kirk. "Nice pitching in there."

And Tank beamed again and snuggled down near his boss after stroking a heavy paw over Kirk's head with all the affection of a fond father.

KIRK WASTED no time in getting the stolen machine away. He let her thunder down the beach while he took a short but intensive course in Mitsubishi flying while she thumped and hammered her way cross-wind until he could get her into the air.

The craft handled well even though she seemed heavy and Kirk brought her around carefully on the first turn before starting back westward for Singapore. He nosed her up while Tank sat and watched with none too much interest from the copilot's seat. The Mitsubishi climbed with a soggy gesture and then suddenly Kirk realized what was wrong—or right.

She was loaded with bombs!

He glanced over the instrument board and tried to figure out the instruction plates which were all printed in Japanese. He finally found the bomb release register and figured that there were at least six good sized missiles tucked away in the racks set below the floor. Then he swung over and swept back over the small island again and saw that the fires were blazing merrily. The natives and Japanese navy men could be seen scampering in all directions, but a few were making their way into the main building at the end of the long courtyard.

Kirk hammed down the fringe of the beach at about 170 and took a quick sight on the group of bombers. He held her steady and pressed two buttons on the bomb release, panel.

The big Mitsubishi jerked after the scrawnch of bomb-bay doors and there was a gulping movement as a heavy explosive left the racks. Another jerked out and Tank sat up hard and stared about. Kirk shoved him back and whanged the big bomber over and peered out of the side windows to the beach below.

It seemed minutes before the projectiles banged into the sand below and Kirk had a sudden fear that he had missed. But two gigantic gushes of flame and sand leaped up suddenly from amid the bombers and banged a double thud of concussion at the under sides of Kirk's stolen bomber.

The big ship almost went over on her back and she fell off into a dangerous side-slip. Kirk eased around, got her nose down, and finally managed to gather enough headway to make the controls take. She came out not many feet above the water and reached into a savage zoom for altitude.

Once she came out, Kirk looked across and saw that his bombs had scored with considerable damage. Two of the Jap machines were already fringed with flame. A wing panel of another had ripped up and flopped over hard across the roof of the cabin. There was smoke and chunks of dural in the air and another gusher of flame leaped up from somewhere in the middle of it all.

"That ought to keep them busy for a time," grinned Kirk. "Now maybe we can. . . ."

But that was as far as he got. As he brought the bomber around again to head her into the west, a full squadron of Kawasaki fighters came boring down from somewhere above. They spat lead and streaked tracer lines of fire across the leaden blue afternoon sky.

"Come on, Tank!" yelled Kirk, slapping at the ape's shoulder. "Get going, boy! Find something that will shoot!"

Tank clambered out of his chair, peered up through the roof window, and disappeared down the companionway. Kirk rammed the throttles well up the quadrant and the Mitsubishi climbed smack into the formation of Jap fighters, just as he had done before. The unexpected move broke up the twelve-machine formation and one slapped a wing tip into another and then rammed together with their engines at about 230 m.p.h.

Kirk had not discovered where his fixed guns were operated from and he had to make the most

of bash and bluster. He squirmed in and out, actually making wild passes at the enemy fighters with his wing tips.

THEN, as Kirk cleared, there came the first cheering sounds from somewhere aft. Tank had obviously managed to get a weapon into action, because the Nambu gun is an exact copy of the American Browning .30 caliber weapon. At any rate, he had found one in a jerk-water mounting and had sense enough to go through the same loading operations and get the trigger dragged back.

Kirk knew the ape would simply point the gun and keep squeezing the trigger with little or no attempt to set a bead on the enemy, so he helped as much as he could by treading on the rudder pedals and making the tail swing. The effect was as good as might be expected. The swinging distributed the fire sufficiently to give a good spray effect, and one Kawasaki fighter was raked with a slashing of lead that cut his struts away; his top plane went off with a retch of outraged metal and the ship nosed down suddenly.

Kirk knew he was playing his luck too far, so he nosed down and took the only other chance open to him. He retracted the landing gear and then with unbelievable daring brought the Mitsubishi bomber down to skipping-the-whitecaps.

The big bomber ballooning over the waves was difficult to handle, and more than once Kirk sensed that he was slamming the curved belly of the machine through the spray being flicked up by the rollers. Still it had to be done. The Kawasaki fighters were racing after them and desperately trying to get in a shot. But if the bomber was dancing against the criss-cross currents, the lighter fighters were having a wicked time keeping their noses in any particular direction. One fighter, getting down low to take a snap shot from behind Kirk's rudder, was nipped by a curler off a white-cap. His wing tip went down, tipped the top of a heavy roller, and she cartwheeled over with a tremendous scream and broke herself to bits.

The others zoomed up in fear and caution but Kirk sat there and gamely held his position.

By this time Tank had managed to get another cartridge container shackled to the gun breech and was again zipping off long bursts in the general

direction of their pursuers. The effect on accuracy was none too good but it provided a visual sense of opposition that could not be laughed off.

The race was carried on for some minutes, but eventually the fighters had to give up. Kirk was playing too desperate a game and they did not have any too much speed or tankage to play very far with this madman. One by one they curled off, sought a safer altitude, and made their way back to a Japanese aircraft carrier skulking away somewhere near the small group of islands that dot the sea west of Singkawang in Dutch Borneo.

The battered but still racing bomber was brought up to a safer level and Kirk relaxed for the first time in hours. He steadied her for a long 300-mile flight and took time out to jack in the robot pilot and somehow managed to get the Japanese set working so that he could contact Singapore and explain what had happened since his last flight. He particularly wanted to tell them that he was flying a Japanese-marked Mitsubishi, because he knew full well that he would never get away with any down-low flying if a flight of British or American fighters decided that he belonged to the ungodly.

The message did the trick, however, for before they were within fifty miles of the Strait of Singapore a flight of American Grumman fighters dropped out of nowhere and huddled around the Jap ship and made certain that Coffin Kirk and his red tin can got safely to the British Malaya naval base.

And by the time they had landed, Tank was curled up in the co-pilot's seat with *Herr* van Gelder's pith helmet tilted so that it would shield his eyes.

"Nice guy to have along," said Kirk when he thought it all over.