

Secret of the Hell Hawks

AN EXCITING THREE MOSQUITOES ADVENTURE

By Ralph Oppenheim

CHAPTER I

Flight With Death

AT dawn, the French military prison of Vincennes reared bleak and grim. Shrouded in mist, it had an almost medieval aspect, with its fortress like buildings of stone, its massive walls.

Dawn was not welcome to the inmates of Vincennes—condemned spies and traitors of France. For invariably, stalking in the dawn's chill mantle, came death.

Even now, in one of the musty, candle-lit cells, a wretched man stood clinging to the bars and peering out at the dawning sky. He was a Frenchman, this doomed prisoner, elderly and gray-bearded, with mild Gallic features that looked incapable of any crime, and with a body that seemed frail beneath its baggy prison shirt and trousers.

His eyes were peering with flickering hope into the east. His back turned to the other two occupants of the cell—a black-robed priest and a trim, blue-clad colonel whose alert fox like face stamped him as an officer of the Deuxieme, France's great Intelligence Corps. The colonel was talking crisply: "Emil Rodet, have you nothing to say before you are led to your execution?"

The old Frenchman did not move from the window. His voice was toneless. "I have nothing to say."

"Come, you have already admitted, Rodet, that you forged that military order which launched a British-French drive in the Somme sector—a drive which, because of the overwhelming enemy there, was suicidal. You have admitted that you owned property in the Somme, and that, avariciously, you caused the drive in the hope of regaining your land. And now, before you die, will you not try to undo some of the damage by answering our other question?" Suddenly his arm shot forward, gripping the

Frenchman's frail shoulder. "Who is von Bergsten?"

A slight stiffening in the prisoner's back was the only indication that the name meant anything to him. But without turning he shook his head.

"Come!" the colonel urged crisply. "We know a famous German scientist named von Bergsten died several years ago. We also know you have communicated by a government wireless with a von Bergsten. We intercepted your code message, asking for a truce-meeting with this Boche. Emil Rodet, what is between you and this von Bergsten? What bargain were you going to drive with our enemies? Speak!"

But the old prisoner only looked more desperately at the eastern sky, now showing the first ruddy flush of the sun.

"I have—nothing—to—say."

The colonel shrugged, turned away. He went to the door, spoke a command, and the door was opened from outside. From the corridor came the grim tramp of boots, the clink of rifles. The priest moved close to the prisoner, his lips beginning the litany. Led by a blue-clad capitaine, a squad of eight poilus gathered just outside the open door.

"Come, Emil Rodet," the priest murmured. "It is time."

The prisoner was loath to stop peering at the sky. But at length, moving as if in a trance, he obeyed, was walking out beside the priest. The squad formed around him. Grim and funereal, the procession started down the corridor. The colonel of the Deuxieme was following in the rear when suddenly he was overtaken by a hurrying, white-faced lieutenant.

"Mon Colonel, here you are; I could not find you!" the lieutenant's voice was shrill, and his eyes showed panic. "I came to report to you that the Hell Hawks have struck again!"

The colonel's face went taut; horror had come into his keen eyes. And that horror was

reflected on the faces of the eight marching poilus, for in the echoing corridor the lieutenant's shrill voice had carried to every ear.

And strangest of all was the effect on the shuffling old prisoner. Where he had been listless and indifferent, he now seemed to go tense in every muscle of his frail body. An ashen look, as of intolerable anguish, came over his bearded face.

"The military supply depot at Clouey—wiped out, without a single survivor!" the lieutenant was shrieking out now. "Road Seven, strafed—a hundred infantry slaughtered! They will destroy us all if this continues! At the last report, the Hell Hawks were believed headed for the town of Luennes—that is only twenty kilometers from Paris!"

The colonel seemed to pull himself together with an effort. "Go back to headquarters," he ordered harshly. "Keep all lines of communication open. Warn Luennes. I'll be back as soon as I can."

And as the lieutenant dashed off, the Colonel, with the air of a man impatient to finish a chore, fell into step behind the firing squad—headed for the exit of the corridor with their prisoner, who once more was slumped and lethargic.

IN the sky, dawn comes earlier than on the ground. Darkness still shrouded the earth below, when, racing through the mists, three Spads hurtled at breakneck speed, their wings rocking, their Hissos thundering at full throttle.

The three Spads flew in a V formation, so precise that they seemed as one. On their trim khaki fuselages, visible in the dawn light, were three identical insignias—each a huge, black-painted picture of a grim-looking mosquito.

And in the cockpits of the three racing crates, hunched to the controls, sat the most celebrated trio of airmen ever to blaze their way through overwhelming odds and live to laugh about it—the trio known as the "Three Mosquitoes."

Captain Kirby, their impetuous young leader, flew at point as always, picking the hasty course by compass, map, and the blurred

landmarks in the murk five thousand feet below. On his right flew "Shorty" Carn, the mild-eyed, corpulent little Mosquito, who was still cursing the earliness of the hour, for he loved his sleep. And on Kirby's left, completing the V, flew the eldest and wisest of the trio—long-faced and taciturn Travis, whose lean frame jutted high from his cockpit. Kirby was leading his two comrades in a race against time into the French back areas. They had broken all records since, in darkness, they had taken off from their drome—the 44th U.S. Pursuit Squadron.

Kirby fished from his teddy-bear the letter that had sent him and his comrades on this strangest of errands. By the light of the hooded instruments he read again the scrawled words he knew by heart—words written in English, but obviously by the hand of a Frenchman.

To the Three Mosquitoes:

I turn to you three gallants as stand in the shadow of death. For my crime I must die. But before I die there is information I dare convey only to you three, in whose hands alone it may serve to expiate the damage my honesty, rather than my treachery, has caused.

If this reaches you in time, and if you are moved by a doomed man's last prayer, speed to Vincennes and enable me to speak with you before they execute me at dawn.

Emil Rodet.

Frowning, Kirby shoved the message away. In the small hours of the night it had been delivered by a furtive, bribed prison warder who had awakened the Mosquitoes by tapping on their barracks' window, and quickly slinked away after leaving the message.

And though the Three Mosquitoes had hastily dressed, they had been dubious. They had heard vaguely of the Rodet case, of the Frenchman who had committed the enormous crime of launching a whole, suicidal drive merely in the hope of regaining his German-held Somme property. It was a clear enough case, and hardly one which could rouse their sympathies.

Kirby had asked his two comrades, as the three dressed in their oil-illuminated cubicle: "What do you make of this Frog's request?"

Little Shorty Carn already had his inevitable briar pipe going. "I think," he yawned between puffs, "that we ought to go back to sleep and forget about it. Probably if we did go to Vincennes, the poor Frog would only give us a locket to take to his sister or some dying words for his brother. What do you say, Trav?"

Both had turned to the lanky, elder Mosquito, on whose shrewd judgment they had come to rely. Travis had taken the letter, was studying it.

"There's something strange about this message," he said at length in his familiar drawl. "The man who wrote it was obviously desperate—look at the scrawly writing. And the wording, too, is puzzling—that stuff about the damage being caused by his honesty. Look here—" he jerked up decisive eyes, "suppose we phone Intelligence and ask their advice. Better move fast." Kirby had made the call from the C.O.'s shack, and in minutes was tensely listening to the barking voice of General Saunders, Yank chief at G-2.

"So Rodet wants to see you three—and nobody else! Maybe you'd better look into it. There's been something fishy about this Rodet case from the start. The French learned that after the treachery in the Somme, Rodet was trying to communicate with a Boche named von Bergsten. And last night we got an even stranger tip from one of our agents. A tip that Udermann himself has been sent across to our lines, ostensibly to contact Rodet before his death and—"

"Udermann!" Kirby had broken in, his eyes narrowing to slits as he held the phone to his ears. For Udermann was a sore spot with the Three Mosquitoes, the one Boche whose cunning and diabolical machinations had offered them grim competition. Erich Udermann, chief of the flying branch of the dread Nachrichtenamt, the mighty Boche Intelligence System. Udermann—a spy of spies, a master of disguise, a crack shot with pistol or Spandau, and on top of that an ace of aces!

"General, it's nearly dawn!" Kirby, stirred to action, had gritted into the phone. "Can you hold up that execution so—"

"Impossible! Before we could wade through the red tape necessary, Rodet will be buried. The French are furious about that Somme business because it put them in a bad light with the British. They intend to make an example of Rodet. No, you'll have to fly there in person, beat the firing squad! And you'd better get started at once!"

The mere mention of Udermann to Shorty and Travis had stirred all Three Mosquitoes to hasty action, caused them to rouse their mechanics and have their mosquito-marked ships hastily wheeled out.

CHAPTER II Terror Ships Strike

NOW they were winging in their V formation on the last lap of the flight to Vincennes, trying to beat dawn and that firing squad. Hell-bent, wings rocking, the three Spads were now just starting to pass over the outskirts of the dark village of Luennes.

It was Shorty Carn who waved excitedly from his cockpit. At first Kirby, seeing the little man's gesticulations, didn't understand them at all. But then, as he saw that Shorty was pointing down toward the earth, while mingled amazement and horror showed on his round, goggled face, Kirby quickly peered over the cowl.

A gasp ripped the breath from the Mosquito leader's lips. For what had, just a moment ago, been a dark, sleepy-looking little village had turned suddenly into a livid eruption of hell!

Geysers of red flame were spouting from Luennes— flame that illumined crumpling buildings, caving-in roofs! Dull concussions reached the planes of the Mosquitoes high above, making them wobble.

Then, over the explosions, over his own pounding Hiss and the two other Hisses beside him, Kirby heard a whining sound, an inhuman, ghastly wail—the sound that perhaps shells of unheard of size might make coursing through the ether.

In the next instant a cry of incredulous horror came from Kirby, for now he saw them! Hurling down upon that doomed village were dark, shadowy shapes—glinting, cylindrical shapes with scarcely any wings. Planes, strange planes, which traveled with impossible speed, slicing down through the air like projectiles. Obviously they were hurling bombs on Luennes as they dived, which gave the falling explosive “eggs” all the momentum and accuracy of direct-hitting shells!

Kirby was crazily pulling up his Spad, scarcely conscious that the two Spads on either side of him were also pulling up. Those hurtling planes—for the past week the Mosquitoes had been hearing rumors about them. From all over the Front had come reports of these new mysterious Hell Hawks which were horrifying the Allies, ships that flew with such incredible speed that it seemed they must be propelled by rockets and controlled by distant wireless, for it was unbelievable that men could fly such things and live.

And now, as Kirby peered over his Spad with wide, horrified eyes, he knew that he and his comrades were witnessing an attack of the dreaded new Terror ships. The mysterious, speedy crates were strafing hell out of Luennes. By whatever power controlled them, they were striking with their bombs like lightning, then rocketing up to attack anew. Up and down they went, at dizzy speed, completing the awful holocaust of Luennes.

This time it was the shrewd Travis who gave the frantic signal with a staccato burst of his twin Vickers guns, followed by a series of gestures with his lank arm. The sudden, rising shriek in their ears told Kirby and Shorty far more than Travis—a shriek that filled the sky around them with its ear-splitting pitch.

Madly, Kirby waved his comrades to follow as he jerked back his joy-stick. The three Spads reared frantically, were zooming at full throttle as, slicing up from the murk below, two of the dread mystery ships came rocketing straight towards the trio.

In comparison with their up-coming speed, the Spads were as slow as snails. Kirby could see the tapering fuselages of the two upcoming

shapes—craft which showed no protruding knob of a pilot’s helmet! With hideous accuracy, the two mystery ships were coming head-on, as if to crash straight into the three Spads.

The onrushing ships seemed to be of metal construction and they had very little airfoil—mere stubby fins seemed to guide their lightning flight.

The Three Yanks who had never yet been stumped by any horror of war gamely tried to leap to the defense now. Unable to elude the mystery ships, they were turning in their fighting formation, and all three were leaning to their sights.

“Try lead on ‘em, damn them!” Kirby was grating, even as he pressed his own stick-triggers.

THE VICKERS of the three Spads blazed in furious unison. Three streams of lead greeted the oncoming mystery planes, but though they were well-aimed they missed; for the whizzing, stubby-winged Terror ships veered—and their speed carried them well wide for the Yank shots. As the two strange crates shrieked in from another angle, the Spad jerked and shook with the blasting impact of lead dealt out faster than any known gun could deal it. The meteor-like enemies were shrieking around them then, flying rings around them! Kirby cursed futilely. Down below now, he saw that the other mystery ships had finished with Luennes. Their bombs, hurled down with such terrific speed and accuracy, had left the French town a smoldering mass of ruin in which not a single building remained standing. Now they, too, were soaring upward! They would probably join the attack against the Mosquitoes, and Kirby and his comrades would be blasted to utter hell.

The brilliant flash of light in his eyes blinded and dazed Kirby. Realization came then—all this time he and his comrades had managed to keep their Spads in a climb. Now they had climbed so high that they had reached the upper sky where the dawn was already day, and the sun was blazing. And as he glanced down from his cockpit, a wave of frenzied

relief swept Kirby. He saw one of the mystery ships turning downwards, abandoning the fight, disappearing with several others in the mists below. Evidently the strange new ships could not come any higher, for some reason or other.

The shriek which rose again in Kirby's ears seemed to belie the very thought. For one of the mystery ships had not turned down! Alone, it was slicing up out of the haze. Up it came towards the Mosquitoes, who were again in close formation.

B-r-r-r-OOOOM!

The explosion flattened Kirby's ear-drums, shook every bone in his body. At first he thought the impact must have come from collisions—either his Spad or one of the others had been smashed by the up-hurling mystery ship.

Dazedly he saw a little blotch of dissipating black smoke and flame in the sky directly below, and at the same time he glimpsed the planes of his comrades, staggering but intact.

He gasped as he saw that the mystery ship which had followed them up here had exploded in mid-air, blown of its own accord to smithereens!

And down below, in the mists, the rest of the Terror ships had vanished as suddenly as they had appeared— vanished after bombing Luennes off the map!

Dazedly, as they resumed formation, Kirby glanced from side to side at his two comrades, saw all his own stunned horror and shock reflected in their goggled faces. Even the stoic Travis looked strangely pale, taut-featured. For all three knew that they had seen and come in contact with the dread Boche menace that had baffled the Allies. They had seen the Terror ships strike with their own eyes.

"It's impossible!" Kirby was wiping the mist from his goggles with the back of his neck-scarf.

He broke off, noting that Travis was waving with grim haste—pointing ahead. And with a shock Kirby remembered then—Vincennes—Emil Rodet—the firing squad! Even now the light of day was beginning to creep across the murky earth below, the mist parting like a

curtain. They had been delayed dangerously long. By this time—

The three Spads, though quite riddled with bullets, were fortunately able to maintain their speed. In a mad spurt of roaring flight they sliced over the ruined town of Luennes, raced on through the air towards the northwest.

'They broke all records then, although to Kirby their speed seemed sluggish after witnessing those dread projectile-things. The Mosquito leader strained his head forward, watching the lightening earth. And then at last his eyes sharpened. He could see the town of Vincennes: and nearby the squat, rearing pile of stone and steel which was Vincennes prison.

And then Kirby saw something else, something that drove a spur into his frenzied haste. On one of the green fields adjoining Vincennes was a little group of blue-clad figures. Eight of them—poilus—were leveling glinting rifles towards a stake in the ground, a stake to which a figure was bound!

No planes ever made a swifter descent, nor a less ceremonious landing, than did the Three Mosquitoes then. They scarcely bothered to get the wind on their noses. One and all, side by side, they went hurling down with cut engines over the grim prison walls, straight for the very field on which the firing squad was assembled. In less time than the telling, their wheels were bouncing on the green, rolling to a three-point stop scarcely a stone's throw away from the group of Frenchmen.

Kirby already had his safety-strap hammered open. From his cockpit he caught a swift but comprehensive glimpse of the grim scene.

The prisoner stood listless against the stake to which he was bound. The eight poilus held their rifles unwaveringly aimed. On one side stood the colonel of the Deuxieme, a blue-clad capitaine, and a priest.

At this very instant the colonel was starting to raise his arm to give the fatal signal.

Kirby leaped to the ground, could feel rather than see Shorty and Travis leaping after him from their own idling crates. He dashed forward, yelling at the top of his lungs in bad but understandable French:

"Arretez! Arretez! Stop! Stop!"

And, quickly, to give it an official air, he whipped out the only paper he had on his possession—the Rodet letter— and waved it as if it were a pardon.

He saw the figure at the stake jerk up his head, saw the old Frenchman's eyes upon him and his rushing comrades; saw recognition in them, and wild hope. He yelled again, trying to drown with his powerful lungs the loud roll of drums. Then the fox-like Deuxieme colonel whirled half-around, was hesitating, his arm still half-poised.

“Wait!” Kirby bellowed at him, waving the letter. “Wait, in the name of the Republic!”

The Colonel lowered his arm, cursed fluently, and barked an order. The drums ceased. The firing squad lowered its rifles.

But a single shot rang out in the stilled air like a crack of doom. One of the eight rifles had fired instead of lowering. Which one, it was impossible to see in the grey air and in the milling confusion which followed. For even as the Mosquitoes stopped in their tracks, frozen, several things happened at once.

As the shot echoed and died in the morning air, the old Frenchman at the stake could be seen to jerk spasmodically against the bonds that held him. Slowly, his frail body slumped forward, his head went to his chest. But even as the life poured out of him in a widening crimson stain on his shirt-front, a shrill shout broke from his dying lips, rose with the rattle of death:

“St. Pierre! St. Pierre—”

Gaspingly he screamed out the name of St. Peter, whom his soul even now must be facing. The shout stirred the priest, who rushed forward in his trailing robe. At the same instant the firing squad, as if confused by the miscarriage of orders, were milling about in a disorderly mass. The Mosquitoes stood, staring at the stake, where the French-man's motionless figure looked like a scarecrow now. The colonel of the Deuxieme, his face livid, his outer calm gone, was bawling at the capitaine, who in turn was bawling at the squad.

IT was minutes before order came out of the ghastly chaos. At the combined orders of the

colonel and capitaine, the squad finally reformed in a line, was standing at attention—holding rifles. The capitaine continued to bawl at them. The colonel rushed to the stake and was untying the Frenchman, whose pitiful body promptly sprawled to the ground in an inert heap.

“Dead—through the heart,” the colonel clipped. He jerked up, for he found the Three Mosquitoes confronting him, standing with goggles pushed up and faces grim.

“But it is no wonder.” Although he did not know them, the Colonel was already making excuses. “This is a late time to bring a stay of execution! When I gave the order, one of the soldiers must have construed it as the order to fire, though that will not serve as his excuse when we learn who he is.” He glanced at Kirby's hand, which still held Rodet's letter. “Now, let us examine the writ.”

Kirby spoke slowly. “It is no writ, monsieur le colonel. It is merely a personal letter I used as a trick to stop you.” And as the colonel seemed to stiffen into a ramrod of indignation, he went on: “We are the Three Mosquitoes, and we came at the behest of G-2 to interview Emil Rodet—before he died.” He glanced bitterly at the inert heap at the foot of the stake. “We had to try to delay you, because we ourselves were held up at Luennes by—”

“Luennes?” The colonel's anger seemed swept away by a far greater agitation. “Then you must—” He stared at them incredulously. “You must have seen the Hell Hawks and yet—”

“Oui, oui, and yet we are alive!” It was Shorty Carn who chimed in.

The lanky Travis, his long face grim, held up an arm. “We're wasting time. The Terror ships are still a mystery, and we can discuss them later. The matter in hand,” there was a strangely cold note in his drawl, “is to learn who fired the shot which killed Emil Rodet. Perhaps the capitaine over there has located the man.”

The others followed his narrowed glance towards the firing squad, where the capitaine was bawling questions. One and all, the eight blue-clad poilus were denying with Gallic

vehemence that they had fired the shot, each man accusing his neighbor.

“Let’s look at those rifles right now!” the Mosquito leader gritted, his own hand, reaching for the butt of his side-holstered Colt. The two French officers and the Three Mosquitoes started at the left of the rigid squad. As each rifle was handed up, the capitaine pulled back the breech-lock and showed the bullet. The third gun showed a blank cartridge, for one of the firing squad rifles always held a blank so that no man would know for sure that he had helped deal death.

As the search went on, the air seemed to grow more and more tense. Four rifles now, five, six—sunlight was sweeping over the green field, bathing in gold the pitiful figure at the stake, over which the priest was bending and saying rites. Only two rifles left now, and thus far all had contained bullets. The seventh poilu’s gun was broken while the Mosquitoes stood by with growing puzzlement and frustration on their faces.

CHAPTER III

A Faded Document

IT came without warning. No one saw the small black object hurl to the ground. Not until there came a slight, hissing explosion did Kirby jerk around with a cry of alarm. And then already the field seemed full of smoke from a grenade-type smoke-bomb which gushed out acrid black clouds. In the thick of it, the Mosquitoes and the French milled confusedly. The wind dispersed the smoke in mere seconds.

“Stop him! There he goes!”

The wild yell ripped from Kirby’s lips. The Mosquito leader was leaping madly across the turf, snatching out his Colt.

Already a good distance away, dashing straight towards the three idling Spads the Mosquitoes had left there, was the eighth man of the firing squad—a stocky figure with swart stubble covering the lower part of his face. He had thrown away his rifle and now, having delayed pursuit with that smoke-bomb, he was already up to the three planes.

“No!” Kirby yelled. “No you don’t, damn you!” He fired his Colt even though he was still hopelessly out of range. Now Shorty and Travis were also whirling, running with drawn guns. The colonel of the Deuxieme was barking mad orders. The remaining seven of the firing squad turned to join the chase with rising rifles.

But all this took precious seconds, and in those seconds the fugitive was moving with lightning swiftness. He darted to the first plane in the line, which happened to be Shorty’s, raised the engine cowl, and reached in. His hand came away with snapping ignition wires—the running Kirby could see the flash of the short circuit, see the propeller slow and stop. The fugitive then leaped to the next plane—Kirby’s. By then Kirby was pounding to the scene at last, again firing his Colt. After him pounded the others; rifles began to bark past him. The stocky fugitive ducked from Kirby’s ship, jerked around his head. Kirby caught a glimpse of two greenish eyes, which even in the daylight seemed to glow like a cat’s. Then, with a guttural curse which rose above the Hissos, the blue-clad man abandoned his move of destruction—and instead, before his pursuers could close in, he leaped like an agile monkey into the cockpit of Kirby’s ship.

Kirby hurled forward, Colt upraised. But like some mocking laugh, the blast of the slipstream met his face. Black exhaust smoke billowed out at him as his own Spad, manned by the French-clad fugitive, fairly leaped forward. Obviously the hand that held its controls was the hand of a born flyer. With a fusillade of hopeless rifle shots sizzling after it, the plane went rocketing off the green, zooming hell-bent into the blue morning sky—and shrinking towards the east.

For an instant Kirby stood frozen, lines of frustration etching his face. Then he saw the lanky figure of Travis running past him on long legs, heading for the one plane the fugitive had left behind undamaged—Travis’ own. The sight stirred Kirby to fresh action. He leaped forward again, overtook the lanky man, was shoving him back towards the

gaping Shorty Carn and the gesticulating poilus.

“My job,” Kirby gritted with frenzied haste. “If anyone has a chance to catch him, it’s me!” And before either of his comrades could answer, he hurled to Travis’ ship, was in the cockpit with one heaving swing. He had the throttle slammed open even as he plopped into the seat. He had the safety-buckle fastened even as the Spad emulated the plane that had just taken off—skimming across the Vincennes field, rocketing over the prison and the tree tops, curving up toward the east and the Front.

Shorty and Travis stared helplessly after their leader, then stared at the one remaining mosquito-marked plane, whose damage would take a long time to repair. The colonel of the Deuxieme was stupefied. The poilus looked frightened and horrified. Only the black-robed priest was calm, and the pitiful corpse at the foot of the stake.

IN the meantime, up in the sky that was now sunny, Kirby was urging his borrowed Spad forward with all his skill and strength. His goggles were down, and through them he peered into the blue ahead—his glance fixed on the fugitive plane which was now just a small-winged shape.

It was going hell-bent. Even he could not have gotten more speed out of the ship he gave such good care, and which was performing smoothly despite the lead it had taken before.

Cursing, Kirby reached into the compartment where Travis kept his air equipment. He yanked out a pair of binoculars, focused them to his goggles until the plane ahead grew to distinct size and shape. Clearly he could see the tin-hatted figure in the cockpit for now the other plane veered to the north, giving Kirby a moment’s side-view.

And even as he looked, he could see a transformation come over that figure. A gust of propeller-made wind suddenly swept the French tin hat off into space. Immediately after came a wig of black hair which left a pate shaven almost bald as a skull! On the face, bits of false stubble were blowing in an ugly smear, as if the wind were shaving the

man! It all took place in a second, that strange metamorphosis. A French poilu with Gallic features changed into an evil-faced, shaven-headed Teuton—a Teuton whose photographs he-knew too well to be mistaken.

“Udermann!” he burst out. “So it is you, you skunk!”

He was not surprised, and yet now that he knew the fact to be true it brought a sense of rage and humiliation. Udermann, the wily chief of the Flying Nachrichtenamt, who had outwitted them all by one of the cleverest stunts ever pulled by any spy!

He had fooled that colonel of the Deuxieme by somehow smuggling himself in as a bona fide member of a French-picked firing squad—how Kirby could not yet guess. And he had fooled the Mosquitoes by killing Emil Rodet just before they could get the Frenchman’s dying message. And then he had added insult to injury by stealing one of the planes the Mosquitoes had conveniently left ready for him, after crippling another.

Already Kirby had swung Travis’ Spad northward, to follow the fleeing spy-crate. It was strange that Udermann was not heading directly for Hunland, but was instead cutting up towards the north this way. But if he hoped to elude Kirby by taking a roundabout course, he was mistaken. Fiercely, Kirby kept hot on the trail, fighting to get more revs out of Travis’ well-kept Hisso.

“I’ve got to stop that Jerry!” he gritted. “Got to get him—alive if possible. This thing must be bigger than it looked, if he took so much trouble to shut up Rodet!”

But though Udermann had not even glanced back at his pursuer, the wily Hun was leading Kirby a most merry chase. The only sense of passing time Kirby got was from the change of the landscape below. He saw it change gradually, even as he first began to gain on the Spad ahead. He saw the green contours turn to a sort of dull gray. He saw a snakelike line of rising smoke to the northeast ahead, and knew it was the Front, much deeper in France here than down south.

The Somme Front!

The Somme Front, which Emil Rodet had betrayed! Even now Kirby could see the futile

British-French advance which was hurling itself to death against the iron-bound Hindenburg line. He could see the moving smoke-lines of the barrages, could even make out the swarms of moving insects which were soldiers. He could see vividly now the full damage Rodet's forged orders had caused. For from the Hun trenches, the gray swarms were even now coming west like a returning tide—the Allied attack was being repulsed by a counter-attack.

And over this sector which Rodet had betrayed, Udermann was heading in his stolen Spad!

"What the hell can it mean?" Kirby cursed. "What brings this Boche skunk up here after killing Rodet?"

He broke off with an eager exclamation. For now, suddenly, the Spad ahead was slowing in its mad, racing speed. It was slowing even as it banked over a section of the area which was still in Franco-British hands. And as it slowed, Kirby's Spad gained in a spurting leap which in seconds would have brought him on the tail of Udermann, who obviously was unaware now that he was still pursued.

But it was then that the shrewd soldier in Kirby made him change his tactics. For the movements of the Spad ahead were strange. Slowing, that Spad was circling, wheeling like a momentary searching gull over a drab, shelled hamlet—a dirty little town surrounded by gray and black torn earth which Kirby recognized as coal-mines, remembering that the Somme was noted for its special coal of a peculiar gray coloring.

DETERMINED to see what Udermann could possibly be up to, circling over this British-held town, Kirby now dropped aggressiveness for furtiveness. Deliberately, he slowed his own Spad, held it safely back so he could watch. At the same time he tried to locate the town. His glance went to the roll-map on Travis' dashboard—after a moment he picked out the location, the printed name, St. Pierre. Something clicked in his brain. And then he remembered with a shock of surprise. The barking rifle, Emil Rodet slumping forward on the stake, that last gurgling cry from his lips:

"St. Pierre! St. Pierre!"

The truth stunned Kirby. Emil Rodet had meant the town of St. Pierre, this town here! He had seen the Mosquitoes, and in dying that was the very message he was conveying to them—trying with his last breath to name this town! They had not grasped it at all. But Udermann had understood!

Again Kirby broke off from his conjecture, stiffening. So sudden did the other slowed Spad dip, its wings catching the sheen of morning sun, that Kirby almost lost it from view before he saw that it was gliding down over St. Pierre, gliding for a stretch of clearing on the outskirts of the town. Udermann was landing in British territory. Though the spot was desolate and deserted.

Warily now, determined to chase this thing to its finish, Kirby approached the scene in a slow, high course. From overhead, above a fringe of cloud, he watched the other Spad land. Through his binoculars he saw the stocky figure of Udermann climb out, start across the stubble field for a sprawling, ramshackle chateau which also seemed deserted.

Kirby's fingers hovered on his stick-trips. To dive down now and finish that damned Hun, helpless down there in the open—

But then he would never get to the roots of this mystery. And so he watched, holding back the impulse, while the blue-clad figure of Udermann went inside the house.

Kirby slipped his own Spad down through space then, as furtively as an eagle stalking its prey. He landed in a field separated by a copse of trees from the other crate. When he climbed from the cockpit, his Colt was in his hand and ready.

Warily, he moved across the ground, through the trees, approaching the ramshackle chateau into which Udermann had disappeared. He circled to the front side of it, lest Udermann be watching from within. He paused, listening to the thunder of shells in the east which seemed to be drawing closer. Perhaps he should get British or French help, which must be nearby. But if he took time to go for help, Udermann might disappear.

With this thought he steeled his nerves, gripped his Colt, and went to the front door. The lock of it was rusted and fallen into disuse. He held his gun level, and with his foot opened the door. A musty hallway met him. He darted in furtively, his every nerve alert, looking up and down. Somewhere in this old house—

A slight sound down the hall caught his ears. He whirled, gun poised. Then he saw a door, half-ajar. The sound seemed to come from within. Kirby crept to the doorway, peered in. He was looking in a large room that had evidently once been a study, but which was now disarrayed and full of dust. And almost opposite the doorway, the blue-clad, shaven-skulled figure of Udermann was bending over an old-fashioned bureau. He had the top drawer pulled out, was hurling clothes and other stuff from it to the floor. Even as Kirby stepped into the room with gun leveled, a grunt of satisfaction came from the Hun spy—for now he had fished out a folded faded paper, which he stuffed hastily into his side-tunic pocket.

Kirby, eyes narrowed to slits, gun trained on the blue back of the Hun, took another step forward, ready to demand surrender. The Mosquito failed to notice that there was a dusty mirror on top of the old bureau. At the moment, Udermann's right hand was occupied, stuffing away the paper he had taken from the drawer.

CHAPTER IV Loser's Spoils

EVEN as Kirby started a crisp: "Stick them up, Udermann," that move came. The German had not turned from the bureau; his body itself seemed to remain immobile. But his left arm flecked back around his waist like a snake, gripping a squat black automatic. And before Kirby could pull the trigger of his own aimed Colt, Udermann—the fastest crack shot ever seen—fired!

Crack! The report split the confines of the musty room, as flame spat viciously from that squat automatic.

Kirby had done the only thing he could in that split second—ducked side-wise with the flash of the pistol. It was the only thing that saved him from certain death, for even shooting left-handed and backwards, aiming by a mirror, the Hun was a deadly marksman. As it was the Mosquito heard the bullet whistle past his very ear, heard it ping into the wall behind. He jerked the trigger of his own gun, but his ducking movement had spoiled his aim—his bullet, too, went wide.

Udermann whirled. The Hun's face, livid in hate, looked more hideously like a skull than ever with its shaven head, its deepsocketed feline eyes. The gun jutted forward in his hand.

Instinctively, fearing to shoot it out with this man who was so superior with a pistol, Kirby leaped forward, swinging his own revolver like a club. The German side-stepped, met the rush with surprising strength. Cursing in a snarling guttural, he took Kirby on, stopping the Mosquito's gun-arm with his own revolver, which he had been forced to swing upwards, unfired. Hand-to-hand they fought.

Kirby, panting and cursing, unable to bring down his locked revolver, was striving to free his left fist, that left fist which carried such a sure knockout if he could only slug with it. But the German kept his left arm down. The Mosquito pushed and tugged against the Hun's blue tunic. At that instant, he felt a crackle of paper under his struggling fingers. The folded document in the Boche's pocket! The Mosquito quickly grasped the paper, but he did not get it all out, for a piece tore off and remained in the Hun's pocket. But the rest Kirby got without Udermann being aware of it, and he managed to stuff it somewhere within his own togs.

Though Udermann did not know what the Mosquito was doing, he sensed that Kirby's attention was momentarily diverted. With a lunge he managed to free his locked automatic, brought it down to Kirby's chest, viciously poking its barrel into the Mosquito. Kirby knew the cold foretaste of death, his every muscle ready for the fatal impact of lead.

There was a sudden pound of heavy boots, a rush of feet from the doorway of the room, guttural shouts.

“Hanthoften!”

Out of the corner of his eye, the horrified Mosquito saw four gray-clad pancake-hatted German soldiers pushing into the room, with leveled Mauser rifles. The sight of them crushed his last hope. Had the German counterattack already retaken this territory or—

Amazedly, Kirby felt Udermann’s gun sharply withdraw, as the German spy chief whirled to face the newcomers. With deadly hostility in their eyes, they were charging towards both the men in the room—apparently taking the blue-clad Udermann for a Frenchman.

“Das bin—Ich Udermann!” he yelled. “You fools, I am not French—German!”

The four soldiers paused momentarily. In that flashing second Kirby noted that their uniforms were peculiar. Each had, on collar and sleeve, an insignia of crossed hammers—the Hammers of Thor, the ancient German thunder god.

And as the soldiers paused, the incredible happened. With a sudden savage snarl, Udermann whipped his automatic around—and was firing point-blank at his own countrymen.

At the first roar of his gun, one of the four gray-clad soldiers dropped like a heavy log, coughing out his life-blood. The other three gave cries of alarmed rage, jerked up their rifles again—and were aiming both at Udermann and at the khaki-clad Mosquito.

The dazed Yank acted out of sheer instinct. He ducked as a rifle roared and a bullet zipped past him. He brought up his own Colt and fired, cursing. A second Boche soldier went down, clutching his chest while blood spilled out over his fingers.

The war had never seen a more ironic moment than this hectic, bloody moment in the St. Pierre chateau. For now Kirby and Udermann, the two deadly enemies who had been seeking to kill one another just an instant ago, were standing side by side, blazing away at German

soldiers. They were fighting as momentary comrades, though they hated one another!

The third Boche tumbled down as Udermann’s deadly automatic continued its fire. The fourth, a light of utter frenzy in his eyes, charged forward crazily. Kirby fired at him—but only wounded his shoulder. Bleeding and screaming he came on. There was another crack from the deadly gun of Udermann—followed by a click that showed it was empty. But the last shot did its work. The last of the four Boche soldiers sank slowly to the floor in a crimson pool of his own blood.

A LITTLE DAZED, Kirby whirled around, still gripping his smoking Colt. And then a cry of fresh, alarm burst from him—for Udermann, tossing away his own spent gun, was leaping like a panther towards the window. There was a crash of old, brittle glass—the French panes shattered as Udermann leaped out into the field outside.

Cursing, Kirby rushed to the window—fired his own last shot, which missed the running figure outside. He leaped out.

It was almost a repetition of Vincennes. Udermann was already up to the Spad he had left idling—Kirby’s stolen Spad—before Kirby was out of the window and dashing after him. And while the Mosquito cursed himself for not having crippled that plane, the roar of the Hisso filled the air. Again Udermann was rocketing into the air with breathless speed, zooming overhead.

Kirby sprinted madly toward the Spad he had left on the other clearing. This time he’d catch that Hun in the air, get him if it was the last thing—

A rattling moan jerked him to an abrupt halt. A whine which this time he recognized as the whine of shells! And in the next instant—
B-r-rOOOOOM! B-r-rOOOOOM!

The explosions deafened his ear drums. Flame, shooting up like an umbrella on every side of him, blinded his eyes. Barrage! The Huns were shelling this terrain—the counter-attack had not yet reached it after all, but was reaching it now!

The very earth seemed to erupt in front of his face. He was hurled several feet as if on a

wave, and landed with every bone shaking in his body. A blinding flash and then he saw that both the clearing and his idling Spad had been obliterated, turned into a gaping, smoldering crater of ruin!

He was trapped! With the rain of shells growing thicker, with smoke clogging his nostrils and shrapnel whistling in his ears, Kirby crawled over the hellish ground with some thought of getting to the cellar of the chateau. But in the next moment there was another series of teeth shaking explosions. The chateau had been hit now, and it disintegrated in a mass of crumpling stone and breaking glass. Thicker and thicker grew the barrage, and Kirby knew it was only a matter of time before he must be blown to hell.

The drone of an engine pierced the thunder of shells overhead. The Mosquito, half-sprawled on the ground, jerked up his eyes. Through the haze of smoke he saw a Spad slicing down in a circular course like a grim bird. A Mosquito-marked Spad. Was Udermann coming back to strafe Kirby, just to make sure he would be doomed?

He saw a face peer over the cowl of the circling plane. And at sight of that face, even with the shells bursting around him, a hoarse cry of incredulous joy broke from Kirby. For the face was round and it was goggled and helmeted.

“Shorty!” Kirby yelled. “Shorty Carn!”

Unmindful of the thundering shells now, the Mosquito leader lurched to his feet, was standing out on the smoky field, gesticulating wildly. And Shorty saw! The Spad promptly dipped, its Hisso sobbing out. At the same instant the barrage became so thick again that the concussions knocked Kirby off his feet. In alarm he started waving from the ground.

“No Shorty! You can’t make it! You’ll be blasted—”

But even if Shorty had heard he never would have heeded that warning. The little Mosquito did the most superb bit of flying of his whole career. Quick as a swooping hawk, his Spad came down through the inferno of roaring shells which rocked its very wings. Somehow, as if finding its way through the bursting

shrapnel, it skimmed over ground that was still level, slowed.

Kirby leaped for it as if shot out of a catapult. He leaped to its nearest wing, swung on with an arm, was crawling up to the fuselage and getting a tight grip on the inner strutting, even as the Hisso roared anew in defiance of the shells, and the Spad cleared the field and was in the air in split seconds.

Not a moment too soon. Even as the ship, with Kirby huddled on its wing, soared into the free clear sky, the entire scene below was blasted out by a final rain of shells which left no spot unscarred.

“Are you all right, guy?” the shout reached his ears vaguely above the roar of wind. Shorty was peering from the cockpit. “And did you get that Hun— it was Udermann, wasn’t it?”

“He got away again, damn him!” Kirby shouted, bitterly thinking that by now Udermann was hopelessly out of reach somewhere in Hunland. And then a sudden remembrance caused him to feel with one hand over his teddy-bear—and he sighed relief as he felt a crackle of paper. At least he had gotten something, something Udermann had apparently been after.

He held on as the Spad banked south-ward in the blue sky, Shorty doing the turn as gently as he could.

“Where are you going?” Kirby bawled then.

“How did you find me anyway, and—”

“Trav figured it out after talking with G-2—they said Rodet had a house in St. Pierre, when Trav told ‘em the Frog had yelled that name in dying. We fixed the one Spad left, and I came rushing out after you. Meantime Trav went to G-2 where we are to meet him! General Saunders is all upset!”

IT was past noon when three grim faced Mosquitoes were once more together, all of them seated around the desk of Brigadier-General Saunders, Chief of Yank G-2. The general, hard-eyed and square-jawed though he was, looked worried and haggard. The red rims around his eyes showed his need of sleep and rest. From time to time his glance went to a wall-clock, and from there to the large

French window overlooking the lawns and traffic-filled roads of A.E.F. Headquarters.

"I don't mind telling you three men that my mind is utterly confused," he groaned. "I'm trying to think of two things at once. First there are these confounded Boche Terror ships—" The worry-lines deepened in his features as he tapped a sheaf of reports on his desk. "Every night the damage is more frightful—more important bases wiped out! You must give me all the details you saw. And I'm still hoping that J-7, the agent we sent across the lines to get the dope on the new menace, will come back—though he's hours overdue now."

He sighed heavily, then resumed. "And on top of that there's all this strange intrigue about the Rodet execution, and Udermann. The French Deuxime colonel has been of little help. He did find out how Udermann slipped into the fighting squad, though. When the original squad filed out of the armory before dawn, Udermann diverted one man, strangled him in the darkness and got his uniform and gun—taking care it wasn't the one with the blank cartridge. But as for his motives—" His glance went to Kirby, who despite his hectic experience looked fresh again, after having grabbed a bite and washed up.

"And if I didn't know you as well as I do, Captain Kirby, I'd never be able to believe your story of Udermann shooting with you at Boche soldiers!"

Kirby smiled grimly. "If the house weren't wiped out you could see the bodies. And after all, there's this evidence."

He nodded to the desk. There, with a piece torn off its edge, was the paper he had wrested from Udermann, who in turn had taken it from the bureau in the chateau. And again, as they once more looked at the paper, the Mosquitoes and the general showed grim bafflement.

The paper was a map, a home-made affair done crudely but with detail. It had no print on it, but already, with the help of some intelligence officers here, it had been identified as a chart of the Black Forest, of Germany.

Travis broke the silence with his drawl: "One thing seems clear. Rodet was trying to tell us

where this map was when he died, and Udermann got it first. It must mean something."

Travis hesitated. "I was just wondering if there were any possibility that—"

He never finished.

Somewhere in the sunny air outside came a sound familiar enough to all Three Mosquitoes to jerk them out of their chairs. A sound like the whine of a shell much larger than any that had burst around Kirby at St. Pierre.

The general, too, had jumped up, his face going blank. "What—" he was blurting.

The whine became an ear-splitting shriek, even through the closed window. High and shrill it rose.

"Look!" Kirby was pointing at the window, his voice hoarse. "Look—there it is, coming!"

Even as he spoke there was the rush of a descending shadow. Frozen, the Mosquitoes and the general stared with wide-eyed horror.

Hurling toward the building with terrific speed, was a single stubby-winged mystery ship! Shrieking, it loomed swiftly to huge size, its cylindrical, rushing body glinting in the sun.

"It's going to crash the building!" Kirby yelled. "Duck or—"

He was already rushing to the general, starting to pull down that stupefied officer.

B-r-r-OOOOM!

Amazedly, the men in the room saw the blinding flash of flame and smoke, as the down-hurling crate suddenly exploded to atoms, still in mid-air. The concussion shattered the windows; outside wreckage was falling like rain. Then there was a milling rush of khaki-clad men from all directions of the grounds.

THE GENERAL, followed by the Mosquitoes, dashed out. When they reached the crowd they found some of the G-2 officers bending over a scarred and crumpled form which lay in a battered heap on the wreck-strewn lawn.

One of the khaki officers gasped at the General. "The body fell with the wreckage, sir. We saw it come down."

"Can it be?" The General's horrified amazement was reflected on the faces of the

Three Mosquitoes. "Then this man was riding in that plane! How—" He pushed through, bent over the corpse, turned it partially over. And though the face was scarcely recognizable with its scarred features, a cry of recognition came from the general. Slowly, like a man stricken, he turned to the Three Mosquitoes.

"It is J-7!" he croaked. "My own agent. He came back—in that ghastly thing!"

Kirby's eyes slitted. "Maybe the Boches put him in it when they sent it over. They've done stuff like that before and—"

He broke off, for now Travis had suddenly stooped swiftly over the corpse. The lanky Mosquito, whose eyes never missed anything, was wresting open the dead man's scarred hand and from it he pulled a scrap of paper, whose fringes were burned away. Only where the hand had covered it was it intact.

The General, Kirby and Shorty were peering over Travis' shoulder as the lanky man held up the scrap. The scrawled bit of writing on it leaped to their eyes:

"Secret of Terror is Rodetol."

"Rodetol!" it was Kirby who echoed that last word, a dazed light in his eyes. "Rodetol—and the name of the Frenchman whom Udermann killed was Rodet!"

"Which means," Travis' drawl was grim as death, "that all this intrigue about Rodet and this new mystery menace are connected—the very idea I was starting to express before!"

The general was not listening. His eyes were misty, his voice thick. "J-7—one of my best men. He must have got to their base. And now..." He shuddered. "If only he could have lived to talk!"

Kirby faced the harried chief. "He lived to bring us enough of a clue, general! And as soon as Shorty and I can get the spare pair of planes from our drome, the three of us are going out—out to the Black Forest! It's clear now that Rodet must have been trying to tell us something about the menace, and the map must concern it. We'll comb that damned woods until we find whatever is there!" He turned to his two tense comrades. "Right, fellers?"

And both Shorty and Travis responded with the famous, reckless war whoop of the Three Mosquitoes.

CHAPTER V Hell's Landing

THE BLACK FOREST! Kirby leaned over the cowl of his roaring new Spad, peered down again at the sprawling mass of green which was one of the most famous woods in the world—a woods abounding in legends.

For hours now, having slipped unseen into Germany here, the Three Mosquitoes had been combing the Black Forest, vainly searching like buzzards for whatever grim secret the dense woods might be hiding—a secret they felt Rodet had been trying to tell them. But thus far all they had seen was sprawling, desolate foliage—barbaric country.

Rat-ta-tat-tat! Rat-ta-tat-tat-tat!

There was no warning at all. The Mosquitoes were taken almost completely off their guard.

Checkered ships—the ships of the Flying Nachrichtenamt. And in their lead, trailing black streamers, a Fokker marked with Imperial Eagles that flew like the very wing itself—"Udermann!" the cry burst from Kirby's dry throat! "It's his crate—he's back, leading his own squadron! It's a trap!"

Before Kirby could even wave his comrades to pull up, before the three Spads could even spring to the defense, the Fokkers of Udermann were upon them. They struck like a tornado, a cone of wings with Udermann's spitting ship at its tip. They flattened on all sides of the three Spads, and their smoky lines of tracer drew like a spider web about the three Yanks. Madly, as the air grew thick with flying, screaming lead, the Mosquitoes half-rolled, turned, dodged and twisted.

In fighting unison, the Yanks went hurtling against their many attackers, lunging in the reckless, insistent fashion which had won them their nicknames—truly Mosquitoes, with gibbering Vickers for stingers!

Together, the trio went hurtling around in a Lufberry circle which momentarily took them out of the crisscross prison of lead. Even as they came around, with guns spitting, one of

the checkered Fokkers grotesquely crumpled before them, went hurtling down like a dead bird with its pilot sprawled over the stick. Shorty Carn, the best marksman of the trio, had already scored!

A blasting hail of lead from above met them then. Kirby, jerking up, glimpsed once more the eagle-marked crate of Udermann, attacking furiously. Behind its flame-tipped guns and transparent propeller arc, Kirby could see the skull-like face of the Hun spy, swathed in goggles and helmet. He cursed and momentarily broke formation from his comrades, jerked back his stick and, pressing his triggers, sent a spray of vicious lead towards the Boche. But Udermann was as slippery as an eel—his Fokker whisked away, staying safely out of range of the Mosquito's deadly stinger.

At the same instant another Fokker, with a plume of smoke and flame gushing from its engine, plunged into the depths of the wood below. Travis had scored!

Kirby, unable to get a crack at Udermann, whipped his Spad down again just as another checkered ship whizzed past him, left to right. He kicked right rudder, banked, and the Fokker flitted into the ring of his sights. Cursing, he fired a long burst—saw the Hun ship literally disintegrate before his withering tracers, which struck like a spear and impaled the Hun pilot to his cockpit.

IN THE SPACE of seconds the Mosquitoes had rid the sky of three of their tormentors, and even now Shorty crippled a fourth and sent it staggering away. But there were fully eight Huns left, and now, goaded to mad vengeance by the fall of their comrades, they rallied under a waved signal of Udermann and hurled upon the three insolent Yanks with overwhelming fury. The three Spads trembled, shook and lurched under the impact of combined lead from every Spandau.

“Stick close, fellers!” Kirby waved desperately. “Don't let 'em split us. Don't—” He broke off with a cry of alarm, for even then he saw Shorty's plane being cut off by two Huns, being swept out of the V. Kirby pulled closer to Travis—desperately the two

Mosquitoes tried to blaze through the wall of Fokker wings to get back to their comrade. But then again Udermann's eagle-marked crate came tearing down like a bat out of hell. A burst shot away half of Travis' tail-fins. The lanky Mosquito fought controls as his plane lurched and lost speed. And before Kirby could slow with him, three more Fokkers flicked in like winged snakes, cutting Travis off!

The Three Mosquitoes were outnumbered and separated—and separated they were as bad as dismembered! Cursing, with cold dread tightening in his heart now, Kirby was fighting alone, amid lunging, looming Fokkers which were drilling his wings, cracking his struts. Desperately his eyes glanced about for the planes of Shorty and Travis. A groan tore from him, for he could not see them.

His desperation to get to them again lent him fresh fury. He bent to his controls, but his Spad was drunk with lead. Even as he opened fire on the nearest Fokker, there came such a terrific fusillade of Spandau lead that he knew it was the finish, knew it even before the joystick went limp in his hand as control wires snapped.

Dazedly he saw the blue sky and green earth change places; saw the earth spinning. A terrific pressure under his goggles, a sickening nausea in the pit of his stomach, were enough to tell him that he was hurtling down in a flat, fatal spin, miles and miles in Germany, over the desolate Black Forest.

Cursing, dizzy, Kirby was fighting the limp controls like a maniac. Then, even with the wood right below, he was getting some sort of control—at least the safety-wires on the flippers were still working. By using full throttle he was able to blast the Spad out of its spin, hurl it into a power dive, though he could not stop it from going down, and its wings were sea-sawing drunkenly. His desperate eyes swept the up-rushing forest below, picking out the nearest place that was at all clear of trees.

Rat-ta-tat-tat-tat-tat!

The shrill clatter, splitting the air right behind him, deafened his eardrums anew. He felt his tail-fins vibrate as if invisible drum-sticks

were beating them, heard tracer whistling past his ears. He jerked his head over his shoulder, and a frenzied curse tore from him.

Riding his tail, Spandaus blazing, was a single Fokker. At first the horrified Mosquito thought it was Udermann's—for it flew streamers. But it was not the eagle-marked ship; evidently it belonged to a flight commander. The Hun had warily followed the Spad down like a vulture, and the moment Kirby's plane had recovered any control he had swooped to make sure of the kill.

THE MOSQUITO threw all his skill and strength into a reckless move. Although he knew the reserve controls were unable to stand any strain, he nevertheless crossed stick and rudder, whipped his screaming Spad into an abrupt, shivering stall which hung it momentarily above the woods. The speeding Fokker was carried past by sheer momentum before the Hun could recover from surprise. It slithered by, was above and ahead. And Kirby had his joy-stick back to his very chest. His Spad was rearing like a bucking bronco. For one fleeting instant, even as the reserve-control wires snapped like twanged mandolin strings, the Mosquito caught the underbelly of that Fokker in his sights. He pressed his triggers again and again while the Spad flapped off like a fish out of water to fall drunkenly.

But even as the Spad flopped down, Kirby felt a surge of savage satisfaction as he glimpsed the Fokker nosing over, to plunge like a stone into the woods below and crash. Another instant and he was making a last struggle with all that was left of his own controls. Somehow, using the power of his motor alone, he managed to get the Spad just over the tiny clearing, managed to keep its nose up at the last moment. There was a rending crash, a shivering impact which rattled his very teeth. The undercarriage of the Spad buckled as if made of match-sticks; the fuselage slid to the ground like a half-capsized canoe while wings buckled.

Even as he was hammering at the safety-buckle, the pungent smell of smoke assailed Kirby's nostrils. He saw the flame-tongue jut

from the engine before him in the next instant, felt its excruciating heat as it grew to blinding, livid size. Instinctively he clutched the Black Forest map tightly as, getting open the safety-belt, he literally rolled out of the wrecked fuselage. He sprawled to the ground then was on his feet and running.

Nor had he been a second too soon. Right behind him the fire rose in a sheet of crackling flame and smoke. The Spad was burning to cinders.

Kirby paused some distance away.

The yammer of Mercedes overhead jerked him up with a start. Over the tree-tops he saw checkered Fokkers, swooping low. Hell, it was the entire Udermann outfit coming down, evidently to land somewhere in the woods! They must have seen the flaming Spad. Kirby would never get away.

Even then, as he ducked momentarily out of sight behind the nearest tree, he heard whining wires that indicated throttled motors, knew the Fokkers were landing close, on some other clearing. Huns would be here in no time. Even if he fled they were sure to find him in his telltale khaki. He was too far from the lines to hope for escape.

His desperate glance swept around the tiny clearing, the dense trees. Suddenly his eyes sharpened. Across the clearing was the wrecked Fokker he had downed at the last moment—crashed with its nose buried in the ground, and with a still gray-clad figure in its cockpit.

Swiftly, Kirby drew his Colt, rushed to the wrecked Boche crate. One glance into the cockpit told him the Boche was dead; a Vickers bullet had penetrated his skull. There was little blood. And the man was almost of Kirby's own build.

The Black Forest was coming to life with running feet. Udermann's Fokkers were still sliding in for their nearby landing. Kirby worked with lightning speed. In no time he had hoisted the dead Boche out of the cockpit and he was changing his own teddy-bear for the striped gray tunic of the Hun. He found identification papers:

Uberleutnant Karl Wolff,
Fliegende-Nachrichtenamt.

Flight Commander

He pocketed the papers, buttoned up the gray flying coat which was just a little tight, jammed on the Boche helmet and goggles. He shoved his own map, compass, and a few other belongings within his borrowed tunic, changed his own Colt for the German's Luger. In the next instant he could hear them coming this way, guided no doubt by the flames of the Spad. He redoubled his speed to finish his grim work. Steeling his nerves to do it, he lifted up the dead, stripped corpse of the Hun, staggered with it to the sinking flames of the Spad. Getting as close as he could to the searing heat, he flung the body directly into the fire. There was an uprush of crackling sparks.

Then, even as two Boche pilots broke through the trees, the Mosquito wiped his grease-stained hands over his face to partially obscure his Yank features.

The two pilots, arriving at the clearing, saw a burning Spad with an already charred, unrecognizable body in the midst of the flames. And, walking away from a wrecked Fokker, was a trim, gray-clad flight commander who was hurrying from the scene. Without turning towards them, the flight commander barked at them in flawless German:

“Achtung! Der Amerikaner—get his corpse from the fire if you can! Identify it.”

As if there would be any chance! By the time that fire burned down there would be nothing left of the corpse. But the two pilots were saluting, going close as they could to the sinking flames.

CHAPTER VI Mystery Ships

KIRBY, grateful that his German was so much better than his French, was going through the trees. Outwardly calm, keeping his stained face averted as best he could, he was passing other pilots. If he could get away now—

Even with the thought he broke off, every nerve tautening. For as he went through another copse of trees, he came abruptly on a large, stubble clearing. Wings filled it—revving Fokkers. Gray-clad pilots stood on the ground, grouped in one spot. And facing them, the Mosquito saw a familiar stocky figure, with a face that resembled a skull!

Furtively, Kirby ducked back, remained in the background. For Udermann was sharp-eyed, and Udermann would remember his face from St. Pierre. He heard the Boche's rasping voice even then:

“Then we did get all three of them?”

“It seems so, Herr Oberst,” answered one of the flyers. “We cut off the two, and though they came together, they were seen to fall. The third—their leader—burned, it is said.”

Kirby felt a wave of grief and horror. His two buddies, Shorty and Travis, downed! His fists clenched at his sides while hate narrowed his misting eyes. Damn Udermann and his murdering Boche-pack! Damn—

“Gut!” Udermann said. “Then we are rid of those insolent Mosquitoes at last! But we bungled just the same! We should have let them locate the secret place before we—”

“Ja, but we thought they had spotted it when they banked,” said one of the others. “And we could not wait forever; they had been flying over the woods for hours. Are you certain, Herr Oberst, that they had the location on their part of the map?”

Udermann growled an oath. “Ja wohl! When their swine leader fooled me by getting most of the map, the little piece left in my pocket did not have anything on it. And after all my trouble too! When that verdammt Frenchman yelled ‘St. Pierre!’ after I shot him, I knew where to go at once. But the swine Mosquito leader tricked me! And unless he and his comrades were blind fools, they should easily have picked the secret stream in this wood, located the estate of von Bergsten!”

Von Bergsten! Kirby's nerves became like electric wires. Why, von Bergsten was the other Hun with whom Emil Rodet's name had been linked—the mysterious Hun who bore the name of a famous dead German scientist!

Quickly but unobtrusively, the Mosquito withdrew a little from the Fokker-filled clearing, got behind a clump of trees. Assured that he was out of sight of all eyes, he once more drew out the torn Rodet map, glanced at it swiftly.

He must find a stream. His eyes lighted. There was one, obvious from its zig-zagging course and dark lines which indicated water.

And, having noted his own position in the woods even as he fell from the air, Kirby knew the stream lay just a few miles away—into the south. Though it was not marked on the map, von Bergsten's estate was somewhere along that stream.

In that instant, standing just a stone's throw from Udermann and the group of Hun pilots, the Mosquito reached reckless decision. His first thought had been to somehow make a break for one of the idling Fokkers—try to get back to the lines. But now his mind was on a different track.

To abandon escape, to deliberately stay in Hunland seeking out a secret base, in a uniform that made him technically a spy—it was a desperate resolve. But with Shorty and Travis downed, Kirby was too reckless to care about the odds, and the whole Allied cause was at stake.

The Mosquito moved like a furtive Indian. Head bent low, he slinked off, a shadowy gray figure through the trees, working away from the Huns, careful as he stepped over twigs and underbrush.

When he had left them behind, he pulled out his pocket compass. From it and the Rodet map he got his bearings, began to journey due south.

IN less than an hour, already panting and foot-weary, he came upon the stream—a narrow, coursing brook. The next question was which way to follow it. He consulted the map. He was near one end of the stream and it seemed to lead out of the woods. His instinct told him the place he sought would be in the thick of the forest. He took the opposite direction, commenced to follow the stream, working along its right bank.

It was an arduous and lonely journey. The further he went the more desolate the woods became. Tree-shadows grew longer as the sun slowly moved down westward.

And then suddenly, even as a heavy gnarled cluster of tree-roots and brush almost blocked the path before him, the Mosquito stiffened, ears acutely alert. Out of the darkening woods ahead came a swishing, rumbling sound which, in the loneliness, seemed almost terrifying, making Kirby think of ancient dragons. And with that sound came another—the sound of heavy pacing boots, the clink of rifles!

The Mosquito quieted his jumping nerves, put a hand on his borrowed Luger. Warily, he crawled around the gnarled impasse of tree-roots. He came into some brush on the other side, worked through.

His eyes widened in amazed awe. For he found himself peering out at an immense clearing, a stretch of well-kept lawns. And at the far side of these expansive grounds reared an enormous castle of vine-covered stone. An old Teutonic castle, no doubt a heritage of feudal times. Etched in the gathering dusk against the old trees of the Black Forest, it looked so medieval, so in keeping with the grim legends of this woods, that the tense Mosquito half-expected to see warriors in armor.

There were warriors all right, though not in armor! Surrounding the entire castle, pacing the grounds everywhere, were pancake-hatted, gray-clad Boche soldiers, with bayonet-tipped Mauser rifles.

Never had the Mosquito seen a more tightly guarded place! In the very next instant he crouched low, despite his German uniform, as one of the pacing guards tramped by scarcely ten feet beyond the brush. Even in the dusk the Mosquito caught a clear glimpse of the gray uniform, and as his eye fell on its collar insignia a stifled gasp rose in his throat.

The crossed hammers of Thor! The same insignia that had been worn by those four Huns at St. Pierre whom Udermann had crazily slaughtered with Kirby!

With growing wonder the Mosquito continued to take in the whole scene. At first he had been

puzzled that he and his comrades had not spotted this place from the air. But then he saw that the roof of the castle was covered with green camouflage—vine and foliage which matched to perfection the green lawns and trees on the ground. From the air the castle would be merged with the earth, unnoticeable, unless one knew just where to look for it.

At the far left side of the castle, Kirby now saw an immense, old-fashioned water-wheel, turned by the passing stream. It was this wheel which made the swishing, rumbling sound that had reached his ears before.

The next instant his attention was caught by something else. With a clattering noise, a huge lorry came out of a tree-shaded road, approached a side door of the castle. Two of the hammer-marked soldiers were in its cab, and in its open rear was a full load of—coal! Coal which, despite the dusk, showed a peculiar, unmistakable grayish color!

Kirby stared. The thing seemed incredible, but there was only one place where that coal could come from.

The Somme—the sector where Emil Rodet had tried to make the British-French armies regain! The Somme, which must now be safely in Hun hands again, since this coal must have been brought from it.

“Why?” Kirby breathed the awed question half-aloud, still peering from the brush. “Why on earth—”

He broke off, and what he next saw jerked his every nerve taut, made his heart leap.

Being wheeled from another side of the castle by a group of coveralled Boches, was a strange, cylindrical shape of huge size which gleamed in the dusk.

It was one of the Terror ships!

In his excitement, the Mosquito almost threw caution to the winds. He had wormed his way to the very core of this whole diabolical mystery. Here in this medieval castle in the Black Forest the secret lay.

Second thought, however, brought fresh caution to the Mosquito. He did not yet go out into the open. Instead, stealthily, he began to work his way around the fringe of brush and trees, until he came to a place directly opposite

the spot where the Boches had halted with the mystery plane. It was close enough for Kirby to see it clearly in the dusk.

HE was thunderstruck, stunned, incredulous. He had expected to see some entirely unfamiliar machine—some propellerless, pilotless ship with rocket devices on it. Instead, though the mystery ship was indeed almost futuristic in appearance, it was a genuine airplane! An airplane with all the usual parts—engine, propeller, and cockpit.

Men must fly these things—after all. The reason no helmeted pilots had been visible was clear. The cockpit was sunk deep in the fuselage—deep enough to protect the pilot completely from the rush of wind which otherwise would be fatal.

The plane itself was metal-covered—some aluminum alloy, doubtless. It was beautifully stream-lined from nose to tail—even its stubby wings, sufficient to hold it in the air at such high speed, were tapered off. Its wheels were covered and close beneath it. The propeller was enormous, and there was a bulging engine cowl. There were the usual forward guns—though they seemed to be of a new type, thin-barreled instead of surrounded by a perforated outer barrel.

But how could this plane travel so fast? Kirby saw no answer to the question. There was a limit to what petrol and engines could do. And how did the machine guns fire so fast that they made a steady stream of battering lead?

Kirby’s furtive glance went to the cowed engine. It looked like a huge Mercedes, bigger than usual but no different.

The coveralled Boches were examining the strange ship, which evidently had something wrong with it. They were shrugging, shaking their heads. And Kirby, still in hiding, was steeling his nerves, once more summoning up reckless resolution.

He rose to his feet behind the brush. Carefully, he straightened out his gray uniform as best he could, rubbed his grease-stained face. With an inner prayer of hope, Kirby threw back his shoulders, trying to assume the arrogant air of a Prussian. Then, deliberately, as though just arriving, he stepped through the brush and was striding across the twilight grounds.

He got past the broken mystery plane, got another look at it which showed him its controls were the same as any other plane controls, before he was noticed. Then, like a sudden wall, a whole crowd of the Boche sentries rose grayly before him, blocking the way to the castle, menacing him with their bayoneted Mausers. He was staring into dark muzzles, above which rose hostile, challenging faces.

“Dumkopf!” he barked out, in the guttural tone of a haughty officer putting inferiors in their places. “Let me through! I must go to von Bergsten at once!” He was playing his hunch to the limit. “Here—my papers! I am Oberleutnant Wolff, of the Nachrichtenamt!” And with a brusque, impatient flourish, he whipped out his stolen identifications.

A stocky feldwebel with a stony face seized the papers, glanced at them in the dying daylight. Kirby waited hopefully. The feldwebel, his face unchanging, glanced up from the documents. He crisped out an order.

TO Kirby’s horror, the menacing rifles closed in on him in a ring—bayonets prodded through his very clothes into his flesh. Before he could move rough hands were seizing him, stripping him of his gun, of the Rodet map, of everything else. Instinctively, he tried to struggle—cuffing blows stunned him into absolute submission. Helpless, pushed and prodded by bayonets, he was being marched towards the castle—a prisoner! Somehow they must have seen through his disguise at once, knew him to be a spy!

The castle doorway loomed. Other Boche sentries moved aside. Kirby was taken in.

A blinding flood of light was the first thing that met his eyes—that and a hissing, liquid sound, and a faint but strangely pungent odor which was a little sickening.

And as he marched, silent and grim-faced amid his prodding captors, he saw the strangest of all sights yet at this strange hideout in the Black Forest.

It was difficult for him to believe that he was actually within the walls of this old castle—for the interior was as utterly modern as the exterior was archaic. Almost the entire

building was occupied by one immense chamber, through which Kirby was being taken. A chamber lighted by myriad electric bulbs which revealed how much power that water-wheel outside could create. A chamber filled with huge vats and pipes and wheels—gleaming machinery, with iron stairways and catwalks running between it and covered with Boche workmen who swarmed about like ants. What had looked like a castle was in reality a flourishing factory, a thriving industrial plant! But Kirby had little chance, as he was pushed and dragged along, to see just what was going on here. Another instant and the feldwebel, walking in the lead, had paused before a door at the front wall. He knocked on it with discreet knuckles, then opened it.

The helpless, captive Mosquito was pushed through into a large, well-furnished office, whose huge window overlooked the twilight expanse of grounds outside.

A figure rose from behind a mahogany desk—a tall, spare figure with a shock of white hair and a face which, though filled with deep lines, nevertheless held a certain nobility of feature. And at once that face struck Kirby as strangely familiar. Despite his predicament his mind was struggling with memories of newspaper pictures.

“Herr von Bergsten—” the feldwebel was saluting the tall figure. And at that instant Kirby’s mind clicked, and he knew. This was the von Bergsten! This was the German scientist whose fame just before the war had been world-wide—the Edison of Germany! The great von Bergsten, who had been reported dead of heart failure close after the outbreak of the war, but who now stood here, looking, worn and old, but very much alive.

“Ja?” the voice of the scientist was deep, resonant. “You say he presented some papers?”

The feldwebel handed them over in silence. Kirby stood, helpless amid the still-menacing ring of Mausers. Von Bergsten glanced at the papers, put them down on the desk. Then he looked at the torn Rodet map—and as he did so an expression as of pain deepened the lines around his blue eyes. His glance narrowed

then as it raised to Kirby, who had been pushed before the desk.

“So you are of the Nachrichtenamt, Oberleutnant Wolff?”

It was so much more a statement of fact than a question that Kirby’s hopes soared. Why, von Bergsten was accepting him as a Hun, accepting his false identity! He was not going to be shot as a spy, not—

Then his eyes went wide with fresh surprise and horror. For even as he was nodding his assent to the question, he saw von Bergsten’s lined face go livid. The blue eyes were like glacial pools. With a sudden curse which betrayed an almost volcanic temper, the German scientist whipped up a Mauser pistol from the desk, pointed it at Kirby’s head.

“You snooping swine!” his voice was a roar now. “I feel like shooting you like the rat you are!”

Kirby could only stare into the menacing black muzzle, so close it looked like a cannon maw. Then, suddenly, von Bergsten seemed to control his rage with an effort; he partially lowered the pistol, gestured with it to the Boche soldiers, crisped an order.

CHAPTER VII Murder Science

Two of the Huns remained to menace Kirby with their Mausers from behind. The others filed out the doorway. More were outside the window; and von Bergsten, Mauser pistol in hand, faced the Mosquito from the front. Kirby was still trapped; still unarmed and helpless to make a move.

“So you found the map!” von Bergsten grated. “You found it and came snooping here, despite all the promise I had from the High Command! Ach, you are all contemptible! I would have more respect for you if you were an Allied spy instead of a German—at least then your snooping would be balanced by bravery!”

Kirby could have laughed hysterically at the irony of these words. The fact that he was being taken for a German seemed to put him

in a worse predicament than if he had been betrayed as a Yank!

“If you were of the enemy, you would be shot; yet now, because you are a German—” Von Bergsten broke off with a curse. Then suddenly his blue-eyed gaze fastened on the Mosquito’s grease-stained face. He was giving Kirby a scrutiny so keen that the Yank felt as if his very soul were being read, “You are of the flying branch, I see. And young, too.” The German’s voice softened a little now. “It is bad, bad. Tell me, why did you ever go into the Nachrichtenamt?”

Kirby answered with careful judgment: “I was chosen by my superiors.”

“You do not look like their breed. You do not look the type who would stab fellowmen in the back, who would resort to the vilest tactics to gain their ends in the name of patriotism.” Contempt edged his deep voice. “Patriotism without honor is uncivilized barbarism! You have flown in the sky,” the softer tone deepened in his voice and a strange glow came now into his blue eyes. “Doesn’t that mean anything to you? Isn’t aviation itself worth more than all this stupid, bloody battling and treachery on the ground?”

“Ja wohl, it is!” Kirby answered, and was surprised by his own sincerity. Something in the tone of this white-haired old scientist was making him feel a liking for the man. “I think flying is more wonderful than anything else one can do,” he was saying warmly

“Yet, you come snooping here like a rat,” von Bergsten repeated. “Why? To ferret out the secret for your chief, Udermann! Do you think he cares what happens to aviation? No, he thinks only of the present, of this war that will soon end one way or the other, while flying will go on. You are young. Can you not consider the future? Do you not want to see airplanes change from the crude frail craft they are now to sturdy machines that can fly at incredible speed over incredible distances?”

Kirby had listened with growing awe. He was almost oblivious of the two menacing guards, oblivious of von Bergsten’s pistol, and of the bustling factory outside the door. This German scientist fascinated him. The man had the

magnetic personality of the true visionary, peering into the future.

“I swear, Herr von Bergsten,” his voice was still sincere, but the shrewd soldier in him, playing the spy, was gaining the upper hand. If he could only get to the bottom of this whole mystery now— “I swear, Herr von Bergsten, that I knew nothing of all this. Oberst Udermann never told me—”

“Yet you have in your possession the map drawn by a man who, though of the enemy, is dearer to me than all of you put together! A man whom,” his voice shook, “I was fool enough to betray—in the paltry name of patriotism. I betrayed Emil Rodet; I was silent to his coded message. How,” his eyes misted, “can I dare face him again?”

Kirby was almost on the verge of telling the German he would never be able to face Emil Rodet again under any circumstances. But he restrained himself. The soldier now had completely the upper hand. He must find out everything he could.

“Pardon me for my ignorance,” he lied now. “I do not know who Emil Rodet is. The map you speak of—Udermann gave it to me. And I did not snoop here, Herr von Bergsten: I tried to come openly, when your men seized me.” He shook his head. “This is all most confusing. You make me feel ashamed, yet I have done nothing I thought wrong.”

It was a shrewd speech, aimed directly at what he thought was the German’s character.

“I do not know yet what to do with you, Oberleutnant Wolff. But since I see in you a young flyer, energetic, capable—I shall tell you what as yet I have told no outsider. No, do not move from where you are. Stand still and remember you are covered.”

He himself moved to a desk chair, sat down, his Mauser pistol before him. The two Boche guards near the door remained vigilant, their rifles gripped and ready. And as Kirby stood a prisoner, von Bergsten began a story which soon held the Mosquito enthralled, a story which—only because he was a young flyer who happened to appeal to von Bergsten—he was getting freely from the German scientist’s own lips.

IT began many years before the war, when von Bergsten was at the height of his scientific career. At that time von Bergsten interested himself in the airplane, then a new thing. And even then von Bergsten envisioned aviation of the future—streamlined ships that flew with projectile like speed, conquering space and gravity. And working with von Bergsten, as an assistant, was a Frenchman named Emil Rodet—a rich man with lands in several parts of France who, rather than waste his riches in idle luxuries, threw them and his own unflagging energies into the same cause as von Bergsten.

“Both of us saw that the secret we must fathom was how to make engines go fast and powerfully enough; how to propel such ships through the air,” the scientist said.

Kirby nodded, not daring to speak for fear of breaking the continuity.

“Petrol improved with time of course. But there was a limit to the force and speed of explosions you could get. Rodet and I considered different propellants—even rockets, but we were unsatisfied. And then, as fate would have it, found the answer on Rodet’s own properties in the Somme sector, or rather Rodet found the answer. He found that by distilling the peculiar slate-mixed coal that is to be had only in that section of country, a new type of petrol could be secured—a petrol fully ten times as explosive as any now in use! That was how Rodetol—for we named it after him—was born!”

Kirby was trying hard to keep his face a mask, to show only normal interest—not stunned amazement. For now, like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle clicking into place, all the mystifying events were at once becoming lucidly clear.

He and Rodet knew that they had the secret of airplane speed in their grasp then. But there were obstacles. The fuel, Rodetol, had to be distilled at normal temperature, and it came out in a gaseous form—a vapor which had to be compressed to make a liquid petrol. For this the two men found an artificial but difficult method—and here von Bergsten was suddenly tight-lipped. He would not tell how they had done it. “However,” he said, and now the pain

again etched his lined face, “we saw that we had only made a temporary bridge over that gap. Though we had a way of producing a liquid fuel, it was dangerous—nein, even suicidal, to try to put it to real use in airplanes as yet. It could only be used in experiments. To give it to flyers would be risking their very lives in every flight. We both agreed, Rodet, and I, not to release Rodetol to the world until we could find a way of rendering it safe and sane. And then the war came!”

It was here that the story of amazing aeronautical science took on a note of tragedy. Under the shadow of war, the two friends—officially enemies now—had parted, both agreeing to stay out of the war itself and work independently on the new product, both promising not to release it to either side. Rodet had retired to St. Pierre. Von Bergsten, knowing the fanatic militarism of his own country, had been forced to take a stronger measure—he had faked his own death, had the report given out. Then he had retired to this castle here, inherited from his feudal ancestors—a castle whose existence was unknown. And here, carrying out another custom from feudal times, von Bergsten had a whole corps of “serfs” who lived on his property and who, when he called them, became his own private army—wearing uniforms with the family coat-of-arms: the hammers of Thor.

Secretly, von Bergsten had constructed his factory, to continue working on the Rodetol formula. And then came the grim, swift tide of national events.

“The years passed. I saw Germany being beaten back, crushed, for I was not blind even in my isolation. A new country came against us with its fresh young blood—the United States. Our armies were in retreat. Desperately our leaders strove to win the war through the air; but the Zeppelin failed under anti-aircraft guns. The airplane was beaten by the airplanes of the enemy. Our great aces—Boelke, Immelmann, Richthofen—all went down. Can you not see how I felt? I who knew I had a secret which, despite the danger of its use, could make our “air force so superior to the enemy that we could wipe them out? Can you

not guess with what emotions—when at times I secretly visited Berlin or some other city—I saw the troops, with younger and younger faces, marching to battle, while the wounded and maimed came straggling back? And when, in my work, I discovered a way to make Rodetol a little safer—”

He broke off, as if a constricting sob had momentarily choked him. Kirby did not move, but full understanding showed in his eyes. The German hardly needed to finish. The rest was obvious enough.

VON BERGSTEN had written a letter to the High Command, telling them he was alive and that he knew how to give them victory in the air. He had had no idea of doing it on a large scale—not with Rodetol so unsafe. Nor did he intend to let them in on the secret. If they gave him a free hand, and did not try to find his base, he would show them how to make ships for the new fuel, and supply enough fuel to at least balance the tide of war.

There was no danger of Rodet doing the same thing for France. For Rodet had already lost his coal properties in the Somme—they were in German hands, which made it possible for von Bergsten to procure all the special coal he needed.

The business of the new Rodetol-propelled ships was given to the staffel of the Nachrichtenamt—Udermann’s staffel. Meetings were arranged between von Bergsten, Udermann, and others of the Imperial Staff. The new ships were made and kept on Udermann’s secret drome. And secretly, von Bergsten had his own private army men bring coal to the hidden castle, where he manufactured the new fuel and sent it to Udermann with equal secrecy.

“No sooner had I begun than I realized what a monster I had created! The new fuel, with all my secret improvements, was still dangerous to use. It killed as many of our flyers as the enemy—the new type planes would explode in mid-air.

“I had the large Mercedes engines specially constructed, with a new, revolutionary cam shaft which could take care of the powerful, rapid-firing Rodetol. I used large propellers

with a low pitch angle to keep them from tearing off their mountings. I improved the stream-lining; and for the guns, which fired so rapidly when synchronized with these whizzing propellers, I used a new processed steel.

“Still the chief danger of the Rodetol itself was not eliminated—ships continued to explode. But Udermann cared nothing for this sacrifice of human life.

“He kept calling for more Rodetol—he himself had learned how to manufacture the ships at the Gotha plant. Udermann secretly planned that he would get an enormous fleet of the new ships—enough to wipe out the Allies in one mighty raid. In this I refused to co-operate.

“Udermann was furious by my refusal. He threatened me, but I said if he tried to find my plant....if he betrayed the High Command’s promise, I should destroy my entire factory and bury the secret of Rodetol forever. This checked him. Yet all along I have known that he has been snooping, trying to discover the location of this base. To forestall him I sent four of my men to try to get Rodet’s map. Without it Udermann would not even have known that it was in the Black Forest, so well did I keep my operations covered. But now you, Oberleutnant Wolff, had come here, with the map—”

Kirby stiffened as the story brought him back with a shock to his grim surroundings. His mind had been piecing together the last links of the whole chain. Rodet causing that drive in the Somme—to regain the coal-lands of course, no doubt with the thought of trying to manufacture Rodetol for France to counteract his former partner’s treachery. Then the failure of the drive, Rodet naturally not revealing the secret after that. For it would be useless to France without the coal—it would only further establish Rodet as a traitor.

Then, too, Rodet probably was as yet not fully convinced of von Bergsten’s treachery, he had been trying to get into communication with the German, to learn the facts. Faced with death, he had at last appealed to the Three Mosquitoes—and here his motive had been similar to the motive that had prompted von

Bergsten to tell his story. The Mosquitoes were flyers who would care about the future of aviation, be willing to fight for it.

And then another thought jerked Kirby’s nerves taut. Udermann! Why, Udermann had not known the location of this Rodetol factory—had tried to find it by taking that map at St. Pierre! He had only gotten a small piece of it, but that piece had evidently been enough to tell him the hideout was in the Black Forest. Knowing shrewdly that the Mosquitoes, with the rest of the map, would come, he had laid his trap, determined to let them lead him to the spot he sought. But as he had said, he had attacked too soon. The Mosquitoes had still been ignorant of the location. And now—

“Herr von Bergsten,” Kirby spoke almost desperately in the silence of the guarded office. “I am grateful for your confidence. I see the situation you are in—I wish you would take me on your side, temporarily at least.”

Von Bergsten rose. His eyes were sharp, narrow. “I cannot forget that you are of the Nachrichtenamt—that they can teach even a young flyer like you the tricks of snakes. If you are trying merely to trick me—” his hand closed on his gun. “Even now I do not know whether to allow you to leave this place or not.”

“I assure you I am not going to trick you,” Kirby said. And inwardly he was thinking the Allies must be notified—this place must be wiped out somehow, even though he’d hate himself for betraying von Bergsten. Yet von Bergsten himself said he would rather see it wiped out than have the menace be built into a monster. “Let me go, Herr von Bergsten. Let me talk to other young flyers in my corps. I’m certain they will see this thing eye to eye with you—that they will refuse to continue flying the new, suicidal ships.”

A glint of eagerness came into the scientist’s blue eyes. “If only I thought it could be done,” he murmured. “If only I—”

He broke off, and at the same instant Kirby’s frame went suddenly rigid.

CHAPTER VIII

Death's Plaything

WITH terrible abruptness the twilight outside had been shattered by the yammer of motors—wide-open Mercedes motors! And even as von Bergsten gave an alarmed cry, even as the two sentries in the room started up, paling, pandemonium broke loose!

Down from the sky over the clearing came swift flitting shadows darker than the dusk. Fokker D-7's—checkered Fokkers, of the Nachrichtenamt! More than a score of them this time—and in their lead an eagle-marked, streamer-flying crate, the plane of Erich Udermann himself!

Even in that first stunned instant Kirby realized what had happened. Udermann, having been shown this part of the Black Forest, by the unwitting Mosquitoes, had gotten his whole squadron together and managed to find the place!

The gray-clad guards outside were running confusedly like chickens without heads. Fully a dozen of the Fokkers, led by Udermann, were slicing down with engines sobbing out, landing with precision on the wide expansive lawn. The rest, with bombs protruding from their underbellies, were wheeling overhead like menacing birds.

Von Bergsten, pistol in hand, had turned to the window to fling open the French-type panes. Now his eyes jerked from the window to Kirby, who was standing frozen, as his plan of escape was already nipped in the bud. The scientist's pistol whipped up again towards the Mosquito.

"You lying schweinhund!" he was grating. "So you were not trying to trick me?"

Kirby, again seeing that pistol maw before him, could only dart a trapped glance out the window. Even as he looked he saw the Hun pilots who had landed climbing from their ships, Luger pistols in hand. And still in their lead, was the stocky, skull-faced figure of Udermann.

The sentries of von Bergsten's army had rallied to rush towards the landed Huns with leveling rifles now. Udermann waved at them

threateningly, then raised his voice so that its rasp carried clearly to the open office window: "Von Bergsten, call off your dogs, do you hear? My planes that are still in the air will blow this place to the devil if one shot is fired at us! We're coming in!"

Even as he spoke, as if obeying the unheard command, the Fokkers over-head swooped lower, their bombs visible.

So suddenly did von Bergsten make his next move that Kirby didn't realize what was happening until, against his right temple, he felt the cold pressure of steel. The scientist, a light of utter desperation in his blue eyes, was pressing his Mauser pistol right at the Mosquito's head. Von Bergsten, pistol against Kirby's temple, yelled out the window:

"You are checkmated, you swine! I have one of your officers—Oberleutnant Wolff! Go back to your planes and go away, or I shall put a bullet through his skull!"

Udermann's voice rose: "It is bluff! Come on, let us pay no attention!"

"Bluffing, am I?" von Bergsten's yell rose in Kirby's ear. "Well, look for-yourself." And to Kirby, savagely: "Get over to that window, schnell Hurry, or I pull this trigger!"

The Mosquito saw that it would be certain suicide to disobey. With despair in his heart, he moved, perforce, to the window. He tried to keep his grease-stained face in the shadow of the room-light, but the gun in his temple literally pushed his head around.

A shout of indignation burst from Udermann—a shout which told Kirby the Hun spy chief knew this was not his Flight Commander Wolff at all. And at a fresh command, while the Fokkers overhead kept the gray-clad sentries from daring resistance, Udermann and the group of pilots deliberately advanced towards the castle again, Lugers gripped.

Von Bergsten gave a desperate oath. His finger closed on the trigger of the Mauser pistol. The pistol roared.

A split second before it fired, Kirby had moved. With sudden unexpectedness, he had jerked his head—literally pushing the pistol partially aside with his own temple. And at the same time he brought up a swift left fist

doubled into a ball. The blow glanced from the scientist's jaw, stunning him and sending him backwards. He shouted in fury, tried to whip up the gun. Kirby grabbed at it like a drowning man clutching a straw, wrested it from von Bergsten's grip. The two Boche soldiers at the door were already lowering their rifles, aiming as they moved with guttural oaths towards the Mosquito.

Kirby whirled, jerking the Mauser trigger. Crack! One of the two Huns stopped in his tracks, a vacant expression coming over his face as his knees buckled and he fell, his rifle clattering to the floor on top of him. Von Bergsten leaped at Kirby like a wildcat then, displaying surprising strength for one so old and worn. He grabbed at Kirby's neck with both arms, pulling the Mosquito back. The second Hun soldier came charging in with bayonet fixed. The Mosquito jerked around with all his ebbing strength, managed, to point the Mauser once more even as the glistening bayonet lunged directly towards him.

THE MAUSER flamed again. The bayonet slithered away as the second Jerry went down like a log. Then Kirby himself was knocked off balance by a second rush from von Bergsten, whose face was livid with fury, the eyes blue flame. The two sprawled to the floor. Kirby writhed madly, trying to push off the leechlike German.

As if to nip the very thought in the bud, he heard a pound of feet at the doorway. The room filled with guttural shouts, rushing shoes. And even as von Bergsten at last rolled off Kirby, a rain of kicks and revolver butt blows stunned the Mosquito.

The next thing he knew, he was jerked to his feet, held up like a scarecrow by a whole group of savage faced Nachrichtennmt pilots, who prodded him with their Lugers. He took in the scene bitterly. The office was in the hands of Udermann's men. Outside more Nachrichtenamt flyers were finishing the disarming of the guard, and the Fokkers from overhead were now landing one by one.

There was another step at the door, and Udermann strode in, his deathlike face lighted with an evil expression of triumph. His

greenish eyes flickered towards the captive Mosquito as he passed without stopping. Across the room there was a movement. Von Bergsten, disheveled, looking even older than his years now, was brutally pushed in front of the Hun spy chief by two more pilots.

"You swine!" weakly rose the voice of the scientist. "You have no right to trespass on my grounds."

Udermann calmly took out a cigarette case, selected a long Turkish cigarette, put it in his thin-lipped mouth and lit it.

"Von Bergsten," His voice was blighting, "it is not you who are to dictate terms now. We happen to be in a hurry. Within the next hours—as soon as the flyers I sent back can report the location of this castle—a newly completed fleet of the new type planes will arrive here on trucks. By midnight those planes are to be fueled with Bodetol—every one of them, and there will be at least thirty. We will take off from these grounds—my men can smooth a big enough runway."

A chill apprehension tightened about Kirby's heart as, amid his ring of captors, he heard these words. And he saw his own horror reflected in the pale face of von Bergsten.

"No!" the scientist cried. "No, you can't do this, Udermann! It will mean the finish of my product! The High Command promised—"

"The High Command," Udermann smoked calmly, "is fortunately most alert and not blind. The High Command has given me full charge and responsibility regarding the use of the new type planes. We are not going to delay any longer. We must strike while the iron is hot Tonight—" his voice rose now with savage triumph; his greenish eyes flickered, "tonight our fleet will make the previous raids look like child's play. We will strike Chaumont first, and cripple their entire nerve center. And then—"

He paused, and a wave of horror coursed through the listening Mosquito. Already he could visualize those new rocket like ships, a huge fleet of them, swooping down on Chaumont, slaughtering G.H.Q., then running rampant all over the Allied lines.

"No!" again von Bergsten's voice rose in furious negation. "You won't do this to me,

Udermann! It is absurd, fantastic! I refuse to have anything to do with it. The secret of manufacturing Bodeltol is still known only to myself and my loyal servants—and you can kill us rather than open our lips! I refuse, do you hear?”

Udermann’s face grew suddenly lean, wolfish. He flung his cigarette to the floor, stamped on it as if it were a bug. “Von Bergsten, there are ways of making you comply. If we take a batch of your private soldiers and shoot them, perhaps that will move you.”

“Verdammt, you wouldn’t! You—”

“I hope such tactics will not be necessary,” the cruel Hun’s voice was suddenly silky now, conciliatory. “I am sure you will be reasonable about it, Herr von Bergsten. After all, why should you resent it that I finally found your plant—when, before me, two verdammt Allied spies have already penetrated it!”

The scientist started, his eyes widening. “A lie!” he blurted.

“First,” Udermann ignored the interruption, “there was their man—J-7.” He picked up one of the new type planes from my secret drome, flew with it back to them. My own agents report that luckily the ship exploded before he could land. But now another spy has penetrated your own plant, the most dangerous man the Allies could send.” He spoke without looking at Kirby. “I thought only cats had more than one life, but evidently a Mosquito has more also.”

“Mosquito?” von Bergsten echoed dumbly now. “What do you mean?”

“I mean,” Udermann’s voice was deadly now, “that the man you idiotically tried to pass off as Oberleutnant Wolff is actually Captain Kirby, leader of the Yankee Three Mosquitoes. His face, even stained with grease, I would know anywhere.”

VON BERGSTEN went rigid, then whirled to look at Kirby. The Mosquito, knowing the game was up, stood silent amid his captors, his face a mask,

“You mean that man is a Yankee Swine? And I confided in him? I—”

“See for yourself. The Three Mosquitoes all have a price on their heads, as you may know.

Here is a little circular issued to the Nachrichtenamt showing their photographs.”

He fished a paper from his pocket, handed it to the scientist. The latter scrutinized it, then walked closer to Kirby, peered at his face.

“It is true! He is Captain Kirby! And he tricked me!”

Udermann was quick to carry on: “Yes, that swine American penetrated your plant. It is fortunate for you—for all of us, that he did not get away before we arrived. You have been blind, von Bergsten. With all your brain absorbed in science, you let other things escape your notice. You speak of honor, of keeping promises you made to a certain enemy, when all the time you are being betrayed.”

“But not by Rodet!” the scientist broke out then, as if clinging to a last vestige of illusion. “Rodet has done nothing—it is I who betrayed him.”

“Rodet,” said Udermann, “is dead. I killed him—never mind under what circumstances.”

“You killed Emil Rodet?” the scientist cried, with frenzy now.

“Wait. I killed Rodet to shut his mouth, do you understand? He was ready to give everything he knew to the Allies, put the secret of the new fuel within their grasp. You do not believe me? Then how do you suppose this American, Captain Kirby, found his way here? How do you suppose he got Rodet’s map? Do you not understand—the Allies know enough to ruin us, and they have none of your scruples! Unless we make one good job of it with the new ships, Germany will go down completely!”

It was clever, diabolically clever, Kirby thought, the way he spoke—painting the picture in his own color. And the worst of it was that the Mosquito dared not try to correct the story—to tell that the Allies did not know the secret, which was probably the very information Udermann longed to hear.

Von Bergsten was standing like a man stricken, anguish on his features.

“I guess you are right, Udermann,” he burst out. “I have been a fool. War is what it is. One cannot keep clean in a cesspool! My product seems to be ruined for future use now—but,”

his eyes blazed, "the enemy will not have the satisfaction of using it against, us! Bring your new ships, bring them all! I will make that fuel if it is the last thing I do!"

Udermann's green eyes lighted, and Kirby felt his last hopes drain.

"Wait!" the scientist cursed. "It has just occurred to me: the thing is impossible. We cannot manufacture so much fuel in such short order. You will have to postpone the raid."

"It must go tonight!" Udermann demanded. "You must find a way. My men will do your bidding."

"It is not that. It is the distilling tank. Even when we are merely producing normal amounts of the fuel, it is a danger for the workmen to operate that tank. We cannot prevent leakage because air must get in—and in the making the Rodetol gives off an odorless, invisible vapor which is deadly. One of my men died last week without knowing what happened to him. In a rush job like this where several men will have to take turns going to the tank, it may prove suicidal!"

"Can't you turn it off once in a while when the fumes become deadly?"

"There is no way of telling. As a matter of fact, we could probably get out all the fuel needed before the danger arises, but since we cannot tell when that moment comes—I dare not risk my men. There is no gauge; I have been trying to invent one."

Udermann cursed. It was obvious he didn't care whether men were killed or not, but he had to deal with the more humane von Bergsten.

IN HERE was a momentary pause. Kirby's captors, still menacing the Mosquito were giving their attention to the discussion now, the Yank noted.

With a gritted oath, he lurched from the grip that held him—tried to break out of the ring of Lugers. His fist catapulted before him, smashing to one pilot's jaw, sending the man down. Madly, cursing, he tried to leap for the open window then. But they were too quick for him.

He struggled madly, futilely, as he was banged and kicked into submission. Panting, glaring

hatred at them all, he was once more being held up like a scarecrow, and now one Luger was pointing straight at his heart. The swart-faced Boche who held it was shouting across the room:

"Let us shoot him and be done with it, Herr Oberst Udermann?"

His finger was eagerly tensing on the trigger. But Udermann, turning, held up a restraining hand. The Hun spy chief came up to Kirby for the first time now—the skull-face loomed before the Mosquito, and in its greenish eyes Kirby read that his death was still certain, even though delayed.

"So, you still hoped to escape, Yankee swine?" Udermann's voice held a strange note of ironic venom now. "Unfortunately we are short of men, and it has occurred to me that you might be of help to us." He turned over his shoulder, to von Bergsten. "You say you lack a gauge to tell you when that distilling tank becomes too deadly to approach. Well, your problem is solved!"

Von Bergsten looked bewildered, but Kirby understood at once, and a wave of clammy chill horror enveloped his whole being.

"You dirty rat!" he blazed out. "You can't get away with this! You can't—"

Again he tried to struggle, but now his captors were wary enough to hold him in a viselike grip. Fresh blows silenced him. Udermann was already explaining to von Bergsten who seemed horrified but angry and desperate enough to assent.

They took the cursing, struggling Mosquito out—dragged him out like a sack of wheat. Out into the immense factory chamber, where workmen scurried and the vats bubbled. They took him to a huge upright tank from which clay pipes led out. Up a iron spiral stairway to a landing close to the top of this tank, where air-holes showed, and other pipes came down. Ropes were produced. Helpless, the Mosquito was bound hand and foot to the rail, so that his face was right over the air holes of the tank. He could not move.

Udermann climbed the spiral stairway, confronted the bound Yank. "They say that the best way to snuff out a mosquito is with some sort of vapor," the spy chief smiled

murderously. "Your death will warn the workmen when the tank is dangerous to approach."

Kirby's face was livid. He strained futilely against the bonds which held him to the rail. "Damn you, you Boche devil!" he gritted. "If I only could get my hands on you, I'd—"

"You have tried that already. This time, my friend, you and your comrades picked the wrong man to match."

He barked an order and he and his men left the writhing Mosquito, climbed down the stairs. Von Bergsten stood on the floor, rasping orders now. Shrill whistles blew. And in another instant the factory became a bedlam of activity, a saturnalia of sound.

The workmen of von Bergsten swarmed like ants. Vents were opened. There was a roar of coal coming in a chute—beneath the bound Mosquito the tank was opened and he saw that coal pouring into it. Chemicals hissed through pipings. Von Bergsten strode around, his shock of white hair dancing in the light, his arms gesturing orders. Udermann and his pilots stood by, armed and watching, but evidently afraid to mingle with the activity lest von Bergsten call it off. The scientist was guarding the secret of his process.

The vent of the tank below Kirby clanged shut. Over his head a pipe lowered mechanically fitted into an opening hole, and he heard liquid splashing through. The pipe lifted. Within the tank came the hissing sound of distillation. It had begun!

CHAPTER IX

Resurrection

THE Mosquito had stopped struggling against his bonds now, since it was useless. He must at least try to save his breath, so he could hold out—though he had no hope. Sooner or later the deadly, odorless vapors would be coming up right under his face and he the human gauge, would be snuffed out!

Now two workmen climbed the stairway, went past him, to work levers which evidently controlled the water-flow. They did their job confidently, for the human gauge showed it was safe—then climbed down again. Another

pair came a few minutes later, and this continued.

The Mosquito tried to occupy himself by watching the work. He could see that the stuff from this tank, made when water and chemicals were poured upon the coal, went through the clay pipes to the other end of the chamber, where there was a closed room vigilantly guarded even from Udermann's men by von Bergsten's soldiers. That must be where the Rodetol was turned, by the "temporary" process, from a gas into a liquid. The thought was confirmed in the next moment. Workmen emerged from the room pushing wheelbarrows, on which stood large metal tanks. Rodetol tanks! Ready for the planes.

Time dragged. Outside moonlight swept the lawns. And presently from the road in the woods, huge lorries were emerging. On them, their wings short enough not to protrude, were the new type, projectile-shaped planes! Workmen and Hun pilots unloaded them onto the lawn; and each truck was sent away with a Fokker, which had to be dismantled.

One by one the Rodetol tanks were being borne out, evidently placed in those new ships. And other trucks were arriving with bombs and ammunition!

Kirby's despair increased with each passing minute. Faced with a horrible death which might strike him at any instant, he could only watch helplessly while the lawn filled with those projectile-shaped ships, which gleamed in the moonlight. Already the array of them had chilled him to the marrow. When they took the air, swooped over Chaumont—

The lights began to blur. That was the first sensation Kirby felt at all, and it came suddenly. He knew that something was happening to his senses. For now the lights seemed to break out into myriad colors. The Mosquito's nostrils began to sting. A clammy sweat broke out on his body.

The vapor was beginning to do its work!

The Mosquito tried to breathe more slowly. If he could hold out against it. Two more workmen came up. He stood scarcely breathing at all. They turned the levers, went down. Not yet—he alone was getting it, being

right over the air vents. He must hold on—hold on. He exerted all his will power to control his lungs.

Slow nausea seeped into the pit of his stomach; his throat became dry, parched. The whole room was swimming. His ears began to shriek—then he knew it was not just a sound in his head, but a sound outside. Hazily he peered towards the big windows. He could make out the new type ships, lined up wing to wing now. Livid sparks came from several of them. Their engines were being revved, making that shrieking sound which in the air would be ten times magnified. They were getting ready to go; most of the petrol had been made already. Hours must have passed.

Death was seeping out of the tank, and Kirby fighting to stall it. Now two more coveralled workmen were starting to climb the stairs. The vapor should be strong enough now. The Mosquito was holding his breath again. If only it would make those workmen, who were breathing regularly, crumple up when they reached the top of the stairs. If only they got a real lungful.

HIS brain was spinning. The shriek of Rodetol ships outside was pounding his eardrums. The two workmen seemed to climb the stairs with painful, snail-like slowness. Kirby did not think he could hold out. In that moment, holding his breath, his mind went to his two comrades—Shorty and Travis, who had fallen before him. Soon he would join them. He knew then that his mind was wandering; in his daze the faces of the two ascending workmen seemed to become the faces of Shorty and Travis.

Funny, there was. Shorty's round, corpulent face; and there was Travis' long countenance, tight-lipped as ever. And the closer they came—they were almost at the top of the stairs now—the more clearly defined became their features. Kirby, still holding his breath, blinked his eyes. Mustn't be seeing ghosts now. Those were two Boches, two workmen who he was trying to make commit suicide by staying alive himself.

“Take it easy, feller! We'll get you out in a jiffy!”

Shorty's voice. Certainly no doubt about that, even though it came in a terse whisper which would not be heard below, above the bustle of the plant, the whine of Rodetol ships.

Hell, it was no delirious vision! A mad, incredulous joy surged through Kirby's being, even though he still held his breath. Those two men dressed as von Bergsten's workers were Shorty and Travis!

Somehow, they were here, were coming to their leader as they always came, as all hell had never stopped them from coming! Coming to pull him out of this horrible death-trap, to— And then, even as they were reaching the iron landing, Kirby's joy turned into sudden panic. All this time he had been holding his breath, knowing that when he expelled it he would only get a lungful of the odorless vapors. And Shorty and Travis obviously didn't know about that vapor—they were breathing free and full. When they came here—the trick he had hoped would doom two real workers now threatened his own buddies! They were facing death, without knowing it!

Indeed, even the shrewd, lanky Travis was oblivious of the peril into which he and his little comrade were going. That Kirby was in a state of daze and weakness both Mosquitoes could see; but they did not know it came from fumes. Their whole thought was centered on getting to him, getting him free, now that they had found him.

Fate had literally guided the two Mosquitoes to their leader. This afternoon, separated in that dogfight, both had managed to get away from the Nachrichtenamt ships with their own Spads shot to hell. Both had crashed. From that time, still knowing that the secret base must lie in the Black Forest, they had continued their search on foot. It had been unrewarded until well after nightfall. Then, footsore and despairing, the two Mosquitoes had seen a truck clattering along a road. It was one of the trucks from Udermann's drome, bearing on it one of the Rodetol ships.

The two Mosquitoes had unobtrusively hitched onto the vehicle, which had driven straight to the hidden castle here. But before it reached the grounds two of von Bergsten's workers had joined it from the rear. They had

come directly upon the two hiding Mosquitoes. Shorty and Travis had unceremoniously used their silent revolver butts. They had finished the workers, thrown their bodies into brush after swiping their coveralls.

Yes, Fate had guided them. As workers they had entered the factory unchallenged, their faces concealed in the darkness. As workers they had spotted Kirby tied to the rail. And as workers, at Travis' shrewd decision, they had gone up the ladder like other pairs of Germans, ostensibly to operate the levers.

And now, eagerly, they were on the landing, coming towards Kirby and the deadly vapor they did not know about. And Kirby was in an utter panic as he saw them come closer to where the stuff emanated from the air holes. In another instant—

The leader of the Mosquitoes, sick and almost ready to collapse, reached his decision then. He opened his mouth. He used what was left of his breath to grit out, distinctly:

“Hold your breaths, guys! There's gas here! There's—”

Before he could say more, his lungs, working organically, against his own will, quickly sucked to get in more air. And the whole chamber seemed to go dark; he felt himself sag against the ropes which held him, felt himself passing out.

Smack! The blow on his cheek, delivered by Travis, was almost vicious. Smack! Again, shocking him partially out of his daze. He did not know that already Travis and Shorty, having heeded the command to hold their breaths, had worked with lightning haste. He did not feel Shorty's pocket knife cutting loose his bonds, did not feel them dragging him away from the tank, thrusting a gun—for they had three between them—into his limp hands, which took it mechanically.

But the slaps Travis gave him were bringing him out of it, that and the air that was fresh away from the tank.

“Vas ist! Look! They have untied the prisoner!”

The shout broke shrilly from one of Udermann's pilots who was watching below.

It rose over the din of the factory, the din of ships outside.

And that yell, followed by other yells as the alarm spread through the plant like wildfire, roused Kirby completely from his daze. His muscles rallied; his body straightened with his own strength, his hands closed on the gun. He was like one returned from the dead, returned with new life-blood flowing through him.

HUN pilots and workers as well were rushing toward the bottom of the iron stairway now, bringing up rifles. And then Kirby, thoroughly alive, was gritting to his two comrades: “Come on, guys! Don't let 'em stop us now!” And once more came the inevitable response, which showed the Three Mosquitoes were reunited again: “Let's go!”

Shorty Carn, marksman of the three, had already whirled with a gritted oath to the driveway. As Boche started up it, firing cautiously, fearful of hitting the inflammable tanks, the little Mosquitoes gun—a stolen Luger—flamed and spat viciously. The leading Hun fell backwards, knocking the rest down with his dead, falling weight. Kirby led the way to the opposite rail. “Jump, guys! I can make it—don't worry!”

And in turn, the three men climbed over the rail, leaped down through ten feet of space to the floor below. They landed sprawling but with their feet under them. Together, all three of their guns spitting now, they catapulted forward, heading for the nearest exit—one of the doors.

A fresh wave of Germans from outside suddenly blocked the doorway, charging in with leveled bayonets. At another, shout from Kirby the Yank trio whirled, zigzagged in a different direction. They were trying for one of the windows now.

“Get them, you fools! They are all three Yankees!” Udermann yelled again ducking somewhere in the background. The window loomed, but the Yanks saw the Germans were again cutting them off. As they backed to fire their Lugers anew, Kirby almost tripped over one of the clay outlet pipes which he knew took the Rodetol, still in gas form, to the secret room. His eyes lighted desperately, flicked

from the oncoming Boches to the pipe. He leaped forward with head bent low to a spot where one of the plugged Boche soldiers lay, rifle sprawled beside him. Shorty and Travis covered their leader with their own fire as he seized the rifle, ran back with it to the pipe.

While the Germans rallied and were closing in, he swung the rifle as he would swing an axe—brought its heavy butt crashing down on the pipe, yelling at the same time! “Be ready to hold your breath, guys!”

Crash! The pipe shivered. Kirby raised the gun again. The Germans seeing what he was up to, renewed the speed of their oncoming charge. Shorty and Travis used almost all their remaining Luger bullets then—stemming the tide momentarily. Down went Kirby’s gun-butt. Crash! A huge portion of the pipe broke like so much glass.

Hiss-s-s-s-s. Yellowish white clouds billowed out from the opening, poured out like a flood. There was a stifling stench, though at once Kirby knew these fumes were not as deadly as the odorless ones that came from the distiller itself. But they were stifling enough to do lots of harm.

Swiftly the clouds were billowing out into the chamber, filling it with a yellow fog. Already the Mosquitoes were running through the midst of the stuff, heading blindly towards the window. Boches were pounding around in confusion now. Men could be heard choking, falling from the slow but insidious effect of the fumes. Von Bergsten’s voice rose somewhere in the sea of vapor: “Verdamnt, be careful! If it is ignited—”

“Here’s the window, guys. Stick close!” Kirby was already climbing a sill, hurling his frame at glass which shattered into a thousand pieces, stung his cheeks. The three leaped out into the night—where the air was hideous with the whine of revving Rodetol ships.

In the shadow of the window, where smoke billowed out, the Yank trio was unseen by the frantically running guards out here. They paused a moment, to take breath.

The whine of Rodetol powered engines suddenly rose to an ear-splitting scream. The three Yanks saw several of the planes leaping forward like ignited rockets, trailing fire. Hun

pilots were hastily climbing into others. In the moonlight they glimpsed a familiar stocky figure rushing to one crate, jumping in. Udermann! He was taking off, his men with him! The raid—Chaumont—

“We’ve got to stop ‘em!” Kirby gritted then. “Fellows, those crates are powered by a new fuel—which is apt to explode, because it has only been turned artificially from a gas to a liquid. But we’ve boasted we can fly anything with wings—and Udermann’s out to wreck everything in sight! Are you with me?”

And even before the other two chorused another “Let’s go!” the three were dashing madly across the grounds. Already Udermann’s ship and two others were in the air, filling it with an unholy racket as they zoomed so swiftly that they seemed to shrink right up in the moonlit sky. Others were streaking down the long runway of the lawn. And now from the building Huns were pouring out of the billowing smoke, staggering as they tried to renew pursuit of the Yanks.

The Mosquitoes reached the line of ships in one mad spurt which almost took away Kirby’s last wind. Three Hun pilots saw them coming, whirled to meet them with up-whipping pistols. Shorty’s gun spat twice, getting one, wounding a second. Kirby leaped in with a terrific swinging left fist which caught the third flush on the jaw, and sent him sprawling, cold.

More Rodetol ships were already taking the air—at least seven of them were off. The Mosquitoes shouted: “Luck!” to each other, then leaped for the low-sunk cockpits.

Kirby got in the center of the three chosen planes, settled down in the seat, hastily fastened the safety. His hands groped for the throttle lever. Like a turtle he raised his head to see that his comrades were in their crates then waved the reckless signal: “Take off!”

HE slammed open the throttle. The shriek that followed split his ear-drums. The blasting slipstream threatened to tear his head from his neck before he ducked low under the triplex windshield. He felt the plane moving under him, so fast that his stomach seemed left somewhere behind. He jerked up his eyes only

to see that two other ships were moving alongside of him. Trees rushed by with breathless speed—then trees loomed ahead.

The Mosquito leader eased his stick forward. So readily did the controls respond at this rate of speed that the crate almost somersaulted before he could pull the stick back again. Then he felt a lift as if he were riding a sky-rocket—and with another peak of his eyes overside he saw the ground and the dark castle dropping away with sickening speed.

Kirby waved, used his rudder ever so lightly, banked with equal gentleness. His Rodetol crate veered around, swinging way across the sky. His comrades followed, sloppily, but close as they could. In split seconds they had circled back over the castle, where they could still see the yellowish smoke billowing. The rest of the fleet of Rodetol planes were starting to take off now—almost a score of them, moving like silver, spark-spitting streaks across the lawn.

“Stop ‘em, guys!” Kirby could not hear his own voice in the shriek of the engine. But he knew his comrades were following him as he eased the stick forward. Again his stomach turned upside down as the crate careened sickeningly, went rushing down, the ships of Shorty and Travis beside it. The castle grounds rushed up so fast that the inexperienced Yanks overshot. They zoomed and were down again in the next second.

This time they were swooping right on top of the fleet still skimming the earth. Kirby found stick-triggers—the spade handle type. He thumbed them.

The special guns emitted a series of detonations so rapid that they sounded like one prolonged roar under the shriek of the ship. From the three diving crates of the Mosquitoes tracers went cascading down like golden hail.

And the aim was true. The ships below crashed, somersaulted, and flamed under the withering fire. The lawn was already a shambles. The Three Mosquitoes, fighting together as always, even though they flew planes years ahead of their time, had stopped all the rest of Udermann’s grim fleet from the take-off.

Zooming, Kirby again managed to poke up his head, to give a new signal to his comrades. They must try to overtake the seven ships that had already gotten off and were now out of sight, winging with Udermann in their lead towards Chaumont.

Kirby hesitated in the split seconds while he and his, comrades zoomed. The castle below must be wiped out if the Hun menace was to be forever silenced. Yet, when Kirby thought of von Bergsten, the German who dreamed of the future of aviation, he hated the thought.

But war was still war, any way you looked at it. The Mosquito leader knew there were bombs under the racks of his ship, and those of his comrades. He had already found the toggles. With grim pain in his heart, he was waving the signal and the Three Mosquitoes were swooping down anew towards the castle. B-r-r-r-r-ooooooooom!

The terrific explosion silenced the very shriek of their engines, as without a single bomb being dropped upon it, the entire castle below went up in a mighty, livid mass of flame which made the sky as light as day! And all that was left was a gaping, smoldering crater of ruin!

Von Bergsten and his secret, his workers and his soldiers, were gone!

Either the gas from the broken pipe inside had somehow been ignited and exploded, or else—and Kirby somehow inclined to this view—von Bergsten himself, as a final atonement, had blown up the place with his own hand.

Kirby, with wild haste, waved again to his comrades—whom he could barely glimpse on either side.

“Udermann and the others, now!” he was waving. “Before they hit Chaumont! They can still blast it!”

THEY needed only the stars to guide them in the right direction. The three screaming ships whirled to the west. And then the three reckless Yanks, who knew that the mere riding in these ships might prove suicide, were trying to make their mad speed still greater!

And despite the peril of it, despite the flogging wind which was almost tearing off his face, Kirby felt an uncanny thrill—as if in this

moment he were living the dream of all aviators—the dream of traversing space at a speed which rivaled the very planets in the universe.

They hardly knew when they had crossed the lines, so swift did the fiery swath of the battle front sweep beneath them. Hell-bent they raced on. They must catch Udermann before it was too late.

And then, suddenly, Kirby's eyes lighted as they peered through the windshield. Pin-points of red pricked the sky ahead—dark rushing shapes. Seven of them—flying in a V with Udermann undoubtedly at point. And they were near the back areas already—getting to Chaumont! The way it looked, they would get there before the Mosquitoes could overtake them!

Then, even as Kirby waved for still more speed, hope soared in him—for now, approaching Udermann's flight from in front, was a whole fleet of night-flying interceptor Camels. English crates. They must have been up in the sky watching for signs of the menace, for they were right in front of it, coming like a winged wall to meet it.

For an instant, as the English guns flamed in the night, the seven Rodetol-ships seemed to slow momentarily. Then a cry of horror burst from Kirby's lips. For he saw the seven Hun ships spurt forward like seven fired shells. They seemed literally to tear into the English squadron which outnumbered them; and their rapid guns sent a whole avalanche of lead before them.

Camels fell off grotesquely, twisting down like dark, dead birds—flaming across the sky like fiery torches, falling to pieces before the withering rapid fire. All in the space of minutes, that British squadron was shot out of the sky by these swift ships which flew like the wind itself!

But there had been a momentary delay; and now Kirby and his two comrades, goaded to grim vengeance, shot their own Rodetol crates on the last lap of the journey. Already, shrewdly, Kirby had led his comrades to a little higher altitude, and now he was rushing with them down a long hill of space, straight for the other squadron hurtling ahead of them.

The seven ships loomed swiftly. The Mosquitoes bent to their trips. Their three pairs of rapid-firers roared in unison.

One of the seven ships was caught immediately in their fire. It staggered off, fell like a stone. The others promptly veered from their formation, whipped up like a bunch of thrown stones. They had been quick to see the situation, to know that these three sister ships must be manned by Yanks. And now, with superior numbers, they came as if to make short work of them.

Blasting lead from their chorusing guns met the three Yanks, whistling in their ears, banging into their hurling crates. The next thing they knew they were in the strangest and most desperate dogfight of their careers! A dogfight in which every maneuver took up whole miles of space—in which antagonists appeared suddenly and then were out of sight altogether in the next instant. A dogfight not of this war, but of some future war—when such speed would be possible!

Kirby was whipping around to keep with his two comrades when he felt his own crate lurch under a sudden well-aimed impact. Glancing back he saw one of the Rodetol crates swooping for his tail. He could not see its low-seated pilot, but from the marksmanship of those shots he knew it was Udermann.

A yell of berserk rage broke from his throat. He had his own ship around in a flash. He went for Udermann's crate with guns blazing, saw it half-roll on its stubby wings—and hurl through miles of space in a side-slip. But he was after it just as quickly.

Again the other ship loomed out of the night. Kirby fired, missed, and Udermann came tearing for him with both guns winking flame. The Mosquito's ship lurched again. The German was still the better marksman.

But the German had not been tied brutally over a distiller, to be used as a human gauge. And Kirby suddenly was hurling his crate towards the other like a streak of silver lightning. He was somehow keeping after it, and his guns were vomiting tracer at a terrific rate.

Most of those shots went wild. But there were some that didn't, for in the next instant

Udermann's skull-like head suddenly came into view. His body jerked up right from the cockpit as if a marionette on a string. His hands clawed the air. His face changed from the semblance of death to death itself.

The ship he flew carried him like a plummet to earth, where a column of livid flame announced its landing. The spy had died as he deserved—slaughtered by one of the very ships he had so treacherously obtained.

IN the meantime, up in the sky above, Shorty and Travis were putting up a desperate fight against the five remaining Rodetol ships. Kirby saw his comrades' crates—which he recognized from their position—taking lead, lurching, even as he zoomed frantically. He joined them in the next instant. Again the Mosquitoes fought. But it was not enough now. The five remaining Germans were desperate, and they had the numbers. They were determined to do their mission or die trying to do it.

The Mosquitoes lunged at them, sliced at them, shrieked at them with gibbering guns. But the Huns were gaining space. The fight was moving west. And presently Kirby, with his own ship as full of lead as Shorty's and Travis', could glimpse the lighter patch of grounds, the rearing network of buildings and roads, which was Chaumont. Hell, despite Udermann's death, his remaining Nachrichtenamt hounds were still going to triumph!

Kirby waved anew to his comrades. They made a last mad stand. They managed again to hold the Germans back, though they had to take more and more tracers to do it. Kirby's hopes drained. It was only a question of time now.

Dawn began to streak the sky. Still the Mosquitoes fought, side by side, their ships riddled and only holding together by what seemed a miracle to Kirby. And then, suddenly, raising his head in the terrific blast of wind, Kirby saw that Travis was waving commandingly. Kirby caught the signal even though he didn't understand it. Travis was telling his two comrades to zoom, to reach for altitude.

And because Kirby knew the shrewd, elder Mosquito never did anything without good reason, he obeyed—crazy and costly though the thing seemed. The Three Mosquitoes zoomed towards the heights. Below them the five Germans, no longer harried, shot forward like bullets—on for Chaumont.

Kirby watched Travis. When the latter leveled in the graying upper reaches, he and Shorty leveled too. Then again Travis waved. He waved the signal which meant: "Do what you see me do!"

The next instant Kirby gasped aloud. For the lanky Mosquito was flinging a huge oblong thing of metal out of his cockpit. It was the Rodetol tank—which evidently detached from the fuselage! Travis' propeller had already stopped as the carburetor emptied—his plane was already starting in a glide, motorless—his fuel deliberately thrown out.

But Travis must know what he was doing.

Kirby squirmed in his cockpit while his plane still sliced through miles of space. The gas tank was under the seat, within reach. It was a simple business, a matter of mere seconds, Kirby's motor died; the silence after its shriek seemed deathly. He lifted the gas tank, surprised to find it moist and cold to touch. He hurled it overside. As he glided, he saw that Shorty must have done likewise, was gliding with him.

They overtook Travis by steepening their glides. And Travis was their leader now. He was leading them in a glide for the Hun ships below, the ships which were almost over Chaumont!

Hell, it did seem crazy, Kirby thought.

Throwing out their gas, then making an attack which after a moment would only carry them hopelessly below their enemies. But there was nothing to do about it now. Cursing, Kirby found the synchronizing gear of the machine guns, detached it.

THE three gasless planes moaned down. They swooped once more upon the Jerries from in front, and their detached guns roared, slower now, at regular staccato intervals.

The hail blasted the surprised Germans momentarily back, and again Shorty the

marksman scored—sent another down, leaving only four. Those four the Mosquitoes fought off from Chaumont as long as they could keep their gliding ships in shooting position. Then, while Kirby cursed bitterly, the three Yanks were below the others, having lost altitude.

And overhead the four remaining Huns were slicing through the growing dawn for Chaumont. Travis must have been out of his head. His crazy actions had merely made it utterly impossible to stop the Germans at all, had—

Blam! B-llam!

The explosion shattered the sky, over the whine of the Mosquitoes' ships. Wide-eyed, Kirby stared upwards as two of the four Chaumont-headed Hun ships blew to atoms in mid-air! And less than a minute later the other two, in turn, exploded to bits!

The Three Mosquitoes landed safe, though all three could not avoid a crash. They picked the nearest level fields, got rid of their bombs when they saw those fields were deserted, and tried to guide their ships—which fell with the speed of stones. Finally, their forward speed being too great for safety, they crossed controls, pancaked down. All three crates buckled, breaking on impact.

But out of all three climbed the trio of Yanks whom the gods of war had not yet marked for hell.

“You see,” the lanky Travis drawled, as the three sat alone in their cubicle at the 44th's drome, with only a bottle of cognac to augment their number, “when Shorty and I were workers in the plant, I happened to touch one of the tanks—found it was freezing. And when you told me about the gas being turned to a liquid, Kirby, I put two and two together. The way they did it was to freeze the stuff, and kept it in a special container, with ice packed around it. When the ice melted the liquid expanded to gas and ignited, while still in the feedlines—that's why the ships exploded. You remember the first time we met them, and that one exploded when we all went into the sun. Well, you can see why now. I figured that if we could stall the Huns their own time-limit would be used up, and their tanks would explode—which they did.”

It was perhaps the longest speech Travis had ever made, and probably it was the cognac which oiled his tongue. Nor was he finished yet. For now, while Shorty sat puffing his pipe, Kirby asked:

“But why did you tell General Saunders, of G-2, that we don't know the truth about Rodetol? We could still give it to the Allies.”

Travis smiled. “I think what von Bergsten told you was better, don't you? With the stuff packed in ice, the whole thing is too crude—better to wait for the day when they can freeze it artificially, or find another way to make it a liquid. No, Rodetol is for the future—just as Emil Rodet and von Bergsten dreamed.”

Kirby nodded slowly, “You're right. And we'll keep what we know.” He picked up his glass. “Let's drink on it. Let's drink to two men who worked and died so that guys like us will someday have real ships to fly! To Emil Rodet—and von Bergsten!”

And gravely the trio drank that toast. The only thing to break the solemn atmosphere which followed was a series of horrible snores arising from one of the cots.

Shorty Carn was sleeping at last.