

The Complete Adventures of Coffin Kirk

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Out of the pall of fog that curtained the trackless Atlantic roared a sleek Northrop—and no stranger pair of flyers had ever been seen than the men who manned it. One was tight-lipped Brian Kirk whose “dead pan” had won him the name “Coffin.” The other was a burly, stoop-shouldered mechanic—a forbidding, animal-like figure. His hair-matted hands bore the strength of cold steel, and Fate had decreed that they soon would be drenched with blood.

DOWN the main runway of the Gatwick Airport raced a silver monoplane. Once in the air, it banked sharply over the Lorenz blind landing lorry and snarled away toward London. A single beam of light from a rotating beacon touched it just before it was lost in the leaden clouds—revealed the stark lines of an American Northrop 2-E service-type ship bearing a strange insignia on its side.

Two British mechanics in cream-linen smocks watched the plane as it hurtled away. There was frank admiration in their eyes. But as the boom of the 750 Cyclone gradually filtered out, their expressions turned to plain awe. Neither spoke. There was that unmistakable air of men waiting for someone else to open the conversation.

“Rum couple, eh, Edgar?” said the first finally. He had a clipped accent.

“Rather! That mechanic lad, anyway. Never seen an uglier man in my life,” replied the other, staring at the “Incoming Aircraft” report.

“These American sportsmen chaps know the game, though, Edgar,” the first mechanic remarked, watching the fast disappearing Northrop.

“I should think so, coming all this way just as though they were out for an afternoon’s spree.”

“But as you say, that mechanic blighter was a crusty old noggin. Ever see a face like that—outside of a nightmare?”

“If he hadn’t spoken to me, I should have said it was old Consul himself. You remember old Consul—the variety show monkey who used to roller-skate, eat toffee-apples, and ride a bike all over the stage?”

“I should think I do. He was a treat at our house, was old Consul. But this mechanic bloke was bigger than Consul,” laughed the other. “And was he strong! Did you see him crank that inertia starter? Like windin’ up a ten shillin’ watch!”

“A nice pair. The pilot chap had—what do they call it in the American films? Oh, yes, a *dead pan*.”

They both turned as footsteps approached from behind.

“What cheer, Sparks?” Edgar greeted. “How’s things on the Stockholm run?”

The man greeted as Sparks was a small chap in a dusty blue uniform. He had a thin thatch of straw-colored hair and light blue eyes set close to a long thin nose. He wore the peaked cap of the Aktiebolaget Aero-transport Company. On his sleeve was the regulation radio operator’s badge stitched in gold cord.

“Who was that in the Northrop?” he asked in a thick accent. Then he reached out, took the “Outgoing Report” book, and ran his short spatulate finger along the line just filled in by the mechanic.

“An American chap named ‘Coffin’ Kirk,” said Edgar. “His plane had American markings,” said the Swedish radio man.

“Of course. American registry.”

“But I don’t understand.”

“He just flew it here—all the way across.”

“Across the Atlantic?” gasped the Swede.

“Well, in easy stages—Nova Scotia, Greenland, Iceland, Scotland, and down to Gatwick. Damn nice show, I call it.”

“And he had a passenger?”

“Eighto! A rum looking mechanic chap. A bit on the strong side, too.”

“What was his name?” They consulted the report again and Edgar said: “Funny, I never noticed that. He signed himself ‘Coffin’ Kirk and the mechanic just ‘Tank!’ That’s queer.”

The radio man studied the details for several seconds, then jotted down the registration numbers of the American Northrop.

“What’s the game, Florman?” the Gatwick mechanic asked.

“I’m just interested—in the Northrop, I mean. I’d like to buy a plane like that. Maybe he’d sell it, eh?”

“Hardly. I think he’s continuing on.”

“What’s his destination?”

“He didn’t say. He should have, I suppose.”

“I think he’s heading for Le Bourget,” the other mechanic added.

“Are you sure it’s Le Bourget?” Florman asked with insistence. “Not Tempelhof?”

“I couldn’t say for sure. But I think the mechanic said Tempelhof.”

“You ‘think.’ All I heard him do was grunt,” said the other mechanic. His pal contradicted him.

“Why he plainly said, “Get away from that starter? I’ll wind it.”

Without a word of thanks, the radio man hurried away toward a big Junkers plane that stood on the tarmac near the embarkation platform.

“We get all sorts, don’t we?” said Edgar, as they picked up their service kits and wandered over to the hangars.

“Coffin Kirk and Tank,” snorted the other. “We don’t’arf!”

ACROSS the North Sea, in the hurrying city of Berlin, a bulbous man in heavy tweeds, thick eyeglasses, and an Alpine hat a full size too small, puffed up the Wittenbergplatz, then crossed with anxious strides between a Tauentzienstrasse omnibus and two girl cyclists. With a quick look around, he darted into the arcade on the opposite corner. There he hesitated, glanced across the street at the motor cars parked at the curb. Two Daimlers, a British Bentley, and an open Benz. He nodded, wiped his brow with a large colored handkerchief, and went inside a cool restaurant.

He sat down, ordered a drink, and carefully scrutinized the patrons. It was well into the afternoon and the before-dinner crowd was not on hand as yet. Finally the waiter returned. He was a thin, creaky sort of man with no hair on his head. Great blue veins stood out on his forehead. He placed the drink before the fat man in tweeds and said: “You’re wanted on the telephone. Booth three, sir.”

The fat man nodded, wiped his forehead again, then went across the room to where the telephone booths were lined against the wall.

Once inside the designated booth, he raised the receiver off the hook, spoke two words quietly, then hung up. Thereupon, a narrow panel opened at the back of the booth. The fat man squeezed his way through.

In the semi-dark room within he slipped off his coat. Then from a small locker he selected a black cloak that offered a monk’s cowl hood and voluminous sleeves. He knotted a gold cord about his waist, drew the hood over his head, and from a slash-pocket took a black mask and fitted it to his face. On the left breast of that cloak was embroidered a scarlet circle bearing a human skull design set in white.

Now the fat man turned to a small wall panel and pressed a sunken block. The panel swung back and disclosed a narrow set of steel stairs. He hurried up them and rapped three times on a metal door above.

A guttural “Come in, No. 7,” came in response.

The fat man puffed in, stared about the high ceilinged room for a moment, then hurried to a vacant chair at the round table.

On a raised dais opposite sat a man in a gold cloak and gold mask. His cloak was likewise decorated with the scarlet circle and skull insignia.

“You are late, No. 7!” the voice boomed from behind the gold mask. “Are you not acquainted with our rules?”

No. 7 arose with a menial bow. Plainly, flustered, he took up a short gilt dagger that had been stuck in a metal slot in front of his chair. He held it by the blade as he spoke.

“It was unavoidable, *Herr* Master,” he began. “I have received important news—very important news.”

The eyes of the man in the gold robe flashed through his mask. “From the Madrid circle?” he barked.

“No, Master from London from Edvin Florman. He informs—”

“No. 7!” boomed the Master. “Again you have insulted our code. We do not use names here!”

No. 7 bowed and placed the hilt of the dagger to his forehead.

“I am a dog, Master. But in my anxiety I forget. It is No. 23 of whom I speak.”

“Then speak!”

“The news concerns Brian Kirk, Master. He is on his way here. He left London a few hours ago.”

The announcement came like a thunderclap. Twelve pairs of eyes turned on No. 7.

THE man in the gold cloak sat down. His long yellow hands clutched the carved lion-heads on the arms of his chair.

“Brian Kirk! *The* Brian Kirk?” he finally managed to get out.

“None other, Master. He is flying here. He has flown all the way from America. It can mean but one thing—we must trace him and stop him. It should be easy in the air.”

The man who sat at the round table opposite an emblazoned figure 11 in the top of the table began to twist in his seat and cast inquiring glances about.

“This was before your time, No. 11,” the Master started to explain. Then he nodded to the man on his right. “You tell him, No. 1.”

No. 1 got up, took up his dagger in the accepted manner, and spoke in a thin voice: “Brian Kirk is the son of an American air service man who fell into our hands late in the war. Brian Kirk, about eleven or twelve at the time, had been in Berlin with his tutor. He was somewhat under guard, being an American. He could have been sent into Switzerland, but for some reason his parents decided that he should continue his studies here. We thought nothing of it at the time, but eventually we discovered that the boy was acting as a carrier for Allied agents.”

The Master spoke softly into a telephone and No. 1 went on.

“We watched this lad, found that he frequented the Berlin Zoo. We also learned that his father, a Captain Dongan Kirk, had disappeared from his squadron and was reported missing in action. We of the Circle of Death were suspicious. We had the lad watched closely. Then one day we observed the lad transferring some important papers to one of the Zoo keepers.”

“The Zoo keeper turned out to be Dongan Kirk. Of course, we tried to corner him. There was a scuffle near the bear cages and Dongan Kirk was fatally shot. In the excitement, the lad disappeared. Even though we had the Zoo covered for hours, we never found him. We did find a cap and part of a coat near the bars of the lion cage, but we could discover no other evidence that gave a hint of what happened to him.”

The Master used the telephone again and No. 1 hesitated before going on.

“Some years later,” No. 1 finally continued, “we discovered that a Brian Kirk was a student at an American technical college. We traced him—learned that he later transferred to Harvard. He was a clever student, a skilled athlete, and a crack fencer. In fact, he held the American intercollegiate 440-yard run record.

“Finally he was picked on the American Olympic team that competed at Berlin last year. Nevertheless, Brian Kirk did not appear here. We learned later that he dropped out to take a flying Cadet course at Randolph Field. That is all we knew of him except—”

No. 1 looked up at the Master.

“Except,” boomed the Master, “that three months ago we were advised through a Berlin newspaper that ... well, that Brian Kirk was now ready to avenge the death of Dongan Kirk.”

“And now,” broke in No. 7, “Brian Kirk is on his way to Berlin—to face the Circle of Death.”

A low-toned gong rang out above the Master’s head. The men stood up, placed the gleaming tips of their daggers on the gold circle that split the center. Then in resounding tones they cried: “Death to Brian Kirk!”

OUT of a small private hangar at Le Bourget Field a silver monoplane was wheeled. A stocky man in dirty white coveralls had the tail of the Northrop on his shoulder, was dragging the machine out single-handed! The staff of French mechanics seemed uncertain what to do; for they had been rudely shoved off when they attempted to assist. They followed the machine out, watched the stalwart mechanic lower the tail to the ground. Then to their amazement, the ugly little man grabbed the top of the fin with a hairy hand, climbed on the tail plane, and vaulted lightly to the back of the fuselage.

Cat-like, he ran along the rounded back of the military machine, stepped on the cross members of the cowl-covered cockpit, and made his way to the nose. Then he gripped the blade of the prop and swung himself lightly to the ground.

“I have read about them,” remarked one of the French mechanics, “but I have never seen one before.”

“What do you mean?” his rigger mate questioned. “Why these American Indians. Didn’t you see that fellow’s face? It is really red and he has no face whiskers—just as it says in the books.”

“But American Indians,” said the rigger, “are always tall, straight men who walk like statues,” remonstrated the other. “This man is short, stocky, and bow-legged.”

“Nevertheless, I have never seen such a face before. Grotesque! But *Mon Dieu!* Is he not strong?”

The stalwart mechanic from America now stood near the nose of the Northrop watching the Frenchmen with a wary eye. Now and then he turned slowly and peered toward the hangars. It was evident he was expecting someone. Uncertain, he turned again, then gave a sudden hop and landed in a sitting position on the leading edge of the wing. The French mechanics were amazed.

“I have never seen such disrespect for aircraft” one said under his breath.

“But here comes the American pilot,” said one. “He’ll make him get off!”

The heavy-set Yank mechanic now climbed up on the wing root, peered over the shatter-proof glass cowling, and saw the young American approaching. Sight of the flyer made him frankly joyful, for his feet beat a happy tattoo on the dural covering of the wing. He made low crooning sounds, and his hands kept tapping the top of the cockpit in expectation.

“What are you doing up there, Tank?” the American said gruffly.

The mechanic addressed as Tank looked sheepish. Running a long forefinger around his shirt collar, he replied: “I had to get up here. Those Frenchmen were trying to steal the clock out of the cockpit.”

It suddenly dawned upon the Frenchmen what the mechanic had said. In a body they moved forward.

“But *M’seu*,” they cried. “What your man has said is not true—for none of us have been able to lay a hand on your aeroplane. He would not let us near the machine. He is telling an untruth.”

“You would steal the wheel from a wheelbarrow,” Tank said without even looking at them.

Again the amazed mechanics stared at one another. They were unable to appreciate the humor of the situation.

“Well, never mind,” said the American. “Get your ‘Clearance Outward’ book, will you. I’m leaving.”

“You have reported to the Customs Office, *M’seu*?”

“Yes, here’s my Triptyque. I’m heading for I’m heading north-east er to Germany.”

“Tempelhof?”

“Germany yes, Berlin.”

“You will have to report in at Cologne, of course,” the mechanic explained.

“Yes, I understand that. The Customs officer explained that,” the flyer said, scribbling his name on the book offered him.

THE American pilot was a well-built man of more than medium height. He carried himself well, his heavy buckthorn cane apparently being nothing more than an appurtenance. He was dark complexioned and kept his hair close cropped. His face, the most impressive thing about him—never seemed to change expression. Only the clear hazel eyes seemed to move. His visage seemed to veil some bitterness.

The contrast between these two men who flew the Northrop was even more startling now that they stood together.

The almost shapeless little man with the longshoreman's shoulders wore dirty rubber-soled shoes of the "sneaker" type. They were irregularly laced and soiled with engine oil. His coverall was too long in the leg and too narrow across the shoulders. The pockets were torn and grimy. A heavy, whitish-gray shirt could be seen through the opening between the buttons. His neck was almost black from sunburn and heavy curly hair. But it was his face that was most striking. A cartoonist's idea of the typical Irishman best described it. The upper lip was wide and deep, and the nose appeared to have stopped too many roundhouse punches. The eyes, small and beady, snuggled under a line of bushy brows. And there was a strange pinkness to the skin that seemed an incongruous contrast to the sunburned neck and hands.

Kirk, on the other hand, was almost dapper in his neat gabardine Norfolk jacket and well-cut breeches. Polished riding boots, a sports-type soft-collar shirt, a dull green tie, and chamois-leather gloves completed his outfit. A wrist-watch with a split-second hand gleamed on his left wrist. "Scram, bums!" the homely mechanic now cracked as he pulled a hopeless-looking helmet out of his pocket.

"That will be all," explained Kirk, handing the book back.

The mechanics, however, did not move. They stood staring at the report and the strange names signed there.

"Coffin Kirk and Tank," they read. "Coffin *biere* *cercueil*—a casket for the dead?"

Then they turned and stared at the garish insignia painted on the side of the Northrop. It represented a closed coffin with the number "13" painted on it. Through the coffin's sides, running at a 45-degree angle, was depicted a beautiful old-fashioned dueling sword. "What are you mugs staring at?" the American mechanic said. "Git out of the way and let a guy work who will work."

"Coffin Kirk," they repeated hollowly, backing away. "These mad Americans!"

Tank now clambered over the wing and rammed the Eclipse inertia starter handle into the shaft hole. Then with amazing speed and ease he wound the device much as a child winds a clockwork locomotive.

Kirk climbed into the cockpit, stepped on the starter release, and the Cyclone bellowed into power. Then Tank made a wild leap, landed lightly on the wing, and with another bound was in the rear cockpit and had the hatch cover closed. Before Kirk had warmed the engine, Tank had curled up in the rear and was apparently sound asleep.

Lights now blossomed out from the front of the Administration Building and flooded the runway. Darkness had fallen suddenly as it does at certain periods in Europe, and Kirk was glad of the illumination to aid his take-off. Just then, however, a signal from the control tower and another from a French gendarme on the tarmac commanded that he wait. A Luft Hansa Junkers airliner was coming in for a landing.

Kirk paused in the clear until the big monoplane was down, then he got the "green" from the tower. He rolled away, made for the long runway, and set her for the take-off. The Junkers had now reached the Administration Building and passenger ramp, so Kirk gave the Northrop the gun.

The pilot of the Junkers turned the wheel over to his co-pilot, hurriedly directed his field glasses toward the Northrop. He went white when he saw the insignia on the side, and he was out of his cockpit and away as soon as he could get his manifest clear. He rushed through the Booking Hall and sought the telegraph office.

KIRK settled back once he was clear, picked out the River Oise and followed it for some time. As he neared the Belgian border, he cut in his headphone jack, listened to the routine radio traffic with which that section of Europe is glutted. Messages in English, French, and German battered at his ears, but he finally selected the Tempelhof station and listened carefully. He knew German well. He knew French, too, and was acquainted with the several Flemish dialects encountered in Belgium and Holland.

Once he caught the routine announcement of his own flight and a report on his destination. They would look for him at Cologne in a couple of hours.

He pondered on his situation now, wondered why he had ever started on this mad adventure. What chance did he stand against modern communications, the intense vigilance of Customs and border patrols? Why had he selected this method of approach when he could have undertaken his quest under so many disguises? There was but one answer! His heritage—the heritage handed down by Dongan Kirk, who had blazed a brilliant trail of glory and heroism across frantic World War skies until he was betrayed and done to death by a hellish syndicate of human devils who accepted no flag or allegiance, who boiled the pot of war for their own ends.

The air was true and clean. It provided speed of movement and a weapon of surprise. There were certain laws that had to be obeyed, indisputable laws that no man can ignore. The air was free and a plane was shackled to no timetable. Brian “Coffin” Kirk had accepted all this months before. He had spent years laying his plans. It had taken time, money, keen effort. No wonder his face had developed that “dead pan” look that had brought him the sobriquet “Coffin.” But “Coffin” Kirk had sounded good to him and he accepted it, warmed inwardly. He lived up to it on the running track, the fencing strip, the golf course, the laboratories, and the classrooms.

He aroused himself, studied the map he had marked before he left Le Bourget, and checked his position east of St. Quentin. He closed his eyes, remembered the wartime magic of that name, then returned to his job of navigating his ship toward Germany.

He glanced around once and relaxed into a grim smile as he watched the sleeping mechanic behind him.

“Do you notice anything, Tank?” Kirk said to himself. “You ought to. You’re heading home, old chap.”

But the man behind him did not move and Kirk returned to his work. Once he cleared the first foothills of the Ardennes, however, he reached well under the instrument board and pulled a short steel lever. In response, two neat metal plates folded down from what appeared to be extra oil tanks set behind the engine. The removal of the plates disclosed two .50 caliber Browning guns. The metal ammunition belts came up through narrow slots between the outer covering and the cockpit paneling.

This ruse was necessary to obtain Customs permits and international travel Carnets. Coffin Kirk smiled as he drew back the loading handles and watched the aluminum belt crawl into the feed blocks.

CRASH!

No sooner had Kirk completed the loading of the guns when something struck the Northrop with a terrific smash. Kirk cringed under the cowling, quickly glanced about. Tank was up, screaming gutturals and clutching at the metal framework of the coffin-marked fuselage.

Kirk slipped his arms through the loops of his seat chute and waited. He stared about, then brought the Northrop around in a tight turn. A spray of silver-green fire slashed past his nose and he had to hoik sharply to clear.

Kirk bellowed something at Tank behind. Then, as he whipped around again, he saw a trim biplane with a skull-like frontal area.

“Heinkel He51 630 h.p. B.M.W. VI engine,” he muttered like a man repeating a Litany. “She does 217 and has a bad blind-spot dead underneath and slightly forward.”

Kirk had awaited an emergency like this for months. He had planned his defense daily in his training at Randolph Field. Yes, he knew what he was to do. But he had never actually fired at a man in his life. In practice it had been simple—a routine maneuver, a feint to the right or left, a faked hoik that suddenly switched into a dip, then up and—

“I don’t like it,” he snarled. “But I have no choice. The poor swine was sent out to stop me—and now, it’s either him or me.”

The Northrop was in the hands of a master. The German Heinkel fighter, flaunting a gaudy Swastika insignia, came around headlong again, splashed another burst at the silver monoplane. Kirk waited, danced to the right, then to the left. He saw the speedy Heinkel swerve and open fire again.

Kirk nosed down a trifle, snapped the Northrop up into a throttle-controlled stall, then went down fast. The Heinkel seemed to hesitate above as if the German pilot was uncertain what to do. It was then that the

Northrop sped in like an arrow and from her gun ports poured two fiery streams of steel. The fusillade converged dead on the Heinkel's vitals. Kirk held the Northrop true, held his triggers down until the last possible moment.

He had to act fast then, for the Heinkel disintegrated in mid-air. A tremendous explosion belched yellow ochre against the night sky. Kirk zipped over on one wing-tip and watched the wreckage gather itself for the long wailing tumble to earth.

Tank was up hammering his hairy fists against the glass of the cowling, jabbering in strange phrases, and staring with eyes that seemed not to understand. Then a sudden tenderness crept into the eyes and he moved forward slowly, put one arm about Kirk's shoulder and buried his face against his neck.

"It's all right, Tank, old boy. It's all right. This sort of thing is new to you, eh? Well, you'd better get used to it, we're going to have a lot more before the year is out."

He stroked the sleeve of Tank's coverall, soothed him. Then in pathetic seriousness, Tank sat back, straightened his grotesque helmet, and took up a position of watchful waiting.

FOR another hour the Northrop hammered her way across western Germany. Rhenish Prussia, Nassau, and Hess swept by, the moon portraying the landscape in stark lines.

Finally, they crossed Saxony and headed for Dessau. At that point, Kirk turned a trifle to the south and followed a river that led toward the open country of south Brandenburg. And now he noted that Tank had become restless, made strange noises as he moved about his confined cockpit, and peered over the side at the colorless panorama below.

Kirk watched Tank for some minutes, then said: "So you're finally beginning to sense something, eh, Tank?"

But Tank's nervousness had nothing to do with the proximity of his native heath, as Kirk had believed. Tank was staring ahead and to port with those strange piercing eyes of his—and now Kirk caught the idea. There was another plane near.

He set himself for anything, then caught the harsh but efficient lines of a Junkers Ju.53 that came hurtling out of the north.

"Luft Hansa Tempelhof-to-Rome run," he muttered. He quickly snapped in his phone jack, ran the wave-length lever over to the Luft Hansa frequency. He caught the trailing words of an official message being relayed back to Berlin.

".... *American Northrop, listed as missing on flight from Le Bourget to Tempelhof, seen flying at 4,000 feet over Kottbus in southern Brandenburg.*"

Kirk smiled, then caught the flash of something streaking at him from the Junkers' control-pit window. He reached for his gun releases, but held his fire when he realized that he was getting an international light beam signal.

The signal repeated K-L-U K-L-U.

Kirk quickly read it to mean: "You should stop. Standing into danger. Report nearest Customs aerodrome."

Kirk grinned and picked up the Aldis lamp he had bought at Croydon. Quickly he took the pistol grip and triggered D-D-D. This meant "Keep clear of me. I am maneuvering with difficulty."

He saw the big Junkers swing wide and let him through. Then Kirk nosed down sharply and held his dive until he was skimming the tree tops and thundering across the agricultural districts of lower Brandenburg.

For twenty minutes he flew a zigzag course, then passed over a country road that trailed off from a main highway, and hugged the Spree River for about four miles. Abruptly, it turned sharply through a heavily timbered stretch and came out again in a wide grassy plain. Kirk hugged it closely, and finally circled a low, rambling rustic-type building that had a log roof, several outside balconies, and a dull pattern of flower gardens before it.

He circled again and caught the flashing of an upright oblong of light.

Tank now became nervous again, made strange noises through his teeth.

“Take it easy!” snapped Kirk. “He’s signaling through a door. You’ll be down there soon enough, if he flashes ‘All safe.’ ”

The signaling took a new note now, and the call Kirk had awaited came through.

“Come in Come in All Clear—Rolf.”

Kirk smiled and shut off the motor. The Northrop held her glide smoothly in the calm night air, and in a few seconds he was running the ship up toward the great building. Tank had the hatch back and was leaping all over the cockpit sniffing and making low clucking sounds.

The Northrop now taxied across the wide expanse of turf, over a low crowned road, and well up on the cracked stone driveway that curled around in front of the Bavarian-type hostel.

“Steady, Tank,” warned Kirk, as he sat back and waited, one hand still on his throttle. But the figure in the back seat was up, both hands on the sides of the cockpit. His knees were bent and a strange crooning cry came from his nostrils.

“Steady!” Kirk cried again, holding Tank back with one arm until a slight, fuzzy-headed man was framed in the doorway. Tank made an audible cry and Kirk had to restrain him.

“*Herr* Kirk?” the man in the doorway asked quietly.

“Rolf! . . . Nostrand!” replied Kirk.

There was no holding Tank now. With a leap he was out of the cockpit and running across the half-moon of turf. In a trice he was pawing the slim man in the green baize apron.

The man known as Rolf Nostrand fell back in terror. And Kirk leaped out of his cockpit to hold the crazed mechanic off.

“It’s Tank, Rolf!” he cried. “It’s Tank! You remember Tank!”

THE next few seconds were a nightmare for the little German hostel keeper. He stared at Tank with eyes that streamed with tears. Then he looked from Tank to Kirk and tried to speak. But for a long time words would not come. Tank, emitting low crooning gutturals, cried on Nostrand’s shoulder and generally behaved badly.

“But I do not understand, *Herr* Kirk. It is not the same Tank. You, too, have grown so big!”

There was a crunching on the gravel behind them and they turned. A man in a polished-leather cap and greenish-blue uniform stood there, one foot on the pedal of a bicycle. He was beginning to unstrap a carbine from his shoulder when Tank made a quick movement.

“Who is this, *Herr* Nostrand?” the German constable said in a flinty voice. “I have received a report—”

But he got no further. There was a low growl and Tank was flying through the air, arms and legs outstretched. He landed full force on the chest of the man with the carbine and there was a jangling crash. Kirk tried to stop him, but he was too late. Tank let out a mad scream, throttled the man with a terrific rendering of flesh, then dropped his body in a heap. Tank then backed away two bow-legged paces, raised the carbine, and brought the stock down on the quivering constable’s head.

For another minute, Tank was a wild man. He broke the carbine stock as though it were a match stick, then he twisted the steel barrel into a badly bent tube. The bicycle next took the full force of his wrath, three quick movements serving to double the frame into a tangle of metal.

Kirk and Nostrand stared in horror, then without a word they picked up the dead man and carried him off. In a few minutes they came back and disposed of the remains of the bicycle and rifle.

Tank watched, still muttering.

In a short time Kirk and Nostrand had cleaned up the marks on the driveway and had raked over the gravel. Then, with the little German’s assistance, Kirk ran the Northrop into a shed set well away from the main building.

Once they were settled down around the broad clean table inside the hostel, Kirk turned to Rolf. “How long can I stay here?” he asked.

“Until Thursday night—early Friday morning at the latest. The hikers of the Hitler Youth Movement do not begin to get here until Friday afternoon. Of course, we shall have to be careful about Rudolstadt.”

“That was the policeman?” queried Kirk. Neither had wished to talk about Tank’s victim.

“Yes, he patrols the road between here and Sorau. He will surely be missed by noon tomorrow.”

“Poor devil! He certainly walked into that. I shall have to watch Tank closer.”

“But it had to happen *Herr* Kirk. I have often suspected him—and he would have reported us.”

“Yes, it had to happen, I suppose.”

“Yet I cannot believe it,” *Herr* Nostrand said, peering across at Tank. “He was so little when I last saw him.”

“Oh, he’s improved since that day, haven’t you, Tank?” Kirk said quietly.

“Very much, but I do have a lot of trouble with my German,” Tank replied in fluent Prussian.

The hair on *Herr* Nostrand’s head stood up like the spines on a porcupine’s back. He stared amazed at Tank, then at Kirk. Tank continued:

“It’s the true Berlin accent that I’ve been trying to get,” he said inspecting a blood-spot on his sleeve.

“But but he talks He speaks!” gasped Nostrand. “I have heard him!”

“Yes, he has even learned to speak,” agreed Kirk quietly. “I did have some trouble in keeping him at school, though.” Then Tank spoke again:

“When do I get a crack at a Death’s Head Huzzar—or a Gestapo?” he cried, breaking up a loaf of bread.

“He knows about the Gestapo—the Secret Police?” gaged *Herr* Nostrand.

“Oh, he reads a lot, does Tank,” replied Kirk, lighting a cigarette. “But we have much to talk about, eh, Rolf?”

The slim German reached for a long narrow bottle of Hock and poured three glasses: “I suppose he drinks, too, eh?” he said uncertainly.

“Oh, he has all the vices. Give him a short one.”

They held their glasses aloft and the eyes of Kirk and Nostrand met under the light.

“To the extermination of the Circle of Death,” they both muttered. Tank drank, too, and put the glass down with: “It’s all right, but I’d sooner have beer.”

THEY were quiet for a time, and Coffin Kirk seemed lost in memories. But finally he spoke. “I suppose you wonder how I got out that day.”

“It has always been a puzzle to me,” Nostrand replied.

“I saw them corner my father a few minutes after I had handed him the Zoo catalog you gave me. You remember how we used the catalog to pass our messages. I saw father go down under the first flurry. I think they shot him in the stomach and then ran him through while he struggled on the ground. He yelled something to me and I obeyed. I ran through the monkey house then saw too late that the door at the other end was closed.

“There was nothing to do but to hide in one of the cages, and kid-like, without realizing the danger, I snatched the cage keys from the guard’s wall cabinet and let myself into the cell of the big female ape.”

“*Gott in Himmel!*” gasped Rolf.

“I think the ape’s name was Katy or—”

“Big Katrina! She would have killed me!”

“That was it—Katrina. Well, no sooner had I climbed in when she grabbed me, lugged me over into the far corner, and cuddled me close to her. She had Tank then, too, you remember.”

“Tank was only a few months old,” added Rolf.

“There you are. The mother instinct. She covered me with her great body while the soldiers were racing back and forth looking for me. Tank and I snuggled together there for more than two hours. I waited for you to come later, but you never came back.”

“I went to jail for three years,” explained Nostrand. “I only got out after the *Putsch*. Then I obtained this post.”

“I hung around after the Zoo was closed,” Kirk continued. “Then I opened the cage and let Katrina and Tank out. Together we worked our way through the buildings and finally made the wall. Tank, of course, climbed up easily. Katrina likewise climbed up, and then somehow sensed that I couldn’t make it. So she hung with one foot and jerked me up. But just as I started over the wall, someone spotted us and fired.”

“Katrina was killed,” said Nostrand sadly.

“Yes, Katrina, who was as big as a man, was killed. And Tank and I ran away. We managed to hide aboard a brick barge in the river that night and woke up the next morning well on our way toward Hamburg. We were days on our way and saw many strange things which at the time were too much for me to comprehend. I learned since that it was the Socialist Revolution. At any rate, the Armistice was signed and I, with Tank, slunk aboard an outgoing American freighter by crawling up the hawser. They never found us again until we had been to sea for three days. That’s how I got back to America, Rolf.”

“And you took Tank and taught him all these things?” said the amazed Nostrand. “It is unbelievable!”

“He never tells you all the things I taught him,” said Tank.

Nostrand turned, stared at the stalwart mechanic. Tank was sound asleep. Like a flash, Nostrand turned, smiled at Kirk, and said: “Now I understand. Ventriloquism! It is very clever.”

“And very handy at times,” said Kirk. “An ape that ‘talks’ often makes other people say things they had no idea they were going to say.”

“You will need all these things if you are going to break up the Circle of Death.”

“Now you must talk,” said Kirk, lighting another cigarette.

“There is very little to say. The Circle is still in existence. They know of you. They waited for you during the Olympics. You were to come with the American team, eh?”

“I was selected—but I had other things to do. For one thing, I had to learn to fly.”

“They know that, too.”

“Yes, they tried to stop me—a German Heinkel fighter. But, I was ready for him. He made one mistake.”

“The Heinkel has a blind spot, as I told you,” Nostrand said examining the end of his cigar. “But what are your plans, *Herr* Kirk?”

Kirk waited for several seconds before he answered. He stared ahead for some time, looking at nothing. Then he said: “My plans have been changed since I arrived here. That poor devil out there—he didn’t deserve that.”

Nostrand sat staring at the American. “It was unfortunate,” he agreed. “Very unfortunate. But we must not lose sight of the fact that Rudolstadt would have been our undoing.”

“That’s just it, Rolf. He was a pawn in the game of the Circle of Death. Otherwise he might have sat here with us enjoying a glass of schnapps. What evidence we have indicates he was not innocent—yet he might have been an unknowing tool in their hands. That’s what bothers me.”

“But,” said Nostrand, “Innocent Rudolstadts in Spain, in Italy, in Ireland, and in Russia are likewise dying because of the Circle of Death. Many Rudolstadts in other countries will die by the thousands unless we stop it.” The little German hesitated, sat watching the American, fascinated.

“When I started out, I had but one idea, Rolf. I was charged with revenge for what happened in the Berlin Zoo when my father was cut down in cold blood. It is all different now. I see it in a new light. Even he was just one of millions. His name might have been Rudolstadt.”

Nostrand nodded, let his gaze fall to the floor.

“No, Rolf, it is no longer revenge for a murder in a Berlin Zoo. I know that my father was a brave man. He did what he saw as his duty. Had he lived he would have been renowned as a hero. But instead he died obscurely on the beaten pathway of a Zoo. No, Rolf. We have a bigger job now. We are going to do something for all the Rudolstadts and all the Dongan Kirks in the world—and that calls for extermination of the Circle of Death.”

Kirk was emotionless now and his words came in a tuneless monotone. He was piercing Nostrand with his steely eyes and his hands were gripping the carved arms of the chair.

“The ruthless leader of those merciless devils must be struck down. But you have done your part. The rest is up to me. You need take no more risks, Rolf. Tank and I will carry on.”

“But I want to aid you, *Herr* Kirk,” remonstrated the little German.

“No,” replied Kirk. “You must reconsider. You are in great danger harboring us. Tomorrow we go.”

“As you wish, *Herr* Kirk,” Rolf whispered, head bowed. “But you seem to forget that I, too, have a mission in life. I lost three sons in the war and a wife after the Revolution. Do you think it is all over for me? Do you believe they let me out of jail because they wished it so?”

“What do you mean, Rolf?”

“I was released and put here because they knew you would come, *Herr* Kirk. They knew that sooner or later they would trap you through me. And they will get me, too, the minute you are taken care of.”

Kirk’s face went the color of aged marble.

“You risked this, Rolf? You knew this all the time—and yet you worked for me? You stayed here and waited for me to come?”

“What was there left to do?” the little German pleaded.

“My Lord!” gasped Kirk. “What a man you are!”

They sat silent for several minutes, searching each other’s eyes.

“You’re the bravest man I have ever known, Rolf Nostrand,” Coffin Kirk finally said.

THE next morning greeted Coffin Kirk with a sunny smile. He stepped to the window of his room, drank in the beauties of the German countryside. A hiking trail crawled pleasantly through a wood about two miles away, rambled at its ease through fields and mellow copses, then disappeared behind a low hillock that glistened with dew.

Tank aroused himself from a folding cot, came over beside Kirk. He stared at the scene with a doleful mug, a mug that had most of the hair carefully removed by electrolysis and expertly tattooed to the color of a human being’s. His years living in close company with Kirk had erased many of his monkey traits and movements. He walked nearly upright and he had adopted the human movements of the head when spoken to, the gestures of mankind.

Male clothing was as much a part of his life as his three meals a day at a table with cutlery and china. He exercised as regularly as did Kirk, he was proficient on a bicycle, and Kirk had even taught him to swim, an accomplishment that astonished his anthropology professors at college.

With his adopted mannerisms of man and his acceptance of the common standards of living, Tank had one outstanding trait—his blind loyalty to Coffin Kirk. Throughout all the years after their escape from Berlin, Tank never wavered in his trust. As the years piled up, they became firmer friends, found in one another an armor-plate strength that could not be broken. By the time Kirk was a young man, Tank had so aped his movements and manners that few realized that Kirk’s “man” was anything but a man.

Kirk smiled at Tank as the ape stared out upon the unfamiliar picture-book scene outside. Tank placed his big paw on the American’s shoulder, gave him an affectionate grip.

“Yes, Tank old boy. Here we are—back in Germany.”

Tank sniffed, nodded his head.

“Perhaps your memories will be awakened when we go to Berlin. How would you like to take in the Zoo again, Tank? No, I guess that wouldn’t do. I remember too well the visit we made to the Zoo in New York. We couldn’t risk another display like that.”

Kirk allowed himself a smile as he recalled the reaction of the monkeys in the Bronx Zoo. On seeing Tank, some screamed and ranted at their bars, some cried and shoved their arms through the cages in pathetic supplication, others just sat and bared their teeth. Poor Tank had stood staring at the scene, utterly frozen. His eyes squinted and he found himself making noises that had not come from his throat in years. It was only by a great effort that Kirk managed to get him into a taxi and hurry him away.

AND now the cheery odor of breakfast aroused them and in a short time they were downstairs enjoying a full meal with Rolf. The latter was now dour and none too talkative. Tank helped carry the dishes away, then curled up on a settee and fingered clumsily through the pages of the *Schweizer Illustrierte Zeitung*.

Kirk and Nostrand sat at the table with a map of the city of Berlin before them.

“Once in the city,” explained Nostrand, “you can take an omnibus to the Wittenbergplatz. Get off at this corner and walk up one more square. The building has an arcade.”

"I think I remember that section," Kirk said, peering at the map. "Yes, I am certain I do now."

"That is about all I can tell you about it, except that they meet in a room two floors above the street. I have never found out how they get up there. I have watched many times. I have been into the nearby buildings, believing that they had some sort of a secret passage through the walls or over the roofs, but I have not been able to discover it."

"But you have seen them enter the building?"

"Yes, I have followed them into the restaurant on the street floor on several occasions. They sit at tables—and then disappear."

"But that's impossible, Rolf."

"My better judgment says so, *Herr* Kirk, but nevertheless they disappear. I have seen them at the table one minute, and the next they have gone, leaving half-eaten meals."

"But they can't just disappear," protested Kirk. "Try to remember. Do you recall any of them being called away to the kitchen, to another table, to answer a telephone?"

A gleam shot across Nostrand's face.

"That is it! That is it, *Herr* Kirk. I remember now. They are usually called to a telephone. The restaurant has several boxes booths, I believe you call them. That is it!"

"Right! They are called to a telephone booth and they never come back. They get upstairs, somehow, through one of those telephone booths. It's perfect!"

"You are going at once?"

"The quicker the better. We can waste no more time."

"And you will go to Berlin by rail? You will not fly, *Herr* Kirk?"

"I have been trying to settle that point. They know I have crossed the German border. They will now expect me to use other means of transportation than the air. No, the railroad is out. I must fly. That will put them off. I stand a better chance in the sky."

"It is suicide! Why not try a disguise and use the roads the omnibus a cycle?"

"No, boldness is what will count now. I will go directly to Tempelhof and report that I have been lost and that I had to come down somewhere north of here. It requires such a bold stroke."

Tank suddenly made a queer noise, rustled the weekly magazine which was full of aviation pictures. Kirk went over, stared at the picture that had excited the ape man.

It was a photograph of a Heinkel fighter!

"That's it, Tank. That's one of them, anyway. From now on you must keep your eyes peeled for them."

Tank tore up the magazine, hurled it against the wall. Then he curled up again and went to sleep.

"Can I get away now?" asked Kirk. "Is it too risky?"

"Perhaps that would be best. True, we are miles from anywhere out here, but on the other hand they will be searching for Rudolstadt later in the day. It will be better if you get away now. But you can return at anytime—except over the week-end. This place will be alive with Youth Movement hikers between Friday and Sunday nights."

"Right away, it is, then!"

But as Kirk spoke, Nostrand's face fell. He had been staring at the window that faced the front of the hostel. And now the low crunch of bicycle wheels over the cracked stone drive caught their ears.

KIRK gave a low command to Tank, and the ape immediately turned around and assumed a noncommittal pose in his chair. Nostrand moved toward the door. "It is the police," he said. "They have missed Rudolstadt."

"All right. Play safe and take it easy. We may be able to talk them out of this."

But Kirk was in for the surprise of his life.

He could see the troop of cycle police roll into view with correct military precision. They dismounted, stacked their bicycles in a true line, and clicked their heels. Then Kirk knew something was really off.

Again, the old fear crept back, all the way from 1918—the fear that haunted men know, a cold, tight-fitting fear that makes them walk with one shoulder braced, expecting any minute to feel the clap of an official hand.

Kirk's throat went dry, and he knew speech would not come easily. And he needed his powers of speech. Again he spoke to Tank, and the ape man sat back, simulated a tired man who has no particular interest in life.

There was the clump, clump, clump of heavy feet across the veranda of the hostel. There was a loud official rapping on the door. Kirk glanced about, saw a black patent leather helmet near each window.

The game was up before it had started!

With feigned cheerfulness, Nostrand opened the door, greeted the Sergeant in charge with a jocular salute.

“Good morning, *Mein Herr* Sergeant!” Nostrand boomed. “Have the police decided on a happy holiday in the—”

That was as far as Nostrand got. Two heavy carbine muzzles were rammed into his stomach and he was shoved back into the room. Two more police with short carbines stepped in from behind, clumped across the floor, and covered Tank and Kirk.

“You are all under arrest and will submit to close confinement until the arrival of the Gestapo,” the Sergeant in charge boomed in thick Prussian.

“The Secret Police, Sergeant?” gasped Nostrand. “But what have we done? What is the meaning of this?”

“Have you seen anything of Constable Rudolstadt?” barked the crusty Sergeant.

“Constable Rudolstadt? No, Sergeant.”

“A likely story! At 10:23 last night he reported seeing an American plane preparing to land in this area. He left the police phone to report personally. Nothing has been heard of him since. And you say you have not seen him?”

“But no, Sergeant! We—” Nostrand started to say.

He was interrupted by a cruel blow across the mouth with the flat side of a carbine stock that knocked him up against the wall. Nostrand looked at Coffin Kirk, closed his eyes. Kirk made a quick swoop, brought down the man who had struck Rolf with a short uppercut that almost lifted the man's head off his shoulders.

“No, Tank!” screamed Kirk watching the ape out of the corner of his eye. He swung once more and the Sergeant also went down, his knees giving way as Kirk brought a swift short right to his chin.

Kirk was quickly surrounded with bristling carbine barrels.

THE police now swarmed in from every door and window. They forced Kirk into a corner, made him pull on a heavy canvas jacket. It was drawn up tight and fastened behind with stout hempen tapes. Then the arms, which were closed at the ends so that it was impossible to get the hands out, were crossed across his chest and the sleeves bound tightly behind his back.

“We will teach you to assault the police, *Herr* Kirk,” the puffing Sergeant snarled when they had brought him around again. “The strait-jacket is what will make your kind behave.”

They now had Nostrand and Tank in the jackets, too. Then bustling and scurrying around, the leaders spoke curtly into telephones and scribbled out formal reports. They took Kirk's papers and passports, piled them on a table.

“Why did you not report in at Cologne, *Herr* Kirk, when you reported you were flying into Germany? Do you not know Customs regulations?”

“I lost my way,” Kirk said, unable to keep his eyes off Tank.

“You engaged a German plane, too—and shot it down!” the Sergeant snarled, standing close to Kirk's face.

“What with?” came from the corner where Tank sat mournfully contemplating the strange jacket into which he had been forced. “All we got aboard that boiler is a bottle of Bromo Seltzer. Can't your guys take it—or did they get tangled up in our prop-wash?”

“Shut up, ugly swine!” the Sergeant clipped, turning suddenly on Tank.

“If I’m ugly,” Tank said in reply, “you had better stay away from a mirror. You’d never get over it.”

The Sergeant fumed through his scrubbing-brush mustache, and for a minute Kirk talked fast, afraid he was going to draw his Luger and kill Tank where he stood. “But you have no right to hold us like this. Ours was not a criminal act. We were lost.”

“You are *Herr* Kirk, are you not?” the Sergeant blurted again. “That is enough for us. You are a dangerous member of a foreign espionage ring. Of that much we are certain.”

“If those are the charges, I demand instant release and an opportunity to consult my Consul.”

“You may see your Consul after the Gestapo is through with you. My duty, now that I have you cornered successfully, is to hold you here until the Gestapo motor car arrives.”

And with that the Sergeant, gave a few short orders. His men were broken up into parties, some to guard the hostel, others to make a thorough search for Rudolstadt, and three others to look for the plane.

Kirk knew then he had to work fast. Nostrand was a helpless figure sitting on a chair behind the table. Tank still maintained his stoic calm, staring down at his folded arms and the strange jacket.

The Sergeant took a seat at the table and began to make out his report. He spoke to Nostrand now and again and added his explanations to his report.

Finally, Kirk decided on action. He caught Tank’s eye. The ape-man was behind the Sergeant and was able to watch both Kirk and Nostrand. Kirk made a suggestive motion by raising his elbows from his side and forcing his arms out. Tank watched him for some time.

The Sergeant was alone with them now, for he was quite confident that three men in strait-jackets were nothing to worry about. Besides, he could call in some of his constables if any trouble started.

But he had not figured on Tank.

The ape-man now made a slight movement, watching Kirk as he did so. Kirk nodded, encouraged the ape. He drew in his breath, watched Tank do the same. And now with fascinated eyes he saw the heavy seams of Tank’s strait-jacket stretch. He nodded again eagerly and Tank responded with his monstrous strength. This time the white linen stitches of the shoulder seams began to flick up like tiny seeds. Kirk signaled Tank to stop and rest.

Tank stared down at the broken seams and a dumb smile crossed his face. He went at it again, took his breathing time from Kirk. Then with a final effort, Tank forced his shoulders clear out of the strait-jacket. With a quick movement, he drew his arms out of the bound sleeves—and made a quick leap for the German at the table.

The Sergeant had heard the sharp rip behind him and had turned slowly in his chair. He let out a choked gurgle as he saw Tank dive for him. That was the last thing he remembered on this earth.

Tank throttled the man cold, shoved him back in his chair. Then he took the Sergeant’s official dirk from the leather scabbard that hung from his official belt and started across the floor toward Kirk.

A Constable came in, let out a gasp and fumbled for his Luger, but his holster flap caught and he never lived to make an official complaint about it. Tank hurled himself again, struck the Constable to the floor, then quietly plunged the dirk through the man’s throat.

In two minutes, Tank had slashed the bonds of both Kirk and Nostrand, and now he stood chattering over the fallen Sergeant.

“Good work, Tank,” husked Kirk, slapping the ape across the shoulders. “Now then, Rolf. We’ve got to get you out of here first of all.”

“But how can I go?” the frantic little German cried.

“I’ll fly you into Czechoslovakia to Prague. It’s only about a hundred miles from here. I can do it in an hour. You’ve got enough papers to get you by.”

Nostrand was befuddled, but he obeyed orders. They retrieved their passports and other documents from the pile on the table, then collected the two Lugers from the two dead policemen and set plans for getting to the hidden Northrop.

Then they heard hurried steps outside, and they hugged the wall behind the door. Three policemen came charging in, shouting that they had discovered the mangled body of Bu-dolstadt. But they stopped short, stared at the bodies of the Sergeant and Constable on the floor. Their hesitation was fateful. Kirk brought a

Luger butt down on the head of one. Tank quickly crumpled the second, and Nostrand obtained satisfactory revenge for his bash in the face by downing the third with the flat of a carbine.

“Come on!” ordered Kirk. “The shortest way to the shed, Rolf!”

Kirk and Nostrand then took up the carbines and Lugers, Tank grasped his bloody dirk, and together they started to crawl out of the back window.

“Wait a minute!” whispered Kirk. “We’ll draw them into it.”

With lightning moves, they collected everything burnable and piled it near the main doorway. Then they ripped down the wall lamps and poured the kerosene over the papers, rugs, and light wicker furniture. Then, after setting a match to it, they darted back into the small dining hall where they had been taken prisoner.

“Lock that door, and as soon as they all flock around to the front of the hostel, we’ll slip out of this window,” explained Kirk.

As they waited, they could hear the flames crackling in the open hallway. In a few minutes, when smoke began to trickle under the door sill, they heard frantic voices out in front of the hostel.

“Now!” said Kirk. “You first, Tank. Come on!”

The voices were wilder now and men were thumping on the door and smashing at the lock with the stocks of their carbines.

“Go around to the front windows!” screamed Kirk, feigning terror. Then he, too, dropped outside and raced after Nostrand and Tank who were running off between the small huts and cottages.

In a few moments they were ripping open the shed door and Tank was dragging the Northrop out like a child fussing with a tricycle. In another minute he had the starter wound and Kirk was in the pilot’s seat setting the controls for the takeoff. Nostrand climbed in the back and huddled down. The engine caught at once and Tank came up over the wing and dropped in beside the little German.

Kirk ran her as long as he dared for a warm-up, then sighted two Constables charging toward the shed. Quickly he released the wheel brakes and let the Northrop roll away under a heavy fire from the two Constables.

The silver ship leaped and bucked along the narrow stretch of greensward. She charged past a row of small huts and Kirk held her tight until he reached the end of the row. Ahead loomed another long barracks-like building and with a quick flip of the stick he hoiked her up with only inches to spare. Next, he let her have her head at about twenty feet for another mile. Then he zoomed hard, and swung back toward the burning hostel.

As they roared over the smoke and flames they saw a cavalcade of gleaming motor cars.

The Gestapo had arrived—a few minutes too late.

YES, the die had been cast. Blood had been spilled and officialdom had been aroused. Kirk knew all this as he swept away toward the southeast. An hour later he landed at Euzyn on the northeast side of Prague.

“You can’t land here,” Nostrand cried. “This is Ruzyn—it is not yet finished.”

“I know. But you get out and we’ll tell them we didn’t know—that we made a mistake and will immediately go back to Kbley, the regular airport, and report in.”

Nostrand grinned. He sensed the cleverness of Kirk’s ruse.

The airport at Euzyn was being completed to relieve the heavy traffic of the main Prague field at Kbley. A number of workmen came over from their tractors and grading machines and excitedly attempted to explain the situation.

“Yes, I know all that,” answered Kirk in German. “But I made a mistake. I’ll refuel here then go on to Kbley and report to the Customs officials.”

The workmen nodded grimly—and Nostrand wandered off, apparently to find fuel. No one noticed that he did not return, for they were much too interested in the American plane and its strange insignia. Kirk rolled the Northrop toward a heavy fuel wagon and made a deal with the man in charge to fill his own tanks from it. Luckily, it was a good grade of gasoline.

Then without making too much fuss about the missing Nostrand, Kirk took off again with Tank sitting up in the back seat, trying to figure out in his ape mind what it was all about.

This time Kirk swung almost due north in a line toward the German border. He crossed at Dresden and followed the Spree River north. Berlin was his goal.

Twice he was fired upon for crossing a restricted area. Over Lubben the anti-aircraft fire was particularly keen and a chunk of shrapnel chopped a chunk from his port wing-tip. Tank sat up, stared at the damage, and began to make his strange grunting sounds again.

Kirk took her up to 12,000 and cleared, then he cut wide of Potsdam and swept around to the north-east side of Berlin. He glanced about as he set himself for the glide to Tempelhof. He realized what he was up against, but knew now that he had to face it—or give up his quest.

The great Tempelhof administration building with its two lattice towers now lay below him. Out beyond the embarkation gangway was a slab of concrete on which was painted in bold white letters the name “Berlin.” On the roof of the building were hundreds of gay sun umbrellas and tables where happy diners sat and watched the activity of the crowds and planes below. Kirk wondered what was ahead for him.

The “come in” flash from the central control tower came just as a Luft Hansa Junkers raced away for the north. He put the Northrop down and got another wave from a ground officer who held a long disc-tipped signaling stick. He was ordered to run over to the raised platform in front of the control tower. Here he saw a sign marked “Customs” and he realized that he was up against it.

At the platform Kirk got another signal ordering him to proceed along the high wire fence to a special transient hangar. He watched four men in gray-green uniforms march alongside of his ship. They wore heavy belts and carried side-arms and short cutlass-like swords.

“Now we’re in for it, Tank,” he observed over his shoulder as they ran the Northrop in.

A squad of mechanics came over, took over the plane as Kirk and Tank climbed out.

“Your papers, *Herr* Kirk!” a tall heavy man with piggish eyes said suddenly. “You have your papers and passports, yes?”

Kirk handed over his passport and the one for Tank which had been manufactured for the occasion. Beyond that, however, everything was in order. The German officials checked the papers and the numbers on the plane.

“You have been delayed, eh?” the German said.

“Slightly. Lost my way trying to find Cologne.”

“Lost your way after flying across the Atlantic? That is a little too much, *Herr* Kirk.”

“Take it or leave it,” said Kirk.

“I’m hungry. Let’s get out of here,” Tank broke in.

“I’m sorry, *Herr* Kirk, but you will have to wait a few minutes until we check you through. You will wait here, yes?”

Kirk nodded, took out his buckthorn stick, and stood off from the Northrop. The four men in uniform were not far away and Kirk knew he was being held a prisoner.

He wandered over to the Northrop, gave orders for the plane to be refueled. He had made certain that the guns were carefully hidden and was confident that the painstaking German mechanics would worry more about getting the motor checked than the mere matter of two small tanks that seemed to have no screw-cap openings.

The ape-man now moved about uncertain of his position; and Kirk stayed near him, for he sensed that Tank was gradually working himself up for a fight. He was watching the men in uniform out of the corner of his eye and his long hairy fingers were twitching.

In the interim, the Northrop was refueled and to all intents and purposes prepared for a continuation of its journey. Still no one came. But the four men in uniform never took their eyes off them. Kirk was slowly being boiled into a mad frenzy. To be held like this was one thing and to know that his death was being plotted only added to his anxiety. The fact that he was helpless and could do nothing was worse than being tied up.

He stood in the hangar mouth and listened to the aerial activity outside. Great airliners from London, Paris, Amsterdam, and Rome came in with efficient regularity. Then a loud siren screeched out and all activity halted. From the north came the concerted roar of powerful engines!

Tank immediately began to dance about with nervous gestures. The men in uniform took a new and more watchful attitude. A formation of Heinkel fighters swept around in a gaudy display, broke off in threes, and made meticulous landings on the wide concrete runway.

"I get it," said Kirk under his breath, as he grabbed Tank's elbow. "Steady, Tank!"

They watched the Heinkels roll up before the high metal fence and halt in military line-up.

"They have no intention of letting us get away, this time," Kirk muttered to himself.

They watched the smartly-dressed pilots climb out and stand before their planes. Then, before Kirk could sense what was really going on, a large black Benz sedan came squealing around the corner of the hangar and came to a stop just outside.

"Now for it," Kirk whispered out of one corner of his mouth. "Take it easy, Tank!"

THREE men got out of the car and stared about. Two stayed in the front seat, the driver and a stocky bull-necked man in uniform. The three men came toward Kirk who nonchalantly tucked his blackthorn stick under his arm and took out a cigarette case. He selected a cork-tipped cigarette, lit it without glancing toward the men who were approaching.

"*Herr* Kirk?" the man in the fore said quietly. "I am very glad to see you."

"You're a damned liar," said Kirk quietly without changing his expression. "You're scared stiff, and you know it."

For a moment the yellow-faced man was unable to answer. He had hardly expected this.

"You will, of course, come quietly. We are of the Gestapo—the Secret Police."

The man was fairly tall, well dressed, almost foppish. He had a trim grayish military mustache. His eyes were close to his thin nose and they were shifty. He had a slight scar under one eye that had dragged the lower lid down off line giving him a particularly sinister appearance.

"That's another lie! You are not the Secret Police. You are Baron von Audemars, of the Circle of Death. I'll never forget, you, von Audemars. You killed my father—in the Berlin Zoo years ago."

"Sure," said Tank from one side while von Audemars stood and gasped. "I remember that guy. I was in the cage when it happened."

The others stared at Kirk, then at Tank. They were unable to make out what was happening.

"Cage? . . . Zoo?" the narrow-faced German said, feigning that he was unable to comprehend.

"Yeah! And you, not me, should have been in that cage, von Audemars," Tank said without changing his expression. "You were the wild animal, not me."

Von Audemars was stunned. Tank certainly looked like an ape—but he spoke! The three Germans moved up closer, stared at Tank.

"Take it easy, Tank," warned Kirk. "Of course, we know you, von Audemars. We know every member of the Circle of Death—you, Sir Eric Spelter, Longeman Worth, Pierre Compte, Cockosaert, and all the rest of them."

Instantly the German sensed that it was he who was trapped, not Kirk. He tried to step back a pace and draw a gun from his pocket, but Kirk had moved like lightning.

With a quick move of his hand he flipped his burning cigarette into von Audemars' face. The German screamed. Then Kirk drew on the handle of his blackthorn stick and out came a gleaming blade.

He allowed the sheath section to drop to his left hand. A quick swish served to knock the gun from von Audemars' hand. Then another lightning movement and he had run von Audemars through the chest.

"That's for the Circle of Death!" he cried.

MEANWHILE, Tank had stood still unable to understand what had happened. Then, as the two Germans behind von Audemars leaped forward, Tank grabbed one by the throat and with a quick snatch hurled him full at the other who was trying to pull a Luger out of his coat pocket.

Kirk leaped, grabbed the gun dropped by von Audemars, and began blasting away at the four Germans across the hangar who were uncertain as to whether to draw their short swords or their pistols.

They had little time to come to a decision. Kirk dropped two of them cold. Then Tank darted across the hangar floor, leaped up on the wing of the Northrop, and felled an amazed mechanic with the inertia starter handle. The ape-man then began winding the starter like a madman.

Somewhere outside boomed the three engines of a heavy Junkers plane taking off. Kirk again raised his pistol.

“Everyone stand still!” he bawled. “No one is to move!”

Then he jabbed the blade back into the blackthorn stick and backed toward the Northrop. The mechanics huddled against the wall, uncertain what was really going on. Kirk leaped for the cockpit, dropped in, and kicked over the starter. The Cyclone opened with a roar.

Two shots now rang out from the car outside. A man in uniform was blazing away at them with a short carbine.

Kirk ducked down, released the brakes, and let the Northrop roar out of the hangar. Ahead of him, not forty yards away, stood the row of Heinkels. The pilots were scrambling into their cockpits.

“Glory! They are taking no chances,” muttered Kirk. “Three of them are in the air already.”

He kept the Northrop low to gain speed, then quickly hoiked over the fighters. A burst of fire hammered at him from somewhere above and Kirk zigzagged all over the field to get away. The three Heinkels came down at him hard, and their bullets kicked up dust off the runway below, but Kirk yanked the Northrop over into a sharp turn and kited off at right angles. Tank in the back seat danced about the cockpit, thumped on the glass cover.

“Take it easy, Tank! Take it easy! Where’s that Junkers?” Kirk yelled.

The Heinkels were now coming after him again and Kirk turned quickly, let down the gun panels, and opened fire. The first Heinkel took his initial burst full in the nose and the silver blades of the prop went flying through the air like berserk broadswords. Kirk twisted out, dived down, came up under the second, and loosed a quick-snap-shot. The Heinkel zoomed slowly, rolled over on its back, screwed over to one side, and smashed directly into the third. They went down together and crashed into a small hut at one side of the airport.

Kirk curled away, then raced after the Junkers. The big transport was heading due east, and he intended to use it for a shield in case the other Heinkels followed him.

As he raced along and finally caught the big German airliner he sighted something that brought a glow to his heart. From a short stub mast above the control cabin of the Junkers fluttered a small square white flag with a black swastika marked in the center. Kirk knew that it was an official government flag.

“It’s the Big Boy himself,” he chuckled. Then his glee died. Was he fighting the Circle of Death and the German government, too? There was no question about it. The Junkers transport was carrying *Generaloberst* Herman Goering, Reich Minister for Air!

“Wait a minute,” Kirk cried as he steadied himself. “There’s something queer here. Goering’s escort was on the ground when I got off. These other Heinkels were in the air. They’re Circle of Death ships, not official government jobs!”

Six Heinkels above maneuvered again, and suddenly three of them dived down, their wires and struts screaming. Tank let out low-throated growls. Their Heinkel tracer cut weird low-angled designs in the sky and a crossfire streaked across the Northrop’s fin.

Kirk took a quick look fore and aft. Then with a mad disregard for the bullets, he suddenly darted under the long fuselage of the Junkers.

The Heinkel guns abruptly held their wrath; the German fighters fell back baffled.

“Come on! Shoot away! If you can pepper me without peppering your big boss, you’re better shots than I give you credit for.”

Kirk held his position doggedly, only eased back and forth gently to keep dead under the Junkers. The three Heinkels were blocked out completely. One Heinkel pilot tried a short snap-shot dive, but he gave up when his tracers drew treacherous streaks around the wing-tips of the transport. Kirk let his eyes close slightly, smiled grimly.

For five or six minutes this unbelievable game of tag continued. Then from below came the real escort Heinkels, the six of them easing in with uncomfortable twists to get between the Circle of Death fighters and the Junkers. A few shots were exchanged, then the escort fighters forced the opposing formation to split up.

“They’re playing the game,” Kirk muttered. “Goering’s guys are on the up and up. Hello, now they’re trying to get me out of here.”

THE big Junkers was swinging back and forth, so Kirk took a chance and darted out. He looked up at the control pit of the Junkers, half expecting to get a heavy burst of fire from a portable machine gun. Instead he saw the uniformed arm of the copilot signaling him on.

Kirk dropped back, pulled out his radio mike, set the wave length lever to the Luft Hansa frequency, and called the Junkers.

In a moment he had raised them.

“I am staying near the transport until I am over the German border,” he said. “If I am in any way molested by German military planes, I shall take cover again beneath you.” There came a quick reply:

“The *Generaloberst* presents his compliments and promises immunity all the way to the border. We hope you will keep safely clear according to rules of the air.”

“Thank you,” answered Kirk, “and happy landings!”

With that, Coffin Kirk dropped into a position well behind the airliner.

Tank just crooned to himself, his eyes half closed, and in another hour they were screaming across the North Sea.

Sky Guns of Singapore Flying Aces 6/38

“Twenty million pounds to fortify Singapore ... Twenty minutes for complete destruction ... Twenty days to embroil the world in war!” That fateful warning meant that Britain's proud new naval base was doomed—doomed by the Circle of Death! And when the masked members of that veiled power learned that “Coffin” Kirk stood in the path of their poisonous fangs, they only laughed sardonically. For Kirk was their most hated enemy. Two scores would be settled with a single blow!

OVER Changi on the eastern tip of Singapore, a dull, tropical night was just beginning to fall when that Blackburn Shark first appeared over the island of Tekong.

The black waters of the Old Strait were flowing down from the fringe of Johore. And now from the teak deck of the American aircraft carrier Santiago, which was heading eastward in mid-stream, there roared a flight of Boeing F4B-4's bent on a routine tactical problem.

Narrow necklaces of lights marked the highways of the island. They wound over to the Causeway—the link between Brani and Johore which lay within two miles of the new British naval base. Indeed, these lights seemed to throw a guide line from the swarming pile that was the city of Singapore over to that billion-dollar stronghold on the northern shore.

Heat rose in pungent waves from the peninsular swamps, swept across the island to curdle in narrow streets of Singapore's native sector, where flat-footed Malays padded along, their slant eyes sparkling like dark jewels set in old ivory.

Meanwhile, linen-appareled whites hurried across tree-skirted Kaffles Square. They only paused a moment to glance up at the military planes overhead, then hurried into the bars of the hotels confident in the feeling of security that went with the great new naval bulwark that had strengthened this cross-roads of the East.

Confident in added security? Yes!

And yet as polished admirals' launches left grim warships in the harbor and snaked their way through lazy *sampans* and swaying *prahus* and sped on toward the wharfs, a certain tense and mysterious expectancy permeated the equatorial air.

There would be formal functions that night which would bring out the color and brilliancy of jewel-bedecked gowns, of dress uniforms, and of white ties and tails. Royal Air Force officers and navy commanders were already gathered at the cocktail bars. Some bore stripes that denoted long experience in the service, others were young and new. Some of those eyes that shone through the blue cigarette smoke were the same eyes that had once been pressed against gun sights at Mons and Verdun, the same eyes that had tried to pierce the haze at Jutland, the same eyes that had been half blinded with sand and sun at Gallipoli. Yet these men were in the minority; the younger post-War officers outnumbered them.

But since this was cosmopolitan Singapore, the group was not totally British. There were also broad-shouldered American naval men relating jokes or news items picked up by service radio sets, ponderous Dutch traders from the nearby Netherland East Indies, a few rather silent and overly-dignified Japanese, some important Chinese merchants, and a handful of French and Italian attaches.

IN such a gun-bristling setting as Singapore it seemed inconceivable that there could be a cause for fear. Yet a certain message had somehow found its way into the office of the colony Governor-General. The startling bit of paper had simply sifted out of a sheaf of reports forwarded by the Director of Drainage and Irrigation. Then when they rushed over to question the D.D.I., they found him dead at his desk—strangled with a silken sarong cord, and with a two-inch circular brand cruelly stamped on his high forehead. The message had read:

Twenty million pounds to fortify Singapore twenty minutes for complete destruction twenty days to embroil the world in war!—The Circle of Death

The Inspector General of Police could throw no light on either the message or the murder. To be sure, the matter could have been dismissed as the work of a madman. But strange things can happen in the Far East, and there was plenty of reason to believe the threat. Singapore was responsible for the protection of wide British interests against which several jealous powers might like to strike.

But the Governor-General's reception and ball had to go on. In fact, it might help ease the tension—for it would at least give the service men responsible for the security of Singapore an opportunity of swinging their thoughts into less-trying channels. A breathing spell assuaged with fine wine, beauty, and music might promote better international understanding and cooperation.

Still, the British and American battleships in the harbor, though gaily bedecked with flags and ceremonial illumination, hummed with tense activity below decks. Skeleton crews sat on metal saddles in the gun turrets, keen-eyed junior officers were in the fire control bridges, and second officers stood watch on the bridge wings. They were on guard against—they knew not what. Yet some satanic power was threatening to snuff out thousands of lives and leave those bedecked battleships floating tombs of sudden death.

THE Blackburn Shark continued on and skirted the north side of Old Strait as the American single-seater fighters turned clear of her riding lights and flew back over the outer harbor of Changi. Those who remember much about it recall only that the British torpedo carrier was not carrying the usual 21-inch torpedo between her wheels, and a few declared she did not carry her Fleet Arm numerals. But in light of what happened afterward it is a wonder anyone in the Straits Settlements was ever able to remember anything.

The Shark finally swung in over the air base, gave the accepted service signals, and continued northwest toward the new Naval Base.

It was then that things began to happen.

A silver Northrop 2-E carrying no registration numbers that could be recognized from the ground, abruptly swung into a searchlight beam that fingered the sky from somewhere east of Mandai. The low-wing craft poised for a moment at the 3,000 foot level, and then when British Archie shells burst across her nose she darted back and forth as though unperturbed. Since she did not deign to pull up, the ground officer in charge of the battery ordered two more three-inchers blasted at her.

The Northrop still gave no salute—she simply nosed down through a blot of AA smoke and hurtled at the British Shark!

Almost instantly, two more searchlight beams splashed their blaze against the night sky and sped across to light up the defiant American ship. Observers below then saw the gunners in the Shark direct a warning burst at the Northrop. But the dull silver monoplane continued its menacing dive on the British service ship.

The ground batteries now held their fire, but the layers worked like beavers to select a new range. Shell fuses were rammed into the automatic selectors, and the gunners stood by in readiness.

And now action had begun above. The Northrop slammed at the Blackburn, and for several minutes a mad aerial engagement took place. It was noted at the time that the Blackburn seemed to be attempting to get inland toward the concrete buttresses of the great new dry-dock, but the Northrop maneuvered continually to keep her out over the Strait.

Two shells burst dangerously close to the Northrop, but they only seemed to goad the American fighter into a new frenzy of action. With a swish she zoomed, curled over on one wing-tip, and went down at the Blackburn spewing a torrent of lead.

The Blackburn staggered, jerked her nose up sharply. Then several missiles fell from her undercarriage racks. Smoke hid this scene from those below.

But there quickly followed four distinct explosions and four gigantic columns of water climbed up into the sky. A thunderous concussion shook the island, and the next thing observers saw was the Blackburn falling through the haze in unsteady flutters, throwing portions of her wings and tail assembly away. Finally a pennon of flame flickered out and crawled along her lower longerons, then she nosed down and her *Siddleley* Tiger engine raced her into the Strait.

The wreckage hit a chain's length ahead of the anchored V.S.S. Marblehurst and sent out a blue-white cloud of vapor and a billowing carpet of flame that unfurled itself across the oily waters.

And with that, the dull-silver Northrop cleared, roared through a mad barrage of three-inch anti-aircraft fire, and headed inland in a southerly direction.

IT was the Flag-Officer of the Marblehurst who gave the first alarm. This American cruiser was connected by telephone buoy with the Rutland, which lay two hundred yards farther downstream.

"For Heaven's sake, batten every gas-tight door you have aboard!" he screamed into the phone. "Every man top-side has been knocked out. The wind is moving it this way. It's gas gas of some"

But that was as far as he got.

The officers aboard the Rutland made a game effort to comply and warn other vessels, but their radio man died at his post, his carrier wave still humming in the earphones of the operators on the ships nearby.

Death had struck with a silent scythe. Men dropped where they stood and metal took on a foul greenish tinge. Two Royal Navy patrol boats hurried across the water, to attempt to pick up survivors. But one bashed itself into the side of an oil tanker, and the other, utterly out of control, went aground in the marshes opposite the Naval base.

For three hours Singapore was in a bedlam. A few on duty at the air base managed to get into gas-proof shelters or don masks. The gunners at the Changi anti-aircraft battery base managed to save themselves. But the Strait was choked with sampans, prahus, bum-boats, barges, and admiralty craft, all out of control and all bearing the corpses of men who had died without knowing what had felled them.

The news was telephoned through to the city of Singapore, fifteen miles away, and the Governor-General quickly ordered a thorough search made for the mysterious Northrop. Armored cars raced through the streets with loud speakers ordering all ranks to return to their stations. American swabs swung to the running boards of cars alongside British bluejackets. Garrison Artillery men trotted at the double with blue-clad American Marines. Officers in full dress barked orders at small groups of men and marched them to their emergency stations. Searchlight beams continued to slash back and forth across the skies.

But no trace of the Northrop could be found.

By midnight, some semblance of order had been regained. A skeleton crew was placed on the Rutland and Marblehurst, and the two cruisers were moved out of the Strait while flags drooped at half-staff from the walled walks of the R.A.F. base.

The Circle of Death had struck!

Radiograms immediately apprised the world of the tragedy that had swept Singapore. Parliament hurried to a special session, the President of the United States addressed a harassed Congress in a midnight assembly, and international tension brought threats, riots, and bombings.

Meanwhile, every source available was checked to discover the identity of the mysterious American Northrop and its audacious pilot. But only a black-robed group of men sitting about a table in Berlin had even a semblance of an idea. And they could never tell, for they themselves were outside the law. Indeed, they were—The Circle of Death!

TWENTY-FOUR HOURS passed, and another night fell on that Far East city. Would it bring more horror?

Two figures, grotesque in their contrast, hurried through the back alleys along the waterfront. Heat rose in pungent waves and mongrel curs yapped and snapped as they fought over a bit of rotting offal found in the murky gutters.

Dim lights threw eerie shadows on the creaking, perilously hung sign whose gaudy letters announced that here was Kanaka Joe's place. Through the warped doorway, which was partially screened with cheap netting, came the odors of sweat, sawdust, and rot-gut alcohol. A dingy ship's lantern swung somewhere in the middle of the room and a tinny player piano of doubtful vintage was giving off a pathetic melody.

Toward this dive the two figures made their way. The first—a tall man in an open throated shirt and pith helmet—drew aside the door netting and peered in. The other, a smaller but startlingly stocky individual

wearing a dirty yachting cap, dingy denim shirt, and dirty duck trousers, stood outside and assumed the belligerent attitude of a sentry.

In a moment, the tall one returned to the side of his short and rugged companion and said: "Not there, Tank. We'd better try farther along."

But the short one seemed not to be listening. He stood sniffing and uttering guttural sounds as he eyed a rickshaw which had suddenly stopped about twenty yards ahead.

"What's up, Tank? Caught something?" The stocky chap only hurried ahead without a word, whereupon the taller fellow followed him with an even-swinging stride, his eyes cold and piercing, his jaw firm.

The man addressed as Tank pulled up in the shadow of a leaning wall and waited. He was sniffing again through a nose that appeared to have seen considerable action in the prize ring. The face was tawny and heavily lined, but the eyes were equally as piercing and keen as that of the taller man.

As the two waited, a dim figure vaulted out of the rickshaw, tossed a coin to the boy, and darted into a dim doorway.

"Um! So he's gone into the Pirate's Pit, eh, Tank?" the tall man said. And when the smaller one simply grunted and sniffed again, he continued: "Take it easy. Let him settle down first."

The man called Tank nodded, then nervously padded about in the shadows on feet encased in rubber-soled sneakers. His great hands at times were drawn up and clenched, and once or twice he thumped them against his chest.

"Now now!" soothed the other. "You'll get your chance—if it's the right man. Take it easy, Tank; here's a cigarette."

The two sucked on their smokes for a minute or so, then the tall man jerked at his belt and led the way. Together they walked into the dingy den and sauntered up to the bar.

"One gin sling and a *seidel* of beer," the tall man ordered.

The bartender, a hunchbacked devil with one eye, drew a short cheroot out of his mouth and set it on the counter behind him. He selected the ingredients of the Singapore gin sling with callous skill, mixed them, and drew the beer.

The two newcomers took up their drinks and sipped. And now the tall one peered cautiously, into the dreary slab of mirror behind the bar.

A giant bluejacket with the inscription H.M.S. Eagle on his cap, stood next to them at the bar. He turned in friendly fashion toward the tall one.

"Where was you, Mate, when it 'appened?" he opened with a booming voice that came from the depths of a barrel chest.

"Beg pardon?" said the tall man.

"I mean, where was you when it 'appened larst night—the bombing and gassing? Narsty bit o' business, that!"

"Oh, last night. Rather. Why I was out Mandai way looking at a plantation. I suppose you fellows were quite busy for a time, eh?"

"You weren't 'arf lucky missin' it. I 'ad a bloomin' gas marsk on for abart four 'ours. Dirty fine mess somebody made of somethink, eh?"

"I don't suppose you're supposed to talk much," the tall man said, "but have they found out what actually occurred when the blow-off came?"

"Who's yer pal?" the bluejacket half-whispered before he answered. He was indicating the stocky, rough-looking fellow who held the big *seidel* of beer.

"Old friend of mine. Call him Tank. He's all right—an Oxford man in his better days," the tall man responded quietly. "And as for me, I'm Kirk—Brian Kirk."

"His associates in crime call him 'Coffin'—'Coffin' Kirk," the smaller man broke in.

On hearing this the big bluejacket looked puzzled. He peered around the front of Kirk's chest at the swarthy chap farther along.

"Did 'e say that?" the Limey asked.

"Just his way of joking. Anyhow, he and I are looking for a small copra place down here."

“ ‘E looks like a foreigner. But ‘e certainly speaks all right,” the bluejacket said still a little confused at the rugged man’s speech.

“Young man,” the chap called Tank went on over the top of his beer *seidel*. “I can trace my ancestry back further than the Norman Conquest. You can speak freely in my presence.”

“Seen better days, eh?” the bluejacket said out of the corner of his mouth to Kirk as he eyed the burly Tank.

“Oh, much better. Drink up and have another with me.”

THE BARTENDER set them up again and the Eagle sailor went on confidentially: “Yus, it was narsty business, and that American Northrop seems to be at the bottom of it. At least they think so.”

“Well,” remarked Kirk. “That was the plane that shot the British plane down, wasn’t it?”

“Ah, you’re right there, Matey. But that’s not the bottom of it. I can tell yer somethink that few ‘ere in Singapore knows abart this little matter, me bein’ on the aircraft carrier.”

“Hm! You sound interesting,” said Kirk. Then he looked around carelessly. He’d already noted that the man they sought was sitting at a small table near the far wall. He was a colorless but exceedingly strong looking fellow who sat watching the door anxiously. He fingered a tall glass of amber liquid and at times turned and watched the movements of a slim girl who sauntered about the smoky den selling cigarettes.

Kirk, who now realized that their quarry had evidently been looking at the girl when they came in and had thus missed them, still pretended to be listening to the big seaman beside him.

“Interesting?” the bluejacket was saying. “Why, do you know, Matey, that that Blackburn—the Shark ship wot was shot down—was one of six such planes that have been missing for about a month? I know, because I’m an artificer on one of the Ospreys. Mister Spelter is my pilot.”

Kirk turned his head sharply and spoke out of the side of his mouth as he watched the cigarette girl: “I don’t understand.”

“No? Well, that Blackburn was one of a half dozen that were flyin’ out to the Far East, for the Singapore base. But none of them got ‘ere!”

“What happened?” asked Kirk, still watching the girl.

“Ah, now you ‘ave me, Matey. That’s wot they’d all like to know. The blarsted flight took off all right from Rangoon—that’s in Burma, yer know. They’d done a lovely show all the way down from Malta without anythink ‘appening—and then, out of nowhere, they all simply well, they just didn’t turn up. And like everything else like this, the whole bloomin’ mess is carefully hushed up. But I know, Matey. I know, ‘cause we blokes on the Eagle went combing the confounded Bay of Bengal lookin’ for ‘em.”

“It’s unbelievable!” said Kirk. “It looks, then, as though someone swiped the lot and now they’re using them to—”

“To ‘do in’ the new business at Singapore,” cut in the giant bluejacket. “Clever bit of work, if you want my opinion. And I says that that bloke in the Northrop knew somethink abart it. ‘E tried to stop that blarsted Blackburn from getting through. I think it was ‘e who made ‘em drop their bombs in the Strait, and if they’d got through to Singapore wiv that gas, there’d be nobody ‘ere tonight to drink beer in the Pirate’s Pit.”

“Which reminds me,” smiled Kirk. “Let’s have another.”

They drank up and stared at each other in the mirror behind the bar.

“That’s a very sensational story,” said Kirk, lighting a cigarette.

“And what worries me,” came from husky Tank on the other side, “is what has happened to the other five.”

The British bluejacket jerked, peered around Kirk again as though he was not quite sure who had spoken.

“You’re right there, Matey,” agreed the Eagle man. “What games will they get up to wiv the other five?”

BUT Kirk was watching the man over near the wall through the mirror now. He noted that the fellow was restless. He continually flicked up the sleeve of his shantung shirt and examined his wrist watch. Then he kept turning to watch the cigarette girl.

Kirk noted that she was now standing near a group of cruel-faced men who were evidently deck-hands from foreign freighters. They seemed to be carrying on the usual chit-chat with the girl, but one of them suddenly made a move that instantly aroused Kirk's suspicion.

"Look here, sailor," he said quietly out of the side of his mouth. "I'm going to start a row here. I think someone is up to something—and if you want to stay out of it, get going now."

"A row, Matey? A bit of a barney? Count me in. Who do I 'ave a go at?"

"All right. Just keep quiet until I give you the word."

Kirk again took up his drink, then began a pantomime of fumbling for a cigarette. The girl was coming up the room with her little tray in front of her, and she was jingling her coins cheerfully in a pocket of a small starched apron.

"Watch now," warned Kirk. "Watch those birds in the back of the room."

And with that he started across the floor, while the bluejacket finished his beer with a satisfied gulp of expectancy. Kirk measured his steps so that he reached the man across the room at the same instant as did the girl. She gave him a half-startled smile, then shoved the tray forward to the man at the table.

One pack of cigarettes was shoved forward to the front of the tray, and the man in the shantung shirt made a move to pick it up. But Kirk was a fraction of a second too fast for him. He took the package with his right hand and dropped a coin on the tray with his left.

"Thanks," he smiled. "I've been looking all over the place for a smoke."

He palmed the cigarettes quickly as the man jumped to his feet and gripped his wrist.

"Drop that!" the fellow hissed at Kirk. "I want that package!"

The girl stood horrified, one hand raised to her lips as if to stifle a cry.

"There's plenty more cigs there—all you want," said Kirk with a thin-lipped smile.

"But I want that pack!"

The man now had his viper face close to Kirk's chin, and his eyes blazed hatred and defiance.

"Try and get it—Trussock. You are Jerry Trussock, aren't you?"

"Yeah, Trussock's the name. And I suppose you're 'Coffin' Kirk. But if you don't hand over that package I'll see that you're put in a coffin quicker than you expected."

They were hissing their sentences now through clenched teeth. The girl had hastily backed away, her other cigarettes spilling off her tray.

"You swine! For the last time—give me that package!"

"Try and get it."

Trussock gave Kirk's hand a wrench, but the Yank curled his left hand around quickly and caught his man full under the chin with the heel of his palm. Trussock went over backward, upsetting a table and several chairs.

Almost instantly the Pirate's Pit was in an uproar. The cigarette girl let out a scream and a bottle swished past Kirk's head and smashed itself to smithereens against the wall.

"Look out!" bawled the bluejacket.

Kirk turned quickly, threw a quick punch at a man who was rushing toward him with a knife in his hand. Then Tank let out a loud piercing scream and dived in to cover the stabber who now lay on his back on the floor.

The bluejacket then thundered into action. First he leaned over the bar and grabbed the bartender by the scruff of the neck and brought his head down with a smash on the edge of the ebony bar. The man let out a groan, went limp, and dropped to the floor on the other side. With that, the husky sailor came into the fray under forced draft. He blundered into four dark men, swung from somewhere near the back of his heel, and scattered them like ten-pins.

"Good work!" cried Kirk. But his words were lost as shouts of "*Look out!*" "*Get him!*", and "*Grab the girl!*" rent the air.

Then a shot rang out somewhere, and Kirk turned after planting his fist in a longshoreman's belt. Tank was scrambling on the floor with Trussock. The man had a gun out. But he'd missed in his first try at Kirk.

Tank, however, soon precluded any further marksmanship of this kind. With a mighty heave, he lifted Trussock high in the air and slammed him down on the edge of a table like a side of beef.

“Take it easy, Tank!” yelled Kirk.

But Tank was inflamed now. He sailed into Trussock again, gripped his throat and almost ripped the man’s head off. Trussock let out a low moan and Tank screamed at him. Then with another heave he again hoisted the man high above his head, stood poised for an instant or two, and hurled him broadside at a knot of men who were rushing at Kirk.

Noting that Tank had the remainder of the assailants well in hand, Kirk shoved the pack of cigarettes into his pocket and went to the aid of the Limey bluejacket. The sailor had taken on two Lascars, and one of them had got through the Eagle man’s guard and inflicted a long, blood-spurting gash across his forehead.

With a series of curling hooks, Kirk sent one of the Lascars crashing across the room while the bluejacket downed the other.

By this time, the place was a shambles. Several men lay motionless on the floor, and the few who could move cowered in the corners, their faces battered and jaws swollen. There were no others left to dispute the three; for Tank had just tossed the last fighter the full length of the dingy den.

Kirk’s eyes sought the cigarette girl, and now with a quick hop, skip, and jump he darted down the room, leaving the big British sailor to gape at Tank with blank amazement spread across his blood-stained countenance. The Limey had never before seen such physical prowess.

KIRK nailed the girl as she tried to get through a window. He dragged her back kicking and screaming. “Shut up. I won’t hurt you,” he yelled. “Show me which man here put you up to that cigarette package gag.”

“He gave me a dollar to give it to him,” the girl whimpered in fright.

“A dollar? Dutch, Mex, or American?”

“American here, look this is what he gave me.”

The girl brought out an American one-dollar bill and showed it to Kirk. He nodded. “But which man gave it to you?” he said as he lugged her forward toward the fallen and cowering men. She pointed to a swarthy bullet-headed man who lay on his back, his body jerking convulsively.

“That’s the one,” she said pointing. “Black Teddy!”

“Right!” said Kirk, kneeling down and going through the man’s pockets quickly. He found a few seaman’s papers, some cards of bars all over the Far East, and a few letters. There were also about three hundred dollars in new American currency.

Kirk had a sudden desire to test the Eagle man. “Want it?” he said to the British seaman, who was staring strangely at the man on the floor.

“Not me, Mate. I don’t take no money wot don’t belong to me. Let ‘im ‘ave it. I’ve been shoved abart in bar brawls me-self. An’ it ain’t any joke wakin’ up and finding yerself stoney broke—an’ far from ‘ome.”

“Good lad!” beamed Kirk.

“Besides, I’ve ‘ad me money’s worth. That little barney was worth a month’s pay. Let shove orf.”

“And now where’s that girl?” But the cigarette seller had completely disappeared.

Kirk grabbed Tank, then all three hurried out into the dark street and sought the protective shadows. Police might be along at any minute.

“Just what was that cigarette business all about?” the Limey asked as they turned into Arthur Street and headed for the brighter lights of Colony Road.

“Nothing much. I just didn’t like that guy,” explained Kirk.

“Know ‘im?”

“Used to. He was a cheap transport pilot once, and he was picked up several times for bringing Chinese across the border. Bad character, that bird.”

“Your mate ‘ere, enjoyed ‘imself, didn’t ‘e? Chucking men abart as though they were stuffed dolls. ‘E ought to come in ‘andy if any of your elephants go on strike an’ you want a few mahogany trees pulled up. Oxford, did you say?”

“Magdalen College. Stroke oar in ‘21. Ancient ceramic arts,” Tank muttered over his shoulder.

“Ah! ceramics I ‘eard once means crockery. And I ‘ad an idea there was something about slingin’ the crockery abart in your pay and mess book, Mate,” the big seaman observed quietly after he had let Tank’s information sink in. “Well, where to now? You ain’t looking for any more cigarettes are you?”

“No. That’s all for tonight, Jack—you British tars go under the name of ‘Jack’, don’t you?” smiled Kirk.

“Oh, that name’ll do. It’s as good as the one your mate ‘as, at any rate.”

“Well, we’ll be leaving you here, Jack. If we’re in town tomorrow, we’ll look you up, and we’ll see what the cocktail bar at the Raffles has to offer, eh?”

“Gawd, matey! Do you mean it?”

“Positive!”

“Give us yer mauley,” the tar said gripping Kirk’s hand. “I’ll be wanderin’ near the Raffles from seven till twelve—unless nothink ‘appens.”

They shook hands, then Kirk and Tank moved away with a final salute.

“And see that you get that gash fixed up before you go back to your ship,” Kirk advised.

“COFFIN” KIRK and his mate, Tank, walked several squares until they found an available conveyance to take them out of town a short distance.

Kirk smiled to himself as he realized what luck he had had that night. He was thankful for the assistance of the big honest Englishman, and he was thankful for the break he had had over the little cigarette girl. But he was more than pleased with the behavior of Tank—his trained ape man.

He would have liked to tell the big English sailor the real story of Tank and how they had practically grown up together since that memorable day twenty years before when they had both escaped from the clutches of the German Secret Police and from the confines of the Berlin Zoo. He would have liked to have told him the story of how the two of them, utter children of their respective species, had managed to sneak across Germany to Hamburg and get aboard a freighter that took them to America.

The big Englishman would not have believed how they had grown up together while Kirk planned in his youthful heart how he would get his revenge on the unscrupulous billion-dollar syndicate that had caused his father’s death. It was hard to credit the story of how he had patiently taught Tank to act or ape human beings and how he had carefully removed most of the natural hair from his face and tattooed a pinkish color to the cheeks and forehead.

The Englishman would have laughed had he known how for years Kirk had studied ventriloquism to “make Tank talk” and how he had added to his own skill and knowledge to carry out the plan which was devised to wipe out that hellish syndicate—the Circle of Death.

Yes, all this had started twenty years before when Dongan Kirk, Brian’s father, had been betrayed by the Circle of Death. Twenty long years of careful planning and control of a bitter hatred. Twenty long years tempered only by the unbelievable loyalty and protection of a trained ape.

THE car carried them on through the outer fringes of the town and along the King Edward road for about five miles. Then, at a signal from Kirk, the Malay driver pulled up at a broad cross-road. A watery moon threw its silver sheen over the swaying background of palms as they got out and walked away. The Alvis car turned and made its way back to Raffles Square.

They walked on in silence for about a quarter of a mile, then turned off across a matted track which curled into the jungle. Their footsteps were softened by the tanga-moss which gave under their feet like a luxurious pile carpet.

“This equatorial jungle business must seem like old times to you, eh, Tank?” Kirk said quietly as he stared up through the nipa palms at the moon.

Then suddenly he realized that Tank might someday want to revert to the jungle. True, he had been born in a city zoo and had never seen a real jungle before. But Kirk sensed that no amount of captivity or confinement could fully erase the inherent desire for the freedom of the natural habitat from where his ancestors had sprung.

The more Kirk thought of the idea, the more it bothered him. He had not considered this when he brought the ape across southern Europe, across Turkey, through Persia, and in long hops over India to the Federated Malay States on this wild dash to attempt to curb this new threat of the Circle of Death.

He walked on, pondering on the new problem—then suddenly realized that Tank was no longer beside him! His throat constricted. He turned sharply. But Tank was nowhere to be seen!

Frantic, he called out and hurried back along the path hoping against hope that the ape-man had stopped to inspect some new evidence of his ancestral past. A fear he had never sensed since that memorable day in the Berlin Zoo twenty years before swept through him like an acidic poison.

“Tank!” he called. “Tank! Come back here!”

He hurried on, broke into a run, then stumbled. He caught himself just in time and kicked at the something that had fouled his feet. He snatched down and drew up the object.

It was Tank’s sailor blouse.

“Tank!” he cried again. Then he saw the dirty duck trousers and the pair of rubber-soled sneakers lying there in the moonlight on the moss-covered path.

The full realization that he was now alone swept over him in an engulfing tide of despond. Alone, really, for the first time in twenty years. Like a man who has received an unexpected blow from a friend, “Coffin” Kirk drew the back of his hand across his eyes and let out a long sigh. He called once more, but the sound of his voice through the nipa palms only seemed to mock him. Finally, he rolled the ape’s still-warm clothing into a bundle, tucked it under his arm, and strode on with leaden steps.

THE plantation house lay about 400 yards ahead. Kirk had arranged for it in Rangoon a week before. The owner, a British planter who was on his way home to clear up the business details of an estate, was glad to let the American take it over for a reasonable sum for a few weeks on the assumption that he was experimenting with a new method of copra pressing.

The building was a well-constructed affair composed of one main living room, three bedrooms, a kitchen, and an attached shack which was rigged out as a sort of laboratory. A few yards away rambled a number of drying sheds, tool houses, and uninhabited shacks which had been used by native workmen when the plantation was being worked.

Kirk wandered in dejectedly and lit a large kerosene lamp which stood on a table near the front window. He placed Tank’s clothing on the window sill nearby, then went over to a cupboard and brought out a brandy bottle and a soda siphon.

“I might have known,” he muttered, “that there’s something about the smell of a jungle that does things even to humans. It was in the cards that Tank should feel the same effect.”

He splashed the soda into the glass, took a deep gulp.

Then he suddenly remembered that he had not yet inspected the package of cigarettes which had been the primary cause of the evening’s adventure. He sat down in a large wicker chair, stuck his long legs out before him, and produced the now crumpled pack from his white breeches pocket. He soon discovered a slit along one side of the pack-age, and by carefully removing the adjacent wrapping he quickly brought out a folded sheet of fine tissue paper.

Kirk whistled lightly as he opened the folded sheet. It was buff in color and marked with dark brown lines. He squinted at it as if unable to believe his eyes—for in the upper right-hand corner was printed: “H.M.S. Eagle”.

He sat staring across the room, utterly unable to figure out how this particular piece of paper got into the cigarette package.

“H.M.S. Eagle?” he pondered. “Why that’s the aircraft carrier that sailor friend of ours came from! This means that he must have delivered this! But how? ... and why? Yet I thought—”

Then he read the message which was plainly printed in telegrapher’s capitals:

ALL CLEAR TONIGHT. I HAVE MEN WATCHING K. WILL STRIKE FROM KRANII SIDE AT MIDNIGHT.

SPEL

For a moment, Kirk could not get the full significance of the message, though he was certain it had been intended for Jerry Trussock, whom he'd long suspected of having a connection with the dread Circle and who surely knew something about the events of the night before.

“‘All clear tonight,’” he repeated, “and they have me watched, for that ‘K’ pretty obviously means ‘Kirk’. But who the deuce could ‘Spel be?”

Then like a flash it struck. ‘Spel’ was Flying-Officer E. V. J. Spelter—the son of Sir Eric Spelter, the noted munitions king whose questionable activities had led Kirk to list him on his secret roster of the Circle of Death.

“So his son is in this thing, too—the spawn of a swine who would tilt the caldron of Mars and spread war and destruction on the heads of the unsuspecting. And should that caldron tilt here, a war would flame through the Pacific and leave the wreckage of two great nations in its wake.”

He sniffed at himself as he realized the statements he was making. “I’m getting squiffy without Tank around. But I wonder why young Spelter took the chance of writing such a message on a sheet of Eagle signal paper?”

He pondered on that as he consulted his wrist watch again. Then he sensed that Trussock would not have considered the message authentic without such evidence. That much was reasonable. Still, Spelter must have felt very sure of himself.

The time was 11:17. And the Circle of Death, with five missing Blackburn Sharks, would strike again at midnight.

He got up, crumpled the message, and glanced about again, hopelessly looking for Tank. Then with a low oath he sank into a chair to think.

HARDLY had he seated himself, when he sensed danger. But somehow tonight his muscles were not tuned for quick action. When he did get to his feet to investigate, it was too late.

A rawhide noose had been skillfully dropped over him and his arms were pinned tightly to his sides!

“Damn you!” he started to say. But then he held his breath. He realized he would need all he could muster to get out of this.

Three men were covering him while a fourth was knotting the thong behind his back. They were viper-faced individuals dressed in black alpaca clothing. This was strange apparel for white men in the Far East, but it had served its purpose of covering their movements as they followed Kirk and Tank from where they had left their conveyance.

“Where is that other fellow?” the leader, a rather young looking Englishman, clipped.

Kirk looked at the man. Judging by photos he'd seen of the elder Spelter, this could not be the young flyer. Then Kirk replied: “I don't know where my man is. I suppose he went to bed. Here's his clothes.” And he nodded toward the pile of clothes on the window sill.

“Take a look about the place,” the young Englishman ordered, flipping a Webley pistol about in an authoritative manner.

One of the others began scrounging his way about the building.

“What's the idea?” asked Kirk in an attempt to eke out some information and confirm what he already knew.

“You know what the idea is,” the young Englishman snarled. “Your name is Kirk, and we've just popped in to see that you don't spoil any more of our plans, although I must say I admire your persistence. Now, about that cigarette package business?”

“What about it?”

“You, of course, found the message. And we want it. It's rather—important to us.”

“You mean, it rather incriminates one Flying-Officer Spelter, eh?”

“That's the story,” admitted the other. “Now hand over that message.”

“It's somewhere about, but I'm not quite sure where now. You've rather messed up things here. I'll make myself comfortable, if you don't mind, and try to recall where that blamed message is.”

The searching chap came back and reported that there was “no sign of the other blighter”.

Kirk sat down, whereupon the young Englishman came over and went through his pockets. The message was nowhere to be found. The crumpled cigarette package still lay on a small table nearby, but the Englishman quickly satisfied himself that the message had been removed from it.

As a matter of fact, Kirk was really puzzled, because for the life of him he could not recall what he had done with the secret note.

“Now come on. There’s no use being nasty about this,” the young Englishman said. “We can, you know, make things pretty hot for you.”

“Well, you’ll have to hurry, won’t you,” Kirk taunted, “if you are going to see the fun at twelve o’clock?”

“There you are, Justin,” a heavy-set Limey broke out, addressing the leader. “You see, ‘e knows somethink abart it. ‘E must ‘ave it abart somewhere.”

“Let’s give him a going-over,” said the third man. “We haven’t much time anyway.”

Justin hesitated a moment, and Kirk spoke up: “Yes, you’d better be moving off if you want to get clear before those other Sharks go into action. I understand there’ll be a devil of a show tonight, and I don’t think your kind will want to be around these parts after things get moving.”

“What about that piece of paper?” spat Justin.

“I tell you I don’t know what I did with it. Your little visit has put me off my balance.”

“Yer only wastin’ time,” the big Limey warned his leader. “We’ve got to get back to Bedok before long, you know.”

Justin’s lips grew hard, and he approached Kirk with his Webley leveled.

“Go on, you’d better get rid of me now, because I don’t know where that paper is,” Kirk said with a grin. “Or are you a little squeamish about killing a man in cold blood?”

“Give it to ‘im, Justin,” the big Limey bawled. “We’ll set fire to this blooming place afterward to make sure nothing leaks out about our part in the doin’s.”

“You’re getting one chance,” Justin said. But his voice had gone weak. “Do you hand that paper over, or do we have to get rough?”

“Haven’t you been rough enough?” Kirk said.

“‘Ere, you ‘aven’t the guts to do it. Let me ‘ave a go at ‘im!” And the big Englishman threw a punch at the helpless Kirk and knocked him sprawling out of his chair. Then he started to draw his foot back to add a kick. But the young leader held him back.

“Not that—not that sort of thing, Holloway!” ‘

“You—you ain’t got a bit of courage in yer. Let ‘im ‘ave it now! We’re only wastin’ time ‘ere.”

Justin started to turn toward the others. But as he did so, he let out a muffled scream. He stood staring at the window. Then, before any of them could make a move, the full frame of the window came crashing in and a gigantic ape bounded into the room.

WITH a lightning move, Kirk rolled into the shadow of a heavy chair and buried his head between his knees. Then there came a smashing blow followed by a loud scream. Justin had been hurled across the room by a pair of strong hairy arms, and he now lay huddled against the stone fireplace. There was a shot somewhere and another scream as the returned Tank went to work on the other three at one and the same time. He grabbed the big Englishman by the scruff of the neck, swung him clear off his feet, and used him as a human hammer against the remaining two. Finally, when the latter lay still, the huge ape-man swung the now-inert Limey around like a discus thrower—and then tossed his battered body on top of Justin’s crumpled form.

One of the others then tried to creep away toward the door. But Tank caught sight of him. With a screech he catapulted across the room and landed full force on the man’s back. There was an ominous crack and a piercing cry, then Tank shoved the broken body into a corner.

“Tank! Tank!” yelled Kirk. “Come over here!”

The big ape bounded back, and put his arms around Kirk. Then he sensed that his master was bound, and with a snuffling cry he leaned over and with one wrench of his big teeth bit the rawhide thong in two. Kirk flexed his muscles a moment, then collected the weapons that had been scattered about the floor.

“Where the devil have you been?” demanded Kirk.

But Tank said nothing. He simply bowed his head, looked about the room with a sniff or two, and found his clothing. And while Kirk examined the injured men and took every paper he could find from them, the ape got dressed again and assumed something of a less forbidding appearance.

“You blew in just in time, old boy!” Kirk said as he inspected Holloway and Justin. They were both stone dead. Justin’s head was crushed in and Holloway’s back was broken. His check also showed that but one of the other two were alive, and that one was so badly injured that Kirk sensed he would never recover consciousness.

“So you succumbed to the spell of the jungle, Tank? Couldn’t resist a ramble through the trees, eh? I figured that was it, but I never thought you’d leave me like that.”

Tank, realizing he was being censored, hung his great head in retribution. But had Kirk inspected the ape’s massive face more closely, he would have noticed a sly smile that bespoke the huge simian’s contentment over his little game of hookey.

Kirk was bustling about the room now, looking for the lost message. He picked up the cigarette package and fingered it a moment, then said aloud: “Now what would I have done had it been a cigarette butt instead of a sheet of paper?”

His face brightened and he darted over and searched the fireplace. No, the message was not there. Indeed, he now recalled that one of the intruders had sifted through that same rubbish. But then, just as he was about to give up, a chance, acute-angle glance toward the side of the fireplace brought the secret note to light. The ball of paper was wedged down almost out of sight between the cross bars of a portable cooking grill.

“I must have unconsciously figured it was a cigarette butt and tossed it toward the fireplace—only to miss and hit this cooking gadget,” spoke up Kirk. Then he quickly consulted his watch and barked out an order to Tank. And once the lamp was blown out, the two of them hurried outside and made their way to the big drying shed where the Northrop had been carefully covered with a large strip of jute netting. From the outside, it would have looked for all the world like a pile of drying copra. Together they carefully stripped the covering back and clambered aboard. The tanks were full, for gasoline was available from several scarlet drums which had been brought in at Kirk’s orders a week or so before he had arrived. He checked the front guns and saw that Tank’s rear weapons were properly loaded and ready for action.

He kicked the Eclipse starter and the big engine opened up. Kirk let her warm for several minutes before moving out. Then with a final blast to check her revs he released the wheel brakes and let the sleek ship race out of the shed and into the roadway beyond.

Carefully setting her for the take-off down the wagon road that ran through the plantation, Kirk held her true, then lifted her into the sky. Both he and Tank had slipped on fairly warm flying clothing, including helmets and goggles, so no one would have suspected that the figure in the rear pit wasn’t a human.

THEY climbed higher, heading north all the time. And about two miles south of the new Naval base they saw the first tell-tale signs of warning. Great searchlight beams flashed out and slashed back and forth across the skies. And from the platforms of the cruisers anchored off Tekong, more shafts of light sprayed out, adding to the mad design that was being carved out of the dull blue sky.

Kirk looked at his watch again, then picking up the hand mike of his radio, he began sending a message on the official wave length of the Singapore air base:

Calling R.A.F. base at Singapore! Emergency warning! Five Blackburn Sharks of the Circle of Death will attack dry-dock, graving dock, and gun emplacements at Changi at midnight. Raid expected to begin from Kranii side at any minute. Warn all Naval vessels and U. S. Navy ships in area. Caution city of Singapore to prepare for gas.

He repeated the message as he climbed the Northrop and sought the point of Kranii on the south-west shore of the island. He did not pause to check to see if his message was being accepted, but continued to

chant his warning. A few moments later, he caught obvious evidence that his message was getting through. Lights threw fan-shaped glares down the main runway of the R.A.F. base. More lights broke out at the civil air base near the city. And signal lamps blinked on the cruisers. Even so, he did not hang up his mike:

This is Brian Kirk reporting. Five Blackburn Sharks will attempt to destroy the new bases at—

But he got no further. Tank's guns abruptly rang out, spewing the first torrent of lead. Kirk turned, saw three Sharks in wide formation curling around on them from the south.

"They're here!" he screamed, dropping the hand mike and snapping the switch. Then with a quick move, Kirk brought the Northrop around hard, and with a pull on the stick, he rammed her up and under the lead Shark and let drive. His two streams of fire fanged into the belly of the renegade Blackburn and she snapped in the middle as though she had been struck with an invisible chopper. Then flame spat out from her fuel tanks and a dull thud of concussion banged down on them from above. To dodge the falling wreck, Kirk had to let the Northrop go over on one wing and sideslip away.

Tank, chattering and dancing like a madman, now poured a wicked burst into the second Shark. Another bull's eye! And they watched the spiked biplane curl away in a tight but somewhat flat spiral. Immediately, Kirk nosed around after it, hammering through a hurricane of leaden hail from the other Blackburns. Finally he got a bead with his nose guns and poured a terrible burst full into the floundering Shark.

It was the death blow! She broke up with a loud roar, rolled over on her back, threw away her wings, and plummeted down to destruction.

"That's two!" yelled Kirk. "Now keep your eye peeled on the other, Tank."

The Northrop came up out of her dive with a scream, climbed almost vertical. The third Shark was racing away to the north, evidently headed for the naval base.

Kirk shot the sauce to the engine, thundered in pursuit. Then he faced a spray of lead from the rear pit of the speeding Blackburn Shark. He tangoed about to keep clear of the fire but gradually crept up on the raider. He could see the long torpedo between the wheels of the streaking biplane. That torpedo deposited in the right spot would quickly sink the gigantic naval dock which had been floated out from Britain.

Kirk sensed that he would have to act fast to get her before she got over the naval base. He started a series of long shots. Fortunately, these made her turn, and in turning she lost valuable time. Kirk then gave the Northrop all she would take and dashed into a position dead below that doom dealer of the Circle of Death.

Tank, chattering madly, caught the idea, crudely aimed the two movable Brownings in a vertical position and hung on the triggers. Kirk, watching the sparkle of his tracers, treadled his rudder pedals to bring Tank's shots to their mark.

Here was fixed-gun practice with a new meaning!

Tank screamed as he pressed his trips, and Kirk see-sawed back and forth until the charging boxes were empty. Then suddenly, the Shark wavered into the gleam of a searchlight and rolled sadly. Kirk dragged his stick back, took a quick pot-shot, and managed to get a short burst into the raider.

That was enough.

There was a fan-shaped blast of flame from beneath the fuselage and a battering concussion. Then the Shark dropped its nose, swept into a slow spin, and plunged down. Kirk hammered another burst into her as she passed and watched one of her wing panels fold back and block off the tail assembly.

The stricken Shark hit with a terrible explosion about a mile clear of the naval base, blasting a massive chunk out of a section of reclaimed marshland.

TANK was slapping Kirk on the back when it was all over. He had somehow changed the ammunition boxes on the Browning guns, and was waiting for Kirk to carry out the loading sequence. Kirk leaned back, jerked the loading handles—and again Tank was ready for action.

Then out of nowhere came a new menace.

Three British R.A.F. Hawker Ospreys slammed out of the sky above and set upon the Northrop. Bullets sizzled past Kirk's head, and he had to wing-over and drop out of the sky like a plummet.

It was obvious they had taken him for one of the raiders—and were taking no chances that he wasn't.

Kirk swore under his breath, zigzagged back and forth, and ran into the clear just east of Mandai. He was swishing back and forth uncertain what course to take, when suddenly he spotted something pass across the gleam of the lights that ran along the Singapore-Jahore Causeway.

The meaning of what he saw struck him squarely between the eyes. The remaining two of the stolen Sharks were taking the contact route across the island to get at the naval base!

Kirk thanked his lucky stars those Ospreys had chased him down. He would never have seen these two raiders otherwise.

But he had to act fast! Darting away from the vengeful Ospreys, he swept the sky-flailing Northrop dead into the path of the first onrushing Shark. Then Tank pressed his trips with split-second speed—and a terrific explosion rent the air as his withering torrent of lead blasted the biplane's bomb rack!

Under the force of that tremendous concussion, the Northrop was tossed down the sky like a battered ten-pin. Frantically, "Coffin" Kirk fought his controls. And finally, hardly two hundred feet from the ground, he righted her and chandelled back into the upper air.

And he got back just in time. For the last Shark was nearing its target—the huge naval dry-dock, nucleus of the British base.

Kirk took a wild chance. Ramming the throttle to the dash, he plunged upon the raider with every forward gun hammering. The minion of the Circle of Death jerked his stick, and his gunner swung his weapons in a futile attempt to fight off the determined Yank. But they were too late. Pounded by Kirk's withering hail, the Shark staggered, threw away a wing panel in a gigantic convulsion—and plummeted to earth!

Kirk twisted quickly in his seat and looked back. Tank was trying to get his guns around to get a bead on another biplane—one of the Ospreys.

"Wait a minute!" screamed Kirk. And he snatched at Tank's shoulder.

But it was too late. Tank's guns flared out at the same instant that a burst from that leading Osprey bashed into the nose of the Northrop. With a scream, the Cyclone engine threw a prop blade away and the silver slab of metal wailed as it went skyward.

"That's done it," said Kirk, looking about for a landing place.

Then he jerked his stick back just in time—for the Osprey just cleared him with inches to spare.

For some reason, Kirk followed as best he could and sensed that the Osprey' was also headed earthward. Together the two silver fighters circled wide and finally rolled to bumpy landings in a wide section of cleared plantation not half a mile from the Causeway.

As they hit, the Northrop's left landing wheel buckled. The fighter went to one knee, slashed the sod with a wing-tip, and spun around hard. But before she had stopped her lumbering, Kirk and Tank were out watching the Osprey come in toward them.

Amazed they saw it roll, bounce twice, and catch itself. Then it came on threatening to smash into the wrecked Northrop, but something made it stop with its prop still ticking over not three feet from the upended wing-tip of the American ship.

For a minute, neither Kirk nor Tank moved. They expected to see the two men get out and cover them. And Kirk's brain was speeding in an attempt to think up an excuse for Tank's action against the British plane. And how could he keep Tank's ape-hood a secret?

Then Kirk realized what had really happened. The Osprey observer was out of sight. He was obviously huddled down in his pit, perhaps dead. The pilot was lying back in a stiff position, his head on the camel hump of the fuselage.

"They're both dead." Kirk half-whispered after an examination. "That pilot made a landing somehow and his feet set the brakes when he stiffened just when she was about to hit the Northrop. Now help me get 'em out of their plane, Tank," ordered Kirk. "This is a break!"

Within three minutes they had transferred the two dead Britishers from the Osprey to the wrecked Northrop. The Osprey's Rolls-Royce Kestrel engine still ticked over beautifully; it was evident that no real damage had been done to the Hawker ship.

As they shoved the pilot into the front seat of the Northrop, hooked his feet into the rudder pedals, and fastened the belt, Kirk slipped the dead man's left sleeve up and glanced quickly at his silver identification disc. With a gasp he read:

Edward V. J. Spelter

R.A.F.

Church of England

"Whew! Here's a twist. Spelter's son—the guy who sent Trussock the details of the raid tonight! Wait 'til they try to figure this one out!"

And before Tank knew what was up, Kirk had him in the back seat of the Osprey and was taking off with a beautiful climbing turn and heading south.

THE FOURTH man of the party which had intruded upon Kirk earlier in the evening was dead when they got back to the plantation. And after carefully stowing the Osprey away, they removed the four bodies to a ramshackle out-building and covered them with lime, of which there was plenty for fertilization purposes. Then they went out, hurried down the plantation path to the highway, and caught a bus into the city.

It was just after one o'clock when they were registering at a small hotel less than a block from Raffles Square. They both slept late, had a meal brought to their room, then, in the late afternoon risked a walk through the town.

An extra edition of the Singapore Gazette carried black headlines about the attempted raid on the Naval base. Pictures were included of the wrecked Sharks and of the damage done by the bombs and torpedoes that had missed their mark. But nothing was said about finding two R.A.F. officers dead in an American Northrop plane. Evidently, that was being hushed up prior to an investigation.

"Well, we might as well risk the Raffles and see if our British bluejacket turns up tonight, eh, Tank?" Kirk said. "And first we'll get some decent togs."

They spent about an hour in a ready-to-wear clothing shop and came out with two presentable suits of white linen. Then at 7:30 they sauntered toward the Raffles Hotel and soon spotted their British tar. He greeted them warmly, grinning under a wide patch of surgeon's tape.

"Won't my mates be narked when they 'ear I've been poshin' it at the Raffles tonight?" he boomed. "I put me clean whites on, too. 'Ow do I look?"

"Splendid. A credit to the service," laughed Kirk. "Come on, let's try the bar first."

THEY went in, found a table, and ordered drinks. Then Kirk quietly opened with: "So you fellows had another hot time of it again last night?"

"Ah, but my bloke and his observer ain't back yet," said the bluejacket. "No trace of 'im. I saw 'im orf in the Osprey wiv Mr. Waites immediately after we got the warning. Carn't make out what 'appened to 'im."

"You said you took care of a man named er 'Spelling', was it?"

"The name's Spelter. 'E's a son of Sir Eric, the munitions bloke. Not a bad sort, either. Posh pilot, if you get me."

"You know much about him outside of his family connections?" asked Kirk.

"Not much—except that 'e was a funny bloke in a way. Always sending me out delivering messages to the queerest coves."

"Did you, by any chance, deliver one last night at the Pirate's Pit?"

The tar looked up sharply: "Right, I did. But 'ow did you know?"

"I just wondered. Who did you deliver it to?"

"A bloke named Black Teddy. I forgot all about him after that fight started—then I saw him lyin' on the floor. I guess your man here musta conked him one."

"Well, my friend, without knowing it you played a small part in those mysterious doings last night. But if you keep quiet, I'll give you sufficient information and evidence to cover yourself—in fact it'll probably put

you in right with your commander. Now, is this the note you took to the Pirate's Pit?" And Kirk shoved the buff paper across the table toward the big English seaman.

"I guess it is. It's on our signal paper, and it's in Spelter's writin'. But who the 'ell are you? And how—" Then the bluejacket stiffened in his chair. "I remember now. You said your name was Brian Kirk—and it was from someone named Kirk that the Fleet got the warning. You're the bloke who stopped the raid, eh?" In his excitement, the sailor was now wiping his forehead with a great blue handkerchief.

"They won't be able to prove much," smiled Kirk.

"Why?"

"Because they'll find Spelter and his observer in the wreckage of the American Northrop—if they haven't already found 'em there. I know, for I have seen them—not half a mile from the Causeway, just southwest of Mandai."

"Whew! Then they changed from the Osprey to the Northrop?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. Spelter might have stopped the raid and got himself shot down in the bargain."

The tar sat staring at his drink for several minutes, then said: "Well, that's as good a way as any for an Englishman to go out, eh, mate? I think you're top hole for telling me, too."

"Thanks," said Kirk. "Now let's drink up and go and have some dinner."

"Thanks! And I'll have another drink to get me breath."

"Good! But get this straight. You say nothing about me to anyone. I'll give you a packet of papers that will direct the blame to the right source. You'll get some sort of a reward for it, but you've got to play the game with me."

The tar shoved a massive hand across the table, and Kirk knew he could trust the fellow.

"And while we have dinner, maybe I'll tell you the inside story about myself and my pal here—if you promise not to say anything about it until you get back to England, and then only to your closest friends." Kirk laughed. "In fact, no one else will believe you anyway, and by that time Tank and I will have put many miles behind us."

"Coffin" Kirk did tell him the story—all except the ventriloquism part. And needless to say, the bluejacket never told the tale to anyone—for he didn't believe it himself, and he had no intention of taking the ribbing he was sure any listener would give him.

"A monkey that talks?" the bluejacket muttered to himself as he strolled back to his ship. "Why, you couldn't expect a man to swallow that much!"

It was at dawn next day that a hastily repainted Hawker Osprey was heading northeast from Singapore. "Coffin" Kirk and Tank were again on their way—and only Fate knew what new menace lay ahead.

Scourge of the Steel Eagles Flying Aces 10/38

“Coffin” Kirk sought rest—but it was stark tragedy that he found in that jungle village at the foot of massive Mount Dulit. For the “death that does not speak” had cut a ghastly swath through that peaceful Kayan settlement—had left but a single horrified native to describe the merciless wrath of the “steel eagles that leap out of solid rock.” Yet Kirk could not turn back. And Fate was beckoning him onward along a path that led to—the fires of hell itself!

FOR the man who sat at the controls of the Hawker Osprey, the last five hundred miles from Cape Sirk had been heartbreaking. He had been flying those long miles like a weary automaton. His blood-shot eyes were now mere slits. His lips were dry, cracked. His hands trembled more and more as with obvious effort he moved the control stick to combat the tormenting gusts that threw the plane from side to side.

And Brune’i—his goal—was still seventy miles distant.

A glance at the map. That was Bintulu they had just passed, with volcanic Mount Dulit off there to the right, an austere sentinel amid jungle hell and Iban mystery.

“Coffin” Kirk shook his head sleepily—and made a decision. “It’s foolish to go on,” he told himself. “Can’t stay awake. Eighteen hundred miles of this is enough. Might pile up, somewhere.”

He smiled grimly as his mind sifted the events of the recent mad days in Singapore which had closed with their hurried flight out in a bedaubed Osprey appropriated from the British to replace the Northrop used in saving the great Naval base from destruction by the Circle of Death.

His thoughts returned to his ship. They had left the white line of froth and sand that had guided him ever since he had crossed the Java Sea. Caution must be exercised. An Osprey does 175 top—but cable and radio messages travel with the speed of light.

“Coffin” Kirk twisted painfully in his seat, glanced at the monstrous figure huddled under the Scarff gun mounting. Then he eased the throttle back and picked out a clearing among the nipa palms below. “A few shacks down below,” he muttered through his puffed lips. “Should be able to get a rest there of some sort. Ought to suit you, Tank. Just your type of stamping grounds.”

The Osprey, in answer to Kirk’s efforts, swished low over a fringe of tapang trees. Ahead lay the small space which had caught his eye from above. He turned again over a row of hutments standing high on bow-legged trestles, then skimmed carefully in for a landing.

The Osprey, seeming to welcome the release from the strain, dropped gently to the lush turf. Kirk held her true, then swung her around and carefully taxied back toward the uneven row of nipa-thatched dwellings.

He waited for the Chief to appear—but no one came out to greet him. Strangely, there were no dusty Kayan children about. No saronged women or tall lean men with Pythan daggers in their belts.

Kirk frowned, turned in his seat, and slapped the shoulder of the figure behind him.

“Come on, Tank! We’re down, you lazy devil.” The stooped, muscle-bulging figure behind struggled up, peered over the rim of the gun mounting. He blinked his small, animal-like eyes, sniffed through his widespread nostrils, and emitted a deep grunt.

“Right. It doesn’t smell so good to me, either,” agreed Kirk. “Let’s have a look-see, eh?”

TOGETHER they climbed out. Kirk packed a heavy gun at his hip. But before moving toward the huts, he had Tank take the tail of the Osprey and swing it around in case they would have to make a hurried takeoff.

Then they started for the Long House—the important building of the village. It was typically Kayan, sagged across the roof and raised on ironwood piles. Along each side, were smaller huts, each with its own Toh-god insignia above the narrow doorway.

Still no movement. No chanting of tribal ceremonies. No clacking of Kayan tongues. No life.

They approached carefully, Kirk fearing he had made a mistake in selecting this place to land, and Tank adding to his worries by making strange noises and running with short strides from one shadow to another.

“What’s happened here?” Kirk said, speaking more to himself than asking a question. Then he espied several natives curled up about the ladders of their homes.

Tank, a strange, broad-bodied figure in dirty white slacks, rubber-soled sneakers, and a Navy blue blouse, darted from figure to figure. But not one moved.

Kirk was anxious now. Puzzled and wary, he moved nearer the figures. They all lay in convulsive positions—dead!

“Holy Moses! What’s been going on here?”

Tank didn’t—and, of course, couldn’t—answer. He was now scaling the single-pole ladder and entering the Long House.

Kirk turned two of the bodies over. They were Kayans, as indicated by the tattoo marks on their temples and chests. And death had come quickly, had stiffened them like bronze figures battered from a statuary group. Silently and cruelly that death had come, leaving only a weird coating of white froth about their lips. And terror was stamped indelibly on their distorted faces.

Kirk, now fully awakened by the tragedy, darted up the pole ladder and entered the Long House. Inside, in the half light, he made out the usual row of dried skulls, the garish designs of the Hantu ghost gods, and the bright tribal ornamentation.

Even here, death had struck. Women sat stiff and stark with stone bowls of rice in their laps. Children lay prostrate with native toys in their fists. Men, with their hands on long knives, had been swept out of existence before they could remove the blades from their sheaths.

“This didn’t happen very long ago, Tank,” Kirk said hollowly. “Look at the fire. It’s still shouldering.”

They continued their ghastly inspection through every hut. It was the same story everywhere. Death—stiffening death that had caught a whole village unaware! Death, silent and sure!

Kirk examined another body. The same stiffness of joints and muscle. The same stark horror in the face. The same whitish crystallization about the mouth.

Tank continued to move from one corpse to another. Then finally he sat down on a polished log and stared into the dying fire. Weariness was likewise tugging at Kirk’s muscles. His eyes were bleary, and he walked with the stride of a drunken man. But the mystery of the stricken Kayan village had accelerated the tempo of his mind to breakneck speed. He tried to figure what had caused it. Had this been some accident due to the ignorance of the natives? Had it been some crazy mass suicide event demanded by the indisputable laws of a religion? Or had it been caused by an enemy who commanded a devilish power of death?

THIS was the most amazing scene Kirk and Tank had come upon in all their months of adventuring around the globe. From the United States they had first followed their trail of revenge to Britain, France, and Germany. Then had come their wild flight across Asia to Singapore where they had scored against the fabulously wealthy, but ingeniously wicked, Sir Eric Spelter, that member of the grim Circle of Death.

Their crusade of revenge had really started, however, more than twenty years before—in a zoo in Berlin. Kirk’s mind flashed back to that day, when he, a youngster, had seen his own father murdered by the German Secret Police—when he had finally escaped with the young ape who was destined to become Tank, his lifelong friend and protector.

He stared at Tank now and wondered what his ape mind made of all this. So far, Tank had been a figure of action, of blameless loyalty—a friend of unbelievable strength and physical cunning. What could the ape think of a man-made death that left no wounds—that left only a horrible, crystallized froth around the lips?

“Come on, Tank.” Kirk finally said. “There’s no use staying here. We’d better try to get through to Brunei and report this matter to the British District Commissioner—to someone connected with the British Foreign Service. We can do no good here.”

The ape, sensing Kirk’s meaning by his tone, got up and glanced about for the last time. Then they began to walk back toward their ship.

“Ugh! No place for a white man—or for you, either, Tank,” Kirk growled as they came to the last row of huts near the clearing.

But the ape abruptly gave a low growl, twitched convulsively, and darted past Kirk.

“What’s up? You getting it, too?” snapped Kirk. Then he peered ahead—and saw what had affected the anthropoid. A strange garish figure in Kayan war paint was standing by the Osprey! Tank was hurrying toward him on his short, bandy legs—so Kirk followed at a trot to be ready to allay any trouble.

The man by their ship was old and bony. He wore a dirty sarong which was decorated with brownish shark teeth, and his chest bore blue tattoo marks. His face was partially hidden by a white bone mask from which hung tufts of human hair tied up with colored cords. In one hand he carried a long polished spear, and in the other was a decorated shield of Punan design.

Kirk found the man drawing his long finger nails through the soft new paint that they had daubed over the Osprey’s fuselage and wings. And his finger scratching had laid bare a red, white, and blue cocarde of the British Royal Air Force.

The native now turned and glared at Tank. Then he switched his gaze on Kirk and said in the Malay tongue: “Why has the Tuan killed my people with the death that does not scream?”

Luckily, Kirk knew the language. Frowning, he laid one hand on his automatic: “But surely the great Penghulu (chief) does not believe we have done this horrible thing?”

“The Tuan’s eagle of steel that screams has brought this death that does not speak. I have seen these eagles before with their proper markings,” he continued, indicating the exposed cocarde. “You have tried to cover it up. See! My ancient fingers have found your proper war markings here.”

Kirk caught the meaning at once. Someone flying a British ship had caused the death of the Kayan villagers. This would be hard to explain.

“The great Penghulu is mistaken, on the oath of my God,” Kirk tried to explain. “We have been flying the steel eagle for many moons from a distant country of the Great Sovereign. We are now heading for Brunei, the seat of the White Chief—to tell him what has happened and to bring the White Chief’s warriors to seek out the devils who caused it and establish justice.”

“But you and your steel eagle have done it!” came the reply. “That I know for three suns ago I saw you flying over my village when I was going to the Tor god’s mountain for advice.”

“Is that why you, too, did not die of the silent death? You were away?”

“That is so. But I saw your steel eagles. You killed my sons and daughters. You, too, fly the steel eagles that come out of the mountain!”

The chief stood his ground, threw out his feeble chest. And Kirk was at a loss. What was the meaning of this “out of the mountain” business? What did it mean?

“I am sorry for the people of the great Penghulu. But this is not of our doing. We have just arrived here—have but now learned of the effects of the silent death.”

“I see lies in your eyes—as I see lies on the side of your steel eagle,” the old Chief bellowed, again picking at the Osprey’s paint. Then he turned his keen eyes upon Tank: “Here, too, is a lie—an ape which appears as a man!”

Quickly, “Coffin” Kirk called upon his art of ventriloquism. “Old Chief,” Tank appeared to say, “these are strange days. Today men fly in machines they themselves make—because the Tor gods do not provide them with wings. Today the ape—if he has such knowledge as I have—can be a man and speak as you do.”

The effect was amazing. The Penghulu stiffened, backed away. He stared wild-eyed at Tank, who added: “Do not be afraid, old Father. I shall not harm you. My companion and I shall bring aid for the people of the jungle. And the Tuan speaks the truth—we did not kill your children.”

The Penghulu’s eyes never left Tank as he retreated, clenching his spear and drawing his shield tighter to him.

“We shall fly to Brunei at once, Father,” Kirk added. “We shall bring aid and the steel eagle death to those who did this to your followers.”

But the old Chief now turned and raced on his bony shanks into the depths of the forest, wailing high-screeching cries toward sacred Mount Dulit.

“WELL, that’s a nice mess,” observed Kirk. “The old boy believes we killed his tribesmen—but most certainly someone did, someone flying a British plane, too.”

Tank simply stared at the portion of the jungle that had swallowed the old Kayan chief, probably wondering what has caused him to leave so unceremoniously.

Kirk’s mind raced on now with new vigor. He prepared the Osprey for flight again, racked his brain as to their next move. Tank, uncertain what was going on but loyal to the end, climbed back into the rear cockpit and stood up as Kirk started the Rolls-Royce “Kestrel” engine. It was getting darker now, but there was enough light from the nearby sea to allow a reasonably safe take-off.

The “Kestrel” roared into life, and the Osprey stiffened for flight. Kirk hoiked her tail as she began to move away. Then he hurtled her headlong toward the shadowy hut at the far end of the kampong, skillfully guided her through the fringe of the trees—and they were in the clear.

Having gained altitude, Kirk consulted his compass with the intention of continuing to Brunei and warning the British District Commissioner of what they had observed. He could not help pondering on the old Kayan chief’s words. What had he meant by the steel eagles that had flown “out of the mountain?”

It was certain that they had been British ships—but what squadrons were stationed in Borneo? He had heard of none. Of course, they might be one or two planes of the Fleet Air Arm doing routine shows off their catapults. But it was hardly likely, as most of the British Navy vessels were off Singapore. Certainly, none of it made much sense.

A scud of clouds now slipped in from the north and obscured what gleam had been offered by a quartering moon. This was not so good. But somehow Kirk found that his weariness has been erased by the mystery of the silent death that had struck the little Kayan village. He was now ready for anything—and he got it!

KIRK has just settled himself when his blood-flecked eyes spotted the rushing outline of a plane of some sort! It had charged past his nose hardly a hundred feet ahead. Behind, Tank stirred and peered over Kirk’s shoulder. But they could see nothing now through the dank streaks of mist that fogged their windscreen and goggles.

“What was that?” Kirk asked. Tank answered by clutching his shoulder, and the warning came just in time. Kirk yanked his stick back, zoomed up to allow another wraithlike plane to slam past, directly ahead.

“Lord! That was close! What the devil was that?”

Kirk pulled higher into the mist, then with new determination he turned inland in the direction taken by the two ghost planes, giving the Osprey the throttle even though the hackles twitched at the back of his neck.

Tank was still clutching his shoulder and making strange, pathetic noises through his broad nostrils. Kirk put one hand up, gripped the back of his pal’s hand, and squeezed it to give him confidence.

Then another plane—a silver biplane of beautiful lines—slammed past his vision!

“Whew!” gasped “Coffin” Kirk. “This is getting too hot. What the deuce is this? I’ll swear I’ve seen that model of plane somewhere before.”

He followed what seemed to be the outline of a ship, now a few hundred feet ahead. Tank shuffled about in the back seat, began to make clutching gestures at the twin-Lewis guns.

“Take it easy,” warned Kirk. “No shooting yet. We’ll just follow them—and see what this is all about.”

They raced through the mist, even though Kirk expected at any moment to feel the thudding crash of two planes coming together. It was eerie, this breakneck speed over the jungles. But fatigued though he was, Kirk somehow hung on. He’d see this thing through!

Then suddenly, after five or ten minutes of tense flying, they came out of the clouds and into the clear. Above, the chunk of yellow moon glowed down on them and stars twinkled. And below were the nipa-palm foothills of volcanic Mount Dulit.

But now there were no silver biplanes in sight!

“Damn!” spat Kirk, staring about and putting the Osprey into an easy curling turn. “Where did they go? And what were they?”

He glanced at his altimeter. They were now skidding about at less than 4,000 feet; and he knew he would have to be careful, for the jagged shoulders of the volcano were well over 5,000. He circled once more, climbing for height, when suddenly out of nowhere came six of the silver biplanes.

Kirk recognized them and whistled. “Whew! Fairey ‘Ferores’ of the Belgian Air Service! What in Heaven’s name are they doing over Borneo?”

But there was no time to ponder on that. Before he could bank to evade their path, the bedaubed Osprey was the target for every gun aboard the six single-seaters.

Kirk knew they were in for it now. He knew these Ferores were powered with 925-h.p. Hissos engines which packed 20 mm. Oerlikon aero cannon within their noses. There were also four Browning guns aboard each, two between the cylinder banks and two in the lower wings. And the Feroce was capable of 270 m.p.h. at 13,000 feet—perhaps 225 down here.

Here were six of these babies—and perhaps more somewhere back in the scud.

Tank now went into action, automatically pressing the triggers of the two guns and pointing them in the general direction of the oncoming fighters. Kirk kicked the Osprey all over the sky, tried to outfly them. For about a minute he was safe—for they had to be careful in formation. But finally two separated from the group and then came in from sharp angles.

That was too much. A burst of Browning stuff slammed into the Osprey’s empennage, made it a sieve. Kirk tried to pour a short hail of lead back at them, but it was useless. Tank, in the meantime, was still hanging onto his triggers, burning out the Lewis barrels with one continual burst from the double drums.

Two more bursts slammed into the Hawker ship, sent an aileron fluttering away. Kirk fought his crippled ship. She was spinning now—plummeting them down toward the green hell below.

The two Ferores continued to pound at him, would not leave them to their fate. Mercilessly, one of them drove in a vicious 20 mm. cannon blast that all but blew the “Kestrel” engine from its bearers.

Kirk knew that the sensible move was to take to the silk. “But no,” he argued with himself. “If we do, those ruthless killers will have too simple a target. I’ll stick with this ship to the finish.”

The silver fighters continued to hammer in lead, but now their aim was hindered by the spinning target. Tank kept on firing until there was nothing left in the drums. Kirk meanwhile had all he could do to stop the Osprey from nosing out of the spin which was their one salvation.

THINGS were happening fast now. The two Ferores hung over them like silver vultures. Short spurts of fire snapped out of their snouts at intervals.

Tank screamed, infuriated at his lack of ammunition. Kirk, too, went mad trying to get the Osprey to spin tighter.

He glanced down quickly. It wouldn’t be long now! “Hang on, Tank!” he screamed. “Hang on!” And he reached over and snatched at one of the great ape’s hands to make him take a firm clutch on the gun mounting—to save himself from being thrown out.

Another burst of gunfire now splashed a streaked, spluttering design across their right wing and made the Osprey jerk crazily.

Kirk took another look over the side, saw it was too late to take to the silk. Below, the waving fronds of the nipa palms could be seen fringing a low swamp that trickled its slimy fingers into the rocky foothills of Dulit.

The Osprey was behaving badly now. Kirk fought what controls he had to get her out. The dark fronds below were wheeling before his eyes into a feathery stew as he struggled to get the Hawker out of her spin for a hundred to one chance at a safe landing. But his futile attempts made him believe he was flying his last flight.

Finally Kirk frantically set her in neutral and prayed—and the old Osprey, answering the laws of flight, came out just as her wheels slashed through the light top vegetation. At that, Kirk took over again—to find

that they were plunging toward some jagged rocks! With his last effort, he quickly pulled back on the stick and just managed to skim her over the crags by inches.

Then, as the ground beyond rushed up to meet them, Kirk obeyed the airman's law of safety in smash-ups. He stuck a wing-tip down, ducked down inside the cockpit—and let her cartwheel over.

CRASH!

KIRK had little idea what really happened after that. There was a thudding bash somewhere behind his ears, then blue-green lights spattered before his eyes and all was black.

With the first thud, Tank went headlong out of the rear cockpit followed by the two Lewis guns that were wrenched off their mounting. The anthropoid landed in a rolling ball on a flat section of cracked sandstone, and there he lay for several seconds.

Finally, he stirred, then crawled to his elbows and knees and looked around for the wreck. It lay nearby—and a small trickle of bluish flame had begun to run along one of the fractured wings. Tank spotted it, and his instinct told him that something was wrong. He uttered strange noises through his great nostrils, clambered to his feet. His great teeth bared, he charged for the side of the buckled fuselage.

With one leap he was on top of the fuselage reaching in for Kirk, who, huddled up under the instrument board, was covered by a wing which had been driven back so that it formed a barrier over the cockpit opening.

Tank screamed into the night as the smoke poured up from burning fuel which had trickled down the wing from the wrenched tanks. He sniffed, cried—struggled with the tangle of dural. The man inside did not move.

Suddenly there was a fearful puff as more fuel gushed out, splashed across the tangled cowling of the engine, and spattered across the hot exhaust ports of the “Kestrel.” Tank sent up his jungle cry—and then went to work.

Tank fought on to save his master. Standing astride the fuselage, he took hold of the metal circle bracket of the gun mounting and with a mighty heave tore it off and hurled it at the flames that were crawling up the wing. Then he dropped inside and ripped out cross-bracing ribs, steel tie-rods, and slabs of dural panels.

Flame snaked a scarlet tongue through the opening and Tank screamed at it. He reached forward, gripped the top of Kirk's bucket seat, and gave another frantic wrench. The metal spade-back came out and Tank threw it sky-ward over his shoulder. Then he shoved outward with both feet, ripped the metal fuselage wide open, and reached forward and grabbed Kirk under his armpits.

“Ugh-h-h-h!” sighed the battered Kirk.

Tank wrenched again—but he could not move his master. He screamed every oath he knew in the ape language, then finally sensed that Kirk was being held back by the binding safety belt. Tank then dived down, drew the heavy manila cording of the belt into his mouth, and with three snatching jerks of his sharp teeth ripped it open!

His master sighed again, started to struggle. Tank grabbed him now, and with a last wrench got him clear and clambered with him over the jagged edges of the cockpit. Then hardly had he set Kirk down, some thirty feet from the wreck, when an enveloping boom of flame and smoke covered the ill-fated Osprey.

Kirk came to in a few seconds and shakily got to his feet. But when he stumbled forward, he made an unearthly clatter across the rocks. The wreckage boomed again and blazing fuel went skyward as the main tank blew out with a savage roar.

Kirk peered over his elbow, groaned, and fell flat. Tank got to his hands and knees, huddled against his master to protect him from the threat of fire. Then he got up quickly, charged at the burning fuselage again, and came out with two drums of machine-gun ammunition. He handed them to Kirk with the expression of one who might be handing out picnic lunch boxes.

“Thanks, Tank,” Kirk muttered through lips that were puffed and bleeding. Then when he again tried to walk, once more there came that strange, metallic clatter at his feet. Kirk fell to his knees, unable to figure out what was wrong with him.

“Legs feel all right,” he muttered. “But I can't walk. Maybe I sprained an ankle.”

He started to feel of his feet—then started to grin. He felt farther and began to laugh. The puzzled Tank moved over, peered into his face which was illuminated by the glare of the blazing Osprey.

“It’s all right, Tank, old boy. No wonder I couldn’t walk. You jerked me out of there so hard you ripped out the rudder pedals. They’re still on my feet!” And he kicked his feet out of the rubber toestraps that hooked the broken pedal plates to his feet.

NOW they crawled to one side, picked up the two guns, and hid behind a slab of rock to watch the circling Feroces above. At the sight of the planes, Tank muttered through his nose again, shoved a gun and a drum of ammunition toward Kirk.

“No. Not now, Tank. Let them think we crashed and died. There’s something sinister going on around here. Just keep your eyes open.”

The blaze died down, and they could now see beyond the area of the rocks. Not two hundred yards away towered the western wall of Mount Dulit.

“Whew!” Kirk half-whistled. “We certainly came close enough to that. But look, Tank! That light blinking up there on the side of the rock! There’s three of them—in a triangular arrangement.”

The ape stared up to where Kirk was pointing, then frowned and began his low muttering again.

“Come on. Let’s move up that way,” said Kirk. And they grabbed a gun apiece, stuck a drum on each, and started across the splintered rock causeway toward the base of the mountain.

Kirk realized what a close call they’d had. And he realized that but for the unswerving loyalty of his ape pal he would have been a cinder by now. But, there was no time for sentiment now. Those three lights gleaming on the side of the rock wall held his attention as they clambered and fought their way through the scrub vegetation.

“Look, Tank!” he muttered again. “The top light is blinking on and off. A signal of some kind!”

The ape answered with a low whinnying growl of understanding.

The two Feroces now came over again, and Kirk again stopped Tank from taking a shot at them.

“No, Tank. Let them think our bodies are back there in that pile-up. They wanted us down, so let them think we are. Meanwhile, we’re after the guy who is working those lights.”

The Feroces split up now, one taking the lead while the other seemed to hold back. Kirk tried to figure out just what they were doing, then suddenly jerked to a standstill and stared with amazed eyes. The lead Feroce was heading straight for the side of the mountain!

“What’s the matter with that fool?” he asked himself. “Can’t he see the wall?”

Tank emitted a low whine, and they both stopped and watched.

“There he goes—straight for the wall!”

Then to their amazement they saw the silver Feroce sweep into a low glide headlong for a point between the three lights. They stood spellbound, expecting any second to see it pile up and tumble a splintering wreck, to the base of the sheer wall.

But then the Feroce disappeared!

“My Lord!” husked Kirk. “What happened to him?”

Tank simply stood staring up at the rock wall, not a sound coming from his expressionless mug.

“Did you see that, Tank?” demanded Kirk. “That bird flew smack into that wall—and went out of sight!”

The top light now blinked three times, then went on steady again. The second Feroce wheeled, set a steady course, and also headed straight for the center of the triangle of lights.

It approached the wall slowly, its engine throttled down, then slipped into nothingness just as the first had done.

“That’s enough for me,” said Kirk. “We’re probably seeing things. We’re damned tired, and that smacking around we got in that crash didn’t help any. I’m going to get some sleep and see if I can see things in a sensible light in the morning.”

They struggled on through to a small patch of nipa, cut a few boughs and heavy fronds with a knife, and made a bed that was well sheltered from outside view. There they huddled together, the Lewis guns near at hand, and lay pondering on the mad events of the night.

Kirk knew he had seen things correctly, of course. But there was no sane answer to it. How did those Belgian ships get through the wall? Why had they fired on him for no apparent reason? What did all this have to do with the village of silent death—and the white crustation that marked the lips of the dead Kayan villagers?

“It certainly looks like solid rock up there, but it couldn’t be,” Kirk argued with himself. “They’ve doped out some gag there whereby they get in safely. But now where did they get those Belgian ships, and what are they doing here?”

Sleep quickly overtook the American adventurer, but troubled dreams of the mountain caused him to twist and turn continually.

BUT Kirk’s sleep was not long. Hardly an hour after he dropped off, twitching and quivering from nervous reaction, when he felt himself being aroused by Tank. His doze had brought some relief to his tired muscles, nevertheless, and he was quickly up and crouching beside the ape.

“What is it?” he demanded. But Tank reached over, clamped a heavy paw across his mouth, and whined softly.

Kirk nodded and pushed Tank’s hand away. He saw what had aroused the anthropoid. Flickering lights were moving about near the pile of Osprey wreckage back in the distance. It appeared that they had axes and were chopping away at the blackened dural.

“They came to look for us, eh?” mumbled Kirk. Then as he watched the group turned from the wreck and headed in their direction. Soon they were nearby.

The voices were a strange mixture of several languages. Kirk caught splashes of French, throaty Flemish, the crackling Nipponese tongue, and also guttural German.

Both Kirk and Tank reached for the Lewis guns—and waited. On came the men, winding through the thicket and rocks in a snake-march safari formation.

“They haven’t seen us, Tank. This is a break. We’ll follow them back and find out what this is all about. But no shooting now,” warned Kirk, holding his hand over the pistol grip of the ape’s gun and wagging his head.

The mumbling group passed within ten yards of them and headed toward the sheer rock wall ahead.

“Coffin” Kirk and Tank fell in quietly some distance behind. The trail led across another tangle of broken rock, and they followed as silent as ghosts, watching the flickering lights and listening to the scraping of heavy boots across the uneven rock track. The men ahead were turning sharply to the left, apparently making for a jagged opening in the mountain wall.

Kirk was trudging along ahead of the ape, and now he was so intent on covering the party ahead that he forgot about his pal.

Now the party ahead disappeared, seemingly swallowed up by the mountain, and Kirk hurried along to make certain just where it was they had entered the wall. He caught a strange, pungent smell, and sniffed cautiously.

“Volcanic gas, I guess,” he muttered to himself. “This hell-fire mountain is supposed to be inactive—but you certainly can smell it. But where the deuce did those fellows go?”

He hurried up to the rock wall, then saw a narrow opening in the face. Darting to one side, he peered about cautiously, then turned to find Tank.

But the ape was nowhere in sight!

“What the devil?” Kirk growled under his breath. “Where did he buzz off to now? Just when I need him, he’s gone.”

But he dared not search about now. Anyhow, he figured, Tank would be all right. He might have returned to the thicket where they had slept.

“Don’t blame him. He must have been dead tired,” agreed Kirk to himself. And with that he hurried along up the steep and winding passageway that lay beyond the narrow opening in the wall. He felt he must check on the men who had been so interested in his crash. Just who were they? What were they doing here? And what was ahead up this steep, nature-slashed ramp?

He was uncertain as to what course he should take, now that Tank had disappeared. He peered ahead, heard the voices again.

Then abruptly came disaster.

All Kirk heard was a low swish—then something thudded down on his head.

An explosion of blinding light spattered across his vision. A million bombs seemed to burst behind his forehead. He fell forward on his face—out.

CENTURIES seemed to have passed before Kirk came to. When he did finally regain consciousness, he rolled over and tried to get to his hands and knees. He sensed he was on a rough bed. Like a boxer who has been tagged on the button, he shook his head, tried to focus his vision.

Pour walls imprisoned him—whitewashed walls of solid stone. A small door was at one end, and it had a small square window, carefully barred. He instinctively looked around for Tank—then remembered the ape's disappearance. He was alone, groggy, with a head that spun and with a mouth that was as dry as the inside of an old derby—and tasted as bad.

"Someone must have conked me," he reflected, trying to make his eyes behave. "Where the deuce am I—and where is that ape?"

Somehow, he got to his feet, steadied himself, and tottered toward the door. There he hung onto the window bars and stared out. And the scene that met his eyes almost knocked him over again.

Through a rocky opening above, a mid-day sun threw its golden glory down on a full stage of action. There, before him, was a great squadron of gun-bristling airplanes—single-seaters, two-seaters, and even larger types of the high-speed bomber class.

They were all new and in splendid condition. And they were all silver with the same insignia—at least most of them had the same insignia. A few were just getting their new cocardes painted on them.

And it was a cocarde that made Brian "Coffin" Kirk gasp—a golden circle on a triangle of scarlet with a sharp dagger pointing to the center.

"The Circle of Death!" breathed Kirk. "Here in Borneo!"

Finally, he let his eyes wander from the insignia painted on a number of American Seversky fighters nearby. He looked up the sides of the great wall of rock opposite, then back to the stony floor which was as even as a billiard table. The whole space, Kirk judged, was fully 500 yards long and about 150 yards wide.

"Where is this?" he asked himself—and then his eyes caught the smart outlines of a flight of Pairey Peroces off to one side. A number of men were adding the strange insignia to their fuselages.

"They flew in here last night, if this is the next day," Kirk figured. "These devils have some sort of an entrance through that rock wall." Then he listened and heard motor noises somewhere. Orders rang out, men darted about. Ships were quickly moved and a wide space was cleared.

"What's up now?" demanded Kirk to himself.

He heard a siren scream, then men formed in rows along the open floor. Puzzled, Kirk watched carefully now.

Then to his amazement, he saw a plane—a German Heinkel high-speed light bomber—come out of nowhere in the rock wall at the far end, dangle in midair for a minute, then drop down for a landing on the stone floor. Quickly, men standing in lines worked a drag-rope and hook device of the type used on aircraft carrier decks and before the ship had run twenty yards it was checked to a standstill.

Kirk, unable to believe his eyes, rubbed them, stared again. It certainly looked as though that rock wall beyond was solid. But as he stared, he realized that there was some sort of a brown dancing film there. He wondered whether his eyes were playing him false, but he tried them again on something solid and they appeared to be functioning normally.

"Mighty queer," he muttered to himself as another Heinkel slipped into the strange, rock-walled airport.

Kirk now sniffed, and he caught the same pungent smell he had noticed the night before when he had started after the men who had investigated his crash. This made him certain that he was somewhere behind those three mysterious lights that he'd seen high on the rock face.

He kept hanging to the window, watched eagerly as men working at a pile of gleaming silver tanks began to carry one to each ship. Then a bugle rang out and its notes echoed and reechoed between the walls.

Immediately, the men dropped everything, hurried to the central portion of the area. There was a tense air of drama.

Then, it all began to come to Kirk. He was somewhere inside the skyscraper walls of the inactive volcano Dulit. The smoke he smelled was coming from somewhere below—somewhere in the very bowels of the earth. And this great gallery was somewhere inside the upper portion of the crater.

A bellowing order rang out. Men stiffened, then on another command relaxed into something of an “at-ease” position.

A man in a trim, greenish-khaki uniform, but wearing no decorations or orders, stepped forward from the group that had just alighted from the two Heinkels. Trim and hawk-eyed, he peered through *pince-nez* from which dangled a narrow silver chain. He gave the group a patronizing smile.

“He must have these birds eating out of his hands,” observed Kirk. “Wonder who he is?”

“Gentlemen,” the man bawled in a firm military tone. “I am, as you may know, General Pierce Compte Cockosaert.”

“The Belgian,” hissed Kirk. “That accounts for the stolen *Feroces*, at any rate.”

“I have come,” he heard the General say, “to lead you in this newest effort of our great organization. And here with me is Rear-Admiral Ichi Tamuracho.”

“Two of the original heads of the Circle of Death,” snarled Kirk gripping the bars of the small doorway.

“. . . We are ready for our first major move in our great world-wide plan. So far, we have been halted in our other moves because we were foolish enough to believe we could carry them out with small forces. This time, however, we shall succeed!”

A roar of applause went up.

“You are all being well paid and well attended to?”

A louder roar this time.

“You know that our amazing new weapon has been successful in the tests against the Kayan tribesmen. You have seen what it will do to groups in fairly congested areas. You know what it will do to northern Borneo and the Philippines!”

It was evident that a hundred pair of eyes now instinctively turned to the stacks of silver drums near the planes.

“You know how easy it is for us to procure this substance of death here in the belly of Dulit. And you understand that we only have to spread it over Brunei and the appointed strong points in the Philippines to completely erase them as bases or forts. There is no question about that.

“Meanwhile I have seen to it that you have been provided with the best of flying equipment, as well as aviation fuel from the captured Dutch tankers and the *Silent Death* from the bowels of Dulit. And you will all reap great rewards when we appoint the new governing bodies here in the Far East.”

A shout of approval went up at that.

“You rats!” snarled Kirk. “So that’s how the poor Kayan natives were bumped off? You tried your gas doom out on them—from ships flying the British insignia.”

“Are there further questions as to our plans?” the Belgian General asked.

“There is, General Cockosaert,” said a man stepping forward.

“Speak up, Denbaerg.”

“It is about the man who was shot down last night. We have him a prisoner here. We understand he is Brian Kirk, the man who has long been a stumbling block to the Circle of Death. What about him? And what does his coming here mean?”

“It was because of this Brian Kirk that the Admiral and I decided to come here. Moreover, we wish to see that this particular mission of ours is carried out properly. I had been advised of Kirk’s capture. We will have him brought out here. We will make him talk.”

“And the other guy who was with him,” an American voice bawled.

“The other? There were two?”

“There was an observer firing from the back seat. They both escaped somehow and we have only located Kirk. Something ought to be done—to make sure nothing slips up.”

The admiral and Cockosaert consulted quietly for a minute. They must placate these men somehow, reassure them that there was nothing to fear.

“Have this swine Brian Kirk brought out!” the Belgian barked.

KIRK had been listening to this conversation with keen interest. He knew he would be in for it now. He knew also that the poison gas they were using was being obtained in some manner from the bubbling depths of Dulit and that they were planning a wholesale slaughter through Northern Borneo and into the Philippines in an effort to carry out their mad plan for another world war and widespread destruction. This was the Circle of Death at its worst.

Now there was a jangle at the lock of his cell door, and someone opened it and came in. At a glance Kirk took in his trim uniform and expensive kit and sidearms. Also he noticed that the man wore one of the latest gas-masks.

He wondered about that, then realized that everyone there carried a mask. Working so near the vent of Dulit, they had to for safety.

“You’re wanted outside,” the man said. He spoke in a clipped voice, appeared to be British. The bridge of his nose had a long white scar across it, the result of a crash, Kirk figured.

“What do they want—and who are they?” Kirk asked, stalling for time.

“You needn’t try to pull that one, Kirk. We all know you, and you know who we are. The leaders want to see you.”

Kirk slyly kicked the door shut, then a voice appeared to come from underneath the army cot upon which he had lately been reclining.

“Don’t go, Kirk. They’re going to rub you out. I heard them talking about it.”

The Britisher seemed puzzled for a moment. He glanced at Kirk.

Then the voice again came from under the bed: “If they want me, they must take me out by force.”

“Who is that?” the British flyer demanded.

“That’s for you to find out,” cracked Kirk. “Lay low, Brunner!” he then called toward the cot.

“But what’s he doing under there?” the Britisher demanded, drawing a heavy gun from his hip holster.

“Let him come and get me,” the voice beneath the bed said in a more muffled tone.

The Englishman dropped to one knee, started to raise the blankets. Then Kirk moved like a striking cobra. His foot shot out and caught the Englishman under the chin, sent him rolling over with a dull groan—entirely out.

Kirk grabbed the man’s gun at once, then unstrapped the gas-mask from his shoulders and slipped it over his face. He tied the guard up tightly.

Outside, the consultation was going on again. But Kirk knew he would have to work fast. He looked again and noticed that the men who had arrived in the Heinkels were not equipped with gas-masks. He looked the situation over closely, then drew the door open slightly. His eyes rested on the bank of silver tanks that stood across the area. And he was about to draw a bead on the containers and pull the trigger when to his amazement the head of Tank appeared over the edge of the pile of gas canisters.

“What the—? How the devil did he get in here?”

This upset his plans completely. He had intended to puncture a number of the gas tanks, cause some sort of a commotion, and make the best of it. But with Tank out there without a mask, his intentions were blocked. What to do now?

Kirk huddled behind the door again and pondered with himself. How could he get out of this mess now? In a minute, they would be coming over to see what the delay was all about.

Then there came a sudden strong draft which banged the door shut with an ominous click!

“Hell’s fire! I’m locked in again,” he muttered. “Worse than that, the keys are still on the other side and I can’t reach them through this small grating. I’m trapped!”

Two men now broke away from the group and started for the cell. Tank, still unnoticed, was standing up across the gallery and was waving the Lewis gun he had retained from the night before.

Kirk was flabbergasted. He had no idea what to do. Ventriloquism would be of no help now. It had worked once, but—

An idea came to him. Quickly he placed his mouth near the opening in the door, threw his voice so that it appeared to be coming from somewhere well down the gallery.

“Take all stations!” his words ordered, seemingly from about twenty yards away. “Serious gas escape from filling chamber below! Take all stations!”

There was a slight move among the men. Then Kirk repeated the orders again. And this time, the men on the fringe began to run. The group in the center seemed unable to comprehend at first, then it dawned on them that they were in danger.

Cockosaert screamed, shouted for a mask. The Jap twirled fast and started running wild-eyed toward a man who stood preparing to adjust his mask. The Jap clutched at it and they went down fighting together.

At that instant, Tank, recognizing Kirk’s voice, hoisted his gun to the top of the silver tanks and began firing.

The group in front of the Heinkels went down in a welter of blood. Others started to fire—then stopped, realizing that they would be emptying their guns into the deadly gas containers.

Kirk, unable to figure out what Tank would do next, began yelling across the gallery to him. Tank clambered over the top of the canisters and continued to sweep the whole gallery left and right with his rattling gun. A Heinkel started up, boomed and thundered through the hail of fire from Tank’s gun.

Kirk watched the plane race down the gallery and disappear through the weird brown film to thunder off into a nothingness.

“They must charge through that peculiar smoke or vapor that has the color of the rocks,” said Kirk. “Yes, that’s it—a slowly rising vapor. A natural screen at the entrance of this rocky gallery.”

He shouted across to Tank who was still sending short bursts across the gallery. The ape heard him now and came charging toward the locked door.

“Open it! . . . Open it!” screeched Kirk. “The door Tank—the lock. Twist it!”

The ape, insane now with emotion, only bashed at the door wildly with the gun. But finally he became enraged to the limit of his animal ferocity. He grabbed the doorway with both paws inside the opening of the small window, braced his feet against the solid rock wall, and yanked.

CRASH!

The thick wooden door came out with a wrench of heavy timbers and Tank went down on his back with a thud. Kirk darted out, pulled the heavy door off the ape, and helped him to his feet. Then over the ape’s face he shoved a gas mask salvaged from a nearby corpse.

Shots were echoing up and down the gallery now. Men were creeping out of holes and openings. Kirk grabbed Tank’s paw, rushed him across the gallery to where a Heinkel He. 170K stood chugging away.

“Perfect!” snorted Kirk, firing a shot from the hip and knocking the man off the wing root who had just started the 910-h.p. Daimler-Benz engine. “Get up there, Tank. There’s a gun mounted in the back cockpit.”

The ape, groggy but game, was on top of the Heinkel fuselage in a leap. He shoved back the gun hatch, was soon spraying hot lead all over the gallery. Kirk took his other gun, fired a few shots into the silver canisters, then quickly ran across to where the Ferores were huddled together, their wings almost interlaced for space-saving.

Carefully, he took two more shots, directing them into the fuel tanks. The first released the gas, and the second provided the spark that ignited the fuel. A small tank went up with a roar, spraying gasoline all over the first Feroce. He took a long shot at another and his first bullet ignited her at once.

“Let them try to get those babies out of there,” snarled Kirk, running back for the Heinkel. “I don’t know where old Cockosaert pinched them, but they’ll never fly any of them out of here.”

He was up on the wing again and ready to drop into the cockpit. A few men crawled about on their hands and knees. A few darted from corner to corner and started to fire shots. Tank still blazed away, managed to set fire to two Severskys far down the gallery.

“Now for the great experiment,” husked Kirk as he slipped behind the heavy stick control. “I saw one guy go out of here. I ought to be able to make it, too.”

He gave her the gun with a last look at the silver canisters, then held his breath. The Heinkel was still warm and he had no trouble in throttling her up to top revs at once. He held her nose down, sensed that she handled heavy.

Ahead, the strange wall of vapor rose slowly. Kirk was actually scared now. He had figured it all out from a distance; he prayed he was right. From behind, Tank threw his great arms around his neck, fearful of a crash.

Kirk held tight. He was near the moving vapor now. Yet maybe he was approaching wrong. Maybe some lever had been pulled to bar the opening he knew must be there.

But the Heinkel charged through, danced a minute in the updraft of the vapor, then staggered out into glorious sunlight.

For a moment, Kirk could hardly believe his eyes. He looked back. There behind him was the sleek wall of Dulit seemingly unyielding and impassive. Then he noted the sockets of the three lights that had marked the entrance through which the stolen ships of the Circle of Death had flown. And he knew it was not a dream.

“Whew! That was an experience. And what a hide-out!”

But again, he sensed that the speedy Heinkel was flying heavy, and he inspected her all over inside. Then his eyes caught the bank of bomb releases near his right elbow. Every release was clamped down in its prong.

With sudden realization of what this meant, Kirk turned back toward Dulit. He climbed the plane hard, circled for position, and managed to get over the upper jagged ridges of the old volcano so that he could peer down.

Below, hidden beyond the thinning cloud of vapor that arose from the depths, was the long gallery. A few masked men could be seen trying to block out the fire of the burning ships.

Kirk did not hesitate. One by one, he pulled the bomb toggles.

The Heinkel jerked as the bombs left the interior compartments. On the metal plate in front of him was the information that they were 50 kg. bombs and that there were six of them aboard.

“Swell!” he muttered. “Let’s go!”

The last two “eggs” fanged out of their containers before the first two hit.

KER-R-UMP!

There was a gargantuan roar from below. Then another—and the wide maw of Dulit seemed to gasp with the thud of the giant blows.

CR-R-R-ASH!

The last two 50 kg. projectiles, intended for the nerve center of the layout, smashed into the solid flooring of the hidden airport and broke it wide open with a crushing, rocky splintering amid searing flame. The explosions echoed upward and the Heinkel danced on the thud of concussion.

“COFFIN” KIRK circled, tried to see what really had happened. Then suddenly from below an even greater belch of explosion bonged out. And this time the Heinkel was hurled over on her back. Tank almost went out of the open hatchway, just managed to hang on as great chunks of rock went thundering high in the air past the overturned bomber-fighter.

The dormant Dulit had replied in her own manner! Old Dulit had returned to life!

Kirk’s bombs had opened up a new fissure for her trapped tongues of Vulcan to break through, and now the world went mad in a roar of spouting lava rocketing rocks.

Kirk fought to get the Heinkel straight. Then, in the great heated spew of volcanic breath the Heinkel bounced up another thousand feet. The American quickly gave her more throttle, fought his way into the clear.

Below, another great boom thundered out and he turned just in time to see a massive chunk of side wall slip slowly down to block out the vapor-curtained opening. “Coffin” Kirk then knew that no other plane would ever fly in, or out of Dulit’s gallery!

“Well, that’s that,” he muttered, through parched lips. And Kirk smiled to himself as he checked his fuel in the tanks and learned he would have no trouble in making Brunei, where he could make some sort of a report to the British Foreign Service officials.

On second thought, he wondered whether they would believe him if he did tell his story.

Clue of the Breda Brood Flying Aces 4/39

Swiftly, silently, and unseen that weird, nameless scourge swept upon Sandakan, Britain's North Borneo outpost. Then lights failed, radios went dead, and planes became useless hulks of fabric, steel, and dural. That meant banishment from the air for "Coffin" Kirk. And now, as he faced the dread jungle which had spewed this strange sorcery, hate boiled in his heart. For "Tank"—faithful "Tank," his steel-muscled, simian bodyguard—had been swallowed by that green hell!

"IT'S TAKING A CHANCE," Brian "Coffin" Kirk muttered, "flying a stolen foreign bomber-fighter this way. And having no registration and no papers is asking for it. But when I tell them what happened up there at Dulit, the Governor ought to do something about it."

Behind Kirk, curled up in utterly exhausted animal sleep, lay Tank, his flying and fighting ape-pal. Tank had drawn the hatch cover shut and was reasonably comfortable, and Kirk knew he could rely on the gorilla if anything turned up.

Kirk's route followed the coastline up past Barham Point and across Kinabalu Peak to Sandakan, which lay on the other side of Lubuk Bay. The speedy Heinkel would eat up the distance in two hours or less.

Ahead lay safety, rest, and officialdom tinged with warm friendship for Kirk, who almost single-handed was fighting the diabolical ring of war mongers known as the Circle of Death. And Coffin was still congratulating himself on his amazing luck in escaping from his last adventure with the agents of the Circle who had trapped him in the grim lethal chamber of old Dulit.

"Old Cockosaert, their leader, got away in one of these Heinkels," Kirk thought. "I wonder what the devil they will be up to next?"

The feud between Kirk and the bloody Circle of Death had been raging since twenty years before when Kirk, then a mere child, had escaped, with the aid of a trained ape, from the Berlin zoo where his father, an American espionage agent, had been cruelly betrayed and shot down in cold blood. It was that crimson-stained scene that forever flickered in the memory of Brian Kirk and prodded him on against bitter odds to win revenge for the man who had sired him.

Again that scene flashed before his eyes as he caught the outline of Lubuk Bay in the velvet half-light of the Borneo night. He drew his features into a mask of hatred. The Circle of Death had now swept its scimitar into the Far East.

"I wonder where that murderous Belgian will head for now?" Kirk pondered. "He said something about captured Dutch tankers. But it's dollars to dingbats they'll try something else—even though we managed to block off their fighters."

THE HEINKEL was approaching Sandakan now, and Kirk forgot the Dulit affair to consider his landing and the explanations to come. As he circled the city, with throttle back a notch or two, "Coffin" again thought of the description of Sandakan he had gleaned from his studies. He repeated to himself the information bearing on this tropical center.

"There are 13,000 people of various races, creeds, and color in Sandakan, and Sandakan is located more than 10,000 miles from the seething center of strife-ridden Shanghai. A small detachment of British and native constabulary maintain peace and defense for the territory of British North Borneo. And," added Kirk, "they are helped along with their Lee Enfield rifles and Lewis machine guns.

"There are nine wireless stations in the region," the reports had stated, "a state bank, and two British Residencies. The commerce amounts to less than ten million dollars a year, but Sandakan is important because of its geographical position in relation to the Philippines, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Australia. And several of the Democratic powers are interested in the safety of British North Borneo, although most of them would officially deny it"

With that much remembered. Kirk circled the north side of the city, and his eye followed the main line of lights which ran southwest toward the open country beyond. He had been advised in Singapore as to where the new R.A.F. field was located, and he was making a mental map on the end of the line of lights to figure out just where the airdrome lay.

But just then the faint thud of concussion caught the stolen Heinkel and made her wing-tips dance. Kirk was all ears and eyes. Then he glanced down again and discovered that all the lights below had been suddenly extinguished!

“Queer!” he muttered. “Some defense measure I suppose. Since I haven’t reported in they’re taking no chances.”

Kirk looked about the cockpit for a radio set, but he had not been aboard long enough to completely familiarize himself with the layout. He circled the city again, trying to figure the German lettering on the panels of the speedy fighter-bomber. And even though he was well versed in the language, he took several minutes in selecting the right switches to put the set in action.

Then he called the station ZGW—a temporary designation given to the R.A.F. headquarters station there—but got no answer.

Kirk frowned a little at that and started to call again,

“Something queer about this. Hello! What are those flashes down there?”

But concussion again caught up with him—and now he knew.

Bombs!

Sandakan was being bombed! Someone was dropping “eggs” on important points of the town! The Circle of Death, perhaps . . .

“Come on. Tank,” Kirk bellowed over his shoulder. “Get up, you lazy rascal, and keep your eyes open.”

It was well that the simian reflexes of Tank responded. Kirk had sensed that something was wrong, and during the few minutes in which he had been vainly attempting to get in touch with the R.A.F. field somewhere below, Fate was bearing down on them out of the Borneo darkness.

The hunched figure in the back seat uncoiled, rubbed a hairy hand across his broad nose, and sniffed. He shot a preliminary glance at Kirk, and then instinctively moved toward the Krupp-Spandau movable gun grip.

INSTINCT, that blind mode of action, came to Coffin Kirk’s aid in the next split-second instant. He gave the control-column a nimble twist, flushed the rudder over, and pressed against his belt as if to urge the Heinkel to faster speed. As the fighter-bomber came around, two forked spurts of flickering tracer light flashed overhead and spanged against the upper wing-tip. Tank responded with a low jungle growl and yanked the gun out of its cradle.

“Wait a minute,” ordered Kirk. “Let’s first see who they are.”

Tank blinked, pawed at the gun again, and looked up toward the winged thing that spat death at them. Then he ripped the Krupp gun around, took his usual wide-eyed bead, and fingered the trigger.

“Wait a minute,” Kirk warned again. Then he ripped the Heinkel around so he could get a better view of their attacker. He fully expected it to be another Heinkel, but it turned out to be an Italian ship.

“Hello! A Roman this time. Looks like a new Breda 65.”

The jet-black ship was a two-place, low-wing with a folding undercart. In the nose—ringed in with a deep circular cowling—was an 850-h.p. Alfa-Romeo engine. Not a super-speedster this ship, but a neat piece of equipment for bombing, combined with excellent maneuverability and get-away. Kirk took all this in as another splatter of tracers fanned down at them from four 7.7-mm. guns set in the leading edge of the Italian plane’s full-cantilever wing.

“That baby can be flown like a single-seater,” Kirk yelled at Tank, who was still fingering his gun with sleepy anticipation. “Let him have it, fellow!”

The simian crouched over the spade grip, pulled the trigger, and held the gun steady. Kirk watched, treadled the rudder, and brought Tank’s fire dead into the nose of the black raider.

“That made him twist,” cried Kirk. “Hold it, Tank!”

The black Italian bomber swung away as if startled by the sudden opposition. Kirk took advantage of the opening, hoiked the Heinkel up, snapped her over hard, and came around at the Breda and opened fire. Tank's great paws were on his shoulders as he drew the bead. There was only one heavy caliber Spandau-type gun under the Heinkel's hood, and Kirk knew his aim had to be true.

Brat-a-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat. . . !

The single streak of fire spat out like a javelin from hell. Vibration rattled along the metal framework of the Heinkel and Tank danced with animal glee in the rear pit.

"Got him! Smoking already!" Kirk called as Tank jabbered excitedly.

The Breda twisted in agony and tried to evade the torturing fire that engulfed the ship in a shroud of death. There seemed to be smoke coming from the Italian ship, but it was only faint in the glare of the flame from the Breda's exhaust.

"That's queer," reflected Kirk, giving her a final burst. "I'll play safe. He may be trying to gas us."

The Breda was out of control now, slipping and sliding off on one wing. Instinct again seemed to warn Kirk, and he drew clear, but kept the Italian ship in sight.

"There's something screwy about this," Kirk muttered, as he kept distance from the floundering bomber. "He's going down all right, but there's something queer in Scandinavia."

The Breda fell off and dropped into a slippery spiral. It was evident that she was definitely out of control, but they followed it down until it struck into a jungle copse near a great spraying waterfall.

"That should finish him," Kirk reflected as he circled again, waiting to see if the wreckage would burn.

THEY swung around twice, but no answering signal of flame came up. And Kirk had to be satisfied with the realization that no plane could land safely in a dense growth like that and get out again. He made a quick check-up on his map and figured the Breda had gone down about ten miles southeast of Sandakan.

Tank now had the hatch open and was leaning out into the slip-stream. He looked down and made strange noises through his nose. Kirk leaned over, lugged the ape inside, and made him put the hardware away.

"Well, that was that," Kirk said to himself, audibly. "Now we'll find out why those lights went out and what all that bombing was about."

Kirk put the Heinkel into a climb again and headed back for the Borneo city, wondering how he was going to find the field without the aid of ground lights. He decided to try the radio again, but the thing only spluttered and died cold.

"That's queer. Everything is out now!"

He fumbled with the set for a minute or two, then realized that the motor was turning over unevenly. Kirk made a quick adjustment on the Daimler-Benz throttle, but the spluttering became more pronounced. Even Tank sensed the tension and peered over Kirk's shoulder.

"He didn't put a burst into us this close to Sandakan, did he?" asked Kirk, as if he expected Tank to answer.

The German engine did not respond to any mixture adjustment. Kirk switched over to another tank, tried again. The spitting and sputtering became worse. He stared about with a helpless grimace. He wished they had parachutes.

The spluttering now became still worse and she started backfiring through the carburetor. There was a final cold explosion, and the engine quit dead!

"Okay. Here we go, Tank. Bundle up and get ready for a crash."

Kirk peered over the side and sought an open stretch of ground to pancake on. But the earth below was a dull gray patchwork of nothingness. Then without warning something blazed out below that appeared to be a landing signal.

"Looks fairly good down there," he argued to himself. "Sure—it's the field. I can see the hangars now. Damn camouflage almost fooled me. But they've got a flare out for us."

He brought the Heinkel around in a wide circle and made his approach in the direction of the smoky blaze that appeared to be set up in the middle of the field. The controls were going lopy now and he had to

wrench the ship about hard to get any action. He worked on the pneumatic undercarriage gear to get his wheels down, and he let out a sigh of relief when the red light on the dash finally changed to green indicating the carriage was in order.

The field was clear to his vision now, and Kirk was satisfied that he could get in safely—engine or no engine. He banked into the wind and let her ride gently. Then for the first time he realized that the blaze was not a landing flare at all, but a burning plane!

“Whew!” gasped Kirk. “What a night!”

The Heinkel floundered over the billowing heat from the burning ship and Kirk nosed her down, felt for the wheel brakes with his heels, and then waited for her to touch.

The Heinkel stabbed at the earth once, dug in hard, floundered into a dull balloon bounce, then dropped back with a metallic thud. Before Kirk realized what was happening the bomber-fighter came to a sudden stop, dipped her nose—and went over on her back.

That was all Kirk remembered.

COFFIN KIRK awoke sometime later with a clatter in his skull like that of blacksmiths building rocker-arms. Some one seemed to be letting skyrockets off under his nose, and his eyes were peering into a crazy-quilt maze of light. Finally, it all cleared and he shook himself into some degree of sanity and stared about him. Heavy legs, greasy tropical shorts, red hands, and businesslike belt buckles made up the lower portion of the cyclorama before him. He raised his eyes a trifle and noticed a ring of broad chests and khaki shirts upon which were stitched murky decoration ribbons and R.A.F. wings. Farther up were tanned necks, sturdy chins, and faces that bore official frowns—and grease.

Kirk let out a sigh, drew a deep breath, and asked: “What the devil happened?”

One of the men came over and rammed Kirk’s chin high with a heavy thumb and forefinger. “That’s what we want to know. What’s the bloody-game?”

Disregarding the R.A.F. pilots for a moment, Kirk stared about, instinctively looked for Tank. But there was nothing that looked like the ape anywhere—just R.A.F. blokes in tropical kit.

“The Heinkel?” he asked. “I swiped it from a mob up at Dulit. It’s a long story and I want to tell it to your C.O.—someone official.”

“It must be a long story,” a chap with the rings of a Wing-Commander on his shirt snapped. “What sort of a game do you call that bombing? We spotted you dropping ‘eggs’ on the Sandakan power station. You can’t talk yourself out of that!”

“Power station? You’re mad! I had no bombs of any sort. I was at something like 6,000 feet over Lubuk when I saw all the lights go out. I was looking for this field when the lights went dead, and then an Italian Breda—I think it was a 65—attacked me and I had to pink it. It went down about ten miles from here in the jungle.”

The faces of the men in khaki changed immediately and there was a muffled conversation off in one corner of the room. The Wing-Commander finally came up and said: “You may be telling the truth, and we’re going to take you to the Governor. A lot of queer things have happened here tonight. How do you feel?”

“Wacky. What the deuce happened to me, anyway?”

One of the men poured a scotch and soda and handed it to Kirk. He took it and drained the glass in one gulp.

The Wing-Commander went on: “You were lucky. Your bus didn’t catch fire. Most of ours did.”

“But she went right over on her back—for no reason,” argued Kirk, getting to his feet. He was shaky, but alert, now.

“Of course. You can’t land a fast ship on wheels with no rubber on them,” the Wing-Commander explained, “We all suffered the same thing. The damn stuff did something to all the rubber around here. It’s a good thing you did crash. We’d have figured you sprayed or discharged the stuff. Now we don’t know who did it.”

Kirk tried to fathom just what they were saying. But none of it made sense. A chemical of some sort must have disintegrated all of the rubber—a solution that took the tires right off the wheels.

“Wait a minute,” he exclaimed, rubbing his eyes and steadying himself again. “My crate quit cold on me, too. Ignition went out. The radio wouldn’t work. Then I went over on my back. But Where’s Tank?”

“Who?”

“Tank—my man. He was in the back seat when I went over.”

A young Squadron Leader broke into the conversation with the explanation: “He cleared off the minute you hit. We saw him running like mad.”

“That’s queer,” muttered Kirk. “I wouldn’t figure he’d leave me like that.”

“That’s why we thought you had something to do with all this. He headed for the jungle, going toward the southeast.”

Kirk pondered for a moment and then said: “He probably took a thump on the noggin and is running wild. He’ll be back.”

The British pilots carried on a muffled conversation again in one corner of the room and Kirk lit a cigarette. Finally, the Wing-Commander came forward and said: “We can’t drive a car on the station. All ignitions gone. We’ll have to take a trap of some sort. There’s one outside now. Want to come along to the Residency?”

“Yes. I think I ought to. The Governor will be glad to hear what I’m going to tell him.”

“I’m sure he will,” the Wing-Commander muttered.

THE RESIDENCY was typical of British Government posts in the Far East. It lay in a tropical park, with its front steps throwing strange lights on a lotus pond that crept up to one side of the wide driveway. Native troops in gaudy costumes were on guard and there was an air of excitement, even at this early hour. The high-pitched chatter of Dusans and Bugis rattled in direct contrast to the low, crisp voices of the British.

“I don’t know whether they were able to get word through on the telephone,” Wing-Commander Evans said, as he threw the reins of the shaggy pony to a Dusan at the foot of the steps. “But I am sure the Governor will see us at once.”

“He should,” commented Kirk. “It seems as though you birds have a first class crisis on your hands.”

Evans ignored the comment and hurried up the wide, white steps and whispered to a Colonial guard who was on duty at the door. They were allowed inside the reception hall, which was garish with Malay decorations and teak furniture. Sleepy-eyed Foreign Service officers in various stages of dress and undress were hurrying from room to room, indicative of the state of affairs.

The Governor would see Wing-Commander Evans and Mr. Kirk at once, an orderly informed them.

The British official, a keen-looking individual with slate gray eyes, a white mustache, and a grand military bearing, in rumpled whites, greeted Evans at once and threw a questioning glance toward Kirk,

Evans opened with: “This is the man who landed the German Heinkel at the station, Your Excellency. He has some interesting statements to make, I believe.”

“All right. Sit down and never mind the ‘Excellency’ business. We can’t waste time. Now what do you know about this affair, Mr. Kirk?”

“It’ll take a little time to tell, but it will be worth it,” explained Kirk. Then for half an hour he outlined in general the workings of the Circle of Death, the recent events at Dulit, and his escape from the lethal chamber of the volcano.

Both the Governor and Wing-Commander Evans listened attentively—and with something akin to fear in their eyes at times.

“I’ve heard of both Cockosaert and von Audemars,” the Governor muttered reflectively. “But Tamuracho is a new one to me. They evidently planned some major move here in Borneo that would draw the British forces out of Singapore which would give them an opening—perhaps a Japanese opening to attack Singapore.”

“Or the Philippines,” prompted Kirk.

“Possibly,” agreed the Governor. “Then, with the British well occupied here in the Far East, the European Dictators would have a splendid chance of making their next major move—possibly in the Mediterranean. A clever and devilish plan, Mr. Kirk. You say you shot down the Italian—er—Breda plane?”

“Yes. We saw it hit near this waterfall I just mentioned.”

“That’s up near Salak,” explained Evans. “I know the spot well. But it will be hard to get to. As a matter of fact, I don’t know how we can get to it until all the damage has been repaired.”

“You know, of course, what happened tonight, Mr. Kirk?” the Governor asked.

“Only a sketchy explanation—something about rubber,” Kirk replied.

“Um! That’s all, eh? Well, I might tell you that nothing quite like this has ever faced me on any of my many posts throughout the Empire. What it is all about is beyond me. And how it was carried out is an even greater mystery. All we know so far is that a German Heinkel—carrying no markings—bombed the Sandakan power plant. And, as you can see, we are making the best of candles and oil lamps. There is no power anywhere about here.

“I saw that actually happen—from about 6,000 feet,” said Kirk.

“But you didn’t see what happened after that. For some strange reason everything composed of rubber has been mysteriously changed into—Well, into just a dried or flaked composition that immediately breaks down into an ashy substance.”

Kirk frowned and his keen mind immediately saw the possibilities of such a widespread chemical change. No wonder he went over on his back. No wonder his tires disintegrated. No wonder his ignition system went out and his motor conked.

His mind raced on as the Governor and Wing-Commander Evans continued the conversation. He reflected on the fight with the Breda and Tank’s effort to shoot the Italian ship down. He knew Evans and Governor Mayne were tracing the events of the night as they had experienced them, but he was now considering them from his own viewpoint.

Then he remembered Tank again. Tank, his guardian, his ever-loyal pal. Tank was somewhere out there in the jungle. Something only his animal instinct could tell had called him from the crash of the Heinkel back there to Salak. Tank alone, a civilized ape, trying to solve the mystery of the Breda!

“We’ve cleared off all the crashes as best we can, sir,” Evans said, “We won’t be able to get a ship off the ground until we get more ignition cable, coated wire, and all that sort of stuff. It will take some time to re-wire and re-tire even one plane,”

“There’s nothing nearby—such as a seaplane—that wouldn’t need tires?” inquired the Governor.

“There might be a small flying boat up at Kudat, but we can’t be sure they have any rubber left in their ignitions either.”

“Wait a minute,” snapped Kirk suddenly. “What about an armored car—something that doesn’t require rubber tires?”

“That’s right!” beamed Evans. “We have a Mark II.B light tank at the airdrome.”

“On metal treads?” queried Kirk hopefully.

“Yes. Of course.”

“But what about the engine—the rubber there?” the Governor asked.

“The Mark II.B tank is gasproof from front to rear. She’ll work,” Evans answered.

“Come on! Let’s take that tank and find Tank!” cried Kirk.

“WHAT THE DEUCE are you talking about?” the Governor asked, fingering the tips of his mustaches, “a tank to find Tank?”

“My mate—my gunner man,” grinned Kirk. “He’s a trained ape, this guy I’ve been telling you about all the while. He works with me all the time. I’ll bet he went back to that crash.”

Both Evans and Mayne exchanged glances of mystified astonishment. The idea of a British tank being sent out to find a trained ape was more than they could comprehend. It was ridiculous,

“But why?” asked Evans. “What would that get us?”

“Don’t you understand, Evans?” argued Kirk, snubbing a cigarette butt into a jade ash tray. “Tank, you see, went off on his own for some reason. He sensed something—that’s it, sensed something back there none of us would be able to figure—and so he went back. There’s no telling what he had in mind or what he will find. We’ve got to go back there after him and find out!”

Evans appealed to the Governor, whose face now looked like a disappointed walrus! The Governor steadied himself and swallowed a sturdy peg of brandy in one gulp. He drew in a deep breath, smoothed his hirsute handle-bars, and said: “Well, it can’t be any more mysterious than it is now. You can do it in a couple of hours, can’t you, Evans? After all, I suppose we should try to follow up on that crash and see if there’s anything there that will give us any idea as to what happened.”

The Governor then sat down, a tired old man who had given up to the mysteries of a modern age—airplanes, Wing-Commanders, tanks, rubber-consuming gas, and trained apes. He wished he were back in London parading the Birdcage Walk,

“Come on, Evans,” boomed Kirk, “Let’s get that armored snail and go after Tank. We can first make sure he isn’t back, and then try this Salak place you know about.”

They left the presence of the Governor unceremoniously and hurried down the steps. They leaped back into the trap and laid a heavy reed across the flanks of the shaggy pony.

“You Americans!” muttered Evans, with an admiring grin spreading across his face. “You like to get things done in a hurry, don’t you? Poor old Mayne will be weeks getting over this.”

“I fear the whole Empire won’t ever get over it, Evans—unless this mess is cleared up pronto.”

They laid on the reed again, and the Pegasus in the shafts increased his pace down the cobbled road to a full eight miles an hour.

“I’m telling you,” confided Kirk, “the more I think about it, the more I am certain that Tank spotted something I missed. He wouldn’t barge off like that, leaving me in a heap under the Heinkel. Apes are queer birds, Evans.”

AND FROM THERE, all the way to the field, Kirk told the Wing-Commander of the strange adventures he had had with Tank since the hair-raising experience at the Berlin Zoo more than two decades before.

“I wouldn’t miss going with you on this junket for all the planes in the Air Force,” Evans finally said, as he tossed the reins over to an anxious eyed Aircraftsman. “Come on! The tank is over here in this shed,”

They made their way past the hangars where mechanics were feverishly working on the planes, ripping out the crippled ignition systems. Their faces were blank masks of apprehension, streaked here and there with dabs of grease. They turned on their raised work-stands and cast anxious eyes toward their Wing-Commander—hoping that he had something encouraging to say about the matter.

But Evans had only more orders, and he spat them out with machine-like precision.

“Come on,” he added to Kirk. “Let’s get going. I want to see this bloke Tank, for he must be a beauty.”

“Well, hardly,” smirked Kirk. “But he’ll do until some prettier gorilla comes along.”

They tore open the doors of the shed, and there stood a gleaming metal monster, trim in olive drab paint—with the muzzle of a three-pound pom-pom gun sticking out of its upper, rotating turret. The car ran on flexible metal treads and, as Evans had stated, was completely enclosed and obviously gasproof.

The Wing-Commander twisted the release lever that unlatched a small steel panel in the bow of the tank’s steel body. He lifted the panel and crawled in. Kirk followed. Inside, they found an amazing display of swinging saddle seats, instruments, a single gun turret and a gunner’s platform. Evans made a quick inspection of the cables and wire, and everything appeared to be in good order.

“You take that seat under the pompom,” ordered the Englishman. “Stick one of these helmets on or you’ll bash your brains out when we’re underway in the rough stuff.”

He adjusted several ignition and fuel levers, pressed the starter, and the Lanchester motor opened with a resounding roar. Evans let her run for a warm-up, meanwhile handing two small rubber plugs to Kirk, indicating with his fingers that they were to go in his ears to protect the delicate hearing drums.

Evans, sitting in the control seat, peered through a small oblong of shatter-proof glass, and drove the tank out into the open. The steering mechanism consisted of a wide-angled Y-handle, fitted with grips and

carrying Bowden cable controls to the engine. There was a simple clutch device on the floor beneath the panel.

Once outside, he throttled the motor down, checked the fuel tank, ammunition magazines, and two-way radio set. He nodded to Kirk, reached forward, closed the entrance hatchway, and sealed it. He opened two vent plates below the oblong peep-hole and fastened a small map before him on a set of spring prongs.

“All set?” Evans bawled back over his shoulder to Kirk, who was trying out the breech of the pom-pom.

Kirk slapped him on the shoulder and nodded.

THE TRIP along the baked roads of Sandakan was reasonably comfortable. But once they left the palm lined highways and entered the jungle and bush, where they had to steer by compass. Kirk realized for the first time what tank crews have to put up with.

For what seemed like more than an hour, “Betsy,” as Evans had named the tank, bumped and lurched across brooks, decayed tree trunks, and rocks. She squealed as her treads slipped over the mud and slithered over the rank vegetation. And as they bounced and thudded. Kirk was glad Evans had given him the tank helmet. His shoulders were already bruised and his chest was marked with the blows from crashing into the ring of the turret.

Finally, they came out into a reasonably open sector that ran toward a low range of blue hills. Ahead they could see the thicket of mango palms, cassava, chincona, and wild sugar cane which hid from view the stream that was being whipped to a froth by the waterfall remembered by Kirk.

Evans halted, throttled down, and checked with “Coffin.”

“This is where the Breda came down,” said Kirk. “I remember that thicket over there. The waterfall must be just beyond it. Can you make it?”

“I’ll try. But it may be bad up ahead. Would you mind walking ahead to check the swamp? Take a gun with you. There’s one or two in a rack behind.”

Kirk was glad to get out of the leaping juggernaut and get a breath of clean air. He found a Webley revolver, stuck it in his breeches pocket, and crawled past Evans who had unlocked the hatchway.

“If I only had a bugle now I’d feel like a Boy Scout,” grinned Kirk through the ventilator.

“I’ll see that you get your merit badge,” soothed Evans. “But mind the hooded cobras!”

Kirk liked this guy Evans. He was one of his own kind, and the American was glad he was mixed up in this thing. They were in a mess and they both knew it. What it was all about they had no idea. But Kirk was certain that the Circle of Death was behind it all. They hadn’t gone to this extent—this rubber-consuming gag—for nothing. He wondered whether it could be another link in the plan old Cockosaert had talked about in the gassy interior of Mount Dulit not many hours before.

The Circle of Death had planned to take Brunei, farther up the coast, and in all probability had managed it. There was no telling whether the strange gas had been discharged up there or not, but Cockosaert had spoken about a plan that included the capturing of this portion of Borneo and later on the Philippines, which lay only some 450 miles across the Sulu Sea.

Kirk pondered on all this as he strode carefully on, testing the ground for the tank.

He was now making his way across an area covered with wide-fronded foliage, not unlike skunk-cabbage. Beneath, the ground was black and fertile, but in spots it threatened to become soggy and ooze off into small areas of swamp land. Just ahead lay a light thicketed area shielded with light second-growth. That would be easy for “Betsy,” if the ground was anything like solid.

He managed to guide the tank safely into this area and was selecting the better section to traverse, when his ears suddenly caught a familiar sound. First there was a flutter of gaudy-plumaged birds cascading from nearby tree-tops with their challenging squeal of the tropics. And then came the ever familiar forest scream of an ape!

The cry came from an indistinct source, but it was welcome music to Kirk—for that cry could have come from no one but Tank!

Kirk turned back and waved an encouraging arm to Evans.

THEN, as if some strange instinct had touched hidden keys somewhere inside the ape, the cry changed to a warning wail. It was repeated in a tone that carried both authority and caution. Kirk dropped to one knee, peered ahead. He signaled for the tank to halt, went on ahead, then listened again for the call.

It was not repeated, and a new fear crept into Kirk. A length of twisted barbed wire seemed to be twisting around his middle, sending jolts of electricity through his body. He openly winced but hurried ahead cautiously until he found himself approaching the edge of the thicket.

Then, with unbelieving eyes, he saw two large elaborately camouflaged canvas hangars, their draped doors partly opened and the glint of equipment inside! He waited and studied the scene. There was no one present—at least, no one in sight.

Kirk hurried back to where he had left the Mark II.B and signaled for Evans to open the hatch. He slipped inside and explained to the Englishman what had happened.

“We must make sure that hatch is gas-tight,” Evans said, “We can’t take a chance on that stuff now. How far ahead is this clearing?”

“About 150 yards. There’s two hangars in there—beautifully camouflaged—but I can’t see anyone around.”

“But your monk gave you a warning cry?”

“Absolutely. There’s something murky up there.”

“Come on then, let’s clean it up,” grinned Evans, his face abeam with anticipation.

“Carry on, Skipper,” replied Kirk, “But look out for that gunner of mine. He’s likely to be around somewhere.”

“You do the shooting, I’ll drive the ‘orses,” answered Evans, letting the clutch in.

The tank rumbled on, lurching and bouncing as it shoved the light trees aside, and nudged her shovel-nose through the underbrush. Kirk jerked the breech lever of the pom-pom and placed a six-shell clip into the loading block. He thumbed a knurled knob to single-shot action and peered through the glass-covered aperture set in line with the gun sight.

They were nearing the clearing now. Evans twisted in his seat and gave Kirk a final glance of assurance before he plunged on through.

They could hear no sound outside because of the rattle of the motor, and Kirk wondered whether his ape was issuing any further information. He waited until the tank lurched out into the open, then studied the layout while Evans steadied “Betsy” in the clear.

“I’ll hold her here a minute and see what happens,” said Evans. “You be ready in case they show up.”

The clearing, now they had time to study it, was perfect for a hideout spot. It was long, reasonably wide, and as level as a billiard table. The hangars were huddled deep into the foliage and could never be seen from above.

“What a plant!” said Kirk, admiring the real estate. “But what the devil is this all about?”

“Let’s skirmish it,” replied Evans, “I’ll run around the edge here and try to get to the hangars. If it gets hot we can dive back into the bushes.”

“Betsy” waddled around on her tread and started to crunch along the edge of the clearing while Kirk watched for action over near the hangars. So far there was not a move, or a sign of life.

But when they reached the end of the clearing and were just about to turn left to cross toward the hangars—bedlam broke loose!

FROM SOMEWHERE deep in the field near the hangar, an automatic weapon of high caliber opened up on them. Kirk saw the streaks of fire several seconds after the first burst biffed into the tank’s mid-section.

Evans slammed the slitted steel plates across the shatterproof glass and squinted through the peep-holes in them. Kirk managed to get set while “Betsy” eased into the thicket again. He squeezed the trigger and the gun slammed back and almost flattened him against the turret top. He moved to one side and continued to fire.

Evans was now out of his seat and was poking a Bren gun through a rubber-bound slot. He, too, opened fire on the mound ahead, and his shots sent up a fountain of stones and damp earth.

Cr-r-r-r-u-m-p!

The pom-pom spoke again and the little tank shook under a wave of blasting, ear shattering concussion, “Got ‘em!” cried Evans excitedly. “You blew their blooming rampart away. Let’s go after them and tread on their whiskers!”

Kirk never heard a word the Englishman said, but he sensed that “Betsy” was moving forward again. He managed to get another shot into the mound again before he had to hang on to keep his teeth in their gums.

“Betsy” waddled on and they saw three heads appear. Kirk fired, but the shot went wide. The trio of men leaped out, ran like madmen toward the back of the hangars, and Kirk blazed another shot which went wide over their heads.

Evans halted “Betsy” near the depression and saw that three bodies were slumped over what appeared to be a heavy gun. Then Kirk yelled—for out of the tree tops above them a gaunt, long-armed figure dropped and hurled itself at the racing men.

“That’s Tank!” Kirk yelled. “Hey, Tank!”

Evans sat stupefied as he watched the strange creature grab two of the men in his long arms, jerk them toward him suddenly, and crush their lives out. Tank dropped the men and came back toward the tank, peering strangely as Evans kicked open the hatch. Kirk dived out first, ran up to the simian, and threw his arms around him,

Evans watched the affiliation of civilization and the jungle, with mixed emotions of amazement and awe. He saw Kirk grab the ape’s shoulders, hold him off, and peer into the blank mug that simply stared back. The ape was still dressed in what was left of a pair of white slacks, a Navy blouse, and the canvas tops of a pair of sneakers which now had the grotesque appearance of spats, since the rubber soles were no more. They had gone with the Heinkel’s tires, ignition insulation, and the rest of it,

Evans, satisfied now that all was reasonable well, crawled out and obeyed Kirk’s silent command to come forward and get the okay from the ape. As he approached, Kirk, with his arms about each, conveyed the idea to Tank, who allowed his mug to relax somewhat while he rubbed his great hands up and down the Englishman’s arm.

“You’re in,” explained Kirk. “I had to explain to him that you were on our side.”

“I’m damn glad I am, too,” muttered Evans, gently patting the ape on the shoulder, “Did you see what he did to those poor devils?”

“I’ll bet he’s been waiting up a tree for that for hours. He can be nasty if he decides he’s facing an enemy. But he’s a grand guy.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” muttered Evans, as Tank swished away and dived into the trench. He tossed the bodies of the men away and snatched at the field gun. Then, before their eyes, he twisted it to junk—bending the steel barrel, breaking the cocking handle off, and shattering the walnut butt across a rock.

“Just like that,” reflected Evans, “I hope he doesn’t get playful with ‘Betsy’.”

“Don’t worry. He won’t, since he saw both you and me get out of it. He’ll behave with me around.”

“Righto! ‘Stick around,’ as you Yanks say,” grinned Evans. “He might start pulling the armor off—just to keep in trim.”

“Let’s have a look around here while we’ve got the chance. We might not be here very long until someone pops in at us again,” suggested Kirk.

“But we’ll take ‘Betsy.’ We might need her again. This is too easy,” said the Englishman.

Evans climbed back in and headed the tank for the hangar, while Kirk and Tank walked alongside, keeping a close watch on the hangar. Evans pulled up near the opening, then decided to run her nose inside a short distance. Kirk and Tank, working together now, crouched behind the tank until they were certain all was clear.

Evans came out from the hatchway, startled at what Kirk was pointing at.

“What the deuce do you make of this?” the Englishman exclaimed. “Look at them. New Breda 65’s—about ten of them!”

“Yeah. And look at what they got painted on them,” said Kirk, fingering his gun as he walked in. “The Rising Sun insignia of the Japs! Italian planes with Nipponese insignia!”

Kirk put his finger on the round, red disc on the side of one of the fighters. The finger came away scarlet. The paint was still wet!

“GET IT, EVANS?” he said quietly, still looking around cautiously. “Get it? They flew these things here and put the Jap markings on only a short time ago. Mean anything to you?”

“What does it mean to you?” asked the puzzled Wing-Commander.

“Part of this Circle of Death gag. They have provided these fighters for the Japs. They were brought here somehow—probably catapulted off a mother ship—and are now probably being fixed up for a Jap attack!”

Tank, Kirk, and Evans went over one of the ships carefully. There were two guns under the hatch of each for an observer—Breda-Safats of 7.7 mm.—two more under the hood, firing through the airscrew, and four guns in the wings.

“What a find!” beamed Kirk. “Have you noticed? The ignition cables and all wiring is carried in some sort of plastic material, I’ll bet the tires are some sort of faked rubber, too,”

They inspected the wheels and discovered that they were the spring-leaf spoke type, and the tires were spring steel coils carefully fitted to the rims.

“We’ve got to get these babies out,” snapped Kirk. “How soon can you get pilots here?”

“I can radio through from ‘Betsy.’ I think we have that range.”

“Sure, but you can’t get them if their sets, are still out of order back there. Try it, anyway.”

Kirk still had an idea that there was no radio channel open to Sandakan, and that Evans would have to go back in “Betsy.” Anything could happen in the meantime.

Then Kirk and Tank made a careful search of the place while Evans tried the radio set in the tank. They discovered that both hangars were full of planes of the same type, that there was a reasonable amount of supplies and spare parts, and that all of the Bredas had been fueled to the limit.

“Queer,” reflected Kirk, trying to fathom the mystery. “Why were these ships brought here, hidden, and then left in charge of a handful of men? Where are the pilots who flew them and why are they being stored here all ready for action?”

He glanced at Tank, who had been following him about like a devoted retainer.

“And what have you been up to since you left me? Kirk suddenly exclaimed. “What the deuce have you been doing, Tank?”

The big ape stood still, twisted his pinkish-brown mug, scratched his whiskers, and padded up and down on his big bare feet. He had all the airs of a youngster who had been caught on the top step of a ladder in the pantry.

“You came back here somehow. But what did you come back for? You saw the other Breda crash, and you probably found it for some reason. What was that reason?”

The ape watched him, his brow even more wrinkled than usual—as if he were trying to fathom what his master was trying to get at. Kirk moved closer to him, stared deep into those hazel eyes, and put on a mental effort to pierce the mind of the ape.

“He came back to search for the wreck. He might have found it, but he never has revenge in his mind. He wouldn’t outrage a corpse—but he might . . .”

That was it! Tank would come back—just as he would have done under ordinary conditions—and searched the wreck and the clothing of the pilot!

“Come here. Tank,” the American said. “Let’s look through your pockets.”

A strange light lit up the ape’s face and he began fingering awkwardly with his long talons through the pockets of the Navy blouse. He worked furiously, then came away with a wad of soiled papers and a thin leather wallet.

“Now we’re getting somewhere,” smiled Kirk. “Let’s see what you discovered, old boy.”

The wad had been rudely twisted into a lump and roughly stuffed into the small blouse pocket. The leather wallet was a *Ministero dell Aeronautica* pilot’s license, issued to one Aldo Ravenna, of Turin. There was a badly bent compass variation card, a nondescript business letter, a bill for a revolver bought in Palermo, and a crisp quarto size sheet of note-paper.

“This looks like the business, Tank. You’re getting good,” grinned Kirk, slapping the ape on the shoulder. “You’re learning, boy!”

The sheet was a set of cryptic orders involving the name of a Japanese aircraft carrier, the new Akudo—recently completed from a British liner that had been sold several years before for scrap. There were names like Sandakan, Borneo, Philippines, and Lubuk. There was a date and a time specification that made Kirk twist sharply.

“Come on, Tank. Let’s see what Evans has to say about this.”

They hurried over to “Betsy” just as Evans was crawling out.

“Nothing doing,” the Englishman muttered. “Can’t raise a spark of any sort. What’s up!”

“Plenty! Look here. Can you figure out any of this?”

“Let’s have a look. Where’d you get it?”

Kirk explained while Tank danced about like a trained bear.

“Damned lucky for us,” Evans said, after a quick but careful glance at the paper. “They’re going to attack Sandakan and Lubuk—that’s the other R.A.F. base up the coast—tonight! We’d better set fire to all these ships.”

“What for?” Kirk demanded, somewhat amazed.

“Why not? We can’t get them out, can we?”

“If you can get pilots up here in time we can.”

“You mean I should take a chance getting back and bringing them here?”

“That’s right. We’ll stay here and hold the fort.”

“It’s an idea,” agreed Evans, beaming. “This paper says they are going to try for a landing—using the Akudo loaded with Jap planes and Jap marines—so that they will have a jumping-off point to attack the Philippines.”

“Well, what are we waiting for?”

“Let’s figure this out. I could go back in a couple of hours. You could stay here with one Breda ready to take off. If anyone came along, you could hold them off while I tried to get pilots back here.”

“That’s one idea,” agreed Kirk. “Or we could take two out. You see, I’d like to practice on one. Anyhow, you fly a Breda to Sandakan and bring a couple of pilots back with you. Then start the others on their way. How do you like that?”

“That’s good, too. It’s quids to quinces they’ll be back—probably with bigger bombers, bringing extra pilots to fly these Bredas for the big show which is slated for 11 o’clock tonight.”

They left “Betsy” in the shadow of the hangar and ran two Bredas out. Tank was a big help at this task and in no time they had the engines running and were climbing aboard.

“You go ahead,” ordered Kirk. “Go back and bring as many of your guys back as you can get aboard. Hang ‘em on meat hooks if you have to.”

“Righto. And the best of luck.” The Englishman fumbled with the controls for some time, and then whipped the Breda around, and, with a wave, gave her the throttle and thundered down the landing field. Kirk watched him get into the clear, turn northwest, and hurry back to Sandakan. Then he gave Tank a signal. The big ape climbed aboard and fumbled with the butts of the Breda-Safat guns.

“That’s right, mug, take ‘em out. And if you have to use ‘em, don’t waste any slugs,” ordered Kirk over his shoulder.

KIRK FUMBLED with the controls. He worked out the statements printed on metal plates in various parts of the cockpit until he found the details of the flap gear, the gun loading sequence and the throttle adjustment. Then he took off, hammering down the green turf runway, and hoiked carefully over the trees.

The Breda flew well. She was a little heavy laterally but responded well to the throttle and showed plenty of speed when Kirk turned on the juice. He tried one or two maneuvers, whip-stalled her twice, and satisfied himself that he could handle her. As she came out of a snap roll, Kirk glanced over his shoulders at Tank—and then immediately whipped the Breda around and set himself for action!

A brace of B.R.20's came out of nowhere and peppered the Breda with some heavy caliber stuff. Kirk whipped over hard and saw that two Italian Fiat heavy bombers were evidently on their way to the long green strip below.

Tank had spotted them first while Kirk was trying out the Breda, and before Coffin could whang her around to get in a full shot from his front guns the ape was spraying the two Fiats with a heavy dosing of Safat lead.

"Hold it!" screamed Kirk. "Wait a minute!"

Tank obeyed, purring contentedly through his massive nostrils as Kirk brought the Breda around. The two Fiats slammed more lead at them, and Kirk had to slip her clear before he could come around to set his guns on the big bombers.

"They must have been given the tip-off," he muttered, waiting for his opening. "Probably returning with pilots to get those planes out of here. Well, we'll see if they can take it."

The Breda screamed through the skies and vomited leaden hate in long gleaming streams. The lead Fiat B.R.20 took the tracers full force in its starboard wing root and Kirk drew the stick back gently and hoiked his line of fire so that the leaden stream continued to saw through the airfoil supports of the Italian ship. He knew he had scored. Its wing buckled, the Fiat was falling.

But before Kirk could whang around again, something caught the Breda full in the quarter-deck!

Tank let out a soul piercing scream.

A plume of flame and smoke, fluttering back over the sealed hatchway, told Kirk that his fuel line had been hit—their ship was in flames!

Kirk gave Tank one look, but the ape twisted around, ripped out the guns again, and opened a wild garden-hose fire on the bomber that was banking behind them. A hopeless but gallant stand to the finish!

Kirk peered over the side and saw the landing strip directly below him. He acted fast now and slithered the Breda into a knifing side-slip. The trim-winged bullet-like ship slipped down. Coffin set the flaps to their limit. The bomber was coming down after them, regardless of the wild fusillade Tank was slamming across his own tail.

This was the end—unless . . .

Kirk waited for a thud of bullets as he slipped toward the field. And he waited for that trowel-like wing-tip of the Breda to dig into the lush grass below. The sideslip was taking the flame and smoke clear of the fuselage, but the hungry fire would soon be gnawing at the ship's vitals.

He waited a few more seconds, expecting any minute to feel the fire wall slide back to his knees and snuff him out of existence.

They were almost down now, and approaching the jungle runway at express-train speed. Kirk reversed his rudder, bringing the nose around. Then a short savage shove at the throttle knob and the Breda eased around into a slow, fluttering glide. The flaps held and she seemed to hang on unseen wires for a moment.

A curtain of flame and a shroud of smoke whipped up as Kirk went through the automatic motions of landing.

Thump! . . . Thump! . . . Bang!

CRASH!

They were down. And by some act of providence Kirk had forgotten to lower the landing gear. Thus the belly-landing had prevented them from barging on through into the jungle brush at the end of the runway.

The rattle of a Safat gun continued as Kirk fought to get clear of the wrenched cockpit.

"Hey, Tank!" he bawled. "Some of your muscle here, lad. Get this damn bus apart!"

The ape stared at Kirk for some seconds, peered out of the shattered hatchway as if he were astonished to find himself on the ground, and gave a final jungle snarl at the Fiat which was still peppering at them from a tight turn above.

WHEN, amid a wild barrage of Italian lead. Tank went bull-in-a-china-shop. His long paws grabbed lengths of stiff dural and his thumbs constricted. The stiff metal gave like lead-foil. He snatched at stringers,

grabbed them with his firm yellow teeth, and tore with savage rage until the fuselage of the Breda had been ripped apart like a shoulder of beef in a lion cage.

Smoke blinded them and flame seared their flesh as they fought their way out of the cockpit. Kirk grabbed a short lug, twisted it, drew out the brace of Safat guns, and tucked them under his arm as he turned for the hangar.

Then he remembered “Betsy.”

He bawled at Tank, who was gnashing his teeth at the Fiats.

“Come on, you fool! Don’t stand there baring your dentistry. You can’t do anything about them out here!”

At last the ape caught on. Together they ran to “Betsy,” lifted the metal hatch, and clambered in. The ape was ill at ease for a moment, for somewhere back in his simian mind he must have remembered being a biological exhibition in a somewhat similar steel cage, placed on view to be gazed upon.

“Take it easy,” argued Kirk. “Sit there while I play the organ.”

Kirk charged the pom-pom and waited to see what the remaining Fiat would do. He rammed home another charge of shells and watched. The Fiat was being flown in a wide circle now, as if the pilot was not quite sure just what to do. “Betsy,” fortunately, was in a secluded position just around the corner of the hangar, and Kirk hoped they had not spotted the British tank.

“We’ll get ‘em cold if they try to land,” he muttered quietly.

The Fiat showed every indication of making a landing. Kirk patted Tank on the shoulder and soothed him, for the ape was watching the bomber through the peep-slits, and showing increased anxiety.

“Take it easy, boy. We’ll get ‘em if they land. I’ll pick out their cylinders one by one and then cut their wheels off. You watch, boy!”

The ape purred, gave Kirk a grateful glance, and then rubbed his great beezee in anticipation.

Kirk took an angle sight past the corner of the hangar and figured he could just make it—if the Fiat landed far enough up the green strip. Still, he took no chances, but stepped up and started the Lanchester motor so that they could run her out farther should it be necessary.

They watched again once the engine was purring quietly, and saw the Fiat turn in for a landing. Coffin Kirk’s eyes sparkled with glee and anticipation, for he saw an easy capture. He moved back to the saddle seat below the gun turret, and reached for the trigger as the Fiat swished around and set herself for the final glide.

“Now take it easy Tank,” he warned. “You’ve had enough scrapping to last you for awhile.”

But Tank was not satisfied. His eyes tightened into slits and he pawed at knobs, handles, and parts of the interior.

“Now what’s up?” demanded Kirk, for he knew the animal had drawn on his jungle instinct to scent danger. Suspiciously, he peered about through the slits.

Then, just as he was drawing a bead on the bumping Fiat, something blinded him! He remembered hearing Tank let out a fiendish squeal, and then four million Roman candles seemed to go off in his brain. Concussion blasted all life out of his muscles and battered the electric reaction from his nerves.

COFFIN KIRK’S eyes were in a world of blackness. He knew nothing of the passage of time. He could hear voices, but they meant nothing. Then abruptly he could see strange figures in trim black uniforms. And his returning vision recognized the hated insignia of the Circle of Death on breast pockets!

He put on a silent struggle to gain full possession of his powers of concentration. He listened again, closed his eyes, and waited. He caught words like “Philippines,” “Akudo,” “Breda,” and “Cockosaert”—and then he knew. He struggled with himself and had to restrain the desire to scream.

Kirk then tried to piece it all together: A Fiat bomber coming in to land . . . “Betsy” and her pom-pom . . . He was just about to fire—and then a crashing nothingness . . . Something had slipped up . . . Something had hit them . . . What?

He rolled his body gently, peered around. Near him, in a half reclining position, lay Tank—trussed and bound.

That was queer! Who could have tied Tank up? They must have gassed them. No, “Betsy” was gas-proof. An antitank shell must have hit the tank.

A hundred scenes flashed before his eyes and he saw Evans—Evans, the Englishman who had relied on him. Evans, coming back with as many British pilots as he could carry. Coming in to land—Englishmen coming to their doom . . . “Hell,” he muttered, glancing over at Tank again. “Got to get out!”

He moved cautiously, as every muscle move brought on jolts of nerve punishment. The men in the black uniforms formed a dim circle off near the opening of the hangar now. They were at an alert position. Something outside was attracting their attention—something with a throbbing boom to it.

That was it! Evans was coming back with his first load of pilots. They were waiting for him—waiting with guns!

Kirk squirmed again and brought his bound wrists up to the long slender fingers of the ape. He shoved against them and whispered over his shoulder.

“Come on. Tank! Go to work, boy! Untie these knots. Let me loose. Tank!”

He waited, and then the hairy fingers began to move. Swiftly and certainly, too, for they were trained and had the background of jungle years at their tips. Fingers that replaced the lack of what men call intelligence. Fingers that were as true and as strong as steel.

It seemed hours before the bindings were off. But once his hands were free. Kirk lay low, turned slightly, and then untied the ropes knotted at the beast’s back.

“Now—now, Tank! Can you hear me? Clean the damn lot of them out, and don’t stop until I order you. To the finish. Tank!”

Words, yes. But Kirk’s pointing finger, directed at the group of men huddled in the hangar doorway, was the “Finger of Death” as far as Tank was concerned. All he knew was that these men were their enemies and they had to be killed. Animal instinct came to the fore, directed by the intense loyalty to the human being he had accepted as his master.

Kirk looked into the ape’s eyes with glances that carried volumes of words. Then Tank eased away like a wraith and skirted the rear of the Bredas. Kirk waited, knowing that the gorilla must carry out the first move to make sure their plan would work.

Kirk flexed his muscles, tested his vision on points at various distances, then got up and moved quickly to the nearest Breda. Here he removed a Safat gun from its mount and took the metal magazine with it. He dropped to the ground, carefully cocked the weapon, and waited for Tank to go into action.

Sure enough! Tank suddenly appeared on top of the front Breda, crouching and poised for a jungle attack. There was an instant of deep silence—then an unearthly bellow of animal rage filled the hangar as Tank charged upon the foe.

Kirk darted into the clear and opened fire on the group which stood spellbound and unable to draw sidearms from hip holsters. Kirk then held his fire, equally spellbound by the ferocious attack of the simian who was cutting a wide swath through the group, swinging the first wretched swine he had grabbed by the ankles. There was the hollow *thock, thock, thock* of skulls crashing together, the piercing crack and crunch of breaking bones, and the dull leaden thud of pounded carcasses.

Tank was having a jungle field day!

Into the midst of it all ran Kirk, his Safat gun covering the lot. Two game devils tried to get out their weapons and put up a fight, but a swinging burst from Kirk’s gun cut them down.

In twenty seconds a major victory had been scored. The black-uniformed mob lay like reaped wheat. A cruel revenge, perhaps, but nothing compared to what might happen if this band of cut-throats could not be stopped. They represented a far greater threat than a few cracked skulls or bullet slashed limbs.

The carnage was ended just as the captured Breda rumbled up to the doorway. Wing-Commander Evans peered out over the front of the Gnome-Rhone cowling and stared at the shambles, unable to figure it all out, until Kirk, with a weary gesture, waved them in.

“WHAT THE DEVIL happened?” demanded Evans, clambering over the tangle of bodies. He grabbed at black Mausers that lay about, and drew a few more from open holsters as he came toward Kirk.

“They downed us and we tried to hold them off with ‘Betsy.’ But someone conked her with a nine-point-two, or something,” said Kirk. “And now I’d give a Breda for a drink.”

Quickly Evans produced a leather-covered flask and shoved it toward Kirk. The American unscrewed the top, placed the short neck to his lips, and added a few much-desired thermal units to his constitution.

Around him flashed the movements of British flying men in khaki shorts, light canvas helmets, and sturdy bare knees. Kirk counted at least four. Then Kirk heard indistinct orders and the bellow of the Fiat bomber’s warming motors. And he rightly sensed that Evans had “told off” someone to fly the plane back to Sandakan and bring in another load of men.

Mercy now tempered the movements of the Britons, too; for they went to work with a will on the injured men in the black uniforms. First-aid kits appeared as if by magic, and in no time those left alive were carefully attended to. They were bandaged and eased into the wide cabin of the Fiat for the trip back to the base. Needless to state, also, they were securely bound to prevent any possibility of their attempting to recapture the bomber once it was in the air.

Kirk watched the Fiat take off with decided satisfaction. Tank was wandering up and down nearby, one eye on his master and the other on the quiet pile of dead his own efforts had heaped up.

“We’re damned lucky, you know,” said Evans, watching the British pilots as they moved three Bredas out for a take-off. “We managed to get a small spark-set radio going back at the station and have warned Brunei and Singapore, but we have no idea whether they got the message straight. What’s more, we have picked up messages from the , and there is no question now but that they are on their way. It’ll be a devil of a fight—if we can get into the air in time.”

There was determination in Kirk’s grin. “We’ll get into the air, all right. All I’m worrying about now is that they’ll find out we have captured their Bredas.”

“All right,” argued Evans. “Suppose they do. The can’t turn back now. She’s probably too far this side of the Singapore-Brunei. The Japs will be safer taking a chance on a landing in Borneo than trying to get back through the British defense units now starting out from Singapore. They’ve begun the mess and they’ll have to go through with it.”

KIRK PONDERED on that as he enjoyed a cigarette, allowing the blue smoke to soothe his nostrils. He spoke quietly to Tank and the ape slumped down, coiled up, and went to sleep.

“If we could only cork off that way,” observed Kirk. “One hour and he’ll be ready to rip five tanks apart!”

“When I want some tanks ripped apart,” said Evans, with a quiet gleam, “I’ll file a requisition for him. By the way, did I tell you? We have a bloke back at the station who’s a bit of a chemist.”

“I hope he doesn’t manufacture your liquor.”

“No, nothing like that. The thing is that he’s been scraping around and making tests on the ruined rubber—and he seems to have found something.”

“About the stuff with which they pulverized the rubber?”

“That’s it. He’s made a couple of simple chemical tests, and he figures the gas they used is a combination of carbon disulphide, benzol, and nitric acid. He explained to me that he once did some time on a rubber plantation and knows a lot about the various curing processes they employ. It was a bit technical for me, but his explanation seemed reasonable when he explained it. It appears they smoke the gum with certain chemicals that have to be blended carefully. But if they’re not in the proper proportions, the latex element in the rubber goes spiffo and they find themselves with a lot of muck.”

“He seems to have hit it,” agreed Kirk, sticking his long legs out for a more comfortable position. “They could make a gas like that. It might cost some money. But after all, these devils don’t seem to worry about sawbucks.”

“Sawbucks?” queried the Englishman.

“Never mind,” answered Kirk with a flick of his cigarette. “It’s an Americanism for *mazuma*. Now, how’s about getting these Breda busses out of here—and damn quick!”

“I’ve sent Mayberry off with the Fiat for more pilots, of course, I have three other flyers here, and I’m putting them into the air now to do a local patrol over this place. Mayberry will ferry the rest of the pilots in as fast as he can make the trips. You and I can take one apiece when you’re ready, and we can go back any time now and plan the rest of the celebration.”

Kirk nodded, lit another cigarette, and twisted with a weary gesture for an easier position.

“There’s a lot of work ahead, you know, Evans,” he finally said. “We’ve got to let these men of yours know just what they’re up against. You’ll have to send one of them around as a dispatch rider to let them know for certain at Lubuk and Brunei so that they can put up some form of defense if the Akudo gets through and lands a gang of marines.”

Evans agreed, then went on:

“The Akudo carries about forty of those new Mitsubishi 96’s—nasty-looking devils, too. I saw some of them when I was in Hong Kong a few months ago. They look a lot like your Boeing P-26’s, and I’d judge have about the same performance.”

“Whew!” whistled Kirk. “Forty of those against what we can put into the air will give us a very pleasant evening. By the way, what’s the time?”

“Well, it’s after noon now, I suppose. Yes, 1:30 to be exact,” said Evans, consulting a formidable-looking ticking turnip on the end of a leather shoestring.

“So we’ve got about nine hours to get ready?”

“Exactly. And in the meantime we can worry about where these Fiats come from and what their next move will be.”

“I’ve already been worrying about that,” chimed in Kirk. “We’ll have to maintain a patrol over Sandakan in short shifts until we take off for the flare-up tonight—just to play safe, eh?”

“A good idea. It will give my men plenty of time to accustom themselves to the new planes, too.”

“Have you had a look at the Breda bomb racks? Can you use them?” Coffin came back.

“They’re adjustable. They’ll take our stuff, I feel sure. You know the blokes at the Air Ministry have an idea now and then. They have our bombs built so that they can be fitted into almost any rack, interior or exterior. Jerry taught us that trick during the World War. German rifles in those days would take both German and British ammunition, but ours wouldn’t take Jerry’s.”

Kirk pondered on that for some time until it was evident that it was time they all got on their feet again. He was weary, but he managed to crawl to a Breda, call to Tank, and take off for the R.A.F. drome outside of Sandakan.

By 3 o’clock the full complement of captured Bredas had been transferred safely. Aircraftsmen were making slight adjustments on the bomb racks, pilots were checking their guns, and Kirk and Tank were enjoying a short but reviving sleep in Wing-Commander Evan’s cubicle.

A THREE-SHIP patrol droned back and forth over the Sandakan field, covering the area and keeping a faithful watch over the R.A.F. station. For hours now this had been going on. A low wind sang through the hangars with lengthy wails that reminded one of some despairing soul shut out in a storm. The sable-vested night, which had fallen with a churchyard gloom, was flecked here and there with light flashes from open doors. And behind those doors was fevered activity in preparation for the “show” which was soon to go on.

The hours hung heavy, even with the excitement of planning and organization. Men sensed what was ahead, realized that a strange menace threatened. A grim battle for life, for existence, in strange craft unfamiliar to their feel and touch. An enemy who had not as yet shown his head.

Some were to live, some to die, in this battle to come. The goal ahead, whether gained or lost, would find record only in the dreary wordings of secret diplomatic papers. Blind faith in a tradition, a national loyalty, an Empire would drive these R.A.F. pilots on, but the world would never know. A mere “Died While Serving Overseas,” would be their epitaph.

Grim, silent mechanics worked like beavers on motors and airframes. Armorers toiled over unfamiliar weapons and fought with strange mechanisms. They all had to carry on. Grimy, sweat-fouled men came

down from their vigil aloft, sought the soothing warmth of baths and clean clothing, and prepared themselves for—for none knew exactly what.

Then suddenly the pent-up spirits of preparation were released. The American—a man whose very personality injected throbbing amperage of courage and enthusiasm—appeared among them, followed by that strange, slant-shouldered figure who somehow forged a link between their civilization and the mammoth strength of the jungle. The combination, coupled with man's newest and most formidable weapon, the airplane, inspired them with a new confidence.

Twenty brand-new Breda 65's now gleamed with aircraft grooming. Gun-muzzles flashed with the glint of oil film, prop blades flashed like broadswords. Portable arc lights threw eerie glows of circular intensity and spread gaunt shadows of men across the oil-soaked tarmac.

In small groups the men stood about, passing on bits of information concerning the quirks and twists of their new mounts, the manner of loading and reloading Breda-Saftas. A year's training had been crammed into a few short hours.

Wrist watches were consulted. Then the reliable Evans, who was dead on his feet but yet still retained the erect dignity of his responsibilities, appeared.

He called his Squadron Leaders around him and they bustled up, clicked heels, and saluted gravely.

"I could say a lot," the Wing Commander opened. "But I won't. You know what we are up against, and you know what is expected of you. That's all, gentlemen, and the best of luck,"

They saluted again. True, some hesitated as if they wished to say something, but tradition and discipline tempered their emotions. They simply answered: "Thank you. Sir!" and moved off.

Evans turned to Kirk, and the expression on his face proved he was profoundly touched. He flicked a tear from the corner of his eye.

"Craziest people in the world, you Britishers," commented Kirk, likewise affected. "Just take orders, keep their traps shut—and go out and probably get killed. How do you do it?"

"You should talk," cracked Evans. "They have to do it. While in this case, you don't. But you've been in the thick of it for hours—and still you want to go along."

"Why not? I owe those raider devils plenty. This is a personal battle with me, and I don't quit until I've cleaned the lot out."

"A very laudatory objective, my lad," agreed Evans moving over toward the lead Breda. "And now how do you like our insignia?"

Then for the first time Kirk noticed that the scarlet discs of Nippon had been quickly but skillfully changed to a familiar outline—the outline of a British Mark II.B tank superimposed by the head of a gorilla.

"Great!" smiled Kirk. "I suppose that is your way of paying a compliment to my pal, Tank?"

"Exactly! And if these Mussolini busses stand up like your—er—your gentleman's gentleman, then we should put up quite a showing."

"In response," added Kirk with a courtly bow, "I'll tag my particular Breda with the title of 'Betsy.' Agreeable to you?"

"Perfect! I had a maiden aunt named 'Betsy.' She was a howler! Once she pulled a letter box up out of the pavement just because she received a birthday card a day late!" Lovely soul, old Aunt Betsy."

"Let's shove off before we go 'relations' on each other," laughed Kirk, "Else we'll never blow the old Akudo out of the water. Best of luck, Evans, old lad."

They shook hands, exchanged glances, and headed for their respective machines.

"Nevertheless I hope I get back to hear further episodes from the adventures of Aunt Betsy," Kirk muttered.

THE BREDAS were ordered into two flights of ten ships each. One flock was led by a young, thin-faced Squadron Leader named Cliff, the other by Kirk, with Tank in the rear office, as usual. Wing-Commander Evans took the Fiat bomber as his flagship and planned to maintain touch with both flights via radio.

Twenty-one to take on at least forty high speed single-seaters that were well armed and flown by pilots who were charged with the fanatic patriotism engendered by promises of a new Oriental Empire! Even so,

the Bredas were manned by highly skilled crews and carried a vast amount of worthy armament. In addition, all these planes carried twelve light bombs suitable for an attack on the flight deck of the Akudo. And Evans' Fiat was equipped with British delayed-fuse bombs for attacks on the deck of the enemy aircraft carrier—bombs that would pierce the teak and metal landing deck and hurtle on through to the more vulnerable compartments below before exploding.

The take-off was as imposing a display as could be imagined. The big Fiat hammered down the parched turf first and hoiked into the air under the skilled hands of the Wing-Commander with a young Flying Officer, Lewis, at his side. Up front, a pink-cheeked Limey gunner, hardly in his teens, peered anxiously out of the shatter-proof glass turret and gave a feeble wave to a couple of pals at the wing-tips. There was another officer in the avigation compartment and a radio operator behind the control pit. Still another gunner, who might have been a twin to the one up front, fumbled with the Breda-Safats in the rear turret.

The Bredas took off in chain formation, zoomed at the end of the runway, and hammered for altitude. They swung into position over the city, and Kirk saw several cheering signals flash up from the entrance steps of the Governor's mansion as they turned in glorious grouping and headed up the coast toward Lubuk Bay,

Finally, they swung off for Pindassan and cut around the mountains past Jesselton, the actual capitol of North Borneo.

Since their return after taking over the Bredas in the jungle hide-out, Wing-Commander Evans had made a more careful study of the papers procured by Tank, and, with the Squadron interpreter officer, had further learned the general plan of the proposed attack. They knew now that the Akudo planned to appear suddenly off Brunei Bay—about thirty miles southwest of Jesselton—then ease into the sheltered waters and stage their proposed landing of marines, light field guns, and supplies while their planes bombed Brunei, Jesselton, and if necessary, Lubuk and Sandakan.

Evans, flying high, up front, led the way out to sea once they had studied the situation around Jesselton.

"He's making all the right moves," reflected Kirk, when he saw the Englishman lead them out over the ocean. "If we can come up from behind we'll have all the advantage. But, Lord, what a night this is going to be if we do clash with them!"

They flew almost due west for nearly thirty minutes. Then Evans gave a signal and reported that he was going down low in an effort to search the surface below. The two flight leaders repeated his signal and headed on toward Brunei Bay, holding their altitude at about 6,000 feet.

The next fifteen minutes were grim, spine-tickling, and eerie. The twenty fighters carrying the Tank insignia opened their formation slightly to cover a greater area and to play safe. Kirk watched the moves of Cliff, the No. 1 Flight leader, and then caught a signal in his helmet phones.

A report from Evans!

"*Tank squadron*" came the words. "*Prepare for action at point due north of Barum. Have spotted enemy fleet approximately six miles off Barum Point.*"

Kirk glanced at his map in the clips and saw that the spot designated was but a few miles south-west of Brunei.

The speaker phones crackled again and he caught:

"*Flight One: Action on target, half left. Enemy planes leaving flight deck of Akudo. Form, echelon for attack. Flight Two: Maintain altitude until further orders. Leaders repeat signal—Evans.*"

In turn, Cliff and Kirk repeated Evans' signal, and then Kirk saw Cliff's outfit swing into echelon formation and go down. At first Coffin had no idea what they were heading for. But as the first flight went down he followed their tail lights and then caught the gleam of a long spear-shaped platform ahead and below—not four miles away. The Japs had illuminated their flight-deck, a move displaying total ignorance of the threat above—and which betrayed them to the Breda formations above. Or were they really ignorant?

"They're getting those ships off fast, though," sensed Kirk. "They're buzzing off like flies. I hope young Cliff can beat them down so that we can get that plane-loaded baby."

From that instant on the world went mad!

The first flight of Bredas flew smack into a curtain barrage of 3-inch antiaircraft stuff that threw a “Hell’s Arbor” of flame-shot rosettes against the ebon night. Kirk saw the flight under young Cliff slam headlong into this De-sign of Death. Two searchlight beams sworded into the night and slashed the sky savagely.

“Good Lord! They must have known after all! They must have been tipped off somehow. Those poor devils slammed right into a beautiful trap!”

Three Bredas blew up before they were within range either of the flight deck or the Jap fighters that were streaming off the carrier like wasps. Flame, smoke, and flickering sections of bright dural added to the crazy backdrop of Doom.

“Their microphone men had the decibel rating of those motors down to the last tick,” snarled Kirk. “Those poor fellows were trapped the instant they started down!”

“Go into action, *Flight Two!*” bawled Evans from somewhere below. “Action—fast!”

Kirk repeated the order, then barked it back to the men in his flight.

“Follow me,” he ordered. “We’re going down to zero level. They have us spotted this way. So we’re going down low and attack from their deck-line level. Repeat!”

A babble of voices came back to him, but it was obvious they had caught the order. Behind, Tank was yanking out the guns in preparation for the battle that they were heading into.

“Only fire at that!” ordered Kirk, pointing down at the carrier. “Only that ship, Tank!”

He wanted no trouble with the ape, who might mistake the Bredas for the Jap Mitsubishi planes. If he confined his efforts to the carrier, he could do no harm to the Britishers.

The flight under Kirk’s command followed him down in perfect formation. With the gray-green waves rushing up toward him, Kirk pulled out, nosed around, and headed straight for the Akudo. From somewhere above, a trio of Rising Sun ships slammed at them and sprayed the sky with lead. But Kirk kept on, sensing that the gunners in the Bredas behind him would hold them off.

He tightened his belt, adjusted the buckles of his life-jacket provided by Evans—and headed dead for the carrier!

“IT’S now or never,” he growled. “If that vessel gets into the bay we’ll never stop them. They’ll call for a destroyer fleet and take over like Grant took Richmond.”

The Bredas fell in line astern now on his order, and together they hammered at the knife prow of the Akudo that was still spewing Mitsubishis.

Kirk fingered for the bomb releases and held the Breda dead on the nose of the carrier. He gulped, wondering whether he would make it. But he hung on as the nose of the Jap carrier came on at express speed.

“Good Lord!” he gasped, as a low-wing fighter flipped off the deck and screamed a hair’s breadth over his hatchway.

There was a resounding crash behind as the Jap fighter collided head-on with the Breda following him. Kirk did not look back, but his mind’s eye developed a picture of the wreckage of two planes being run down by a massive carrier that was doing about thirty knots. He winced at that—and pulled his releases!

The Breda jerked as the bombs slipped out of internal racks. He hoiked hard to clear another Mitsubishi that was pounding down the deck. He jerked the releases again and let the rest of the “eggs” go full on the deck.

A portion of the carrier’s “island” superstructure then toppled across the deck and floundered across the last three Mitsubishi fighters waiting to get away.

CR-R-R-UMP! BR-R-R-R-UM!

Flame, smoke, and concussion battered at Kirk as he slewed off to starboard. He turned and saw Tank sending a wild burst of fire down at a group of bluejackets huddled about a 3-incher. A light flashed out and blinded him for a moment, but he cleared and danced in the concussion of a burst of antiaircraft fire that fanged out from a hidden turret below the battered flight-deck.

The remaining Bredas of his flight followed him and rained their explosives down upon the teak and steel deck, then skudded through the welter of flame and debris each bomb threw up. One Breda ran smack into

the lip of the carrier deck and scattered its parts all over the flight deck. Flame billowed out and Kirk knew another brave British crew had gone west.

But by now the Jap pilots were in action against the raiding Bredas. Off to the right, young Cliff was weaving his flight—or what was left of it—in and out of a Mitsubishi formation. The gunners were fighting like Waterloo heroes from their rear turrets, and the British pilots were hammering heavy caliber stuff at the dancing single seaters.

The sky was a mad theater of tumbling fire-balls. Bredas and Mitsubishi fighters locked wings, rammed noses, and slithered into each other from all angles.

Kirk led his mob into it all and gave signals calmly as he slapped short but deadly bursts at the Jap single-seaters. Tank, dancing his jungle war hop, still blazed away madly at the indistinct carrier from which sizzling 3-inch shells continued to blaze.

“Where’s Evans and his Big Berthas?” raged Kirk: “Where the devil is that bird?”

Now the American rammed through a scattering formation of Mitsubishi fighters and sought the Fiat. His guns splashed lead at a Jap directly in his path and blew it to bits. He darted clear of the debris and banked to avoid three attacking Mitsubishis. Two Britons in Bredas somewhere above picked two more Japs off, sending one down in flames and ripping the wings off another. A third Nipponese hoiked so hard he flamed up dead into the path of another and they both went down in a swirl of smoke and flames.

Then, out of the corner of his eye. Kirk caught the outline of the Wing-Commander’s Fiat. It was fighting its way through a veritable wall of Mitsubishis. Kirk changed his course, barked a crisp order into his phone, and went to the rescue. Number Two Flight slammed at the heavy formation of Mitsubishi fighters, sprayed it with Italian lead, and broke it up.

A report then came through from the Fiat, and Kirk slammed at the Japs again—keeping them in the clear until Evans could get set for his personal raid.

Kirk saw Evans dive for the carrier and then saw three more Bredas kick out of nowhere and blast at the deck, too. It was obvious that they were still trying to get at the carrier deck with what bombs they had left.

“Look out!” screamed Kirk. But the Breda guys were intent on doing what they came to do. They slammed full at the Akudo and released everything they had left amid a welter of anti-aircraft fire and the blinding glare of a lone searchlight that was picking out the raiders.

Kirk saw them hoik up and saw the first blast of flame from their bombs. Then, as the Akudo belched forth a mass of searing flame, the Fiat flew into the middle of the lot just in time to take the full force of a massive explosion.

“Wow!” gasped Kirk. “One of those Bredas put a bomb through that caught their magazine!”

BRRR-R-R-OOOM!

The decking of the carrier suddenly blew out and engulfed the Fiat which had roared in to loose its heavy armor-piercing stuff.

The great carrier’s blazing maw now spewed gigantic blossom of scarlet flame. Great forks of fire flashed out, pierced the Fiat—and hurled it over the side of the still speeding hull!

“Lord!” Kirk raged. “He flew right into it. What the—”

He himself now cleared the doomed hulk and saw men leaping into the sea. He tried to glance down and see where the Fiat had hit, but the blinding glare of flame and the mushrooming smoke blotted out all vision of the water below.

“Poor old Evans—and not a boat anywhere.”

He roared past again and drew his wing men with him as Cliff rounded up his formation to chase the fleeing Mitsubishi fighters. There was now no carrier deck left, and it was obvious that the Nippon planes left in the air must scurry off.

THEN, before his startled eyes, appeared the most beautiful formation Kirk had ever seen. Six majestic flying boats, glinting in steel gray, and gay with red, white, and blue cocardes came roaring over!

“Cripes, the Navy—our Navy!” gulped Kirk. “What the devil! Who called ‘em?”

He caught the identification numerals on the sides of the hulls and saw them go down to the water, great landing lights laying broad pathways for them. He realized that they were Consolidated PB3Y-1 patrol boats out of Manila. They had made the 750-mile flight that afternoon. The Philippine Navy radio somehow had caught the faint sparks of warning sent out of Sandakan. And these planes had hastily flown south.

All this flashed through Kirk's mind as he watched a long silver pencil of light from the blunt nose of a Consolidated pierce the smoke and flame to pick out a floundering Fiat. That beam showed Evans standing on the roof of the cabin and waving—of all things—a handkerchief!

“Oh, well. Let the Navy clean up. They always do,” muttered Kirk. “I'll take my lads home—what's left of them, at any rate.”

He did, and later watched the battle-weary R.A.F. pilots crawl out of their planes at Sandakan and stagger off toward the medical hut. Kirk and Tank then rolled up to the “A” Flight hangar and asked that their tanks be filled.

Finally, the American went in to Evans' recording office. Here he conversed with the Adjutant and told him what had happened. Then, while the adjutant hurried off to get a short message through to Singapore, Kirk sat down and scrawled a note. He stuck it in an envelope and addressed it to Wing-Commander Evans. It read:

Sorry not to be here on the welcoming committee, but we can't stand scenes. Hope you get your shirt dried out in time for the decoration that is sure to come. But we have other things to attend to, Tank and I. It has just occurred to me that we must track down those birds who flew the Breda in. And so—we may meet again, on less exciting terms, I hope. Thanks for the memories, as the song goes—and lots of luck. Brian “Coffin” Kirk—and Tank.

Balloons For a Breda Flying Aces 8/40

Only one green balloon was supposed to be floating above the U.S.S. Marblehurst. But somehow the plans had gone haywire—for there were two! Which was the right one? “Coffin” Kirk had to choose—and choose fast. Because three lead-hurling Mitsubishis were roaring down the heavens! Still, none of it fazed “Tank.” He was always ready—even when Kirk deliberately put a Jap Intelligence officer on their own sky trail and presented him with—a bouquet of lavender!

THROUGH the heat-wave of cushioned air that danced over the waters of the China Sea slammed the solitary Breda 65. On a chart, the position would have read 9:14,N. by 117:22,E. In other words, about 30 miles west of the jagged coast of Palawan. The Breda was clipping over the sea in this vicinity because a certain man in Washington had relayed a strange message via another certain man in Manila.

That message told about balloons—colored toy balloons.

Oh the water, not far ahead, the U.S.S. Marblehurst, a vessel of the Asiatic squadron, was plowing along. Her skipper—Captain Ravenstoke—almost wished he were back under sail. He could understand a mariner’s glass tide tables, and the pull of a to’g’an’s’l. But this silly business of toy balloons, airplanes flown by civilians, and messages back and forth from a flying boat which someone had the audacity to call a “Clipper”! It all had him walking on eggs.

But there they were on the quarterdeck—his Flag-Officer, a radio man, a warrant officer clerk, and two machinist ratings. They had a three-legged instrument called a theodolite and a lot of silly balloons. Five balloons, as a matter of fact. Four red ones and one green one.

That’s where the trouble began. For when the balloons were released and were well on their way—there were six! Two greens and four reds!

The Flag-Officer gasped. He stared up at the bridge, then raced for the companionway. At the steps he stopped: “What’s the use?” he muttered. “Can’t shoot one down. Don’t know which one—both greens look alike from here!”

They were alike, too. For each had a small aluminum tube fastened to its knotted nozzle.

COFFIN KIRK sat back and relaxed. He had flown that Breda plenty of miles to make this strange contact. He had prepared for the contact so that no slip-up could take place. He pondered on it all, sensed that while it was all very mysterious, there didn’t seem to be much danger attached to it.

His gunner was huddled in the back seat. He was a strange individual, of ungainly proportions. He wore a soiled seaman’s blouse, which revealed a scraggy neck. Long hairy arms protruded below the cuffs and the hands hung limp in relaxation. More careful examination would have disclosed that this gunner guy had the face of an ape. It was heavy and broad across the frontal bone. The nose was frankly flat and the nostrils broadly defined. And there was a strange unreal pinkish glow across the cheeks which ran into the hairy beard line of the jaw.

His name was “Tank”—no more, no less. And he was just about as strong as a military tank.

Kirk, on the other hand, was striking in his tropical whites. He might have been a fencing master. He might have been the master of any profession demanding grace and muscular skill.

He shuffled in his seat and glanced ahead. His keen piercing eyes now spotted the splinter of gray steel on the water a few miles ahead—the U.S.S. Marblehurst. He glanced at his dash clock, nodded, and called over his shoulder: “Come on, Tank! Get the butterfly net!”

The Breda thundered on at three-quarter throttle now. It had a 1,000-h.p. Fiat radial up front and there was plenty of push-push in the cylinders. She was capable of 254 m.p.h.

The gunner guy behind shuffled twice, then aroused completely. He drew his shapeless canvas helmet down tighter over his ears and made a somewhat mournful grimace as he stared at Kirk.

“Get busy, Tank! Just as I told you—with the net!”

Coffin Kirk now peered ahead again. And frowned. He sat there tense as a violin string. Sure, there were several colored blobs in the sky ahead, just as he had been told. But something wasn't right.

"Something wrong here, Tank. There's two greens."

The man behind only peered ahead, then glanced at Kirk and waited dumbly for further instructions.

The balloons were at 1,500 feet now and spreading out on the breeze. There were four reds and two greens.

"Never mind. We'll get both greens and play safe, eh, Tank?"

The man behind allowed his face to go through a curdling motion which indicated that he was ready. He leaned down in his seat, drew out a length of flexible wire and some light fish-netting. This he formed into a loop.

Kirk let down the wing flaps a few notches to slow her up, then pointed the plane toward one of the green balloons. The man behind climbed up on his seat and stood in the blast of the slipstream.

The balloons came on, and meantime there was some sort of Aldis lamp signaling from the wing of the Marblehurst's bridge.

Kirk watched it carefully and caught a Navy warning signal. He glanced about and watched the light again. It read: "Take both greens! Take both greens—quick!"

"We intend to," Kirk muttered. "Don't want to hazard any chances." Then he settled to the tedious task of maneuvering the Breda near the balloons, handling the stick with care. "Here goes nothing!" he yelled.

HE SWUNG the Breda around as the wide cluster of balloons passed over them. Then he saw the reason for the warning. Three wide-winged Mitsubishi bombers which had been straddling the sunlight were coming down at them.

"Get that green one first!" cried Kirk, pointing.

The stocky figure behind was fingering his wire and net. The throttle was back and Kirk climbed the ship gently and skillfully to a stall. A spatter of lead splashed across the tail surfaces of the Breda and the man behind let out an animal growl.

"This one, Tank!" yelled Kirk.

It all happened very fast as the Breda reached the tip of the stall.

There was a lightning swish of the net and a green balloon was caught and quickly drawn down.

"Good! Now that other one—over there."

They skidded, caught on the quick roar of the Fiat engine, and climbed back into the Mardi Gras of balloons. Streaks of tracer bullets crackled across the sky, jangled into the dural plates of the Breda. Kirk let out an oath, rammed the Breda full at a Mitsubishi, and pumped out a short chugging burst. The bomber-fighter staggered a few jerks, straightened out, then fell away. Obviously, it was doomed.

"Where's that other green balloon?" Kirk yelled looking around anxiously.

Tank was staring coldly through the wailing slipstream at one of the Japanese bombers. Kirk followed his gaze—and sensed what had happened. "So that guy got it, eh? Well, I hope we got the right one."

Coffin Kirk twisted hard, looked down at the green balloon that was dancing around in the space behind him. He pinched it quickly, breaking it with a dull plop, whereupon Tank almost jumped out of the cockpit. He now gave Kirk a haunted, puzzled look.

"It's all right, Tank. I just busted the balloon. Just went 'bang.' It's all right"

The ape resumed his seat gingerly, peered about cautiously. Then, apparently satisfied, he suddenly swung into action. There was a Breda-Safat gun in a space behind him, and he yanked it out with a grunt.

Peering along the sights with both eyes open, he dragged back the trigger and hung on while the gleaming weapon danced under the recoil and thud of streaking mechanism. A stream of piercing death slammed out and caught the lead Mitsubishi. There was an ominous rattle of steel against dural. A gash opened up across the rear half of the Jap's port motor nacelle. It yawned wider across the wing root, then split wide the fuselage between the control pit and the rear gunner's turret.

That was all there was to it. The big bomber broke itself in half as though some invisible blade had hacked her apart. A smudge of smoke trailed back and formed a mourning band. A tiara of flame fanged up from the wing root and a dark stub-legged figure hurtled itself through it all and went tumbling away.

“Don’t stand there admiring the view,” Kirk blurted out. “Get another!”

Tank responded. Without taking his finger from the trigger, he hosed a torrent of steel-jacketed lead at the turret gunner of another Nipponese plane, who was in turn hammering lead back at them. Tank let the guy have it—with a hosing that hacked the turret off.

It fell off, twisting and turning end over end. It plummeted straight at the Breda, and Tank grabbed at Kirk’s shoulder and let out a jungle squeal. Kirk instinctively yanked the controls back so that the Breda stood on its tail wheel, and they just avoided the tumbling turret.

“Wow!” gasped Kirk. “Here comes some more of the same!”

There had been another wrenching screech and the tail of the Mitsubishi tore itself away and fluttered clear only when Kirk whipped the Breda around.

They now looked about for the third Mitsubishi. But it was nowhere to be seen. They steadied their mad flight, then saw a high-speed cutter racing out from the Marblehurst to give assistance to the fallen flyers. “Well, that other bird must have cleared off into the stuff upstairs with the other balloon,” observed Coffin. “Wonder what he got?”

They circled and watched the efforts of the Marblehurst’s cutter crew attempting to save lives. But it was no business of theirs now. So Kirk flew off.

The rest of his instructions were clear: He was to carry on from there to Sandakan, in British North Borneo. That was another 250 miles, but he knew he could stop and refuel at Sinajar.

“Where’s that balloon, Tank?” he asked over his shoulder.

The gunner guy behind stared about hopelessly and looked worried. But finally, he came up with a jagged piece of green rubber, to which was attached a small aluminum tube with a screw cap.

“Thanks! Now let’s have a look at it.”

Kirk locked the stick between his knees and unscrewed the cap.” He fingered inside gently, brought out a loose tube of paper. It was ordinary paper such as might have been torn out of a stenographer’s notebook. Along the straight pink lines was written:

Secret defense plans of Anglo-American forces to maintain present status of Dutch East Indies are on way to Singapore via “Pacific Clipper,” possibly in possession of Shaw-Herndon newspaperman named Woodward Drake. Plans may be on wax dictaphone record secreted in luggage. Drake will travel from Manila to Singapore by boat.

The message was not signed, but it carried a strange little design, down in the lower left hand corner, which resembled a flat, paddle-shaped device that might mean anything from a frying pan to a railroad semaphore.

Kirk frowned, tucked the message back into the tube, and pondered.

“We got goofed up, Tank,” he said over his shoulder. “This doesn’t seem to be the message for me. This must have been meant for someone else.”

TANK SAID nothing. He was still looking about the floor for the green balloon which had gone “bang.” Tank, of course, couldn’t say anything. And it was quite understandable that he should be puzzled. For after all, Tank was simply an ape.

Tank had been with Coffin Kirk since a memorable day in 1918 when Kirk was just a youngster stranded in Berlin. Tank was a baby ape then. Kirk’s father, a secret agent for the American Intelligence, had been trapped and assassinated in the Berlin Zoo. There followed a general upheaval in which young Kirk, a badly frightened schoolboy, had escaped the fate of his father by coming under the protection of this strange animal, who had escaped from his cage. Together they had moved overland into the security of neutrality. And eventually they made their way back to the United States.

From that day on, “Coffin” Kirk, as he was now known, was inseparable from “Tank,” as he had named the ape. Kirk, having masqueraded Tank as a man, had learned ventriloquism, which he used to startling effect when he wished to give the illusion that Tank was talking. The ape, meanwhile, had learned to play his part well.

KIRK STRAIGHTENED the Breda out and gave the Marblehurst a final glance. “Someone aboard that ship put one over. There was only supposed to be one green balloon.”

The Breda raced on southward along the crooked-fingered tip of Palawan and across the Balabar Strait. Yes, it was clear that two green balloons had been sent up. One had carried a message intended for Kirk. The other had carried still another message—intended for someone aboard one of those Mitsubishi bombers.

“I’m sure I got the one intended for that Jappo,” said Kirk after fifty or sixty miles of contemplation. “That means he has the one intended for me. We’re both mixed up!”

There was little he could do about it now. So he accepted the bad break and continued toward Sandakan. Somehow he sensed that whoever had been aboard that Mitsubishi—and who had gone to such lengths to gather in that balloon—would turn up later to try to get the message he had missed.

“That’s the angle,” said Kirk. “I have one ace in the hole, at any rate. They may try to waylay me somewhere along the rest of the trip. But we’ll see soon enough.”

Across the Balabar Strait he cruised the Breda to conserve what gas they had left in the tanks, then they sat down at Sinajar where they were warmly greeted and quickly refueled. There, he learned something very interesting from Ronnie Blaisdell, the resident manager of the Sinajar field.

“Is there a plane following you?” asked young Ronnie, covertly making a sign which brought Kirk to the realization that the young Englishman was a member of the British Intelligence Service. “We’ve got a queer bloke,” he went on, “coming through aboard a Japan Airways Co. plane—a charter job of some sort.”

“What is he flying?” asked Kirk.

“A Mitsubishi—one of those new Soyokaze freight carriers. Soyokaze means ‘breeze’ in Japanese, you know.”

“What does it look like?” asked Kirk.

“Well, it has two radials. It’s a low-wing machine. As a matter of fact, militarized versions of it are used as bombers by the Jappo Army.”

“I get it,” nodded Kirk. “Three Mitsubishis tackled me an hour or so ago. One got away,” he added with a grin. “And that must have been it. But what’s the name of the bird?”

“He’s Koji Yasui—Intelligence, I’ll bet, too. He’ll bob in here all Leica cameras, maps, teeth, and buzz-fuzz.”

“Good! Let him go along to Sandakan. I’ll be at the Imperial Hotel there. Drop that info to him, like that. Koji Yasui, eh?”

“Yes—and this looks like them now,” said young Blaisdell. “You’d better shove off.”

Kirk was back in the cockpit in no time and the Breda was roaring down the oiled streak that went for a runway. He was in the air and thundering away southeast toward Lubuk Bay before the Japanese plane was in position for its landing.

But once he was out of sight, Kirk changed his course again and hurtled on inland. He stalled for time for about thirty minutes, then turned back for Sandakan which sweltered in the heat of the North Borneo shore.

OFFICIALLY, there is no true airport at Sandakan, but an emergency field has been developed about three miles outside the city. It is typical of all such fields in the Far East, with a few nipa-thatched bungalows, two elephant-iron hangars, and a lot of flower beds. A flag droops at a mast, and the wind sock flaps dismally. There is a tennis court hacked out of the scrub where the Englishmen do a nice job of sweating as a change from the monotony of their duties.

“There’s our guy, Tank,” said Kirk as they circled the field and spotted the Mitsubishi freighter drawn up on the tarmac. “Now don’t get rough—unless I give you the office. He might be a nice guy, for all we know.”

Again Kirk circled to get the full feeling of the layout. The Mitsubishi, below, carried the markings of the Japan Airways outfit. Nearby, a small man was walking up and down the tarmac looking up at the Breda as Kirk brought it around.

The Breda, it should be explained, was one Kirk had swiped during an interesting adventure some weeks before. At any rate, Kirk set her down across the parched turf and ran it up behind the big freighter plane.

The little Japanese was still walking up and down with mincing steps when Kirk and Tank crawled out. He did have a Leica camera about his neck, plus too many teeth and super-plus personal flutter. His finger tips were together in a pious manner. He might have been a Shinto priest parading the altar of a temple, so self-satisfied and suave he appeared. He watched the Breda come up, pursed his lips, then peered pleasantly over the rims of his thick-lensed glasses. He also flipped down the lens cover of his camera.

"After the evidence?" grinned Kirk as the little Jap aimed his camera at two patches of perforated fuselage just aft of the Breda's cockpit.

A little Eurasian mechanic came out, unceremoniously hoisted the tail of the Breda to his shoulder, and dragged it into a hangar by brute force. Tank followed him.

"Hailstones cause those holes, Mister Kirk?" the little Jap inquired. "You have found some strange meteorological conditions in North Borneo?"

"Sure! Hailstones, Mr. Moto. I got those when I inadvertently flew into one of your Japanese restricted areas. Maybe some Kawanishi 93's," said Kirk with a sly grin.

"Kawanishi 93's?" the little Jap's eyebrows went up. He was off guard and frankly puzzled. "Surely you don't mean Mitsubishi bombers, do you?"

"You guess, Mr. Fujiyama," laughed Kirk, while the Jap snapped another picture.

"The name is Yasui—Koji Yasui," the Jap countered.

"I know it—you and Frank Luke!"

"Frank Luke?"

"Sure! The balloon buster. Get it?"

"I think I shall see the Resident Commissioner and have you arrested, Mister Kirk. You are flying an unmarked plane. It carries weapons. You have proved a menace to aviation. There are international laws on the subject."

"Do that, will you? Have me grounded for a few days, eh, Yasui? I'm going to take a few days off and see the sights anyway."

"You are staying in Sandakan?"

"At the Imperial. Drop around some afternoon and I'll get the bar-keep to dish you up a Mickey Finn."

The little Jap was uncertain of himself now. But he hung on and stood around. "I'm afraid I can't leave for some time, either," he added. "We have developed, let us say, a little engine trouble."

"Breda-Safat slugs, Yasui?" asked Kirk, loosening his chute pack.

"Quite possibly."

Kirk grinned back at him and now lowered his coveralls and started to step out of them. Abruptly, Yasui moved like a striking cobra. In one hand he now had a Mauser machine pistol which covered the coverall-tangled Kirk. With the other hand he snatched up the aluminum tube that had unfortunately rolled clear of Kirk's coverall pocket.

"That is all, Mister Kirk," Yasui said with a toothy smile, still holding the machine pistol on him. "Now we fully understand each other. You are now free to visit all the sights you wish. A few temples, perhaps?"

He held the tube in his gun hand and twisted the cap with the other. He flipped out the paper, read it quickly, tucked it back, and tossed the paper and tube at Kirk's feet."

"It was so kind of you to get this for me, Mister Kirk," Yasui hissed. Then he pocketed his gun strode through the hangar, and left by a rear door. Kirk stood there stunned and listened to a motor car start up and crunch away.

"I wish I could find a very large pile-driver," said Coffin Kirk. "I'd go and stick my head under it!"

Tank came out of the hangar, stared at Kirk with a puzzled frown, and watched him complete the business of stepping out of his coverall. He also watched him pick up the tube, screw the cap on tighter, and shove it with a growl into his breeches pocket.

The Yank then made a discreet inquiry as to the damage done to the Mitsubishi, and he learned that it might be ready to fly within a few hours. He would have to work fast if he hoped to stop Yasui and recover the other message.

KIRK WAS sipping a cooling drink in the Imperial Bar, and Tank was again asleep in the corner, when a girl walked in. She had maple colored hair, violet eyes, and was as lovely as a bouquet of goldenrod in a black vase. Her lips were curled in a slight smile.

“Well, I’ll be!” gasped Kirk. “It must be the notorious Miss Velox! I haven’t heard of you since that little affair with Hardwick and Beansie!”

“Don’t stall,” she whispered, sitting down on a tubular chair. “What happened?”

“What do you mean, what happened?”

“Something slipped, didn’t it? I just saw Koji Yasui grinning like a lad with a double-dip of ice cream. He was sending telegrams by the mile. What happened?”

“Sit down before someone mistakes you for a model out of Milgrims and sticks a price tag on you,” argued Kirk. “Who are you, anyway? Yes, I know this ‘Miss Velox’ gag—but who are you for sure?”

The girl smiled. “I suppose that creature over there is the famous Tank, eh?”

Kirk only kept pondering on the girl. “Russian background,” he said quietly taking in her eyes. “Some education in Switzerland. A little in Paris and London. I get it—White Russian. Right?”

“Right! Countess Astrid Khitrovo—Miss Velox, to you,” she smiled.

“Miss Velox. The ‘Glossy One’!” beamed Kirk. “And what are you doing here?”

“Getting you straightened out.”

“The balloons you mean? Well, there were two greens—and I picked the wrong one! But that’s not all. That guy Yasui put one over on me at the dump they call an air field. The tube rolled out of my pocket—and he had a Mauser. You don’t argue with Mausers. I got the message back—but he already had read it.”

“Let me see it,” she said, dabbing at her nose with a square of dainty cambric. Then she took the tube, flattened out the message, and read it. “This is a nice mess,” she said.

“What’s it really all about?” Kirk asked. “Do you know?”

“Don’t you see? Yasui has the code key to the defense plans. The key was in your message attached to the other green balloon. A certain element in Japan favors snatching the Dutch East Indies. The real details of the plans are on a dictaphone record, but they are in code. The record is no good without the code key.”

“And Yasui has the code key and knows that the record is being taken out to Singapore, since he’s seen this message!”

“Correct! He will now try to intercept the record and check the effort to save the Dutch East Indies’ neutrality. We’ve got to think and think fast. I happen to know that this plan can work both ways. If the Japanese use it, the combined forces of the U.S. and what is available of the British Navy will have a hard time curbing it.”

“But I can’t understand how you know all about this business.”

“They sent me in here—just in case. I ran into Yasui at the cable office. That is, I managed to be nearby. And I picked up a few more items.”

THEY HALTED the conversation while the girl gave an order for a light lunch. When the waiter left, Kirk said:

“Well, Yasui has the information on this fellow Drake. All he has to do is send some sort of a screwy cable to the boat this newspaperman is taking—and they’ll probably kid him into handing it over. Or some spy will slit his gizzard and take it away.”

“Then they’ll have the code key and the record, too!”

Kirk nodded.

“Well, don’t worry about Drake. I ‘fixed’ Yasui’s cable to the Baikal Maru—that’s the boat Drake is aboard. I know one of the boys in the cable office, and I changed the name of the vessel to Maibashi Man on the message. He knows it, but he’s willing to make the mistake.”

“Baby, you’re dangerous!”

The waiter brought the lunch and the girl began to eat slowly. Kirk looked like a guy trying to figure out the printing on a grapefruit after a particularly boisterous evening.

The girl went on talking: “Yasui has the code key, but his plane is down for an hour or so. Drake has the record and as long as he has it, he is in danger. How can we get it off that boat he’s on?”

“We can’t take a chance on cabling him. Yasui will have someone aboard to block it. You know how those lads work.”

“Let’s look at that message again,” the girl said. And Kirk brought it out and spread it on the table. The message, word by word, was gone over and taken apart—but there seemed to be nothing more than the actual meaning in it.

“Don’t forget that this is meant for Yasui, or his gang, only. It simply tells then about the plans and who has it. But wait a minute! What’s this design in the corner?”

“That’s what has me. What does it look like to you?”

“A tennis racket.”

“I’ll settle for a frying pan or a bed warmer,” smiled Kirk.

“Tennis racket...tennis...tennis balls—that’s it!” the girl beamed.

“What’s what?”

“Don’t you see? Tennis racket brings up the thought of tennis balls, and tennis balls can be carried in a long, round can. The can is the right diameter for a dictaphone record. That’s where the plan is—in a three-ball can!”

“You have a lovely way of proving things, don’t you?” Kirk said. But he had to admit there was soundness to the idea.

“Now we’ve got to get that key from Yasui. Sure, we could get another—but that would take too much time and we have to work fast. This thing may blow up in our faces any minute. No, we’ve got to get that key.”

“How?” asked Kirk. “You seem to be full of bright ideas. I suppose you’d send him a nice bouquet and pit your feminine wiles on him.”

“Wait a minute!” the girl said. “How did you think of that? Yasui loves flowers. He was buying some to put on his table at lunch. And he was buying lavender—nice smelly lavender!”

“Lavender? Wow! Now there is an idea. You’re sure he likes lavender?” asked Kirk, showing real enthusiasm. “I can at last see the dawn. Finish your lunch, get on the phone, and call the airport—while I dash out and get the business.”

“Call the airport?”

“Yes! Find out how soon Yasui is leaving. Give some phoney Countess’ name. But don’t talk to him personally.”

“Don’t worry. He’s still here in the hotel.”

“Fine! Leave Tank here. I’ll get the business.”

FROM THAT MINUTE on, the Velox-Kirk combine went into high gear. First, Kirk hurried down the busy Sandakan street and purchased a gaudy lacquered box of pseudo Japanese design. Then he went farther, found a small flower stall, and purchased several large sprigs of pungent lavender. A small, slant-eyed Eurasian girl provided some suitable ribbon and a sprig or two of Oriental fern. This bouquet he carefully placed in the lacquer box.

“Now for the rest of the trick!” grinned Kirk. Yes, he particularly wanted to show this Miss Velox that he could pull a trick or two himself.

Off another small side street, he discovered a dingy chemist's shop run by Yang Cho, a tall, gaunt Chinese. The shop had the odors and reeks of a small drug factory. At any rate, a quick glance around the dull bottles and boxes on the dusty shelves made Kirk certain he could get what he wanted.

The Oriental looked like a magazine-cover Mandarin. He wore a small skull cap, and stringy mustaches dangled over the corners of his mouth. His jacket was carefully embroidered, and when he spoke his eyes closed to slits with each sentence.

"Good afternoon," said Kirk frankly. "I want some oil of quetrol."

"But you appear to be a man of upright character," protested Yang Cho after a long pause.

"I am—but I just want it for a certain Japanese," smiled Kirk.

"In that case, then, you are still a man of upright character. And I shall see that you get it of the best quality."

The Chinese shuffled away behind a beaded screen and was gone for some minutes. Then he returned with a small vial of colorless liquid. He carefully wrapped it in a square of newspaper and handed it over.

"My honorable friend is the first to demand such a distillation in many years. Where did you learn of its potency?"

"It was many years ago, Yang Cho," explained Kirk. "My old friend, C.J.S. Thompson, curator of the Historical Section of the Museum of the Royal College of Surgeons in London, first told me of it."

"Ah, yes! I recall the case. Some years ago a London flower hawker attempted to strengthen the perfume of some lavender he was selling by the application of the oil of quetrol. Hejvas pushing a handcart along the streets of Stockwell when he suddenly collapsed and was taken to the Lambeth Infirmary where he died of the effects of the vapor inhaled from the lavender on the truck. Am I not right?"

"You are correct, Yang Cho. And now, the price?"

"There is no price—if it is to be used on one of our Japanese friends. I wish you good day and many moons of luck."

"Thanks! Wish me special luck today, Yang Cho. I'll sure need it!"

The Chinese bowed, smiled, and tucked his hands away inside his sleeves with an air of warm satisfaction.

BACK at the Imperial, Miss Velox was all of a flutter. Tank was still asleep in the cocktail bar. Kirk now hurried in and got what news was available.

"They are taking off in half an hour," Miss Velox said anxiously. "Yasui plans to go through to Singapore. They have a Resident Commissioner's permission to land there."

"Wow! Let's get busy."

Kirk opened the lacquer box, drew back the sheet of tissue paper, then carefully sprinkled a few drops of the oil of quetrol into the mauve colored sprays. He quickly lowered the tissue back into position.

"Don't sniff this. You'll go flat on your face," he warned.

He closed the box, tied it tight, and then taking a sheet of hotel note paper he ordered the girl to write the following:

Dear Colonel Yasui:

I am a great admirer of yours. I have seen you at the hotel, and I am forwarding you this telegram, which was dropped from the pocket of Mr. Kirk. I wonder if it is of any use to you. I am also sending you a small token of my personal affection and regard. Best of luck,

—Countess Mara von Karlstadt

"Who's that?" the girl asked as she finished.

"I don't know. I just made that countess up. Here's an old telegram. It doesn't mean anything, but maybe it will make the gag look authentic. All I want Yasui to do is take a sniff of the lavender. We do the rest."

THEY slipped the letter under the cord that fastened the box. Then Miss Velox went out, selected the brightest looking taxi driver she could find, gave him the packet, and told him to run it out to the airport and personally deliver it to Colonel Yasui before he left Sandakan.

They gave this first taxi a five-minute start, then they took another and followed. Tank, now aroused, was with them.

The ancient conveyance was strong on noise but backward on speed, and their five minute leeway had stretched to nearly twelve by the time the three clambered out at the field.

The other cab was nowhere in sight.

Still, they went into their act, walking carelessly with a map held out in front of them as they went around the corner of the main hangar. Miss Velox was indicating, playact style, some fantastic route down from Sandakan to Sarawak.

They came out in front of the hangar just in time to see a number of wild-eyed Jap aviation men running around in circles. The men were letting off loud exclamations. A few yards away from the group stood the Mitsubishi freight carrier. Nearby, in a heap on the tarmac, lay two inert figures. Obviously they had just fallen.

Tank, Kirk, and Miss Velox hurried forward, saw that one of the figures was Koji Yasui. The other was a Japan Airways Company pilot. Beside them lay the opened lacquer box and the lavender bouquet.

"The darned thing worked!" whispered Kirk.

The girl shushed him and told him to keep the others occupied. Then she hurried into the circle of clacking mechanics and airmen and dropped to her knees beside the Jap Secret Service man.

"He show the Captain-Pilot the flowers," said a Jap radio man, who was apparently not in confidence with Yasui. "And they read a letter. Mister Yasui hold the flowers—then they both fall down very hard. It is strange."

"I'm a nurse," the girl cried. "Let me look them over."

She took Yasui's hand and fingered for his pulse. She also took the bouquet and held it close to Yasui's face while she glanced up and asked further questions.

"Has he had anything to drink?"

"We do not know. He just arrived here to be flown to Singapore."

"He ate nothing while he was here?" Miss Velox went on, waving the lavender bouquet back and forth, aimlessly it seemed.

"We do not know, Missie."

"Were they standing anywhere near the line of the exhaust from the engines?" she went on, finally throwing the bouquet down.

"They were only standing right there, Missie."

"Well, they appear to have been taken with a sudden stroke. I must have them moved inside out of the sun." She glanced up at Kirk. "You, mister, and that hairy pal of yours carry this man in first."

Tank picked up the pilot, tucked his limp body under one arm. Kirk was able to carry the little Jap Secret Service man with very little trouble.

Miss Velox went on: "We must loosen most of their clothing, especially about their necks. If they do not recover quickly we must have them removed to the infirmary in Sandakan."

"But that cannot be, Missie," remonstrated the radio man. "Mr. Yasui must be in Singapore before morning. He said it was most important!"

"All right. We'll do what we can. Get them inside," said the girl.

The two unconscious figures were stretched out on the hangar floor. Kirk began cutting off Yasui's coat and making a general fuss. They rolled the torn garments under the Secret Service man's head. But not before Miss Velox had skillfully removed Yasui's wallet, a map, a wad of telegrams, and other papers. They openly handed what seemed to be all of this material over to the radio man who was working on the Pilot-Captain. Miss Velox, however, had first carefully retrieved the letter accompanying the bouquet. And she had also held out certain items which seemed important. They all went into the top of her stocking.

She stood off now and gave the Japs instructions for reviving the two. Then there was a great display of slapping and water splashing. And finally the pilot made the first effort to come out of it. Yasui, having had a larger dose, obviously would be “out” longer.

“I’ll look into our first aid kit,” said Kirk, moving over toward their Breda. “Perhaps we have some smelling salts.”

“Yes, make sure of what we have,” said Miss Velox with a knowing glance.

Kirk nodded and left the group, while Tank still stood pondering on the strange goings-on and Miss Velox kept up her Florence Nightingale role.

Kirk carefully slipped inside the cockpit of the Breda and inspected their loot. The code sheet was quickly sorted from the other material. It had the official U.S. Government mark in one corner, making Kirk certain this was the item they were after. He then returned to the group with a first-aid kit.

The Japanese pilot was now sitting up, but Yasui was still snuffling and moaning. The pilot was trying to brace himself in an upright position. He was staring down groggily at the buttons on his tunic.

“He’s coming around, all right,” said Miss Velox.

“That’s fine!” said Kirk. “Maybe they want to get away now.”

Miss Velox now knew that half of their quest had been successful. She stood up, took the smelling salts from Kirk, and handed them over to the Jap skipper. He sniffed, shook his head, and glanced about. His original military training now came to the fore. He instinctively glanced at his wrist watch and began muttering orders in a choked voice.

“We must get Colonel Yasui aboard the plane,” the radio man explained. “The pilot says we must be away—at once! We will carry Colonel Yasui aboard!”

“All right. And give him our compliments when he comes to,” said Kirk, helping gather up Yasui’s clothing.

THROUGH all this, Tank had remained a patient character. His eyes now wandered slowly from Kirk to the girl and from the men on the hangar floor to the clacking mechanics. He finally allowed them to go back to Kirk again, as if trying to figure out what this Borneo clambake was all about. He watched them carry Yasui back to the plane, and he stood near Kirk when the Mitsubishi rumbled away with its load.

“Well, what now?” Kirk was asking Miss Velox.

“Once they are well on their way, we better go back to town and see if we can check on the Baikal Maru. We’ve got to contact her somehow and get the plan out of Drake’s hands. As long as they know he has it, his life won’t be worth much. I don’t believe they’ll let him get into Singapore with it—even if they have to torpedo the boat.”

“You’re right. But how the deuce are we to kid him into turning it over? We’ve got to devise a gag of some sort that will assure him that we are okay.”

“We’d better think plenty about that on the way back. But on second thought,” she said suddenly. “I have an idea that Yasui may come out of that quicker than we figure. If he does, they’ll return here and try to get rough.”

Kirk watched the Mitsubishi disappearing into the heat and haze of North Borneo. It was taking a south-westerly course, and he was fairly confident that it was on its way to Singapore. “You call Sandakan,” he said, “and get Lloyd’s office there. See if they can give you the approximate position of that boat. I’ll make sure our plane is ready in case we have to make a dash for it.”

The girl then threaded her way through the hangar and went into another building where she found the office of one of the British-American oil syndicates. There telephone and telegraph facilities were available.

“Come on, Tank,” said Kirk. “Let’s get our bus out and make ready for a long hop. No knowing what might happen if that guy Yasui comes back.”

Tank fully understood. He quickly went to work dragging the Breda into a position near the door where they might get away fast. Kirk checked the fuel, then carefully loaded the guns again from a secret store of ammunition which was carried in hidden panels within the cockpit.

They warmed the engine of the Breda and let her die down again. Then suddenly they heard the roar of twin engines overhead. Kirk went stiff, glanced up. The Mitsubishi freighter was circling overhead for a landing!

“They’re coming back, Tank! Break them up, if they get gay. Understand?”

Kirk made explanatory gestures with his hands and watched the long sinewy fingers of the ape flex and unflex in anticipation.

The Mitsubishi circled hurriedly, then glided down. Both Kirk and Tank watched tensely. They were both ready to fight it out if they had to. Kirk had a large gun tucked away in his hip pocket, and his strong hands were fisted.

The Mitsubishi made a thuddy landing. She wrenched hard at her oleos, then came thundering up before the hangar. It was left where it would block off the entrance, or exit of any other plane.

The crew swarmed out armed with Mauser machine pistols. They were led by the disheveled Yasui who still managed his oily smile. Carrying no weapon, he advanced before the young army that followed him.

“Unfortunate, Mister Kirk. But I must ask you to give back that which you have stolen from me. You know what I mean, of course.”

“Whatever it was you think was stolen from you, Yasui,” countered Kirk, “is now in safe hands. You may have been able to put one play over on me, but there was a certain other party who simply would not be fooled.”

“All that sort of talk will not do. I know your plans. You hoped to escape with your machine and get to Singapore. But I can assure you that the gentleman you hope to meet there will arrive empty handed. Why not be sensible and give up this particular quest?”

“Baloney!” cracked Kirk. “We just outsmarted you. And the quicker you decide to break all this up, the quicker—”

But Kirk got no further. Tank had taken matters into his own hands. He had moved like lightning and had Yasui about the waist before the Jap trigger-men could move. Kirk now had his gun out, too. And a hasty shot from the hip brought a menacing Jap to the ground, his machine pistol shot clear out of his hands.

Tank rushed at the rest swinging Yasui like a ball bat. The Secret Service man screamed as Tank hammered him full into the jam of men and weapons. The ape bowled them over lustily with wild swipes of his human bludgeon.

Kirk took a pot shot at the pilot, who was now trying to get a burst of Mauser into Tank. The Yank’s shot spun the Jap around hard and he went down on his face covering his own gun. Somehow his finger yanked back the Mauser trigger and the machine pistol began to yammer underneath him while his body jerked with the surge of metal discharge.

Tank, who had been fired by the words “break all this up” which Kirk had inadvertently used in warning Yasui, was in his glory now. He plunged back and forth from one Jap to another, crashing them over as fast as they tried to get up and offer further resistance. Heads cracked like cocoanuts. They yelled as the leaden body of the Secret Service man hammered them.

At last, there was nothing left to knock down. And so Tank went to work on the Mitsubishi which was blocking the doorway of the hangar.

“Get it out of there. Get it out quick,” cried Kirk, staring about for a sign of Miss Velox. “Break it up, Tank!”

The ape man was in fine fettle now. First he ripped away a length of lowered flap surface and began beating at the port motor which was still ticking over at idling speed. The steel blades of the prop went splintering in all directions. Tank then hammered the cover plate in, and oil and metal came spurting out of the radial. He clambered up on the wing, tore the main section of the cockpit hatchway apart, and hurled it with an animal scream through the other revolving prop. More prop blades went to pieces with a metallic clangor.

Now the ape man leaped inside the ship, and spare parts and chunks of instrument board came flying out in a crazy storm. Slabs of dural, seat cushions, and folding chairs came next. Tank ripped and tore until there was nothing movable to hurl.

Finally, he leaped out, and with another sudden bright idea hurried with his waddling gait to the tail. There, with a display of insane strength, he hoisted the tail to his shoulder and began to drag the wrecked Mitsubishi away.

He horsed it into the clear, lowered the tail section, and began systematically to rip the movable controls away with the ease with which a child destroys her big brother's model airplane. In another few minutes the Mitsubishi looked like an enormous plucked bird.

"That's enough!" yelled Kirk. "Get back here and keep these guys quiet. I've got to find Miss Velox."

BUT MISS VELOX required no finding. She came out, excited and anxious, from somewhere. Her eyes were now more beautiful than ever. As she folded a sheet of paper, she stared amazed at the carnage Kirk and Tank had spread across the apron.

"You've got to get going—somehow," she called. "Fly fast and contact the Baikal Maru at once. She's at 7:15, N. by 112:07, E. right now. That's approximately 130 miles northwest of Brunei."

"Brunei? That's in Sarawak!"

"Exactly! You can contact the Baikal Maru in a little over two hours, if you make any time at all."

"We can make the time. But how can we kid this guy Drake to hand over?"

"If he's alive when you get there, this note will do the trick I am sure. If you get the record bearing the plan, cut back inland to Bintulu or Kabong and refuel. From there you should be able to make Singapore in one hop. There's an American warship in the harbor there. Find Bear-Admiral Jessop. That's all! Now get moving before your Jap friends regain use of their trigger fingers. See you later, Mr. Kirk!"

"Okey-doke, sister. They have some good hotels in Singapore. I hope you can make it there, too," grinned Coffin Kirk.

"Maybe so, but don't bet on it. This is a silly business at times. But best of luck!"

Sensing she was being businesslike now, Kirk smilingly saluted her. Then he pocketed the note without reading it, called to Tank, and together they climbed into their flying togs and parachutes. Kirk started the engine while Tank went over and gave a few stirring Japs a careful added boot or two under the chin to keep them, immobile. Then he returned and clambered aboard the Breda as Kirk eased her past the wreckage of the Mitsubishi.

They were off! But how far they would get without opposition they could not know. Still, they would give it a whirl. The Breda was carrying them from Sandakan across the widest portion of North Borneo and into the Sarawak district. They checked weather and position over Brunei, the capital city of the Sarawak district which looked out across the heat of the China Sea.

With another glance over his instruments and fuel gauges, Kirk now boldly turned the nose of the Breda into the northwest in search of the Baikal Maru. Then he suddenly remembered the note Miss Velox had given him. He drew it out of his pocket, read it. It was somewhat startling, to say the least. In the first place, it was addressed to Woodward Drake, a passenger aboard the Baikal Maru. It read:

Ambassador's tennis party requires new American tennis balls at once. Can you provide at least thr.ee? Will pick up can, if dropped overboard. Urgent!

—Reversed Newspaper

At first, Kirk couldn't make any sense out of the signature. But then he smiled.

"I've got to hand it to Miss Velox," he grinned, recalling that the man who directed the Intelligence work from the dusty office in Washington, D. C, always talked to them over a newspaper he appeared to be reading upside down. That signature alone would assure confirmation of the rest of the message. If Drake did have the message in a tennis ball can, he most certainly would understand what was required.

Kirk pondered on it all as he guided the speeding Breda to its strange rendezvous with a man aboard the Baikal Maru. Then it dawned on him that if Drake did sense the true meaning of the message and tossed out the can, they still had to recover it from the water. How were they to accomplish that—with a land-plane?

“First, they want us to snatch toy balloons with a plane that does umpteen miles an hour. And now we’re expected to pick up a floating tin can from the ocean. How do we do that trick?!”

He finally realized that this would have to be something of a reverse-English gag. Snagging the balloon had been a matter of picking an object from the air. Well, couldn’t the same trick be tried in reverse? Kirk figured some more—then decided that Tank again would have to play a dangerous part. And only Tank could play it.

He set the controls and let the Breda head her own way out across the China Sea under robot control. He leaned back, picked up the flat wire and net, and went about untangling it. Tank now sat up and watched with his beady eyes while Kirk prepared the netting for action again. The ape man then peered about the sky and made strange chattering noises. He saw no balloons.

“No, Tank! No balloons,” explained Kirk. “This time, you go out on one wheel and pick up a can—a colored can.

Kirk pointed down at the water. And the ape got up and peered over and then back at his master, puzzled. Kirk kept at it, repeating over and over what he wanted done until Tank began to get the idea.

“Understand, Tank? A can—and you catch it in the net. You slide down the wheel leg and grab the can from the water.”

The ape nodded several times dubiously. He kept peering over the side as if he expected to see the can somewhere below immediately. It was pathetic in a way, this blind, unswerving loyalty.

“Not right now, Tank, but later on when I tell you,” said Kirk, holding the ape back from climbing out with the fish-net.

The ape nodded, glanced over the side again, then sat down, his warm, deep-brown eyes steadfastly fixed on the man in the front seat.

“Only when I tell you,” repeated Kirk, taking over the controls again.

They both settled down now for the long flight out to the point where their course would cross that of the Baikal Maru. The miles seemed endless, but when both had nearly reached the limit of their patience, the vessel suddenly loomed into view.

“In a minute, Tank. Take it easy, boy!” cried Kirk.

They soon caught up with the trailing plume of funnel smoke and circled the liner. Kirk looked around and selected a message streamer from a small pigeonhole set into the cockpit. It was a weighted strip of colored linen carrying a small pocket. He slipped the message Miss Velox had written into the pocket, rolled the strip up around the flat leaden weight, and drew back the hatch-cover.

TANK WAS FIDGETY in the back seat, but Kirk settled him down again with a word or two. He lowered the wing flaps a few notches and circled the Baikal Maru twice more until there was quite a gathering of seamen and passengers in tropical whites on the forward deck.

Kirk now drew away, lowered his wheels, then glided gently toward the stern of the ship until it appeared that the Breda would skewer itself on the mast aft. And at the right moment he tossed out the weighted streamer. It fluttered clear, unrolled into a long ribbon, and plummeted to the deck. It was pounced upon by a group of passengers.

“Any minute now, Tank,” warned Kirk. They could see the group on the deck standing about the man who had retrieved the streamer.

“Tighten your helmet, Tank. You go to work pretty soon now—I hope!”

The ape man prepared himself and gathered up the fish-net. Below, on the long covered deck of the Baikal Maru, the crowd of passengers moved along to the open portion of the deck again. And now a tall slim figure sifted itself from the group.

“Watch that guy, Tank. And keep an eye out for the can!”

The Breda was dipped down low close to the deck of the liner and they roared past just as the man ran to the rail and threw a bright red cylinder far out into the water.

“That’s it! That’s it, Tank! Keep your eye on it!”

Kirk drew the Breda around slowly and glided back to where the can had struck the water. Tank was pulling the hatchway back and moving out.

“Take your shoes off!” called Kirk. “You can hang on better, then!”

Tank kicked his loose sneakers away. He then went over the side, dropping on the wing root on feet and paws while holding the net in his teeth. Next, he stuck his head down, crawled forward to the leading edge, and grabbed one of the Breda-Safat gun barrels that protruded. Then he rolled his legs over the wing and his feet clutched at the Vee-casting that housed the right landing wheel.

Kirk brought the flaps all the way down. Then he circled the Breda slowly over the area upon which bobbed the red container. He gave Tank a chance to get his net ready and dropped lower and lower. He could not see that Tank was straddling the wheel housing of the landing gear, waiting patiently until he was in a position to snatch at the can with his net.

Kirk held his breath as he brought the Breda down still lower. He never took his eyes from the bright can bobbing and dancing on the easy swells of the sea. And now he made a careful move toward it. The sea, luckily, was glassy.

He made his initial pass—and hoped. But when he looked back, the can was still bobbing on the water. He swung around gently, keeping his eye on the container, and tried again. He then came dangerously near a stall, but the ape man didn’t fail this time. He made a lightning swish at the can as it rode up—and caught it in the folds of the net.

His arm must have been almost torn off by the effort, but he hung on and was soon clambering back to the leading edge of the wing. He came over the side, serious and slow—but satisfied. Kirk let out a wild cheer and held the plane in a slow easy climb to give the ape a chance to climb back into the cockpit.

“Great stuff, boy!” he yelled, reaching for the can and net. “Give it to me. I’ll take care of it.”

Kirk took the tangle, then saw a sudden glint of rage in Tank’s eyes as the ape regained his seat. And before he knew just what had happened the rear gun was chattering madly.

Tank had got back in just in time to block off an attack by three Japanese Kawasaki Naval fighters. They were slamming down, their guns throwing slugs at the Breda from all angles.

KIRK RIPPED the Breda over, sensing that these planes had probably been discharged from one of the Japanese aircraft carriers somewhere in the vicinity. Koji Yasui had evidently recovered enough to send out a warning. It was well that Tank had got back in fast.

Kirk went to work now, feeling that so far Miss Velox and Tank had more than had their innings at this game. He drew his belt tighter, set out his fighter counter, and stiffened his jaw.

He allowed the Breda to fall off on one wing-tip for an instant or so while Tank’s bursts harassed the Jap formation. Then with a scream of power from the 1,000-h.p. Fiat, the Breda suddenly horsed its nose up and went full tilt at a twisting Kawasaki.

The Jap saw it all coming, but he was unable to clear. He was just pulling out of his dive when the four Breda-Safat guns began to cough. The N-struts on one side of the Kawasaki went out first, then the wings slapped together with a loud clank. A piece of the fin and rudder went away, and she began a queer corkscrewing climb that ended in a stall. Then it plunged into the water.

Kirk swished away, shot at another. Tank was still screeching and letting off endless bursts from behind. His fire broke up the Jap attempt to reform—and the rest was easy for Kirk. He sent a clean shot through the vitals of the pilot of the second fighter. And another stream of lead crippled the third’s empennage, whereupon it limped away.

In five minutes they were in the clear again and racing past the sun deck of the Baikal Maru. Kirk flashed down a signal that the contact had been completed. And a tall figure on the steamer waved back and then became—just another newspaper man.

Then as Kirk sped the Breda toward Kabong to refuel for the flight to Singapore, a radio message came through from the Marblehurst. It translated into—

Coffin Kirk . . . Wish to inform you “extra ballooning” aboard this ship apprehended . . . Also have Okay from Drake . . . Rear-Admiral Jessop looks forward to seeing you in Singapore.

“We’ll be pleased to see the Rear-Admiral, too!” spoke Coffin Kirk into his radio mike. Then he turned around.

“Hey, there, Tank!” he barked. “You better put your shoes back on. We’re headin’ for a society call!”

Fate Flies a Breda Flying Aces 6/41

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

CHAPTER I SINGAPORE BOUND

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

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

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

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

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

The Japanese Navy Kawasaki fighters were on them before they knew it. The first burst spanged into their wing and beat a hellish Highland fling on the dual panels before Kirk sensed what was up.

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

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

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

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

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

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

TANK WAS the distinct opposite to Kirk. He was squat and broad. He had long arms that reached below his knees, and his clothes seemed to have been selected from a masquerade costumer's. He had the face of an ape. It was heavy and broad and alarmingly wide across the frontal bone. There were strange tufts of hair

under the eyes. The nose was practically Mongolian, with heavy, red-rimmed nostrils. There was a strange unreal pinkish glow across the cheeks which somehow seeped down into the beard line of the lower jaw.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Kirk glanced about and saw that he was fairly close to several small islands, but he decided to try and make one that looked somewhat larger than the others. He gave a quick glance at his chart and figured it was the larger of the Tambelan group, which was about 300 miles east of Singapore.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He drew the Breda over and stuck a wing-tip down. He was wondering where those shots came from and why, when she hit with a sideslipping motion like a great broad-bladed knife slashing at the sand. The

machine dug in, cartwheeled over and over, and came up with a clatter of metal and hollow boomings. Kirk remembered reaching for the red tennis-ball can and then passed out cold.

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

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

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

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

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

Still, Tank continued to struggle and growl as he fought to take the Breda apart. Kirk finally rammed himself into a sitting position and raised his arms so that he could pull himself out. He rested amid the wreckage while Tank tugged to get him clear.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“If you’re a Dutchman, you must have lived many years in Hamburg. You certainly have a Hamburg docks accent,” the gunner guy seemed to say.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER II MITSUBISHI MENACE

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

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

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

He took the lid off and peered inside.

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

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

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

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

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

“German guns?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Can I contact Singapore?”

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

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

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

“How do you get mail out?”

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

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

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

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

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

“In time?” the Controleur asked curiously.

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

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

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

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

“That’s a good idea.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“He’s an insolent oaf.”

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

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

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

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

“I know I was, and you know it too.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Finally, he could stand it no longer. He suddenly let out a growl, moved like a panther, and grabbed one around the waist. He raised the unfortunate one high and then hurled him with terrific force into the scattering group ahead. Then with a bellow he started running, rapidly for the village.

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

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

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

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

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

Tank blazed into the building, lumbered through a room, and then climbed out of a side window. He edged along a teak runway and clambered down a carved pole. He was in a side street now. In a minute he decided on his course and rumbled on through a lot of dank piles and disappeared under another building,

all the time making his way toward the chieftain's place with a series of zigzags which offered cover and gave him time to riffle the mental matter.

Eventually, Tank reached the lower portion of the Dutch official's building and he moved like a jungle animal among the heavy timbers and through the maze of foundation uprights that had been woven into a supporting pattern. He waited for several seconds in the semi-darkness and sniffed again. He could hear voices and the thud of bare feet scurrying above.

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

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

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

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

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

Tank hit van Gelder from the window in the far corner. The massive bulk of animal brawn, bone, and muscle shot through the room like a hairy thunderbolt. Tank's hands hit the Dutch official full across the throat and the man's head went back with a leaden crack before he could suck in his breath to let out a yell. The electric waves of muscular action were switched off as though a broadsword blade had cut off van Gelder's head. He simply went limp and rolled over into a corner. Tank got up from a cruel crouching position and stared at the man. He reached forward and yanked van Gelder's head up, and then by animal reasoning realized that he would shoot at him no more.

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

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

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

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

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

Kirk stepped back and watched. He tried to figure it all out, but another Mitsubishi bomber hammering over the pile of huts brought into full focus the realization of what was taking place. That at least set his time bracket for him. He'd been out for nearly an hour!

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

CHAPTER III A SIGNAL TO SINGAPORE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"When?"

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

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

"At once, of course. We intend to waste no more time. It will be very simple tonight. Most of the vessels in Singapore harbor will be undermanned. They have conveniently arranged a special ceremony for the

opening of the new dry-dock there and most of the crews will be ashore for the ceremonial ball and dinner the British are so fond of arranging for their American hirelings.”

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

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

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

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

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

“Certainly. Make yourself at home,” nodded Tank.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Your men would die for you, wouldn’t they, Yasui?”

“That is our tradition.”

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

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

“And when your friends come to rescue you, Yasui, they’ll find the real van Gelder in that closet. *Herr* van Gelder unfortunately broke his neck trying to wrestle with my talkative friend here. Still, you might like to stay on and give him a suitable burial; he’s entitled to that much. You might also take time to plant a double-cross over his grave. He was a Nazi, of course.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER IV THE JOURNEY COMPLETED

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

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

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

He had to struggle against the flame and smoke but finally reached what he was getting at. Well inside, he flipped up the breech flap of the drift-flare tube and drew out a bright red can. It was that which

contained the all important dictaphone record which carried the code formula of the war plans of the Pacific Fleet.

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

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

Tank was at it again!

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

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

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

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

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

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

She was loaded with bombs!

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

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

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

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

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

Once she came out, Kirk looked across and saw that his bombs had scored with considerable damage. Two of the Jap machines were already fringed with flame. A wing panel of another had ripped up and

flopped over hard across the roof of the cabin. There was smoke and chunks of dural in the air and another gusher of flame leaped up from somewhere in the middle of it all.

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

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

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

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

Kirk had not discovered where his fixed guns were operated from and he had to make the most of bash and bluster. He squirmed in and out, actually making wild passes at the enemy fighters with his wing tips.

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

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

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

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

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

By this time Tank had managed to get another cartridge container shackled to the gun breech and was again zipping off long bursts in the general direction of their pursuers. The effect on accuracy was none too good but it provided a visual sense of opposition that could not be laughed off.

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

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

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

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

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