



*Butterworth had leaped against his belt. In the same instant Wayne's plane disintegrated.*

# DOUBLE DEATH

*by* WILLIAM E. BARRETT

*Here is a smashing complete novelette of strange wings over the Italian front. Ships were being blown to shambles and none knew why. Until Jack Lannigan came.*

THE TINY American drome north of Istranso on the Italian front gleamed in the sunlight beneath Jack Lannigan's S.E.-5. Lannigan looked at it with interest. If reports were true, there was grim tragedy on that shining drome; tragedy and mystery. Lannigan had had his share of both since the war got under way—and before. He had leaped into the war from a berth as police reporter on a St. Louis paper and had had a year with the British before the United States entered the war. The Americans were using him unattached with a roving commission under G-2, the Intelligence section. This was his first trip to Italy.

A GLUM group of pilots eyed him soberly as he rolled in. One young chap whose uniform showed the effects of slovenly neglect, stepped forward from the line. Lannigan assumed that this was the C.O. whose place he was to take temporarily until the mystery of 690 Squadron was cleared up. The young man saluted indifferently. "You, Lannigan?" he asked.

"Sure. Where's the wake?" Jack waved toward the pilots. The sloppily attired officer flushed.

"Oh! You think there ought to be more pep and hurrah-forever around here, do you?" he asked bitterly. "Well, come into my office—yours now, that is—and I'll tell you."

Without the formality of introducing Lannigan to the other pilots, the deposed C.O. turned on his heel. "Incidentally," he said over his shoulder, "my name is Holland."

In the semi-gloom of the stone house, that served Captain Holland for quarters, the two men faced each other across a table. Holland filled a tumbler out of a black bottle and pushed the bottle across the table. It was an English whiskey of proven potency and Lannigan raised his eyebrows. Men who drank such liquor out of tumblers were entitled to respect—and sympathy. Holland tossed his drink, grimaced and waved his hand.

"You've probably had reports," he said thickly. "Roten morale here. Wind up. Dying in bunches like bananas. All that twaddle."

"Right. I have. What's the answer?" Lannigan's eyes searched the other's face. Holland's eyes were bleak.

"There isn't any answer," he said. "It's all true. I've got as much guts as you have or anybody else has; but

I'm washed up. I'm through with a war where something kills you that you can't see or hear-or fight."

"What do you mean?"

HOLLAND leaned across the table and his eyes blazed. "I mean that I can't lead a flight across the patrol line without losing two men and sometimes four. I lose them when there isn't an Austrian in the sky and when there is no fire from the ground; when we aren't within range of an Austrian gun. I know—and every damned man I've got, knows—that when we go out on a patrol, two of them will die, or four of them will die, before we come home. Morale? Hell!"

Lannigan stared. It sounded hysterical to him. "Why two or four?" he asked. "Why not three or five?"

"You tell me." Holland snarled the reply. "I just know that it never is three or five. I've lost sixteen men, Lannigan, since I've been here and the Austrians never got one of the sixteen. Something got them; something that we weren't fighting. Now it's your job. You lead them out to the killing. After you've lost your sixteen—if you don't take part in a double funeral before then, maybe you'll be more sane than I am. If you are, then I'll buy you a drink. You'll need it."

"But, man, there must be an explanation. What happens to the men?" Lannigan's brow was furrowed. Holland laughed shortly.

"They go down, my friend," he said. "They go down. When they go down, they crash and spatter all over these god-blasted Alps. Lead 'em out and watch 'em."

Gulping another half tumbler of fiery liquor, the deposed commander lurched to his feet. "You'll find records, vital statistics and the whole blurry shooting match here," he said wildly. "Help yourself. You're welcome to all of it; all of it, my friend. I'm through."

HE banged out of the room and Lannigan stared after him. Slowly, he lighted a cigarette. "Humrnm," he murmured thoughtfully. "There is more to this than meets the eye. Well, we shall see what we shall see."

For five minutes he sat there quietly and smoked. Graham, his chief at G-2, had not exaggerated the situation here in Italy a bit. When pilots stand around listlessly and watch a strange ship land on their drome without showing either interest or excitement and when a commanding officer talks as Holland talked,

then morale is a forgotten word. No wonder reports had come through that this squadron was inefficient and that it was disgracing the U.S.A.S. in the sight of the Allies. No wonder at all. Still?

Sixteen men lost in five weeks and none of them charged off to Austrian guns.

Jack Lannigan got up and strode across the room to the map on the wall. He studied the patrol line, noted the landmarks and then went out. His S.E. had already been serviced and he ordered it out on the line. "Holland says I'll lose at least two men if I take a flight out, eh?" he said softly, "Well, I can't lose two if I go alone. We'll look around."

AN hour later he regretted the fact that he had gone without a more careful check-up of his bus or that he hadn't taken one of the squadron Camels. He had crossed the Piave and was flying over some of the wildest country on earth when his engine sputtered and gasped. A glance at his pressure guage showed him that his pressure was practically nil. He grabbed the hand pump and pumped hard while his eyes strained overside.

Below him spread the Alps; snowy peaks, rocky valleys, terrible gorges and precipices. There was death in the very look of that jagged terrain, death for any pilot unfortunate enough to be forced down. Not a level spot showed and the sky was empty save for the one struggling ship.

Suddenly an eye winked somewhere below. Lannigan pushed his goggles back. He could place neither the location nor the character of the eye. He merely knew that something had flashed off to his right; something that was not part of the regular scenery. "There it is again," he muttered, "but what in blazes is it?"

He had seen something that time and there was no doubt about it. but he did not know what he had seen. He had an impression of sun glinting off a monstrous goggle or of a great, evil eye winking; yet he was sure that it was not the sun reflected off a large glass or a body of water. He banked hard over. He was curious but not as curious as he was alarmed. He was dead-sticked, He had to go down. He could no longer see the eye nor anything which suggested it, but his heart leaped wildly as he saw something else. Almost miraculously, a flat table spread beneath him; a plateau

atop a mountain that appeared to be sliced off where the others were conical.

"You could fly over that for years and never see it because of the shadow of the rest if you didn't happen to get at the right angle. And I'd never have gotten in that angle if it wasn't for that eye, or goggle or whatever it was."

Jack was nursing his ship down now in a steep glide. It was going to be tough setting down on that table. It was a short run and a good part of it seemed to be cultivated. There was a rocky slope, too. He levelled off, whipped the stick over, slipped her and came almost to the ground with his wing tip before he righted the bus and squashed down. As he swung over the side, he saw a slim youth in brown overalls and a heavy sweater who was regarding him out of wide eyes. He waved good naturedly but the boy seemed to shrink away.

"Who are you?" he said, "and what do you want here?"

THE BOY spoke in clipped, precise, Italian in a manner that conveyed that the tongue was natural to him, but that betrayed, at the same time, a terrific sense of fear or embarrassment as though speaking to strangers was a new and frightening experience. Lannigan, who had learned to speak Italian after a fashion while serving as a reporter on a New York newspaper, smiled.

"Name's Jack Lannigan," he said. "I've had a bit of trouble and had to set down here. Fix it in a jiffy now. What's your name and how is it that you are living up here?"

The youth was staring at the ship. He backed slowly away, then suddenly he took to his heels. Lannigan looked after him with a puzzled frown. "Figure that out?" he said slowly.

For a second he stood and stared at the little pathway through the trees down which the boy had vanished. No house was visible nor was there anything on this quiet mountain top that remotely suggested the eye that had guided the flyer down. Lannigan shrugged.

"It might be worth a fellow's while to poke around up here," he murmured, "if he didn't have anything else to do. Me, I've got to get this bus going and get on the job before it gets dark."

IT TOOK a half hour to get the engine singing sweetly once more and as Jack Lannigan stepped back and wiped his hands, the mountain top mystery intruded once more upon him. A twig snapped at the edge of the clearing and the flyer whirled. What he saw caused him to recoil with a muttered exclamation.

There was a man standing there with his head forward more in the attitude of one sniffing than of one staring; an old man whose long white hair hung loosely over his shoulders and whose face was hideously scarred. It was the face that fascinated Lannigan. He had never seen a face like it; not even among the knife-hacked denizens of Dago Hill. It was not merely scarred; it was slashed and furrowed and gouged. Chunks of skin and flesh seemed to be gathered in bulges as though the thing that had inflicted these wounds had not only cut but squeezed and twisted. It was unlike anything human. Not even the gargoyles of the many old European cathedrals that Lannigan had seen had faces as hideous.

“Now what in God’s name could have done that?” Instinctively Lannigan’s news-trained mind leaped backward for a story. Before he could take a step toward the old man, however, the youth that he had first seen came rushing madly down the path. Paying no attention to the flyer, the boy gripped the old man’s arm and jabbered in swift staccato syllables that rattled out so fast and at such a low pitch that Lannigan could not follow. The old man crouched and his deformed face became more hideous as his crooked mouth curled back over toothless gums. The youth gripped him tightly and half pushed him up the path; darting a look of intense dislike toward the flyer. Lannigan scratched his head.

“What’s it all about?” he murmured. “I’d give a farm in Kansas, if I had one, to find out.”

FOR a moment he contemplated following the two up the path, then he threw a look at the sun and shook his head. “Some other time,” he said regretfully. “These mountains would be tough once it got dark—and it will get dark fast once it starts or I don’t know mountain country.”

Stepping around his ship, he kicked the rocks away from the wheels and vaulted into the cockpit. The engine was already turning over from the test and the

S.E.-5 was a sensitive little pet. He had moved fast once he moved the rocks. Feeding her full gun, he roared across the short field and thanked the gods that he had an S.E. above all ships. It was one of the few that would take off from this spot. As a jagged line of rocks loomed before him.

he pulled the stick back and the Hiss roared. The prop went heavenward and the S.E. climbed straight up like a sky-rocket.

“Zooming fool!” he chuckled contently. “Like to see a Camel get out of that. Us, we’re coming back.”

At a thousand feet, he circled the queer flat mountain top, but he had no reward for his pains. He could see neither human, nor habitation, nor winking eye. A half mile to the left and he could not even see the field from which he had taken off. The shadows of higher peaks fell on the lopped off mountain and hid it from view.

THE Piave River flows through a flat country that is cut up into tiny hedge-bordered fields and slashed by a multitude of ditches. Montebelluno Hill dominated the Italian side of the river below the British drome at Istrana. The American Squadron 690 nestled into a background of trees some twelve miles above the British drome. Lannigan set his wheels on the drome just as the sun was going down. There was no one about but the mechanics and that was another evidence of the squadron’s state of mind.

Without waiting to strip off his flying togs, Lannigan routed out the adjutant, picked a list of names at random from the squadron roll and handed it to him. “Post that!” he said curtly. “I’m leading those four men on the dawn show. See that they all know about it.”

He retired then to his own quarters. He was not in a mood to talk with such a dispirited crowd as this. There was a lot on his mind. Smoking quietly he reviewed the day. The strange scene of the flat mountain top, the scarred man and the winking eye; these things kept revolving in his mind and challenging him even to the exclusion of the strange fact that two airmen would die at a time—but that one never went down, nor three nor five.

“I wonder,” he said slowly, “if there could be a connection between that eye or whatever it was and the

losses of this squadron? Possible, but? Those two on the mountain were Italian, not Austrian, and it's hardly likely that the Austrians would leave a plane-killing apparatus in such hands if they had such an apparatus. And if they have, why keep it in such an unimportant spot? Why not bring it to France and clean up with it—or shift it down the line where the British have been raising hell with them?"

The further he went with the problem, the more impossible the whole thing seemed and finally he stood up and flipped his cigarette away impatiently. "I'll never get anything done like this," he said. "I'll have to see the thing in action—if the whole affair isn't imagination."

HE stopped as there came a hesitant rap on his door. "Come in," he said. A slim, scared youth opened the door and stood framed in the opening.

"Lieutenant—Second Lieutenant, that is—Wayne, sir. I—I'd like to speak with you."

"Sure. Never mind the formality. Come in and sit down." Lannigan's keen eyes had detected the nervousness, the fear which approached close to stark terror, in the man's eyes.

Wayne sat down, made three attempts to light a cigarette and finally accepted a light from Lannigan,

"It's about this patrol tomorrow, sir, he said jerkily. "I can't do it. You've got me down, but I can't fly. I can't. I've been hoping ever since they said you were coming that maybe you'd be able to do something, but—"

"You don't want to risk your neck helping me. Is that it?"

WAYNE flushed. "No. That is, I don't think so. I've been out three times when I got buddies of mine. I'm all shot. I can't—"

"I know. You said it before. But can you tell me, Wayne, why I should let you off and send some other fellow out? I didn't pick on you. It was chance. You or me or someone else; we can't tell what is going to happen to us, but we're soldiers."

Wayne choked. "But, Captain, there's my mother. I just got a letter." He fumbled in his pocket as though he were about to produce the letter, then changed his mind under Lannigan's hard stare. He spread his

hands despairingly. "And there's a girl in London, I can't— If it was just a fair break but it isn't."

"Most of us have mothers, Wayne, and most of us have girls in England. Sorry as all hell, but you'll fly, son. You'd never be any good now if you got out of this; never face anything unpleasant in your life again, Bad habit to get into; dogging it. Go along now and get your sleep and take it grinning tomorrow. Chances are nothing will happen."

Wayne stumbled to his feet. His eyes were haunted. "Something always happens," he said desperately. "I can't. I'm not physically fit to fly. I'll report sick. I—" "You'll get in a cockpit if I have to put you there myself—and you'll fly." Lannigan's voice was grim; then it softened. "But snap out of it, kid. If your number is up, you'll get it even if you stay in bed—and if it isn't up, you can fall out of your bus and find a ton of feathers under you."

The pilot shifted for a moment and his bleak eyes stared across the table at Lannigan. Then, with a short laugh that bordered on hysteria, he wheeled and rushed from the room. Lannigan looked after him thoughtfully and then took a striding turn of the room.

"Pretty rum go, that," he said. "Kid's all washed out. I'll give him leave after tomorrow, but he'd never fly again if I gave it to him now."

With a weary grunt he threw himself on his bunk. After a while he slept and a queer procession of scarred faces and winking eyes, shattered ships and pleading voices disturbed his slumbers.

THE LITTLE Camels panted on the line at dawn. Lannigan looked his pilots over. There was no chaff, no horse-play. They looked like men going to a funeral. For the most part they were grim, but Wayne was like a man about to be executed. His cheeks were hollow and his eyes bagged from a sleepless night. Lannigan was tempted to order him to quarters; then the man came over to him, shakily.

"Captain, can't I—"

Lannigan's jaw hardened. "No, Old Man," he said. "The best tonic for you is action. I'll keep an eye on you. Just fly and forget the rest"

His voice was gentle and Wayne turned away with a despairing gesture. Lannigan swung his lean length

into the cockpit. He goosed the throttle and the little Camel shot away. He went down the field like a streak and flipped it off. He went over the trees in a stiff zoom, touched the rudder and let the powerful rotary engine pull him over into a skidding right turn that would have given the ground 'crew heart failure in France. Like a flashing dragon fly in the pale sun of a new day, he climbed above the drome in a tight series of turns that a thousand men would have sworn could not be done—in a Camel.

IT WAS his gesture; a way of bucking the morale of men sunk in lethargy. But it didn't work. These men, trembling in the fear of the unknown, were not to be snapped out of it by daring of the normal sort. They were slow in following him and he had to wait for them at the rendezvous; 1,500 feet above the drome.

One by one he watched them drop into formation in the little mirror under his dash. Wayne was flying behind him, paired with a hard-faced youth named Butterworth. Two grim youngsters named Goalby and Train rode the tips of the V. Lannigan felt a sense of relief in the fact that Wayne was not on the tip. That was the logical danger spot and he was conscious of a feeling of personal responsibility for Wayne. After all, a mother who writes letters regularly and a girl in London make a man hang to life.

"Maybe I'd be as scared as he is if I knew more about this thing that knocks men off two at a time," he said shortly. "I don't know."

The Camel, never a stable ship at best, was making hard going of it over this mountainous country. It took a lot of piloting and Lannigan longed for his S.E. Then he saw the Austrians.

There was a long, rakish looking two-seater off to his left, a second two-seater beyond that and a cluster of five Albatrosses flying high. The Camels were between the escort and the escorted and Lannigan felt a premonitory tingle in his nerves. There would be time for a good flight to get down there and slaughter those two-seaters and then come around for a good scrap with the scouts. But, would this dispirited gang get away with it.

HE SHRUGGED. There was nothing to do but try at any rate. His hand went up and fanned out a signal.

He caught the stiffening of his men in the mirror under his windshield; then the Camels were away like flashing lances of light down the sky.

The two-seaters saw them coming and Lannigan saw the gunners leaping to the rear guns. Then he opened his sight cover and got the rear cockpit of a two-seater in his guns.

A tiny ship flashed past him, curved under the two-seater, bounced against an invisible cushion beneath the Austrian and came up spitting flame. Even as the Austrian pilot wobbled to throw Lannigan's sights off, that flashing meteor beneath him closed to the kill. Crimson streaks framed the mouth of the Vickers and the two-seater reeled groggily. Like a tiger, the Camel tore in, the pilot holding his tricky ship at the stalling point for another burst.

With a low hiss, the two-seater heeled over. A puff of flame leaped out from between the front and rear cockpit; then it was gone in a pillar of greasy smoke.

Lannigan hurdled the blazing wreckage and brought his Camel around. He was a bit chagrined that one of his men had beaten him to a kill, but he was pleased, too, to find that there was fire and vitality in this gang even if they did act dead; then he saw the pilot who had made the kill. He whistled softly.

It was the chap named Wayne.

The other Austrian two-seater was also plunging down the sky; the victim of a three man gang effort. There was not, however, any time to celebrate victories. The avenging Albatrosses were coming like the wind.

Light danced on the black crosses and the tricolor cockades as scout whirled to scout above the dawn reddened Alps. Lannigan did a quick climbing turn and came head-on into one of the Albatrosses. His guns spat fire but his aim was a little hurried and he missed. The Austrian dived under him and Lannigan half-rolled. Dropping out of his roll upside down, Lannigan pressed the trips again.

BLACK crosses loomed in his sights and he had a flash of an agonized pilot, who twisted in the cockpit as he realized that his race was run. Then the wings came off the Austrian scout and it shrieked down the sky to oblivion.

Even as Lannigan turned, however, there was a

hammering thud that splintered his dash and nicked a corner out of the mirror under his windshield. He did a fast half-roll and the Austrian rolled with him. The Spandaus sang again and death blistered the wings and the tail surfaces of the Camel. Then, like the Angel of Death, another Camel ripped across the sky and tracers bit into the Albatross cockpit. Like a shot pigeon, the Albatross leaped, pointed its prop momentarily toward Heaven and then plunged to a battering finish against the rocky sides of the Alps.

Lannigan had a glimpse of the goggled face in the Camel as the two ships passed. He recognized the hard features of Butterworth. Another member of the depressed squadron had proved himself a fighting fool.

Kicking back into the conflict, Lannigan was in time to see a pretty series of vertical eights as the once terrified Wayne chased tails with the Austrian leader. It was a pretty fight and the kid was holding his own, but there was no time for individual duels. Lannigan goosed the throttle and almost had his head snapped from his shoulders as the Camel leaped across the sky. With unerring skill, he cut in on the arc of the Austrian's lower loop. Crosses flashed momentarily in the sights and he pressed the trips. The Austrian leaped convulsively and died.

THEN, for the first time, Lannigan had a chance to size up the results of the conflict. He gave a low whistle of surprise. There was not an Austrian left in the sky—and he had everyone of his Camels.

"Seven down," he murmured. "Good Lord! And they told me that this was a dud squadron."

He sized the men up as they dropped into place behind him. There was none of the stunting that usually followed decisive victories, no waving between cockpits, no hand shaking above heads. The men seemed as grim as when they started; stolid, sober—waiting.

The mood of these men brought something like a chill to Lannigan's stiff spine. They had proved their hardness, their courage, their ability to cope with odds; and brave men have the right to fear. If men like these were fearful, then there was something in these skies that could not be laughed off. If a fighting demon like Wayne was reduced to the status of a cringing, sobbing wreck—then any man might be.

They were turning toward home now and the sky was blue and clear. Not an enemy ship was in sight and there was no fierce ground-fire to be observed as there was in France. It was almost monotonous. Jack yawned and looked at the cracked mirror.

"The Hun that did that sure got his load of hard luck," he said lightly. "and it serves—"

He stopped in mid sentence; the words frozen in horror. Butterworth, hardest looking pilot in the flight, had leaped against his belt like a condemned murderer against the straps of the electric chair. In the same instant, Wayne's plane disintegrated. It seemed to blow up from the inside and come apart. Lannigan spun around in the cockpit. He had a flash of blanched faces beneath the goggles in the surviving ships and of two ships that plunged downward to a shattering finale against the rocky chasm below.

SO sudden was it and so horrifying, that Lannigan felt frozen in the cockpit. His breath came out with a sobbing catch in it. His eyes swept the sky above and beneath his tiny flight. There was not another ship in the air. Beneath him was the rocky gorges and steep precipices, the wild tumbled, terrifying Alps against which two airmen were battered as their ships were reduced to kindling in a flash. There was not a puff of smoke nor a flash of flame to mark the spot from which the doom had lashed out.

Once more the unseen terror had struck and Lannigan had been as powerless as Holland had been. Nor did he have any more idea than Holland why two men had gone—not one, nor three, nor five.

Goalby and Train, the two survivors, were no longer holding formation. They had spread out wide in the sky and Lannigan nodded his head. They had probably been out before and feared the jinx of teaming when the hidden horror was on the hunt. He waved a signal for "washout" and headed home with a swift dive toward the distant Piave.

"I'd like to prowl around here for a looksee," he growled, "but Holland says that sometimes he has lost four men. I'll do my prowling alone."

He came in over the trees and set down fast. Goalby and Train were right behind him. Goalby, short and thickest, threw his helmet on the ground and walked away from it. His face was very white.

“Lannigan,” he said and it was noticeable that he omitted the “Captain”—“I’m through. I’ve seen six men go and I haven’t seen yet the thing that got ‘em. When the Austrians have something I can’t see; something that kills like THAT does, I’m giving them the war. I quit.”

“Lannigan,” he said and it was “I know how you feel,” he said. “The Austrians HAVE got something. But take your time about quitting. We’ll find out about this—”

HE TURNED toward his quarters, conscious of the fact that he had made a vague speech. He didn’t know what he intended to find out nor how he was going to find out anything. He felt dazed, bewildered. The memory of that flat mountain top and the scarred man came back to him once more, but it was hard to connect a mere youngster and a feeble, scarred wreck with so deadly an instrument of destruction as that which took men out of the air in pairs.

“I’ll go look anyway.” He flipped his cigarette away and called the M.S. to him. “Get my S.E. ready in a hurry,” he said. “I’m going out.”

IT WAS peaceful on the Piave, The fighting had been desultory for some time and neither side, Italian nor Austrian, seemed prepared for any great expenditure of effort. Only in the air was the war unremitting. The Austrians, soundly beaten by the British Royal Air Force since the introduction of the Bristol Fighter, had shifted their strength to the section patrolled by the Americans. The sky was heavily patrolled when Lannigan crossed the lines alone. He was disconcerted.

“Boy! They don’t need their mankiller now,” he said. “They ought to be able to mop up by weight of numbers.”

He was anxious to get over the section where he had lost his men a short hour before, but it was not going to be easy. He had a flight stalking him and, although they were a safe distance away yet, they might be troublesome before he got home. High above the Alps was another flight; a large one. He cut across, with a wary eye on these high cruisers, in the general direction of the flat-topped mountain on which he had found temporary sanctuary only yesterday. Suddenly, something swooped out of nowhere and lead

whistled past his ears.

Instinctively shrinking in the cockpit, Lannigan trusted to a zoom to get out of danger. He had a ship little known on this front and an airman who didn’t know the S.E. would be fooled by its terrific rocket quality. Moreover, the thing was not the hottest ship in the world to roll in. Too much dihedral.

THE AUSTRIAN’S tracers bit through the tail surfaces of the S.E. as Lannigan went almost straight up. Then the American flipped over and dropped. His Vickers sputtered and lead whanged into the flat snout of the Albatross. Lannigan saw that he had only one foe to mix with. The fellow had evidently taken a chance of sneaking down on him while he was watching the big formation. Well, he’d guessed right and Lannigan had been careless, but now!

Lannigan was on top of him, his guns battering and hammering broadside into the whale-shaped fuselage of the Albatross. The Austrian threw up his hand as though to protect his face from a blow and then lunged forward. A spiral of flame curled back from the engine and became, in a split second, a roaring holocaust. But, even as his foe fell, Lannigan could feel the swift rush of the avengers. He threw a startled glance upward.

In tight formation, a flight of at least seven Albatrosses was diving down upon him.

There was no time to get away. They had him foul anyway he turned. Lannigan had a split second to appreciate the terrible irony of it. He had come to Italy to find out the reason for the extraordinary deaths visited upon American airmen—and he was booked through for the months ordinary of all sky deaths without ever finding the answer.

It was folly to dive away, but it was folly to do anything else. Lannigan dove. He saw the Austrians in his cracked mirror. Diving death! Then, his heart gave a mad leap against his ribs. His eyes widened.

As though a sword had slashed downward from the hand of some great unseen giant, some doom fell on the Austrian airmen. Two ships lunged madly and one of them fell apart. The other, reeling crazily, as though a dead hand were at the controls, crashed into a third ship and the fragments fell in scattered confusion down the sky.



HEAVY WARCHALOWSKI engines roared as startled pilots pulled up from their careening dive. Lannigan, taking the reprieve offered him by this strange intervention, levelled himself and struck out for the lines. He threw a glance over his shoulder to see the Austrian flight reforming. Then, even as he looked back, two more Austrians went down. Lannigan's face paled and he roared for the Piave.

"Pairs!" he muttered. "Always in pairs. And IT kills Austrians, too. What in blazes?"

He was still mulling over the problem, a little shaken by his experience, when he landed on his own drome once more; but there was a quiet set to his lips and an eager light in his eyes to show that he more than half guessed the answer to the strange riddle of the Alps. Holland, very drunk as was the privilege of a man relieved of his command, was on the drome. He waved to Lannigan, his lips curling.

"Well, you've seen it," he said hoarsely, "Do you believe now that the Austrian's have something or—"

"The Austrians haven't got a thing that we haven't got," Lannigan said softly. "Not a thing."

He walked around his bus, indicated the bullet holes to the mechanics for patching and then went to sleep for two hours in his quarters.

AT THREE in the afternoon, Lannigan took off once more alone. At three-thirty, he spiralled down over the levelled mountain top. He was not dead-sticked this time and he could look the place over carefully. He found that he had to hover almost over the trees to do it. Slanting light and massed shadow had given this place a natural camouflage that the masters of the art in France might well envy. He strained over the side and saw a slender figure run from a flat, shed-like building to a little hut near-by. He circled and looked the building over carefully.

At the far end there was a tall turret-like spire. From the top of this, there projected a round tubular object on the order of a light field piece. Lannigan whistled.

"The trail is hot," he said softly. "We land."

He banked around and side slipped over the trees, running his wheels on the short landing field as gently as though he had been landed with a long cable. He swung out of the cockpit and, as he did, some instinct warned him of danger and he ducked. A shot

whistled over his head and plunked dully into the S.E.

Lannigan flung himself flat and wiggled away from the ship toward the trees. Four more shots followed in quick succession, but as he suspected, they were above and beyond him. The marksman was firing from high ground and Lannigan was safely within his angle of fire.

WITH HIS automatic in his hand, the American slid through the trees and moved steadily toward the spot from whence the shots had come. It was upgrade going and he was cautious. The firing had ceased and he did not know where the marksmen might be. He suspected that it was the youth who had fired but he was not forgetting that there were at least two men on this mountain top. He circled the clearing and then, in the shadow of the shed-like building, his foot touched something soft and he sprang back. For a moment he stood tense, then he dropped to one knee and dropped his automatic back into his holster. The thing that he had stumbled over was a dead body. He turned it over and his lips tightened.

HE WAS looking into the horribly distorted face of an Austrian airman. The man's throat had been cut from ear to ear.

"So there are Austrians here." Lannigan frowned at this overturn of his theory. The finding of this man in Austrian uniform near the spot from which, he suspected, the hidden death had struck, opened up a new field of conjecture. He reached out and picked up the Austrian's revolver; noting that one shot had been fired from it.

"I wonder now—"

He started to straighten up and something tapped him on the back. He half turned as a claw-like hand closed on his uniform; then something emitted a maniacal shriek of rage and leaped at him.

As he went down, Lannigan had a flash of hideously scarred features; furrowed, gouged and bunched folds of skin. The man was clawing at him and kicking at him with a mad man's strength and Lannigan fought fiercely to break the hold of a skinny arm that had fastened across his throat. The face slipped from his vision as the man swung behind him with the

tightening of that grip, but not before Lannigan discovered another startling thing.

The man who had leaped on him was blind.

Thrashing wildly about, Lannigan succeeded in breaking that hold that was shutting off his wind. He could hear the wheezy panting of his opponent, but there was no diminishing of the man's terrible strength. Young and athletic though he was, Lannigan found it impossible to shake the man off and rise to his feet. He lost the Austrian's gun in breaking the throat grip. It made no difference. He felt that he wouldn't need it if he could get the man off his back or twist around to where he could use his fists. The man was clawing, gouging, tearing—

THEN A voice shouted beyond the trees and the creature on Lannigan's back gave vent to another of his weird, unearthly screeches. Running feet sounded and the young boy that Lannigan had first seen came running down the path. He was not a shy, embarrassed youth now; he was a wild, snarling thing as mad as the blind man. He was brandishing a long knife and spitting Italian with machine-gun speed. Lannigan heaved and partially broke the madman's hold. As he struggled to regain his feet, however, the man's fingers locked in his hair and strong, rosy legs curled about his waist. His jaw set, Lannigan rose and lifted the weight with him. The blind man laughed shrilly and tugged with a demon's strength on Lannigan's hair. The American's head snapped back.

The youth leaped across the clearing and raised the long knife.

A horrible vision of the Austrian's distorted face, his cut throat and the pooled blood on the ground came before Lannigan's eyes. He leaped backward and crashed to the ground.

The blind man screamed wildly and his voice broke on the high note as his body smashed against the ground with Lannigan's hurled weight against it. Lannigan felt the grip on his hair relax and the legs loosen their hold. He twisted sideways and left bunches of his hair in the gnarled fingers as the young man leaped.

The gleaming blade swept past Lannigan in a glittering arc and Lannigan came up on his feet. His right fist lashed out like a pile driver and the young

man turned in time to get the full benefit of it. He fell forward on his face without a sound.

Spent though he was and dripping blood from a dozen gouged places, Lannigan made short work of trussing up his two enemies. The old man was conscious but moaning and all but breathless. The American trussed him first. The young man opened his eyes as Lannigan completed his job of tying the blind man, took one look around and bounded to his feet. Lannigan was after him like a shot.

Over any distance it would have been an unequal race, since Lannigan was wearing boots and the slender youth was barefooted, but the young man made a mistake. He stopped at the edge of the clearing and lifted a rifle that he had standing against a tree. He had no time to use it. Lannigan hit him in a flying tackle and the rifle flew off into the bushes.

THERE WAS no fierce fight about this. The youngster was not the fighter the old man was. Lannigan battered him into submission in two very rough minutes and trussed him up without effort. Then he stood back and took his automatic out of its holster.

"I'm going to get a little truth out of you," he said, "or you are going to die very quick."

He spoke in Italian so that the youth would be sure to understand. "You, two, have been bringing down airplanes with some kind of a device that you have in the shack yonder. Right?"

DEFIANT EYES looked into his. Even when his finger tightened on the trigger, the other remained tight-lipped. It was obvious without any long argument that this chap would not talk under the gun; yet he was obviously weaker than the old man, who, Lannigan was convinced, could never be made to answer anything. But, when a man refuses to talk under the threat of death, what will make him talk?

Suddenly Lannigan remembered the Austrian back there with his throat cut. This fierce little brute had done that, and men the whole world over are afraid of their own medicine. He walked slowly across the clearing and retrieved the knife. As he approached the youth with it, he knew that he had won. The wide stare of fright told him that, but he left nothing to chance. He pulled the youth's head back by the hair.

"You talk or I'll give you what you gave the fellow back there," he said grimly. "Now, tell me why and how you have been destroying airplanes."

The youth was very white. "My father, he hates them because they fly," he said slowly. Lannigan stared. He remembered the scarred face, the cavities where eyes had been.

"Because," he asked, "he was scarred and torn like that by birds?"

The youth shivered. "Eagles," he said bitterly. "Eagles, things that fly. He was a professor. I would have been a professor. Now he is nothing and I am nothing because of eagles. They caught him in the mountains. He was climbing, at the end of a rope. They nearly tore him to pieces."

"But what has that got to do with your killing us?"

The youth snarled and for the moment he was as mad as his father. Lannigan saw that the solitude and disappointment and the unnatural life here in high altitude had unbalanced the boy's mind. "My father is great," he said. "A great man. He can destroy anything that flies; anything—"

His voice rose to a shriek. Lannigan shook his head. "No, he can't," he said. "He can't destroy eagles—because eagles do not fly side by side."

THE BOY stared and in the stare Lannigan read the baffled disappointment that the youth had shared with his father; the disappointment that had probably helped to drive the two of them mad. Lannigan leaned forward.

"I don't know what you've got in there," he said, "but I'm willing to bet that it's something like a giant X-ray. You have to have something in back of the thing that you aim at in order to destroy and, once you have that, you destroy both the object and the backing, Right?"

The youth was still staring and in his eyes, Lannigan saw that he had guessed right. His heart gave a wild leap. He could see what this meant to the Allied cause. He had scarcely dared to hope that his wild hypothesis had been correct; that the brain of man had evolved such a terrible instrument. Not even with evidence before him had he been able to believe. Now he knew that he had been right.

An X-ray works on the principle of hurling at incred-

ible velocities, minute particles which pass through a body and impinge upon a plate. A monster X-ray doing that and destroying the object could make a war too terrible to endure and bring it to a swift conclusion. It was in his hands and he was suddenly possessed of a wild eagerness to get away; to bring men back and occupy this mountain top.

The boy was babbling now. His long pent-up longing for speech seemed to break a dam. Incredible things passed his lips, tales of scientists who had helped build this monster X-ray and then died so that they might not take it back with them away from the mountain top where a mad man still pondered on ways to kill eagles.

Lannigan wasn't paying attention. With a hasty promise to return, he turned down the path. Then he stopped abruptly. The body of the Austrian lay in the brush. He had forgotten the Austrian. He turned back.

"Where did he come from?" he challenged fiercely.

The youth waved aloft. "From up there. Like you did. They surprised us."

"They?" Lannigan's face blanched. If there were more than one, it meant that one had escaped since there was no ship in evidence. He was running now to his own plane. It would be a tragedy to let that death dealing invention fall into Austrian hands. It mustn't be.

FRANTICALLY he threw the prop over and as the engine caught he hurled himself into the cockpit and roared down the short runway. With one wing scraping he went over the trees and zoomed for the clouds. Clear of the valley of shadow, he threw a look aloft and his heart fell. He had lost.

The Austrians were coming in force. There were at least twenty of them and they were strung out in single file; a fact that betrayed their knowledge of what they were going up against. Even if the two on the mountain top had been free, they could not have fought these eagles which refused to fly side by side. And the great secret of the war; the secret that meant victory was going to Austria. There were too many ships for one plane to attack and Lannigan would have to watch them helplessly.

He gritted his teeth and his free hand knotted in

a fist. Even as he vowed to hurl his ship into an unequal fight before permitting that, he saw an incredible sight.

THE Austrians were bombing the mountain top. Great pillars of flame shot skyward and dark blobs went down as the ships circled above the doomed castle of the man inventor. Lannigan circled off to the right and stared incredulously.

“They are mad and just as single track as the Dutchmen,” he said. “All they can think about is destruction. Maybe I’m not glad of that. If either the Allies or the Huns had what that old man built to kill eagles,

it would make this war too blamed horrible. Good riddance to it.”

Like an eagle himself, he hovered high while the shadow of death that had hung over the Americans in Italy was slowly blotted from the earth. For a moment he was sorry for the two helpless men beneath that shower of death, but then he thought of Wayne and Butterworth and the rest. They had been helpless, too, before a death that they could not see. He bowed his head.

“It’s the last double death,” he said softly, “and a fitting end to the pair that dealt it out.”