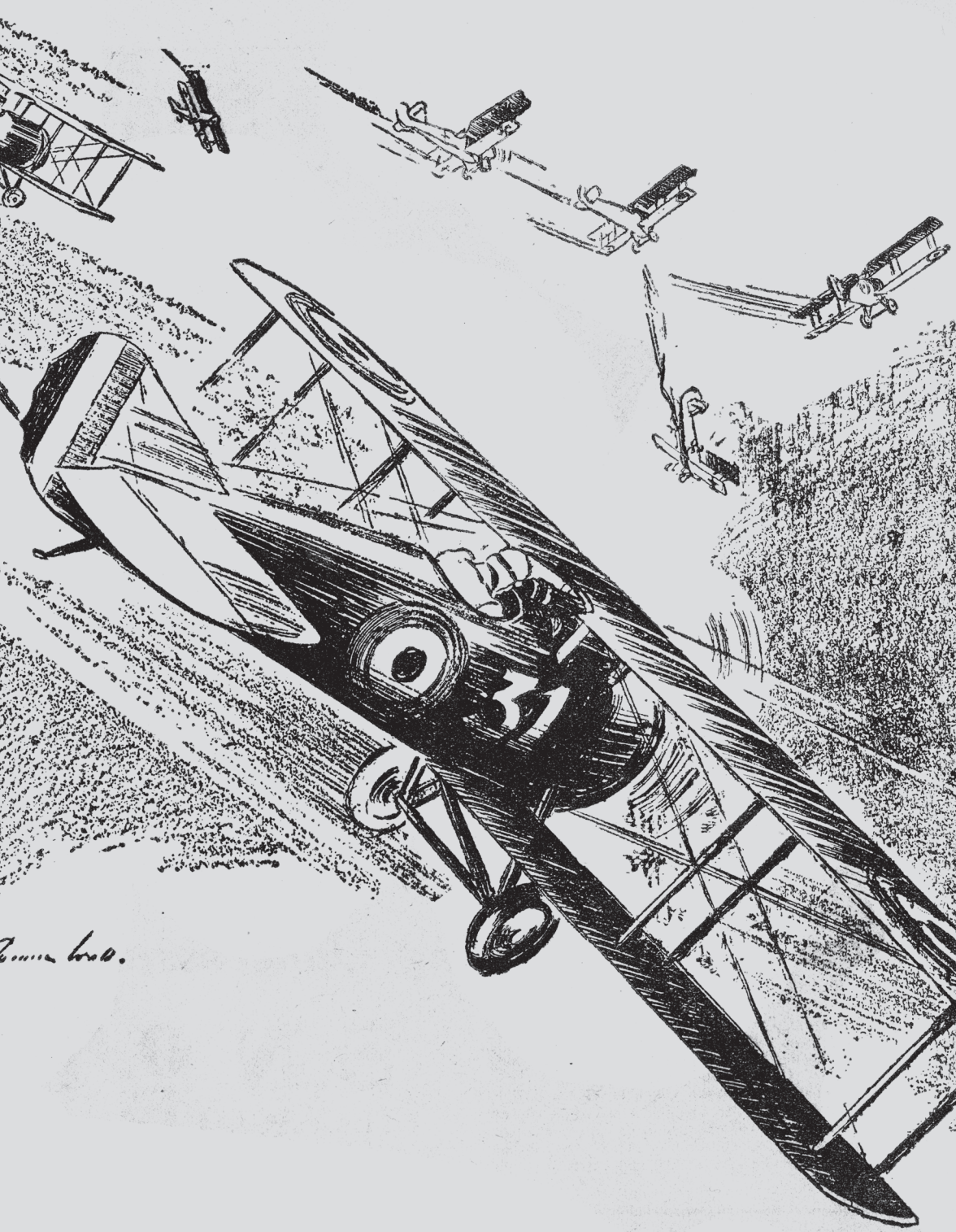


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The Jailbird Flight

CHAPTER ONE **This Side of Hell!**

FROM OUT OF THE FOG that rolled above the Doumans-Ville road came a sudden ominous roar, like the savage drone of a huge and angry hornet. On the ground, five hundred feet below the mist clouds, the startled faces of two thousand marching Germans jerked upward in quick fright. The drone of unseen planes became a deafening bellow, drowning the rumble of nearby Front artillery.

Down through a hole in the fog streaked an Allied ship, guns blazing like two red eyes. Panic-stricken soldiers broke and ran. Trucks and artillery piled up in mad havoc. Frightened horses reared and trampled men underfoot.

Screeching like furies from hell, five plunging Spads erupted from the gray fog ceiling. With Vickers aflame, they pitched down in a murderous ground strafe of the terrified Boches.

Hunched over the stick of the leading Spad was a tall and grim-faced Texan. "The Killer" they once had called him below the Rio Grande. But there was no killer's look now in his steel-blue eyes. He had come to fight his battles man to man—Vickers against Spandaus, not in wholesale butchery of helpless groundhogs! He had no love for Boches, but

this was cold-blooded slaughter. Never before had he killed a man who was helpless to fight back.

Five notches his pistol butt had borne in those days below the Border—but each man had been given his chance. Three more had died before the deadly guns of “Killer” Kirby, this time on the right side of the law, when he forsook his gambler’s life across the Rio Grande to become a Texas Ranger. And now his Vickers grips showed thirteen, tiny grooves, filed there by proud greaseballs who swore their fighting pilot feared neither man nor devil.

But those had been fair fights, while this was massacre—needless strafing against which he bitterly rebelled, even as he carried out the orders of a drunken, drug-mad superior.

But though his soul rebelled, his hands were firm as he bent his death-ship down. Like lightning bolts, the scarlet streams of his blazing guns struck into the *feldgrau* mass. Staring bleakly down his sights, Kirby saw his bullets tear into the mob, reaping a bloody harvest. Men wilted, fell to the mud like sacks of wet grain. The road was a crimson welter.

Back of him the four Spads followed in an orgy of annihilation. Kirby zoomed at twenty-five feet, flashed upward and then dived again. But now the terrified infantry were past. Before him were truck gunners who grimly stood their ground. Kirby’s eyes narrowed. Here was battle, not butchery. He crouched low as a wicked burst crashed through his wing. Something plucked at his shoulder, hot, ripping. He kicked sideways. Death sprayed from his spouting Vickers, Gray forms melted into sodden bundles and the nearest gunners died.

The Spad shrieked down straight into the crimson muzzles of a battery of guns. Wood flew from the struts and the fabric hung in tatters, but downward Kirby dived, raking the seething mass beneath till his guns turned red hot.

Seconds that seemed an age, and then he zoomed up to the lowering fog. The riddled Spad groaned but its wings held. Kirby stared back. The road was littered with dead and dying. Two of his Spads raced up to join him. The others lay in fiery ruins. His lips went flat and hard. But it was not hate for the German gunners that filled his bitter soul. They had paid a frightful toll, for at least half of the *feldgrau* columns lay scattered on the highway.

Instead, it was a grinding hatred for the sotted commander who had sent them out on this needless errand—Dorsey, the S.C., who day after day had ordered his flights on these massacres without command from H.Q., solely to gratify the blood-lust of his twisted, crazy brain.

A picture of Dorsey's yellow, twitching face came into Kirby's mind as he drilled up through the fog. His eyes became like granite. Sometime Dorsey would pay for this sacrifice of war birds who should have been miles high seeking their normal prey. Seven pilots had died in unnecessary ground strafing, while Dorsey drank himself into a frenzy and fed his raw nerves on morphine.

The three Spads broke through into a layer of clear air above the fog. Kirby's thoughts were not on his work as he turned back toward the 78th. A shadow came over his face. That morning fate had dealt a stunning blow. Among the three green replacements from Issoudun had been his younger brother Jimmy, who seemed still a kid, with his eager grin and rumpled blond hair.

A surprise, Jimmy had told him happily—for Kirby had not dreamed the boy was following in his steps, from Kelly Field to Issoudun, and then up to the Front. A surprise! Kirby's eyes were dark and moody. A surprise, yes—but a bitter one. The whole Front to which he might have gone, and fate had sent him to the 78th, to Dorsey, the butcher!

Kirby's jaw hardened. For twenty-four hours Jimmy would be safe. That was the period allowed for becoming familiar with the field and adjacent terrain. Then he would be put on patrol at Dorsey's mercy. Kirby's eyes filmed. Jimmy would never go as those others had gone! The time had come for a showdown. Jimmy and those green youngsters from Issoudun would have their chance to learn up on top, on high-altitude patrol, and he himself would take them across on their first few flights.

If Dorsey tried to send them on one of these suicide hops—Kirby's fingers twitched and the pupils of his eyes became deadly pin points, like queer bits of black ice. More than one man had seen that look and backed away in dread—or had reached for a gun too late.

Suddenly Kirby started. Settling out of the heavy clouds above, but half a mile ahead, were at least a dozen Fokkers. They were flying in two flights, one behind and above the other. He seized his trips, then slacked his fingers, for the Fokkers were headed away from the trio of Spads.

Either the Boche leader was pretending not to see them, hoping to cut about before they could jump into the clouds, or he had more important business and did not notice them.

Kirby wagged his wings in a quick signal and eased up to the very bottom of the clouds. Then he pushed his throttle open and began to close in. There was a chance for a quick fight and then a plunge into the fog below if things became too warm.

The Fokkers were closer now. Kirby leaned out and stared, as his glance fell on an orange-and-black ship from which two black streamers fluttered like pieces of crepe. A thrill shot through him. Von Falke and the Hate staffel! The most dreaded Boche squadron on the Front—and he had them under his guns!

EVERY pilot of von Falke's mob had been cleverly selected because of his lust for revenge on Allied airmen. Every man in the Hate jagdstaffel had lost a sweetheart, a mother, or a sister in an Allied bombing raid, such as were carried on in the industrial valley of the Saar and along the Rhine. Von Falke, himself a fanatic, had promised them revenge. Adding fuel to the flame of their grief and rage, he had made them into savages who took a fearful joy in killing. They had even been known to crash their foes as a last resort, though it meant losing their own lives. Feared more than any other Boche outfit, the Hate staffel had become a nightmare to every Allied pilot.

Kirby's pulses began to pound. He looked back hastily at his two followers. They signaled their readiness, and he saw them hunch down in their pits. But as he faced, to the front his hand dropped from the throttle, he had been about to jam wide open. The Hate staffel had nosed down and begun to dive, eleven black and orange ships plunging behind the crepe-like streamers-on von Falke's tilted wings.

Then Kirby saw what he had missed before—three Spads cruising blindly eastward, a mile away and a thousand feet below. With an oath, he hurled his own Spad onto its nose and drilled down after the slithering Fokkers. Unless he and his men split von Falke's formation in the next few seconds those three pilots underneath would be dead men.

"The damned blind fools!" Kirby grated out, as he cut his Vickers loose. "Why in hell don't they duck!"

A Fokker sheered out madly as Kirby's tracers ripped past him. It flung around, guns snarling. Kirby flicked his stick to the right. The Boche died at the Spad's first burst and Kirby was gone, helling down the sky to where two black streamers marked von Falke's mad dive.

The three Spads below had frantically begun to climb. Kirby groaned.

"Dive!" he shouted, as though they could have heard his wild yell. "Dive for the fog, you fools!"

A Fokker whipped about on wing-tips and raked him furiously. He huddled low as tracers crackled past his ears. The crash-pad ripped to bits before his eyes. The smell of Boche tracers came ominously to his nostrils, but he held to his dizzy plunge. The men behind would take that Jerry off his tail. He was after bigger game!

A Spad from the strange trio bored in toward von Falke. The German went into a savage, slashing turn and in a twinkling had the other before his smoking Spandaus. Kirby dived under a skidding Boche and fired fiercely past the two black streamers that swept into his sights. Von Falke whirled like a tiger.

Kirby's gaze flickered for the thousandth part of a second to the other Spad. Then something cold closed around his heart. A familiar blond head showed above the pit, unhelmeted—with a crimson streak already gashed down the cheek.

"Jimmy!" There was a sobbing agony in Kirby's cry. "Jimmy! Oh my God!"

It was madness. It couldn't be. His dazed eyes leaped to the Spad's markings. The insignia of the 78th swam before his gaze. It was no wild nightmare! The pilot was Jimmy, his brother—a green kid, plunged into action with the fiercest killers of the Imperial Air Force. Dorsey had sent him out to his death. Three raw replacements sent out alone on their first hop across the lines!

A blasting horror shook Killer Kirby. There was just one chance. He might hold off von Falke while Jimmy dived for the fog. With a madman's skill, he hurled his ship inside the German's turn. His bullets wrote a double trail of doom up the tail, flashing for von Falke's heart. Frantically, Kirby signaled for his brother to dive into the safety of the mists.

Von Falke jerked about in his seat. A distorted face, half hidden by

goggles, glared back in berserk fury. The Fokker seemed to leap sideways, and before Kirby could follow he had roared past and the German was behind.

The sky was filled with screaming ships. Three black-and-orange planes closed in on Kirby's Spad. In the wildness of desperation, he kicked onto the nearest plane and blasted it from his way. Then, burning a deadly path before him, he raced to Jimmy's aid.

Like an avenging fury he came—but this time he was too late. With swift, relentless skill, von Falke drove in to the youngster's back. There was one hideous moment, when Kirby saw the boy's face, white in pain, but pulled into a scared grin. Then von Falke's bullets stabbed up the Spad's tail, leaped like lightning to the pit—and his Spandaus took their toll.

The next two minutes were blotted from Kirby's consciousness. With the ferocity of a wild animal, he fought and killed, while a searing agony numbed his brain and mercifully closed off that last picture of the youngster he had loved.

Only one thought struck through his mind—to find and kill von Falke. Through a maze of swirling wings and deadly tracer streaks he saw the leader's ship. With trips hard down he closed the gap, his hate-filmed eyes riveted on the Boche. The Vickers snarled and ceased. His belts had run empty!

Bullets creased his shoulder but he hardly felt them strike. Through the cross-fire of two darting Boches he sent the Spad, his mouth a bitter snarl. Von Falke would die as he had taught his own men to die when all else failed. Hard forward went his stick. The Spad bored in for a mighty crash.

Zang! Something cut through Kirby's ship, ricocheted from a wire. He felt hot metal scrape across his forehead, then his eyes filled with blood. He dashed it away. Von Falke was gone. A new sound was in the air. He stared up stupidly. A French pursuit squadron was splitting the air in hot chase after the seven remaining German ships. And at one side, spinning down in flame, was the only other Spad in sight. The Hate staffel had shot down all but him.

Kirby wiped away the blood that ran, warm and salty, down his face. Like a man in a dream he headed west, flying just in the top of the fog.

He would come back and get von Falke later. Just now there was something else.

Half an hour later his Spad wobbled to the ground on the field of the 78th. Gaping mechanics stared at the winged wreck, and then fell back as they saw the man who climbed out of the pit. Slowly Kirby unfastened his flying suit and tossed it to the ground. A service 45 automatic swung at his side. His hand dropped against it as he strode toward the squadron office.

A frightened orderly took one look at his drawn, white face, clotted with blood, and stumbled hastily out of the way. Kirby flung open the door and stepped inside.

A yellow, twitching face turned fearfully toward him. A chair scraped as the man pushed back from the desk, and one shaking hand fell away from the half-empty bottle before him.

"Kirby!" said the other man hoarsely. "What—what's happened?"

Killer Kirby stood like a statue, facing him. His hands hung at his sides, but the fingers were curled like talons. When he spoke his voice was strange and unnatural.

"Better take that drink, Dorsey," he said. "It's the last drink you'll get this side of hell."

An awful pallor crept into Dorsey's face under the jaundiced skin.

"What do you mean?" he whispered. His right hand crept toward the desk.

"Jimmy—my brother." A strange film came over Kirby's eyes. The pupils had become mere pin points, black, menacing. "He's dead, and it was you who killed him!"

Dorsey sank back before the look in Kirby's face.

"No, no," he cried. "I swear to God I didn't mean to do it! You can't—"

"Draw your gun!" rasped Kirby. "It's there in your desk. Draw it—or I'll burn you down!"

"It's murder!" Dorsey shrieked. "You're mad—"

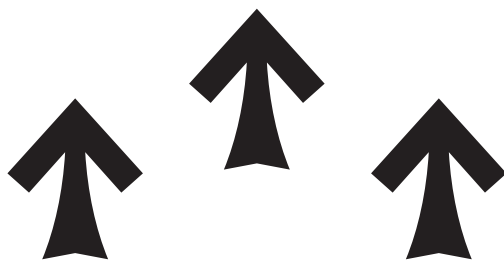
"Murder! Yes, and you murdered him! Draw!"

With a crazy scream, Dorsey jerked his pistol from the drawer. His hand threw the weapon upward. Instantly, Kirby's hand flashed down. The gun seemed to leap into his clutching fingers. There was a crash as

two shots came at once. Dorsey's face turned a hideous gray as he staggered back. His gun fell from his hand. Suddenly he crumpled up and fell like a log.

Startled voices sounded outside. Men burst into the squadron office. Kirby turned and faced them. He held out his pistol butt foremost, while a red stream trickled from his left arm.

"Here's my gun," said Kirby slowly. His face was black as granite. "You needn't call the surgeon. I shot him through the heart."



CHAPTER TWO

Brood of Satan!

DARK AS THE MIDNIGHT SKY ABOVE, lay the A.E.F. prison at Blois. It was a sullen, evil thing, a hell hole of despair, as grim and stern as the brooding men within its gloomy walls. Blois—the end of all hope, where the A.E.F. hid its failures and broken men, its cowards and misfits, and imprisoned its lawbreakers.

Deep within the prison, staring up with embittered eyes through the tiny window of his cell, lay a man. On the back of the chair beside his hard bunk was a uniform blouse, stripped of the captain's bars and the silver pilot's wings their owner had proudly worn. The man lay motionless, gazing through the window to where a single star showed in the darkness. For the thousandth time a sentence hammered itself into his brain—

“And from Blois to be transported to the Federal Prison at Leavenworth, Kansas, U.S.A., there to be imprisoned for the remainder of your natural life.”

Grimly the man drew on his iron reserve to fight back the weight of a crushing despair. But in spite of himself, a tide of horror rose higher in his heart. Gray walls. Tiny barred cells. Endless days and nights of brooding. A few more days at Blois, then back to the country for which he had come to fight. Then long, desolate years, while his vigorous manhood withered away and he rotted in a cell at Leavenworth. Physical and mental decay, until madness or death mercifully released his tortured brain and body.

Suddenly a droning sound beat down from the night sky, across the gravelike silence of the prison. The man stiffened.

A look—half of agony, half wild longing—came into his haggard face. A plane! Somewhere in the heavens was a man free to climb up

into the cool, clear sky—free to soar as he once had soared, but as he would never do again. With a muffled groan he closed his eyes and turned his face to the barren wall.

In a semi-stupor he lay there for an hour. Then, abruptly, footsteps were audible in the corridor. A flashlight beam shot through the bars, crossed his drawn and deep-lined face.

“That’s him,” growled a voice.

A key grated in the cell door. Two armed guards stepped inside. One of them shook the prisoner roughly.

“Out of that, Kirby,” he snapped. “Get into your clothes. You’re wanted up front.”

Kirby’s face had become a hard emotionless mask, but his mind was busy. Here was his chance. He had been overlooked on that day’s transfer of prisoners. That was the only explanation for this midnight visit. He would be sent to Havre under guard, with perhaps but one man to watch him. He would soon be out of Blois. And then he would risk everything in a desperate break. Better to be shot down if he failed, than to drag out his life in Leavenworth.

But as he entered the prison office his eyes narrowed. This was not a transfer party by any means. Seated at the desk was a gray-haired colonel of air service, in whose not unkindly face were deeply etched lines of worry and care. Thompson, the sour, red-faced major in command of the prison, stood at one side scowling at a line of prisoners. One look and Kirby recognized the group.

Each man had been a pilot. And each had come to Blois through some disgrace and dishonor. Raw liquor, the strain of war, violent temperaments—each had had some part. Once normal men, these shorn eagles now seemed the lowest of all human scum in the depths to which they had fallen from their place in a war-torn sky. Hard, bitter men, in rumpled uniforms devoid of all insignia.

Thorne, lean, stooping, with a hollow hatchetlike face and burnt-out eyes. Lynch, marked with scars of battle, sullen, staring through mere slits. Denison, a snub-nosed youngster whose once-cheerful face had become grim and stern, though a faint trace of hope still gleamed in his deep blue eyes. Kirby knew these three well, and recognized a fourth—Durgin, a great, hulking fellow whose fiery temper and appetite for

cognac had carried him into a fatal brawl in a Paris restaurant. The rest were similar—men who had come to fight their battles in the air. Once proud and eager—but now the dregs of the army, thrust into the dark cells and poisonous gloom of Blois.

Wolves, Kirby thought to himself—human wolves. How long before he would look like them? Or perhaps he already did!

“This is the last,” said Major Thompson, as Kirby took his place. “This is the one you asked about, the bird they call Killer Kirby.”

The colonel’s tired eyes lifted to Kirby’s face. Kirby stared back stonily. The sour Thompson stepped forward, glowering.

“Wipe that glare off your face, Kirby,” he barked. Then he turned to the air service officer. “This man’s the worst of the lot, Colonel Rand. Used to be a gunman down in Mexico, a tough egg—”

“Read what you have there,” cut in Rand coldly. “I’ll form my own opinions.”

Thompson reddened. He picked up a summary of Kirby’s record.

“Bruce Kirby, formerly captain, U.S. Air Service. Credited with eleven German planes, two balloons. Was awarded D.S.C. for special service January 8, 1918. Tried for the murder of Major T. K. Dorsey, S.C. 78th pursuit squadron, April 17, 1918. Convicted, but sentenced to life imprisonment instead of death in view of his record and certain extenuating circumstances.”

Colonel Rand leaned forward and studied Kirby.

“You do not look like a man who would be willing to rot out his life in prison if there were any alternative,” he said quietly.

Kirby’s eyes burned into Rand’s.

“What do you mean?” he said harshly.

“I have a desperate mission, and I need desperate men. I will give you your choice—”

“You mean you’ve got some damned dirty work nobody else will touch,” sneered Kirby.

Rand showed no sign of anger. He nodded slowly, soberly.

“That’s right, Kirby. It is work I cannot send army pilots to do.”

“So you’ve come to the scum of Blois—the jailbirds! By God, that’s good!” Kirby’s lips twisted into a scornful laugh. “And what if we live through this dirty job of yours?”

"There is little chance of that," Rand replied grimly. "And if you do, there will be other missions."

"Till we're blotted out, you mean?" snarled Kirby.

RAND sat back and gazed at him silently for several seconds. There was still no hint of resentment on his weary face, though Thompson, the prison commander, was purple with rage.

"I would like to have you lead this group, Kirby," the gray-haired colonel said at last. "But I will hold out no hope. The men who form this squadron will not live through the war. They will be used for what we call the 'suicide' flights. If they die before the work is finished, others will replace them and carry on."

Kirby grinned mirthlessly.

"Where'll you get them? Blois isn't full of broken pilots."

"The French and the British have promised to give me their con—their unfortunates."

"Go on, say it!" jeered Kirby. "Convicts. That's what we are."

Major Thompson turned to the colonel.

"You see how these men act, Colonel Rand. You couldn't use them. They're dangerous."

"That's why I want them," snapped Rand. He waved Thompson away. "Kirby, seven of these men have accepted my offer. You are—or were—the senior pilot in rank and victories both. Will you lead these men?"

"Put your cards on the table," said Kirby roughly. "What's the job?"

His eyes narrowed as he watched Rand's face, to hide the thought that had leaped into his brain. If he accepted, what was there to prevent escape by air? Two hours and a half in a Spad would put him far from the Front, in a part of France where he could shed his uniform and play the part of a peasant till he was out of the country.

Rand's words dashed his hopes instantly.

"First, drop all idea that you might use this means to escape. You will fly Fokker planes, a number of which have been captured by the Allies in various sectors and reconditioned. They will carry the German Iron Cross on their wings."

"Spy-ships!" muttered one of the prisoners. Kirby saw it was Durgin. "You didn't tell us that before."

"If you fly to any point except the one I designate, you will run into Allied pilots who will not know of the impersonation," Rand said coolly. "If you land back of the Front the French will tear you to pieces. If you land in Germany you will be shot as spies."

"You haven't overlooked anything," Kirby said, but there was a new plan already springing into his mind.

But Rand seemed to have read his mind.

"And if you should by some chance get by these obstacles, you will still be marked men." He paused, and went on gravely. "It was the only condition on which I could effect your release from Blois. For purposes of identification, a broad arrow will be branded on the back of each man's right hand."

An angry growl ran down the line of prisoners. The guards gripped their weapons threateningly. Kirby had lurched forward, his eyes blazing. Two guards shoved him back, cursing.

"So you'd brand us like cattle!" he rasped. "I'll see you in hell first!"

"It was not of my choosing," said Rand wearily. "But you have made your decision." He turned to the rest of the group. "Durgin, you are next in experience. Will you take the lead?"

Durgin's sullen gaze fell to his right hand. But at last he nodded.

"What do you want done?" he demanded gruffly.

"I want the Hate jagdstaffel wiped out."

"Wait!" Kirby flung around toward Rand. "Is von Falke still alive?"

"Yes—damn him! In the April push, the Germans captured a number of French Spads. Von Falke and his men used them, still flying the Allied cocardes, pretending to be Allied pilots. Before the truth was learned they completely destroyed three French and two American flights. Now they have gone back to their black-and-orange Fokkers. But God knows what trick they will try next. They must be shot down before the next big offensive or the Boche will have complete supremacy of the air over Château-Thierry."

Kirby hardly heard him. His mind had flashed back to a frightful scene—a blond head showing above a riddled cockpit, a boy's face white with pain, and von Falke's deadly Spandaus plunging their steel up the tail of the Spad.

"Oh, God!" he groaned, the rest of the group forgotten.

Rand stared at Kirby's suddenly anguished face. The room went still as death. Then Killer Kirby looked down and slowly smiled. It was not a pleasant smile. Rand tensed.

"I've changed my mind," said Kirby. "I'll go."

An hour later, attended by a squad of guards, the eight prisoners left the gloomy prison at Blois. Kirby, peering up into the starry sky, drew his first breath of fresh, cool air. A strange exultation ran through his veins. Death was waiting—but he did not care. No more would he see the black iron bars of a cell before his face. And out there—somewhere—was von Falke!

Then from the entrance he heard Thompson's disagreeable voice.

"Good-by, Colonel Rand, and I wish you joy of your Satan's brood."

Rand's sharp reply went unheard by Kirby as the guards snickered and repeated the words to their comrades. He turned to the man nearest him. It was Durgin, his eyes smoldering in resentment.

"They've tagged us already," Durgin muttered. "Every one on the field will know us. The jailbird flight!"

"Satan's Brood," said Kirby grimly. "He's right, Durgin. We are a devil's brood. Spawned from the dregs and filth of Blois. But they'll remember us long after this dirty job of Rand's is done!"

