



They played the double-cross both ways from the middle—when it boomeranged on the major none knew which way the fire would fall.

THE BLUFF BUSTER

by LESTER DENT

HE WAS a little, bow-legged buzzard. He came striding onto the Eightieth tarmac like a scarred, brindled bulldog. His feet stamped down hard as he walked. His fists were stony swellings jammed deep in his pockets. One tawny eye was purple, half closed, and anger smoked in the other. His flinty knot of a jaw jutted out. His jacket was minus a sleeve, one breeches leg was ripped nearly in halves. Dirt encrusted him, as if he had collided forcibly with the ground a number of times.

His gaze roved sourly over the hangars, over planes

like spawn before them, over mechanics and armorers working on Hissos and Vickers. Wheeling left, his eyes inspected the street of Adrian barracks, finally focusing on an officer with the rank of major.

He scowled, grunted: "Damn that cookie nibbler. He looks worse than they said." He bent a pinch-eyed glare on the afternoon sun. "And about now I would have been hitting Paris."

The major stood alone in the dusty street of shacks, holding a cigarette which curled pale yarns of smoke. He was a tall man, a fashion plate of what the well-dressed warrior should wear. He was staring at a hut

before which an armed sentry paced. A large-mesh net of iron bars covered the hut windows.

The little buzzard came to a hard-heeled halt beside him, asked: "Who's in charge here?"

The major jerked his gaze from the jail shack. He had a long, arrogantly handsome face and slender, sensitive hands. His fingers were manicured, the cigarette they held gold-tipped—not cork—and perfumed. The creases in his tailored uniform were beautiful samples of some clothes-presser's art.

He advised: "I am Major Selby Cottrill."

The little buzzard pointed a horny, nicotine-stained thumb at his own dust-coated wad of a chest.

"I'm Major Sam Flack of the Seventy-first," he grunted. "I cracked up my bus a few miles from here. One of our own damned archie pegged a shell right between my wings. I've got to get back to my outfit. Can you loan me a ship? I'll have someone ferry it back tonight."

Cottrill drew briefly on his cigarette, let a scant fistful of aromatic smoke spurt out through his nostrils. His eyebrows, so thin they looked like they had been shaped by plucking tweezers, made an arch.

"So you are the widely touted Major Flack?" he murmured.

Flack ran tawny, displeased eyes up and down the officer's immaculate form, asked: "Can you please loan me a wagon?"

Through a barred window of the jail shack, a man was watching them, his face a grayish blur in the shadowy interior.

Cottrill frowned and suggested: "My dear chappie, may I point out that to loan you a plane would be somewhat irregular?"

"Possibly," Flack admitted. "But it is no more than I would do for another man under the same circumstance. It is very important that I reach my squadron within the next couple of hours."

The other dropped his cigarette, carefully put the heel of a polished boot on it. He said sharply: "I really didn't expect you to try to put it across in quite this manner. I really didn't."

Flack pinned him with a hard stare. "What d'you mean by that?"

The face inside the jail shack moved nearer the bars, as if to better absorb what was being said and done.

With long, supple fingers, Cottrill opened his coat at the second button. He smiled thinly. "I mean, you might have been more subtle."

Flack made a bleak glare. "What is this—a guessing game?"

"Not at all. You see, I know Major Sam Flack personally!"

Flack's mouth twitched down at the ends. His jaw inched out. "The hell you do. I don't remember you!"

"You wouldn't!" Cottrill ran a hand into his unbuttoned coat and brought a black automatic out. "You wouldn't, because you are not Major Sam Flack!"

He pointed the gun at the little buzzard, lifted his voice over the clamor of a Spad circling above. "You are under arrest as a German agent!"

Flack, his voice a roar that beat the Spad howl into insignificance, demanded: "What?"

"Stand quietly!" rapped Cottrill. He swung his head to call to the sentry who paced before the Adrian hut with the barred windows.

FLACK, an unholy, devilish light blazing in his tawny eyes, kicked suddenly at the hand which held the automatic. The weapon spun full ten feet upward. The officer yelped from the pain in his bruised fingers. His yelp turned to a squawk as Flack's fist collapsed his stomach. His face came down as he doubled and met Flack's other fist upward bound. The man hit the ground on his back with a loud, hollowish thump. Flack pivoted, started to run. "Halt! Halt!" A voice crashed.

Flack flung a glance at the sentry, saw the fellow could hardly miss with his rifle, and stopped. Barracks huts spewed pilots, attracted by the sentry's yell. Mechanics and armorers quit planes to dash for the spot. Flack maintained hard silence while they pinned his arms. A pilot produced a squat black bottle and administered some of its contents to the prone Cottrill.

The officer gagged, clutched his midriff with both hands and moaned. At length, he managed to point at Flack and grind out hoarse words:

"Lock that man up! He is a German agent!"

Flack strained against the hands holding him.

"That's a damn black lie!" he gritted. "I'm Major Sam Flack of the Seventy-first!"

The officer sneered painfully. "The body of Major Sam Flack was found hidden under a brush pile this afternoon! He had been murdered and his clothing and papers stolen. It was purely by accident that the body was discovered. You thought you had hidden it effectively, didn't you? Murderer!"

"Get somebody here who knows me and I'll prove whom I am!" Flack invited harshly.

"You'll have plenty to prove!" the officer croaked.

"Lock the little rotter up! Put him with the other German agent so you can watch them both at once!"

A dozen tight hands clamped on Flack and bore his jerking form, wrapped in a lurid haze of profanity, to the Adrian shack with the barred windows. They tossed him bodily inside, slammed the door, locked it.

Flack sat up and glared at the shut door. He grunted, massaged the small of his back where somebody had kicked him. His eyes accustomed themselves to the gloom inside the hut.

The place was bare of furnishings as the inside of a box. The man who had been looking out of the window stared at Flack. Handcuffs linked the fellow's thick wrists, the steel circlets fitting tightly as finger rings. His ankles were also manacled.

He was a big man, over two hundred pounds. His nose was snub, his mouth a round thick lipped affair like a doughnut. A double handful of gristle lay in a roll across the back of his neck. His head was shaven, evidently so he could don a wig with facility. He looked very dumb and apish except for his eyes. These last were big and coldly, very coldly intelligent. Flack scowled at him, spat against the opposite wall, did not speak.

The man said in German: "My name is Max Hauser. I salute you for a very brave comrade, or a very foolish one."

Flack, who understood and spoke German like a native, growled: "Ixnay. No savvy worth a damn!"

The man changed to English as perfect as his German had been. "Might I, Max Hauser, ask how you come here?"

"T'hell with you! Dry up!" Flack said.

Max Mauser showed long teeth behind thick lips in a cold smile, but did not say more. He slowly sat down on the door below the window, his back pressing against the wall. Flack sniffed the foul air in the place and growled. He got up, stamped to a window and knocked the glass out with a fist. The sentry outside cursed him. Flack, lowering fiercely, leaned against the wall, his face close to the window, and swore back at the sentry.

Through the window, he could view the Eightieth tarmac. The sun hung low; its rays glanced brilliantly from the doped wings of an afternoon patrol of Spads peaking in for landings. A slight breeze brought cooking odors, the smell of gasoline and the fainter tang of cordite to his nostrils. Somewhere out of sight, an armorer fired short test bursts from a machine gun.

Flack, tired of standing, hunkered to the floor. He

scowled at the German agent across the room. The man had been watching him, coldly intelligent eyes expressionless.

"You were on a mission?" he asked in English.

"You go drown yourself, Jack!" Flack said bitterly.

Then the door opened and two bayoneted rifles speared in. A soldier, pointing over one of them at Flack, said: "You come with us, bud! An' behave yourself, see!"

Maintaining sullen silence, Flack let them prod him through the dusk to the operations office. The immaculate major who smoked perfumed cigarettes was there. The two guards backed outside and closed the door, leaving Flack alone with the man. The major glowered, threw the cigarette he had been smoking at Flack.

"You loosened three of my teeth when you hit me!" he said savagely. "I am going to have a civilian dentist repair them and I am going to see that the bill is taken out of your pay. I should have you courtmartialed for that act! You might have injured me seriously!"

Flack made a loud, jeering laugh, said: "This dizzy business was none of my idea! And you said over the telephone to put on an act that would make that German agent think I was a Boche spy, didn't you?"

COTTRILL snapped: "You did not have to be so violent about it!"

"I don't like your crackpot scheme!" Flack snorted. "And G.H.Q. cancelled a Paris leave I've been six months wangling, to send me over here. Anyway, what do you think a German agent would do? Stand there and take a catching? I had to make it look genuine."

Cottrill felt tenderly of his jaw. "Is the German deceived?"

"I dunno. Maybe. He hailed me as a brother, but he might have been fooling. He looks like a cagey cuss."

"He is," Cottrill grunted sourly. "But I will out-cage him!"

Flack brought out a muslin sack of tobacco and papers, spilled brown flakes into a paper, made a cylinder. He did not seal it with his tongue, but held it in shape with a caloused thumb and forefinger while the tobacco burned.

"You didn't tell me much over the phone," he said. "Let's have the rest of it."

Cottrill leaned back, fixed his gaze on the ceiling.

"That German agent was captured last night," he explained with bad grace. "A Boche plane dropped him with a parachute and it was our good fortune to have

him land right in the arms of a patrol of our soldiers. They knew positively he was a spy, although they found no documentary proof when they searched him the first time. He was brought here. When daylight came, we searched him again."

Cottrill fumbled a paper out of the drawer of the field desk. "We found this coiled in the cap of a fountain pen he carried."

Flack took the paper. It bore several lines written in a simple German cipher code. The characters sprawled, as if hastily written. A translation was penned on the lower part of the sheet.

To Operative X193:

First pursuit plane of new type completed. Tests by Designer Karl Seehund and our leading flying officers have shown it will give Germany unquestioned supremacy in the air. Speed forty miles an hour greater than anything enemy has.

Bearer of this, Operative X311, has flown plane and can recognize one of similar design, should enemy bring out such a ship. Keep accurate check on type of aircraft being manufactured by enemy and let bearer of this inspect all information. It is important that we know if enemy has anything equal to it, or if their agents secure the design of our plane. If they get such a craft, we will be forced to put our new ships in the air as rapidly as completed.

Otherwise, we will hold them in secret until a sufficient number are on hand to wipe the enemy from the air in a single drive.

Operative X2.

Flack returned the paper, moistened his lips and drew on his queerly fashioned cigarette.

"If they have a bus forty miles an hour faster than anything we've got," he said slowly, "it'll do just what that says."

"Beyond a doubt!" Cottrill declared grimly. "We must get that plane. We can do it, thanks to my carefully worked out plan."

Flack squinted at him. "Let's have it!"

Cottrill laced his fingers on his chest and smiled smugly over them. "The scheme is already in operation."

Flack shrugged impatiently. "If you mean I can get the confidence of this Boche and pry the dope out of him, you're barking in the wrong barrel. He's not the kind you can work that way."

"I don't mean that!" Cottrill said sharply. "My plan is more intelligent. It is my idea that you, pretending to be a German agent, tell this Boche you have a message

for Karl Seehund, the designer of that new ship. Then you can manage to escape in one of our ships, taking this Boche with you. Have him direct you to this Karl Seehund. Once there, you will steal their new ship and fly it back, or destroy it and dispose of the designer. As a precaution, I will send a flight of planes after you. Should something go wrong when you land, you will fire a Very signal and the ships will immediately strafe the German drome in an effort to destroy the new Boche job."

Flack, face purple, threw his cigarette violently at the floor. His voice low and full of disgust, he said, "I might have guessed it would be something like this!"

Cottrill moved his shoulders angrily. "I will admit a possibility of the plan being far-fetched in minor respects, but——"

"Far-fetched—far-fetched!" Flack gritted. "There never was a more crack-brained idea!"

Rage flushed Cottrill's Adonis features.

"I think it has definite possibilities of success!"

"I don't!" snorted Flack. "The only thing I see in it is a nice way of handing the Boche back their spy and one of our ships, to say nothing of what'll happen to me."

Cottrill stared fixedly at the field desk, said slowly: "You can refuse to accept this mission, of course. G.H.Q. was unnecessarily insistent on that point when I put the matter up to them. They professed to see elements of danger in it which I must confess I cannot."

"That surprises me!" Flack growled. "They generally lap up every ga-ga scheme that's dished out to them, and to hell with the danger!"

The little buzzard took a stamping turn about the operations shack, fists imbedded deep in his pockets. He grumbled: "And about now I'd have been on about the third *vin rouge* bottle in Paris." He crashed out a brittle, wreckless laugh.

"My leave is cancelled and your lousy scheme is under way, so we might as well go ahead with it!" he grunted. "If the Boche have got a ship like that message described, we're sunk if we don't do something. This plan has got about one chance in a thousand of working. But maybe that one chance makes it worth trying."

"It seems to me any intelligent man could see the plan will work. I must confess I don't like your attitude at all. Or your actions, either. But G.H.Q. recommended you for the job because, so they said, no other flier in the Allied service is more particularly fitted for a thing of this sort," Cottrill said coldly.

Flack glowered, "I always figured they had me pegged for a dumb cluck!"

HE FLUNG a rigid, pointing bar of an arm at Cottrill's handsome face. "I'll tackle it! But not if you send a flight of planes to follow me. The Boche will hear them and telephone the dope all over the front. It'll make it hard for me to get a look at this new plane. They'll be on guard, anyway. Besides, what good will destroying the ship do? They'll have specifications of it filed in a dozen places."

"I have decided to send a flight of ships!"

"Then count me out!"

Cottrill purpled. He opened and shut his mouth. He fingered his long, too-perfectly moulded nose. "If you insist, I will make a concession. I will follow you in a two-seater with a heavy load of bombs. I will fly high. One plane will not attract attention."

"No good!" Flack snapped. "The Boche will send up a pursuit flight and nail you."

"I do not think so!" the officer said stiffly.

Flack spread his hands angrily. "I do! And it's not only your scalp I'm thinking of! It's mine. A ship following is liable to raise all kinds of hell. Either I go alone, or I don't go. That's final!"

"Very well, then! I concede. But your attitude is endangering my plan. You will make every effort. I do not wish to be humiliated by having my plan fail."

"Your humiliation will be my funeral!" Flack laughed angrily.

Dusk was congealing rapidly into darkness as Flack was prodded back into the jail shack. He swore at the guards while they locked the door behind him. The German, Max Hauser, still sat below the window. He watched Flack, but did not speak. Flack strode to the window and peered out. Several minutes he stood there, breathing noisily, watching the Eightieth tarmac. He could see the bat patrol ships on the line, ready for the air.

Backing to the middle of the floor, he sat down, said softly: "C'mere!"

The manacled Boche hobbled silently across the floor and lowered beside him.

In words hardly louder than his breathing, Flack declared: "I wouldn't talk to you a while ago because I thought you might be somebody they had put in here to pump me. Now I've got to take a chance on you, because I'm going to make a break."

"That would be fatal!" objected the Boche.

"What do you think staying here will be?" Flack snorted. Then he began speaking in perfect German. "I've got a message that has to go across the lines."

"Did they not find it when they, searched you?" the other questioned also in German.

"It's written on the skin of my back with a colorless acid," Flack explained glibly, nothing in his voice showing his statements were springing from nothing more tangible than a fertile brain. "It's invisible, but a sheet of damp litmus paper pressed against my back will pick up the writing. They didn't think of that."

"Ah!" ejaculated Max Hauser. "Then you are on a mission! To whom does this message go?"

"That is not your affair!" Flack said fiercely.

"*Das ist treu*," admitted the German. "That is true. But, should we escape, I might be able to take you to whoever the message is addressed."

A perfect trend for the conversation to take! Flack had been wondering how he was going to get at the subject. He made an elaborate pretense of considering and said, "All right. The message is for the designer, Karl Seehund. It has to do with a new plane—a ship we have reason to believe the Allies copied from Seehund's latest product."

"*Mein Gott!*" Hauser ejaculated. "Can it be the enemy already has the design of our new ship?"

"We can tell when Karl Seehund inspects the data on my back," Flack declared. "At any rate, it is imperative my message get through. It may cause the German high command to change their plans, should this plane be equal to Karl Seehund's newest."

"It is important—very important!" the Boche agreed earnestly. "You have a plan for escape?"

Not answering, Flack tugged off his left boot. He removed the sock. From where it had been well hidden on the bottom of his foot, he pulled a square of adhesive tape and showed Max Hauser the short hacksaw blade it had concealed.

He repeated the process with the other foot, bringing to light a metal box about as long and wide, but somewhat more shallow than the containers used to hold safety razor blades. In it were two slim celluloid phials, imbedded in cotton.

"Tear gas," he explained. "I carry all this stuff for an emergency."

He neglected to add the emergency contemplated had been the chance he might be forced down behind the Hun lines some time and committed to a prison camp from which he might want to escape.

FLACK used the fragment of hacksaw blade on Max Hauser's wrist and leg manacles. Severing the links took half an hour.

While the German stretched to un-kink his muscles, the little buzzard whispered rapidly: "The bat patrol hasn't taken off yet, but their ships are on the line. When the mechanics start to warm them, we'll make our break and try to get one!"

"*Wohl!*" agreed Max Hauser. "So be it!"

Flack grinned wolfishly in the black gloom which now soaked the inside of the shack. The sentry outside knew what was to happen; he was probably wondering what was holding up the event. But it was all of half an hour before a Hisso motor coughed a ragged volley of exhaust sound.

"We will try now!" Flack told Max Hauser in German.

Then he called softly to the sentry.

"What d'you want?" the man demanded.

"I want you to take this paper to the C.O.," Flack replied.

The sentry, playing his part, hesitated a proper interval, then opened the door a crack and threw a flashlight in. "Where's the paper?"

Flack fumbled in his breast pocket with his left hand. Simultaneously, his right hand shot one tear gas phial at the sentry, using the gesture a small boy employs to shoot a marble. It was excellently acted. The sentry howled, clapped hands to his eyes. Flack and Max Hauser charged. Flack got the man's rifle. Hauser got his service automatic.

They sprinted for the warming planes. Somebody shouted. Somebody else fired a rifle; the bullet passed well overhead. They veered for a ship, reached it.

"Ride the wing!" Flack yelled. He plunged into the cockpit.

Max Hauser smeared his bulk on the wing, close to the fuselage. The Spad howled, shook itself and hopped the wheel chocks. Across the tarmac it scudded, bawling like a branded calf. Flack, holding ailerons leafed at an angle to counterbalance the Boche's not inconsiderable weight, coaxed the clammy little dragonfly of a ship into the night air.

Adding further reality to the escape, ground Maxims began to fish in the darkened sky with fierce threads of tracer. Whatever else he might be, handsome Cottrill was a good stage manager.

Flack ran the Spad upstairs steeply as possible. With the altimeter at a thousand, he leveled, and craned his neck overside. Max Hauser, securely tangled in the wing brace wires, had inched ahead until he could peer over the wing leading edge. He pointed.

Flack banked in the indicated direction—and

breathed an ardent hope they were really bound to meet Karl Seehund, designer of the Huns' new super-ship.

FOR possibly an hour, the heavily burdened Spad boomed through the night. Then Max Hauser, like a huge, depilous insect, waggled an arm and pointed straight down. Stick ahead, boot on right rudder, Flack spiraled the ship. In the pale moonlight, the earth resembled a faded picture, without color or much graphic detail; it bloated up at them after the fashion of an inflating balloon.

Flack made out hangars, paunchy bullfrog structures squatting at the edge of a level smear of landing field. Squinting at the lay-out, he brightened slightly. The very size of the tarmac indicated it was an experimental drome. A searchlight rammed up a great taper of white luminance. The beam shifted; they were suddenly imbedded in it.

Flack dipped his wings violently in hopes that would encourage the Boche to hold their fire. Flying wires let out a moan as he banked down. The sound softened to a low hiss as he fish-tailed speed away a few yards above the Hun tarmac.

The landing trucks touched with a sound like a drum rolling down a stairs. Tailskid grinding, the Spad stopped. The searchlight had followed them, and was pressing glare into their eyes.

Flack stood erect in the pit, said in German: "Well, we're here!"

"*Ja*," Max Hauser agreed. "Cut off your engine!"

Flack started to obey, but something queer in the German's tone stopped him. He stared at the fellow.

Max Hauser drew the automatic he had taken from the Yank sentry. He pointed it at Flack and grinned fiercely. "Cut off your engine!"

Flack's tongue made a race track of his lips. Wild thoughts clicked about in his head like dice on a cigar store counter. He hadn't figured it quite this way!

"Do as I command!" rapped Max Hauser. "I know you are no German spy!"

Flack put an easy grin on his homely face, but it took an effort to do it. He cut off the ignition with a feeling like he was cutting his own throat. The engine sobbed and died.

"You're pretty clever, Hauser!" Flack said.

Max Hauser stared at him levelly. Uniformed Germans were appearing in the searchlight beam, their leaping forms casting long, grotesquely dancing shadows. Hauser smiled tightly, pocketed his gun.

"Ja," he said. "I knew that if you were not a German agent, you would try to escape when I said that."

The other Germans came up. Flack went to the field office with Max Hauser. They told their story there and received a roar of congratulations. Hauser seemed to be well known here. It was evident he was a German flying officer of fairly high rank.

"I have sent for Karl Seehund," he told Flack after a while. "He will arrive within half an hour."

Flack's grin became more hearty. He thanked the Boche agent.

A few moments later, a telephone rang. An *Unterleutnant* spoke over the instrument.

"That was a pursuit staffel nearer the lines," he announced. "They advise us a single enemy ship passed overhead a few minutes ago. They have sent a circus up after it, since the enemy craft seemed to be heading this way."

It was a two-seater, flying very high."

Flack took that without change of expression. Too-handsome Major Cottrill! The man had come up in the two-seater with a load of bombs, as he had been set on doing. The searchlights must have guided him to this Boche drome. Rage reddened Flack's neck. The man might as well have brought a squadron! Would these Germans become suspicious?

It was not more than two minutes before a mad droning of motors overhead drew them outside. With the Huns, Flack peered at the moonlit sky—and his teeth set together so hard they acquired an ache.

The Boche circus had sky-cornered Major Cottrill. Against the fast Fokkers the two-seater the Major flew was helpless as a fat Wyandotte pullet among chicken hawks.

"He should have known better!" Flack muttered, absently speaking English.

"Ja," Max Hauser agreed in German. "He must have succeeded in following us."

Flack sopped sudden perspiration off his forehead and continued to peer skyward. Major Cottrill abruptly came down. It was the only thing he could do, unless he wanted to be shot out of the sky. He swung in, crowded by Maltese-crossed Hun pursuits, and put his trucks on the Boche tarmac. He made an attempt to fire his plane, but failed. The pursuits overhead boiled around until they were sure the capture was complete, then swerved off for their home field.

Cottrill was an actor. Let up, he arrogantly cursed Flack and Max Hauser for two German spies, swearing stilted, bookish oaths.

Max Hauser smirked at him, "You have a great load of bombs on your ship, I see. You followed us in hopes of destroying Germany's new plane, ja?"

Cottrill drew himself up, replied nothing.

"It is a good night for Germany when the enemy presents us with two ships and one of their squadron commanders," Mauser laughed.

"There is Karl Seehund," he smiled at Flack, pointing to a new arrival.

PLANE Designer Karl Seehund was a stoop-shouldered, gaunt man. His hands dangled out of his sleeves like gnarled, pale clubs. Thick-lensed magnifying spectacles gave him a pop-eyed look. He listened sleepily to Flack explain about the imaginary message written in acid on his back, then said: "It will take hours to get litmus paper to procure that message. Do you know some of the specifications of this new enemy plane?"

"A few," Flack fabricated.

"I will show you my ship," suggested the designer. "Perhaps you can tell immediately if the enemy craft is identical." He hesitated. "That is, if Max Hauser will vouch for your loyalty to Germany."

"He is loyal," said Max Hauser.

"I think I can tell by looking at the plane," Flack declared. Then he had inspiration. He bowed ironically at Major Cottrill, put a typical *Kultur* sneer in his voice. The sneer wasn't hard. "Perhaps the ambitious fashion plate would like a look at the bait which drew him here before he is taken to a prison camp?"

Max Hauser laughed loudly. He had enough *Kultur* himself to appreciate that joke. "A good idea, *Mein Herr!* Yes, he should see it." He sobered suddenly. "But not too closely."

"Not too closely," Flack agreed.

They went to a hangar.

"We keep it well guarded!" smiled Karl Seehund. When Hauser, Flack, Major Cottrill and himself were inside, he relocked the door on the inside. Then he turned on electric lights. Flack, catching a glaring, fanatical gleam in Cottrill's eyes, managed to give a warning, shake of the head that only the Eightieth C.O. saw. With four sentries outside and a drome swarming with Boche, this was no time for rash moves.

"I will hold the prisoner here," chuckled Max Hauser. "He can see the ship, but not closely enough to ascertain structural details."

The new German pursuit job. A gleaming, graceful falcon of fabric and wood and metal. Flack, staring at it, sucked in his breath admiringly. The Boche

really had something here! He could see speed and maneuverability in the lines of the craft, without going nearer it.

"Come!" said Karl Seehund.

"*Himmel!*" he breathed in German. "The enemy ship is very similar. I believe it is almost the same. What a calamity for Germany! Have you specifications I can inspect to be more certain?"

"*Ja,*" said the designer. "Locked in the safe. I will get them. This is terrible! We have guarded the secret of this plane so jealously." He bent before a massive box of gray steel, fumbling with keys and combination dials. *Click!* The sound was faint. And it did not come from the safe dials. Flack screwed his head around.

Major Cottrill and Max Hauser were fighting! Cottrill had a hand on the Boche's throat, preventing an outcry.

For a fraction of a second Flack wondered how Cottrill had managed to seize Hauser without getting shot. Then he guessed the answer. The German was guarding Cottrill with the automatic he had taken from the Yank sentry and Cottrill must have had the gun emptied so none of the Eightieth would get shot during the faked escape! The empty gun had made the click.

The safe door opened with a low squeak. Karl Seehund brought out blueprints, said: "These are the specifications!"

Flack swung a clubbed fist. It caught the plane designer on the temple. The man slumped forward, his forehead butted the hard iron of the safe, and he fell backward, limp. The blueprints rolled across the floor.

Flack scooped up the drawings, crumpled them in a manner that would have been agony to the draftsman whose loving hand had made them, rammed them inside his jacket, and spun for the fight by the door. Major Cottrill was keeping his throat grip, although taking a terrific clouting.

With a bony knot of a fist, Flack slugged Max Hauser in the small of the back. The fellow stiffened. Hooking the other fist around, Flack landed it against the Boche's jaw. Hauser's head became slack on his shoulders. His eyeballs rolled loosely and his body shook as though chilled.

Flack hit him once again, breathed: "That'll hold him!"

"Get the hangar doors open!" Cottrill hissed. "I will steal this plane! You will shoot down those who try to stop me!"

Outside, a sentry shouted a question which showed

he had heard the blows. Flack cursed Major Cottrill silently. He wracked his brains. This was a pretty jam! They would never get away with that plane. There was another way out, though, a thousand to one shot.

Flack's voice, lifting, roared words in German.

"The fool prisoner!" he told the sentry. "He tried to get near the new ship!"

Major Cottrill goggled at Flack. He didn't understand German.

HE WAS still goggling when Flack hit him—hit him a terrific, upper-cutting blow to the nose that stood the dandified officer on his shoulders on the hard floor.

Cottrill's mouth gaped at the lights funneling luminance from the hangar rafters. His long nose had acquired a new, awry shape. He was thoroughly unconscious. Flack ran to Karl Seehund, got the keys. Hardly pausing on his way back, he scooped up the form of Cottrill.

Unlocking the door, he stepped out boldly, then closed it. Four rifles levelled at him, the sentries behind them hard-eyed, suspicious.

"We had to knock the prisoner unconscious," Flack grinned brazenly. "And we discovered he is a much more important prisoner than we thought. We are taking him to headquarters of the Imperial Staff at once. We are going to take him in the plane he came in. Carry him to it!"

Two of the sentries obediently seized the limp form of Cottrill. Another sentry stepped toward the hangar door.

Flack's heart dived into his boots. He said evenly: "Max Hauser and Karl Seehund are talking. They will be out in a moment."

The sentry nodded and did not go nearer the door. Flack followed the pair carrying Cottrill.

"Put him in the aft cockpit," he ordered. "Max Hauser will ride there with him. One of you give the prop a turn."

He glanced toward the hangar which held the new plane—suddenly saw the open door a gaping rectangle of light. The sentry had gone in!

With a vault, Flack made the two-seater cockpit. His palm hit the throttle about the time his pants hit the bucket cushion. The *Hisso* had not cooled much; it pulled the ship ahead sluggishly.

A rifle bullet tore stuffing out of the pit pad. Flack hauled on the stick so forcibly the tailskid jabbed the tarmac. Up went the panting ship.

A whistling metallic torrent ate a hole through both

wings. Flack held his course, tongue gripped between his teeth. He tugged the bomb trips.

Flack looked back, decided he couldn't have done better, and hoicked the ship for France. He might make it if he didn't meet the Boche pursuit circus that had forced Cottrill down.

He didn't meet them. The trucks jouncing across the Eightieth tarmac awakened Cottrill. He peered vacantly at the clumsy two-seater. To Cottrill's dazed eyes, the two-seater evidently looked like the German pursuit job. And his egoism was still working.

"I got it!" he gulped. "I got it!"

Flack started to reach for the blueprinted specifications inside his jacket, changed his mind and peered at the altered shape of Major Cottrill's handsome nose. He grinned from ear to ear.

"Yeah, you got it!" he agreed.