

THE ADVENTURES OF
The **THREE** 
MOSQUITOES



DARK SKIES *Flanagan build*

by RALPH OPPENHEIM

Each day those death-dealing bombs came winging down out of space. Every ship on the Front rammed its nose into the skies on the vengeance trail, but their eager guns found nothing. Then came that mysterious light to taunt the Three Mosquitoes into the greatest mystery of their career.

THE BIG ROOM in the big chateau which was Allied headquarters at Remiens, was dimly lit, and its great French windows were heavily curtained so that not even a ray of light might escape. The sole illumination came from the hooded electric bulb which hung from the center of the ceiling, casting its funnel-like glare down upon the colonel and the three men who stood before his desk. The rest of the room was in shadows and darkness. One could just make out the hands of the big clock on the wall, which now indicated that the hour was twenty minutes to eleven.

The colonel, a thin, gray-haired veteran, looked up at the three men before him, and as the light from above fell upon his features it revealed deep lines of worry and eyes that were bloodshot from many sleepless nights. Before, when the glare had not been directly upon him, he had merely looked stern and officious. But under the light he seemed old and haggard—a tired old man who suddenly feels the burden of a responsibility which has become too heavy for his shoulders.

When he spoke his voice was low and tense, but it seemed loud in the room which had been silent save for the slow ticking of the clock on the wall.

"I'm glad you three men lost no time in getting here," he said. "There may still be a chance that we can get at the roots of this thing to-night, and stop it before it can go any further!"

The "Three Mosquitoes," the most famous trio of aces on the Western Front, nodded slowly, thoughtfully. Now, at last, they began to realize that it was not without reason they had been summoned from their drome at the Front to this town of Remiens, way in the back areas. At first, they had been quite disgusted over the prospect, for Remiens, like Blois, was nothing but a supply base, though it was the biggest and most important supply base the Allies possessed.

"You've done work of this kind before," the colonel continued, in the same tense voice. "That is why we feel confident that you can help us solve this baffling mystery." And his eyes measured them appraisingly.

"Well, we can try, anyhow!" Kirby, impetuous young leader of the trio, conceded cheerfully, feeling that something should be said.

"But before we make any rash promises, sir"—Shorty Carn, the mild-eyed, corpulent little Mosquito was always conservative except when his fighting blood was aroused—"we'd better know exactly what it's all about."

The lanky Travis, eldest and wisest of the trio, said nothing, but waited in respectful silence for the colonel's explanation. It did not come immediately, however. Instead, the high officer seemed to digress. He picked up a metal object from his desk and held it under the light in the cupped palm of his hand.

"What would you men call this?" he asked, abruptly.

"Why, that's a nose-fuse," replied Kirby, and simultaneously Shorty said, "A nose-fuse," and Travis drawled, "A nose-fuse from an aerial bomb."

The colonel nodded in slow agreement. "Yes, that's just what I would call it myself—a nose-fuse from an aerial bomb. In fact, that's just what it is!"

THE THREE MOSQUITOES stared at the colonel blankly. Despite the obvious gravity of the situation, they half-wondered whether the colonel was trying to kid them. But the colonel's face, if anything, was more sober and tense than ever, and there seemed to be a strange brooding horror in his bloodshot eyes now. He replaced the nose-fuse on his desk, and then, leaning back wearily in his chair, plunged abruptly into his explanation.

"It is hardly necessary for me to tell you that if our supply base here were wiped out, we might very well lose the whole war," was the surprising conjecture with which he started. "Our troops, in fact, the troops of all the Allies depend vitally upon the supplies stored here. And we who are in charge of those supplies have a responsibility which few, especially those in more active service at the Front, can appreciate. It is up to us to protect the stuff, and to see that nothing happens to it.

"You can believe, then, that we have spared no measures to take every possible precaution against enemy activity here. I doubt if anything could be protected more carefully than our great supply base. We keep it way behind the lines here so that even the longest range Boche guns can't reach it, and we guard against sabotage by having scores of intelligence operatives constantly on the grounds, mingling with the men. And above all," he emphasized, "we have taken measures against air raids, for only by that means could the Germans attempt to reach us. We have an aerial defense here which is even stronger than those in Paris and London! There are continuous patrols, day and night, and we have a sufficient battery of anti-aircraft guns to make the sky solid with a barrage." He paused, and the lines in his face deepened, while that strange horror stared

more clearly from his eyes. "And that is why the thing that has been happening is so incredible, so utterly preposterous!" He leaned forward in his chair, and the Three Mosquitoes instinctively moved closer, tense, expectant.

"For the past five days," he told them slowly, so that each word came like the blow of a hammer, "on every single night at approximately eleven o'clock, we have been bombed from the air!"

Again the Three Mosquitoes nodded slowly, thoughtfully. But they were not shocked or awed by the announcement. Though the colonel had assured them that the aerial defense here was virtually impregnable, they were aviators, and consequently had more faith in airplanes than in the defenses used against them. But they did glance somewhat tensely at the clock on the wall, whose scarcely visible hands now pointed to ten minutes of eleven.

"Gothas, I suppose," Kirby ventured.

The colonel smiled a queer, twisted smile.

"Phantoms would be the better word," he corrected, and something in his tone chilled the Mosquitoes to the very marrow, and they were acutely aware that it was a dark night outside the curtained windows, and that the town was ominously quiet, hushed. In the strained silence the clock on the wall ticked on, the minute hand moving slowly, inexorably.

Kirby spoke again.

"Phantoms," he echoed, thickly. "Why do you say that, colonel?"

The colonel's voice rose, a little wildly now, as if he could no longer suppress his horror and worry.

"Did you ever hear of a bomb-raid where the raiders are absolutely invisible, where not a sign of them could be found either by the searchlights or the fleets of patrol ships, where they had not been seen or reported anywhere along the route they must take from Bochelant to here?"

The question, which was really a statement, caused all Three Mosquitoes to start. A look of puzzled mystification came over their features. Now they were shocked and awed. They shook their heads in a bewildered negative.

"But how about the engines?" Travis drawled. "Certainly you could hear them between the bomb-bursts, especially with the detectors at the anti-aircraft guns."

"So we thought," the colonel said wearily, as if dismissing an idea that had long since become stale and meaningless. "On the third night, we deliberately

kept all our own planes on the ground, and listened between the bombs for the slightest sound. There was nothing." He shook his head, and repeated dully, "Nothing."

THE THREE MOSQUITOES looked at one another bewilderedly. The thing seemed to be getting more and more uncanny. It was Kirby who next tried to fit logic to it. The leader of the Mosquitoes suddenly brightened.

"Are you sure the Jerries are not putting an old one over on you?" he asked. "Suppose, for instance, they are using a Zeppelin, which could just hang above the town with its motors off. It could easily hide in or above a cloud."

"Not if there are no clouds in the sky," the colonel instantly shattered his theory. "And on practically all the nights the sky was quite clear. Certainly we would have seen a Zeppelin, if there was any."

"They can fly pretty high, though," Shorty put in, hopefully.

"But not so high that they'd be invisible on a cloudless night," the wise Travis agreed with the colonel.

The colonel waved an impatient hand, as if to indicate that they were wasting time with such conjecturing. His glance went to the clock. It was now just five minutes to eleven. He spoke more hurriedly, but still continued to give the Mosquitoes all the details.

"At first, when we repeatedly saw no signs of the raiders, we thought that perhaps the Germans actually had some long-range gun which could shoot the incredible distance of 150 miles, for we are that far from the Front. But that theory was disproved in a thousand ways. Our ordnance experts, examining the hits, found that they could only have been made by bombs dropped directly from above. Then there is the testimony of near-by residents and soldiers, who heard the bombs coming down—a sound that is clearly distinguishable from the shrill whistle of a shell. Finally, there are the nose-fuses we picked up and all three of you identified this one immediately and without hesitation.

"In short," he concluded, while the Three Mosquitoes listened in hushed awe, "these attacks have positively been made from the air, with ordinary aerial bombs. We have gone so far as to suspect that the Germans might have produced some new-type plane, which can fly so high that it can't be seen, and whose engine is muffled. A preposterous theory, but

far more logical than any other we can think of. At any rate, night after night, these raiders have come down over our town, unseen, and unheard, and dropped their bombs with devastating effects. Scores of helpless people have been killed or wounded, not to mention the damage to buildings and property.

“Fortunately, the raiders have not yet been able to hit their real objective, which is, of course, the big supply base on the other side of the town. Thus far their bombs have been inaccurate, but they are getting closer with each raid, and it stands to reason that soon, perhaps this very night, they will achieve their deadly purpose!” His features whitened at the ghastly thought. “If they do, it will mean the end. One direct hit could set that highly inflammable supply base on fire, and it would burn to cinders in no time. And so you see, the situation is——”

Boom! The shattering explosion drowned out the rest of his words as it reverberated through the night. The floor of the room shook, the windows rattled. The blast had come from some distance away, but it had seemed deafening in the stillness.

The colonel was on his feet, waving his arms excitedly. The Three Mosquitoes were standing rigid, frozen. Another explosion crashed through the night, and then a third.

“There you are.” The colonel was speaking with that exaggerated quietness that betrays nerves about to snap, emotions about to burst. His face was ashen. “There you can hear it for yourselves. It’s just eleven o’clock and the Boche are here as usual to——” He choked, and shook his clenched fist impotently upward while he muttered hoarse curses.

THE FOURTH EAR-SPLITTING EXPLOSION seemed cruelly to mock the colonel’s maledictions. He leaned weakly against his desk for support, his face twisting with horror and anguish as explosion now followed explosion, in slow but terrible succession. And now the town which had been so quiet a moment before seemed to awaken with a shock. Beneath the reverberating crashes of bombs rose the shrill wail of raid sirens; there were shouts and running footsteps, as of people frantically scurrying to get under shelter. Ambulances and fire-engines clattered madly through the streets, horns honking, bells clanging. But all throughout, the frightful explosions continued, making the building here tremble on its foundations, making the windowpanes rattle like crinkling paper.

And then Kirby, stirred to savage action by all

the excitement and clamor, was shouting with lusty eagerness: “Colonel, our planes are right near by and ready! And we’re going up! We’re going up right now!” He wheeled on his comrades. “Come on, fellers. Let’s see what this is all about!”

And Shorty and Travis gave their eager assent. “Let’s go!” they chorused the inevitable war-whoop of the Mosquitoes. And something in their tone must have reassured the colonel, for he managed to grin, though his face was still white.

“That’s the spirit!” he commended. “Go to it! You ought to have time. These raids last twenty minutes at least! And perhaps,” he added, with all the frenzied optimism of a drowning man clutching a straw, “you’ll be able to see what hundreds of other pilots have missed—the raiders! We’re counting on you! It’s our only hope now!”

But the eager Mosquitoes did not hear this last, for they had already dashed out through the doorway. Down the corridor they ran, and but through the main entrance of the chateau, where two alert but flustered doughboy sentries presented arms to them. They emerged in the brisk but noisy night. It was a dark night, made even darker by the unlighted streets and shuttered buildings. But it was also a clear night: above were twinkling stars, though there was no moon.

The bombs were still bursting with crashing monotony on the other side of the town. As the Mosquitoes started through the practically deserted streets, all three glanced upward at the patch of starry sky which showed above the buildings. Over the house-tops they could see several waving ribbons of light which stabbed up through the darkness. Searchlights, hunting frantically for the raiders.

Down through the village dashed the Mosquitoes, while the streets shook beneath their feet at each distant explosion. A few minutes and they arrived, breathless, at the aviation field on the outskirts of the town. They rushed to their three Spads, which squatted side by side on the dark tarmac.

“Snap into it” Kirby yelled to the startled mechanics who came out from the hangars. “Get our ships revved up toot sweet! We’ve got to be in the air before those bombs stop coming down!” Scarcely ten minutes later the three trim Spads were rocketing skyward, with sparks streaming from their exhausts and motors roaring in thunderous unison. They climbed over the town in their usual formation, with Kirby leading and Shorty and Travis flanking him on either side and a little to the rear. As soon as they were over the village,

Kirby led them around in a wide sweeping circle, while they still continued to make altitude.

The sky around them was a maze of probing searchlights now—scores and scores of white bands which waved to and fro like a lot of gesticulating arms, like feelers groping for the danger which lurked above. Off to the left the Mosquitoes could discern a squadron of night-flying Camels, and another patrol swept past far in front of them. But there was not a trace of German ships. There was not a trace of them, though their bombs were still falling in terrible succession upon the village below! Every now and then the Mosquitoes saw a vivid flash of fire leap out of the dim blur of buildings, and seconds later the slower-traveling concussion made their ships wobble slightly.

CHAPTER II GHOST BOMBER

KIRBY LED his comrades straight over the vicinity of the raid. Beneath them now, indistinct except when grotesquely illumined by the flash of a bomb, they could make out a large cluster of low, squatting buildings, surrounded by a wall. The supply base! The bombs seemed to be falling terribly close to it, just a few hundred yards away as a matter of fact. If they hit it——

The Mosquitoes scanned the surrounding sky with growing perplexity. There were those bombs, bursting right beneath them, so that they felt they were running the risk of being struck by one of them on its way down. For, in the light of cold reason, the Jerry bombers must be somewhere above. The Mosquitoes kept searching for them, straining their eyes toward the starry ceiling overhead. But they could see nothing but clear sky and twinkling stars. There were no German planes or ships above, or anywhere else around here!

Kirby glanced from side to side at his two comrades, whose goggled faces were revealed in the glow from the hooded lights of their dashboards. They looked back at him, and he could see his own bewildered incredulity reflected in their features. He shook his head. It was uncanny, those bombs bursting down there an yet no trace of Jerry aircraft overhead! It was uncanny, and damn it all, Kirby kept telling himself with stubborn Yankee logic, it was impossible!

On a sudden impulse he waved a signal to his comrades and again led them upward, this time in

a long, streaking zoom. Up, up, up, they climbed, still keeping over the scene of the raid. The air grew thinner and colder, with the thin biting coldness of the upper regions, which chills to the very marrow. The Three Mosquitoes began to breathe with increasing difficulty. But they kept climbing toward the stars until their protesting engines would pull them no farther through the thin air. Then, at this highest possible ceiling, miles above the earth, they again commenced to circle. Once more they searched the surrounding sky, straining their eyes to peer through the murk. And once more they saw absolutely nothing! It was maddening, brain-teasing!

Baffled and awed, the Mosquitoes swept downward again, and as they came down this time they saw that the raid had ended! It had ended as abruptly as it had come. The bombs were no longer bursting below. For awhile the trio continued to fly around, still searching desperately for signs of any Jerries. But at last Kirby gave up in disgust. It was no use. Those Boche bombers were nowhere to be seen, and probably by this time they must be safely on their way home! Dismally, futilely, Kirby waved to his comrades, and the three Spads banked in graceful unison and went roaring back toward their field. They flashed their wing-tips lights, the floodlights were switched on below, and they all swept down and settled on the tarmac in perfect landings.

Minutes later they were once more in the dimly-lit room of the headquarters chateau. The room was crowded now, filled with officers and men. There were ordnance experts, Intelligence operatives, and a major who commanded the pursuit flights here. The colonel still sat at his desk, looking older and more haggard than ever. But his eyes lit up with eager hope as he saw the Three Mosquitoes.

“Well,” he exclaimed eagerly, “any luck? We’ve been waiting for you!” And instantly every eye in the room was focused upon Kirby and his comrades. The Mosquitoes shifted uncomfortably, looking somewhat sheepish. Evidently these men had never doubted that the famous trio of aces would instantly solve the baffling mystery. The exploits of the Three Mosquitoes had been so widely broadcast, and doubtless so exaggerated with each re-telling, that they were expected to work miracles.

KIRBY SHOOK his head almost guiltily. “I’m afraid you gentlemen rate us a little too high,” he confessed, frankly. “Because we’re just as stumped as you are. We

flew all over the town; in fact we risked our necks by flying over the spot where the bombs were dropping.” He sighed, bitterly. “But we didn’t see a damned thing!”

Disappointment clouded every face in the room. The colonel, all the hope fading from his tense features, gave a groan.

“Good Lord, will we never be able to match wits with the Boche?” he uttered, in despair. “Will they never cease to pull the wool over our eyes? Are we just going to stand by with idle hands while they blast our supply base off the face of the earth? They almost hit it to-night. One more raid like this and they’ll surely hit it!” Again his voice rose with shrill frenzy. “We must do something, I tell you! We must stop them! We can’t have this go on any longer!”

The men in the room nodded in grim and somber agreement, but all felt helpless to offer any suggestions. With a superhuman effort the colonel pulled himself together again.

“Well, let us hear the rest of the reports,” he snapped, officiously. “Perhaps we will be able to find some new clues!”

The reports continued. The major in command of the air squadrons explained that none of his pilots had been able to see any signs of the Boche raiders, though they had swept the sky as zealously as the Mosquitoes. The ordnance experts told of their observations of the bomb hits, describing the terrific damage, and giving only further proof that the missiles were indeed ordinary aerial bombs. To clinch this incontrovertible conclusion, there was the report of an eye-witness, a badly bruised and scratched infantry private who told his story with wild hysteria.

“And so I’m walking down the street, returnin’ to my billet, when I hear a noise over my head like something dropping. I’ve heard that noise before, so I know what it is. It’s a bomb, spinnin’ down! I flopped right on the street and lay there. I didn’t dare to breathe. And then,” his eyes widened as the horror of it all came back to him in full, “I seen it! I seen that bomb falling right across the street! I could see it spinnin’ down like a big pear and then it struck the roof of a building. There’s an explosion which threw me way down the street. The building went up in flames and smoke, and debris come raining down all over the place.

“I got up and began to run like hell, because now I hear more bombs coming. They came down one after another, and each time I threw myself flat on the

street. It was rainin’ nose-fuses and the fumes from the bombs almost choked me! But after a while I managed to crawl into a building where there’s a cellar full of people. I stayed there with ‘em until it was over——”

The men in the room shook their heads, perplexed and horrified. The Three Mosquitoes racked their brains in vain, trying to figure it all out.

“The funny part of it is,” remarked Kirby musingly, “there’s only one thing unusual about these raids, only one thing that makes them any different from other air raids, and that’s that the bombers can’t seem to be located. That’s all there really is to the mystery.”

“That’s all there is to most mysteries,” put in a keen-eyed captain of the U.S. intelligence corps, a man who evidently spoke from experience. “The most baffling cases are just like that. You’ve got everything except the one elusive thread, the spring within a spring. But,” he shook his head, “it’s a damned hard thing to find!”

“We’ve got to find it!” the colonel insisted, with frenzy.

THERE CAME a sudden rude interruption. Through the doorway, dragging a squirming, protesting man in peasant’s clothes between them, came two burly M.P.s. They were using their clubs quite freely on the prisoner, for he was constantly trying to struggle out of their grasp. They dragged him into the room, while all looked on with surprise and wonder. One of the M.P.s spoke, without losing his tenacious hold on the squirming peasant.

“Beggin’ the Colonel’s pardon, sir,” he said, huskily, “but we found this Frog prowlin’ right around the neighborhood where all them bombs fell. He was actin’ so damn suspicious we thought we better run him in.” He reached with a free hand into his pocket, pulled out a metal object. “We found this flashlight on him, sir.” And he leaned over to place it on the colonel’s desk.

The colonel, his brows knitting, picked up the flashlight and examined it. It proved to be a well-known French make, but though it was small, the light in it was surprisingly bright. The colonel switched it on and off a few times, then set it down on the desk. His glance went to the squirming peasant, and his face suddenly grew lean and stern. Despite his inner panic and horror, he became the commanding officer, the stern military official.

“Bring him up to the desk!” he snapped tersely.

The M.P.s obeyed with alacrity. They dragged their protesting captive before the desk and stood him up, covering him with their Colt forty-fives. The prisoner

immediately began to speak, volubly and in French. He sputtered like a steam radiator, pouring out an endless stream of words. He gesticulated frantically, waving his arms over his head, jumping up and down until the colonel, watching him narrowly, shouted at him.

"Wait a minute! Wait a minute!" The man subsided long enough for the colonel to demand, "Can you speak English?"

The peasant nodded eagerly. "*Qui, monsieur!*" he croaked, almost triumphantly. "I spik ze Anglais ver' well! Eet ees pair-feet, how I spik her!"

"All right," said the colonel, like a judge in court. "I want you to answer my questions. Who are you and what do you do?"

"I am Emil Durand," came the instant reply. "I am merchant of pots, and I live in ze Rue des Vaches. Tonight I am walking home," his voice rose with righteous indignation, and again he waved his arms, "when zese men, zey jump on me—so!" He leaped into the air to illustrate it, and in spite of the tenseness of the situation, the Three Mosquitoes and several others laughed aloud at his amusing antics. "Zen zey hit me, once, twice!" He beat his head with a violent fist, and groaned with the pain of it. "Three time, four time! *Et alors, zey drag me here!*"

The colonel's face lost none of its sternness. He held up the flashlight.

"Does this belong to you or not?" he demanded.

"*Qui, monsieur!*" the Frenchman did not hesitate to claim ownership of the thing.

"Why were you carrying it with you?"

"Because, *monsieur*, ze house where I live eet ees ver' dark, on account of ze raid. I use ze light to go upstairs so I weel not fall!"

The colonel nodded. "But why were you prowling around the scene of the raid?"

"He sure was actin' damn suspicious," one of the M.P.s spoke up again. "Sneaky like, he was, and so we nabbed him!"

"Eet ees a lie!" screamed the peasant, in fury. "I am on my way home. Een ze raid I hide in ze cellar of my frien', Pierre Latiens, where I go to dreenk a leetle wine. I come out, and I am afraid of bombs, so I run, I make zigzag!"

"You mean," the colonel tried to translate the bad English, "that the reason you seemed to be acting suspicious was that you were afraid of the bombs? In other words, you were not walking along naturally, but were dodging in and out?"

"Yes," the peasant's face brightened. "*C'est juste!* Ze bombs—I am ver' much afraid!"

THE COLONEL seemed satisfied. The man's story was creditable enough, and there was absolutely no evidence that he was up to mischief. "I'm afraid you have made a mistake," the colonel told the M.P.s. "*Monsieur Durand* is apparently just a frightened citizen of the town. Hereafter," he warned, and the M.P.s listened in crestfallen silence, "be careful whom you apprehend. We can't be running in harmless citizens like this!" He handed the flashlight back to the peasant. "You may go now, *Monsieur Durand.*"

The Frenchman beamed and expressed his profuse gratitude. Then, after indulging in a grimacing leer at the two humiliated M.P.s, he marched with pompous pride toward the door. All watched him with amusement. Though his presence here had thrown no light on the mystery, he had somehow served to relieve the tension momentarily, given the men a chance to relax and smile again. He strutted to the door.

"*Erstazchen!*"

Harsh and guttural, this apparently meaningless utterance rose from the keen-eyed U.S. intelligence Captain, who stood in the center of the room. All turned to him with surprise. And the peasant, having just reached the doorway, stopped in his tracks, stiffening from head to foot. It was only momentary, that start—in the next instant, before many had time to notice it, the peasant was beaming again and strutting out through the door. But then the intelligence captain yelled hoarsely:

"Seize him! Seize that man! He's a German spy!"

The tone in which this order was given caused every man in the room to jump to obey it. The peasant seemed to hesitate a split-second, then a guttural snarl broke from him. With a defiant yell, he turned and rushed out into the corridor. The men poured out after him, whipping out their revolvers. It was Kirby who made the flying leap which brought him right up to the fugitive. The Mosquito caught the man's collar and held it in a leechlike clutch. The snarling peasant squirmed, and his hand darted furtively down his side.

"Look out!" some one yelled the frenzied warning. "He's got a gun! He's——"

Even as the words were uttered, something flashed silver in the fugitive's hand, and a dark muzzle loomed right in front of Kirby's face—a small muzzle, but to Kirby it looked as large as the mouth of a cannon. *Crack!* The spurt of livid flame just grazed his cheek, as he ducked instinctively to one side. By this time the rest of the men had reached the scene, and they bore down savagely on the spy, knocking him to the floor.

It took several minutes to subdue him. They dragged him, snarling and cursing in German, back to the room. Again he was standing before the colonel's desk, and this time the Three Mosquitoes, the M.P.s, and several others, covered him from all sides with their revolvers. He glared at them all with sullen defiance.

The U.S. intelligence captain was smiling queerly, as he turned a small nickel-plated pistol around in his hand.

"Nice little toy," he mused. "He had it so well hidden in a special pocket of his clothes that even the M.P.s here couldn't find it." He tossed it on the colonel's desk. The latter stared at it blankly. He was dumfounded and at loss to make out what it was all about. He stammered foolishly:

"What is the meaning of all this, Captain Brown? I realize we have just apprehended a spy, but the whole thing was so extraordinary."

CHAPTER III SILENCED MOTORS

THE INTELLIGENCE CAPTAIN'S SMILE broadened as he explained. "I suspected him the moment he came in. He was too anxious to get away, and his alibi was far too pat, as was his portrayal of an excited Frenchman. But I knew that he'd be wily, and that he'd really have to be taken off his guard to be betrayed. The psychological moment came when he thought he was getting away, when he was inwardly relaxing and all his fears had vanished; it was the last time he'd expect anything to happen. I just surprised him, and that was all there was to it." He spoke with the carelessness of a man to whom such things are commonplace routine.

"But that word you shouted at him," the bewildered colonel put in. "*Ershatz*—"

"*Erstazchen!*" the captain corrected, and for a second time the sullen-faced spy stiffened. "Yes, that happens to be the password of one of the most crafty and deadly branches of the Imperial intelligence corps. It is a branch composed only of picked and experienced veterans, who can play a lone hand anywhere. Its chief is the notorious Baron von Harbach, and he's more crafty than the devil himself! When I saw this man here, I figured that if he were a spy he must belong to von Harbach's famous branch, for only such an agent would be entrusted to try any espionage in this town, which is so well guarded. I

happened to know the password and sprung it on him. You saw what happened!"

The colonel nodded, full understanding coming to him at last. He glanced at the M.P.s, and his warm praise allayed all the humiliation they had first felt.

"You two men have made a great catch," he commended. "I'll see that it is properly reported to your superiors." And they beamed proudly. The colonel turned then to the spy, and his face grew lean and wolfish. With the situation now clear in his mind, he knew just how to deal with it. His eyes narrowed to ominous slits.

"Well," he thundered, "what have you to say for yourself? Do you dare to deny that you are a German spy, operating under von Harbach's branch?"

The German gave a shrug. "I have nothing to say," came the sullen reply, in flawless English.

"Oh, very well," the colonel's voice was as cold as steel. "In that case we will have nothing to say either! I thought perhaps you would be sensible, but suit yourself!" He jerked his head toward an infantry officer across the room. "Lieutenant," he snapped, tersely, "get a squad of men, take this spy out, and shoot him instantly! We will set an example to Germans who try any espionage in this town!"

The German winced, and his face paled, but he still held himself defiantly erect. The lieutenant dashed out of the room. A moment later he was back, with a squad of privates who marched in with shouldered rifles. The spy shifted like an animal in a trap, his lips working nervously.

"I won't waste any time asking you if you have anything to say," the colonel snapped now. "You have refused to talk, so we refuse to give you a trial. It is fair enough, isn't it?"

The German wet his lips. "And if I should talk—" he hinted, his voice strained now.

"That would make a difference," the colonel cleverly explained. "In fact," he decided suddenly, "it would mean life to you."

The German seemed to waver. He glanced nervously at the waiting squad of soldiers, then back again to the colonel. The Three Mosquitoes and the others watched him grimly. It was a hard choice that had been offered to him, a cruel temptation. Life, after all, was sweet. They wondered whether he would be able to resist that temptation.

"HOW DO I know you are not just fooling me?" the spy demanded, and they knew then that he was

weakening. "I might talk, and then you will shoot me anyway."

The colonel looked at him grimly. "Not if you tell the truth," the colonel promised. "If you tell us, to our satisfaction, just what you were doing with this flashlight on the scene of the raid, we will see that you are sent to a prison camp, from which you'll be released at the end of the war."

The German hesitated. Then, suddenly, a resigned look came over his face. His shoulder slumped.

"Very well, I will tell you."

The colonel nodded, and the rest of the men in the room flashed him a look of admiration. He had won!

"Go ahead, then," he ordered. "And be careful to tell the truth. If we catch you in one lie you die!"

The German spoke smoothly, in a monotonous tone. He told his story without hesitating or pausing.

"The captain here was right. I am working in the special branch of the Imperial intelligence. I was ordered to this town to attempt to blow up your supply base." He ignored the stunned amazement this introduction brought over the room, and went right on. "That was when we knew we were unable to raid it from the air, due to your defense. But I found out also that I could not get near the place from the ground. It would be impossible for me to do anything as there were too many enemy operatives.

"Then the raids which you all know about began. I watched each night, and saw that the hits were inaccurate. I decided to help my countrymen. I went there to-night and, sheltered under the ruins of a building, I attempted to flash signals to correct the range of the bombs——"

"One moment!" The colonel broke in, unable to conceal his excitement. "You say you flashed signals? To whom were you signaling?"

"To the Gothas," the man replied, simply.

"Then—then these raids are being made by Gothas?" the colonel was leaning forward tensely, his hands clutching the edge of his desk.

"Yes, and I thought I could signal them," the spy went on, still apparently oblivious of the startling effect of his words. "I don't know if they understood my flashed messages or not, though I used regular international code."

The colonel's face suddenly clouded, and once more his eyes narrowed ominously. "Look here, now!" he thundered. "Are you trying to tell me that Gothas have been flying over this town, dropping bombs, and that you could attempt to signal them when none of

us, either in the air or on the ground, could see any sign of them?"

The spy was not at all flustered. On the contrary, a look of triumph came into his face.

"You will never be able to see them," he boasted. "They are new-type ships, and can fly so much higher than your own planes that you will never get near them. Also they have silenced motors, and are camouflaged in such a way that they blend right with the sky."

There was a murmur of surprise from the crowd in the room. The colonel was impressed in spite of himself, for this was the very theory he had advanced previously to the Mosquitoes. But his tone was still ominous.

"I don't know whether to believe you or not," he said, darkly. "Granted that these planes are all you say, how could they see your signals from such a height?"

"They use telescopes," the spy replied, without hesitation. "That is why their hits are so nearly accurate. They haven't yet learned exactly how much to allow for deflection from such a great height, otherwise they would have hit your base long ago! But," again his tone was triumphant, "in the next raid I'll wager they do hit it!"

"Never mind that!" snapped the colonel, shifting uneasily. "Stick to the point. You've just told us a story that is a little less than fantastic. Still, I'll admit that I'm inclined to believe it. I'm going to let you live now, provided you answer one more question." His keen glance went to the spy's face. "What is the location of the airdrome from which these Gothas come?"

THE MEN in the room waited in suspense for the spy's answer. All realized the colonel's purpose. If he could get the location of that drome, a fleet of Allied planes could be sent over to blast it off the face of the earth, and put a stop to all future raids.

But the German was shaking his head. "How should I know that?" he demanded, as if the question were absurd. "I know nothing of German airdromes, or where they are."

"Then," the colonel shot at him, "how did you know so much about these new-type ships?"

"I was told about them before I left Germany. They told me to try to blow up the supply base, but if I failed they hoped to have these new ships. I didn't realize they were in use until the raids began, and I was quite surprised."

And that was all the colonel could get out of him, though he threatened, cajoled, and used every trick

he knew. The spy stubbornly stuck to his story, and repeated it monotonously when questioned. And finally the colonel called an end to the business, for it was nearly dawn now.

"Very well," he said, "I won't press you any further. You seem to have kept your word, and I'll keep mine." He turned to the squad of soldiers. "Take him away, and see that he is sent directly to the internment camp."

The spy, still sullen and defiant, was marched out. No sooner was he gone than the room buzzed with excited voices, as everybody began to argue and give their various reactions. The colonel seemed visibly relieved.

"Well," he was saying, "it looks like we are getting to the roots of this matter at last! Thanks to the M.Ps. and—" he beamed at the U.S. intelligence captain—"and especially to Captain Brown here. My congratulations to you, captain, for your clever work in revealing the spy." He sighed, audibly. "I must confess that our intelligence corps is far more efficient than most other branches of the service."

The Three Mosquitoes, hearing this last, stiffened as if they had been struck with a lash. The remark was too obviously insinuating for them to miss its import. The colonel might just as well have said that he was disgusted with the Mosquitoes, who had been called especially to this momentous assignment, and had accomplished nothing! It infuriated them, especially when they thought that Kirby had risked his life to help nab the spy during his flight.

It was Kirby who spoke for them, and he suppressed his feelings with difficulty. Somehow he managed to keep his tone steady.

"Pardon me, colonel," he said, "but I can't help telling you that I think the story that spy told is crazy, downright crazy! It's just a lot of fantastic bunk!"

The colonel was taken aback. "Indeed?" his voice was slightly acrid now. "And on what do you base this remarkable conclusion, captain? Certainly not on any discoveries you and your comrades made in the air to-night."

Kirby reddened, but kept his wits. He even smiled.

"Exactly," he answered levelly. "That is just what I do base my conclusion on! We discovered nothing—that's the whole point. And I maintain that if there were any Gothas in the air we would have seen them! We not only looked all over, but we flew to our highest possible ceiling and you can't tell me that any bomb-laden ship can fly higher than three light Spads,

new-type Gothas or not. It just couldn't be done!" He turned appealingly to the major who commanded the squadrons here. "Don't you think I'm right, major? Don't you think this story is ridiculous, that if there were Gothas we would have seen them?"

CHAPTER IV DUMDUM RAID

THE MAJOR FROWNED at Kirby's question and stroked his chin. "I don't know what to think," he confessed. "All I do know is that my squadrons scoured the skies as we have done every night and that nothing was seen."

"In fact," Kirby went on, as if steadily driving home a point, "I could almost swear that the only planes in the sky were Allied planes and——"

The major jumped, a flush mounting on his face. "You don't mean to insinuate—" he broke out, with sudden heat.

"No, of course not," Kirby quickly assured him. "I did think of that for awhile—spies using Allied planes. But that's out too! I'm telling you we three flew right over the scene of the raid, and there was nothing, not even an Allied plane, above or below us."

"I'll back him up on that any time," Shorty Carn put in, vehemently.

"I'll vouch for it, too," drawled the lanky Travis.

"In fact," Kirby insisted, "the only kind of aircraft I could imagine being up there would be a Zeppelin, as I said before. A Zeppelin might, by some miracle, fly so high that you couldn't see it, and it might hang up there with its engines off. That's what I thought at first, but now," he shook his head, "well, I don't know."

The colonel sighed impatiently. "But what are you driving at?" he demanded. "What are you trying to suggest?"

Kirby did not reply at once. He seemed to be in the grip of a strange excitement now, as if an idea were slowly shaping itself in his mind. Suddenly his eyes brightened.

"Look here, colonel," he burst out with a vibrant eagerness that made his comrades look at him wonderingly. "I've got a hunch about this business. I don't want to say just what it is, because I may be all wet—I'm only a peilot, and no intelligence man," he couldn't resist repaying the colonel for his former dig. "But I do think I know how this mystery can be solved!"

And at this, every eye in the room turned toward him in awe and wonder, and the colonel's expression changed. He was tensely interested now, eager. "You mean——"

Kirby broke in with an eager question: "Do you think it would be possible to get hold of a real Jerry Gotha? Not a giant Gotha—I know we haven't captured any of those, but a three-seater will do. Or better yet, a two-seater and also a Fokker scout which can serve as escort."

The colonel was once more perplexed. "I suppose we could obtain such ships, through G.H.Q. But what is the object?"

Kirby spoke with growing enthusiasm. "If we get the ships, the rest will be easy. To-morrow night, just a little before the scheduled Boche raid begins, my two buddies and I will fly those German ships over the town and stage one of the prettiest raids you ever saw! We'll fly quite low and drop bombs all over the place—Don't be alarmed," he added hastily, as every one in the room stared at him in horror. "The bombs will be fakes of course, paper-wrapped stuff which makes a lot of noise and smoke but does no damage. And just to play safe, we won't drop any directly over the supply base."

The colonel's face was dark. "But what earthly good would such a fantastic procedure accomplish?" he asked, with impatient chagrin. "It just means a lot of trouble and bother, and what for?"

"But it will be worth all the trouble, sir!" Kirby insisted. "I can't tell you just what I think it will accomplish, because I'm not sure myself. But I am sure it will solve the mystery! Please, colonel," he pleaded, fervently, "give us a chance to try this stunt! You have absolutely nothing to lose, and everything to gain!"

SOMETHING in Kirby's tone must have impressed the colonel, for the latter leaned back in his chair, considering. Then, abruptly, he shrugged. "Very well," he decided, to Kirby's joy. "I suppose there is nothing to lose, and G.H.Q. did advise me to let you three men work on the case in any way you think best. I'll get those German planes for you but," he added, skeptically, "I'm afraid I can't rely on your extraordinary measure alone. We can't take any chances, with the supply base in such imminent danger. I'm going to check up on the story the spy told, and I'll see that intelligence tries to locate any drome in Bochelant where new-type Gothas are nested. If we find such a drome we can send over a bombing fleet to wipe it out!"

"Okay, sir," Kirby agreed readily enough. He did not mind what else the colonel did as long as the latter permitted, him to follow out his hunch. "I suppose you're right about not taking any chances. And now, the only other thing to consider is how to make our stunt look as realistic as possible. There'll be searchlights of course, and it would be good to let the anti-aircrafts cut loose, though the gunners must be instructed not to aim at us." He turned to the major who commanded the air squadrons. "And you can have your planes make things look pretty hot for us, too, sir, as if we've just gotten through by the skin of our teeth. Be sure," he warned, grimly, "to tell all the pilots not to shoot at us."

The major, slightly taken aback by this authoritative command which came from a subordinate, nodded dubiously. "I must confess I don't know what it's all about, but I'll see that my boys play their part."

The colonel rose from his desk with an air of finality. "Well, you three men go back to the aviation field and get some sleep. It's almost daybreak, so you'd better sleep all through the day. I'll arrange for getting the German ships, and I'll have the fake bombs made for you." He smiled, ruefully. "I wish I could say that I feel your tactics will work, but somehow it all seems rather futile and silly to me. But we'll give it a trial anyway."

Shortly afterward, the Three Mosquitoes were again walking toward the airdrome, through the streets of the village. The first furtive streaks of dawn were already showing above the buildings, and the air was chill and damp. The Mosquitoes walked briskly, scarcely missing the night's sleep they had lost, for they were keyed up to a high pitch of excitement over the mystery, and Kirby's two comrades were intensely curious. They kept pumping their leader relentlessly.

"What in hell have you got up your sleeve?" Shorty wanted to know. "What's the big idea of this fake raid?"

Kirby grinned maliciously. "Don't be so damned inquisitive!" he chided. "You're worse than an old woman!"

"But look here," Travis drawled, angrily, "inasmuch as we have to be in on this thing, it's only proper that you tell us what it's all about."

Kirby's tone suddenly became earnest, grim: "I can't tell you fellers, honestly. I can't tell you because I'm not sure. It's just a hunch. But you just stick by me, and see what happens. And unless I'm all wet," he assured them, warmly, "you'll see plenty!"

ON THE following night, a dark, dim-starred night, the inhabitants of Remiens were startled when the explosions to which they had become horribly accustomed, began at least ten minutes earlier than usual. Instantly the raid sirens shrieked out their warnings, and there was the usual frantic scurry for shelter. For how was anybody to know that the bombs which were falling in such terrible succession was as harmless as fire-crackers? They made a lot of noise, those bombs, they exploded with deafening concussions and sent up great clouds of dense black smoke, but they left no mark or dent in the deserted streets where they fell and detonated. The people did not know this, because they were huddled in cellars and other shelters, trembling at each ear-splitting burst.

But there was not only the sound of bursting bombs to-night. There were other sounds—that were new to the terrified populace. Between the crash of bombs could be heard the gruff, rasping barks of anti-aircraft guns, which were blazing away relentlessly. And beneath it all, audible at times when there was a lull in the crashing clamor, there was the sound of engines overhead—engines whose static, intermittent drone distinguished them from the engines of any Allied planes!

“Gothas!” the alarm rose through the town, spreading like wildfire. “Gothas!” And awe and horror changed to the grateful realization that the raiders, for the first time, were heard and seen! Several saw them clearly as they moved through the sky. There were two of them—a huge, monstrous bomber which moved slowly and smoothly, and a tiny graceful scout plane which gyrated above and behind it like some pesky insect. They were flying insolently low, those two ships, and they were flying through a maze of waging searchlights and a storm of anti-aircraft fire. Every now and then two or three of the groping searchlight beams would catch them and fasten upon them like deadly tentacles, striving to suck them to destruction. At such times the ships were revealed in all their details—the Gotha with its twin motors and long wing spread, the trim Fokker with its blunt nose and short fuselage. Both ships were black in color, but even in the darkness the white Maltese Crosses on their wings stood out in luminous clarity.

The knowledge that the raiders were no longer invisible brought a strange comfort to the terrified townsfolk. The shroud of mystery which had concealed the Boche until now had been lifted, and the

enemy was exposed at last! True, the Jerries were doing their deadly work the same as ever, but now, being seen, it stood to reason that presently they'd be caught, either by the anti-aircrafts or by the night-flying patrols which even now scoured the skies for them.

So thought the people of Remiens, for how were they to suspect the truth? How could they suspect that those Boche planes were manned by three grim-faced Yanks who were working with cold system to follow out a mere hunch of their leader?

It was Shorty Carn who was dropping those fake bombs, paper-wrapped missiles which he threw by hand from the forward, bathtub cockpit of the Gotha. Behind him, in the pilot's cockpit, sat Travis, intent not only on his controls but also on the fleeting shadowy form of the Fokker which gyrated above and behind. Every now and then an arm would wave from the cockpit of that Fokker, and Travis would faithfully follow out the order it signaled.

In the cockpit, his nerves taut, his heart pounding with a nameless suspense, sat Kirby. Carefully, he was setting the course for his comrades, guiding them as he hovered above the Gotha's huge twin tail-fins. He was leading them all around the town, as if he wished to leave no part of it uncovered, save the big supply base itself. And all the time he was waiting, watching, hoping against hope that his hunch had been correct. For now he could not fail, could not possibly afford to lose out!

THE COLONEL had checked up on the spy's story to-day, and while the story could not be entirely discredited, no drome in Bocheland could be located where new-type Gothas were nesting. Intelligence maintained that there was no such place, for they had the location of every German drome that existed. That left the colonel empty-handed, and helpless to make any move or take any measures. He had been forced in the end to bank all his hope upon the Mosquitoes and their apparently fantastic stratagem. Kirby was all too well aware of the responsibility which had suddenly fallen upon his shoulders. If he failed now, he knew the supply base was most certainly doomed! But—his jaw set determinedly—he was not going to fail, not if he could help it!

At any rate, Kirby thought more cheerfully, the stunt would not fail because of any hitch in the staging of this raid. Thus far, it had been even more perfect than he had dared to expect. In every way it was as realistic, as frightfully convincing, as any genuine

air raid. The searchlight crews and the anti-aircraft gunners below were seeing to that. In fact, they were making it almost too realistic for comfort. Several times the bright, groping beams of the searchlights blinded the three Yanks and almost made Travis and Kirby lose control of their ships, and more than once an anti-aircraft shell spewed its livid orange flame close enough to cause the two planes to wobble from the concussion. Those anti-aircraft shells made Kirby vaguely uneasy. He knew that anti-aircrafts seldom hit anything, even if they aimed for it and now they were deliberately aiming away from their target. But by all the laws of balance, it would not have seemed strange if they should hit when they tried to miss, just as they missed when they tried to hit. The ironic thought helped to keep Kirby in a state of raw-nerved tension which further accentuated his cold suspense.

The village below lay in dark obscurity, so that it was difficult to make out the clustered buildings. But Kirby kept watching the bomb-bursts down there, as Shorty continued to drop the harmless missiles. He kept watching to see if any other bursts would join them—different bursts, which would show the livid, destroying flash of high explosives. A glance at his luminous wrist-watch had told him it was now just eleven p.m. It was time for the real Germans to begin their nightly raid. Being methodical, they would be certain to begin promptly. But at five minutes past eleven, at ten minutes past, they had not begun at all! Kirby's lips drew up into a tight little smile of satisfaction. So far so good! He had expected this much and hoped for it. It was part of his hunch.

On, on, around and around, moved the Gotha and its gyrating escort as if the town were a big lawn every inch of which must be mowed. Faithfully, Shorty kept throwing out his fake bombs, while Kirby kept watching, watching.

They passed out of an anti-aircraft zone, and in the darker and calmer sky a lurking flight of Camels gleefully feigned to give chase to them. The Gotha put on full throttle and its twin engines thundered as it gathered speed. Kirby split-aired wildly above it, as if he were protecting it. The Camels, five of them followed behind and all Three Mosquitoes caught their breaths as they heard the staccato fire of machine guns, saw the jagged streaks of red spurting from the shadowy noses of the American pursuit ships. White lines of tracer penciled the sky on all sides.

Again the thing was being made too realistic for the Mosquitoes' comfort. The Yank pilots of the Camels

were obeying their instructions not to shoot at the invaders, but they were shooting all around them! After awhile, however, to the Mosquitoes' relief, the five Camels politely permitted the two German ships to "elude" them and go on their way!

Kirby gave a whistling sigh. The major in command of the air squadrons had certainly taken him literally when Kirby had requested: "And you can have your planes make things look pretty hot for us too, sir, as if we've just gotten through by the skin of our teeth!"

CHAPTER V LURKING FLARE

THE FAKE RAID continued, Shorty dropping bomb after bomb. But long before the supply of bombs began to give out, Kirby's hopes began to sink. He realized now that they had covered practically every inch of the town and nothing had happened. His face became drawn and gaunt. It was beginning to look as if he had failed, as if his stunt had been futile and silly, just as the skeptical colonel had thought it would be!

Even now he knew that they were retracing the course they had already covered, going back over parts of the town they had already "bombed." Shorty was still dropping one fake missile after another, and he still had plenty left. But Kirby was becoming more and more hopeless. A slow feeling of frustration was coming over him. The thing was not working, and that was all there was to it! Tears dimmed his goggled eyes. To go back, to admit that he had failed, that he had been all wrong! A sob choked him. What a fool he would look like, what an utter jackass!

But it was no use. He had tried his stunt, and it had failed. Why go on any further, why retrace their course again? They were at a far end of the town now, over dark and deserted outskirts. It was no use wasting time here, no use——

Kirby sat bolt upright in his cockpit, stiffening from head to foot. Then he was leaning over the fuselage, straining his goggled eyes wildly as he peered down through the murk. Had he just been imagining it, just been seeing things or— An excited shout broke hoarsely from his throat. For now he saw it again, saw it clearly this time. It was flashing a bright red in the darkness. A light, somewhere in the murk below! A red light which flashed on and off, as if in frantic signal!

Kirby's momentary elation gave way to a reaction of doubt, and he racked his brain with a thousand conjectures. It might mean nothing at all, that light. Certainly it was not flashing out any message for the flashes were regular, not coming like dots and dashes. The light just kept blinking with rhythmic monotony, on and off, on and off. Nor could Kirby see where it came from. It was too dark down there.

However, Kirby was determined to investigate, to find out. A wild hope was flaming within him, and his pulses were racing. Hastily, he swept down to pull up right beside the Gotha, so close that the Fokker's tiny wing-tip almost touched the huge wing-tip of the bomber. Kirby looked across the space which separated him from his comrades, whose goggled features he could just see in the darkness. He waved frantic directions to them, using the gesticulating signals by which the Mosquitoes were able to communicate as easily as if they were speaking.

Kirby waved: "Go right on with the fake raid. Keep covering the town. I'll join you again when I'm ready!" And he waited until he saw them nod their agreement, though they were clearly puzzled.

Then, quickly, he looked down again lest the red light should escape him. It was still there, blinking away. With a shove he sent his joystick forward. The nose of the Fokker dipped abruptly, and the little plane dropped away from its monstrous companion. It went streaking downward in a fast dive, its flying-wires singing in the wind. Looking up over his shoulder, Kirby saw the Gotha still moving on its smooth course, and the explosions he heard below told him that Shorty was going right on with his work.

Straight for that blinking red light Kirby headed his descending plane. Down, down, until the light was looming closer and brighter before him. But still he could not see where it was, whether it was on the ground or on some building. He plunged on toward it, his excitement mounting, his pulses racing.

AND THEN a despairing groan broke from Kirby. For just as he was drawing quite near to it, that red light suddenly went out! There was nothing but blackness below! Kirby cursed and fumed! Was he going to lose out now, when he felt he was so close? He refused to give up hope this time. He knew that he had kept the nose of his Fokker pointed straight for the spot where the light had been, and so he held the plane to its course, using all his skill as a pilot to keep her descent on the exact same line.

Down, down, he kept streaking, and now at last his straining eyes could vaguely discern the blurred earth which was rushing up to meet him. He could see the desolate landscape now, see the shadowy dark bulks of widely scattered buildings.

But not until it loomed gigantic in front of him did he see the tall church spire and then it was too late! In frenzied horror, he stood on the right rudder and whipped over the joystick, trying desperately to bank out of the way of that steeple. The Fokker careened perilously, almost standing on one wing. But even as it tilted, the tip of its left wing struck the steeple with a shivering impact. The plane stalled, floundered crazily, while Kirby fought like a madman with its controls. There was a sudden, rending crash which made his very teeth rattle. He heard the groan of twisting metal, the splintering and snapping of wood. And then suddenly everything was still, and the Fokker had come to a stop.

Dazed and shaken, but otherwise unhurt, the Mosquito slowly realized where the plane had crashed. He was on the sloping roof of a ramshackle old church, whose spire he had struck. The Fokker had luckily hit it on even keel, but the force of the impact had caused wheels and undercarriage to tear right through the thinly-shingled roof. In this fashion, rooted in the roof of the church, the plane rested like a canoe.

The motor had stalled, but the Mosquito hastily switched off the ignition. In the silence which followed he could hear the distant explosions of the fake bombs. Shorty and Travis were still at it, somewhere over the town. Still remaining in his cockpit, Kirby peered out into the surrounding darkness. A feeling of desolation swept him. God, what a lonely spot! There didn't seem to be another building or person in the vicinity. The church was obviously an abandoned one, having long since fallen into disuse.

"Woh bist du, Kamerad? Wir sind Freunde!"

Kirby almost jumped out of his skin as the low, guttural voice rose weirdly out of the darkness. With a furtive movement he whipped out his Colt, and his finger was ready on the trigger as he peered in the direction whence the voice had come.

Above him, on the sloping roof, the vague bulk of a man was silhouetted against the lighter sky. Even as Kirby looked, a flashlight suddenly glowed in the man's hand, and its narrow but dazzling beam fell right on the Mosquito's cockpit. Kirby's finger tightened on the trigger, and he would have fired blindly then and there

had not a cold realization checked him. There would be others here, he told himself and they would make short work of him if he tried any such tactics. Besides, he was thought to be a Jerry aviator. His eyes narrowed shrewdly. Why not take advantage of it?

He could speak German fluently, and fortunately he had on a dirty old teddy-bear which could not be easily identified as an Allied uniform. All in that breathless moment he reached his decision. He would take a long chance. It was worth the odds, for if he got away with it he ought to make some startling discoveries indeed!

He cleared his throat and shouted back in German, choosing and pronouncing his words with the grim knowledge that a slight blunder in grammar would bring certain betrayal and death!

“*Wer da?*” he challenged for he must remember that he was a Jerry aviator who has just crashed in enemy territory, but who finds himself being addressed by one who seems to be a countryman. “*Kommen Sie hier, das ich Ihnen sehen mag!*”

THE BULKY FIGURE made his way gingerly down the sloping roof and drew up right beside the plane. Kirby saw now that he was dressed in peasant clothes similar to those worn by the captured spy of last night.

“You are fortunate, *Kamerad*,” he told the Mosquito. “You picked the right spot indeed for your crash! Any other place and you would doubtless have fallen prisoner to the *verdampfte* swine Yankees!”

Kirby feigned surprise. “But who—who are you? What are you doing up here?”

“I cannot answer that question now,” the other told him, “but certainly you must have seen our signal, the red light we flashed from the steeple.”

As Kirby heard this last, a sense of triumph came over him in spite of his tense predicament. By God, he had certainly done some swell flying to guide his Fokker to the very place where the light had come from! That was good judgment even if it had cost him this crash.

Aloud he was replying: “Yes, of course we saw the light. But—” he hesitated, with clever purpose.

“But you did not know when you crashed that this was the place it came from?” the other guilelessly filled in for him.

“Exactly what I meant to say,” Kirby instantly took the cue. “It was only by chance that I crashed here. My ship was disabled by an anti-aircraft shell”—this to convince the German that the raid was authentic, and

that the Allies had really molested the two Jerry planes with damaging effect—“and as I came down in the darkness, I struck the steeple here.” He smiled, ruefully. “I fear I am stuck here now, what with my plane jammed through the roof!”

The other man laughed carelessly. “Have no fear,” he assured the Mosquito. “Before you know it, you will be safely back with your *staffel*. It will be arranged.” His voice filled with reverence and awe. “There is nothing that the great *Meister* cannot arrange!”

“The great *Meister*?” Kirby echoed, wonderingly but the other did not hear him, for the German was now continuing, “and now, comrade, you had better climb out of there so I can take you in immediately. It is not wise for us to stay out here in the open. We can take no chances.”

Kirby, having no other alternative, complied without hesitation. He climbed out of the cockpit and got his footing with the German on the sloping roof. The latter led the way up the slope, right to the adjacent rise of the steeple. In the darkness he opened a large French window, and Kirby climbed through it after him.

This brought them right upon a rickety stairway which spiraled up through the belfry tower. It was dark and foully musty in here, but from above came a dim light. Kirby’s guide led him up the rickety stairs, which creaked and shook at every step. Cobwebs brushed the Mosquito’s head and once a dark flapping thing grazed him as it swept past, and he shuddered. Bats! A cold excitement held him in its grip as he and his guide drew nearer and nearer to the top of the stairs. He knew he might be walking right into a trap from which he might never emerge alive, but at the same time he was feverishly curious, impatiently eager, like a bloodhound on the scent.

With sudden abruptness, they gained the top of the stairs, where there was a sort of balcony. They were in the belfry of the church. Above, in the dark hollow cone of the spire, were great rafters, and from one of them a huge bell, rusty and dust-laden from disuse, hung still and motionless, so that it looked as stationary as the rafters themselves.

ON A WALL of the belfry, weird and distorted, Kirby saw four, gigantic shadows. Otherwise he wouldn’t have noticed the four men who stood on the balcony in the dim light. They were dressed in the same peasant clothes, these four men, but they also wore holsters, from which protruded the butts of large and deadly automatics.

As Kirby's guide led him around the balcony, one of these four men detached himself from the rest and confronted the Mosquito. He was a tall, powerfully built man, and even in the dim light Kirby could see the hard intelligence of his features, seeming to bear the stamp of reckless courage and indomitable will.

His eyes were keen and piercing; they seemed almost like lights in themselves as they peered at Kirby in the comparative darkness. They fastened upon the Mosquito a scrutinizing gaze which made the latter shift uneasily. It was as if the man were looking right through him, and no longer did Kirby feel so confident about his flying togs not being distinguishable from a German's. After all, there were a few buttons on those togs which bore the unmistakable letters: U.S. One couldn't see them in the shadowy light, but if the German should take it into his head to look close!

"This is our countryman of the air, *mein Herr Meister*," the man who brought Kirby here was explaining. "The pilot who crashed on the roof!"

Again the expression *Meister*, which was said with such deep reverence, startled Kirby, and he looked curiously at the tall figure which confronted him. The *Meister*, whoever he was, was nodding slowly, his piercing eyes still scrutinizing the Mosquito with their gaze. Suddenly he spoke, in a voice harsh and terse:

"Who are you and what is your *staffel*?"

Kirby's heart seemed almost to stop beating. The question had taken him by surprise, and he had to use all his wits to keep from growing flustered. His brain raced frantically.

"I am *Leutnant* Karl Schmidt," he chose the first German name that came to him, and regretted his choice immediately. Surely such a simple, common name would attract suspicion! But he rushed on, "I am with *Jagdstaffel* 16."

Instantly came the German's next question: "Who commands that squadron?"

"Major Otto von Keppel," Kirby replied, without the slightest hesitation. He had half expected this question, and he had been shrewd enough to name a squadron whose leader and activities were known to him. But he felt no relief. The fact that he had kept the trap from springing on him did not mean that he was out of it! A few more questions like this, and he would be finished! The man called the *Meister* seemed to suspect him, and the German would have little difficulty in making the Yank betray himself.

The *Meister* seemed to think a moment, and not once did his piercing eyes leave the Mosquito. Kirby

felt like a doomed man waiting for the moment of his execution. Then——

"I don't know Major von Keppel, but he must be a fool and a dunderhead!" The German's tone was contemptuous in its rage. "Did he actually order you out on this asinine expedition?"

CHAPTER VI ENGINE OF DEATH

KIRBY COULD HAVE WEPT in his relief. He realized at last that it was not suspicion that had caused the *Meister* to ask his challenging questions. The German was simply trying to find out who had ordered this air raid, which had apparently not pleased him at all.

The Mosquito spoke with more confidence. "Yes sir, the major personally ordered the raid."

"And on what authority?" demanded the German, getting more and more enraged. "Certainly the High Command never authorized such a ridiculous thing!"

"That I couldn't say," Kirby wisely evaded. "I merely know that I took my orders from the major."

"I can't understand such pig-headed asininity!" the *Meister* burst out. "Why the whole thing is absolutely futile and suicidal! You saw for yourself what happened to you. Well, before long that Gotha will be brought down too and I doubt if its flyers will escape so fortunately!" He paused, listening. From the distance sounded the dull but reverberating boom of explosions. Shorty was still at it!

"And what does it all accomplish?" the angry German went on. "Certainly you couldn't have gotten anywhere near the supply base; the defense there would have blown you to ribbons! And what is the object of raiding Remiens unless it is to wipe out the supply base?"

Kirby was getting more and more wily now, as if he were no longer standing on such thin ice. "That was the object of our raid," he confessed. "But we found it impossible, just as you say it is. So we dropped our bombs wherever we could."

"Yes, and almost dropped them on us by mistake!" the German added, furiously. "Your idiotic commander didn't know, of course, that we were here, so he didn't make provisions for us! That's why I felt sure the raid was not authorized by the High Command! And we had to risk discovery on account of such clumsy blundering! When your bombs began to sound too close, we had to

flash you a red light, relying on that fact that all German aviators should know that a red light flashing in enemy territory means that there are countrymen below. Fortunately your comrades in the bomber understood, for they moved away and we were at last able to turn off the tell-tale light!"

Kirby could scarcely suppress his eager excitement. His hunch had not been amiss! He had not known about the meaning of that flashing red light, but even so the thing he had planned so carefully had happened! But then he realized, tensely, that he had not by any means reached the solution of the baffling mystery yet. He mustn't count his chickens before they were hatched!

One of the other men suddenly joined the conversation now. "*Mein Herr Meister*," he was saying, almost consolingly. "In some ways this idiotic raid may bring us some benefit after all. Certainly, seeing the Gotha bombing them, the swine Yanks in this town will think they have solved the mystery which is puzzling them and undermining their morale! And it will steer them even further off the right track, making it all the safer for us!"

"That's all well and good, snapped the *Meister*, unimpressed. "But we don't have to go to such risks to make the accursed Yankees believe anything. The fools will never suspect the truth. Besides, our valiant comrade, 23, was captured by them last night and I'm sure he obeyed my instructions to talk, if pressed hard enough. What he said will leave the enemy more confused and helpless than ever!" He chuckled at this thought, and, in a slightly better humor, turned to Kirby, who was listening to all this with awed understanding. "Of course, *Leutnant Schmidt*," the *Meister* said to him in a gentler tone, "I realize you are not to blame for this. You were merely obeying orders. But when I explain to you just what the situation is, I am sure you will understand why I became so upset over your commander's imbecility."

Kirby nodded respectfully, though inwardly he was on pins and needles now, alert to his very fingertips. His goal did not seem far away, with the *Meister* about to explain things!

"FIRST OF ALL," the *Meister* began, "since you are here and will be among us for awhile, I want to introduce my comrades and myself to you. They shall be known to you only by their numbers," and he pointed each man out: "15, 22, 25, 26. But you can know me by name. I am the Baron Franz von Harbach."

Kirby started, his eyes widening with incredulity. Clearly, he remembered the words of the U.S. intelligence captain last night: "A special branch composed only of picked and experienced veterans. Its chief is the notorious Baron von Harbach and he's more crafty than the devil himself." And von Harbach was right here in this town, with his gang! Now Kirby saw the reason for the term: *Meister*. The master of master-spies!

"The name is familiar to you?" the baron queried, seeing Kirby's wide-eyed surprise. The Mosquito decided instantly that inasmuch as he had shown such emotion, he must go on playing the part. It was logical that even a Jerry aviator would be awed on confronting the great spy.

"Indeed the name is familiar, *mein Herr Baron*," he exclaimed. "Is there any one who has not heard of the great von Harbach?"

The baron accepted the compliment with a smile.

"The dense Yankees think I am in Germany, directing my men while I sit back in safety and comfort! They do not know that I possess the *wanderlust* and perhaps a little courage, myself." He gave an acrid chuckle. "And so they do not dream that I am right here in their midst, working zealously with my loyal comrades! Only the High Command in the Fatherland knows what I am doing and," again his tone became angry, "I shall certainly report the outrageous blunder of your squadron commander to them!"

"Such things as that must be *verboten*, and I am going to let you in on the reason, *Leutnant Schmidt*, though I trust you will regard it as a strict secret and never breathe a word of it to any one. Since you will doubtless still be with us when we begin our work, you might as well know about it. Perhaps we might even use you, we are short of one of our men, as you heard me say before."

Kirby jumped eagerly at the opportunity. "I should consider it an honor to be in the service of the great Baron von Harbach!" he exclaimed.

The baron again accepted the compliment with a smile. "Very well, then I will show you why you and your comrades were wasting your time and ours." Calmly, he stepped around the balcony, Kirby and the others following him. Von Harbach seized a cord which seemed suspended from above. "The reason," he said, "is this!" And he pulled the cord down.

There was a rustling noise overhead, and the tense Mosquito saw something move in the dark maze of rafters up in the belfry. The thing proved to be a

curtain of tarpaulin which had hung in the shadows up there, and had consequently been unnoticeable. But as it moved, or rather lifted, in response to the baron's jerk on the cord, it disclosed a strange sight indeed!

There, gleaming in the dim reflected glow of the lamps, was a huge and complicated affair of steel. From it a glistening long barrel seemed to point right out through an opening in the steeple. At the base were long steel tanks, full of strange valves and gadgets, and also there was a tiny, one-cylindereed gasoline engine.

Kirby's astonished eyes swept from this strange-looking affair to the platform on which it seemed to stand. And then he saw them—the neat piles of long, pear-shaped objects. Bombs! Aerial bombs, with tail-fins and all! Aerial bombs, stacked and ready for use!

FORTUNATELY, the Mosquito thought, he was not supposed to know what all this meant." In fact, as a Jerry pilot who had just come over from Germany, he was not supposed to know half as much as he actually did! His astonishment and awe attracted no suspicion, but instead brought only a smile from von Harbach and the others.

"I suppose you are wondering what all this strange machinery means?" the baron queried. "I guess you have never seen anything like it before, *nicht wahr?*"

Kirby was breathless. "It amazes me, *mein Herr Baron*. I see what looks something like a cannon, only there are tanks and valves on it, and a gasoline engine! And I see bombs there, just like the bombs we have been dropping! I cannot understand!"

The baron's smile broadened. "The invention," he confessed, not without pride, "is one of my own, I have always had an outside interest in mechanics. Your conclusion that this is a sort of cannon is quite correct. It is, to be exact, a compressed-air gun capable of projecting one of those twenty-five kilo air-bombs to a distance of almost two miles! We have been using that gun nightly to the great confusion and consternation of our enemies!" He laughed, with grim triumph.

"They stopped our planes from reaching their supply base, they kept our spies from getting near the grounds to blow it up but we have outwitted them as we shall always outwit them! They cannot compete with German brains and genius! Each night, while they are craning their necks to see what is bombing them from the sky, we are merrily performing our little stunt from this church steeple, right in their own town, though in a deserted section, of course. This gun of ours hurls the bombs into the air at an angle which

brings them directly overhead of their objective. There, having lost their momentum and having succumbed to the pull of gravity, they drop straight down, due to their shape and tail-fins. This, of course, makes it look as if they could only come from airplanes above, which is just what we want!"

He paused, and Kirby stood there, shocked and dumbfounded despite the fact that he had actually expected something of this very nature! What astounded him was the superhuman sagacity of this master-spy, who not only worked such uncanny machinations, but who worked them in such a way that he left no loopholes, no clues for his baffled enemies! A lesser mind would have been satisfied to work this trick with ordinary projectiles or shells which wouldn't have necessitated such an elaborate device. This alone would have been sufficient to mystify the Allies.

But the use of aerial bombs which dropped straight down from the sky, had not only mystified the Allies, but had led them so far from the scene that they never thought of looking anywhere except into the air for the solution of the mystery! This was the master-stroke, the finishing touch of perfection which only a wizard like von Harbach could have fitted to such a scheme!

"It is marvelous, *mein Herr Baron*," the Mosquito exclaimed, and his admiration was sincere. "I never heard of anything like it! A trick that could fool the most clever minds! But," he asked curiously, for even a Jerry aviator would be curious to learn the full details, "how on earth can you range such a weapon? How do you aim it?"

Von Harbach frowned. "That has been our chief difficulty," he confessed. "We can only aim this gun by experiment and correction. Unfortunately, we have to work under cover, and we cannot see our hits because the buildings are in the way. But each night, after we have loosed a goodly score of bombs, we send one of our men to check up and make corrections in the range. Then, on the following night, we change the elevation of the gun accordingly, and in this way we have crept steadily nearer to our objective, the supply base!"

IT WAS CLEAR now why the M.P.s had found the spy last night prowling around the scene of the raid with a flashlight. In fact everything was clear now. The mystery stood exposed in all its details. But the Mosquito was curious to learn one thing more.

"I cannot understand how you have ever managed

to do all this here, so far within enemy territory!” he said, incredulously. “How did you construct all this machinery, and get these bombs into this old church?”

“That was child’s play!” the master-spy’s tone was careless. And in the most casual tone he told Kirby a story which seemed thrilling and amazing to the Mosquito in all its aspects. A story of that underworld of military activity, where men fought with weapons far more powerful in their effect than mere guns, where they matched wits in the strange and hazardous game of espionage, a game whose forfeit was the dreaded firing squad!

Von Harbach had hit upon his brilliant idea when the Imperial High Command was racking its brains vainly for some way to cripple the Remiens supply base. This was the Boche’s last remaining hope of turning the tide of the war, of checking the great Allied offensive and winning the conflict. And it was on von Harbach’s shoulders that this responsibility finally was placed. The baron had come to Remiens through the usual mysterious channels by which spies travel, and six of his most trusty veterans had come too, though none of them had met until everything was in readiness. All had received their instructions in Germany. Each was to play his part.

Von Harbach, disguised as a middle-aged French peasant who had fled from his home town at the Front when it was razed by shells, made it plain that he had come to “settle down” in Remiens and continue his trade as a mechanic. He had immediately bought himself a machine shop, and he kept it humming busily, welcoming all customers. And no one dreamed that in this same shop, in the small hours of the night, he had been working like a demon to construct a strange and fantastic device of his own invention!

In the meantime, Imperial Operative Number 25, following his particular instructions, was active in other quarters. By all kinds of surreptitious methods, he was stealing twenty-five kilo air-bombs one by one—stealing them from parked trucks when the drivers were not looking, stealing them from freight-yards, stealing them even from airdromes. He never stole more than one bomb from the same place, and for this reason the Allies never noticed the slight loss. But in a quiet spot in the thickness of a forest, Operative Number 25 was steadily amassing a great quantity of these bombs, building himself a secret and private ammunition dump, to which he added the missiles one by one.

Operative Number 22, during this time, was also a

conscientious worker, his trade being that of teamster. He had bought himself a stable, two drays, and an immense wagon, with which he transported furniture, express, junk, or anything his customers wished.

Operatives 15 and 23 (the latter being the one who was captured last night) were each doing practically the same thing, though neither knew it, for they had to work their game alone. Both had taken up various lines of peddling in the town of Remiens, so that they could ply all through the streets freely and without suspicion.

CHAPTER VII SPY STEALTH

FINALLY there remained Operative Number 26, the last of the band of six which made up von Harbach and his gang. It was the task of Number 26 to find a suitable location whence the daring stunt could be worked. The original plan had not counted on using a building. Von Harbach had not dared to hope for such a break of luck. He had planned to shoot his bombs from the ground, which would of course have been far more risky. But Operative Number 26 had been so zealous in his duties that he had done far more than was expected of him. He had come upon this old abandoned church quite by accident, had taken note that it was in a deserted section and itself deserted, and had figured that its steeple was the ideal place to use. The added height, as well as the obscurity which the building would lend to the business, made the whole thing fool-proof and certain of success.

All these activities, which von Harbach had described so casually, had taken fully three months, during which the Imperial High Command fidgetted and waited with increasing impatience, while the Allied armies kept advancing, driving the Boche back day by day.

Long before von Harbach had finished the device he was making in his machine shop, Operative 26 strolled into his store to inform him of the church. Von Harbach agreed joyfully to the idea of using the steeple, gave Operative 26 instructions and sent him away.

Nothing happened then until von Harbach had at last completed his contraption. Then, very casually, he sent for Number 22, the teamster, who drew up one evening in front of the machine shop, obviously

to call for and deliver a machine to some customer. Having been loaded with its cargo, the wagon, which was a covered one, proceeded through the streets. It happened to pass two peddlers, a merchant of pots and pans and a fruit vendor. To these von Harbach addressed a few low words in passing.

The wagon then proceeded to the church. By the time it reached there darkness had descended, and under its added protection, von Harbach and his comrade unloaded the truck. They were soon met by the two peddlers and Operative 25 who had stored up the bombs. Thus the band of six came together for the first time since they had left their country! Thereafter they met every night, while by day they kept up their masquerade in the village, plying their various trades.

The bombs, of course, were carted from their secret hiding place in the forest to the abandoned church by this same teamster. But it was another whole week before those bombs were first used. During this week von Harbach and his men worked like fiends every night, boarding up the windows of the steeple, cutting out the opening for the gun, installing the gun itself, and rigging up the little gasoline engine from von Harbach's shop to pump compressed air into the tanks. And at last, just six days ago, they were ready. They had begun the frightful bombing which had so terrified the populace and baffled the authorities. After each raid, and all during the following day, the two operatives disguised as peddlers would examine the hits carefully. And so, night after night, as the range was steadily corrected, the bombs had been creeping up upon that supply base!

"And now," von Harbach was concluding, on a note of triumph, "we feel confident that our next bomb, or one of our next few bombs, will hit our objective! We have worked hard, and we have lost one of our valiant comrades," a look of pain clouded his face, but then his features hardened immediately again, "but it will be worth the price. For," his voice rose with vibrant patriotism, "this very night will mean victory for the Fatherland, victory and glory for our Kaiser!"

A LOW but enthusiastic cheer from the four other spies on the balcony greeted this announcement, and the sound of it filled Kirby with cold panic. He had all he could do to conceal his horror. This very night the Germans here meant to use their gun again, and this time they were surely going to hit their objective! God, Kirby told himself frantically, he must get out of here, must lose no time in reporting this daring nest of

spies, must get help to capture them before they could begin their diabolical work! The thought made him desperate, and he took a long chance.

"*Mein Herr Baron,*" he said, "after hearing your remarkable story I see that I have no place among men of such genius as yours. I am only a mere pilot, and I am afraid that I shall be in your way. I do not even speak English or French, and if you should be surprised I could not act any part! Therefore," he tried to suppress the pleading tone that was creeping into his voice, "I think it is best that I take my leave of you now. Under cover of darkness I can sneak back toward my lines or perhaps even steal an Allied plane. I am not afraid, at worst I shall be captured."

And he waited in frightful suspense to see what effect his speech would have. Von Harbach was frowning, stroking his chin. Then——

"The Fatherland needs its pilots," he said slowly, thoughtfully, and his next words crushed all the Mosquito's hopes, filled the Yank with despair: "And there is no sense risking one of them when he can so easily be returned in safety. Tomorrow I will communicate by secret channels to Germany, and a German plane will come over to pick you up at some chosen rendezvous and take you right back to your drome. In the meanwhile, there is no reason why you can't stay with us! There will be no necessity for your speaking English or French, we are safe from interruption here, and our work will soon be finished anyway!" This last thought caused him to pause, listening. His face suddenly lit up. "Why, the bomb raid has stopped!" he exclaimed. "Either the Gotha was brought down or it is safely on its way home; let us hope the latter is the case!"

Surely enough the boom of Shorty's fake bombs no longer resounded through the night. Doubtless, Kirby thought despairingly, his comrades had followed his instructions and gone on with the raid until they had run out of bombs. Then, when he had still failed to join them as he had promised, they must have assumed that he had flown back to the aviation field and probably had flown there too. They would miss him of course, but it would never occur to them that he was in danger or trouble, for they had not suspected, as he had, what was going on here. He knew just what they would think, that he had played a little trick on them, gone off to follow out his hunch alone. He had done such things before, and now he cursed himself for having done them! There was not the slightest chance for him to escape! He was stuck

here, stuck among these Germans who refused to let him depart. Even though they thought he was a countryman, they virtually held him prisoner. For if he tried to break away, if he made one false move, they would become suspicious. And if they found out that he was masquerading, they wouldn't hesitate to finish him, off, immediately! Men who would go to all these pains to do their diabolical work would stop at nothing, would kill without hesitation or——

“And now,” von Harbach's words sounded like a knell in his ears, “we can begin, since the Gotha has departed. We did not want to operate while it was raiding the town, for it was wiser to take advantage of this misleading clue the Gotha would give our accursed enemies. It would not do to have the plane bombing one part of the town while we dropped our bombs on another—the Yankee swine might suspect, though I probably overestimate their intelligence!” He laughed contemptuously, and then his expression became stern, officious. “And now,” he ordered, as if stirred to sudden action, “let us get to our work! *Achtung!*” And his four henchmen stiffened, stood ready, alert.

KIRBY STOOD HELPLESS, stricken with horror and anguish! God, what could he do to prevent these determined Boche from carrying out their frightful plans? What could he, one lone man against five, do to thwart them?

“To the gun!” von Harbach shouted, and with the agility of a monkey he hoisted himself up by a rafter, and leaped onto the platform in the belfry. He stood at the strange-looking gun, and started cranking the cogs which elevated or lowered the barrel. Another man immediately went over to the pile of bombs, picked out one of the deadly pear-shaped missiles. And a third man started up the little gasoline engine. *Chug-chug! Chug-chug!* The one-lung engine sputtered and coughed, and there was a hissing sound as it forced compressed air into the tanks.

All this Kirby had watched in awful fascination. And in the next moment, to his horror, von Harbach was shouting to him eagerly: “Now you will see our little toy in action, *Leutnant!*” Even as he spoke he was lifting the bomb, with the aid of one of the men, into a compartment of the steel barrel. He slammed a hinged cover down over it, and turned the catch.

“As I said,” he continued triumphantly, “we ought to hit that base with one of our bombs to-night, perhaps the first. We will know if we have hit it all

right. The fire which will be set off will light up the whole sky instantly!” He glanced out through a tiny window in the steeple. Kirby, looking there, caught a vague glimpse of stars. Then his heart stopped as he saw von Harbach seize a lever on one side on the gun's base.

“Here goes the first,” he said gaily. “May it wing its way straight to the supply base!” And, with a violent jerk, he pulled the lever.

There was a low, sibilant hiss, a noise of furiously rushing air—and that was all! But the gun which had fired so silently recoiled as if it were a huge cannon! The barrel leaped backward, and von Harbach and the others jumped aside to give it plenty of room. They all stood waiting. And the horrified Mosquito found himself mentally counting the seconds. Sixty of them passed. Then sixty more! Two full minutes!

Then it came, the dull but reverberating explosion from the other side of the town. The bomb had struck! The wild-eyed Mosquito glanced out of that small window in the steeple. There was no red glow in the sky, thank God! Von Harbach's curse of disappointment gave him further assurance of that.

But then the German exclaimed: “I guess we're still a little short! I'm going to lower the elevation and then we cannot miss!” And again he manipulated the cranks on the barrel, which came down slowly, almost imperceptibly, from its upright position. They were putting in another bomb now.

Kirby thought his nerves would snap if he had to stand this another minute! He knew, somehow, that this shot was not going to miss as the first had! He could feel it, as every other man in the belfry seemed to feel it! All of them were eager, flushed with excitement. Now von Harbach was slamming down the door of the compartment again, locking the bomb in. Kirby, in a frenzy of desperation, tried once more to think of some plan, some tiny fleeting means by which he could somehow prevent this horrible thing. God, must he see these Germans succeed when he had gone so far as to discover their mysterious trick, when he had solved everything and learned all the details? And yet he knew there was nothing he could do. At the first move, he'd be shot down like a dog and then they'd go right on with their work!

Helplessly, his face twisting in absolute agony, as if he were being stretched on the rack, inhumanly tortured, he saw von Harbach again reach for that lever!

“Have we got enough pressure?” the Baron demanded.

Some one looked at the gauge. "Better wait a moment more," he suggested.

THE ENGINE CHUGGED away, pumping, pumping the air which would hurl the bomb high above the town to land almost two miles from here! The minute which followed seemed to pass like lightning to Kirby. The Mosquito's fists were clenched so tightly that his nails dug cruelly into the flesh of his palms. His muscles seemed to be bursting, and the veins swelled purple on his forehead. God, if only he weren't so damned helpless!

The blood drained from his face as von Harbach, again seizing the lever, shouted out with vibrant joy, "And now, here goes the supply base of our accursed enemies!"

"Wait!" Out of sheer hysteria, the word burst from Kirby's lips through no fault of his own.

Von Harbach paused in the act of pulling the lever, and stared at him in gaping astonishment, as did the four other Germans. And before they had time to recover from their astonishment, before they even moved, something snapped inside of the Mosquito, and he saw red. He forgot his helplessness, forgot that a false move would bring certain death. He forgot everything except that diabolical machine up there which was about to send a bomb crashing down on the supply base.

All in that single split-second his desperate eye had fallen on the huge rusty bell which hung motionless from the rafter—and on the rope which hung from it down through the belfry. All in the same instant he had noticed that the big bell was right on line with the gun itself, and with that lightning speed with which a man's mind sometimes works in a crisis, he had figured out his course of action! A desperate, suicidal course and it might not accomplish a damned thing. But he did not hesitate. He measured his distance, judged his time. Then——

With a berserk shout he leaped straight for the rope which hung from the bell. Even as he made that tigerlike spring he heard von Harbach's cry of surprised alarm. And then Kirby's hands caught the rope, clutched it frantically, held onto it for dear life as he was suspended over the sheer drop from the belfry tower. The jerking weight of his body pulled the rope downward, and slowly, with a squeaking groan, the bell began to swing on its axis.

By this time von Harbach and the other Germans, at last sensing the significance of the business, had

whipped out their automatics with a snarl of rage. *Crack!* A bullet whined past the Mosquito's face, and another ricocheted from a rafter over his head. But he ignored the fire. A demon seemed to be inside of him now, a demon which laughed at bullets, which could not be stopped by anything! Madly the Yank swung and danced on the rope to help pull that bell, which was still swinging slowly outward.

And then, like an agile monkey, even as another shot crashed out and a hot slug seared his cheek, he pulled himself up that rope, almost to the top. Then, swinging with his whole body, he shoved that bell with his two feet. He put every ounce of energy into that one mighty kick, and it did the trick! The bell went swinging wildly to the other side of the belfry.

Bong! The great bell clanged out a muffled but deafening peal. The huge thing swung as far as it could go, then came back with a terrific speed, gathering momentum on its way straight for the gun! Von Harbach and his companions on the platform leaped out of the way with shouts of terror and rage. Then it happened!

With a clanging crash, the ponderous bell struck the gun full force. The terrific impact made the very rafters shake, and for a moment it seemed as if the whole steeple would collapse! The gun was ripped clean off its foundation, and it rolled down grotesquely on the platform. Kirby, still hanging on to the bell rope, saw it and gave a yell of savage exultation.

CHAPTER VIII BOCHE REVENGE

THE GERMANS, recovering from their confusion, immediately focused their wild fury on the Mosquito again. They were bent on vengeance now, determined to put an end to the madman who had knocked down their gun! But Kirby having done his work, had no intention of staying here any longer. With the bell still swinging above him, filling the belfry with its reverberating peals, the Mosquito went sliding down that rope as fast as he could. The rope cut his hands agonizingly, tore through his teddybear, but he ignored the burning pain of it, and kept letting himself slip down, down through the dark shaft of the tower.

But before he had gotten far, while there was still a fatal drop of space beneath him, he felt the rope giving, giving! Looking up, he saw with horror that

the enraged von Harbach, unable to aim his gun at the swiftly descending form of the Mosquito down in the darkness, was slashing at the rope with a knife, hacking it to bits! Desperately, the Mosquito again swung on the rope with all his might, and then let go. He went flying through space and landed, sprawling and cursing, on the rickety stairway, which almost broke beneath him. Simultaneously, he saw the rope drop down snakily, as von Harbach's knife finally severed it from the bell! The Mosquito drew in his breath sharply. He had not been a second too soon!

Picking himself up, he started dashing down the creaking stairway, cursing as he stumbled in the darkness. The Germans were after him now, clattering down from the belfry. With mad defiance Kirby whipped out his Colt and fired blindly at the dark forms he saw on the opposite side of the circular stairs, above him. But his shots went way amiss; under the circumstances it was impossible to aim. Again he stumbled on the dark stairs, and before he could pick himself up this time they were upon him and he was suddenly caught in the beam of a flashlight.

Once more he tried to bring his gun into play, but they bore down on him, overwhelming him with their strength and numbers. The breath was knocked out of his lungs, and the gun wrested from his weakening grasp. Roughly he was dragged up the stairs like a sack of potatoes. They took him right back to the belfry, which had at last resumed its former quietness. The bell, due to the rust, had gotten stuck, and hung motionless at a crazy slant.

Weak and helpless, the Mosquito was literally held up by his collar before the livid-faced von Harbach. The master spy immediately turned a flashlight on him, passing the beam from Kirby's face to his teddybear. He suddenly caught a button in the gleam and held it there. Slowly his eyes narrowed to gleaming, murderous slits, and his face became satanic.

"So!" he snarled, with blighting malice. "A pig of a Yankee. A *verdampfer* American swine! It is all clear now! There must be Americans in that Gotha too! Tried to fool us, didn't you! Impudent dog, I'll teach you to trifle with Imperial intelligence! You will dare to smash up what we have worked so hard to build, you dirty, filthy——" He became speechless in his rage.

Suddenly, unable to restrain himself any longer, he seized the dazed Mosquito by the throat, and as his fingers tightened like bands of steel, he forced the choking Yank right over the rail of the balcony.

FRANTICALLY, with his senses gradually becoming numbed as those murderous fingers kept pressing his windpipe, Kirby squirmed and struggled, while the other Germans looked on in grim silence, with drawn revolvers. Slowly, fiercely, the enraged von Harbach kept pushing, pushing and choking. Kirby's head and shoulders were over the rail now, and below he could feel that sheer drop of space into which he was being slowly forced! His feet tried instinctively to stay on the floor of the balcony, but as von Harbach continued to shove and push, they lost their hold and lifted, kicking and dangling aimlessly. Dizzy and overcome with nausea, the Mosquito knew it was the end. A swift dizzying drop to the bottom of the shaft, and he would be reduced to a mangled heap of flesh and bones!

"*Schweinhund!*" von Harbach roared, as he braced himself to give Kirby the final push that would send the helpless Yank off the balcony. "You will never meddle with Imperial intelligence again!" His voice, full of hate and venom, rose shrilly in the quiet belfry. "You die even now—like this!"

At first Kirby did not know what actually happened. One moment he had felt himself being pushed off the balcony, and the next, von Harbach's brutal pressure had suddenly relaxed and the Mosquito, gasping for breath, was on the floor of the balcony again, where several of the Germans kept him covered with their automatics.

Not until then did he hear it—that sound which had startled von Harbach had caused him to stop in his murderous work. The baron and the rest were listening now, while alarm slowly came over their faces.

Mmmmm——Mmmmm—— The beelike drone rose somewhere overhead, and it seemed to get closer and closer, louder and louder. Then, as it was rising to a roar, von Harbach leaped to the lookout window in the steeple above, peering out. He cursed savagely.

"It's that *verdampfer* Gotha again!" he rasped. "And there must be Americans in it! There must be—*Gott!*" he broke off with an alarmed shout. "It's coming right down over us! Can it be that they know we are here and are going to bomb us?"

A gasp of horror broke from the other Germans, but Kirby felt a surge of frenzied joy which brought tears to his eyes. Shorty and Travis, his two comrades, somewhere right above here and coming closer! What had brought them here and what they were doing, he could not guess, but the knowledge of their presence put new life blood into him. The roar of twin motors was

rising deafeningly close now, until the rickety church actually trembled from it! The Germans, growing more and more alarmed, stood frozen, rigid. Von Harbach again shouted wildly from the lookout window.

“*Gott*, it is right overhead now! It is passing right over us!”

Kirby, beside himself, yelled crazily. “Shorty! Travis! Come on down, you hell-fired buzzards, you——” A hand clapped roughly over his mouth by one of the snarling Germans cut off further speech. But he knew his shout was futile anyway, that his voice could never reach his comrades above the thunder of their motors!

And then von Harbach gave an audible sigh of relief. “It has passed! It is climbing away!” And even as he spoke the roar slowly died out into the night, and was gone.

KIRBY’S MOMENTARY JOY changed to abject despair. They had been so close, his comrades, such a small distance had been between them and himself! If only they had guessed that he was right in this steeple, trapped with these murderous Boche!

Von Harbach, with a little grunt of satisfaction, left the lookout window. His insane rage had had a chance to cool down now, and he was once more the calm and level-headed master-spy. He seemed to have momentarily forgotten about Kirby, though the rest of the Germans were keeping the Mosquito well covered, seeing that he could not move. Von Harbach’s keen glance went to the wrecked gun in the belfry, and as he looked at it a slow gleam came back into his eyes.

“By Heaven!” he shouted joyfully. “The gun is not half as badly damaged as I feared! There’s no reason why we can’t fix it and get it working again!”

As Kirby heard these words, his last spark of hope was crushed entirely. God, all his work had been to no avail! They were going to fix the gun and set it working again! And now that they had discovered his identity and had him prisoner, there was nothing he could possibly do about it! He knew he was doomed to die with the secret he had worked so hard to reveal! A feeling of utter defeat, of bitter resignation, came over him. What was the use? He had done his best, he had done everything within his power, but von Harbach and the rest were too much for him. He was no match for these daring, desperate spies!

After a further examination of the gun, von Harbach now remembered his prisoner again. He came down and confronted Kirby once more, and this time there was a contemptuous sneer on his hard features, and

his voice was a silky purr: “Well, my friend, I greatly fear you have not accomplished anything at all by your insane tactics. At best you have delayed us, and for that, as well as for what you have learned, you will die.” His tone was still as casual and calm as ever, but there was something absolutely deadly in its very calmness.

“I am glad that I was interrupted when I lost my temper and tried to throw you off the balcony. After all,” his smile sent a shudder through the horrified Mosquito, “there is no hurry. In fact, there is no reason why you can’t hear and see the supply base blow up before we dispense with you. There——”

“You dirty skunk!” Kirby burst out, his face contorting with wild fury. “You dirty, underhanded dog! You’ll pay for this!” His voice rose in its promising threat. “You’ll fry in your own grease for it, you and all your damned Boche gang! You——”

“Bind the pig!” von Harbach suddenly snapped at the other Germans who were growling angrily at Kirby’s curses and threatening him with their revolvers. “Tie him up and leave him on the floor here where he can watch us and enjoy the show!”

Instantly the others carried out the order. Some one fetched a stout rope, and the helpless Mosquito squirmed futilely as he was bound hand and foot. The knots were drawn so tightly that he groaned as the rope cut into his raw flesh. Unable to move even the slightest bit, he was chucked like a rag doll into a corner of the belfry, from which he could watch all the proceedings.

Von Harbach’s terse voice again rose in a command, “And now, every man to the gun! We must set it up and get it working! Hurry, we have wasted enough time!”

The men responded with alacrity. A moment later and all were laboring furiously. Kirby, his muscles straining futilely against the tight bonds which held him, watched them in growing horror and agony. It was a cruel torture von Harbach had devised to punish the Yank. Powerless, unable to make the slightest resistance, the anguished Mosquito had to watch them as they slowly but steadily worked at the gun! Even now they were hoisting it back on its mountings, from which it had been torn cleanly.

THE BELFRY resounded with the clang of hammers, as all banged away at rivets or twisted metal. Sweat poured down every face, but they kept working with the same ardent enthusiasm, kept working tirelessly while von Harbach, who was the most active of all, urged them on by setting the example.

"It is coming along excellently," the master-spy remarked with satisfaction. "It will not be long now before we send our faithful bombs right over to that supply base! This night will yet see our triumph, our victory——"

"Damn you to hell!" Kirby cursed at him in a frenzy of helpless rage. Again his muscles strained at the bonds which held him, and the veins swelled purple on his forehead. "God, if only I had a chance to get at you, you dirty lousy skunk! But," once more his voice rose in a wild threat, "you'll pay for this, I tell you! You'll pay for it, you dirty——"

Von Harbach's smile was mocking in its cool amusement. "What a typical Yankee!" he observed, with profound irony. "He threatens even when he is bound and helpless." Then suddenly he came down and stood over Kirby, and his face hardened. "Yes, perhaps we will pay for this!" he admitted in a different tone of voice, and once more Kirby could see that stamp of reckless courage on his face. "But not until we have done our work, and then the price will be worth paying, no matter how great it is! We have prepared for this night for the last three months, and nothing is going to stop us!"

"You'll never get away with it!" the desperate Mosquito threatened, as if he had some wild hope of persuading the German actually to give up his momentous project! "You're biting off more than you can chew! You'll never——"

"My friend is inclined toward pessimism," observed von Harbach, and again his eyes narrowed ominously. "And while I do not mind his words, I am afraid they might discourage my men." The other Germans laughed uproariously at this. "And so," von Harbach concluded, "I am afraid we must put an end to your eloquent speeches." And with a sudden gesture, he whipped out a handkerchief, and before the Mosquito knew what was happening, the cloth was stuffed roughly into his mouth, gagging him and making him choke. He could not even shout now. He was bound and gagged, absolutely helpless!

Von Harbach went back to the gun. "*Mach schnell!*" he commanded. "The sooner we can get the gun fixed the better. Here, give me a hand here, Twenty-six." And while the bound and silenced Mosquito kept writhing and watching in torment, the Germans continued their work. They were getting the gun right back into its place now. They were getting it fixed! In another few minutes, in just a little while——

It came then, that sudden interruption which

caused all the Germans to pause in their work and stiffen from head to foot. Footsteps somewhere in the building below! Somebody was down there, stumbling about in the darkness.

"Kirby!" The Mosquito's heart leaped as he heard that familiar voice, shouting from below. It was the voice of Shorty Carn, his comrade! "Kirby!" it shouted again. "Where in hell are you? Are you in here?"

Von Harbach let out a low, snarling curse, then motioned his men for absolute silence. And Kirby strained more madly against his bonds than ever. His throat and lungs worked to push the gag which choked back the answering shout he longed to give. He tried to articulate, but only a muffled, incoherent sound came from him.

CHAPTER IX THREE MOSQUITOES CRASH THROUGH

"THERE'S A LIGHT up in the belfry!"

Kirby's heart jumped, it was Travis' familiar drawl that he heard. With von Harbach and his men remaining in absolute silence, the words, though low spoken, came clearly from below. "Maybe he's up there."

"Hell, what would he be doing up there?" Shorty's voice answered.

"He crashed on the roof, didn't he?" Travis came back. "Well, maybe he was hurt and somebody, the rector or some one, took him in."

Bewilderedly, Kirby wondered how his comrades had come here. Again he struggled vainly to force the gag from his throat. Von Harbach and the others still stood motionless, but all were drawing their revolvers now. And in the next instant came the unmistakable creak of rickety stairs. The two Mosquitoes were ascending the circular stairway, coming up——

Von Harbach's voice was a low and ominous whisper.

"They do not expect to find Germans here," he said, for he had heard Travis' words. "We will finish them before they know what it is all about." He gave more directions which Kirby, horrified, could not hear. But he saw all the Germans take stations right at the head of the stairs, where they crouched furtively against the wall so they would not be seen. The footsteps on the creaking stairs were drawing closer, closer. The Germans all held their revolvers ready and trained directly on the stairway!

And the blood froze within Kirby as he heard von Harbach's next and last whispered command: "As soon as they appear, shoot to kill! We cannot waste any time with them! Ready now! They are coming!"

In a wild panic Kirby renewed his struggles to get that gag out of his mouth. His muscles almost burst as they strained against the tight ropes which bound him. Sweat covered his face, and tears of helpless anguish filled his eyes. God, his comrades were walking right to their death, coming closer and closer every second. Even now they were right near the top of the stairs, approaching in serene oblivion of the ghastly fate which awaited them in the form of deadly revolvers. *Creak-creak!* The stairs shook as the footsteps rose louder, louder. The Germans were tensing now, their fingers were tightening perceptibly on their triggers——

Sheer desperation lent Kirby strength. He rallied all his energy and made one supreme effort to force that handkerchief from his mouth. In another instant the two Mosquitoes would be at the top of the stairs, and would be drilled like rats! But in that instant, Kirby succeeded! The handkerchief suddenly burst out of his straining mouth, and right after it came the hoarse, frantic yell:

"Shorty! Trav! Look out—Boche! Give 'em hell!"

And hell broke loose! Before the confused Germans had time to grasp the situation, while all of them turned their surprised eyes toward Kirby, there was a sudden rush on the stairs, and then the deafening crash of two blazing Colt automatics! The two Mosquitoes, hearing their leader's shout, had responded with that unquestioning alacrity with which they always responded to his commands! They had whipped out their Colts and leaped up the stairs, firing as soon as they saw the waiting figures above. One of the Germans dropped with a shrill yelp while the others, with shouts of alarm and rage, sprang to face the attack which they had never expected. A THOUSAND things seemed to happen at once. Revolvers crashed out all over the place. Kirby caught a vague glimpse of his two comrades, bursting onto the balcony with guns blazing, and then the two lamps which illumined the belfry were shattered by bullets, and the place was plunged into darkness. There were curses, sounds of wild scuffling, and the constant reports of revolvers. Everywhere the livid orange streaks of flame were spurting, and bullets whined all over the belfry, sometimes ricocheting from the bell with a liquid clang!

During the excitement, Kirby, with new strength suddenly filling his tired muscles, again struggled to throw off his bonds. Once more he gathered every ounce of energy. Then his whole body expanded, straining madly against the ropes. And to his savage joy the ropes burst asunder, and he was free! Quickly he untangled himself from the shackles and leaped to his feet.

A dark bulk loomed before him, but even in the darkness he recognized one of the German spies. The latter also recognized him, and his flashing automatic came up swiftly. But Kirby, hauling off with all his might, sent a crashing left uppercut to the man's jaw. The German staggered backward with a pained gasp. He toppled right over the rail of the balcony and fell shrieking into the space below. There was a dull thud as his body hit the stone flagging at the bottom, and lay still.

Another figure loomed in front of Kirby then, and both were about to hurl themselves upon each other when joyful recognition came. The other man was Shorty Carn! The two were exchanging gleeful greetings when a wild-eyed German came between them with leveled gun. Shorty got the Boche with a well aimed blow from the butt of his Colt. The Jerry, his skull crushed, dropped like a log.

Then suddenly it was all over as abruptly as it had begun. Panting and wondering what had been the result, Kirby stood in the darkness. All was still, a hushed, ominous silence. Kirby found his voice, and it rose hoarsely in the darkness: "Shorty! Trav! Are you all right, guys?"

"I'm still with you," Shorty's panting voice came right by his side.

"So am I!" came a familiar drawl which filled both the others with instant relief. Simultaneously a flashlight suddenly came to life in the hands of the lanky Travis, who stood gasping but smiling. He flashed the beam all around the belfry. Two grotesque heaps on the floor were revealed—Operatives 15 and 22. One was shot through the heart, the other's skull had been crushed by Shorty's revolver butt.

"Looks like we've cleaned 'em out," Travis remarked, grimly. Then his voice rose with tense curiosity. "But I'm still wondering what the hell it's all about."

"So am I!" panted Shorty, and turned to Kirby. "What the devil are you doing here in this spy nest?"

Kirby, still looking around the belfry, grinned. "That's a long story," he said. But he couldn't conceal

his tense curiosity either. "What the devil are you guys doing here," he demanded. "How did you ever find this place anyhow?"

"IT WAS EASY to find this place," Travis explained. "When we finished the raid, we noticed you hadn't joined us like you said you would. Shorty thought he remembered the place where you had left us, and we decided to look around that neighborhood. After awhile we thought we saw a crashed plane on the roof of the church. We came down to investigate, and sure enough it was your Fokker. We landed in a field near by, and came here looking for you, never thinking for an instant that we'd bump into a crowd of Jerries. But," he smiled grimly, "we found you anyhow!"

"Damn lucky for me you did!" Kirby mused, slowly. He was still looking about. "I hope we've gotten all these bozos. There were five of them altogether, you know."

"I plugged one when we first came up, I know," Travis said. "I think it was this bird here," he nodded toward one of the dead Jerries.

"I know I got this other one with my gun-butt," Shorty motioned toward the other corpse.

"And I sent one off the balcony," Kirby counted. "That makes three. How about the other two? I wonder if we got von Harbach?"

"Von Harbach?" the other two echoed incredulously, remembering the reference to the great German spy which the U.S. intelligence captain had made last night.

"Yeah," Kirby's voice was thoughtful. "I hope we'll find him lying around somewhere too, because— Now what the hell is that?" he broke in on his own words, with alarm.

All three had stiffened at the sudden, familiar sound which rose somewhere outside. Kirby need not have asked his question, for he knew all too well what that sound meant. *Pop-poppity-pop!* A series of loud detonations, which rose to a deafening roar, then died into a smooth and rhythmic purr.

Shorty's eyes were wide. "Good night, that's our Gotha! Some one's starting up the motors; we shut them off! I wonder——"

But already Kirby, with a wild yell, had leaped for the stairs, stopping only to grab up a revolver from one of the dead Germans. His comrades followed hastily. Madly they all went clattering down the protesting stairs. They reached the bottom, and in the glow of Travis' flashlight, found the door. It was closed and as they tried it they found it had been bolted from

the outside! Furiously, Kirby hurled himself against it. There was a straining creak of wood as the door trembled but did not give. Shorty and Travis kicked at it with all their might, while Kirby lunged against it once more. There was a groan of snapping hinges, and the door at last yielded.

The Three Mosquitoes, led by the wild-eyed Kirby, dashed out into the night. The drone of twin engines was clear and distinct now. They were still purring smoothly.

"Not that way!" Shorty yelled, as Kirby started to run in the direction whence he thought the sound came. "Here—over here!" He led the way, and Kirby and Travis followed. Around the dark church they dashed, and as they came on the other side the Gotha, squatting like some dark monstrous bird in the adjacent field, came into view. Sparks were streaming from its exhausts, as its twin propellers turned over smoothly.

Then a savage oath ripped from Kirby's throat, and he fairly hurled himself forward, his automatic pointing. The other two Mosquitoes, seeing the reason why, also brought up their guns as they ran!

THERE WAS A MAN sitting in the forward bomber's cockpit of the Gotha. And there was another man standing on the ground below him, and the latter was handing up some dark pear-shaped objects of steel which he took from a wheelbarrow, one by one. Instantly Kirby had recognized the tall, broad figure on the ground. Von Harbach! The man in the observer's cockpit must be the last of the five spies!

Kirby fired long before he and his comrades were in range. Von Harbach wheeled at the report, and then a defiant snarl broke from the master-spy. Leaving the wheelbarrow before it was yet empty of its bombs, the German climbed up into the pilot's cockpit with the agility of a monkey. The Mosquitoes, redoubling their efforts, rushed up, their guns blazing. Then——

Rat-ta-tat-tat! The shrill staccato clatter shattered the air as the German in the observer's cockpit swung around the flanking machine gun mounted there, brought it to bear directly on the charging Mosquitoes. A fusilade of tracers whined right over the heads of the Yanks, and realizing they'd be mowed down like flies if they stood out in the open like this, they were forced to hurl themselves flat upon the ground. Kirby cursed wildly, despairingly, as the bullets tore up the dirt right in front of him. Damn it, he had never meant to have the guns of the two Boche planes loaded; it had not

been necessary as far as his plan was concerned. But he had humored his comrades, who did not know that Kirby's hunch had nothing to do with dogfighting! And now this proved to be the very blunder that ruined everything!

Helplessly, the three Yanks were forced to lie there. The Gotha's twin motors roared now, as von Harbach, at the controls, opened their throttles wide. Slowly the big ship was moving, lumbering out across the stubble field. Another moment and its wheels lifted, it rose slowly into the air, and was climbing toward the dim-starred sky!

"Well," Travis sighed, like a good loser of a game, "they made their getaway! There's no stopping them now! But what the hell?"

"You damned idiot!" Kirby cursed his comrade in his wild panic. "They aren't making any get-away! Don't you understand? They've loaded that ship with real bombs! The anti-aircraft gunners and Allied pilots will let them through of course—they have orders not to harm that Gotha! They'll think you guys are still in it, carrying on your fake raid! Why," his voice broke hysterically, "that dirty skunk is going to blow hell out of that supply base! He'll fly right over and bomb it before any one can stop him!"

The eyes of his two comrades widened with horror. Even though they knew nothing of the mysterious business, they grasped the significance of Kirby's words. Helplessly they looked at their desolate surroundings.

"What can we do?" Shorty wrung his hands. "There's nobody anywhere near here, and by the time we get any place, that Gotha will be over the dump! How can we stop it?"

"We've got to stop it!" Kirby burst out, with stubborn fierceness. "We can't let that dirty skunk get away with this!" But even as he spoke he felt hopelessly outwitted, tricked by an intelligence and cunning which he knew were superior to his own. Von Harbach was a fiend, a wizard who seemed always to find ways of doing the impossible. There was no stopping him from reaching the goal he had chosen. With his nest in the steeple discovered and betrayed, with all his men save one shot or captured, he had nevertheless found a way of carrying on with his work, of reaching his objective!

CHAPTER X SLANTING TO HELL

SUDDENLY KIRBY'S FRANTIC EYES swept up to the roof of the church, and vaguely he glimpsed the Fokker whose wheels had torn clean through the shingles. He had forgotten that plane until this moment, and as he saw it a wild gleam of hope flickered in his eyes. He spoke with frantic haste.

"Damn it, I don't think that ship was really damaged! If we could only find some way to get it into the air—" He broke off, and went dashing back toward the belfry tower, his surprised comrades on his heels. Kirby fairly flew up the rickety steps, until he came to the French window which gave on to the sloping roof. He risked his neck as he ran down that roof, for his feet almost slipped several times. His comrades followed faithfully.

In the next instant all were examining the Fokker in the light of Travis' flashlight. Again Kirby spoke with mad haste.

"By God, it looks all right! I have an idea! Come on, give me a hand, see if we can lift it out of this damned hole. Hurry! Every second counts!"

The other two needed no such urging, however. They knew that all the time the Gotha was slowly climbing over Remiens, approaching its objective. All three worked with that lightning rapidity which only desperate men can attain. Bracing their feet on the sloping roof, they heaved with all their might. The Fokker, being quite light, lifted suddenly. All in the space of a minute they had hoisted it out of the hole, and they found to their relief that its wheels and undercarriage had not really suffered from the crash. Sweating and groaning from the exertion of it, they slowly managed to turn the craft around, so that it was resting on the slope, with its nose pointed downward. Shorty and Travis held it in this position, while Kirby dashed back to the belfry to fetch a rope. He found the part of the line that still dangled from the bell, and cut a long stretch from it with his pocket knife. Then, rope in hand, he dashed back out on the roof.

And only another moment passed before they had fastened that rope to the Fokker's tail-skid, looping its other end around a rafter beneath the gaping hole which the plane had torn through the shingles. Thus the ship, squatting on the downward sloping roof, was

held securely. Already Kirby was climbing into the cockpit, and his comrades did not question his right to assume the job, for they knew he was by far the best pilot among them, and this particular job would require a remarkable pilot indeed!

“Switch on!” Kirby shouted, as Travis, supported on the roof by Shorty, swung the propeller furiously, then leaped aside as it whirled from his grasp. The engine burst into deafening life, and the plane trembled and strained at the rope which held it. Kirby jazzed the throttle.

“You guys get help and see that this place falls into the right hands,” he bellowed to them above the roar. “And now get ready at that rope!”

They leaped to obey the order, going behind the tail of the plane, where /v vjShorty stood over the rope, a ready knife in his hand. Kirby, in his impatient haste, scarcely waited long enough for his motor to warm. Madly he jerked the throttle lever wide open. The engine roared and thundered. The plane strained forward like a dog on a leash, and the rope which held it began to creak ominously.

KIRBY’S ARM shot upward from the cockpit, waving the signal. Instantly Shorty’s knife came down on the rope, cutting the taut line in two. The Fokker, engine roaring, fairly hurtled down the sloping roof. With a lurch it jumped right off, into space, where it reeled perilously and started floundering toward the ground! But then Kirby, forcing himself to keep a cool head, did one of the greatest bits of flying of his career.

Deliberately he pushed his stick forward, and let the plane dive straight for the ground right below! In a split-second the force of gravity had given it flying speed. And with the ground looming right up at him, as if to give him a terrific smack, Kirby pulled back madly on the joystick. And the Fokker responded! Its nose literally spurned the earth, it lifted upwards, and in the next second it was rocketing skyward, while Shorty and Travis cheered from the roof of the church in joyous relief.

Up, up, Kirby zoomed his roaring plane, giving her all the gas she could take. He must hurry, hurry before that Gotha could get over the supply base! Luckily the Fokker could fly almost three times as fast as the lumbering bomber, which gave Kirby a fleeting chance at least! Swiftly the Mosquito gained altitude, was climbing over the town.

And as he scanned the sky before him he at once caught the sight for which he was looking. Searchlights

and anti-aircraft shells which were bursting off there. That meant the Gotha was there, although he could not see it yet. The gunners and searchlight crews were again playing their game, pretending to shoot at what they thought to be fake raiders!

But the muscles in Kirby’s face grew taut as he realized how near the Gotha was to the supply base over there. From his high position now he could once more discern that cluster of squatting buildings and its surrounding wall. Judging from the position of the anti-aircraft bursts, the Gotha did not have far to go! Could he reach it?

He fought frantically to get more speed out of his roaring Fokker. He used every trick he knew, coaxing the plane forward as a jockey coaxes his racehorse. The engine roared in shrill protest now, as the plane literally shot forward, cleaving the night sky like an arrow. The Fokker was trembling in every fiber, shivering as if the strain must break it to pieces! But Kirby went right on abusing it. He must get to that Gotha before it got to the supply base!

He was getting there now, nearing the maze of waving lights and the bursting anti-aircraft shells. In the very next moment he saw at last the Gotha’s monstrous lumbering shape as it winged slowly but confidently through the harmless fire. Kirby’s eyes narrowed to grim slits as he drew closer and closer to that big ship. He reached forward and tripped the twin Spandau guns mounted in front of him. A tight smile flickered across his lips. He was glad after all that the guns had been loaded now!

Then his smile faded. The Gotha, still some distance ahead, was almost over the supply base! In another moment, another few seconds, it would be sweeping over those grounds.

Kirby flew as he had never flown before. He had altitude on the Gotha, he saw now, and he used it to its full advantage. With his plane still at full throttle, with the propeller whirling as fast as it possibly could, he eased his joystick forward ever so slightly. The nose of the Fokker tilted downward, and then the plane was streaking down a long hill of space, at the other end of which was the Gotha. The added pull of gravity gave Kirby the impossible speed he needed now. Down he went, hell-bent, with the wind tearing at his face, with the flying wires straining, straining. A waving searchlight beam caught him momentarily in its glare, but he passed right out of it. There was nothing to fear from the gunners below: they had orders not to shoot at the Fokker either.

EVEN AS THE GOTHA was just about to come overhead of the supply center, its twin-tails were looming right before Kirby, and he was leaning fiercely to his sights. His fingers closed on the stick-triggers. He pressed them savagely, firing as he swept into range. *Rat-tat-tat-tat!* The Spandau guns vibrated as they stuttered into life, two spurting streaks of flame leaping from their nozzles. With grim triumph Kirby watched the white lines of tracers penciling themselves against the darkness. They were reaching their mark! Even in the darkness he saw the bits of wood and fabric leaping from the Gotha's tail assembly.

The huge bomber half-rolled clumsily, awkwardly. Von Harbach, suddenly aware of his deadly attacker, was trying to throw off Kirby's sights while he kept moving right on toward his objective! The Gotha was sticking to its course, getting right overhead of that supply base!

Cursing, Kirby swept up and then went streaking right past the other ship. The observer in the front cockpit swung around his flanking machine gun frantically. *Rat-tat-tat-tat!* Bullets sang in Kirby's ears, and he heard them ticking through his fuselage. But he ignored them and, passing the Fokker, cut in madly on its airpath to intercept it from the supply base. Von Harbach, to avoid certain collision, was forced to bank sharply, while his observer continued to blaze away at the fleeting, darting Fokker. Kirby attacked head-on, and now he had succeeded in making the Germans abandon their course! They were no longer heading for that supply center, but were moving on a parallel with its boundaries. With his heart exulting, Kirby shot up into a breathless Immelmann turn, and came down with guns blazing to make the kill.

And it was at that moment that the five night-flying Camels came diving out of the dark sky above, plunging like plummets with their guns blazing in staccato fury. And it was not at the Gotha they were shooting! It was at Kirby! In cold horror the Mosquito grasped the situation. The pilots of the Camels, seeing a plane attack the bomber they had been told to let through unharmed, assumed that the Fokker must be manned by a German! And they were coming down, all five of them, to make short work of this German!

Even now their bullets were pumping into Kirby's ship, drilling his wings and ripping through his fuselage. In a frenzy of terror, he pulled up, and waved a frantic arm from the cockpit. But the signals were neither seen nor heeded. In the next instant the five Camels were weaving all about the Fokker as if in

some strange snake-dance, and they were peppering away at it relentlessly.

The horrified Mosquito saw the Gotha below him straighten out, as von Harbach, crafty fiend that he was, took full advantage of the situation. Banking slowly, the German once more headed the monstrous bomber straight for that supply center, and moved on toward it smoothly and serenely!

Again Kirby tried to signal his own countrymen, who were bent on his destruction. But again his signals went wasted. The Fokker was lurching now, as if drunk from the bullets which pumped it. In another moment Kirby would be shot to hell while that Gotha would calmly soar over the base and drop its bombs! The thought filled Kirby with such frenzy that he ignored the bullets which were singing all around him. By God, he'd get that Gotha no matter what happened to him. He'd get von Harbach! The shrewd spy was not going to triumph over him, not going to outwit him any longer!

WITH RECKLESS ABANDON, Kirby shoved his stick forward and dived for the Gotha again, both guns blazing. The Camels closed in on him furiously, trying to stop him. The Jerry in the observer's cockpit of the Gotha also met him with a rain of lead. The very air was thick with bullets now, dense with flying screaming slugs which sought to destroy him. *Crash!* A strut shivered and broke, and the wing which it supported began to crack ominously, threatening to give. But Kirby leaned to his sights, and kept pressing his triggers. Again, to his savage triumph, he saw his bullets going into the Gotha. And now they were scoring! The Gotha began to wobble now, began to lurch! A few more bursts——

But then, to his despair, the Camels had closed in on him at last, and they intercepted his attack, forcing him to hold his fire lest he hit one of them! They literally swept him away from the Gotha, and then they crowded in on him, seeking to wall him in a prison of fatal crisscross fire. And again, to his horror, he saw the Gotha straighten out, saw it move toward the Allied supply base, though it was flying a little jerkily now.

He made one last desperate effort to break away from the Camels and attack once more. But it was useless. They had him blocked from every side, so that all he could do was twist and turn and roll. He cursed and yelled in sobbing hysteria as the bullets grew thicker and thicker.

"Fools!" he shrieked, as if there were the slightest

chance of their hearing him. "Fools! Can't you see that Gotha is going to bomb hell out of the supply base? Damn you, you blundering idiots! You——"

His voice trailed into a gasp of sheer, agonized horror. The Gotha was now going over the supply center, passing over the walls! And the Mosquito knew that it was all over. Von Harbach had won! By the crudest irony of fate, Kirby was slowly but surely being shot to ribbons while the German spy, in perfect safety, rode over his objective to carry out his diabolical work!

And then a cry of frenzied joy broke from Kirby's throat, even though his Fokker was floundering, falling off into stalling side-slips with half its controls shot away. For with startling abruptness, two other planes had dropped out of the sky, two trim scouts which came down like comets with fire trailing from their exhausts. They were Spads, those two planes, and they were the Spads of Shorty Carn and Travis. The two Mosquitoes had realized, after Kirby had left them, that just such a thing as this might happen. They had rushed to their aviation field as fast as they could, praying that Kirby could at least delay the Gotha until they could come to his rescue. And now they had arrived, in the nick of time.

Guns blazing, they came down like winged furies on that Gotha. Immediately the Camels which were molesting Kirby ceased their fire, for the pilots, now seeing two Yank planes attack that same Gotha, knew that a mistake of some sort had been made. And Kirby gratefully pulled up his bullet-ridden ship and, though he could hardly hold it in the air, he drove it nevertheless toward the Gotha once more.

But he need not have done so. For the two Spads had forced that Gotha off the boundaries of the supply center before it had gotten far enough to loose its bombs. And then the end came with breathless swiftness. The two Spads, guns spitting, leaped like blood-crazed vultures on their prey. A ribbon of flame leaped from the Gotha's engine, went licking greedily along its flanks.

Boom! B-r-rooom! In a mighty burst of fire which illuminated the whole sky, the Gotha disappeared forever. Its bombs had gone off and blown it to hell.

A MOMENT LATER and Kirby had come up in his limping Fokker, and he was actually chagrined that he had not come in time to help finish that Gotha. His comrades swung in on either side of him, the pilots of the Camels saw then what their mistakes had been, and the Three Mosquitoes flew back to their aviation field.

Once more the Three Mosquitoes stood before the colonel's desk in the large chateau which was Remiens headquarters. But this time the colonel, instead of looking worried and haggard, was beaming at them pleasantly. The U.S. intelligence captain who had been there the other night was also present.

"Well, we've got everything cleaned up," he was saying. "Von Harbach's gang seems to be wiped off the slate. And we owe it all to you!" he confessed warmly to Kirby, and the latter smiled modestly.

"I still don't see how you did it!" the beaming colonel put in, almost with awe. "How in the world did you ever figure the thing out?"

Kirby shrugged carelessly. "Oh, it was just horse sense, that's all," he insisted. "I didn't get my hunch until I heard that spy spin his yarn the other night. That's what set me thinking. I knew that my buddies and I hadn't seen a damned thing in the air, and here was this spy raving about high-flying Gothas and other fantastic rot which no real aviator could believe. It began to look to me as if he were deliberately trying to keep our minds in the sky. Why? Well, I began to wonder if it wasn't because he was afraid we might look on the ground.

"That's why I felt the fake raid would turn the trick. I figured that if there were Boche working from the ground, they'd signal any Jerry planes that threatened to drop a bomb on them by mistake. I didn't know just how they would signal, or what I would find so I just kept an open mind. I must admit," he added, with grim reminiscence, "that I got a few surprises!"

The U.S. intelligence captain again spoke in frank admiration. "If you ask me, Captain Kirby, you're wasting your talents. You'd make an A-1 intelligence man! Why don't you join our branch?"

Kirby looked at him almost with disdain. "Join intelligence?" he snorted. "No thanks! You see," He grinned affectionately at his comrades, "I'm afraid I'd rather be just an ordinary peegot with a little horse sense than a brainy intelligence man! No hard feelings though!"