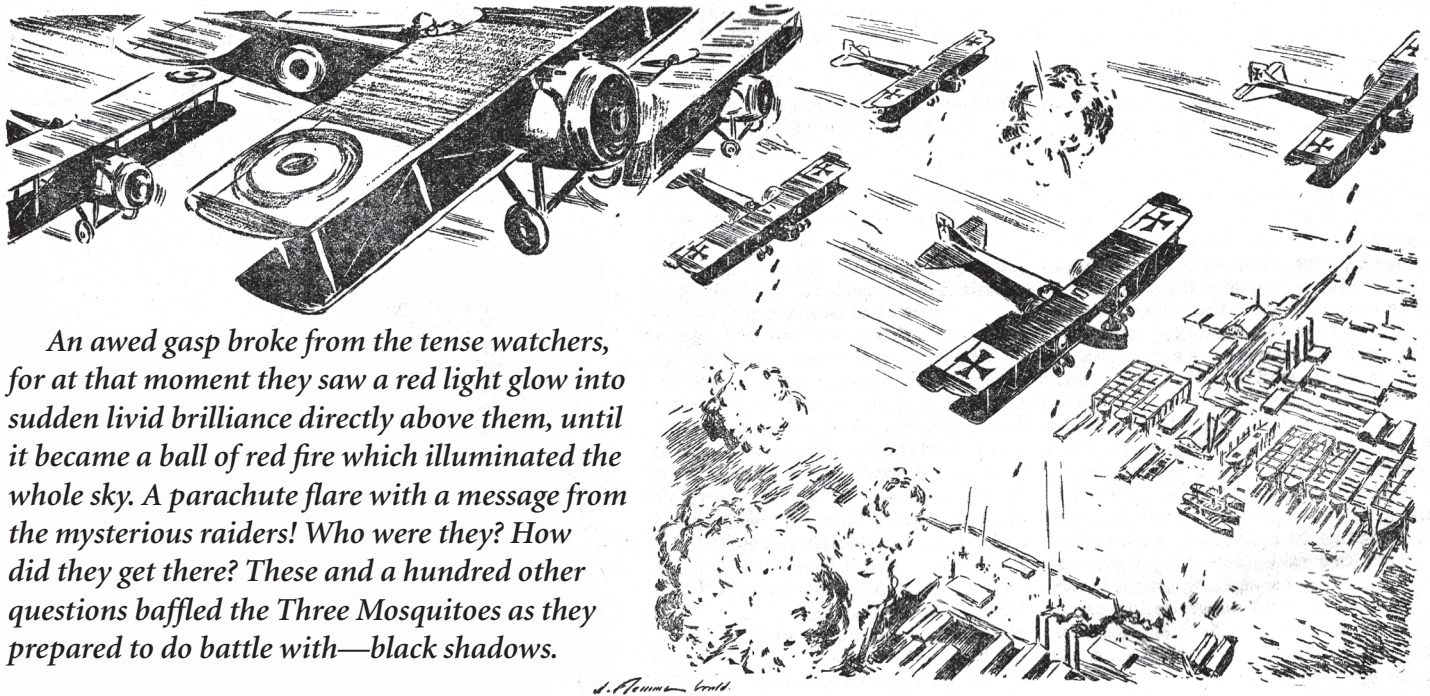


The **THREE** **MOSQUITOES**™



An awed gasp broke from the tense watchers, for at that moment they saw a red light glow into sudden livid brilliance directly above them, until it became a ball of red fire which illuminated the whole sky. A parachute flare with a message from the mysterious raiders! Who were they? How did they get there? These and a hundred other questions baffled the Three Mosquitoes as they prepared to do battle with—black shadows.

THE SQUADRON FROM NOWHERE

by **RALPH OPPENHEIM**

IT'S A BEASTLY MESS, I tell you," the old florid-faced British colonel was exclaiming. He pulled nervously at the ends of his large white mustache. "It's the bloodiest atrocity I ever heard of. Here we are, up at the border of Scotland—which is the last place you'd expect to find

any signs of the war—and yet we're as bad off as if we were at the Front, in France." He shook his head.

Already well enough advanced in years to be retired from active service, he had been sent to this peaceful quiet zone at Empworth in northern England, to take care of the troops at the Scotch border. He had

expected to see no action at all, for the doctors had warned him that high blood pressure and war did not go well together. That was why he was so agitated about the whole thing.

"It's beastly," he kept repeating with growing indignation. "It's absolutely beastly."

The three men who stood before his desk nodded slowly and sympathetically. They were Yanks, these three men, and they wore the silver wings of the U.S. air corps. They had come all the way from France, having been called upon to tackle one of the strangest mysteries the war had yet produced. Since this was a mystery of the air, Allied G.H.Q. knew that if it could be solved at all, the "Three Mosquitoes," as this famous trio of war birds were known, were the ones to solve it.

Now, late at night, they stood inside the rude unobtrusive hut which the British colonel made his headquarters. It was a ramshackle sort of office, dimly lit by a kerosene lamp which hung from the ceiling, and heated by a small smoky wood-stove—for it was cold here.

As yet, the Three Mosquitoes had that slightly bewildered look of men who have just stepped into an entirely new and strange environment. This was nothing like France, this cold quiet country nested in the foothills of the Highlands. It was not like England, either; the atmosphere was completely Scotch. Most of the men to be seen here wore kilts and spoke with a burr, whether they were soldiers or civilians. And even now, from the distance outside, accompanied by a rhythmic but barbaric beat of drums, there rose into the night a shrill catlike wail which hardly seemed music to the untutored ears of the three Yanks—bagpipes. Some Highland regiment was marching in to its barracks.

"Infernal pipes!" the colonel exploded in angry disgust. "That's no sound for a civilized man. Gives one the creeps, what with all this ghastly business."

The Three Mosquitoes shifted uncomfortably, and pulled their slickers a little more tightly around their shoulders. It was cold in here, despite the smoking wood-stove. Already the gloom of this dimly lit shack was beginning to have its effect on them. And it was true, now that the colonel had mentioned it, that those bagpipes did give one the creeps.

"But look here, sir," Kirby, impetuous young leader of the famous trio, suddenly put in. "Let's try to get this straight. You say this business has been going on for over a month, and yet you've been unable to find out even how it's being done?"

The British colonel's face looked strangely gray and haggard in the dim light. "We know only that it's being done from the air," he sighed, "and that each time the results are more disastrous." He leaned over a map spread on his desk, and dabbed at various points with his forefinger. "These places," he burst out with grim emphasis, "have been raided. They have been bombed from the air with terrible effect. It seems inconceivable, but it's jolly well true. As far away from Germany as we are, the bloody Boche have been carrying out one raid after another on our important towns and shipping ports."

A look of awed mystification came over the faces of the Three Mosquitoes. It was baffling, the idea of German air raids away up here.

"Only a big Zeppelin could possibly make such a trip," drawled the lanky Travis, eldest and wisest of the trio.

"And even for a Zep, it's a helluva distance to come for a raid and then return," put in "Shorty" Carn, the mild-eyed, corpulent little Mosquito. "Why, they have all they can do to get as far as London."

The colonel nodded. "Not only that, but it would take a whole fleet of Zeppelins to do the damage these raiders have been causing," he explained. "Of course, there are some who do insist that only Zeppelins could possibly manage the trip, but the majority of those who were on the scenes of the raids all agree that they distinctly heard airplane engines overhead. Unfortunately," he added hastily, "we have never been able to see any signs of the raiders. They always come over in the darkness, blast them!"

"Well, if you ask me, airplanes are out of the question," Kirby insisted, "Why, how could any plane fly from Boche-land to here, drop its eggs all over the place, and then get back home?"

"That's the bloody mystery of it," the colonel sighed. "The only explanation is that the Germans have produced some new plane of unheard-of endurance—a super-plane for long-distance flights. It seems incredible, but"—he shook his head, as if the puzzle kept growing in his mind the more he tried to explain it—"how else could the thing be done? Some time ago, when the atrocious business started, our intelligence division thought that perhaps a group of German spies, masquerading as a regular British squadron, were operating from England. That would account for the raids. And the theory that the Germans have some secret and concealed airdrome on this continent was blasted; every inch of England

and Scotland was searched and surveyed. Nothing was found." Again he shook his head. "Nothing."

There was a little silence. The Three Mosquitoes shifted again, their brows knitting in awed puzzlement. Outside, the wailing bagpipes had died out into the night. But the crunch of heavy footsteps could be heard, as the sentries at the shack paced their watch.

Kirby's eyes suddenly brightened with an idea. "Couldn't it be that the Germans bring these planes close to the shore by battleships, and then release them?" he wanted to know.

The colonel smiled wearily, as at a joke grown pointless with age. "We eliminated that possibility long ago," he said. "Our navy has the North Sea bottled up completely, and no German ships, not even submarines, could ever get through."

"But damn it, sir"—Kirby was exasperated to find his solution discarded as a ridiculous and stale idea—"they must come from somewhere, these raiders! And it seems damn strange that you shouldn't have seen any sign of them at all. What's the matter with your defense up here?"

The colonel was slightly taken back, for to a British officer such Yankee outspokenness seemed little short of insolent disrespect. "Our defense here is naturally a bit inadequate," he replied, with a tinge of irony. "Hardly expecting any trouble in this peaceful region, we made very few preparations. We have only the most crude and elementary weapons to fight with. A few regiments of soldiers equipped with rifles, one or two cannon, and just a few machine guns.

"As for our aerial defense, we have but one flying field and just a few antiquated ships, which have all they can do to stand up, much less fly. These ships have gone up during the raids, and few of them are left now. Those that returned were unable to get anywhere near the raiders, and the others—" He shrugged. "Well, either they were shot down by the raiders or, owing to the fact that they were such deficient obsolete crafts, they crashed of their own accord. The terrain here is rather unhealthy for flying, anyway. The country is rough and mountainous, and a forced landing in all but a few picked places would be fatal."

HE PAUSED to let his words sink into the minds of the Three Mosquitoes. Mechanically he rose from his desk, walked across the room, and tossed a couple of pieces of wood into the smoking stove.

"Of course, we have now taken measures to remedy this helpless situation," he said, as he stirred the fire

with a poker. "Even now, planes and flyers are being sent up to help us combat this menace. But all that must take time—precious time." He slammed the stove door shut, straightened up, and suddenly faced the Three Mosquitoes. His hard gray eyes appraised them keenly, and his voice was the crisp voice of a superior officer. "That is why you three men were rushed up here, with three new-type Sopwiths. It is our hope, our supreme hope, that you can somehow ferret out this mystery, so that we can later combat it."

The Three Mosquitoes met his searching glance unflinchingly enough. And Kirby said, with quiet firmness, "perhaps we can."

"At least, we can try," Shorty Carn put in.

The wise Travis, however, wasted no words on optimistic statements. Instead, getting right down to business, he voiced a question. "Suppose you tell us more about these raids, sir. When did the last one come off?"

"Two nights ago," the colonel replied, and glanced at a large gold watch. "Yes, it was just about this time of the evening—ten-thirty o'clock." He went to his desk again, and once more resorted to the map. The Three Mosquitoes had to come close and lean over to follow his pointing finger in the dim light.

"The raid took in a wide area. The barracks here were bombed, but not so severely, and then the raiders went down to the coast to wreak terrible destruction on Deemsgate." He dabbed the spot. "As you know, this is one of our greatest ship-building centers, and evidently the chief objective of the raiders. Each time, they attack it with more deadly results, though as yet they have not been able to strike a really vital blow. If they ever do"—the worry lines on his old face deepened—"it will be an irreparable loss for us. England and her Allies depend on the ships that are being turned out here."

"Then," Kirby put in with sudden understanding, "that explains why the Jerries are going to all this trouble."

"Exactly," the colonel conceded. "And unless we can do something to stop them we—" He broke off abruptly, and all four men stiffened from head to foot. All were listening, listening with ears horribly alert.

Mmmmmmmmm! At first scarcely audible, but then steadily increasing until the very floor vibrated from it, that steady, beelike drone drifted to the tense listeners. Louder and louder it became, closer and closer; it was somewhere overhead now. The Three Mosquitoes stood frozen, an expression of incredulity and awe on

their features. The old British colonel's face had gone ashen.

"Engines!" He waved his arms like a madman. "Engines! Hear them, man?" His voice grew more and more frenzied in its horror. "Listen, listen! They must be right above. Engines!" he kept repeating, as if arguing to drive home a fact. "Don't you hear them? God, I tell you—"

Kirby's voice sounded a trifle unnatural. "By heaven, I'd swear that's an airplane!"

"It's more than that." Travis' drawl was strangely grim. "It's—it's a German airplane. Hear that static motor?"

The drone had risen to a roar now, shaking the whole room. With a frenzied oath, the colonel dashed to the door, and the Mosquitoes followed. Out into the cold brisk night they emerged. There they found a group of kilted Highland sentries staring frantically upward. A full bright moon rode high in the star-filled sky, and thin wisps of clouds raced swiftly across it.

But even as they all looked, straining their eyes to pierce through the murk, the loud roar died out almost abruptly and was gone. There was not a sign of anything overhead, not a sign of—

Then an awed gasp broke from the tense watchers, for at that moment they saw a red light glow into sudden livid brilliance directly above them, until it became a ball of red fire which illumined the whole sky. It was descending, descending slowly! And presently, as it came lower and lower, the men on the ground could see the white spread of a tiny parachute mushroomed above it—a parachute flare. Down it came drifting, glowing brilliantly in the night. It fell before the awed and startled group of men, and lay smoldering and flaring.

By the time the old British colonel and the Mosquitoes had reached the spot, the flare had sputtered out. The colonel stooped and picked up the parachute. An aluminum cylinder was attached to it.

"A dispatch case," Kirby blurted foolishly. "A dispatch case."

The colonel did not have to be told, however. In the darkness his trembling fingers were already unscrewing the cover of the cylinder. Reaching in, he pulled out a folded paper. It was too dark for him to read it, so with the Mosquitoes on his heels, he dashed back into the lighted shack. He held the paper in the dim glow of the kerosene lamp, and read. Slowly his face turned a sickly white. He tottered, as if the blow were too great for him. He had to grip his desk for

support. His eyes were bulging from their sockets, but they turned wildly, frantically to the Three Mosquitoes.

"Look," he groaned. "Look at this."

Wonderingly, Kirby took the paper, and his comrades looked at it with him from either side. Clear legible handwriting, in a red ink made still more red by the dim glow of the lamp, appeared before their eyes.

"To our accursed enemies—

"We are aware that the so-called Three Mosquitoes have just arrived with the idea of combating us. To show you our contempt for this desperate measure on your part, we intend to defy you openly.

"Hitherto, we have struck only by night. Now we shall strike by daylight, without any concealment. The dawn of this very day will bring us. And if we find these Three Mosquitoes in the air, we shall shoot them to ribbons.

"THE BLACK RAIDERS."

The Mosquitoes' momentary awe changed suddenly to a black fighting rage. Kirby cursed fiercely. "Damn them!" he exclaimed. "They have one helluva nerve, whoever they are. By God," he burst out, with gripping determination, "we'll go right up now and see if we can't find 'em!"

His two comrades instantly fell into their leader's mood. They gave an eager assent.

"Let's go!" they shouted, giving the famous war whoop of the Three Mosquitoes.

But the old British colonel, who had managed to recover himself once more, was shaking his head firmly.

"It would be useless," he told them. "By this time the plane we heard—if it was a plane—must be miles and miles away. And you'd have no idea which way to fly. Furthermore, you don't know the terrain here, and flying over this strange rough country by night would be next to suicide." His features tightened. "In fact, I doubt whether you ought to take the air to-morrow. You'd better wait until—"

"Wait, hell!" Kirby exploded, completely forgetting his rank in his eager impetuosity. "Do you think we're gonna let a lot of Boche bragging scare us? We'll be right in the air at dawn tomorrow, threats or no threats."

And the others agreed so vehemently that the colonel saw it would be useless to protest. Somehow their eager determination seemed to reassure him; somehow he had faith in these three Yanks.

"Go to it then, with the best o' luck," he urged, with a grin. "And now you'd better hop right to bed and get all the sleep you can." Again his tone became grim. "You'll need to be in good shape to-morrow."

A moment later the Mosquitoes left the shack and walked briskly to the small airdome near by. A few planes squatted out on the field in the darkness, most of them clumsy, monstrous-looking things whose uncovered fuselage reminded one of the earliest aviation pictures. But there were three planes which stood out in strange contrast—three trim fleeting little scouts with sturdy wings and blunt noses that proclaimed speed and power.

With an almost affectionate glance at these three Sopwiths, the Mosquitoes crossed the field to the hut which had been turned over to them. They went straight to bed, and as always, fell asleep immediately, despite the cold suspense that gripped them. They had learned how to make themselves sleep soundly before any perilous job.

THE sun was a cold red disc in the east, and the furtive streaks of daylight were just filling the sky. The air was bitter cold, but clear.

High over the open moors near the border of Scotland, the three trim Sopwiths flew their dawn patrol. In their usual V-shaped formation, they moved together over a wide area, circling back and forth like searching birds. In their cockpits sat three tense Yanks—three Yanks who huddled low in the fur collars of their teddy-bears. The biting cold which nipped and pinched at them kept them savagely alert, stirred them toward action. The fearful apprehension clutching at their hearts keyed them up to an almost frenzied pitch of excitement.

All three were straining their eyes through their goggles, scanning the surrounding sky as it grew lighter and lighter. Particularly, they were looking toward the southeast, the direction of the coast and Germany. If the unknown enemies who called themselves the Black Raiders came, they should come from that direction. But the Three Mosquitoes did not ignore the other parts of the sky. They were fiercely determined not to be taken off their guard by those who had threatened to shoot them to ribbons. They were looking all about—looking across a rolling landscape which stretched clear to a jutting range of mountains in the north. Those mountains marked the Scotch border.

As time passed, however, and as the sun rose

higher and glowed into brilliance, filling the sky with its streaming golden radiance, Kirby began to tell himself that the whole idea of German airplanes up here was ridiculous. During the night there had been a new development in the strange mystery, and now it set Kirby thinking. While he and his comrades had slept, the report had come in from one of the seacoast towns that a Zeppelin had been sighted making its way toward Germany. At first this had seemed so preposterous that the British colonel and the Mosquitoes, discussing it before dawn, as the three flyers received their maps and instructions, had decided that it was untrue. Some one must have been imagining things.

Now, however, Kirby began to fit his Yankee common sense to the incident, and he decided suddenly that the reported Zeppelin was the explanation of the whole mystery. True, he and his comrades had identified that engine last night as belonging to a German plane; but their ears must have been deceiving them. A Zeppelin could make a long trip from Germany to this place, and that was doubtless how the lurid note had been delivered.

Just why the Jerries should go to all that trouble to drop such a message, Kirby couldn't figure. Perhaps it was merely a measure to terrorize and confuse the Allies, and even to scare the Mosquitoes out of taking the air this morning. Perhaps a Zeppelin, or a few of them, were going to attempt the threatened raid. In such a case, the Three Mosquitoes had nothing to fear. Zeppelins, with their large and vulnerable hydrogen-filled envelopes, were cold meat to them; they could make short work of any that appeared.

Such was Kirby's explanation, but it hardly satisfied him. Here and there were flaws that he could not seem to cover, loose threads that refused to be tied. First, there was the remembrance of the engine, which had risen to a loud roar and then died out abruptly. How could such a sound come from a Zeppelin? Worse yet, how could a huge Zeppelin soar overhead absolutely unseen, when there were a full moon and stars, and only a few thin straying clouds?

Nevertheless, Kirby clung to his conclusion, since it was the only one which had any logic to it at all. A German airplane simply couldn't get up here, and that was all there was to it.

The sun had risen high now, and it was full bright morning. The air was a trifle warmer, but still cold enough to keep the three pilots huddled in their cockpits, their helmeted heads deep in their fur collars.

Visibility was increasing. The sky had become an infinite translucent blue of crystal clearness; one could see distinctly for miles and miles. Far to the south, the Three Mosquitoes could distinguish the silver sheen of the sea, while to the north those mountains at the Scotch border rose one behind another in majestic splendor.

Kirby continued to lead his comrades on their random patrol, watching constantly to see that the bobbing noses of their Sopwiths hovered on either side of him. On moved the three ships, their propellers droning a lazy chant, their wings rocking gently in the breeze. On, on, back and forth, watching and waiting. And the more they waited, the more hopeful Kirby became that his conclusions were correct. That note was just plain bunk, just so much braggadocio. Why, the diabolical threat was not being carried out at all. The dawn had come, and it had brought no Black Raiders. The sky was utterly empty, without even a cloud to stain the translucent blue, without even—

Rat-ta-tat-tat-tat!

The shrill staccato clatter, deafeningly close, almost made Kirby jump out of his skin. It took him a full moment to discover that it was Shorty Carn who had fired that signaling burst from twin Vickers. The little Mosquito was waving now, waving frantically. His face looked as white as a sheet, and sheer horror stared from behind his goggles. He was waving and pointing off to the left—which at this time happened to be the north.

With apprehensive haste, Kirby turned and looked. Slowly his face drained of its blood, and an icy wave of horror went coursing through him like a shuddering chill. Again and again he stared at that impossible, incredible sight, as if he could not quite believe his eyes. And yet there it was, unmistakably real, hideously clear. It was no illusion, no mirage.

Standing out in bold black relief against the pale blue sky, having appeared as if from nowhere, a huge group of black-winged shapes were advancing from the north in a graceful V. There must have been at least fifteen of them, and they presented a formidable array as they moved on, flashing in the brilliant sunlight, their great wings rocking gently.

Gothas! At once Kirby identified the great curved wing spreads, the twin tails which characterized the famous and deadly German bombers. They were close enough to be unmistakable. Gothas—way up here at the Scotch border, and moving from the direction of Scotland, as if they had come over those jutting mountains off there.

Good God, it was preposterous, supernatural! How in hell did those ships ever get up here?

His mind whirling in confusion, Kirby saw Travis waving to him from the plane on his other side now. The wisest and eldest Mosquito, his face also drawn and white, was waving a signal of warning, a signal which clearly said, "We'd better look out or they'll spot us in another moment."

AT ONCE Kirby became the alert war bird again, the leader of his men. Travis' warning was not to be unheeded, especially after the threat the Jerries had made in that note. Against those fifteen Gothas, each of which contained four men and was heavily armored with deadly machine guns, three tiny Sopwiths would be as helpless as three sheep against a pack of wolves. Besides it was up to the Mosquitoes to try to get to the root of this baffling mystery, to try to find some explanation of the apparently inexplicable presence of these Gothas.

There was only one thing the Yanks could do under the circumstances. Reaching a swift decision, Kirby waved a hasty signal to his comrades, then pulled back his stick and opened his throttle wide. Shorty and Travis duplicated the move with faithful precision, and the three Sopwiths, motors roaring, went streaking straight toward the sun in a long breathless zoom. High in the blue they straightened out, secure in the knowledge that the sun's blinding orb would conceal them from the Jerries below.

The Gothas swept on in serene oblivion. They were moving smoothly and unwaveringly toward the southeast—toward the coast. The Three Mosquitoes began to follow them from above and behind, like timid gulls, tensely curious to learn where they would go and what they would do. Looking down, Kirby and his comrades could see every detail of the fifteen giant ships spread out beneath them—the Maltese crosses on their great wings, the tiny helmeted figures in their cockpits, and the glistening machine guns with which each bomber bristled.

They flew surprisingly fast for Gothas, the three Sopwiths hardly had to slow down to keep pace with them, but could go on at three-quarters throttle. Evidently the German planes were of the newest and latest type, Kirby was telling himself. Then he remembered the British colonel's seemingly shabby diagnosis. "The only explanation is that the Germans have produced some new plane of unheard-of endurance—a super-plane for long-distance flights."

That diagnosis still seemed absurdly far-fetched, but how else could these fifteen giant ships be accounted for? No ordinary Gothas could make that trip from Germany, much less return. These particular planes must have an extraordinary gas capacity. And yet, they had not even appeared from the direction of Germany, but from the north, from the opposite direction.

Kirby cursed fiercely. Damn it, but this thing was getting more and more maddening with its brain-teasing complications, its puzzling paradoxes! There seemed to be no reason for it, no explanation.

But one thing was certain; these Gothas were here, and from the looks of them they were up to no good. For they were flying in tight battle formation, in a tiered V where no one ship was in front of another, and thus all had free play for their guns. Nerves taut, hearts pounding in cold suspense, the Three Mosquitoes kept following overhead.

On, on moved the gigantic V of Gothas, still headed for the southeast. While in the sun above, the smaller V of tiny Sopwiths followed as if drawn along with the bombers by a magnet. Minutes passed. The two Vs, above and below, kept droning together through the clear sky, with the Jerries totally unaware of their company. On, on, on, until presently they were all approaching the coast. A great expanse of sea was looming toward them, shining and glistening in the brilliant sunlight. The Gothas went right on, and as the coast line loomed closer and closer, like a picture slowly coming into clear and distinct focus, Kirby suddenly stiffened, his eyes widening with awful realization.

Deemsgate! There it was, right ahead—that great ship-building center the British colonel had spoken about. Its immense dry docks and cranes, its many steel structures showed clearly against the maplike earth. The harbor was full of ships, ships large and small, ships of war and merchant ships. There were scores of them in all the different stages of construction—from a mere keel that was just being laid, to a cruising vessel complete in all its details. The place teemed with activity. Even now, at least ten ships were under construction, and high above though they were, the Mosquitoes could see the workmen swarming about the uncompleted vessels like industrious ants.

Kirby gave a groan. It was all too clear, too obvious. Those fifteen Gothas were headed straight for that harbor, moving toward it with deadly purpose. And

above them were three Yanks, helpless to stop them, helpless to do anything but watch.

Even now, the great V of bombers was circling directly over the harbor. And then, from both the shore below and several of the cruising warships, a score of anti-aircrafts were blazing into sudden life. The Gothas had been spotted at last. The Britishers below were hastily employing their meager weapons of defense. *G-r-rumpf! G-r-rumpf!* The rasping bark of the archies rose above the drone of engines. Shells began to burst and spew around the formation of Gothas, sprouting like white mushrooms in the translucent blue. The Mosquitoes had to fall back behind the Germans now, so as not to risk getting hit by the Allied gunfire. Reluctantly, Kirby and his comrades slowed down their Sopwiths. They continued to follow the Jerry V from some distance behind, and high above.

The anti-aircraft fire continued to accompany the Gothas, but it was hopelessly ineffectual. The V of bombers, outside of assuming a slightly zigzag course to throw off the range of the gunners below, sailed on serene and unscathed, never losing their tight battle formation. Smoothly they droned straight toward their objective. Calmly they soared over the harbor. And then—

From the belly of the apex bomber, a long black object suddenly detached itself and went spinning and shrieking down through space. The Mosquitoes saw the burst below—a flash of fire, a puff of smoke. A few seconds later the slower-traveling sound of the concussion reached their ears and made their Sopwiths wobble slightly. The first bomb was followed almost instantly by a second, and then several more in swift succession. In another moment all fifteen Gothas were loosing their steel eggs, literally raining bombs down on that harbor.

Boom! B-r-room! Boom! Explosion followed explosion with deafening rapidity and deadly effect. An anti-aircraft nest on the shore was suddenly struck, and went up in a geyser of debris and smoke. Another bomb tore a huge gaping hole in a destroyer which stood at one of the piers, and the slender warship began to heel over, with smoke and fire licking down its decks.

Helplessly, their faces white with anguish and rage, the Three Mosquitoes watched that awful rain of destruction. Unable to prevent it, unable to do anything to thwart those fifteen powerful Gothas, they could only circle up here in the sun while the Jerries calmly dropped bomb after bomb. Never before had

they been in such a helpless position; here they were, the greatest trio of fighting aces in the service, forced to stand by with idle hands and watch a bunch of enemy planes wreak destruction upon their British comrades below.

Madly Kirby yelled and cursed, hurling futile oaths at the Black Raiders. His hands clenched about the Sopwith's joystick until his knuckles became white. God, how he longed to shove that stick forward, to lead his comrades down on those Gothas and try to pick off at least one of them! But he realized the folly of such a move; it could bring them nothing but swift and certain death. Even if they did manage to pick off a Gotha—which was doubtful, because the Jerries were holding such a tight formation—they'd be shot to shreds by the others. And then they would have no chance to solve this baffling mystery.

Besides, Kirby noticed now that the bombs were not actually being dropped on the ship-building center itself. Instead, the Jerries seemed to be interested only in the defenses below. Evidently they were bent on wiping out those defenses completely, as if to pave the way for something else. What? Tensely, carefully, Kirby wondered.

But meanwhile the Gothas were also slaughtering the defenders, taking a terrific toll of human lives. Sailors and soldiers down there were blown to atoms, wiped out as they stuck valiantly to their guns and tried vainly to bring down the raiders. The Gothas, still holding their perfect V, wheeled around in graceful unison to attack the harbor again and again. It was amazing, the number of bombs they were dropping. Moreover, it was ironically contradictory to the idea that the Jerry planes had an extra-large gas capacity. Certainly those ships must have been too heavily loaded with bombs to carry any more than the normal amount of gas; and the normal amount would never begin to bring them here from Germany.

RELENTLESSLY, with cold precision, the Black Raiders continued to loose their steel-jacketed missiles on those defenses. Through it all, the three helpless Yanks circled above them in frenzied despair and anguish, loathing to watch the awful sight and yet unable to keep their eyes away from it. One after another now, the anti-aircraft guns below were silenced, until presently all of them and their crews had been put out of commission. There remained only a few machine guns, which peppered away with no more effect than toy popguns. Even these the Germans did not spare.

"Damn them," Kirby burst out, his goggled face livid with a helpless fury he could see mirrored in the goggled faces of Shorty and Travis, on either side of him. "Damn their mysterious tactics, their dirty methods! God," he swore fervently, "if only we could find out where they came from, how they manage it! If only we could make them pay." And his comrades, though they could not hear him above the roar of motors and the thundering bombs, seemed to sense his feelings, for they were shaking their heads grimly.

At last, to their intense relief, it was over. The Germans, having wiped out every last defense below, seemed satisfied. Gracefully the tremendous V of Gothas wheeled around once more, and then, smoothly and calmly, headed back in the direction whence they had come—toward the north.

Cursing and fuming with rage, the Three Mosquitoes again followed them from above. There was nothing else to do. The Gothas, having finished their grim work, were obviously homeward bound—by some roundabout course, Kirby thought. Despite his conclusion that the German ships could never have carried enough gas to get here from Germany, he was still half convinced that the Gothas were new-type super-planes, which could somehow make the trip and go back. Perhaps they were only going toward Scotland to deceive their enemies on the ground; perhaps later they would swing off and take the reverse course back to Boche-land. At any rate, Kirby and his comrades were determined to follow them as far as their own gas supply permitted.

And so again the tiny V of Sopwiths moved above the gigantic V of Gothas, keeping parallel with the latter. Together, they droned away from that gruesome scene of destruction and death in the harbor below. Together, they flew back over the rough but peaceful countryside, retracing their course. Soon they were passing over the spot where the Mosquitoes had first seen the Gothas approaching. The Jerries went right on. The Sopwiths followed, unseen.

Then, looming ahead of them, seeming to rise higher and higher as they slowly drew nearer, were those jutting mountains which stretched across the Scotch border. The Gothas were heading straight toward them.

Suddenly Kirby drew in his breath sharply. For now, abruptly, that V of Gothas below was tilting upward, pointing its apex toward the sky. Moreover, they were rising with incredible swiftness. Hastily, Kirby waved to his comrades, and the Three Mosquitoes

commenced to climb, too, for they must stay a safe distance above the German ships if they hoped to be unseen. Thus both Vs still remained on a parallel, both of them zooming at a sharp angle. But not for long. All too soon the Sopwiths had reached their ceiling in the thin cold upper regions, and the protesting coughs of their engines told the Mosquitoes they could risk going no higher.

But the Gothas were still ascending. Despite their size and weight, they evidently had a ceiling as high as the tiny Sopwiths. They were coming straight up from below, drawing closer, closer. In a moment or so they must surely spot the three Yankee scouts above, despite the glare of the sun.

There was only one thing for the Mosquitoes to do, and they did it with frantic haste. At another signal from Kirby, the three Sopwiths wheeled around as one in a breathless vertical bank, and went streaking off toward the south, away from the Gothas. A full three miles behind the Jerry ships, they turned back once more. The Gothas, they saw, had almost reached their level now. The tremendous V stopped climbing and straightened out, still moving toward those mountains.

The Mosquitoes proceeded to follow now from this safe distance behind, and just a little above. They prayed fervently that the Jerries, should they happen to glance back, would not see the three tiny ships. The Gothas being so large and numerous, the Mosquitoes could still see them clearly.

The Gothas continued to cross the mountains. They were nearing the highest one of all now, a great precipitous bulk which screened off the landscape behind it, even at this altitude. As the Gothas passed over it, it seemed as if their undercarriages all but grazed the rugged peak. When they went over to the other side, they were immediately shut off from the Mosquitoes' view by the mountain itself.

Kirby waved again to his comrades, and all opened their throttles full. Engines roaring, the Sopwiths sped ahead so that they could catch sight of their quarry once more. The huge mountain loomed ahead of them, and they climbed a little higher despite their protesting engines. Now they were coming to the peak, which seemed to reach up toward them hungrily. But they, too, spurned it with their undercarriages. In another moment they were across the high mountain, and here, on the other side, the landscape was once more visible as far as the eye could see. There were no more high mountains here; the range was low enough for the Mosquitoes to see every valley, every rising peak.

That was why their faces were so blank with horrified amazement and awe. That was why their eyes bulged and stared incredulously from behind their goggles. That was why a chill of uncanny horror went coursing up their spines.

For despite the fact that nothing obstructed their view, that they could see for scores of miles ahead, the fifteen Gothas were nowhere in sight.

The tremendous V of Jerry ships had vanished, disappeared. The clear, translucent sky was absolutely blank.

Still unable to believe their eyes, the Three Mosquitoes stared at one another from their cockpits. They shook their heads, waved in crazy bewilderment. It was impossible. Only a few minutes before, they had seen the Gothas sail over this mountain. The Jerry ships could not have gone very far, because the Mosquitoes had speeded to catch up with them. And yet they had melted into thin air.

Baffled and awed, the Three Mosquitoes commenced to fly all around the place, scanning the sky and the terrain below. But both were utterly empty; the terrain was just a desolate rugged mass of mountains and valleys, fatal for any planes, and the sky was just an infinite limitless expanse of clear blue.

At last, realizing that they were only wasting time and that their gas was beginning to run low, the Mosquitoes gave up. In helpless despair and frustration, they turned and headed back for their flying field. Kirby shook his head gloomily. With all their flying around, their playing hide-and-seek, he and his comrades had accomplished absolutely nothing.

They had gone on a wild-goose chase after a bunch of Gothas which, having pulled off their deadly raid, had simply disappeared from the scene. The mystery, far from being solved, had become more hopelessly baffling than ever. The Mosquitoes, in whom the British had placed so much confidence, had failed—failed miserably. A sob choked Kirby. God, this was the first time they had fallen down on the job. Yet what could they do? Bitterly, futilely, Kirby led his comrades toward home. The three Sopwiths recrossed the high mountain peak and started to descend to a lower altitude for the sake of their engines. But even as they were descending, the blow came.

IT CAME like a bolt from the blue, with total unexpectedness, with terrible suddenness. It came with a deafening roar, a yammer of wide-open engines—

and then, above the roar, the shrill staccato clatter of Spandaus. Before the Mosqtxitoes had time even to pull up, before they could recover from their surprise and horror, the six fleeting winged shapes were upon them, weaving in and out among them as if in some mad snake dance, with twin streams of tracers spitting from their noses.

Fokkers—D-7s! They had dived right out of the sun, and they had not only attacked by surprise with their overwhelming numbers, but they had so dumfounded the Mosquitoes that they had a still greater advantage.

This was the final shattering blow to any semblance of logic that could be attached to all the mysterious happenings. Fokkers up here—tiny scouts that could carry only enough gas for a couple of hundred miles. The Gothas might have been explained; but now everything was inexplicable. Everything was crazily confused and muddled, and vaguely the Mosquitoes wondered whether it could all be real, or whether they weren't in the throes of some lurid nightmare.

Only the ominous tick of bullets through their fuselages brought them back to full consciousness of the situation, stirred them savagely to action. The six Fokkers were closing in on all sides now, diving, swooping upon the Sopwiths to fire burst after burst—six speedy, black-colored planes with helmeted heads protruding from their cockpits. Their bullets were already beginning to pump the three Sopwiths, ripping and tearing through the fabric and wood, drilling the wings, singing wildly in the Mosquitoes' ears as they ricocheted from the engine and cockpit cowls.

Then a berserk oath ripped from Kirby's throat, and all his bewilderment, his honor and awe, turned into blind but deadly rage. The Jerries had thus far balked him and his comrades at every turn, and now, just as they had boastfully promised in that note, they were shooting the Mosquitoes to ribbons, as well. By God, they wouldn't find it so easy!

Eyes blazing behind his goggles, Kirby waved wildly to Shorty and Travis, whose Sopwiths he could only glimpse vaguely in the confused mass of diving, weaving ships. He waved the signal which meant, "Fight, fellers! Fight like hell!" And fiercely they waved back the answer, "Let's go!"

The Three Mosquitoes began to fight as only desperate cornered men can. They became the reckless, split-airing trio that had won such fame on the Western Front. They fought like winged furies, like bats out of hell. They leaned to their sights and pressed

their stick triggers, answering the Germans' fire with their own twin machine guns. They fought stubbornly to get out of the trap the Fokkers had sprung on them, struggled to work their way back toward their flying field—though they did not know what good it would do them.

High in the blue the dogfight raged, with the planes flashing as the sun struck their tilting, banking wings, with the smoky tracer bullets penciling zigzag lines across the sky. Slowly the stubborn Yanks were drifting toward the south, though they were getting terribly shot up for their pains. The fight was gradually shifting over the treacherous mountains, until soon the boggy moors and rolling countryside spread below. Furiously, in the insistent, lunging fashion that had won them their nicknames, the Three Mosquitoes were defending themselves against those six Fokkers.

They were more than defending themselves; for suddenly, out of the fray, one of the Fokkers went reeling, crumpled by a well-aimed burst from the guns of little Shorty Carn. A hoarse cheer of exultation broke from Kirby. Shorty had scored. The Fokker was hurtling earthward in a dizzy tailspin, and in seconds a column of livid flame and smoke proclaimed its landing on the moors below.

But there were still five Jerries left, and these five closed in with a vengeance, enraged by the fall of their comrade. They cut the Three Mosquitoes off from the south now, blocking their one path of retreat and commencing to crowd in on all sides. Slowly, but with deadly precision, they were walling those three Sopwiths in a prison of crisscross fire. Frantically the Mosquitoes half-rolled, zigzagged, and turned to shake off the terrific streams of tracer. Thicker and thicker grew the bullets, until the air was dense with flying, screaming lead.

In a wild frenzy, Kirby waved to his comrades to hold on, to fight anew. But even as he was banking to line his sights on a fleeting Fokker which whisked across his path, there was a sudden metallic shriek in front of him. With cold horror, he saw the terrific hail of bullets ripping through his engine casing. Hit! The Sopwith's motor sputtered, coughed vainly for life, and then with one choking gasp, conked out cold.

Kirby had been caught unawares, and before he could recover from his horrified surprise, the Sopwith had lost flying speed and stalled. Its wing drooped over slowly, its nose was pulled down by the force of gravity, and then Kirby was reeling out of the fray, hurtling earthward in a sickening spin that took the breath

from his lungs. Down, down, faster and faster, with the wind shrieking through the flying wires. High above, farther and farther away, the other two Mosquitoes were still fighting it out with the Fokkers.

Kirby fought madly with his controls as he saw the blurred rough earth spinning toward him in a breathless rush. By sheer skill, he got the Sopwith out of the spin and put her in a glide. He guided the motorless plane in the general direction of the distant flying field at the shallowest angle possible. But he knew to his despair that he could never hope to make the flying field. Even now the boggy moors were looming toward him, as the gliding Sopwith settled. Vainly he tried to pull the plane's nose higher, but he saw that she would only lose flying speed and stall again. God, he would have to land somewhere down here in this desolate rugged terrain! He must find some flat space or else crash to certain death.

His frantic eyes scanned the up-coming landscape. Desperation lent him keen vision, for almost instantly he spotted a stretch to the left and ahead, which was less rough and boggy than the rest. It was anything but smooth, but there was a fleeting chance that he could manage a safe landing there.

Since there was no other alternative, he did not hesitate. Hastily, but with expert care, he banked his gliding Sopwith, heading for that stretch in the moors. The plane was so low now that he wondered how he could ever make it. Tightly, firmly, he held back the joystick, struggling with all his skill to keep the nose up. Relief swept him as he saw that he was going to make it.

Abruptly his relief froze to abject horror; for at that same instant, the air behind him was shattered by a deafening clatter, and invisible drumsticks beat a vibrating tattoo on his tail fins. The Sopwith shivered. Wildly Kirby turned his head and looked back. The blood drained from his face.

There, right behind him, riding his tail like a hawk after a chicken, was one of the speedy black Fokkers. Jagged streaks of flame were leaping from its twin forward guns, and between them Kirby could glimpse the helmeted head of the pilot, leaning grimly to his sights. Evidently the Jerry, seeing that the falling Yank was actually going to make a safe landing, had left the dogfight to plunge down on the helpless Mosquito. With his engine gone and his plane virtually reduced to a glider, Kirby was utterly at the mercy of the Boche.

FRANTICALLY, with bullets whistling and singing in his ears, the Mosquito went on gliding toward the

level stretch of moors, at the same time zigzagging in a futile effort to shake off the Jerry's sights. The German clung to his tail like a leech, blazing away with more and more deadly results.

Rat-ta-tat-tat! With a crash, the dashboard in front of Kirby shattered, while flying bits of glass and wood cut into his goggled face. *Rat-ta-tat-tat!* An outer-bay strut suddenly splintered in its place, and the wing which it supported began to wobble ominously, threatening to crack. A bullet actually tore through the sleeve of Kirby's teddy-bear; another imbedded itself in the seat beside him. God, he was done for! Even if he should manage by some miracle to land the Sopwith on that level stretch, he'd only be shot to hell for his pains. The Jerry could strafe him as he stood helpless on the ground. He didn't have a chance.

Even now the Jerry suddenly zoomed upward, to Immelmann overhead for the maneuver Kirby knew all too well. The Fokker was getting into a position to plummet down on the helpless Sopwith and finish the kill.

"Damn you!" Kirby shrieked up through the space which separated them, though he could hardly hear his own voice in the roar of the Fokker's engine. "Can't you give a man a sporting chance? Got to shoot him in the back when he can't fight?"

But as if in mock answer to his enraged protest, the Fokker calmly nosed forward and dived. Down it came, swooping to make the kill. Already the first burst was ripping from its twin Spandaus.

Then, in his desperation, Kirby became insanely reckless. He forgot all the rules of orthodox flying, forgot that it was impossible to maneuver a gliding, bullet-ridden plane. All in a flash he glanced at the ground beneath him, saw that he still had some altitude to spare—and then his eyes went up to the swooping Fokker overhead. He judged its position, measured his time, and acted. With savage abandon, he plunged his stick forward. The Sopwith's nose dipped sickeningly, arrowing for the ground. But at the same time, the steep dive caused the plane to gather tremendous speed. That was all Kirby wanted. With the ground directly under his nose, with a crash seemingly inevitable, the Mosquito jerked the joystick back again, jerked it back to his very chest and held it there tightly, fiercely.

With a shivering lurch which almost tore it to pieces, the Sopwith's nose suddenly spurned the ground and reared high in the air. The speed the plane had gained during the dive had given it sufficient momentum

to soar upward, motorless though it was. Kirby's remarkable flying skill had enabled him to do the almost impossible maneuver. For a moment his nose pointed skyward. In that moment he leaned to his sights and steered as he had never steered before, he saw the Fokker framed in his ring sights. Then he pressed his gun triggers fiercely, even as the Sopwith lost flying speed again and stalled off in a floundering sideslip.

What happened during the next few seconds, Kirby scarcely knew. He was only aware that he was fighting like a madman with his floundering, sideslipping ship, that the ground was swinging up to smack him, and that there was a rending, shivering crash which made his very teeth rattle. He was somersaulted around violently as he sat in his cockpit, and he heard the ripping of fabric, the splintering of wood, and the groan of twisting, snapping metal. Then he was crawling out of the Sopwith, which had piled itself up in a heap of wreckage on the rough moors—crawling out, shaken and bewildered, but miraculously alive and unscathed.

Slowly, stiffly, he got to his feet, trying to pull his wits together. He reached mechanically to push up his goggles, and found to his vague surprise that he had already shoved the glasses from his eyes. He must have done it instinctively when he saw the crash coming. He glanced at the wrecked Sopwith. It was just a worthless, useless heap of junk, but evidently he had pancaked her. Otherwise he would never have survived a wreck like that. Once more his remarkable flying instinct had saved him.

Suddenly he stiffened, his nerves tensing, while his eyes widened with incredulity. The Fokker! There it was, squatting on the level stretch of ground Kirby had formerly picked out for his thwarted landing. The motor of the Jerry ship was off, its propeller at a standstill, but the plane seemed intact. And its pilot, Kirby noticed with a start, was sitting right there in the cockpit.

The Mosquito's hand reached furtively for the Colt beneath his teddy-bear. Had the German landed to capture him, or had Kirby's reckless maneuver actually brought down the Fokker? In either case, why was the Jerry just sitting there in his cockpit? Why hadn't he come out to seize or shoot Kirby, when the latter was still dazed and shaken by the crash? His brows knitting in puzzlement, Kirby walked cautiously across the moors and approached the German ship with tense curiosity. He had his Colt out now, and ready for action.

Still the Jerry did not move from the cockpit. With more confidence, Kirby drew closer to the Fokker.

And then he saw. The Boche was indeed sitting in the cockpit, but he had slumped over the controls. One arm drooped lifelessly over the cockpit cowl. The German was dead—or unconscious.

But Kirby still approached the Fokker with trepidation. He knew only too well the tricks these crafty Germans were capable of performing. He gripped his Colt firmly, and his finger was ready on the trigger. Not until he was almost upon the Jerry plane did he relax his caution.

The German was indeed dead. His eyes stared vacantly from behind their goggles, a thin trickle of blood oozed from a corner of his half-open mouth, and a large crimson splotch still widened on the breast of his flying togs. He had been shot to hell.

Either he had survived long enough to land his plane here, or the Fokker had landed itself on even keel by one of those freakish accidents which sometimes happened. The great Richthofen's triplane had settled in a perfect landing, even though the Red Ace sat dead at its controls.

At any rate, Kirby knew that his bullets had killed the Jerry. He had made his feat of maneuvering the gliding Sopwith all the more miraculous by aiming his guns with deadly accuracy. But he felt no triumph. It was one thing to kill your foe in the air, and an other to see the remains of your victim. The result of Kirby's skillful marksmanship was not pleasant to look upon—especially out here on these lonely Godforsaken moors, with not another human being in sight.

But how about the dogfight from which he had fallen? How about those other Fokkers, in whose midst he had been forced to leave his comrades fighting with their backs to the wall? Anxiously, he scanned the sunny blue sky. Not a sign of any plane. The fight must have drifted off into the distance, or perhaps it was over. God, what had befallen Shorty and Travis?

The thought of his two comrades served to link his mind with the other events of the past. With a shock, he remembered the baffling mystery which had led them into all this trouble, the mystery whose climax was the presence of Fokkers up here at the Scotch border. And now, right before him, stood one of those Fokkers.

AGAIN his feverish desire to get at the bottom of the mystery, took possession of him. He ignored the slumping corpse in the cockpit, and turned his attention to the plane. He commenced to examine it keenly from nose to tail. But his search was rewarded by nothing at all unusual. This was an ordinary Fokker

D-7, just like the captured ones he had seen on the Western Front. It had an ordinary gas capacity, the gauge now showing the tank to be just about half full. There still remained the pilot. And though the mere idea of touching the dead man was odious to Kirby, he grimly forced himself to a task he felt it his duty to perform. With great effort, he hoisted the limp, still-warm body out of the cockpit and lowered it to the weedy ground. He stooped over to examine the metal identification disc fastened around the German's neck. On it was scratched, "Mueller, Hans—*Leutnant-Fleiger*." Reluctantly, but with forced haste to get the thing over with, Kirby searched through the man's clothes, trying not to be bothered by the blood he got smeared over his hands. He found the usual German pilot's equipment—a Luger automatic, cigarettes, matches, a few other odds and ends of no importance. There was one thing lacking, however, and it was the one thing Kirby had hoped to find—a map. If only the Jerry had carried the customary roll map which would surely show the location of his drome, wherever it might be. Kirby searched him once more, still hoping vainly to find it, it wasn't there. However, he discovered something he had overlooked in his first search. This was a small folded packet which had been stuffed away in an inside pocket of the German's tunic. Eagerly Kirby opened it. He found papers—two of them. He glanced through them. They were in German, of course, but he had mastered that language.

The first paper was not very interesting. It simply bore a description of *Leutnant* Hans Mueller, giving his age, weight, height, and so forth. But the second paper was different. Stamped on its top was the Imperial seal of Germany, with its twin eagles. And beneath was a message that Kirby easily translated.

*"From the High Command
To Rittmeister Baron von Molke, commanding officer,
jagdstaffel X.*

"In accordance with your request for a replacement, we are sending you the bearer of this note, Leutnant Hans Mueller, with our highest recommendations. His excellent achievements have qualified him for a place among your experts; and we are sure that he will measure up to your high standards. We suggest that you place him in the new pursuit branch you have just organized, for he is skilled in handling the D-7s.

"Signed, VON SPATZ."

Kirby was mystified. He read and reread the message. Jagdstaffel X—evidently that meant a mystery squadron, one that the Germans had left unnumbered. But what

really puzzled Kirby was the peculiar wording of the letter, such phrases as, "qualified him for a place among your experts—measure up to your high standards—pursuit branch you have just organized." Only one thing seemed clear, and that was that *Leutnant* Hans Mueller had been sent as a replacement to the squadron commanded by one Baron von Molke.

Which left Kirby as far away from the solution of the mystery as ever.

Well, there was no use standing around here with the corpse. He roused himself from his grim musings. The thing to do now was to get back to civilization, back to the flying field, where he could report the whole story and find out what had happened to his two comrades. He glanced ruefully at the pile of wreckage across the moors. He certainly couldn't get home in the Sopwith. His eyes wandered to the Fokker. It seemed undamaged, though its engine was off. Kirby leaned into the cockpit to examine the ignition switch, it was on. The Jerry hadn't turned off the engine. But the throttle lever was way down, and perhaps the motor had just stalled from idling too low. The Mosquito went to the square nose of the Fokker, lifted up the engine cowl, and peered in at the familiar Mercedes. Nothing wrong with it, so far as he could see.

With anxious hope, he seized the propeller, gave it a vicious tug, and then leaped back joyfully, as the blade instantly whirled from his grasp and the Fokker's engine roared into deafening life. Luck was with him. The Fokker was in perfect condition, turning over nicely. He'd simply get in and fly home.

He paused to take a last look at the dead Jerry. The true war bird's compassion for a vanquished foe rose to the surface.

"Poor devil!" the Mosquito muttered. "As a replacement in jagdstaffel X, he didn't do so well as the High Command expected."

Then, with a shrug, he turned away, went to the Fokker, and was about to climb in when something caught his eye in the sky overhead—something which made him stiffen from head to foot.

High in the sky, advancing swiftly from the south, were four tiny specks which stood out like black dots against the clear pale blue. Kirby did not have to think twice to realize that they must be the four Fokkers which had been left with his comrades, the one down here being the fifth. They were returning from the battle. Either they had shot down the two Mosquitoes, or Shorty and Travis had somehow managed to slip

away from them. Wildly Kirby hoped against hope that the latter was true.

On came the four specks, and now they began to grow, assuming shape and color, until presently they looked like four flitting dragon flies, whose wings shimmered in the brilliant sun.

As those Fokkers drew closer, a wild gleam suddenly leaped into Kirby's eyes. Like a bolt from the blue, inspiration had come to him. It was a reckless, death-defying idea, but if it worked, it ought to lead him straight to the bottom of the whole mystery. And after all, he told himself optimistically, why shouldn't it work? This Fokker down here belonged to the flight above. The Germans would be neither surprised nor suspicious if it now rejoined them and accompanied them wherever they went. Moreover, if Kirby put on the dead Jerry pilot's helmet and goggles, there was no reason why the others should even dream that he was a Yank. It was extremely difficult, especially in the air, to distinguish the features of a goggled, helmeted pilot.

Kirby knew that it was a long chance. Nevertheless, that did not deter him. He had already reached a swift decision. He was determined to join the flight with this Fokker, determined to stick with the four other Jerry ships until he found out where they nested.

There was no time to hesitate. Even now, those four Fokkers were drawing closer and closer. Kirby must hurry if he wanted to join them.

He stooped over the dead Jerry and got off the man's helmet and goggles. He changed them for his own, and they fit him well enough. He paused a second, considering. Then his eyes narrowed shrewdly. It would be best, he decided, if he took the Jerry's complete uniform and papers, in case, by some chance, he was forced to land among those other four Germans. The gas tank of the Fokker being only half full, such a contingency might well arise.

THE German's uniform was still wet with bloodstains, but it would have to do. With feverish haste, Kirby stripped it off the corpse. Just a couple of minutes later, with the four Fokkers now almost overhead, Kirby was getting into the Jerry uniform and flying togs. They fit him quite well. The dead German was just about his size and build. Moreover, the man was something like him in complexion, color of hair, and other distinguishing characteristics. Luck was with the Mosquito, all right. In a pinch, he might even pass for *Leutnant* Hans Mueller. But damn the blood on the breast of his uniform! Pulling out a handkerchief,

he wiped and rubbed at the wet stains. It did not help. Then a new idea came to him, and though he had no time to spare, knowing that in another moment the four Fokkers would be past and he might lose them, he took precious seconds to carry out his little scheme. Again he opened the Fokker's engine cowl. Reaching in, he gathered a handful of oozy, dripping black grease. He rubbed the grimy stuff over the bloodstains, and it covered them completely. To all appearances, his uniform was just soiled from the grime of his plane, which would be the plight of any pilot who had made a forced landing and repaired his bus—an excuse Kirby could give if necessary.

Finally, he smeared some of the oozy grime on his face, to hide his features further. Then, as best he could, he surveyed himself. Not half bad, he concluded with satisfaction. He ought to get by now, all right.

The four Fokkers were passing overhead, going directly toward the north. God, he must hurry, or they'd be gone and out of sight—he'd never catch up with them. Hastily he pocketed the German's Luger, cigarettes, matches, and papers. He discarded all his own telltale belongings save his roll map and his Very pistol, both of which he might need if he tried to fly home in this Fokker.

He stopped only long enough to throw his own discarded flying togs over the gruesome Jerry corpse—the sole mark of respect he could pay to the dead. Then, he climbed into the cockpit of the Fokker, strapped himself in, and pulled down his goggles. He reached for the throttle lever and jerked it open. The engine roared with deafening power. The Fokker leaped forward, bounding and jouncing over the rough ground.

Kirby taxied her around into the wind, then let her out. The controls seemed a little strange to him, but he made them respond the way he wanted them to. Swiftly, the Fokker went roaring down into the wind. It gathered speed. Its wheels skimmed the rough ground and its tail lifted. Then, with breathless grace, it swept into the air, to roar skyward in a long streaking zoom.

Up, up, Kirby arced toward the four Fokkers which flew so swiftly northward. Fortunately for him, the Jerries must have spotted his climbing ship, for instead of going on, they started to circle as if waiting for him. Evidently they had already identified the fifth plane of their flight, which had been missing. Kirby, his heart pounding with strange excitement, urged his ship on. The next moment he was approaching them, flying into their midst. It was a strange sensation; never

before had he flown into the midst of Fokkers without finding their guns blazing at him from all sides. But he knew he was only a sheep in wolf's clothing. If they should suspect him, realize he was a Yank, they would turn on him and shoot him to ribbons without a moment's reluctance.

He could see the four goggled Boche pilots clearly in their cockpits. They were staring across the space which separated them from him, staring with inquiry which the tense Mosquito fearfully translated as suspicion. But then they were waving to him with unmistakable welcome. He waved back nervously.

Then they all started for the north again, Kirby staying in their midst. They were not flying in any particular formation, but in their lead, steering their course, was a Fokker which, although all black like the rest, was marked with a special insignia. Painted on its wings and fuselage, standing out in white relief against the black background, was a gruesome skull and crossbones. Kirby stared curiously at the helmeted head which protruded from the cockpit of that weirdly marked ship. Was that Baron von Molke, the leader of jagdstaffel X?

On, on toward the north droned the five Fokkers, with a tense Yank in one of their cockpits, though the others never suspected it, never dreamed of it. In cold suspense, Kirby wondered where this strange trip was going to end. Certainly they could not be going very far, judging from his own gas gauge. The other four Fokkers, having flown still farther than his ship, must have even less fuel.

Suddenly, abruptly, the lead ship with its skull-and-cross markings lifted its nose and began to climb. The others followed, Kirby faithfully pulling back his joystick with the rest. They were climbing because they were approaching those rugged mountains again, with their one great high peak. These Jerries were evidently taking the exactly same route as the Gothas. The Mosquito's excitement mounted. Would he find out now how those Gothas had managed to vanish so mysteriously? Would the Fokkers do the same thing? Well—his features set grimly—wherever they went, he would go with them.

Tensely, his pulses racing, he sailed on with his dangerous company. He did not turn from his controls, for the less he showed his goggled face to the Jerry pilots, the safer. Up, up, up, they all kept climbing—up into the thin cold upper regions. Past the first jutting peaks now, and once more that tremendous mountain was looming ahead, as if to obstruct their

path. But the Fokkers went on zooming determinedly. Kirby heard his Mercedes engine coughing a trifle now, but since the rest must also be straining their motors, he kept with them stubbornly. He skimmed right over that high, jutting peak, saw it drop away behind him. On the other side, a limitless vista of smaller mountains and valleys unrolled.

In the next second, to Kirby's surprise, the nose of the leading Fokker suddenly dropped. The craft was rushing downward at a steep angle. Again Kirby followed with the rest. Then strange things began to happen. The other Fokkers suddenly began to string out behind the lead ship in single file. Kirby automatically took his place in the line, and found himself third from the front. On his tail, in a position which would have spelled Kirby's doom should he be suspected, rode the ship next in line, its glistening forward guns pointing their hungry muzzles point-blank at the Mosquito. But on the other hand, Kirby was right on the tail of the ship in front of him, and he could have ripped it to ribbons with his own twin Spandaus. The single line of Fokkers streaked onward, rushing down a hill of space, one behind the other. Down, down, and Kirby's nerves grew more and more taut. God, they were going awfully low. They were—

His heart leaped to his throat, and he gave an involuntary shout of surprise. For now, looming ahead, rushing toward the line of descending Fokkers at a terrific speed, was one of the smaller mountains. The lead Jerry ship seemed to be headed straight for its rugged side. Incredulity swept over Kirby, and his eyes bulged behind their goggles. God, was the Boche leader crazy, out of his head? Was he going to crash deliberately into the side of a mountain?

So it seemed, and yet the second ship, and the others behind Kirby, were following that leading Fokker with faithful confidence, following it even as it went streaking for the mountainside. Kirby, knowing that he must stick to the line or else surely betray himself, followed, too, though his heart was in his mouth.

The mountainside loomed gigantic—a rugged mass, dense with trees and foliage. Closer and closer now. The Mosquito had to employ all his will-power to follow the two planes ahead of him. Only the thought that these four Jerries could not be deliberately committing suicide enabled him to go on with them. But a crash seemed absolutely inevitable. Even now, the mountain was so close that it would have been impossible to turn to avoid it. Kirby cursed himself

for having followed, after all. Good Lord, these Jerries must all be insane! There was no doubt about it, they were going straight for that mountain, head-on, hell-bent.

THEN, with wide-eyed amazement and awe, Kirby saw it—saw the tremendous, gaping opening in the side of that mountain. Even in the next instant, the lead Fokker was sailing into the enormous hole, and the second ship in line was following on its tail. The dumfounded Mosquito saw the two of them disappear in the opening, and at the same time saw that it was too late for him to avoid going in there, too. With his brain whirling as he tried vainly to piece the crazy puzzle together, he steered with instinctive care for the gaping hole. Swiftly it loomed toward him, looking hideously like a pair of cavernous waiting jaws, about to swallow him and his plane. Another split-second, and he was flying straight into it, sailing through the opening.

His first sensation after that was that he was having a horrible and fantastic dream in which he had flown into the very bowels of the earth. Never before had he found himself in such unreal and supernatural surroundings. Though he was still in mid-air, still flying in line with the Fokkers ahead of him, he was in the interior of an enormous cave—a cave with rugged, jagged walls. This mountain was hollow inside. The Fokkers were nesting within it.

In one swift comprehensive glance, as he mechanically controlled his descending plane, Kirby took in the whole place. He saw the smooth flooring of the immense cavern—saw the fifteen Gothas which had raided the ship-building center. Gray-clad figures swarmed around them. He saw the wooden huts and buildings in the rear, and—even stranger—the scores of brilliant electric lights which illuminated this gigantic room of nature.

Then he realized the truth of the matter. The baffling mystery stood revealed at last, though it still seemed little short of supernatural. Here, in the hollow interior of this mountain, the wily Germans, by some miracle of miracles, had constructed a huge and completely equipped airdrome. No wonder British intelligence in their search for concealed dromes had never found this hidden lair. The inside of a mountain was the very last place one could expect to find a squadron of planes. Yet here they were—unless Kirby was actually dreaming. And here were the fifteen Gothas which had vanished so mysteriously. While another mountain had screened them from Kirby and

his comrades, they had simply filed into the opening of this mountain.

The lead plane with its skull-and-cross markings was now whisking over the smooth flooring below, settling in a perfect landing. The second plane landed close on its tail. A mad impulse came over Kirby. God, he'd like to put on full throttle, try to turn around inside of this immense cave, and go streaking out of the large opening through which he had entered. He had the solution of the mystery now, and if he could only get away before his identity were revealed, if he could only get help so that this whole nest could be captured—

He would have risked the suicidal stunt, even though he knew he'd doubtless be shot to ribbons before he could get out, but at that moment something happened which put all such thoughts out of the question. For as he glanced back over his shoulder to look at the opening through which he longed to escape, he saw a tremendous door of wood and iron sliding down in front of it like a curtain. It was so ponderous and heavy, this door, that it had to be operated by a powerful electric winch. The last plane having entered, the cave was being closed and Kirby and his descending Fokker were being shut up within it. There was no alternative but to land, despite the peril of being betrayed as an impostor and a spy.

Even now, the smooth flooring, covered with hard dirt, was beneath him. With his heart in his mouth, he let the Fokker settle, until it rolled to a stop behind the first two ships. The fourth and fifth planes followed, landing immediately after him. He was down—down in the midst of the enemy.

Coveralled Boche mechanics seized his plane, and assisted him out of the cockpit. He winced as they gripped his arms; it was ironic and unbelievable that a Jerry should touch him except to seize and capture him. As a matter of fact, they were all servile respect. The Mosquito got to the ground and tried hard to fight down his inner panic. The other Jerry pilots were climbing from their ships now, and still other flyers, in the trim ground uniforms of the Imperial air force, were gathering at the scene.

More than one of them happened to glance at Kirby, and the fearful Mosquito prayed that the grease on his face and the fact that he was taking the part of a new replacement would prevent them from seeing that he was not the real Hans Mueller. Not until he was sure that his identity was unquestioned did he dare to push the goggles from his eyes. He would have liked to

keep them on, but since nobody else was doing so, it would only have attracted suspicion.

Beside the leader's Fokker, a tall erect figure of Prussian bearing was talking to some of the other pilots, who stood respectfully before him. Von Molke! Even as Kirby glanced at him, the German caught his eye, and to the Mosquito's cold horror, came walking in his direction. Kirby could scarcely breathe. He felt like covering his grease-smeared face with his hands. God, if von Molke took a good look at him, recognized him—

Somehow he had the presence of mind to snap out a precise German salute, for now the tall Prussian was confronting him—a powerful man with keen, steel-gray eyes and hard intelligent features. His face bore the stamp of indomitable courage as well as relentless purpose. Those keen gray eyes seemed to be piercing right through Kirby now, and the Mosquito had all he could do to meet them unflinchingly.

"You are the replacement who arrived last night?" The question, which was almost a statement, was spoken in crisp German, in a rich but guttural voice.

Kirby nodded and forced German from his own lips with the knowledge that a slip in grammar or vocabulary would doubtless cost him his life.

"*Ja wohl, mein Herr Baron,*" he said respectfully. "I am *Leutnant* Hans Mueller."

The baron's smile, a smile that was friendly and unsuspecting, reassured him no little. "I must commend you, *Herr* Mueller. You have made an excellent beginning as a member of our illustrious squadron. From the air, I saw the wrecked Sopwith which must have fallen by your guns. But evidently you had to make a forced landing yourself, *nein?*"

Kirby thought fast. He must be careful, damned careful. "Yes, *mein Herr,*" he said quickly. "I had some slight trouble with my engine, and had to land to repair it."

"And the swine Yankee?" The baron's face suddenly took on a look of cruel anticipation. "Did you find him dead?"

"Yes, *mein Herr.*" Kirby took the cue and tried to put relish into his tone. "He had died by my bullets." He hated von Molke fiercely as he saw the evil satisfaction which lit up the German's eyes. Then his frenzied anxiety to learn the fate of his two comrades, Shorty and Travis, led him to take a chance. He tried to make his tone casual. "And how about those other two pigs?" he asked. "Did you account for them, *mein Herr Baron?*"

AN ETERNITY seemed to pass before the reply came. "We shot them full of holes, but unfortunately we began to run short of gas and had to abandon them. I doubt, however, that they ever got back to their field, and if they made a forced landing, the chances are they crashed to their death."

Kirby nodded, trying to hide his conflicting emotions. God, if only Shorty and Travis had managed to get back, if only they were safe! And then, as if he feared the keen-eyed German would read his thoughts, he said vehemently, "It's too bad all three of them were not sent down in flames—especially since they managed to get one of our six Fokkers."

The baron's face was ominously grim, almost satanic. "Have no fear," he assured the Mosquito. "We will do for those other two before long. It was no idle boast that I dropped from my plane last night."

Kirby started at this revelation. So that was how the lurid message had been delivered; that explained the roar which had died out so abruptly—a fleeting Fokker, diving out of the dark and then zooming quickly away after releasing the parachute flare.

Von Molke was continuing in a voice full of blighting malice. "I have always listened with anger and contempt to stories about the Three Mosquitoes and their exploits on the Western Front. I have always wished that my squadron and I could be there in France to put an end to the three insolent swine. And now, to my joy, I find that they have come up here to give us this very opportunity. My only regret is that I could not come to grips with their leader myself." His eyes narrowed to murderous slits of hate. "I should have enjoyed the pleasure of doing away with that Captain Kirby."

Kirby smiled—horribly. "I am sorry I cheated you out of that pleasure, *mein Herr Baron,*" he said with an exaggerated calm which almost betrayed his inner panic.

The baron shrugged. "No matter. So long as one of my flyers has done it, the honor will go to this squadron, and I am satisfied." He changed the subject then, to Kirby's relief. "By the way, *Herr* Mueller, I have not had much time to devote to you since your arrival. You came to us late last night, and before dawn today we had to hurry you into the air with us. I don't believe I even had a chance to present you to the rest of the men; they were asleep when you arrived."

Kirby nodded agreement, and at the same time wondered tensely how he was supposed to have arrived late last night, and from where.

"Well," von Molke was concluding, "I can present

you formally when we gather for our belated breakfast." His eyes gleamed. "A victory breakfast it will be to-day, in more ways than one. And now, *Herr Leutnant*, I suppose you will want to wash up and change to your ground clothes like the rest of us. You may go to your quarters."

Cold panic descended on the Mosquito. To wash up and change to a ground uniform meant removing the concealing grease from his face, and also taking off the flapping helmet which further disguised him. God, then they would surely see that he was not the real Hans Mueller, even if they only vaguely remembered the man! Worst of all, he didn't even know where his quarters were supposed to be, and von Molke had ordered him to go to them.

His frenzied fears made him desperate. Damn it, he must get out of this place, must get out and find help to capture it! He took a long chance.

"*Mein Herr Baron*," he said, "if it is satisfactory to you, sir, I should like very much to take the air again now, while I am still dirty and in flying togs. I found this morning that the terrain here was quite new to me, and I am afraid I would have been lost, had you others not come along and found me. Therefore, with your permission, I should like to go up again for a brief reconnaissance."

He waited in frightful suspense to see what results his plea would have. His face actually fell as he saw the baron sternly shake his head. "You have done plenty of flying for the time being," von Molke said, crushing his hopes entirely. "You must remember that we shall all be going out later, and you will have to be in good shape. Besides, we don't want to take unnecessary chances. Every time we open the door of our cave and fly out there is a danger that we might be spotted. No, you go along and wash up now. Or better yet," he said, suddenly changing his mind, "suppose I show you around this wonderful place which is our home. I always make it a practice to show its details to every new replacement personally. There will be just enough time before breakfast for us to tour the place."

Kirby, preferring anything to washing up and changing into a ground uniform, had no choice but to assent. So the baron conducted him on the strangest and most fantastic sight-seeing tour he had ever experienced.

"Perhaps you know the history of this wonderful place," von Molke was saying, as they started out. "It was discovered by my grandfather, the late Baron Rudolf von Molke, who spent many years in the

Highlands here. He was a great traveler, and had our characteristic German passion for science, being quite an authority on geology. Quite accidentally, he stumbled upon this phenomenon of nature—a hollow mountain, or rather a mountain containing an immense cave. He must have suspected that some day it might prove useful to him or his heirs, for he kept its discovery a secret. He merely charted the place on a map and later, when he died at Potsdam, he passed the map down to my father, who in turn passed it on to me.

"At the outbreak of the war, I was already serving with our newly formed flying corps, and when England entered the conflict, it occurred to me instantly that we might somehow conceal a squadron of planes in this mountain and thus have access to parts of England and Scotland that would otherwise be impossible to raid. Especially there was Deemsgate, the great ship-building center, whose destruction might well spell defeat for the accursed British.

"I proposed my plan to the High Command," the baron continued, while Kirby listened in spellbound awe to this strange tale, "and they readily agreed, and placed everything possible at my disposal. The greatest of our engineers were commissioned to carry out the idea I had in mind. We started in the fall of 1914, and it took us almost three years of grueling, arduous labor to make the place what it is now." He sighed with grim reminiscence, and on his hard features Kirby could see written all the worries, the disappointments, the anxieties and suspense which he must have gone through during those three years.

"Originally this place was just a rough barbarous cave, with strange jutting rock formations rising from its floor bed. We had to excavate and blast—and we had to do all of this cautiously and in utmost secrecy, lest some hiking Scotchman or Englishman discover us at our work. Also we had to smuggle in all our supplies and men. Yes," he sighed again, "it was difficult. More than once we were so discouraged that we were on the point of abandoning the enterprise, especially since we thought the war must surely end before we were through, and all our work would be useless.

"But when we finished a few months ago, there was more need for our services than ever, for our armies were being hard-pressed on every Front. And so our mission is accomplished. We have performed perhaps the greatest feat of engineering ever done by man, and I think we have a right to be proud of it."

"Indeed you have, *mein Herr*," Kirby agreed, with

frank admiration. He could not help marveling at it all. At the same time, he wondered tensely how all the supplies and men had been smuggled here—by what means. He dared not ask; evidently he was supposed to know, for otherwise von Molke would have told him.

THEY had come to the immense door at the opening of the big cave now. A few German soldiers with coal-scuttle helmets and rifles on their shoulders stood guard here. It was incongruous to see them in such a place, up here at the Scotch border. Little did the British suspect that regular Boche soldiers of the Imperial army were right in their midst.

"This door alone," von Molke was explaining to Kirby now, "took us a year to construct. We had to blast out this immense opening ourselves. The natural entrance to the cavern consisted of only that small cave there"—he pointed to a small jagged black hole in the rough walls—"a rough passageway which leads out through the mountain. It was necessary for us to create an opening large enough to admit at least one big plane at a time.

"And then we had to build a door so that this opening would not stand the constant risk of being spotted outside. The door itself is so camouflaged on its outer surface that it looks just like the side of the mountain—containing the same trees and rocks. When we had finished building it, we found that it was of such a tremendous weight that we had to build a special powerful winch to operate it on a pulley system." He pointed to the cables and chains. "We had hoped to operate it by hand, but the combined strength of a hundred men could never raise that door."

They passed on, and von Molke paused next beside three huge purring engines, where coveralled workmen bustled with oil cans and grease. "Here is our generating plant, with three gasoline-driven generators which supply electricity for the lights, the winch, and also for the pumps that bring us water from natural springs."

Thus they went on, with the baron pointing out one wonder after another. More and more Kirby had the feeling that he was in some lurid dreamland, that everything here was unreal and fantastic. Never before had he seen anything to compare with this enormous jagged cave, fashioned by nature but remodeled by man—who had not only turned it into a practical airdrome, but had also fitted it up with all the modern conveniences of a comfortable house, with electric lighting, running water, and all the rest.

The very immensity of the place was all the more impressive because it was so well illuminated. The myriad of electric bulbs, strung along the jagged walls and the great high ceiling, kept it almost as light as day.

Von Molke showed Kirby the assembly and repair plant—a large factory in itself. Here workmen were actually putting together airplanes; a Gotha was being fitted with wings and painted with fresh dope. "Naturally, we have to assemble all our ships right here," the baron explained to the awed Mosquito. "Only the parts and engines can be brought to us, as you know."

Kirby only wished he did know.

Then there was the ammunition storeroom, a virtual arsenal housed in a corrugated-iron building. It was full of bombs, machine guns, rifles, pistol bullets, and weapons of all kinds, carefully guarded by several sentries.

"And there are the new-type high-explosive bombs which arrived last night." Von Molke indicated a score of ugly blunt-nosed objects which stood side by side, like eggs in a box. A cold apprehension came over Kirby at the sight of them, even before he heard the German say, "We shall be using these little eggs to-day, and unless the reports are all wrong, they will create unheard-of damage." What diabolical plans did these Jerries have in mind? Fearfully Kirby wondered.

The tour continued, with Kirby growing more and more awed and dum-founded by it all. What with workmen, mechanics, pilots and soldiers, there must have been over a hundred men in this fantastic place. And perhaps the strangest part of it all was that the atmosphere was so definitely German.

Just as Kirby had been impressed last night by the Scotch atmosphere of his surroundings, now he felt that he was in another foreign country—the country of the enemy. The men all wore German uniforms, spoke the German language, used German machines and furniture. Moreover, there were German planes with black Maltese crosses, and finally, a tremendous German flag which hung from a pole on one of the jagged walls. It was as if a portion of the Fatherland had been miraculously transported to the inside of this mountain at the Scotch border.

At last, having walked all around the great place—and the distance must have been over a mile, Kirby figured—von Molke paused before a line of wooden buildings that looked much like bathing houses at a beach resort. These, however, were much larger and more comfortable-looking.

"And here are our quarters, as you already know. At first we all slept right out in the open—if you could call the cave that. But the nights proved too cold for comfort, and we Germans," he smiled, "do like our *Gemutlichkeit*, our comforts of home. So we built these barracks, which are supplied with electric heat as well as running water."

He had stopped before an open door, above which was marked the number 5. "This is your room, I believe," he enlightened Kirby, relieving the Mosquito of at least one fear. He knew his quarters now. "And by the time you get washed up, our breakfast will be ready. We eat outside on a day like this." He indicated a long wooden table out on the floor of the cave. German privates were setting it as though for a banquet. "And so I'll leave you for the time being, *Herr Mueller*."

Again Kirby had the presence of mind to snap out a salute, as the tall baron turned and strode away.

The Mosquito, not knowing what else to do, entered the room he had been shown and shut the door behind him. There was a cot, and it was littered with clothing and articles that had been hastily unpacked. One of the very first things Kirby saw among these articles almost caused him to jump out of his skin. There, lying face upward on top of the littered pile and in plain view, was a large framed photograph of a young man in the uniform of a *Leutnant* of the Imperial flying corps. Beneath it was the scrawled signature, "Hans Mueller, 1918." With frantic fingers, Kirby got the picture out of the frame and tore it into a thousand pieces, depositing them into the waste basket.

He drew in his breath sharply, and beads of sweat stood out on his brow. Good God, if any one else had seen that picture, whose features didn't resemble his in the least, his goose would have been cooked! Frantically he searched through all the rest of the stuff for any other telltale evidence. Thank heavens, there was no more.

But the discovery of that picture had served to bring him to a full realization of his perilous predicament, had shown him how slender was the thread on which his life hung in this stronghold of the enemy. Again panic seized him.

"Damn it," he told himself fiercely, "I've got to get the hell out of this place! I've got to get out or they'll spot me, sure. They'll—" Then he broke off tensely, realizing with a shock that he was talking aloud and in English. Through the walls of his room, he could distinctly hear movement in the rooms on either side

of him. Pilots there were washing and dressing. If they heard him— He thrust the awful thought from his mind with a resolve to be careful hereafter. He must never relax his guard for an instant. Every word, every move meant life or death as long as he was here.

He racked his brain for some plan of escape. Taking a plane was impossible, what with the immense door shut and no planes on hand with their motors running. Perhaps he could sneak out on foot through the smaller entrance von Molke had shown him, the passage in the wall. But what if he did? He'd be absolutely lost in this desolate country. He would never know how to get home. And his presence at breakfast would be missed at once. They'd come out and find him before he could get very far.

No, escape was impossible. There was only one thing he could do. From what von Molke had said, the planes were going out again to-day—and as Hans Mueller he'd be going with them. If he could manage somehow to ward off suspicion until then, he could doubtless find some way to leave the formation in the air and get away with his precious information.

This was his final decision. He would play the game, regardless of the stakes. He would carry on as *Leutnant* Hans Mueller.

BUT now to face his immediate problem. Unless he washed and changed to a ground uniform, he'd surely be suspected. On the other hand, such an act might easily betray him.

Still undecided, he slowly stripped off his bloodstained flying togs. Reluctantly he went to the sink with its running water, hot and cold. Again, despite his predicament, he marveled at the luxuries of this place. On the Western Front one could never find such conveniences. These Jerries lived in style, all right.

He was letting the warm water run over his filthy hands, while he regarded his grease-smeared face in the mirror above. Yes, his features were well disguised now. He could hardly recognize himself. But with the grease washed off, with his features clean and clear, he'd surely look unmistakably like a Yank.

Again his brain raced frantically. A wild idea suddenly came to him, and out of sheer desperation he resolved to gamble on it. He wouldn't take the grease from his face and hands—at least, not all of it. He got busy with the water, soap, and towel, and removed just a little of the filth, leaving enough to keep his features well disguised. Then he left the sink and searched through the clothing on the bed until he found a

trim ground uniform. He got into it, and it fit neatly enough. He pulled the soft-visor cap over his head and then surveyed himself in the mirror.

He had to smile at the ludicrous incongruity of his make-up. His dress was impeccable and trim, but his face and hands disgraced the immaculate uniform by their filth. But it was his only hope of getting by unsuspected. Even now, without a helmet on his head and bulky flying togs to conceal his figure, he might be spotted. And then, too, perhaps his wild idea might not have the proper results at all.

He had just finished transferring all the articles from his flying togs to his new ground uniform, including the captured Luger and his own Very pistol, when he was startled by a sharp knock at the door. Hastily he pulled his nerves together. Then, drawing in a long breath, he opened the door. A trim German orderly stood at attention and saluted as Kirby faced him.

"Begging the *Leutnant's* pardon, *mein Herr*," he announced respectfully, "but the *Rittmeister* wishes to inform you that breakfast is now being served."

Kirby nodded, and at the same time noticed that the German was looking at his grimy face. This filled him with alarm, but again the realization that he simply had to keep that grease on his features made him desperate enough to ignore the Boche's curious glance. He waited until the man had wheeled on his heel and marched away, and then he walked out himself.

The long wood table which von Molke had shown him before was now being occupied by trim, gray-clad pilots. The baron himself was already seated at its head. Timidly Kirby approached. The men all turned to greet him, and all stared at his dirty face. He tried to keep his voice steady.

"I must apologize for my disheveled appearance," he blurted, forcing a grin. "You see, I got the grease from my engine all over me, and I found that soap and water would not take it off."

Even as he spoke, the words which he had thought would make an effective alibi sounded hollow and absurd in his own ears. Cold fear gripped him as von Molke's keen eyes fixed him with their stern piercing gaze.

"That seems strange," the baron said slowly. "I have always managed to wash the grease off my face. And I do like to have my officers keep a neat and trim appearance." He paused, and Kirby felt as if the fatal net were slowly closing about him.

But then von Molke shrugged. "Well, no matter. You may be seated, *Herr Mueller*. After breakfast I'll give you some mechanic's soap which will surely remove that grease." And he waved the relieved Mosquito to the chair next to him. Kirby sat down and breathed at last. By this time all the other places were filled. Some two dozen officers, all of them young and courageous-looking, had gathered at the long table. The alert soldier stewards were bringing steaming viands from a near-by open kitchen.

Kirby was amazed at the lavishness of this breakfast. It was virtually a banquet, a great feast. The men all seemed in high spirits, and somehow, beneath their inconsequential chatter and jesting, Kirby could detect an undercurrent of strange excitement. Something was certainly in the wind. These Jerries had something up their sleeves.

Champagne appeared magically. Corks popped and glasses tinkled as they were filled all around. Then the sharp-featured Baron von Molke was rising from his chair, holding his glass aloft.

"Gentlemen," he said, tinkling on his plate until the murmur of voices died and all eyes were focused upon him, "gentlemen, let me present to you our newest member, who has already distinguished himself and proved that he is more than worthy to fly and fight with the great jagdstaffel X. This morning he brought down the swine leader of the Three Mosquitoes, Captain Kirby." A hearty deafening cheer rose from the table—a cheer which made Kirby's blood curdle. "A toast, gentlemen," the baron continued, beaming toward the Mosquito, "to our new replacement, *Herr Leutnant* Hans Mueller."

All the men save Kirby leaped to their feet, and held their glasses solemnly aloft. The Mosquito, trying to play his part as a grateful and modest hero, pretended to be embarrassed. He sat, a sheepish smile on his dirty face, while the glasses were silently drained. The pilots resumed their seats. The baron, however, remained on his feet.

"And now for something else, gentlemen," he announced. A smile of eager triumph came over his features. "We are gathered here for a victory breakfast, in accordance with the glorious tradition established by our ancestors, who drank and feasted before they went out to do their heroic deeds, so that even those who died could celebrate the victory which all knew would come. To-day, gentlemen, we go out to accomplish the great project for which we have worked and striven so long. The needed supplies have arrived.

They were brought to us last night, as was *Leutnant* Hans Mueller, by the L-99, that wonderful Zeppelin which has faithfully come to us with supplies from Germany once a month."

Kirby sat bolt upright. A light of understanding had come into his eyes as he realized at last how this place had obtained its supplies. Everything was clear now; the last knot in the mystery was untied. Each month a great Zeppelin had cruised here from Germany. It had brought the parts and engines of the airplanes which were assembled here, as well as men and ammunition and food. Doubtless, it had always managed to arrive by night, and it could easily settle down in the valley outside this mountain, and then float back into the sky. The report from the seacoast last night that a Zeppelin had been seen heading for Germany was true, after all. That Zeppelin had just left here, after landing *Leutnant* Hans Mueller and its supplies.

The Mosquito broke off from his musings with a start, for von Molke was speaking again. Kirby became instantly alert. He did not want to miss a word now.

"We not only have the Gothas," the baron continued, "but we also have the new-type high-explosive bombs which can wreak unheard-of damage on our enemies. We are ready. And once our great project is accomplished, it matters not what we do. Our work will just be routine, though we shall continue to spread destruction and terror among our accursed enemies. We have paved the way this morning, and at dusk we shall go out to finish our task."

Again he held his glass aloft, his face flushing with pride and triumph. "A toast, gentlemen, to victory for the Kaiser and the *Vaterland!* To our project, which will bring England to her knees!" His voice rose with frenzied exultation. "To the raid which will this day blast Deemsgate off the face of the earth!"

THE whole cave seemed to reverberate with the deafening cheer which rose from the table. In that stunned moment of boisterous noise, Kirby sat frozen with horror, the blood gone from his face. Then, to his own surprise, he was mechanically getting to his feet with the rest, mechanically smiling, mechanically drinking down the toast. The instinctive realization that a false move would be fatal had forced him to keep acting, while his mind was a rioting tumult of confusion and horror in which only one thought remained clear and coherent. It was the same thought he had experienced so many times before—the thought that he must get out of here.

These bloodthirsty Boche, having paved the way by wiping out every defense at Deemsgate, were going to fly over that helpless ship-building center at dusk and blow it to hell with their new bombs. And von Molke's boast that England would thus be brought to her knees was no idle exaggeration. Kirby realized only too well what the destruction of that ship-building center would mean.

His decision to wait until the German squadron took the air, and then slip away from the formation to get back to his flying field with the information, was no longer of any use. Such a measure would be absolutely futile. Once the Jerries were in the air, they could carry out their raid even if the British should be informed about it. There were neither sufficient planes nor ground defenses to stop them. They could be stopped, in only one way, that was, if Kirby could get help to come here and capture them while they were still in their nest and their planes on the ground. Once they took off, their work would be done. After that, they probably wouldn't care if they were captured.

That was why that mad refrain kept beating against Kirby's mind. All through the remainder of the lavish breakfast, he kept telling himself one thing—he must get out. Even as he kept acting his part by sheer will power—as he ate food he could not taste and drank liquor which had no more effect than water, as he chatted affably with his supposed brother pilots and his commander about inconsequential subjects—he kept thinking, racking his brain.

But the more he thought the more hopeless he became. How could he ever get help to come here before dusk? How could he escape from this enemy stronghold, swarming with Boche who would shoot him down like a dog the moment he betrayed himself? Again came the hopeless realization that even if he could slip out of the cave through the small natural passageway von Molke had shown him, he would never find his way home in this desolate mountainous country. Not that it would have done him much good if he could find his way. He must be miles and miles from the nearest town, and doubtless it would be well into the night before he could hike to any place where there were enough soldiers or armed men to capture this eyrie. The utter helplessness of his position filled him with frenzy. God, what could he do?

Before he knew it, the breakfast was over and the men were lighting cigarettes and smoking. Then von Molke and the others were rising, pushing back their chairs, and Kirby was mechanically rising with them.

Vaguely he listened to von Molke's authoritative voice. "We shall all retire now and rest up for the remainder of the day, so we will be in good shape for the raid. Our next meal will be after our great victory, at twilight."

He turned to Kirby. "And now, *Herr* Mueller, if you will accompany me I can give you that mechanic's soap, so you can take the grease off your face and feel more like an officer and a gentleman."

"*Ja wohl, mein Herr* Baron," Kirby managed to breathe, while his nerves seemed to be stretching to the breaking point. Not only could he find no way out of here, but now this business of the grease on his face had come to a final issue. Betrayal and capture lay close at hand, and there was nothing he could do about it. God, he must think, think! But all he could think was that same, maddening thought—he must get out of here. It was useless, futile. Even now von Molke started to walk toward the barracks, and Kirby went with him, marching like a doomed man to his execution. He was trapped, caught.

At first he scarcely noticed the wild-eyed orderly who came dashing up to von Molke, waving his arms in frantic excitement, forgetting even to salute his superior. Von Molke stopped in his tracks at the soldier's wild shout.

"Enemy planes, sir! We sighted them."

A look of alarm came over the baron's face, but then he scowled at the excited Boche soldier. "What do you mean?" he roared. "Are you crazy? I don't hear any planes." He spoke the truth; there was no drone of engines audible.

"They are too far away, sir," the orderly blurted. "They are flying over the surrounding mountains, as if looking for something."

Von Molke seized the man's arm and shook it savagely. "*Dumkopf!*" he snapped. "Try to think before you talk. Now those planes—how many of them are there?"

"Two of them," the soldier announced in a calmer tone. "And one of the other men told me they are Sopwiths."

Simultaneously Kirby and von Molke stiffened. But where rage came over the German's face, a light of wild joy came over Kirby's. Only by a superhuman effort could he suppress his frenzied relief. His two comrades, Shorty and Travis. They had got back, after all, and now they were obviously out looking for him. Good old Shorty and Trav! A wave of warm affection swept him. Nothing would ever happen to him if they

could help it. Evidently they hadn't seen his wrecked Spad on the moors, and they were patiently searching for him, determined to find him if he were still alive.

A savage oath ripped from the crimson-faced von Molke. "The insolent swine," he roared, "daring to come back after the beating we gave them!" He brooded a moment, glowering. Then he shrugged. "Well, we shall not waste time with them now. Let them fly around all they want; they can never spot our camouflaged cave. They'll soon tire of the sport and go home, and if we find them in the air at dusk, we'll finish them once and for all."

Kirby had listened to these words with growing despair. His momentary spark of hope had been instantly crushed. At first, the mere thought that his comrades were flying around this vicinity had so overjoyed him that he had half imagined his troubles were over. But now, bitterly, hopelessly, he saw that their presence here could not do the least bit of good. Von Molke was right; they could never discover this concealed drome, and they would have to return home empty handed.

But Kirby was desperate enough to seize upon the very first idea that came to him. He turned to von Molke, and could not keep the pleading look from his face.

"*Mein Herr* Baron, I beg of you to allow me to go up and fight those two swine," he implored fervently. "Send another plane with me if you wish, but let me have a chance. I should like to add them to my victory over their leader this morning."

The baron frowned thoughtfully, and Kirby waited in wild hope. If only he could go up now, everything would be all right. Nor did he care if another Fokker went with him, or even two of them. His Very pistol, which he had cleverly saved, would instantly inform Shorty and Travis that he was their leader, since it contained the special orange rockets which only the Mosquitoes used. And once reunited, the Mosquitoes could fight off any other Fokkers that came along with Kirby.

Von Molke came to sudden decision. "No, it would be senseless to court trouble," he said, pronouncing the doom of Kirby's last plan. "We lost one man already to-day and there is no need to take further risks. As long as those two swine Mosquitoes can do no damage, we shall not bother them. We'll just ignore them, though I shall go to have a look at them myself. As for you, *Herr Leutnant*," he told the frustrated Mosquito, "you can retire for your rest now, and one of the other pilots will get you that soap."

He turned on his heel, following the excited orderly.

Kirby, standing there in abject gloom and despair, watched him stroll across the great cave. The baron climbed an iron ladder at one of the walls, and stepped onto a platform which seemed to be a lookout post. There was a small jagged aperture in the wall. Von Molke was peering through it.

THE Mosquito still stood where he had been left, not knowing what to do. He looked around like a trapped animal, searching for some loophole, some tiny means of escape. Suddenly his frantic eyes fell upon the small passage which formed the natural entrance to the cave. Twice he had abandoned the thought of trying to slip out there. But now, he realized with sudden excitement, the situation was altered. Now, somewhere outside—if they hadn't left already—two Sopwiths must be sailing around in the sky. If he could get out there, signal them somehow and——

A desperate, reckless gleam came into his eyes. Nobody was paying particular attention to him now. The pilots were all strolling to the barracks, while von Molke and most of the other men were interested in looking for the planes outside. Kirby hesitated no longer. Casually, so as not to attract any suspicion, he began to stroll around the cave, heading for that passage. He passed soldiers and mechanics, but they paid him no heed.

On he went, slowly, cautiously making his way along the jagged walls of the great cavern. Once he paused fearfully, when von Molke, from his high lookout platform, happened to glance down in his direction. But, thank God, he did not see the Mosquito! Kirby went on, wishing he could run, but not daring to. He was getting to the passage now. Then he noticed with alarm that there was a sentry guarding it, strolling up and down before it with shouldered rifle. Kirby waited, his heart pounding like a sledge hammer. The sentry's back was turned as the Boche walked in the other direction. The Mosquito took one swift glance all around. The coast seemed clear. He drew a long breath.

Then like a sprinter, he leaped for that passageway and ducked into it. He found himself in a dark jagged tunnel of rock. He paused to look back into the cavern, to see if any one had noticed. Nothing wrong yet. He turned and started to make his way through the dark passage. He tripped on rocks, stumbled and fell, cursing. Bruised and scratched, he got to his feet. God, it was dark in here! It seemed as though the passage could lead

nowhere. But he kept going forward, crawling now, lest he fall again or bang his head against the jagged rock ceiling.

Progress was slow, painful. The air in the tunnel was musty and stifling. Already he was gasping for breath, and his hands were torn and bleeding from the rocks. God, by the time he got out of here, if he ever did get out, the planes would probably be gone! The thought spurred him to wild haste, and he bruised and battered himself anew as he tried to scramble more swiftly through the black tunnel.

Then at last, to his frenzied relief, a gleam of light suddenly appeared ahead as he rounded a bend in the jagged tunnel. Daylight! Eagerly he struggled toward it. A draught of fresh air met him, and he gulped it in grateful lungfuls. In another moment he was scrambling out of the tunnel, getting his footing amid the twisted foliage and rocks outside. Quickly he took in his surroundings.

He was on the side of the mountain. The place was quite desolate, and it afforded a good view of the surrounding hills and valleys. With frenzied hope, Kirby scanned the sky. At first he saw nothing but sunny blue, then a suppressed whoop of joy broke from him, as two tiny planes suddenly appeared over one of the high peaks. Side by side, they were circling above the mountains, their wings shimmering in the sun. They were still looking, still searching.

Kirby's hand reached eagerly beneath his German tunic and snatched out the Very pistol. But even as he was pointing the rocket gun into the air, he paused with sudden alarm. He could not attempt to signal those planes from here, with von Molke and others peering through the lookout windows. He would surely be seen.

The planes continued to circle, miles away and above. Kirby's brain raced furiously. Again he scanned his surroundings. He noticed then that a smaller hill rose in front of the mountain on which he stood. If he could get to the other side of that hill, where it would screen him off from this cave——

He fairly dashed over the rocky mountainside, making sure to keep away from anything that looked like an aperture or opening. Now he was at the door of the mountain, and in front of it. He marveled at its wonderful camouflage. Even from the ground he had difficulty in distinguishing it from the rest of the mountainside. It had the same rocky contours and foliage. He could not see the planes now, for the other hill was in his way. But he heard, or thought he

heard, the faint distant hum of their engines—and the sound spurred him on. Pushing and thrusting his way through the foliage and twisted undergrowth, he slowly circled the foot of this new hill. Reaching the other side, he climbed it until he could once more get a clear view of the sky. The planes—where were they? He searched frantically. Then he spotted them once more. They had moved farther away. Were they starting home?

He must hurry. Again he lifted his *Very* pistol, pointing it skyward, and again he paused in dismay. If he fired a rocket in the sky, von Molke and the others in the cave would surely see it, since they were watching the planes. And that would be suicidal.

There was only one other thing to do. He must fire the rocket almost horizontally, so that this hill on which he stood would screen it from the Germans' view. But would his comrades see it in that case? He glanced again toward the distant planes. They were still circling, though constantly drifting farther away. He waited until he knew their circling course brought their noses in his direction. Then, aiming at the other side of the valley, he pulled the trigger of the *Very* pistol.

Pop! A livid flame of orange went streaking across the valley. In frightful suspense Kirby waited, watching the planes. He groaned. They had not seen. They were continuing their circle. Waiting until they were pointed in his direction, Kirby fired again. As the rocket went sizzling across the valley, despair gripped him. The two planes were still circling.

His hopes sank. He knew there was only one rocket left in the pistol now—one last means of attracting those two Sopwiths. If this failed, it would be the end. Twice, when the Sopwiths were again headed his way, he aimed to fire, and each time he couldn't get himself to pull the trigger. He wavered, torn by doubt and anguish. God, he couldn't just throw away this last rocket! If only he could be sure that they would see—

A sudden shout of hope broke from his throat. By heaven, the Sopwiths were coming closer now. They were evidently resuming their search, perhaps to take a final look before going home. Kirby waited, watching with excited impatience as the two trim planes slowly circled in his direction, gradually assuming larger shape and outline. At length, just about a mile away, they stopped advancing and began to circle back again. Kirby must act now, before it was too late. Once more he waited until the noses of the two scout planes were pointed toward him. He aimed his pistol. Then, breathing a prayer, he fired.

THE streaking orange flame went zipping across the valley. There, was a moment of the most agonizing suspense Kirby had ever experienced. Then tears of relief came to his eyes, and he danced in hysterical joy.

The two Sopwiths, moving as one in graceful unison, had come out of their circle. Now their noses dipped earthward, and they swooped down, down—straight toward the valley where they had seen the orange rocket that could mean only one thing.

In just another moment, with their flying wires shrilling in the wind and their engines droning, they were sweeping over the valley, so close that Kirby could see their helmeted heads protruding from the cockpits. The Mosquito leader waved as he had never waved before. He danced up and down on the side of the hill and gave every gesticulating signal he and his comrades had ever used in the air. But as yet Shorty and Travis had not seen him. The two Sopwiths began to circle over the valley now, lower and lower, while the two pilots leaned over the side of their fuselages, looking down.

Kirby, realizing that they'd never pick him out amidst all the foliage on the side of the hill, went dashing and stumbling down the mountainside and into the valley. As he came rushing out into the open space, directly beneath the two circling planes, they saw him at last. Coming still lower, they banked directly overhead of the tiny gesticulating figure in gray, and circled above him like curious and suspicious birds. Kirby could see their goggled faces now, peering down at him.

Knowing that his German uniform might prevent them from recognizing him, he started waving still more signals which the three of them used. He shouted wildly, "Shorty, Trav! Don't you know me, you hell-fired buzzards?"

A hysterical sob shook his voice. "Don't you know your old buddy?" But his shouts were more than drowned out by the roar of engines—which was fortunate, because otherwise they might have been heard by the Jerries in the Other mountain.

Kirby kept on his mad signaling. He had snatched off his German cap now, and was turning his face up toward the circling planes so that his comrades might see. They saw. In the next second, both pilots commenced to wave their free hands with frantic joy. Kirby, recognized at last, hastily motioned them to come down still farther, so that the hill would screen them from the watching Germans. Again the Sopwiths dipped as they circled. Insolently low, they kept

roaring around over the valley, skillfully avoiding its treacherous surrounding hills.

They were waving interrogatively, as if asking Kirby what they should do—for he was their captain even now. But as Kirby took stock of the situation, he found himself as hopelessly stumped as ever. Somehow, throughout this whole situation, he had assumed that once he signaled the planes, one of them could simply pick him up and take him off. But now a mere glance at the terrain showed the utter impossibility of such a measure. No plane could land here, even by the sheerest stretch of the imagination. The ground was too rough, too full of rocks and foliage.

Grimly, Kirby recognized the only course he could take. After all, there was just one thing that really mattered; help must be summoned so that this nest of Jerries could be captured before they could take off on their diabolical raid. Kirby would have to disregard all thoughts of personal safety. He would have to convey his vital information to his comrades and send them away, regardless of what happened to him afterward. Perhaps he could manage to lie in hiding until the help arrived. Perhaps he would be found and caught, in which case—

“Well, *c’est la guerre*,” he murmured, and then hastily racked his brain for some way to communicate his message to the circling planes. The idea came readily. Reaching in his pockets, he found two handkerchiefs. With one in each hand, he commenced to wigwag to the two planes overhead, using the semaphore system they all knew. Shorty and Travis both watched intently, and by their waving gestures Kirby knew that they were getting it. “F-l-y b-a-c-k,” he wigwagged care fully, with his two fluttering handkerchiefs. “G-e-t h-e-l-p. M-o-u-n-t-a-i-n i-s——”

He broke off his waving with a moan of mingled horror and terror, and shouted a futile warning to his comrades. For at that moment, with a sudden deafening roar, three fleeting black-winged shapes appeared from over the hill as if by magic and went streaking for the unsuspecting Sopwiths, their Spandaus blazing with staccato shrillness.

In horror Kirby stood there, watching. In horror he realized what had happened. The Germans in the cave must have seen or heard the Sopwiths that were so close. They, had sent three speedy Fokker D-7s out to attack the Yanks. Even now, the Jerry ships were weaving in and out between the Mosquitoes, who had wheeled frantically to the defense. Motors

thundered, guns blazed. The sky over the valley became a churning mass of streaking, darting ships. The Germans had all the advantage, but Shorty and Travis were putting up a terrific scrap. Furiously the dogfight raged.

As Kirby stood watching it in helpless horror, there came a guttural shout behind him, and several gray-clad Boche soldiers leaped straight upon him, knocking him to the ground with a force that took the breath from his lungs. Half senseless, he hardly had the strength to squirm and struggle. He was carried or dragged roughly along like a sack of potatoes, and the next thing he knew he found himself standing inside the hollow mountain again, with a ring of scowling Boche surrounding him and covering him with rifles and revolvers.

Rough hands stripped him of his weapons and he stood there, dazed and beaten, looking around hopelessly. He noticed that the immense door at the opening of the cave was raised now, and from without he could hear the din of engines and guns which gave evidence that the dogfight was still going on. God, he was caught—and his comrades were probably caught, too! And even if they got away, the vital part of his message had not been communicated to them. Everything was hopeless. Tears of rage dimmed his eyes. What a finish, what a lousy finish!

Suddenly a familiar tall figure thrust his way through the ring of Boche, and Baron von Molke, his face livid with anger, was confronting Kirby. Before Kirby realized what was happening, the infuriated German pulled out a handkerchief and rubbed it over the Mosquito’s grease-smeared face with a violence which almost tore off the skin. A savage oath tore from the baron as he easily wiped away most of the grease. “So, it is just as I thought,” he snarled venomously. “Yankee features. And it is my guess that they are the features of the swine leader of the Three Mosquitoes, Captain Kirby.”

Kirby glared at him with the sullen defiance of a doomed man. “You’re a damn good guesser!” he grated.

Von Molke’s eyes narrowed to slits. “You killed Hans Mueller and then took his plane and uniform and came here. Later you slipped out, and when we heard the planes flying so low, I suspected something immediately. We came out to get all of you. You”—his face was satanic—“are certain to die. As for your comrades—” He turned and barked out to a near-by Boche officer, “What is happening with the fight in the air?”

"The two Yanks are fleeing, sir, with our Fokkers on their tails," came the reply, and indeed the din of engines and guns was fading out now. A wild hope flickered in Kirby's eyes. He prayed that his comrades would get away, even though they did not have the precious information.

Another officer suddenly addressed von Molke. "Shall we lower the door, sir, or leave it open?"

Von Molke considered a moment. Then, "Leave it open," he ordered. "Those swine Yanks probably saw it, anyway, when we sent out the Fokkers."

AT THIS Kirby's hopes mounted like a high flame. He had never thought of such a possibility. Why shouldn't Shorty or Travis have spotted that opening? Even if they had been flying so low over the valley that the hill had obstructed their view, they might have seen the entrance way later, during the dogfight. There was a fleeting chance that they had grasped the upshot of the business, despite Kirby's failure to explain it to them. If only one of them managed to get back with that information, it would be enough. He could get help to come here at once.

Evidently von Molke had no trouble reading Kirby's thoughts, for a crafty mocking sneer came over the baron's face. "I suppose you believe that if your comrades get back, they can bring soldiers here to surprise us. Well, my friend, I am afraid you underestimate us and think that we are as dense as you Yankees! Granted that your comrades escape from our excellent flyers—which I fear they will not—granted that they get back with information, do you know how long it will take for help to come here?" He smiled, cruelly. "A matter of two or three hours at least, for they will have to come on foot through all these mountains. And by that time where do you think we will be, my friend? Here, waiting patiently for them to come and capture us?"

His laugh of gloating mockery sent a shudder of horror through the Mosquito. Then, like a final crushing blow which shattered every last atom of hope, came the German's sharp command to his men. "Prepare all ships for immediate flight. We take off on our raid within the next twenty minutes. We will take no chances on being frustrated."

With lightning rapidity the command was relayed from man to man all through the immense cave, and within the next moment it was being translated into action. The big cavern began to bustle with feverish preparations. Mechanics rushed to the ships and began

to start and rev motors. Bombs were wheeled out on hand trucks and tucked carefully beneath the bellies of the Gothas.

Kirby's teeth clenched in helpless rage, and tears coursed down his cheeks. "Damn you, you skunk!" he shrieked at von Molke. Veins stood out on his temples, and his fists doubled until the nails dug into his palms. Surely he would have hurled himself upon the gloating baron, had not the scowling crowd of Boche soldiers moved forward ominously with their trained rifles and guns. "You lousy Boche, you'll pay for this. You'll get it when you come back from that raid."

Von Molke's smile did not change. "If your comrades get away with information, and soldiers come here, your words are quite correct," he conceded with the utmost calm. "Yes, they will doubtless defeat us, even though we can put up a strong resistance."

His features hardened, and again Kirby could see the stamp of indomitable courage on them. "But we knew the chance we were taking when we started here, and there is not a man among us who is afraid."

He glanced at the surrounding Boche, both pilots and soldiers. All of them stiffened, and their eyes gave unflinching agreement to their commander's statement. In spite of himself, Kirby had to admire their guts, they were brave and there was no getting out of it.

"And once we carry out the raid," Baron von Molke continued, "our work is accomplished. It will be worth the sacrifice. However, we shall take all the measures we can to avoid betrayal. Certainly those three Fokkers must be delaying your comrades, if not slaughtering them. The rest of the scout pilots and myself shall take off in advance, while the Gothas are still being prepared. We shall try to catch up to the fight and bring it to a swift finish."

The evil murderous look suddenly returned to his hard features. "And now," he snapped, "no more time shall be wasted. I go at once to get ready and take off. And as for you, Captain Kirby, we will deal with you as all spies are dealt with." He turned to the officer in charge of the soldiers, a grim-faced captain. "Take this pig over to the wall," he ordered quietly, "and shoot him."

He turned and went dashing away toward the barracks. The soldiers, at the captain's order, fell in beside the Mosquito.

"*Marsche, schweinhund!*" the captain barked. Kirby dully began to walk in their midst, his shoulders stooped, and his face a mask because it could not

express the horrible emotions he felt. There surged over him the feeling of resignation that comes when hope is dead. He was utterly defeated. Even his comrades' doom seemed certain now, with von Molke and the rest of the scout pilots about to give chase and probably catch up to the fray. The raid would be carried out, and this awful place would go on flourishing in its deadly fashion, with the British as mystified and terrorized as ever. In short, Kirby had been able to win absolutely nothing from the Germans. They were coming out victorious in all their purposes.

The fact that he was going to his own death was the least that bothered him. Defeated, frustrated, feeling like a fool who has been outwitted at every turn, he hardly cared. It was not the death he would have chosen, being shot down like a dog way up here in Scotland. He would have preferred to die fighting in the air, to go down in a blaze of glory. But what difference? It would be quick, and he did not care.

The squad of Boche soldiers were marching him down along the side of the cave, and they were passing the smooth field with all its planes. One after another, engines thundered into life, until the whole cavern reverberated with their deafening barks. Pilots rushed around, strapping on their helmets. Kirby and his escort were passing the line of Fokker D-7's now; there were five of them. Their propellers were already turning over as they revved up.

It was at this moment that something seemed to snap inside of Kirby. With death so close at hand, with his mind already resolved to it, it was as if he wanted to put up one last desperate fight. He did not stop to think whether it could work or not, nor did he stop to figure what good it could possibly do. He simply saw red. A demon suddenly rose inside of him, and this demon laughed at all odds and was reckless to the point of insanity.

With a single glance, he took in the throbbing Fokker which he and his escort were now passing. It was scarcely twenty feet away. Then his eyes caught sight of the tremendous opening of the cave, saw that the door was still raised. With lightning rapidity, he judged his distance, measured his time.

Then with a berserk yell, he leaped right from the midst of his captors. He took them almost completely off their guard. They had never expected the slouching, resigned prisoner to turn suddenly into a fighting madman with the agility of a panther. Only one of them, the one who had been on Kirby's right,

had the presence of mind to block the Yank's path. He lunged furiously with his bayonet. But Kirby dodged the flashing steel blade, and hauling off with all his might, sent a smashing uppercut to the Jerry's jaw which sprawled him out cold.

The Mosquito literally hurled himself toward the Fokker. He was almost up to it, when the other Boche recovered from their confusion. With a shout of rage they came charging after him, bringing their rifles and revolvers into play. The shouted alarm soon spread throughout the place, and from every direction men came running, drawing their weapons. *Crack! Crack!* Shrill reports shattered the drone of engines. A fusillade of bullets whistled right over the Mosquito's head, singing wildly in his ears. But before his foes had time really to aim at him, he had swung himself like a monkey into the cockpit of that Fokker, and at the next fusillade he was already ducking beneath the metal cowl. His groping hand reached wildly for the throttle lever and jerked it wide open.

With a deafening roar, the Fokker leaped forward, jumping its wheel chocks. The Germans who had rushed up to surround it leaped from its path in terror. Straight down the open floor it went streaking, straight toward the huge mouth of the cave. Bullets pursued it from all sides, but Kirby laughed at them. With his usual expert skill he was lifting the ship from the ground. He was in the air now, flying toward the mouth of the cave at an elevation of some fifteen feet. He was flying with a defiant reckless gleam in his eyes. A mad cackle broke from his lips. By God, he was going to get away, even if it was the last thing he did!

BUT suddenly, to his cold horror, that portal ahead of him was closing. The ponderous door was descending swiftly as frantic Boche worked the mechanism. In a frenzy of desperation, Kirby struggled to coax more speed out of his roaring engine. He fairly hurled the Fokker forward, determined to win that race with the closing door. God, there was still room to get out, if he hurried!

The ever-narrowing opening was looming right in front of him now, rushing toward him. He fought with tooth and nail, flying as he had never flown before, Still room——

A moan of abject horror tore from his very soul. For in that moment, just when he thought he was surely going to get through, the men at the electric winch suddenly released the cogs entirely, letting the door descend by sheer gravity. It came down with a

tremendous reverberating crash, and the cave was closed.

Sheer flying instinct caused Kirby to perform a maneuver which made the watching Boche on the floor gasp with awe. By bare inches, he avoided crashing into the door, swerving away from it in an almost vertical climbing bank. Then, like a frightened bird in the cage, he was flying around in the cave where he had been trapped, flying around futilely, aimlessly, while wild sobs of frustration broke from him. God, what a predicament—to be trapped in a flying Fokker within an immense cave, from which there was no escape. He had to employ all his skill to fly in so confined a space. As he circled around crazily, he almost brushed the jagged walls with his wings, and twice the rugged ceiling seemed to swing down to strike him.

It was a strange and uncanny spectacle, that roaring plane flying around the big cave like a crazed bat. Kirby knew he was as good as dead right now, but the thought that he was delaying the Boche from starting off on their raid as long as he stayed in the air, made him go right on with his wild circling. By this time, he had probably accomplished at least one thing. His comrades, if they had managed to fight off the three Fokkers, would be so far away by now that von Molke and the others would no longer have a chance to catch up to them and make a kill. At least Kirby would have that triumph. Shorty and Travis would have a fighting chance.

But if Kirby knew he was delaying the Germans, the Germans knew it, too. At first they had been content merely to watch the crazy plane, expecting it either to land voluntarily or to crash by colliding with the walls or ceiling. But when it continued its wild flight, they grew impatient at the sport. In the next moment, Kirby heard the beginning of the end. *Rat-ta-tat-tat! Rat-ta-tat-tat!* From every side of the place, machine guns were blazing into life, filling the confined space in which Kirby flew with deadly crisscross bullets.

Rifles and revolvers punctuated the staccato clatter with their shrill barks, and Kirby suddenly found himself in the most terrific maelstrom of lead and steel he had ever experienced. The whole cave became thick with flying, screaming bullets. They went ripping viciously through the Fokker's fuselage, smashing against the wood and metal parts of the plane. This was the end. With grim irony, Kirby told himself that he was getting his wish, to die fighting in the air rather than by a firing squad. But never had he imagined,

even in his most lurid nightmares, that a death in the air could be so horrible and ghastly.

Thicker and thicker grew the bullets. Struts began to splinter; fabric ripped and flapped loosely. Several of the whistling slugs grazed Kirby's face and he knew that soon, very soon, one of the bullets must find him and end this hellish business.

If only he could fight back, it wouldn't be so bad. But though his Fokker was armored with twin forward Spandaus, he couldn't even bring them to bear on the Boche below. It required all his skill to steer the Fokker at all; to aim it so that he could use its guns was out of the question. But was there nothing he could do—nothing, before they finished him? As he kept circling amid the constant fusillade of bullets, he tried desperately to think of some scheme, some way to thwart these Jerries from going out on their raid.

His desperate eyes fell on the ammunition storeroom, the corrugated-iron building von Molke had shown him. For a moment he had a reckless crazy impulse to send his Fokker crashing into it. But it would probably be a useless suicide. The ammunition might not be exploded, and even if it were it might not do much damage, since it was far from all the planes.

Then, as he swung around in his mad circle, with his Fokker getting shot up more and more, his eyes went to the ponderous door which had now closed the cave. All in a flash he remembered what von Molke had said. "The combined strength of a hundred could never raise that door. All in a flash it came to him—another suicidal idea, but if it worked he might yet prevent this diabolical raid, in spite of everything. If that electric winch could be put out of commission, totally ruined, it would probably take them hours to open or move that door. And in those hours the help might come, provided Kirby's comrades had got away to fetch it. He clung to the stubborn optimistic conviction that they had.

There was no time for hesitation. Even now, one wing of the Fokker was cracking, straining on its weakened, splintered struts. Another moment and the plane would be falling to pieces, or one of the zipping bullets would find Kirby's heart. He must act while he still lived. He must act even though it meant just as certain a death.

Once more he was coming around in his circle. At the very rear of the cave he did another breathless, climbing bank which all but tore off the damaged wing. He struggled to get all the altitude the rocky ceiling permitted. Then, with his nose again toward

the door, he straightened out. Carefully he judged his course, his eyes focused on the electric winch which looked so tiny from here. That winch became the only thing he saw, his sole interest! Nothing else counted now. He took mental aim for it. Then—

With an oath, he shoved his joystick slightly forward and at the same time put on full throttle. Down he went streaking, along the length of the great cave, with the bullets still crackling relentlessly about him, with his nose aimed straight and true for that winch. Down, down, faster and faster, hellbent, with his teeth gritted in fierce purpose, his eyes grim and unafraid, and seeing only that winch which loomed closer and closer. The crowd of Jerries suddenly held their fire and stood thunderstruck, rooted to the spot, as they saw this crazed Yank deliberately heading for a fatal crash. Too late they realized his purpose. The men at the winch just had time to scurry in terrified haste from the plane which came swooping straight toward them like a monstrous hawk.

There was a mighty, ear-splitting crash—a crash of metal against metal, a shivering and twisting of steel, a snapping of wood. At full speed, the thundering Fokker tore into that winch, head-on, and the impact sent the big electric machine flying to pieces. Chains broke, cables snapped. The Fokker, its nose a blunt twisted mass, hurtled on, carried by sheer momentum. Kirby saw the jagged stone wall of the cave come rushing toward him. Then, as it seemed to swing right out and smack his face, there was a buzzing noise in his head and everything went black.

WHEN he came to a dazed consciousness, his first sensation was that he could not be alive, that he could not have survived that crash. Slowly his eyelids fluttered, blinked. Slowly he became aware of the throbbing pain in his head, and the aches in his whole body. He was lying on a cot, and as clear vision gradually came to him, he recognized the room in the barracks where, as *Leutnant* Hans Mueller, he had gone to wash up before. How long he had lain here he could not guess. But evidently he was not seriously hurt at all—just badly shaken and bruised. His hand moved to his head, and he felt a sticky ugly lump. That was what had knocked him out, probably.

Almost instantly his mind cleared, and everything came back to him. Had his desperate stunt succeeded? Had he prevented the Germans from going on the raid? He tried to move so that he could look out through the door, but he was too exhausted and

aching to manage it. He listened. At once the strange silence outside impressed itself upon him. A pang of fear went through him. Had the planes managed to get out, anyway? Had they gone on their raid?

Even as he made these fearful conjectures, the silence outside was broken by a series of raucous barks. An airplane engine was starting. Another followed, and then others in quick succession! What could it mean?

Weakly he lay back on the cot, wondering, brooding. And then, abruptly, a tall gray-clad figure entered the room—a figure with a scowling, murderous face. In the next instant Baron von Molke was standing over the cot, glaring down at the Mosquito. Kirby looked at him dully, sullenly.

“So, you have come to at last, swine of a Yankee!” the German rasped with blighting malice. “Well, you had a miraculous escape. The plane crashed to pieces, but you were thrown out of the cockpit and only got a bump on the head. It is well,” he conceded, with cruel satisfaction. “Because now you can live to see how useless all your work was. After which”—calmly, ever so calmly, he pulled out a Luger and pointed its long barrel point-blank at the helpless Yank—“after which I shall have the pleasure of finishing you once and for all.”

Kirby made no reply, but continued to glare sullenly at his hated enemy. The baron pursed his lips.

“Yes, you did cause us some trouble,” he admitted grudgingly. “It has taken us all this time to find a way to open that door. We have had to do a lot of blasting, and now the final charge of dynamite has been laid. You have regained consciousness just in time to hear the blast that will break down that door and free the opening. Even now the ships are being made ready once more, and we will be starting immediately. And you,” he went on, his voice almost a silky purr, “will have the pleasure of hearing that door go down—and will die immediately after it falls.”

He gripped the Luger more firmly, aiming it for Kirby’s heart now. The Mosquito did not have the strength or will even to protest. Once more a feeling of absolute resignation had come over him. Once more he realized that he had been defeated, that these Germans had been too clever for him. It was no use. His desperate stunt had been to no avail. “Perhaps you have something to say before your death?” the German inquired in the same silky tone. “If so, you’d better hurry. The blast will come any moment.”

Kirby managed a last defiant retort. “All I have to say,” he grated, “is that I hope you rot in hell—you and your devilish crew!”

The German smiled pleasantly. "Spoken like a true Yank," he praised, with acid sarcasm. "I'm sure that those last words of yours ought to go down in history. And perhaps—"

The rest of his sentence was cut off by a thunderous, reverberating explosion. Von Molke, still keeping the Luger aimed at Kirby, glanced swiftly through the door. An exclamation of triumph broke from him as he saw the ponderous door at the mouth of the cave come tumbling down in a mass of falling debris, of rocks and wood and trees. The opening was uncovered.

But no sooner was it uncovered than there rose, right from outside, a shrill and barbarous wail of music accompanied by the beat of drums. At the sound of it, von Molke's face blanched and his eyes widened in horror. And at the sound of it Kirby gave a shout of hysterical joy, and felt new life and strength flowing back into his aching body. Bagpipes! No music could have sounded sweeter now than the shrill, catlike wail of the Scotch "doodle-sacks." Loudly they blared forth their most famous battle song.

"The Campbells are coming, ho ho, ho ho,
The drums are rum-tumming, ho ho, ho ho . . ."

And into the opening which had been so conveniently uncovered for them, spurred on by the band as always in battle, came the swarming kilted Highlanders, the "Ladies from Hell," who were such fighting demons. It was hardly a battle, the brief encounter which followed. The surprised Germans courageously opened fire on their attackers, but the Scotchmen had such overwhelming numbers that they had things their own way.

During all this, which took place with incredible swiftness, von Molke had been staring out through the door of the room with horror. Now, with a sudden savage oath, he wheeled around to bring his Luger to bear on Kirby again, determined at least to finish the Yank who had caused his downfall. But by this time Kirby, with the savage music of the bagpipes acting on him like a tonic, had recovered his strength. With a husky yell; he leaped from his cot, straight for the snarling German. The Luger went flying out of the Boche's hands. Then the two men were grappling furiously in the little room, while out in the cave the Scotchmen were rounding up their prisoners.

VON MOLKE proved to be of amazing strength, and at close quarters, in wrestling, he was more than

Kirby's match, since the Mosquito was in such an exhausted condition. He couldn't box as von Molke did, but he could slug. And his first smashing left swing sent the baron sprawling across the room. "Come on!" the Mosquito taunted him. "Get up and fight, you skunk!"

The snarling German scrambled to his feet and came at Kirby with a rush. Again he tried to crowd and wrestle, but again Kirby held him off. *Sock!* A beautiful uppercut again sent the German to the floor.

"Come on!" Kirby repeated fiercely. "We can finish it out right here. No one's bothering us. Get up!"

Von Molke, hurling savage maledictions on his foe, again scrambled to his feet and began to fight with desperate fury. One of his blows landed hard on the Mosquito's jaw, and dazed Kirby for a moment. But the Yank shook it off and repaid it by another of his smashing lefts. Battered and half knocked out, von Molke again sprawled across the room. But this time, as he was moving to get up, his eye suddenly fell on the Luger he had dropped before.

"No you don't, you dirty dog!" Kirby yelled, as the German made a furtive move for the gun. The Mosquito leaped toward him, then stopped in his tracks, helpless. The German had the pistol. With murder in his eyes, von Molke raised the Luger, and its muzzle loomed right in front of Kirby's face.

Crack! A shrill report shattered the air. But it was not von Molke who had fired. The baron was clutching his chest, where a crimson stain was slowly widening. He staggered a moment, his face contorted with agony. Then a hoarse shout broke from him.

"*Deutschland uber Alles!*" And he dropped, and lay where he had fallen. Into the room came two grim-faced Yanks, at the sight of whom Kirby gave a whoop of joy and relief. Shorty and Travis! And it was Shorty who still gripped the smoking Colt revolver. With boisterous joy, the Three Mosquitoes welcomed each other, celebrating their reunion once more.

"How in hell did you two buzzards ever get away from those Fokkers!" Kirby wanted to know.

"That was simple," Shorty volunteered. "We just shot the Fokkers down and went on home."

"We had seen the opening of this cave from the air," drawled the lanky Travis, "and so we knew pretty near what was up. We marched here with the Highland regiment the old British colonel sent."

"And believe me, he was excited, the old Limey!" Shorty exclaimed. "Wanted to come along himself and—"

"And did!" came a new voice, while into the room

strode the object of their conversation—the florid-faced English colonel with his walrus mustache. “Yes, I couldn’t miss it for anything,” said the old warrior. “So I came along afterward, and arrived here just in time to see our Highlanders rounding up all the Boche.” He beamed “How you found this place is more of a mystery to me than the mystery of the raids itself.”

Kirby smiled wearily. “Well, sir, it’s a long story.” He sighed, and his glance went to the dead German on the floor. “Funny about that guy, von Molke, here,” he mused. “He was one of the dirtiest, most merciless skunks I ever met, and I hated his guts like poison. And yet”—he shook his head—“it’s funny, but somehow I feel kinda sorry for that guy. Why, just

think; he spent three years rigging up this place, and he put in electricity, heat, and”—his voice filled with reverent awe—“running water, which is something I never saw at any other drome! And what does he get for it all?”

“One of my bullets, I guess,” Shorty put in, patting his Colt affectionately.

“Yeah,” said Kirby, “it’s tough.” Then, seeing that his comrades and the British colonel were staring at him almost in horror, as if they feared he had suddenly turned pro-German, he scowled with exaggerated fury, and grated, “Yeah, it’s tough I didn’t get him, instead of Shorty. It was my score to settle, and I hate like hell to be cheated.”

