

THE ADVENTURES OF *The* **THREE** **MOSQUITOES**™

FLAMING COCKPITS

by **RALPH OPPENHEIM**

The Black Devil's brother was seeking revenge. He was after Kirby, the famous leader of the "Three Mosquitoes," and for the first time in his great career, though he fought on frantically, Kirby was losing his nerve. Oppenheim at his best in a splendid, breath-taking flying story.

BY THIS TIME Kirby was quite tense about the enterprise, and as he glanced at the two pilots whose planes made up the V with him—"Shorty" Carn flying on his right, and the lanky Travis on his left—he knew the same must be true of them. Yet, despite the growing tensity, the three graceful Spads moved through the hazy sky, above a blurred brown earth and below heavy cloud banks, at a leisurely rate, their engines droning lazily. But this slowness was all part of the game, a strange game, in which the "Three Mosquitoes," as this trio was known, played the principal role. They were decoys. And they knew that, if all was well, there must be twenty other American planes up in that sky, safely concealed by the clouds and the blurred but dazzling sun. Those planes should be watching, waiting, though the three could not see them.

They were all out to crush the Bismark Circus, that notorious Boche pursuit squadron which had been raising ned among allied aircraft, killing off pilots and stopping important reconnaissance work. Many previous attempts to break up this circus had failed. Its

pilots were too clever; they had an almost uncanny way of slipping out of every trap set for them, and avoided fights when they saw they didn't have a winning chance. The only way to get them was to strike with sudden, surprising swiftness, throwing them into confusion and shutting off all paths of escape. And that was precisely what the C.O. of this American squadron had planned to do, banking the success of his elaborate scheme on the Three Mosquitoes. Of course this meant a big risk for Kirby and his men. Playing "bait" was pulling the very whiskers of death: often the bait was devoured before the fish could be hooked, or without the fish being hooked at all. But the C.O. was so sure that everything would go off like clock-work that he had decided to entrust the task to the three men.

Just how correct his calculations were would soon be seen. The time was close at hand. If the Germans followed their prescribed route, at their prescribed time—as the Boche usually did—they ought to meet them within a few minutes, before they crossed the lines into German territory. Kirby and his men were

ready. They would play their part. The rest was up to those other twenty planes, above.

But were those other planes up there? Kirby scanned the white-patched ceiling in vain for a trace of them. Not a one in sight. Of course, it was natural that he couldn't see them, for they were hiding. But suppose they were not there at all, suppose they had been intercepted, or had lost track of the three Spads flying below—as so often happened in these games? The uncertainty of the thing was enough to put the strongest man on edge. Kirby had gone unflinchingly through many nerve-racking experiences, but this was different. Hitherto he and his comrades had gone out by themselves, had met the enemy independently and given him a straight fight. If they lost they had only themselves to blame. It was due to their own failure, not to some hitch in a proceeding which involved twenty other planes. The fact that they now depended completely on outside help, that unless that help was on hand they didn't have a chance, skill or no skill, was what worried Kirby. He didn't like being a part of a big machine, every cog of which had to work exactly right, or the whole would totter.

Still, he could not blame the task in hand entirely for his growing uneasiness and worry. He knew that it was something else which bothered him, something which had taken an unreasonable, ridiculous hold on him until it had actually become a dread. And he knew that his comrades knew, for they were watching him closely—anxiously, he thought. It made him ashamed. He hated to show that he was upset simply because this was his first time out since the arrival of that message, that letter.

A STRANGE letter it was, and it had been delivered in a strange way. At dawn a German airplane had appeared suddenly over the airdrome and, before the men on the field could get after it, had swooped down low, dropped something white, and zoomed up again in a trail of black smoke. The white thing proved to be an envelope, attached to a weight. It was addressed, in clear Latin script, to "Captain Kirby, leader of the Three Mosquitoes, C flight,—th aero pursuit squadron, Amiens."

Perhaps this would have looked suspicious to the inexperienced, but the men on the field knew it had nothing to do with spies or secret service. It had happened before; it was in keeping with the strange etiquette of the air, the chivalrous code of aces who met and fought like the knights of old, who saw the conflict as a sport as well as a war.

That is why the men, instead of being alarmed by the message, carried it, still sealed, to Kirby, who was in his bunk with his comrades, dressing. Kirby seized the envelope eagerly, sensing its import before opening it. A challenge! His eyes gleamed. Some German ace doubtless wanted to fight a duel with him, and he reveled in those duels. He tore out the letter and read. It was in English:

Dear Captain Kirby:

One month ago you shot to death a German flyer known as the "Black Devil." You killed him in fair, clean combat, and he died a worthy death. But I am his brother, and in accordance with a family code dating back to feudal times, it is my duty and desire to avenge his death.

I am going to shoot you down in flames just as you shot down my brother.

I have transferred from two-seaters to fighting single-seaters since my brother's death, and am considered an ace—so we will be fairly matched. I cannot disclose my identity for fear this letter will fall into the wrong hands, and a trap will be set for me. I know, however, that if it falls in your hands you will act like a true sportsman. Therefore, if you will fly over Rois Forest, within your own lines, at five o'clock this afternoon—alone—I shall be waiting in the clouds. If I see that it is you, I will come out. Otherwise, I shall bide my time until we meet elsewhere—which, pray God, will be soon, before either of us gets killed.

You will know my plane, a Fokker, by the skull painted on its fuselage—similar to my brother's insignia.

Respectfully,

The Black Devil's Brother.

As Kirby read this message, his two comrades saw the gleam fade from his eyes, and a shadow seemed to creep over his features. He stared at the letter again, stared at every word. The muscles on his face twitched perceptibly. It was evident that he was struggling with some inner force, trying vainly to overcome it.

"What's up?" demanded Shorty Carn, who sat on his cot, pulling on his socks.

Kirby said nothing, but handed him the letter. Carn read it, then gave it to Travis, who in turn gave it back to Kirby. They were all silent for a moment.

Then Travis said quietly: "Of course you won't meet him."

Kirby shook his head slowly. Again the muscles on his face twitched.

"Gosh—" his voice was strained, "I know it's ridiculous, but I—I can't. I can't accept." He laughed ruefully. "Worst of it is I could probably beat hell out of him—but you understand."

The two men nodded. They did understand, and approved. Kirby must not meet this man, must not fight him.

It was not a question of fear, of physical inferiority, nor was it a sentimental reason. It was simply that Kirby, like most brave men, had his Achilles' heel, his one weak spot. Like so many of his fellow pilots, like Carn and Travis—though the latter would never admit it was true of himself—Kirby was superstitious.

Nowhere else did superstition have fuller sway than in the air force, where, indeed, it sometimes even influenced squadron rules and plans. The reason is simple. To these intrepid flyers, used to going up in frail little planes and thumbing their noses at death every day, lady luck was a patron saint. Skill, strength, and courage were supreme requisites, but the element of luck always figured in, too. A broken wire, an adverse wind, a jammed control, a motor suddenly gone dead—these were usually the workings of chance, and the most skillful pilot could not avoid them. And so these otherwise hard-boiled fighters worshipped the fickle lady, and sought to propitiate her by respecting her jinxes and carrying with them tokens said to be blessed by her. And even to-day there are many former war pilots who still consider it bad luck to talk about their crashes, or who still preserve some ridiculous luck charm—a garter, a woman's stocking, a piece of their first wreck, or some such object which "protected" them during the war.

Every squadron had its own set of "do's and don'ts," its own jinxes. In Kirby's squadron one of the superstitions was directly in bearing with the challenge he had received. It was considered bad luck, in fact fatal, to give combat to anyone close in kin to a pilot you've killed, especially if his motive was revenge. Like most jinxes, this had grown out of actual occurrences. The seed was sown when a member of the squadron died fighting a cousin of an ace he'd bagged; the seed blossomed into full flower when another pilot was shot down by the brother of one of his victims. The jinx was firmly established, and would remain so until some other pilot, defying precedent, broke it.

KIRBY would have liked to be the one to break it, but he couldn't bring himself to it. He had all the nerve and courage a man could possess, but he could only fight something he could put his hands on, something tangible and concrete—no stranger than himself. This Jinx business was different: it was something dark and uncanny and coldly terrifying. The whole squadron,

even the C.O., agreed that Kirby shouldn't take the chance, which only made it more impossible for him to cope with the thing.

Yet he struggled all the day, though the more he struggled the tighter grew the grip of that superstition. He cursed himself for a spineless fool, a weak jellyfish, but it didn't do any good. He couldn't accept that challenge. He was firmly convinced, despite all efforts to think otherwise, that disaster would face him if he met the German. Carn and Travis suggested that one of them go up in his plane, bait the Hun, and end the business. But Kirby would not hear of it. It was bad sport, and besides it was dangerous for them. Thus, for the first time, Kirby let a challenge go unanswered, and he was ashamed, ashamed because he knew the German would think him a coward.

He tried to forget the matter then, tried to get back his fighting spirit for to-morrow—the day of the decoy. But, to his chagrin, the thing kept bothering him, annoying him, making him worry. He knew that any day he might suddenly meet the German, and then what would he do? His comrades had promised, of course, that they would take care of the man if he should show up, but suppose Kirby happened to be separated from them? Well, he told himself, in that case, rather than run away like a coward he would fight, fight even if it cost him his life. Yet the conviction was lacking in this resolution. He wasn't afraid of the Black Devil's brother personally, for he wasn't afraid of any man. But the dark shadow of the jinx made Kirby see the German, not as a man, but as his nemesis, his evil spirit. That was what chilled him, filled him with a strange dread.

Next morning, however, in the bustle and excitement of taking off for the big decoy stunt, Kirby managed to forget his worry for awhile. He plunged into the spirit of the thing, cooperated in working out the details, and gave himself over to the idea of the "hunt." The Three Mosquitoes and the other twenty planes rendezvoused above the drome and set off together. The sight of all those planes reassured Kirby, put him at ease. He always felt more confident in the air.

But then those twenty planes had climbed into hiding among the clouds, had disappeared from view, and the awful uncertainty as to their presence had begun. Kirby's confidence dwindled; he found himself worrying again. He glanced at his comrades with unusual frequency, and was thankful that they were there beside him, for he could never have gone it alone to-day. Somehow this whole business—the decoy,

the circus—seemed to connect itself in an uncanny way to that letter. And Kirby felt a vague but strong premonition that something terrific was going to happen this morning. . . .

THEY were already over the Front now, flying high above the Allied trenches which zig-zagged the blurred brown, pock-marked ground. It was quiet down there—there had been a lull in the fighting, and only an occasional shell would burst. The three Spads moved on smoothly, getting ever closer to the lines. It was time for the German squadron to show up. Kirby wished they'd hurry, for the strain of waiting and watching was getting terrific. He wanted to get the thing over with, face the music and be done with it.

There seemed to be an ominous calm in the air now, despite the drone of engines, the rush of wind. Nothing stirred. The ground was vast and still, the sky a dome of silence. It was hard to imagine twenty planes flying up in the clouds. Those white banks, pile upon pile, seemed so quiet, so undisturbed. Kirby's nerves were getting tauter every second, winding up like a spring. Damn it, why didn't something happen? How much longer must they wait? There wasn't a plane in sight. Just he and his comrades—flying alone through the stilled air: three Spads droning along monotonously.

Then suddenly the calm was split by a dull reverberating crash which brought Kirby up in his seat with a shock. He saw the shell mushrooming out to the left—a good distance away. Anti-aircraft guns! But the smoke was white, which meant it was an Allied battery. What were they shooting at? There were no Huns over there. Then in a flash he realized that they had sent up the burst as a signal for him and his comrades—perhaps for the planes above, too. They had seen something over that way.

He scanned the sky to his left, strained his eyes. At first he could see nothing, but then he started and sat tense, rigid. Way off there, and forward, moving towards the Allied lines on a course parallel to the Three Mosquitoes, were two big Vs of tiny birdlike silhouettes. Kirby could not see them clearly, could not even distinguish their type, but he knew, knew for sure. They were the Bismark Jagstaffel!

Instantly his heart sank. Something had gone wrong! They were supposed to have met the Boche on the same path they were following. How come the circus was flying over there? Had they sensed the decoy and changed course?

He racked his brain with conjectures. Carn and Travis were both waving to him now, pointing to those planes, gesturing interrogatively. Kirby forgot his fears as the skilled flyer in him rose to the surface, tried to work out a course of action. He knew that the squadron wouldn't penetrate much further into Allied territory. They never did. Any moment they might turn back for their own lines, in which case the elaborately planned decoy would be a fizzle. On the other hand, if Kirby and his men changed their course, rushed over there and put themselves out as bait before the Boche's nose, what about those other twenty planes? Would they understand the shift and change their course too? There was no way of signaling them, for the Boche would see the signal and suspect a snare.

The Germans, still on that distant parallel, would soon be passing the Three Mosquitoes. There was no time to lose. Once more Kirby glanced at the cottonlike ceiling above, and once more he failed to see any planes. But they must be keeping their eyes on him and his comrades. Abruptly, he came to his decision, resolved to take the chance.

His left arm darted outward, waved, and the three planes did a beautiful left bank in perfect timing. Then Kirby signaled for full speed, opened his throttle wide. The lazy drone of the engine suddenly became a roaring Niagara, and the plane trembled, wind rushing through its flying wires. He felt the other two Spads at his sides, racing with him on a line that would converge with that big squadron over there. But there was no way of telling whether the twenty planes above were racing, too, or whether he and his comrades were simply going alone on a fool's errand, to certain death. . . .

On they raced, and the swift little Spads literally chewed up the gap between the slow-moving Boche squadron and themselves. They were drawing closer now, and soon the Germans would be overhead. The three Mosquitoes flew low so as to suck the Boche planes into a disadvantageous position whence they couldn't escape when the others dived on them. The Germans were not flying at a very high altitude as it was. Evidently they had decided to do a little reconnoitering while looking for easy prey. Kirby was glad they weren't in the clouds too.

THE squadron was so close now that Kirby could see every plane distinctly. His heart beat wildly. Nineteen of them! It was an overwhelming force, and, worried as he was over his inner fears, he began to feel shaky for the first time in his life. Yet he did not waver, but continued to lead his comrades on.

Now he saw that the two Vs were composed of Fokkers and L.V.G. two-seaters. And he knew for certain, beyond all doubt, that he had picked the right squadron—the Bismark Jagstaffel. The Germans had just inaugurated their fad of “painting up” their ships, covering them with fantastic designs, and this circus was the only one in the sector which had adopted the scheme. The purpose of it was a mystery, but as the sunlight, suddenly bright, fell on those planes up there, Kirby decided that the Germans were trying to confuse the Allied pilots by dazzling their eyes. The very sky flashed with bright reds, greens, yellows, silvers, golds. Some of the planes were painted to look like strange birds, gaudy creatures; some were bright, buzzing yellow-jackets, their tails ringed with brown to represent the stingers; and some, among the larger two-seaters, looked like monstrous flying dragons, seemed to have come right out of a Chinese painting.

They made a thrilling spectacle as they came, moving smoothly on, as yet unaware of the planes below. Kirby waited until he was assured that they would cross his path, until he saw them coming directly overhead. Then he slowed down his motor, the others slowed down theirs, and the lazy drone recommended. To all appearances these planes were cruising along leisurely, not expecting to meet the Huns, and not prepared for battle. They looked like so much cold meat. But Kirby was watching, his thumb on his gun-triggers. For the last time he looked up in the sky, wondered if those planes were ready. He did not see them, but he saw something else—something just as important.

The German planes were breaking formation. He saw them spreading out, saw them flash, and then they seemed to plunge over as one and come dropping down—gleaming streaks of color. Down they came, and now a shrill clatter and red streaks of flame from their noses showed that they were warming up their guns.

Kirby signaled his men, got them close to him. He felt his comrades more than ever now, felt them sticking with him—a good, thrilling feeling which gave him fresh courage. It was nerve-racking, letting a whole squadron dive on three frail planes, without knowing whether those twenty ships were coming or not—yet, now that the thing was actually happening, Kirby felt that there was something big about it, too, something which warmed the blood. He felt strong in his very helplessness, in standing up against these overwhelming odds.

Closer and closer came those streaking shapes, until the three felt their shadows overhead. All three affected surprise, broke confusedly and hung there in a shivering stall. The crisis was at hand. On the next few seconds would hang their fate and the success of the decoy. If the flight was overhead, and dived as soon as the Germans were absorbed in the Three Mosquitoes, all would be well. But if they didn’t dive—!

Kirby gritted his teeth, and waved to his men to encourage himself as well as them. They needed courage now, lots of it. For in the next second a stream of smoky tracer came raining down on them. Kirby saw the bullets ricocheting from his cockpit cowlings, heard them hissing through the fabric. He ducked low, then half rolled into a stalling side-slip. As he came out of the stall a two-seater flashed across his sights. He jerked both his triggers, fired a short burst. But he did not score. It was impossible to score now, to fight back under such conditions. German planes were crowding down on them, swooping upon the three little Spads which clung together so valiantly. The bullets thickened, tore at them from all directions. Kirby knew they could not hold out against planes like these: the squadron was too good, too accurate. Bullets were ripping through his top wing now, until it shook—

Then, with dramatic suddenness, they came. Kirby saw them as he brought up his nose again for a climbing turn. It was an amazing sight—almost like magic. The quiet, snow-white clouds suddenly became specked with black shapes, the shapes dropped out and turned into plunging planes—twenty fighting single-seaters!

The Germans saw them too, tried to pull right out. But it was too late. The decoy had worked. The new planes dropped upon the Huns like monstrous hawks, their guns beating out a thunderous tattoo. Confusion followed: two Fokkers went hurtling down in a spin. The rest, realizing that they could not get out, turned to give battle, and the dog-fight was on!

Kirby and his men resumed formation and helped, fighting in their usual, coordinated style, working together. They zoomed up after a two-seater, maneuvered to trap it. Carn got above it, Travis cut it off from in front, while Kirby jumped on its tail and sprayed it with sulphurous tracer. The two-seater nosed over slowly, then dropped like a stone—in a tight spin. The three picked up formation and gave chase to another.

The Germans were putting up a stiff fight, but it was a losing fight. So much in aerial combat depends

on the first few seconds, the opening blow, and the Germans had first been taken by surprise. The circus was being broken up, one plane after another hurtling down. No longer would it be a menace to Allied aircraft. The decoy was a success.

Kirby upbraided himself for his ridiculous apprehensions. He had been all wrong about something awful happening. Everything was going like clock-work. His fighting spirit was with him again, with him strong. He was a little apart from his comrades now, and was banking around to attack a bright yellow Fokker, which had suddenly jumped on his tail. He got around, and his guns spat. The Fokker rolled and started to pull up. Kirby pulled after it, in hot pursuit. The Fokker sped out through the swarm of planes, apparently intent on getting back to its own lines. Kirby followed, crept closer. His mind was fixed on his prey, as always. He didn't notice that he was moving further and further from the battle.

Suddenly the Fokker did a breathless vertical bank and came crashing straight towards Kirby, its guns spitting. Kirby half rolled to the left, and the other plane went past, so close that he could see the helmeted pilot plainly. The latter sat straight up and waved, pointing down at the side of his own fuselage. Kirby didn't understand at first. Then he looked.

HIS heart leaped, the blood seemed to freeze within him, and he turned deathly pale. For a few seconds he actually felt faint, and could hardly keep control of his plane. His brain whirled, but in the whirl the picture he had seen stood out with grim clarity, remained firmly imprinted. It was a picture of a leering death's head, staring from the fuselage of that yellow Fokker.

Perhaps it was the suddenness, the surprise of the thing which got him so. He had never suspected that the Black Devil's brother was a member of the Bismark Circus. Now, when the plane had suddenly appeared before him, he could not help but feel that there was something uncanny, supernatural, about it. It was as if he were suddenly confronted by a ghost.

Yet he was struggling with himself, as instinctively he rolled to shake off the German's sights, for the latter was right on his tail now. The fighter, the dauntless aviator in him told him to turn around and fight like a man, to ignore this ridiculous jinx business. But that darker element in his nature crushed his fighting spirit, shattered his morale, and made him want to flee. He felt that he was doomed already, for hadn't he fought the German, fired at him? That awful

premonition rose in him again: he knew he was going to meet with disaster.

The German was clinging to his tail like a leech, and the tracer was getting closer. Kirby tried to shake him off, then felt more helpless, more powerless than ever when he saw he couldn't. He glanced all about him frantically. Carn—Travis—where were they? For God's sake, why didn't they come and take this German on like they had agreed?

Then he saw how far he was from that swarm of planes over there, saw that he was utterly alone with this determined German, and a giddy terror seized him. He pushed his stick forward and went into a dive. He was fleeing—fleeing like a coward. The German knew he was fleeing; the men in the trenches down there knew it too, saw him running away without trying to fight back. The shame of it tortured him, dry sobs were wrenched from his throat. He was a coward! He, known as one of the bravest, was plain yellow!

Yet he could not help himself. He went on down, trying to dive out of it. But the German was plunging with him: it seemed that an invisible rope attached the Fokker to the Spad's tail. It was like a lurid nightmare, when you see something coming for you and can't escape. Kirby kept zig-zagging to shake off his foe, but failed. He was getting dangerously close to the ground. He'd crash if he went any lower. Desperately, he leveled off and raced ahead once more. The German was getting his range again: the man was a wizard, and Kirby knew it was only a matter of seconds.

Then, suddenly, something caught his eye, something that filled him with frenzied, blessed relief. Plunging down from above, dropping down like a comet with a trail of smoke in its wake, came another tiny Spad. A joyous shout broke from Kirby. It was Carn! He knew, knew even though he could scarcely make out the insignia. His comrade was coming to his rescue, diving straight for the German, who had to break off to meet him. Good old Shorty! He had kept his promise.

Down came the Spad, both its guns blazing away. The German started to roll. Carn was almost in range, and was timing his dive with perfect accuracy.

"Come on. Shorty!" Kirby yelled, though only to his own ears. "Come on, you little son-of-a-gun! Get him cold! Get——" he broke off with a cry of horror, shuddered from head to foot.

Carn, in his over-eagerness and haste, had shot off his own propeller!

The disabled Spad came on down like a stone, swept

right past the Fokker, unable to attack it, and then glided into the wind for an attempt at a landing. Somehow, to Kirby's dazed mind, the incident seemed to connect itself to that jinx. The bad luck was beginning: poor Carn would be damned lucky if he avoided a crash.

Kirby was more bewildered than ever now. The German was nosing after him, doing a roll above him to get his range again. He raced forward, kept rolling and zig-zagging, his object being to get back to the big fight, where he could lose the German. But as he glanced ahead he saw, to his dismay, that the fight was ended. The Germans were nowhere in sight. The Americans—having picked up formation—were fading into tiny distant specks. They had not seen him, or they would have come over here!

PANIC seized him. There was no escape now. Nevertheless, he kept racing ahead, felt the German on his tail, though he didn't want to look behind to see. It seemed he had gone on like that for miles before he suddenly noticed that the tracer had stopped. He glanced back, and was stunned with blank astonishment. The German wasn't on his tail at all! His Fokker was maneuvering with another plane. In a flash Kirby saw that it was Travis. The third Mosquito had doubtless been looking for him, and had quietly removed the German from his tail.

Kirby banked around swiftly, drew closer to that battle. His eyes lit up. Travis was winning, whipping down on the Fokker and out-maneuvering it. It was a hot fight. The two planes swerved, dipped, and circled around one another, their guns spitting.

Kirby was above them now, saw them flashing below. He wished he could go down there and help finish off the German, but he didn't dare. Besides, it was all right. Travis was winning. The third Mosquito, at a moment when his plane passed right beneath Kirby's, looked up and waved reassuringly. Kirby waved back, cheered him hoarsely, fired his two guns into the air to encourage him.

Travis went down after the German with renewed effort, tried to crowd him in. But now the fight was beginning to change. It was almost imperceptible at first, but slowly, gradually, the German began to gain the upper hand. Travis was getting more and more on the defensive—a bad sign, which made Kirby's heart sink. He noticed for the first time that his comrade's plane was acting a bit sluggish. Doubtless that overwhelming attack of the German circus had scored against the machine.

Now the German was getting on Travis' tail, and Kirby, his nerves growing taut, saw the tracer go

smoking past the other Mosquito's fuselage. Travis rolled awkwardly, helplessly. He was losing! He was going to be shot down!

Instantly a change came over Kirby. It was his feeling for his comrade, a feeling far stronger than that for himself. Travis was in danger. He was being beaten by a Hun. And by God, jinx or no jinx, Kirby wasn't going to stand by and see him shot down! He'd stop that German even if he himself was killed for it!

With a savage motion, he pushed his stick forward. The nose of the Spad dropped, and he went thundering down, his eyes to his sights, his thumbs to his triggers. The two planes were below him, and Travis was trying to do an Immelmann turn. The German banked and forced him on the outside arc. Kirby flattened out behind the Fokker, letting go with both guns. But he was too late.

Travis' plane, drunk with bullets, lurched precipitously. For one awful moment Kirby, staring on in agonized suspense, was certain that it was going into a fatal spin, for it was nosing over to the left. But then, slowly, uncertainly, it seemed to stagger back to even keel, and started to descend. Travis waved that he would try to make a landing, but Kirby knew his chances were slim, slimmer even than Carn's had been. His plane was dropping faster and faster down into that vast space, falling constantly into jerky side-slips, getting more and more beyond control. The German had scored.

At first Kirby felt only anguish and remorse, and a torturing sense of guilt. He blamed himself for Travis' predicament. Fool that he was, he had let the German beat down his comrade right before his eyes. He had done nothing until it was too late.

THEN he saw the Fokker coming on his tail again, and a mighty oath broke from him. Rage was upon him, a deadly volcanic rage which swept everything else aside. He did not care what happened, but he was going to make the German pay for his tricks, make him pay in blood. Superstition be damned!

He rolled into a stall, and the German plane rushed past him again. Once more he saw the pilot's goggled face, which seemed to be looking around at him with grim determination. Kirby whipped his Spad around to the right and spat contemptuously at his enemy with both guns.

"All right!" he bellowed, wishing the man could hear. "If it's a fight you want, you're going to get it!"

He pulled back his stick and shot upwards, knowing the German would follow. He was climbing

straight up towards the clouds, and the other pilot was soon trying to out-speed him in the climb. But he didn't. Kirby skirted the cloud-edges, went right through the ever-thickening mist, and came out above—in a clear, crystal blue sky. He leveled off and, looking down at the puffy white banks, gauged the spot where the German would come out, and dove for it. But the German fooled him, came out behind him and greeted him with a shower of bullets.

Kirby banked vertically, and the two confronted each other—two grim men both determined to kill, both guided by a thirst for revenge. One was going to avenge his brother's death, the other was going to avenge the defeat of his comrade. It was blood-feud. Only against one was a dark superstition which said that disaster faced the man who fought the kin of his victim.

The battle started off with a mad rush. The two planes came charging straight at one another, their guns spitting. They passed, and both banked vertically to charge again. Then they began to maneuver, began to duel like expert swordsmen. They made swift darts at one another, parried, lunged, feinted, each trying to crowd his adversary. They fought each other all over the sky, and skirted in and out of the clouds. The men in the trenches below, every now and then, would see those tiny birdlike shapes emerge from a white cloudbank, scuffle around each other for a furious second, and then shoot up and disappear.

Neither seemed to gain headway. Neither could get the upper hand. And now, as they came out below the clouds again, they became furiously deadlocked. They were going around in a circle, each trying to creep on the other's tail, each unable to make his bullets score because the two planes were both on the same diameter, opposite one another. Around they went, faster and with ever-increasing fury, their engines roaring. Now one of them would bank vertically, but the other followed at once, and they'd commence going around in the opposite direction. The men on the ground gazed up at them, spellbound, watched the tiny planes chasing each other's tails like two puppies, or, as Richthofen described it, "like two madmen playing ring-around-o'-rosies almost two miles above the earth." How long was it going to last? Both men wanted the other to break the circle, both knew that the one who straightened out would be in a very disadvantageous position.

Kirby was exasperated, and felt dizzy. The fact that he could not gain an inch of headway, that he could not come to grips with his foe, filled him with a sort of helpless frenzy. Once more the shadow of that jinx fell

upon him, began to loom larger. There was something uncanny about this fight. He was up against a force which he could not move. It didn't occur to him that his superstition, which had never really left him, was preventing him from fighting at his best, preventing him from blazing through in his usual, overwhelming way.

Now he felt that old dread rising in him again, getting stronger than his rage. He became desperate. He must hurry, hurry before he lost his fighting spirit.

He must break this awful circle, get out of it so he could attack his man. The only way to get out of it right was to do an Immelmann turn, which, if tight and close enough, would bring him on the German's tail. He should have remembered that Travis had suffered for doing such a turn: the German had a special trick to play against the maneuver. But all he thought of was getting out, getting into a position where he could meet his foe.

So he pulled back his stick, started to shoot upwards. The German, continuing on his circular course, caught up to him in a split second. And as Kirby—risking his plane as it was in the frenzied speed and closeness of the maneuver—turned half over, the German forced him right on the outside arc, just as he had forced Travis. His two guns blazed. Kirby saw the stream of tracer coming straight for him. The bullets ricocheted on a strut which splintered and flew to pieces. The plane shook from nose to tail. The German was firing another burst. Then it happened.

There was a hissing, screaming noise right behind Kirby, and a red tongue licked out around him, scorching hot. In a second, flames began to surround him, black smoke choked him. His plane was on fire! The cockpit was in flames! The German had hit an oil pipe.

Instantly Kirby knew that the jinx had worked against him; and the words of the German's letter raced through his whirling brain:

"I am going to shoot you down in flames just as you shot down my brother."

THE fire was burning him now, licking up at his face, igniting his clothes. The plane continued to fly on, its controls having gotten automatically into neutral, but Kirby knew that the engine would stop as soon as the bearings melted. He was done for! He couldn't stay in this cockpit any longer, couldn't stand being burned alive. He began to unfasten his safety belt. When a plane caught fire the pilot, if it grew too hot, usually jumped out—and not with a parachute! Kirby glanced over the side of the fuselage, and for the

first time knew the awful feeling of space—saw the miles of it that were below him. Horror gripped him, but then he put his foot out of the cockpit.

He got out on the wing, and now he saw that the fire was, at present, confined mainly to the inside of the cockpit. Perhaps he could stay here awhile—until his plane “cracked” or the flames spread too far. He drew himself to a half standing posture, close to the cockpit, and held on to a strut. The motor was sputtering now, going out.

Then a new terror seized him, for he heard the roar of a motor above, the *rat-tat-tat* of a Spandaus machine gun. Glancing up, he saw that the Fokker was swooping down on him! The German, seeing that he had a chance to live, was coming to finish him off. Even now he was right overhead, getting his range.

Again rage swept over Kirby, made him act before he realized what he was doing. From where he stood, he reached in the cockpit, put his gloved hand right into the flames, and got the joy-stick. He pulled it back. The plane lurched upwards, almost causing him to slide off the wing. He held on to the stick for dear life, until he saw that his nose was pointed towards the Fokker above. Then he took his hand off, groped for the gun trigger. He found it and jerked it, jerked it with all his might even as his propeller came to a stop and the plane started to nose over.

And in the next second a streaking shape went down past him. It was the Fokker, dropping like a plummet, and Kirby caught a glimpse of its pilot, frozen where he sat leaning to his sights. The Black Devil’s Brother was dead!

Yet, Kirby thought grimly, he was as good as dead himself. For, as the flames mounted, his plane lurched forward and nosed downwards—almost making him lose his hold again. Luckily it had not gone into a spin, but was diving at a steep angle. He clung on for dear life, stayed on the wing as he went screaming down, with the flying wires singing in the wind and the whole machine trembling, shaking as if it must fall to pieces. That wind alone almost pushed Kirby off, and the flames from the cockpit whipped out at him every now and then, forced him to retreat further from the fuselage, out along the wing. He could not stand this much longer. Soon he would have to let go and jump.

Then, suddenly, the ground loomed up below him, and he was trying to get back to his joy-stick for a pancake. Down plunged the plane, closer and closer, while Kirby struggled to force his way through the withering flames and smoke to reach his cockpit.

Some British Tommies in a reserve line trench watched it.

“Poor divil!” said one private to another. “’E wouldn’t ’ave a chawnce!”

“’E’s crashing now—look!” yelled somebody.

And it certainly looked that way. But then Kirby, after a last frantic effort, got the joy-stick and, though his hand was almost paralyzed by the burning pain of it, pulled it back. The Tommies, to their amazement, saw the plane lift sluggishly, then it glided right over their heads and settled, on even keel, just behind the trench. Instantly the jolt threw the fire into full power; the Spad was completely swallowed up by flames and black smoke which rose high into the sky.

The tommies rushed over, and then stopped in their tracks when they saw a man moving towards them, a grimy man, scarred with burns, his clothes in charred tatters, but nevertheless a man very much alive.

“Strike me dead!” exclaimed a captain. “’E’s alive!”

“Am I?” asked Kirby, dazedly.

IT WAS a day later. The Three Mosquitoes, all three of them, sat at a secluded table in Papa Renier’s estaminet, a bottle of *vin rouge* before them. Kirby’s face was a mess, full of salve, while his right hand was bandaged and useless. But with his left he managed to lift his glass steadily enough. The other two Mosquitoes didn’t have a scratch.

“Well,” said Travis, in his earnest voice, as he held up his glass. “To the Black Devil and his brother—a pair of aces!”

Then Carn proposed another toast. “To lady luck! She saved us all. She enabled us all to land safely in our lines. Here’s looking at her!”

Travis lifted his glass, but Kirby didn’t.

“What’s the matter?” Shorty demanded, amazed.

Kirby spoke slowly.

“This luck business,” he said, “is a lot of bunk. You see, there was no jinx, and I went through all that nonsense for nothing. If I hadn’t believed in it, I would have plugged that bird before he ever got a chance to set me on fire. So I wouldn’t have needed any luck to get me out of a burning plane alive. See what I mean?”

Travis nodded. “You’re sensible anyway. So now you’re not superstitious, eh? You’re not afraid of bad luck?”

“Afraid of bad luck?” Kirby snorted. “Why should I be? . . . And besides,” he added, triumphantly, “I’ve just got hold of a piece of Richthofen’s plane, and if I keep that on my person I’d like to know what could hurt me!”