



# OUTLAWED ACES

by HAROLD F.  
CRUICKSHANK

*The thunder of guns rumbled constantly, ominously, past that secret drome in the badlands back of the Meuse River. And in the tiny hiding place were three men whose garb was strangely unmarked, whose wrists bore no identification tags. For they were a flight of vanished men—and their orders were known only to a few.*

**N**OBODY HAD EVER DENIED that Captain Kelly “Kell” Vance and his A Flight of Sixty Squadron were wild, untamed young buzzards. Vance had grinned when some wag, in the night, had painted a wisp of wild oats on either side of each of A Flight’s Spads. Kell took it with a grin. He had his flight’s record in combat to back him up. It was nobody’s business what he and his boys did when off duty. After the sort of sky action they engaged in, recreation of any kind was necessary.

However, Vance did wince when, after he and his boys, thinking C Flight was in a jam, had roared on down to their assistance, cracking up a famous Boche circus and downing two of the enemy ships, someone at the squadron had painted out the wild oats insignia and substituted two butting billy goats.

Vance and his buzzards had not thought they were butting in on C Flight’s thunder. It had seemed to them that there was need for assistance and, in good faith, they had gone down into hell-bent action. A Flight was credited with two more Hun flamers—and C Flight had drawn a blank.

As Vance glimpsed those lurid goats deftly painted on his ships, he at first saw red. His first impulse was to tackle the skipper of C, and demand an explanation. But as he continued to gaze at those butting goats, his blood cooled. After all, two butting goats did symbolize action and fearlessness. He’d watched billies charge each other back west on the ranch. There was nothing yellow about the way they settled their differences. A grin played with his features and, with a shrug, he decided to let the insignia ride.

From the time those goats appeared on his ships, though, trouble enough and to spare seemed to hound the skipper of A and his boys. They became known as the “Wild Goats.” A Fokker dropped a note once, making some slighting remark about the Goat flight. There had been a threat from the nefarious Baron von Kramer to the effect that he was shortly embarking on a goat-hunting expedition. Ill luck dogged the tails of the Goats, and now Kell Vance’s flight was reduced to three members.

A little less than a month ago he had lost two of his best men. The jinx was riding them hard, nor had headquarters considered replacing those two departed buzzards. In fact, Vance was informed that it was only his amazing record that held him his command. He had been too inconsiderate of life when in action, too untamably wild when off duty.

Vance’s two remaining lieutenants had stuck to him like glue. “Bat” Norton and “Sandy” Craig were stickers, men of loyalty. They knew that Kell Vance was second to none in the French sky lanes, that he was second to none anywhere. It hadn’t been Vance’s fault that those other two members of A had gone West. He had ordered them back, and they had refused his order. It hadn’t been his fault that a flight of bombers which he was ordered to escort had been lost. He had signaled the bomber leader that they were heading into a terrific storm.

There had been other matters brought up at a court of inquiry, but in spite of them all, Kell was determined to keep his head.

“If we’re to be outlawed, gang, let’s not forget that there’s a purpose in our presence in these skies. It’s our job to get this elusive black baron of Prussia. I’ve been doing plenty of scouting, and there’s more at the back of von Kramer’s actions on this Front than even our Intelligence seems to know.”

Kelly Vance had cruised well back of the German lines, deep into the badlands of the Ardennes, across the Meuse River. He had been nearly trapped, more than once, but he had secured information which proved to him that von Kramer was not only a clever *Rittmeister*, but an enemy to be feared for the dark, terrible secret he held at those badlands beyond the Meuse.

TODAY, Kelly Vance had drawn the black Fokker flight of von Kramer into action.

“So you’ve come hunting wild goats, eh?” the Yank muttered to himself. “Well, call your shots, for the goats are coming in a-butting.”

For ten or fifteen minutes, watchers below were treated to some of the most awe-inspiring action they had ever seen. Vance’s trio swirled, zoomed, dived, looped, and Immelmanned about the seven devils of von Kramer like three gray hawks. But it was no play. Von Kramer had combed the German Air Service for the buzzards who flew from his Staffel. They were hard-bitten sky fighters of the first order.

Kell Vance was not afraid of them. In fact, he knew that so long as he watched the wily baron carefully, he could hold his own against the rest of the black flight. Von Kramer flew apart from his formation, now and then swooping down to drive a hideous burst from his Spandaus across the bows of one or the other American ships, turning them back into that circle of black, milling ships.

But Vance was fed up with this cat-and-mouse play. He wanted von Kramer. He knew that, without the baron, the secret menace at the badlands might not be so formidable. Von Kramer must go!

Now the Yank skipper signaled to his two flight mates. He faked a spin, and got away with it. Zooming up over a patch of hemlocks in the woods below, he cut to eastward. He was clear. There was a chance now that he could coil in around the tail of the baron's ship. Flashing a glance back over his shoulder, he saw his two pals scrapping, with Vickers wide open. Craig and Norton were forcing the Hun flight to the utmost, covering their skipper's flight to the east. Now Kell was coming back in. Craig took a tumble into a falling leaf spin. The entire German flight pounced on his tail, but out of the upper altitudes came a signal flare from von Kramer.

The killer baron wanted another Yank on his scalp belt. *Lieber Gott!* What had gone wrong with his pilots? Had they forgotten themselves?

At the flash of the flare, the six black ships diverged away from the spinning Spad. Craig spotted the significance of the move. He had pulled a bold maneuver when he went into this spin, but he told himself that he wasn't going to become cold meat for that diving killer above him. Where were Kell and Norton? To Craig, it seemed that the skies were emptying. He was on the spot, with no hope of immediate help. Von Kramer came down like the chip from some flaming comet. His Spandaus were blazing orange-red flame, and his lead was stuttering through the Spad's fabric.

Taut-lipped, Craig continued on down. It seemed that he was tolling off the seconds in his mind. He was flirting with death, for when von Kramer rode the tail of an enemy ship, he seldom missed.

Now, with a sharp gasp, as a slug nicked the leather of his coverall, Craig socked the ship back in a zoom which threatened to pull her apart. He was forced to loop smartly, for von Kramer had anticipated his move. He came up again, soaring on into an Immelmann. This time he had cheated the Prussian vulture. But von Kramer was too clever to put himself in a jam. He rocketed up in a counter-maneuver which strained Craig's ability to combat.

Sandy Craig was nobody's fool. He was lightning-swift at controls and gun trips, but today he had met his match. This *Rittmeister* from the badlands flung his ship around in her tracks with the darting speed of a bee.

As Craig came up in a long zoom, his fingers

clamped on the stick trigger, he gasped. The baron was making one of the most amazing loops, to come down at him head on, Spandaus ablaze with spewed flame.

Sandy's guns were sleeting lead, but suddenly they stopped short, so abruptly as to cause the Yank's heart to miss a beat. The baron had jammed the Vickers. Craig was doomed to go down in flames, unless he became unusually masterful at the stick and rudder and throttle. There was only one move, a roll off right, and a dive in power.

Von Kramer grinned. He had one goat. After all, these Americans were much the same as any other pilots. They were all cold meat, if one so experienced as the Baron von Kramer played them the right way. He was just sticking his black Fokker into position to rip the Spad's gas tanks when, with no warning at all, he felt his ship stagger. Lead in large doses was spattering the ship abaft the coaming.

KELL VANCE had broken through a cordon of Hun ships which held him up. Almost too late to do Sandy Craig any good, he had come tearing down vertically, risking an outside loop. A low snarl escaped him as he pressed his trigger trips. Von Kramer was his!

But the German had seen. Through a mirror on one of his struts, he had glimpsed Vance's position, and now he hurled his Fokker into a furious barrel roll. He slipped off from this, flattened, and then, before Kell could nail him, he was searing sky in an Immelmann turn.

Kell swore bitterly. Again he was checkmated. How had the baron come out of that slip-off into the zoom?

Von Kramer was clear. He cruised away in a wide circle, signaling across to his pilots to come on into complete formation again. There was a sudden flash of silver in the sky above the Fokkers as they turned. Lieutenant Bat Norton had come out of the nothingness beyond. He was driving in, his Vickers stuttering flame and lead.

Kelly Vance grinned as he roared his Hisso wide out. Sandy Craig was one Boche ship up on his buddy. Bat was out to tie the score. He split the Fokker formation wide open, clinging like a leech to one spotted ship. A sudden cough of oily, black-red flame marked the work of his Vickers lead. He zoomed up out of reach of those long tongues of flame. Now Kell Vance was signaling to him. The Hun flight was disorganized. Now was the big chance the Yanks had played for in a furious fight for upwards of half an hour.

Sandy Craig was fixing a stoppage in his guns as he steadily climbed back to the mill. The other two flanked each other and tore on in like a couple of meat-hungry buzzards. Vance suddenly ripped up in a screaming zoom, which carried him well above the milling Boche flight. Bat Norton followed. They had at last got the Kramer outfit in a trap. They Immelmanned around and tipped down their noses. But it was destined that they should hold their fire. A snarl broke on Kelly's lips as he glimpsed a full Spad flight speeding from the west, and the snarl became a barrage of oaths as he glimpsed the lettering of C Flight.

C Flight was driving head-down on that Fokker formation.

Vance poured his ship through space, his blood boiling. Suddenly the lead ship of C Flight ran her nose up. Vance began to read signals from the flight leader.

"Get your goats out," flashed Tim Corby, C Flight's skipper. "Let a real outfit take these Jerries. Orders from Headquarters that you withdraw at once."

Kell Vance spluttered. What was Corby trying to pull? This goatgetting business had gone too far! Since when did old A Flight have to rely on help from C?

Tim Corby was still signaling. "No fooling, Kell, you'd better get out. Something important at Wing H.Q. C.O. says to hurry. Luck!"

Tim Corby had wished him luck . . . Something important . . . Kelly Vance eased back on his throttle and leveled his ship out. He signaled to his two boys, who came swooping down to his flanks.

It was a mystery to Vance why he should be plucked from the skies so suddenly. Usually such moves have their shadows cast hours ahead. He thought of a split in his trio flight. He thought of withdrawal from Sixty Squadron, the squadron he had helped organize and build up.

"If those big lugs at H.Q. are thinkin' of railroadin' me or the boys out to any school of instruction, I'll light into 'em!" A host of other harassing thoughts filled Kelly's mind. He had had no luck since these butting goats had become his insignia.

What now? Was Wing about to kick him out? He scarcely dared think up a logical answer. One thing he was sure of—no big head on earth was going to insist that he withdraw from the leadership of an active combat flight. And with his mind a maelstrom of chaotic thought, he smacked his Spad at the tarmac.

In a flash, he was overside, trotting to the office of the C.O. Kell Vance was in a hurry to get the news.

"AH, CAPTAIN VANCE!" Kelly Vance stopped short in his tracks. He had expected to see only his own C.O. present, but the office was filled with big shots from brigade and Wing. It was the brigadier who had greeted him. Was this to be another court of inquiry?

"Have a seat, captain," crisped the brigadier. "Smoke if you wish. You've had a hot afternoon, by the look of you. Run into enemy aircraft?"

"Yes, sir, von Kramer's outfit. Had 'em in the bag, too, when C Flight horned in with a message to withdraw."

"You say it was von Kramer's flight?"

"Yes, sir, the man who claimed he was coming for our goats. We got one of his. Would it be asking too much if I were to request this court to proceed with its business as quickly as possible, sir?"

"H'mmm. This doesn't happen to be a court of inquiry, Vance," returned the brigadier. "In a way, it is a court, a court that has convened to pass sentence on you."

"Sentence? For what?" Kell stabbed the fire from a cigarette butt and swung round on the chief executive officer.

"The sentence of death is about to be passed on you, Vance. And this isn't a comic opera. From this date on, Captain Vance, Lieutenants Norton and Craig are officially dead. Just a moment. I'm coming to the point. And from now on, the comic opera aspect is finished with. We're withdrawing you from active service with Sixty squadron. You—"

"Well, sir, I—I won't stand for it. I had a notion I was to be railroaded into something back of the lines. I'd prefer to resign my Air Force commission right here, and foot it back to an infantry platoon." Vance was on his feet, his eyes blazing.

A thin smile played on the brigadier's face. He took off his glasses and tapped out a gentle tattoo with them while Vance calmed down.

"Resume your seat, captain," soothed the brigadier. "Just listen a moment longer. Then, if you still wish to foot it back to the infantry, I'll be glad to sign your transfer. Now, to get on. We have combed the entire Allied air services for a suitable flight to carry out a special assignment. Back of those badlands at the Ardennes lies the Staffel of von Kramer, which, in the ordinary sense, is not merely a headquarters, but the lair of a devil and his grim secret. We want that secret.

"We have to find a formation of flyers on whom we can depend to the utmost—fearless, efficient sky fighters who can use their heads, and cooperate with



our Intelligence branch. In view of your record in the past, we have chosen you and your two lieutenants. We want von Kramer, and his secret. It is imperative. Well, there you are. Take an hour or so to think it over. If you don't want the job, I have a recommendation here from your commanding officer and from Wing headquarters, to which I have put my signature. You will, as an alternative, take over command of the Forty-eighth pursuit squadron."

Something thundered in Kell Vance's eardrums. The whole universe seemed to have avalanched down on his head. Was he dreaming? Command of a squadron! The chance to work out the end of von Kramer in his own way! These men who had ridden him into a previous court of inquiry, who had robbed him of a full flight, were now extending promotion—the chance to turn a real Intelligence trick in his own way. Here was an expression of confidence that was crushing.

It was a moment before he could make reply. He got to his feet.

"I don't need any time to think over your proposition, sir," he finally announced to the general. "I've thought it all out for days and nights. I'll accept the assignment to the badlands. It's the best news I ever got. When do we start?"

A murmur rippled about the room. The brigadier got to his feet and extended his hand to Vance.

"Thank you, captain. You had us all on edge for a moment," he remarked. "For some little time you've felt that you've been ridden at this squadron. Well, that was all part of our plan. We wanted, if necessary, to make you dissatisfied here. Knowing how attached you were to old Sixty, we knew that it would take a lot of urging to get you to leave to command Forty-eight. I want you to know that there is nothing recorded on your papers in connection with that recent court of inquiry. That was another part of our play—that, and the desire on our part to attempt to tame you and your Wild Goats a little. You'll report to G-2 headquarters at once. Major Brant will give you your final instructions. Remember, Vance, tight mouths from this moment on. You are no longer connected with the Allied flying services, officially. You at once become a masked, independent flight of three, carrying no insignia, nothing that would identify you. You take up position at an isolated point in the Meuse valley. There—Brant will give you the rest. Do you and your men speak German?"

"Enough to get by on, sir. That's one thing I've

insisted on, with every man that ever joined my flight. Thanks a lot, general. May I go now? My boys will be anxious to hear the news."

The brigadier nodded. Vance lifted his right hand in a smart salute and withdrew, his heart pounding with excitement.

DAYS had fled swiftly by since Kell Vance's interview with the general and his staff. They were days of suspense, during which time Baron von Kramer searched the skies in vain for the American trio of three wild goats. Word had reached him that Kelly Vance and his pilots had been crashed in action east of Verdun. At first he didn't believe the story. There had been no direct confirmation; and if von Kramer feared any organization in the Allied flying services, it was that hellion trio under Vance.

On the fifth day since the baron's last meeting with the trio, he decided to accept the story. A rumor reached him that they had been transferred to the Italian-Austrian front. It didn't matter. They no longer crossed his path. He continued his mad plundering of the sky-lanes, grimly, ruthlessly. Soon, very soon, he would spring his deadly secret from the badlands Staffel, and the enemy air service would crumble.

Working in conjunction with von Kramer and his black flight of death, the German infantry would sweep on to certain victory. It was a pleasant thought. Ever a scheming scientist, the baron had drawn his plans well. There had been no hitches. Allied Intelligence departments were completely baffled. Operatives who had succeeded in penetrating the black Staffel defenses had been caught and killed. The secret hung, a menace, over the heads of the American, British, and French forces.

Now a sudden increase in the German artillery operations was making itself felt. Gradually, the Huns were ranging with countless new guns, guns drawn from the Russian and Austrian fronts. Night patrols across No-Man's-Land were more frequent, and more than one Allied outpost holder was being snatched away to the German lines, with the hope that information could be extracted from them.

From a cleverly hidden little drome in the badlands of the Meuse valley, Kell Vance took stock of the new crescendo of the war gods. His face was drawn taut and grim as he watched the leaping chains of light at the horizon. The grumble of drumfire thundered in his ears with an ominous roll. He was an ex-infantryman, an old front-liner, and he knew this sign.

The German command was not hurling thousands of dollars' worth of steel and explosives through space for nothing.

Vance turned to his two pilots standing by.

"Our turn's come, gang," he jerked. "Von Kramer is ready to strike. We've got to move fast."

"But you haven't told us yet what it's all about, Kell," Sandy Craig observed. "What can Kramer have up his sleeve that we haven't already heard of?"

"Your guess would be as good as mine, Sandy. It must be either gas, flame, or both—or electricity. It might be none of these. If not—well, I don't know. Tomorrow, just before dawn, we hit up into those hills and take a look."

Neither of Kell's pilots essayed any further remark. They understood. They were prepared to back their skipper in any adventure he decided on. Together they slipped back to a rock dugout, where once a doomed company of Frenchmen had gallantly attempted to hold up the sweeping horde of German field gray which threatened Paris.

Two mechanics only had accompanied the flight—two tightmouthed greaseballs whom Vance wouldn't have swapped for a full platoon of the best scrappers in France. These men were dressed in the same strange garb as their officers—a neutral-gray coverall suit. Their hair was clipped short all over. They asked no questions, took their orders with silent grace. Mechanic Sergeant Dan Nolan and Private Pete Shaw were no longer official members of any department of the American Army. They carried no mark of identification and, should they fail to return, their next of kin would be suitably taken care of. They were part of a flight of vanished men whom nobody knew, whom nobody would recognize.

The Spads had had their lines altered. In the dull light they might easily have passed for Pfalzes, Fokkers, Nieuports. Their paint job was a neutral gray, a grim, ghostly color carrying no insignia of any sort. American G-2 headquarters men were taking no chance against the crafty von Kramer.

Now Kell Vance alone remained awake, alert. He was patrolling the ghostly, shadow-filled craglands, while his small aggregation slept. In two hours he would awaken Sergeant Nolan, who in turn would jab Pete Shaw in the ribs. Tonight Bat Norton and Sandy Craig were not to be disturbed. Vance wanted them sound and fresh for his first trip into the lair of the black baron of Prussia.

LONG before dawn, the following morning, the three Spads were pulsing on their chocks. Kell Vance stood by, listening anxiously to the timing of the Hissos. He shot a glance at the sky, and heaved a sigh of relief.

A perfect morning for his adventure, this was. There would be no rosy blushes of early sunlight; on the other hand, there would be no strong winds, or rain. As he climbed aboard and buckled his belt webbing, he cast a glance along the line, and smiled. Norton and Craig were already aboard, crouched above their sticks, like hounds of hell straining at the leash.

High above the badlands of the westerly fringes of the Ardennes, the three ghost Spads soared. Below them stretched a yawning maw of frightfulness—a place of rugged beauty at any other time. Although it lacked the grandeur of the Grand Canyon back home, this maze of gorges, timber, cliffs and mountainous country made Kell Vance think of Colorado. But he snapped away all such thoughts. There was a devil down in those gullies—a devil and his gang of sky demons.

Screened by a favorable morning mist, the trio of Yanks slid down, searching every nook, cleft, and cranny in the area. Kell Vance was not circusing as he slipped off between sheer walls of rock. His face was drawn taut. This was no count try to flirt with. Besides, death in a million forms lurked behind each promontory. Somewhere in the fastness of this wilderness von Kramer and his buzzards had their nest.

But the Yank patrol flew on, unmolested. This only served to tighten the suspense. Somehow, it didn't appeal to Kell Vance. He wanted Kramer to show a hand, in some form or other.

They gyrated around the badlands for more than half an hour. All at once, as the skipper zoomed his small flight up from an almost sheer drop to 1,000 feet, his keen eyes had caught a sudden splash of light off the starboard head. It might have been nothing, or just the spewing of flame from some long-range gun hidden in the wilds. But it was the first sign of anything suspicious Vance had seen.

As the flight soared up to eight thousand feet, Kell's mind was working fast. He had the spot from which the flash issued well registered in his mind. Now the question was—should he risk taking Norton and Sandy Craig down with him, as he dived to investigate, or should he turn the boys out and go it alone? He

decided swiftly on the latter course. There was nothing to be gained by all tearing on down, if trouble actually did lurk at that point. The two other pilots would be more useful alive!

Kell signaled to the boys. They protested, but the skipper was firm. He had a plan outlined, and it called for single action. It meant a drop to a landing somewhere on one of those rock ledges where only a goat would have felt safe. Vance was sure that the hazard presented to a three-ship landing would be too great.

He waved his boys back, signaling them to stand by, then hurled his ship down into the gloom of the uninviting regions below.

Down, down—Kell winced as he felt his port wing tips just kiss a cliff side. He had almost misjudged the space through which he must drop. Now he leveled off, to strike into wind and catch that flat, moss-covered rocky plateau on which to plaster his Spad in a pancake landing. It was like falling down a well, and pulling the top in after one.

Down, down! He gave a sudden gasp. Something had suddenly flashed across his dash mirror—some monster, batlike thing, whose face gleamed red. Another, and still another form photographed themselves in the mirror. Vance could not venture a glance above him. He had all he could do, watching the sides of the cliffs.

A low groan escaped him as he felt his ship stagger under a hard hammering of lead. He was being attacked. From out of the very face of the rockside, the mystery ships of von Kramer's death Staffel had catapulted. Kell Vance had fallen dead into a trap which the wily von Kramer had set.

There was nothing the Yank skipper could do. He couldn't hazard a zoom up that canyon. The only move was to continue on down, with the hope that the Hun lead would miss him. Then, instead of landing on the plateau, he would try a tight Immelmann, off to port, and roll away into the more expansive valley to the northwest.

But those weird ships which had struck from their cave hideouts had the skipper in a trap. His chin suddenly slumped. A million bright lights danced before his vision. He had not felt the physical shock of any striking bullet, yet his whole being had been jarred. He was slipping into a fog of unconsciousness—with a plateau of hard, flat rock beneath him.

Down! His brain swam, but he was still seeing. Now the rock landing field rushed up to meet him.

Kell switched off. He tightened himself against stick and rudder bar, holding his head overside to catch the blast of the prop wash. Strangely enough, there was no further demonstration of gun fire from the rear.

Kell peered into his mirror. There was no sign of those shadowy shapes which had attacked him. He was alone, and had he been fully conscious, he could have attempted a getaway. But his senses were reeling, and his body had lost its firmness. He was sagging against the belt webbing as his tires smacked the moss covering of the rock. The Spad bounced high. Kell's last conscious act was to smack his right rudder hard. Then a claiming drowsiness overcame him. As his Spad came to a halt, the skipper went out into a vale of unconsciousness.

WITH almost the first awakening breath, Kell Vance was cursing himself. He was quick to realize that he was a captive in the hands of the man he had come to get.

"You fool!" he swore at himself. "A fuzz-faced second looie couldn't have made a worse mess of things." Something was throbbing in his eardrums. He rubbed his ears, as though to rid them of this drumming sound, but it persisted. And then it dawned on him that the chamber in which he was held captive lay close to a throbbing dynamo.

He sat up with a start at the sound of a door opening and closing. He heard voices, a sharp laugh, footsteps! Then Baron von Kramer slouched into the room, or rocky chamber.

"*Ach*, so! You are awake!" he said. His eyes found Vance's, and their gaze held.

With utter nonchalance, von Kramer took a seat and lit a long, thin cheroot. Puffing clouds of smoke idly at the ceiling for a moment, he suddenly swung on the Yank skipper.

"You speak German?" he jerked.

"So."

"*Ach*, that is good. Then we can talk. You carried no marks of identification. Who are you?"

A thin smile toyed with Kell's drawn features. So von Kramer wasn't wise to him!

"I am nobody, *Herr* Baron," he observed. "I have no name, no military status. You might just as well try something else. You'll get nothing out of me."

"So? I have means of extracting information that may surprise you. What is your name, your squadron number, and your business in this zone?"

"No name, no squadron, and my business in this

zone was to get you and your secret. That's all. I'd be glad of a bite to eat and a drink of anything wet—and non-poisonous.” Kell Vance had lost none of his composure. His keen mind was even now working fast. He was alone in this room with the greatest enemy, the greatest threat to the Allied cause. And while there wasn't much hope for Vance, there was always that unquenchable American spirit which refused to cool until the body cooled in death.

“You defy me, *nicht wahr?*” The baron moved in closer to Vance's seat, “This morning, my observers reported that there were three of you in the flight above the badlands, *Herr Hauptmann*. There was an American flight of three which suddenly vanished from the Front. I am suspicious of you. You—”

A low chuckle escaped Kell Vance. “So you are scared of the ghosts of those three pilots, *Herr Baron*? But have no fear. Perhaps I am a Frenchman, or even a Britisher. Now get on with your dirty work. What's in store for me?”

“Death. You are virtually a spy. Since you refuse to identify yourself, you must die. Your uniform signifies nothing. You are a spy, and you know the penalty.”

“Quite. A firing squad will be swift, and sure, at least,” Vance snapped. “One can only die once. The bullets of a firing squad seldom miss, *nicht wahr?*”

“No.” The baron's cruel face was suddenly distorted in an odd grin. “But I hadn't thought of a firing squad. Come.” He got to his feet, and beckoned. “Make no false moves. There are eyes that see, eyes that watch your every move. You see I have not drawn my pistol. There is no need. Follow me.”

Kelly vance got a whiff of fresh air. It revived him. He had received no wound in his crash landing other than a blow on the temple, but being cooped up in the stuffy confinement of that stone chamber had kept him fairly groggy. Now, as he walked along at the back of von Kramer, he began to drink in lungfuls of pure oxygen.

But the supply of fresh air was short-lived. Von Kramer suddenly turned, and they entered a corridor cut out of solid rock. Here the roar of a dynamo was deafening. Von Kramer pressed a button. Vance saw a glass panel in the rock wall.

“Elevator shaft,” he told himself. He was right. A car whined up to a halt. A slab of rock slid to one side and the baron motioned the Yank to board the car. They struck down at terrific speed. Now Vance's temples began to throb. A strange odor assailed his nostrils.

Stepping from the shaft, von Kramer led the way

down a short corridor, and halted outside a glass partition. Vance started. On the other side of that partition, men worked in a machine shop which held the diabolical secret of the black Baron of Prussia. They moved about like ghouls, masked, clad in tight coveralls with hoods. At times they were almost lost to view in a screening of greenish-yellow vapor which swirled about the lethal chamber.

“Gas!” Vance spat the word through tightly drawn lips. He watched the ghouls draw the deadly liquid from cauldrons, pouring it into steel shapes which were neither shells nor bombs. Suddenly the Yank looked up, to see the grinning face of von Kramer leering at him.

“Tomorrow night those missiles will snuff out many lives,” he snarled. “Come—I show you more.” They moved on out through another stone doorway, into another corridor, where the baron again pressed a wall button. Another elevator car whisked them up to a landing at about half the altitude of the plateau surface.

Kell Vance gasped as he entered a large cavern, a place that might have been a chamber in some forgotten world. Here, squatted down on a form of hollow trackage, were a number of monster black shapes, batlike things. They were the black mystery planes, word of which had been received by Allied headquarters.

Vance at once saw that a narrow aperture struck out from the strange hangar, out to the open. He could see vaguely across the valley outside. His heart beat madly. This was the spot he had passed, and these shapes were the shadows which had been momentarily photographed in his dash mirror.

Von Kramer snapped an order at a masked, towering *Feldwebel*. At once the view from outside was shut off. The chamber was plunged into an inky black void. And then, at some mysterious sign from the baron, the monster shapes broke out in a phosphorescent glow. Vance started back. By God, this wasn't real! It was a bad dream. He was staring at a line of luminous demons of hell. There were seven of them in this one rock hangar, and heaven knew how many more of a similar type the baron possessed.

The baron clutched Kelly's arm, and drew him in close to the side of one of the ships. He tapped it with his knuckles, and a metallic ring responded.

“All-metal, bullet-proof, splinter-proof,” chuckled the baron. “Look below. They carry my secret torpedoes. *Ach!* I have at last the means to an end—



and end of this war, in favor of the Fatherland. Before another forty hours, I shall have killed many people with my new gas stuff. Your Allied associates, whoever you are, are fools. I promised you death. Come, look!”

VON KRAMER climbed the stirrup of a plane and beckoned Vance to board the ship from the other side. Kell started as he got his first glimpse of the interior of the monster. This was no ordinary flying machine. It was a deadly compartment of intricate devices. Aft of the pilot’s and navigator’s seats was a gun well, from which two gunners could operate two sets of Spandaus. One set was slung so that they could command the topside air-lanes, while a set was enabled to fire through a port below.

There was room for five of the ghastly torpedoes below the fuselage. Von Kramer drew Vance down, and they moved in below the ship.

“This coupling here holds the center torpedo,” the baron observed. “I spoke of your death. You, spy, will ride the center torpedo of one of these ships. You will be shot down to share the death of your French associates at Paris. Who knows. You might crash through the skylight of a notable cafe. You might meet your end in the chancel of a battered church. You spoke of a swift death. Yours will be swift enough, once my navigator has let go a certain center torpedo. Of course, there will be a period of suspense. You will be alive while you ride through space. A novel way to pass along, you’ll agree?”

A snarl broke from Kell Vance’s lips. He was in the presence of a madman, to whom Germany had given a free hand. Yet there seemed no way of preventing this outrageous, deathly raid. It would be too late for Germany to offer excuses when once this deadly cargo of gas had been released.

Kell Vance fought a fierce battle with himself. He wanted to attack this fiend on the spot, but to destroy the baron at this moment would not guarantee that the dastardly scheme would be destroyed. There were others who lurked in the shadows.

“We will now return to your quarters,” said the baron. “It is not often that one enjoys the novelty of seeing one’s casket before death. You have seen. Come.”

Kell Vance fought hard to retain his senses. Everything was swimming before his eyes. He had discovered the secret, but was powerless to act. He moved on at the baron’s back. Muffled voices followed him along the corridor. The baron was taking a different route through the rocks, back to the stone

chamber in which Vance had awakened to find himself. They now mounted a gradual slope, a place that was dark, moss-grown. This was not a spot carved by modern machinery or modern hands, Vance assured himself. These old caves were the work of soldiers of a bygone age.

Suddenly a narrow fissure not more than two feet wide offered a faint glimmer of light. It brought, too, a faint glimmer of hope to Kell’s mind. It was now or never. He must strike, and then, if death followed, it would be welcome.

He leaped forward and swung an arm around the baron’s throat. Almost simultaneously a shrill sound blasted the quiet. Von Kramer had had his warning whistle in his lips throughout the ascent of the sloping corridor. He came back at the sudden lurch on his upper body. Like a fiend unleashed, Kell Vance began to rain a shower of blows to the baron’s head and neck.

Von Kramer swung sharply. His weight was greater than Vance’s, and he struck up violently with a knee. The Yank skipper sagged, but quickly recovered. Von Kramer carried no gun.

Suddenly there was a sudden sound of rushing footsteps. Rescuers were coming. A low groan escaped the Yank. He had hoped for a moment more, when he might have squeezed the life out of this killer. But now von Kramer’s wilderness jackals were rushing to his aid.

Vance gasped as a boot struck him a savage blow across the shins. He suddenly relaxed his throat hold, then struck forward with a couple of hooks to the baron’s jaw. The tall German rocked back. His head crashed against a jagged outcropping, and he crumpled. Kell Vance wasn’t satisfied. He poised himself to deliver a further attack when the spiteful flash and roar of a Luger arrested him. He felt a bullet fan his face, and he turned. That thin strip of white light was beckoning him from the outside. With a snarl he turned, and flung himself at the aperture.

Flat to the rock, he squeezed a painful way out through the narrow crevices. Suddenly his legs dropped from beneath him. He felt around, frantically searching for a foothold. He caught the sound of voices. The baron’s men were coming in. A Luger blasted. One of Kell’s handholds gave way; then a black void seemed to swallow him. He was rushing through empty space—down, down, into the gaping maw of a terrible death.

He was not conscious of a sudden jar to his body, nor of the pain of a host of scratches and tears in his

skin and flesh. Battered, bleeding, he hung limply in a maze of thorny gorse, a huddled form to whom fate had once more administered the anaesthesia of unconsciousness.

IT WAS Bat Norton who first found a set of night glasses and clapped them to his eyes. He saw movement on a rocky ledge below. He and Sandy Craig had returned to their hideout, where they refueled, and had come back over the badlands, almost despairing of ever seeing Vance alive again.

Dusk had crept in on them. The badlands were a maze of ghastly shadow shapes which flitted about from crag to crag, from cave to cave, in the last lights of a swiftly departing day, Norton signaled to Craig, and they swept down together, narrowly missing the jagged edge of a cliff side.

"Some one's hung up there on a ledge, Bat," Sandy Craig flashed at his pal. "Stand by to cover me. I'm going on down."

Craig circled, then dropped. His breathing was cut off. He zoomed, looped, then went down again. There were signal flashes issuing from that black mass. He was getting a message in Morse code. Intermittent at first, the message was now making sense; and then Sandy caught the call letters of his skipper.

Kell Vance was glad he had sewed a small pencil flashlight into his clothing. Each of his flight members had always carried one, together with a small compass. The Huns had overlooked this.

He had become conscious, to the sound of a snoring Hisso. At first he thought there was only one plane in the night sky, and then he discovered there were two. He feared for his buddies. At any second those night monsters might catapult from their lair to swoop down and smash the Spads to atoms. Kell had ripped the seam of his clothing hiding the flash. Bracing himself in his precarious hideout, he began to signal. There was a reply coming from above. His first thought must be for the Allies, the people of Paris and London. So, with teeth gritted hard, he began to give up the secret of von Kramer's badlands Staffel of black death.

"Get that to H.Q., Sandy," he flashed. "Then get a flight from Sixty Squadron and a Bristol two-seater over. Drop me a rope, and give me a chance to get at von Kramer. I'm pretty well used up. Rush right back and arrange for heavy flotilla of bombers and pursuits. Luck!"

He sagged back, spent. His job was done, but there

was still hope of getting von Kramer. The hope was so wild that he dared no longer think of it. He began to doze, while all about him lurked searchers, the jackals of von Kramer, who hunted up this lone spy who had their secret. Von Kramer, recovering from his wounds, was now a storming mountain lion. The one man who had seen his secret plant and lived had escaped. Kramer's officers tried to console their chief with the hope that the spy's body would be picked up in pieces somewhere in the bottomlands at dawn, but the baron continued to rave. He gave orders that his torpedoes were to be loaded without fail by the zero hour already arranged. For himself, as soon as his head was better, he was going to take his black Fokker flight topside. There must be no mistake now. Paris, London, the Allies, must go down to death!

IT WAS the roar of a thunderous avalanche that awakened Kell Vance. He clutched at a hard knob of gorse root for support. He gazed up into the sky above him, cowering as though he feared his own cliff were roaring down on him. And then it dawned on him that the roar came from the engines of many planes.

His heart beat madly. He seemed to be watching the approach of a terrible armada of some sort—or—was this noise the sound of von Kramer's night monsters returning from a successful raid on Paris?

Kell ducked as a huge shape floated above him. He crouched as he caught the sudden chatter of sky guns. Then all the heavens seemed to erupt in a mad splash of flame. *Attack!* The skipper got shakily to his feet. Two score of ships were milling above in the uncertain light. Then a fearful eruption shook the entire badlands zone—another, and another.

"Bombs!" Kell gasped.

Now a plane was swooping down low over him. He saw a dark blob break out overside and sway towards him. He started, and almost lost his hold as a heavy object crashed to the gorse bed close to him. A light flashed at him from the zooming plane—one of his ghost ships.

With trembling fingers, Kelly Vance adjusted to his body a chute pack he had borrowed from the balloon corps. One of his fingers was nearly shot away, but he suppressed the desire to call aloud with pain. Here was a chance of escape! His boys had gone through. Allied ships were blasting the rock lands to atoms. There was a chance that von Kramer's plans might be utterly wiped out in this one drive. With this hope in his mind, Vance shot himself out into the space. The

pack was long in opening. The jagged bottomland was rushing hard up to meet him. He almost swooned as he missed an overhanging ledge, and then he felt a sudden jar on his harness. He had made it. He was going down—down—to safety, and to the chance he had hoped for.

Pilots of the great war tell their children of the fight of a Bristol two-seater over the badlands of the Ardennes—a Bristol whose sides were hastily painted with the insignia of two butting goats. Bat Norton had not forgotten the importance his skipper had placed in that insignia at one time. There was no more fitting locale for two fighting goats to perform than above the rocky craglands of those cliffs and canyons.

There was one enemy pilot in a single-seater black Fokker who suddenly glimpsed that glaring insignia. He saw red. He had been tricked, outguessed by a flight of three Yankee skymen!

Allied pilots used this fight as the chief topic for discussion at mess and recreation halls for many weeks afterward. True, vivid pictures were drawn of a skipper, bleeding, out on his feet, at the breeches of twin Lewis guns in the rear pit of a fighting Bristol, flanked by two Spads.

The names Vance, Norton and Craig were names that were welcome in any gathering of Allied pilots. But with their names was coupled that of Captain Tim Corby, for it was he who flew that wild goat Bristol. It was the skipper of C Flight of Sixty Squadron who had insisted on piloting that rescue Bristol, and who had so maneuvered it, though badly wounded, as to enable the skipper in the rear pit to draw his guns down in a final burst of fire on the most deadly threat to the Allies in the history of the war.

Von Kramer crashed to his inglorious end in the bottomlands of the Ardennes. Germany expressed no sorrow, for the deadly baron's scheme to annihilate Paris and London had not been sponsored by the High Command.

Kell Vance grinned through a maze of bandaging at a white-faced form in a cot just off his.

"So you got my goat, Tim," he mumbled. "It was great of you, coming in like you did. I always knew that there was no real enmity between us. Glad it turned out like that."

And Tim Corby smiled back at him.