



KILLER TARMAC

by T.W. FORD

“Kill before somebody kills you!” That was the advice they handed to young Kid Crain when he arrived at the Front. Then the Kid ran into von Kunnel, great German ace, whose insignia was a jagged streak of lightning and who fought like that—swift, deadly, sure. And the Kid learned a lot about killers that no one had ever told him—that no one else knew.

CHAPTER I SKY LIGHTNING

THE SECTOR WAS UNDER a zone-fire barrage. Camions and men crammed into the tiny town in the rain-rifled darkness. M.P. whistles shrilled and men cursed.

Nobody seemed to know anything. A continuous file of shambling figures streamed into the packed bistro. At regular intervals, a little, white-bearded French captain would appear in the doorway and announce that nothing could get through down the road. It was being shelled continuously.

Nothing could get through down the road. It was being shelled continuously. Blue-eyed, long-legged Lieutenant Arthur Crain got so he mumbled it after the French captain. It became a sing-song dirge that rumbled through his numbed consciousness. He was half-drunk for the want of sleep. He sat hunched in his wet, dank leather coat where the long table made a corner with the wall. He had been two days getting up to the Front, and he hadn't reached the drome of the Bats, 71st Pursuit, yet. He was eager to get there. He wanted to meet the infamous “Bloody” Doll.

Down the table, a bunch of drunken artillerymen pounded and argued. It seems to be a question of whose battery could slam .75 shells across the fastest. It was deafeningly noisy and the room stank with wet uniforms and sweating bodies and *vin*.

“Got a smoke, fella?” somebody said a second time.

Young, boyish Crain looked across the table.

Slouched opposite was a big lump of a man in a dirty

white raincoat. He had a puffy face and a raw-looking red scar down the center of his forehead.

Crain gave him a cigarette, and the man with the scar pushed a cognac bottle at him. When he leaned forward, his raincoat fell open and Art Crain saw the wings on his tunic. The kid took a gulp of the cognac.

“I’m going up to join my squadron now,” he volunteered.

The big man in the white raincoat put his elbows on the table and played with the stubble of his unshaven beard. “Let me give you a word of advice, youngster. Kill—kill every time you get the chance—before somebody kills you.”

The kid blinked. They had some more cognac. The big man kept pouring it and smiling and lifting his glass with a nod. After a while, he said, “Bet yuh wanta get von Kunnel, too, eh?”

The slim Crain shook his head thoughtfully. Yes, he’d heard about von Kunnel, the Boche circus chief who was said to be more than a little mad. Von Kunnel, who flew at the head of the black-winged Fokkers known as the Black Tigers. Von Kunnel, whose sky emblem was a jagged streak of lightning painted on the fuselage of his bus. They said he fought like that, sudden, deadly, striking where never expected.

“No-o,” he answered slowly. “I want to get a man called Doll, Major Doll. Some call him ‘Bloody’ Doll.”

The big man stopped rubbing his beard, nodded. “Uh-huh. Seems to me I’ve heard of him.”

“I don’t want to kill him so much,” Art went on as he drew pictures with his finger in the moisture on the table.

“No? You don’t?”

“No-o,” Art said. Then he found himself telling the other man all about it, how Bloody Doll was the C.O. of the squadron to which a friend of his had been attached.

“You see, this friend—well, this is his scarf.” He

fingering the faded red muffler around his neck. "He—he was like a brother to me. We grew up together."

"Really?" said the big man. He poked a cigarette into his thick lips and looked amused.

MAYBE that was what kept Art talking. He wanted to show the big man how serious it was. "You see, my friend, Kent, he—"

"Kent?" repeated the big man. His little eyes seemed to tighten around the rims.

"Yeah, Kent." He accepted the drink the other poured. "Kent was his name. We were like brothers. And Kent's dead. You see, this C.O., Doll, said Kent was yellow. And Kent, he went out and died. Trying to prove to this C.O. that he wasn't."

"Death is always sad," said the man in the raincoat.

The French captain stepped in and announced that the road was still impassable.

"So I want to meet this C.O., this Bloody Doll. I knew Kent was afraid. He always was. He couldn't help it."

"No?" said the big man.

"No. So I want to meet this man who sent him out to die."

He of the white raincoat leaned across the table. His voice was persuasively low. "What do you intend to do to him?"

Art's hands clenched. "I'm going to make a coward out of him!"

The artillerymen began to sing. It wasn't a nice song. The blood came to Art's cheeks. He was still just a boy. Words like that were strange to him. Head bowed, he sat thinking of Kent James, shy, smiling Kent, who could play a violin till tears ran down a man's face—tall, soft-spoken Kent who'd always been afraid but had gone ahead, just as he'd gone to war. Dead now—killed in a personal duel with von Kunnel, famed Boche ace.

Word came in that it had stopped raining. When Art looked up, the big man in the white raincoat had gone. After a while Art got hold of the French captain. The latter told him there was a drome two kilos on the other side of the town—the 42nd Observation Group.

The kid slogged through nearer five kilos of mud before he found it. The field lights were on, and something like a moth flickered up through them and vanished into the dark maw of the night. A sentry took him to the adjutant down on the deadline. Art stated his mission. He wanted to get down to the 71st drome.

"Want to get to the 71st?" the adjutant queried.

Art nodded. He did want to get there. He wanted to settle his strange score with Bloody Doll. "Yes, sir." The adjutant looked up into the night where the moth-like plane had vanished. "They do say it takes fools to fight a war," he mumbled. "Okay. We've got some Nieuports to be ferried down there in the morning. You can take one down."

"Not now?" The kid, too, looked up to where that other ship had disappeared.

"That was Bloody Doll of the 71st. We were glad to get rid of him. You couldn't find the field in the dark anyway. I've got a drink inside if—" Boyish Crain stood staring up where Bloody Doll had gone.

IT WAS the middle of a sunny April morning when rookie Lieutenant Crain took off from the observation outfit. Twenty minutes later, he saw it—a Fokker tripe, black as a cobra's hood.

At twelve thousand, the kid was winging the Nieuport one-and-a-half for Vacauleur. Then one of the French sausages jerked downward as a winch crew toiled frantically. In the gap left by it in the blue screen of the sky, the black Fokker took form.

It came streaking westward. White buds of Allied archie blossomed around it. Watching it, Crain strained his eyes through the prop whorl. Sunlight glinted on its black wing panels. It was one of von Kunnel's Black Tigers.

Crain blanched. Fear made his face gaunt. His hands fumbled toward the Bowden controls. The feel of them steadied him. Before he quite knew it, he'd done it. He'd show them he wasn't afraid—for Kent's sake. And the Nieuport, nineteen-foot fuselage bucking, stormed up at a chunk of dirty nimbus that foretold rain. He saw the Fokker bank northward. If he could maneuver to get on its tail . . .

Wings trailing moisture, he hopped a breach of open sky. In a nimbus layer again, he worked blindly for position. All the things they'd drilled into him at St. Maxient and the gunnery butts of Cazeau began to dance through his mind in a mad jumble. Then he knew that what he wanted was a *descendu* when he reported to Bloody Doll of the Bats.

The Bloody Doll—he was known from the Picard to the Vosges. A wing-riding man-killer, so they said. Drove the men under him to death, made sky fodder of them. That was the story. Crain knew it, yet he was going to fight and fly under Doll, the man who'd sent Kent James to death.

So Art Crain wanted a victory credited to him first.

His orders were to stay away from the lines and avoid combat, to get to the tarmac of the Bats four kilos south-by-southeast from where the Meuse curved at Regneville, but he forgot all that as he sent the Nieuport blasting down out of the nimbus.

Strain drew his face taut. Slipstream hollowed his cheeks, but his eyes were hard and chill as he picked up the Fokker. He had come out on its tail and from the sun side. He mopped his goggles, remembering, too, that he had forgotten to warm up the air-lined Vickers.

Then he poured the gun to the Gnome, and the bus plummeted at the Fokker that hung like a black scar below.

It was one of von Kunnel's cats, all right. Art Crain had heard all about von Kunnel, the Boche ace. At Cazeau and St. Maxient they talked about him. Rumor had it that he had to be closely guarded on the ground. In the air, he was pure, unadulterated poison.

There was the story of the Frenchman who had permitted him to land after a signal of surrender. Von Kunnel had signed that his guns were out, but when the Frenchman taxied down ahead of him, von Kunnel had promptly cut on his Spandaus and blasted him to hell and home again. They said von Kunnel liked to get a good look at the men he killed, too. There were other stories.

Crain thought of those things in split seconds as he chuted down on the black-winged Fokker of the von Kunnel circus. Then he choked.

The Nieuport had dipped clear of the last trailers of the nimbus formation. In its furious down-rush, it seemed to charge like a runaway horse toward those black wings. Frozen with terror, Crain felt he couldn't stop the vibrating, hurtling ship. He saw clearly the scarlet Maltese Crosses on the tripe's wing panels. And he saw only too clearly the jagged yellow streak along the tripe's fuselage side—the crude imitation of lightning that was the sky sign of von Kunnel himself.

It was too late to stop. Crain's fingers contracted on the Bowdens. Slashing in, his Vickers traced a furry swirl around the black tripe's empennage.

The black Fokker ducked up, then dived like a hopping jack-rabbit. Its pilot twisted around and half-rose to wave Crain away frantically. He was trying to tell Crain to stay off. The sneer deepened on Crain's boyish face as he tailed the circling tripe. Von Kunnel didn't seem man enough to fight a rookie fresh to the combat front. He jabbed a finger groundward as if to say he wanted to land.

Impetuously Crain dived to cut him off, and his

eagerness betrayed him. The black tripe looped tightly and slashed down on his tail. Panic plucked at Crain's heart as he saw it roar down. He kicked the rudder bar desperately, then sent the ship into a barrel roll. No lethal stream of lead came.

That red scarf that had belonged to Kent choked him. He remembered the darker spots on it that were blood. In desperation, he stood the Nieuport on its tail. The next burst would burn into his back . . .

But the Fokker streaked by and on into the north.

A SNEER twisted the kid's young face. The great von Kunnel had missed him and was taking a run-out powder. A fresh recklessness pulsing in his veins, Crain hurled the Nieuport after him. Then some untested instinct made him twist and peer across the skies.

A gasp broke from him. In the east, the sky was latticed with black wings like shark fins—tripe wings. The sun shone through them. Von Kunnel's circus was roaring to the rescue.

The Yank kid thought he saw the game then, and he hurled the Nieuport down once more, pouring burst after burst into the fleeing Fokker's tail feathers. This was the man at whose hands the Bloody Doll had sent Kent out to die!

The Fokker pilot turned to wave him off once more, saw those sharkish wings behind Art, and promptly dived groundward. The kid went after him like a wolf. Thrice he sent Vickers lead ripping through the black Fokker's wing banks.

The Fokker pilot kept jabbing a finger downward in signal that he wanted to land. Crain fed him another burst. He never thought of the possibility of the Nieuport wings shedding their fabric. The thrill of the hunt was in him. He had von Kunnel. Then his fingers froze on the Bowdens. The pilot of the Fokker had his hands half-lifted in token of surrender. His tripe had come out of its dive.

The kid was just toeing his rudder bar to get the broad back of the Fokker pilot square in his sights. Then he caught a glimpse of the Fokker's nose as it slipped groundward in a slow slant. The Nieuport was hopping up on the tripe fast, for the latter's Mercedes was washed out. The slow-drifting prop told that.

Holding his fire, Art Crain trailed it down a hundred yards. He remembered what that officer had told him the night before. Kill lest you get killed. But the rookie wasn't hard enough to cut down a helpless foe—even if it was the treacherous von Kunnel himself.

Glancing overside, he saw infantrymen deploying across a meadow to meet the dropping Fokker. He twisted his eyes to the rear. The Black Tiger flight was close. He trailed the lone tripe another few seconds, then slapped the Nieuport's nose up and poured the gun to the Gnome. He hurled toward the winding ribbon of the Meuse.

For long seconds, he sat thinking of it. It just didn't seem possible that he'd shot down the great von Kunnel himself, yet he had. A backward glance showed him the black tripe already bumping over the meadow. Allied A.A. was potting at the main Black Tiger flight. In the west, an echelon of French Spads loomed.

The kid took a deep breath. It was hard to believe he was alive. Now that it was over, he sat trembling in the pit. On the outskirts of Regneville, the gaping husk of a shelled steeple speared. Beyond was the drome of the Bats. Fingering the red scarf that had been Kent's, Crain nodded in the cockpit.

"All right, Bloody Doll! I've come at last . . .

CHAPTER II DROME OF BLOODY DOLL

CRAIN BOUNCED TWICE as he settled on the tarmac of the Bats, then taxied unsteadily toward the deadline. Now that he was safe, the full chill of fear paralyzed him for a moment. Slowly he loosened the faded red scarf and unbelted his flying jacket. From inside his tunic he dug out a thumb-worn letter. He needed something to steel him.

That letter was from Kent, the one he'd written before he went out on his last patrol. Crain's blue eyes went to the hastily scrawled second paragraph, then grew hot as he read it again.

"Doll, the C.O. here, says I'm yellow, Art. Maybe I am. I don't know. But I'm going to prove to myself and to him that I'm not. In a few minutes, I take off to meet von Kunnel, the famous German ace, in a personal duel.

Maybe I won't come back, Art. God only knows. But if you ever come up this way, talk to Canton. He was my friend . . ."

There wasn't much else. Kent hadn't come back. The boyish Crain crumpled the letter in his fist. In that

moment, his rosy-cheeked face was hard and strained. When he looked up, a plump sergeant-mec was waddling toward him with a half-emptied beer bottle.

Crain unshipped his slim legs and slid to the earth. It seemed to sway under him. He leaned against the fuselage and screwed a limp cigarette into his mouth. The mec took in the bullet tracks on the Nieuport with practiced eye.

"Baptized already, huh?"

Crain nodded. "Von Kunnel," he announced quietly.

The sergeant-mec's eyes popped and he dropped the beer bottle. "Von Kunnel? But—you're alive!" He turned as a pilot sauntered from the low farmhouse that was the squadron barracks. "This new one, he's met von Kunnel already," he squawked.

The pilot stopped in his tracks. He stared at Crain, then went back and stuck his head in the farmhouse door. He called something, and half a dozen figures appeared. They crowded out and hurried down to the soft-faced replacement kid still leaning against the Nieuport's side.

A tall, cadaverous pilot stepped in front of the rest and stared hard at Crain for several moments. He had sunken cheeks, a bald, egg-shaped skull, and deep-set eyes that glittered with a strange mockery.

"You tangled with von Kunnel, rookie?" he asked in a soft voice.

"Yes. Over Vacauleur."

"You're still alive. Have a drink." The bald pilot extended a bottle. Crain let a healthy swig of burning brandy run down his taut throat. Then he exhaled smoke and tried to speak casually.

"Is Blood—I mean, Major Doll—"

The cadaverous, bald man cut him short with a harsh laugh. It was ugly, that laugh, as if something inside him were splintering.

"Say it," he said in that curiously soft voice. "You mean Bloody Doll, damn his soul! Well, he isn't here."

The men around him grinned. One guffawed, swaying. "Baby, you're just in time to help celebrate his wake."

THE bald, soft-voiced man with the captain's chevrons told it quickly. Led by Bloody Doll himself, the Bats had taken off a few hours before to get some Drachens.

"Tough babies," he explained, "over Hill 202. We've been trying to get 'em for a week. This morning, our luck changed. We didn't get 'em. But they got Doll, a flight of the Black Tigers that cut us off." He laughed shortly.

When last seen, Bloody Doll had been making a forced landing behind enemy lines in the company of a trio of Fokkers.

"He's sent up his last sky fodder, the butcher. If he isn't dead, he's captured," the bald man said. "I got a hunch von Kunnel'd shoot him on sight. Just—a—hunch!"

"Von Kunnel won't," Crain said. "I just got von Kunnel over Vacauleur."

It was quiet. In one of the hangars, a mec's wrench clattered against a petrol tin. The mockery faded from the bald pilot's eyes. He looked at the faded red scarf around Art's neck.

"Fella named Kent James had a scarf like that," he remarked.

"I know," Crain said, a catch in his voice. "This was his."

The hollow-cheeked man nodded and stuck out his hand. "I understand about von Kunnel, now. I'm Canton. Kent said—"

The hornetlike drone of a plane sang over the tarmac. It grew to a hot snarl, then an engulfing roar. It was coming low and like one of hell's own bats when it appeared to the south of the Regneville steeple.

Then it sheered down like a diving shark toward the Bat drome. Somebody yelled. It was a black tripe, a Fokker, one of the Black Tiger ships. Down on the deadline, a corporal barked hoarse orders at the ground guard. Men began running wildly toward the Lewis guns swiveled in braces atop posts before the hangars.

And Canton, mocking eyes squinted upward, stepped close to Crain. "Von Kunnel himself," he said tonelessly. "See the lightning-streak emblem on the fuselage?"

An m.g. began to rattle away. Then the squadron adjutant, grabbing at his glasses, popped from the elephant-iron operations shack. As he ran, he waved frantically for them to cease firing. At the same instant, a white handkerchief appeared over the side of the black Fokker as it dragged the drome on a wing tip. Crain watched it, hypnotized.

The ship slammed down, bounced its tailskid, then roared up alongside Crain's own Nieuport. The begoggled pilot stared hard at the Nieuport and the numerals on its rudder. Then he swung a thick leg overside and lowered his bulky figure to the ground.

Everything on the tarmac seemed to have stopped moving. More pilots appeared at the door of the farmhouse barracks. The pudgy adjutant blinked behind his glasses.

The man who'd landed in the black Fokker tripe swaggered forward a few steps, shoved up his goggles. Planting his big fists on his hips, he looked around with a sneer.

Beside Crain, Captain Canton closed his cynical eyes. "Bloody Doll himself," he muttered.

Crain paled. It was the man of the *bistro* with the forehead scar!

DOLL was a slouching hulk of a man, some two hundred shapeless pounds crammed into a crookedly buttoned uniform. He was unshaven, and he rubbed his beard stubble as he stood there. His voice and his bloodshot eyes had a habitual sneer. Down the middle of his forehead was that scar like a hot burn.

He spoke. "Yeah, I'm back. Don't look so damned happy about it. Thought I was captured, eh? Dead, maybe? Well, here I am. Who flew in that ship?" He thumbed at Crain's Nieuport.

Art Crain stuck his jaw out and stepped forward. "Mine, sir. Lieutenant Crain, reporting for duty, sir." Bloody Doll stared. Slowly a crooked grin broke on his face. "You, eh?" He recognized him.

Crain nodded. He was nervous. "Yes, sir. That ship you flew in— that's von Kunnel's, isn't it?"

Doll nodded, still grinning.

"Well—" Then Crain got a grip on himself. He had come to show Doll. He spat his words coldly. "I'd like to request confirmation for a victory over Captain von Kunnel of the Germans in an engagement over Vacauleur—" he eyed his wrist-watch— "about twenty minutes ago."

Doll just nodded again. Little Crain felt like a blushing schoolboy under it. He gestured at the Fokker of von Kunnel that Doll had just landed in. "Maybe you know about it, sir," he said.

Doll slouched toward him unhurriedly. "Yes. I know all about it. So you think you shot down von Kunnel, eh?"

Crain nodded. His own tones were hard when he replied. "I did. I saw him make a forced landing after—"

"Was it a hard fight, lieutenant?" Doll's dark teeth were bared as his lips curled.

"He seemed afraid of me," Crain blurted.

Towering over him, breathing heavily, Bloody Doll stopped a scant inch from the rookie. "Couldn't you have killed him?"

Crain could feel the antagonism crackling between them like an electric charge. "He went down dead-engined, so I—"

"You think you licked von Kunnel? Why, you damned little hero," Doll yelled, "von Kunnel'd blown you to bits—if that had been him up there!"

"Him—" Crain stopped. He began to realize.

"Yeah," said Doll, "it was me. Me in von Kunnel's ship. I made a forced landing behind the Boche lines this morning. Was taken down to von Kunnel's drome. Then I made a break for it in von Kunnel's bus." His eyes ran around. He didn't see Crain or any of those pilots for a moment. His thoughts were back on the Boche field.

"Got away," he went on. "Then you jumped me. I waved you off. I showed you I wanted to land. Perhaps, Lieutenant Crain, you didn't make any mistake. Perhaps you knew who it was—"

"I thought it was von Kunnel," the kid blurted. "I'd heard—"

Doll nodded, face grimacing in sarcasm. "Yeah, sure. Well, one of your lucky bursts cut my feed line and forced me down." He lit a cigarette slowly.

"All right," he purred. "Three days now we've been trying to get those Drachens over Hill 202. Lost quite a few pilots, too. Half a dozen, maybe more. Crain, you'll get your chance to be a hero, a real one—or a dead one."

Crain said, "Yes, sir," in the silence.

Doll nodded. "Sure. Well, get those Drachens, Crain. Be prepared to take off in—say, about an hour."

Their eyes locked. Crain made his face hard to mask the chill that seemed to freeze his blood. He nodded after a while. Doll slouched off to the operations shack. Both men were thinking of what had been said when they met in that *bistro* the night before.

Canton's hand fell on the kid's shoulder. "More sky fodder," he groaned.

CHAPTER III SKY FODDER

SWIFTLY LIEUTENANT CRAIN walked along the duckboards toward the operations shack. He tried not to listen to his own footsteps. They sounded like the hollow beat of a judge's gavel measuring words of doom.

Other pilots looked at him strangely as he passed.

They knew. It made him feel like a living corpse. In front of the tent hangars, they were warming up his Nieuport beside the black tripe of von Kunnel's that Doll had flown in. They cut the ignition switch and a greaseball wormed through the struts to do something with a spanner to the Nieuport's Gnome. Crain felt the blood leave his face. It was like making sure the coffin lid would be on tight.

He had tried to talk to Canton before in one of the makeshift cubicles on the second floor of the sprawling farmhouse, but the sunken-cheeked pilot who'd been Kent's friend had sat like a ghost, drinking steadily from a whiskey bottle. Crain felt he had something to tell him, but Canton hadn't even seemed to hear his questions.

"Don't go, kid. Don't go," was all he would say, in that strangely soft voice.

But Art Crain knew he had to go. He wouldn't quail before Doll. He even made himself whistle a little as he approached the slightly open door of the operations shack. Then the whistle died on his lips. A man was talking inside. It was the soft-voiced Canton. Only his voice was shrill now with desperation.

"You can't send that boy out to certain death, Doll."

"No-o?" Crain heard Bloody Doll answer. "Who's skipper of this squadron?"

"Doll," Canton said slowly, "he hasn't got a chance and you know it. It's murder—plain murder!"

"My orders are to get those Drachens, captain. I've wasted good men, veterans. If more have to die, a rookie is as good sky fodder as—"

"You lie, Doll! One man alone—"

"You have my permission to accompany Lieutenant Crain on the flight," Doll purred.

There was a snarl from Canton, then that harsh, splintering laugh. "You know I haven't got the nerve, Doll. I'm yellow. You've always known that. That's how you made me keep my mouth shut. But I'll talk now if you make that kid—"

"No, you won't, Captain Canton," Doll drawled. "It's my word against yours, now."

"Now that Kent James is dead, you mean!" Canton's voice was husky with strain, almost a whisper, hoarse.

"Yes. We were both there when you did it, Doll. You weren't afraid I'd tell. I'm yellow. You knew it. You knew I knew you were wise, but you were afraid of Kent. He—"

Doll snapped, "Go to your quarters, captain—"

"Go to hell and take you with me, Doll!" There was a moment of silence. Canton went on.

"You were afraid of Kent James, Doll. He was a rotten pilot, but he had nerve, more than you. You knew that, and you were afraid. So you taunted the poor kid till he went half-mad and challenged von Kunnel himself to show you—"

"I'll finish the story," Doll cut in heavily. "Kent James met von Kunnel in a personal duel. Von Kunnel double-crossed him with three of his Tigers hidden in a cloud. They forced James behind their lines, and we got word he was shot down."

"Correct, major." Canton laughed. "And we got his uniform back, too, didn't we? That uniform with—"

"Shut up!" Doll bellowed. "Why blame me?"

"Because you sent him out to die, Bloody Doll. And I won't let you send this kid out to die, too—Kent's best friend."

"That's exactly why he's going, Captain Canton," Doll said firmly. "I know he was Kent James' buddy. He came up to get me, and he damned near did, this morning."

"He thought it was von Kunnel—"

"Von Kunnel, hell!" Doll flared. "He hasn't got the nerve to go after von Kunnel. He's like James. Now let him go after those Drachens. We'll see how much nerve he's got!"

Canton cursed slowly, oath after oath.

"You're addressing a superior officer," Doll warned.

"A superior corpse, too, you'd make," Canton said.

"You haven't got the nerve to shoot me. Canton."

"Does that kid go out?"

"I've given my orders," Doll drawled.

Crain heard his footsteps come toward the door. They stopped suddenly. There was a whisper from Doll. It was stark with terror. "Don't be—a fool—"

Crain leaped up the single step of the operations shack and burst in. He got a dazed glimpse of Doll, face wrenched with fear, digging for his sidearm. On the other side of the makeshift table that served as a desk was Canton. He had an automatic in a yellow but steady hand.

"Scratch Major Bloody Doll's name off the 'in commission' list," he spat, and his gun spat after him.

The door Crain had flung open struck Canton's arm as he fired, but he didn't miss. Doll lurched sideways. His wildly clutching hand ripped charts and a pair of field glasses off the table.

The bespectacled face of the adjutant popped in at the door. He made a squealing sound. Then Doll, both hands clutched over his side, crashed past him and swayed out across the tarmac. He ran humped

over and with a queer hopping motion, like a man in a trance. Deathly pale himself, Canton walked to the door. He stood looking after Doll, automatic hanging in his hand.

Figures came running. Pilots spewed from the farm barracks. The shot had been clearly heard in the momentary stillness of the tarmac. Doll grabbed the shoulder of the ground guard corporal for support as the man hurried up.

"Put him under arrest for attempted murder," Doll ordered, waving his head toward Canton in the doorway.

Canton's hollow cheeks quivered with unholy rage. "I didn't kill him, after all," he muttered. The thought seemed to awaken him. He whirled, shot a desperate-eyed glance at Crain, shook his head, then grabbed the little adjutant. The adjutant's glasses fell off. Canton pushed him out the door, stuck the automatic in his back.

"I'll shoot him—if anybody makes a move toward me," he announced.

Prodding the stumbling adjutant ahead of him, Captain Canton, who for a brief moment had conquered his own cowardice, strode toward the deadline.

THE only sound on the drome was the snarl of Doll's oaths as he repeated his command to the ground guard. Nobody moved. Canton held the upper hand. He was desperate. The little adjutant at the nose of Canton's automatic moved with the dragging steps of a condemned man.

Slowly the men began to close in behind as the pair passed. Crain found himself walking in the van after Canton and his captive.

"Where are you going, Canton?"

"After those damned Drachens," Canton called back. "I won't be back. When you drive a prop into a sausage skin, your health suffers—so they say. Maybe I'll meet Kent."

He passed the first of the line of colorfully camouflaged tent hangars.

"Kent wasn't yellow, kid," he told Crain. "Don't worry—I'll tell him you aren't, either." His boots were steady as he stepped over the duckboards. "Wind up that Nieuport."

A stocky greaseball looked to right and left, then slowly shuffled out to the nose of Crain's own ship. As quietly as if he were going up for a dull reconnaissance patrol, Canton ordered another mechanic to cut on the switch. The Gnome was still warm. It kicked on

quickly, settling to a steady fire as its exhaust stack hosed up dirt.

Behind Art Crain, a pilot whispered hoarsely, "Hell, I knew somebody'd try to finish Bloody Doll some day. But Canton—"

It was then that the little adjutant jumped away from Canton's weapon, pointing skyward. The tarmac had been in a trance, attention concentrated on the hollow-cheeked Canton. Nobody had seen. In the spatter of the Nieuport's Gnome, nobody had heard.

Out of the east, already diving down, flashed twenty-odd blackwinged Fokker tripes. The Black Tigers of von Kunnel had trapped the Bats in their own lair.

Faces wrenched skyward to follow the adjutant's trembling hand. Boots began to pound along the duck-boards. Men sprang tearing at the flaps of the tent hangars. But it was too late. A ground guard sentry, hustling toward the A.A. unit, sat down, hard on the ground, trying to get a hand to his head. The next instant the rattle of the Spandaus chattered through the roar of the down-charging Mercedes of the Fokkers. The Black Tigers were upon them.

Swooping, they came ripping up the tarmac, their Spandaus cutting furrows in the close-bunched men. A red-haired pilot collapsed over a post-mounted m.g. Art leaped to take his place. There was a spanging sound. A Spandau slug ricocheted off one of the Lewis barrels, struck him a glancing blow across the side of the head. He felt earth in his hands.

When he came to, he was choking. Dirt bit at his face. He twisted around only a couple of yards behind his own Nieuport. Even as his eyes cleared, the ship threshed slowly away from the deadline. The long-legged kid got his feet under him as the Nieuport bolted down the field.

From above, a Fokker on wing tip sliced at it. The Nieuport curveted, then bucketed on down the field and up. Canton was taking off in the face of that savage fire.

And Art Crain knew he couldn't let him go alone. Canton was going to hell on account of him. Grabbing a greaseball by the shoulders, the kid screeched into his ear, then hurled him toward the nose of the black Fokker on the ground—von Kunnel's Fokker.

CLAMBERING into the cockpit, he signaled that the switch was off. The mec shot a look over his shoulder, then wound her up. Crain signaled switch on. The mec yanked. Dirt jetted at his feet. The Fokker tripe's Mercedes coughed once, then died. The kid signaled

again. After another failure, it started; he warmed it.

Goggleless eyes slitting against the prop-blast, the boyish-faced replacement poured the gun to it, kicking right and left rudder to jump her off the chocks. Things began to move backward. The Fokker careened when the landing gear bumped over a prone figure. Something crackled, splintering, as a rafale of Spandau lead speared from above. For an instant, the kid lost control of himself, of the black tripe with the famed jagged lightning insignia.

The other end of the field was rushing at him. For a moment, the tail assembly of a hedgehopping Black Tiger ship was in the Spandau sights. Then Crain got a grip on himself.

Bolt upright, ghostly pale, he sat in the Boche cockpit and backsticked. The black bus roared down the field and into the air, chandelling. A diving Fokker whipped down at him, but no ruddy glow broke from its gun noses, and it veered away almost instantly.

Crain shot a quick glance around. Near the hangars, a dead-piloted Fokker struck with an explosive crash. At the east end of the field, Canton was in a moiling tangle with two of the Tigers. Then Crain saw a burst of colored Very balls trail from the cockpit of the Fokker gang's leader.

They seemed to hang in the air as the kid banked to get to Canton's aid. When he looked again, another burst, the same color, was drifting down. The kid looked farther, saw a blunt Fokker nose riding right smack on his rudder. But the Fokker did not fire, and the Black Tiger flight was swinging up and away from the Bats' nest.

BEWILDERED, wondering that he hadn't been chopped down already, the kid with the red scarf whisked his own black tripe into a bank. He wanted to get to Canton's aid. Canton was corkscrewing up for his very life, bald head glistening over the Nieuport's crashpad. Crain raced at one of Canton's pursuers and hauled at the Spandau firing levers.

Nothing happened. The weapons mounted on the Fokker's nacelle remained silent. Crain tried to fire them again. No response. Then he sat staring at the empty web belts. In making his escape from the Boche drome, Bloody Doll had emptied the gun belts. That was why he had not fired in the dogfight with the kid. He couldn't.

In a fit of madness, the kid tried again. Doll had sent Kent out to die. Now, by a trick of the Fates, Doll was doing the same to him. Yelling, swearing as he'd

never known he could, Crain half-rose in the pit and beat at those weapons. Dying was one thing. Given a chance to fight, no matter how great the odds, how thin the chances, was a man's right. But to be winging around up there like a kite target

The calm of a doomed man gradually came over him. Grim, desperate, expecting the impact of a bullet any instant, he stood the tripe on its black tail, laughed spitefully at those guns, then poured the throttle to her. The ship zoomed hard. Still nothing happened. He flattened.

Slowly the pale kid edged around in the Boche cockpit. Behind, two of the Black Tigers clung to his tail, but their Spandaus were not spitting. Below, another cruised, but it, too, made no attempt to stab up at his blind spot, the ship's belly. Above, another pair of Tigers hung over him.

After a moment, he made out the bald Canton in the Nieuport. Five of the Black Tigers had Canton hemmed in, too. Canton tried to break south, but a warning burst of Spandau fire through his wings straightened him. He tossed up his hands in a gesture of resignation.

Inch by inch, the kid looked around again. Those enemy tripes herded him in exactly the same position. Crain yanked the stick back. M.g. fire from behind crackled over the upper wing panel. Slowly Crain flattened again.

Climbing steadily with their two prisoners a-wing, the Tigers left the strafed drome behind. The remainder of the flight deployed in an echelon overhead, then roared eastward at a two-mile-a-minute clip. After a few minutes the trenchworks of the Front showed below like worm-tracks. They were headed for the home drome of the Tigers.

Art Crain said it to himself. Then he said, "God help us!" after it. He shrugged with a twisted smile and screwed a smoke into his lips, bent behind the scant isinglass windshield, and applied a match to it. He sat back. The blue eyes were bleak. Around his mouth were gutting lines that hadn't been there that morning.

In the space of a few hours, he had aged.

CHAPTER IV "I WILL KILL ALL THREE!"

THE BLACK TIGER DROME of von Kunnel and mates looked like a tiny city in itself. It lay snuggled in the shadow of a low, black hill. A stagnant canal bounded it on the east. Behind the low, flat metal hangars, the shelled ruins of a former town stretched. A few buildings still stood, including a dirty white town hall. Part of a cobbled street curved along before the hangar line.

To the north, there was an adjoining tarmac, lined on one side by the bigger hangars of bombers.

From the spear-point of the echelon, the flight leader of the Fokkers plummeted down from formation. He flipped in a dangerous loop low over the tarmac, swept into a roaring bank so close to the ground it seemed as if his wing tip must be cutting the dead grass, then flattened to land. A car shot down the cobbled roadway in front of the hangars and swerved across the landing-T toward the flight leader's ship.

Art Crain slanted his Fokker down, too. The Tiger ship beneath him darted out and up, its pilot waving to him to follow. One of the tripes behind bucketed abreast. Its pilot beckoned vehemently to the Yank kid to stay up with the main flight, which had already started to bank in a slow circle above the drome, maintaining its altitude.

A queer recklessness gripped Crain. He knew that if they meant to shoot him down, they'd have done so by then, so he held the tripe in its down-slant. His sky guards hung with him a moment. Then, strangely, they sent their ships zooming to rejoin the echelon minus its flight leader.

Art Crain came down about twenty yards behind the leader's grounded ship. With a flippant gesture, he goosed the Mercedes until it sang in a reverberating roar. Then he cut the ignition switch as a non-com, with clanking saber, ran toward him with a detachment of the hod-helmeted ground guard. The man shrieked in guttural German, waving for Art to go up again. The kid recognized the repeated word, "*verboten.*" He paid no heed as his eyes locked on the ship ahead.

The car with staff insignia had pulled up close to

it, and officers swarmed around the flight leader's tripe. One carried a cane. Slowly, as if he were hoisting himself by his arms alone, a small, hunched figure in a black leather coat rose from the cockpit of the flight leader's Fokker.

Hands were stretched toward him, gripped him. A Brandenburger captain mounted the stirrup, holding the cane. And before Art Crain's astonished eyes, the Fokker pilot was lifted like a baby from his ship to the ground. Hunched in the ankle-length black coat, he was hemmed in by the others. He seemed scarcely bigger than a child. Unconsciously, Crain rose in the cockpit to get a better look.

The landed flight leader turned his way a moment. His goggles were still down. That was usually the first act of any pilot upon landing—to push up his glasses. His coat collar was turned up to meet the flaps of his helmet. All that remained exposed was his nose and eyes, and the eyes were masked by the square-lensed goggles.

Officers closed around the Black Tiger flight leader, and slowly the group moved to the waiting car. It shot across the field with men so clustered on the running boards that the occupant was hidden. It turned down toward the town hall of the former town.

The flight came droning down, ship after ship landing precisely. Mecs hauled at the leading edges of the wings to draw them to a halt. Wooden wheels were quickly substituted for the rubber-tired ones of the landing trucks. Germany was getting short on rubber.

In a squad of the ground guard, Crain was marched to the hangar line. There was silence as he passed the Boche pilots. No word was spoken. There wasn't even a nod, a gesture. The kid felt again as he had when Doll ordered him on that suicide mission against the Drachens. A glimpse of Canton, also under guard, told him that there was plenty to fear. Canton, who a few minutes before had been about to depart for sure death so gaily, now looked like a man in the shadow of the scaffold.

IN A guardhouse on the edge of the landing-T, they two were searched and stripped of every possession, including their cigarettes. The non-com smiled at the full package he found in Crain's pocket. The kid wondered if he himself would ever smoke them again.

They were escorted down to the former town hall that now served as the C.O.'s quarters. At the end of the long corridor, they came to an anteroom. Officers pored over charts and a signalman worked dexterously

at a switchboard. All of them surveyed the Yanks once, then looked away as if it were very, very sad.

An orderly stepped out of the room behind and nodded to the non-com. The prisoners were told to go in by signs.

The wobbly-legged Canton entered that second room in front. Crain saw everything over his stooped shoulder. Canton stopped as if struck.

Behind an ornate French Empire-period desk sat the flight leader who had been lifted from his cockpit and whisked away in the car bearing the staff insignia. He no longer wore the all-enveloping black coat. His goggles were gone. Sight of him was an affliction to the human eye. He rose and hobbled sideways to stand in full view.

To begin with, he was small. Some accident had twisted his back so that he stood stooped as tiny as a dwarf. One arm hung, awkward and withered, half in front of his misshapen body. His right leg was revealed in a steel brace. A fist as bony as a skeleton's was wrapped around a cane for support, for his left leg was wasted and shrunken, shorter than the other. Involuntarily gasping, Art Crain turned his back to his face.

He knew, then, without being told, that here was the infamous von Kunnel himself.

But the face! The Yank kid's eyes instinctively closed a moment after one glance. Von Kunnel's right eye was gone completely. A half-lidded socket stared sightlessly ahead. There were a few wisps of close-growing, tight-curved, black hair. The right side of his face was a markedly different hue from the left. The skin on the left was naturally ruddy and flushed, but the right side was unlined, unmoving and the color of a corpse's hide. The skin and flesh there had been grafted on.

Von Kunnel smiled—and that grimace completed the picture. His teeth were unnaturally white things, false. They even rattled when he closed his mouth. He was a grisly caricature of a man.

Canton made a sound like a sob and choked a curse. And von Kunnel said the only English word he knew. "So!"

His hand clenching the cane whitened with the strain of supporting himself. His other hand fingered the black and white ribbon worked through a button-hole of his bottle-green tunic that signified the Iron Cross, First Class. Slowly he turned and hobbled like a lamed bird toward the swivel chair behind the desk. An orderly attempted to help him. Von Kunnel's only response was to signal him to leave with a wave of his hand. He sat down.

Art realized then that the maimed Boche leader had deliberately stood in full sight of them so that no detail of his crippled body might escape their notice. The kid felt as if there were no air in the room. He could hear Canton breathing.

"*Hoch!*" von Kunnel said heavily. Then he reeled off something in German.

A figure stepped from the duskiness of the side wall, unnoticed till then. He was an *Unteroffizier* of the Intelligence. He proceeded to serve as an interpreter.

"His *Excellenz* says," he translated in stilted English, "that all things come to him who waits."

BALD CANTON'S "Gawd help me!" echoed and reechoed in the room like a ghostly whisper.

"So-o," said von Kunnel again, and he sucked the word as if he were hungry for the satisfaction it afforded him. "So-o," he said again, peering past Canton to Crain.

Then the dwarfed, maimed, Boche king sky-tiger of them all was on his feet, spitting oaths in German.

"It is not he," he kept saying over and over again.

The Intelligence officer gave up the repetitious translating. Hobbling around the desk, von Kunnel passed Canton and stood before Art Crain. He stared a long time, lone eye finally closing with bitterness. When he opened it again, it lighted on that faded, blood-stained scarf Art wore—the scarf that had been Kent's. Reaching forward, he fingered it, staring harder.

Half-hypnotized by the crippled dwarf, the Yank replacement stood motionless. Von Kunnel spoke. The Intelligence officer translated in his precise syllables.

"He says he killed the man who wore that once before." The words, terrible in themselves, dropped coldly from the interpreter's lips.

Art Crain stared into von Kunnel's single eye. The Boche Staffel leader stared back. Von Kunnel said something again in his toneless voice.

"He says," relayed the interpreter, "that he expected it to be the man with the scar in the middle of his forehead."

Crain stiffened as a picture of Bloody Doll with his peculiar scar flashed through his mind. The Intelligence officer was translating von Kunnel's words again.

"His *Excellenz* wishes to know who you are, how you happen to be wearing that same muffler."

Art Crain stared full into that lone eye of von Kunnel's. It gleamed with madness. Von Kunnel resembled nothing so much as an executioner.

"Tell him," the kid said, "it was my best friend who wore it before." The interpreter translated. Von Kunnel stood sucking his lips. He opened and closed and opened his one eye. Then he shook his head, hobbled back and sat down. He looked like a suspicious child. Something had happened to that man that left its mark on his brain.

"No, I cannot know. There were three, one with the red scarf," he said. "I killed one with the red scarf. Maybe he was not the one. I will take no chances. *Nein*. Maybe you were the one." He kept staring at Crain.

Leaning forward, he tapped a photograph on his desk, speaking.

"His *Excellenz* says that was what he looked like once," intoned the interpreter woodenly.

Canton thrust forward his egg-shaped skull, then recoiled, pinchclipped. Art looked. It was a snapshot taken on a drome. There was a background of planes. There were two figures in the foreground, hands gripped in a handshake at the moment the picture was taken. One was the taller, smiling, straight-backed. The other was small but handsome, his diminutive body a model the sculptors of ancient Greece would have been proud to duplicate in marble. Every inch of him bespoke the thoroughbred.

In the lower, right-hand corner was a signature, "*Manfred von Richthofen, to my good friend, Lothar.*"

"That was he," the Intelligence officer interpreted von Kunnel's slow, sad words as the latter tapped toward the smaller figure in the photograph with his cigar.

Crain couldn't control his widened eyes as they turned to the maimed, half-deformed frame that was the body of that man now.

"I'd kill the man who did that to me," he burst out impulsively.

The interpreter put his words into German. Von Kunnel nodded at Crain, lone eye flashing.

"So I am," he said, according to the interpreter. "So I am. There were three—one with the bald head, one with the red scarf, and one with the forehead scar. Which one did it, I do not know for certain. So I will kill all three. One has gone already." Crain knew that one was Kent. "Maybe he was the wrong one," von Kunnel added, according to the interpreter, "but I am taking no chances." Bald skull thrust forward, Canton began to beg and plead, but not for himself. He waved at the interpreter, shook his head.

"This kid wasn't in it," he said, pointing to Crain. "He just came up today. He didn't do it."

Von Kunnel turned his hideous head from right to left. "That was what the other one said. When I get the one with the scar in the middle of his forehead, he will say the same thing. *Ja!* But I am taking no chances." His face thrust forward; his voice dropped to a whisper. "One with the bald head—one with the red scarf—and one with the scar in the middle of the forehead. Which one did it, I do not know. So, all three—" The phone clicked as he picked it up and gave an order. The sentries reentered and the two Yanks were returned to the guardhouse. The door clanged behind them.

CANTON sank on a bunk, haggard. A moment later, the door opened and their cigarettes were passed in. Art lit one, then faced Canton.

"Canton, what was it that was done? Why does von Kunnel want us?"

Minutes dragged by before Canton replied.

"Doll used to drink too much," was the way he started it. "Maybe that was his way of getting nerve. It was before he was made C.O."

It had happened months ago, almost a year. It had been a hot, sultry afternoon. Five of them had been on a sector patrol when they jumped a couple of reconnaissance ships of the Boche. It looked like an easy fight until a trio of Fokkers, convoying the latter, had hurtled down.

One of them had fastened himself onto Doll's tail. For a few seconds, it had been dog eat dog. One of their own men had gone down in flames. One of the Boche Fokkers had crashed. Then Canton and another had gone to Doll's aid. That other had been Kent.

The Fokker had been blasting him to bits when the pair of them arrived on the scene. Between the three of them, they had knocked the Boche down. Followed him as he landed under control, although wounded. It was behind the Allied lines, in a rocky meadow. The three had set their crates down near the Boche, Doll himself touching ground first.

"He was scared, scared to death," Canton explained. "That Boche had almost gotten him."

The Boche pilot had climbed out, bleeding. Crumpling on the ground, he sat beside his dead-engined ship with lifted hands. Doll had been mad—fairly well drunk, as well. Drawing his automatic, he had walked toward the seated Boche pilot.

"I was on one side of him," Canton explained slowly. "Kent jumped out of his bus and ran up on the other side, yelling for him not to do it. I can still see

the way that red scarf blew out behind Kent's neck as he ran."

Crain's mouth whitened.

"Sorry," Canton muttered. "Not that it makes much difference now."

Sucking on his cigarette, he went on with his story. Doll, scared and drunken, had done it. Point-blank, he had fired upon the wounded, sitting enemy pilot in violation of all the rules of international warfare. He had fired until his gun was empty and the Boche pilot lay prone on the ground. Doll had walked up close and taken a kick at him. To all appearances, the man was stone dead.

"Kent almost killed Doll himself that day," Canton said.

That was about all there was to it. Even cold-blooded Doll had felt ashamed afterward. All three had taken off as soon as possible without a word, but later Canton had learned from a medical officer that the Boche pilot had not died. Taken to a hospital, he had been operated upon, identified as von Kunnel. A few days later, he had escaped.

"It must have been hell," Canton murmured.

Crain stood listening to the tale as he watched the shadow of the pacing sentry outside fall across the slit of sunlight high up in the iron door.

"The doctors didn't think he had much chance of living, much less escaping. But he did escape. Then he came back to fly again. He must have gotten himself patched up and waited for his body to heal. Anyway, I saw his ship one day. Then I knew, somehow, that our time had come. He began to make a rep for himself for killing like a mad dog—shooting in the back—surrendering, then striking—anything."

Outside, ships roared off the field, Mercedes droning, then blasting to a resounding roar, then droning again. It got quiet again. Crain realized that his nails were gouging into his palms and that sweat crawled down his cheeks. Somehow, he didn't blame von Kunnel a bit.

"Doll taunted Kent until he called von Kunnel for a personal scrap. Doll knew von Kunnel was back, and he was afraid. I think—I think he half hoped Kent might get him. Kent could shoot like a hawk."

The kid nodded. He and Kent had both been dead-eye marksmen with any kind of a weapon when they were at military school together.

The cot creaked as Canton shifted a little. He sighed. "That's about all. They got Kent, von Kunnel and his mates did. Forced him over behind the Boche lines. That was the last we saw of him. Got a report that he'd been shot down."

Canton scratched a match. The flicker of it lit his bald head grotesquely. Both leaned close to fire their cigarettes.

"It was the next day," Canton spoke fast, voice hard and dry. "A black Fokker dropped low over our field with a white-flag signal. Then it dropped a bundle and went away. The bundle was Kent's uniform—wrapped in the red scarf he told me to send you."

Art spoke for the first time. "Yes?"

Canton's lips parted. He clamped them shut instantly. "That's all."

Crain turned and walked over to him. "Tell me the rest of it, Canton?" Canton shook his head, shrugged as if there was no more. "Kent would want me to know."

Canton looked up. His face was yellow in the half light. He had the look of a crucified man. When he spoke, it was as if he were reading his own sentence of doom.

"There were four bullet holes in Kent's uniform. One in each leg, one in each arm. And there was a fifth one through the chest of his tunic, the heart. I guess—that was the last one."

The cramped guardhouse room was suddenly cold. A fly buzzed up near the ceiling. Art walked back to the iron door and sucked the draft of air that came through the vent.

He knew then that Canton had read their sentence.

CHAPTER V THE BOCHE BROTHERHOOD

IT GOT DIM OUTSIDE and pitch-dark in the tiny guardhouse. A lone ship zoomed off the Tiger tarmac, to return a little more than an hour later. Once there was the changing of the guard outside. A few pilots on their way to mess passed, chatting lightly. Dinner, with a bottle of wine apiece, was brought to the Yank prisoners. A guard stood and watched them eat by candle light.

Afterwards, it was black as sin. Somebody began to sing, "*Ach du lieber, Augustine*" down in one of the hutments. From the direction of the Front came the basso moan of the heavies. A cool wind began to rise.

Smoking cigarette after cigarette. Art Crain stood thinking by the iron door. It was so simple. One man

had acted the coward and the beast. Another had paid for the act. Now he and Canton, too, were going to pay. And one man, a Boche, had been transformed into a prowling sky wolf with a mind as warped and twisted as his hacked, patched body.

Art thought of Kent; yet, even thinking of Kent and how he had died, he could not blame von Kunnel. He thought of the picture of that smiling, handsome little officer shaking hands and receiving the commendation of the great von Richthofen himself.

He found himself whispering it in the blackness. A man, Doll, had lost his nerve for an instant and reverted to the savage. As a result, a Boche circus leader had become a maniac. Doll, fearing him on his return to the skies, had driven his squadron like a butcher in the hope of getting von Kunnel. One had died. Two more would.

The kid's teeth ground. He lived again that dogfight with Doll when he had thought it was von Kunnel. If he only had not spared the other man then when the Fokker conked out. . . . He lived through the attack on the Bat drome again when von Kunnel's Black Tigers had struck, remembering how he had followed the doomed Canton up. He turned to Canton stretched on the cot.

"How did von Kunnel know he was going to capture us?"

Canton crossed his legs the other way. "He didn't. It was Fate, like everything else. Retaliation attack. I took off. Guess he must have spotted my bald dome. Then you followed in the ship Doll had escaped in. Von Kunnel probably thought you were Doll."

Crain couldn't say anything. It was Fate.

"Fate," Canton repeated thoughtfully. "I knew when I saw von Kunnel back in the skies again, and I knew Kent was next. But some day—Doll, he'll pay. I know that, too."

Crain was young. He wanted to live. "But in the morning—" He stopped. The rest wasn't pleasant to say or think of.

"In the morning!" Canton said.

The night ebbed slowly. About midnight, there was a droning over the field. A searchlight flashed on. The effulgence of it reflected through the vent in the guardhouse door. A plane landed. Art dozed off after that.

When he awoke, a hod-helmeted infantryman was shaking him, and Canton stood sipping a steaming cup of coffee. It was just dawn. A bluish light dyed the tarmac. From the distance came the ticking of slow-

revving motors. Canton could hardly hold his tin cup. Art forced some of the coffee down.

They were led outside. A few minutes afterward, a couple of gray staff cars took form out of the ground mist from the direction of the town hall. Canton turned in the bleak dawn and held out his hand.

"And I told Kent I'd look out for you," he said. "Well, I never was good for much. But I'll go out right."

Mufflers open, the two staff cars drew up opposite them. Von Kunnel, with his blank-faced interpreter from Intelligence, sat in the first. The little circus leader was wrapped in a black cape that made him look somehow like an executioner. His face glowed, though, like that of some fanatic pilgrim close to a Holy Grail. He saluted them solemnly.

Canton was trying to say something else, but one of the hod helmets used his gun butt to hurry him into the second car. Canton dragged himself up onto the running board and sagged down inside. By sheer willpower, the kid made himself step briskly in. His whistle shrilled feebly on the dank morn. He even summoned a lop-sided smile for the officer who sat in the second car.

The two machines shot across the damp field, tires leaving marks in the mud. At the other side, they veered toward the canal until they came to a track between the hangars of the adjoining bomber field. A guard rode on either running board.

Head thrust forward, Canton sat with a dull, fixed stare. He seemed to be peering toward his fate as if the sight of it and the end would be a relief. Art searched his tunic pockets, then remembered that they had split their last cigarette before going to sleep. He made sign language to the officer, who smiled stiffly. He was young, lean-faced, with the intent look of the typical Prussian. His high-cut hair revealed Heidelberg duelling scars. The longer he looked at Art Crain, the sadder his smile got.

"A cigarette?" he enunciated in perfect English that revealed even more perfect teeth. "*Ach, ja. Certainly.*"

He brought out a case and offered it to Art. The kid took one. Canton didn't seem to hear when asked if he wanted one. The German held a match expertly cupped in his hand. Art inhaled deeply. Inside, he was shaking, but he made his voice almost nonchalant.

"Wish I had something to swap you for the rest of the pack."

The German shook his head. "*Nein.* You will not have need for any more." Art looked away. There was finality in the Boche officer's words. The German touched his arm.

"*Leutnant*, if there is a note you may have written—anything—I may get the opportunity to drop it over your drome. *Ja.*"

The kid felt himself cracking. Everything seemed so foreordained and so cold. He turned on the young officer desperately.

"Say, what's going to happen?" he demanded.

The Boche stared straight ahead. "I do not know. Nobody does—except His *Excellenz.*" He meant von Kunnel. He fitted his lips around his cigarette and blew out smoke precisely.

Art grabbed his arm. "But the man's mad. He's a maniac. He's a homicidal—"

Calmly the Boche inclined his head in a nod. "*Ja*, but *Herr Hauptmann* von Kunnel leads his men to victory. They know that. He belongs to a very old house, besides. If he has his peculiar habits on the ground—" A shrug of his tight-tailored shoulders said the rest.

The two cars emerged onto the tarmac of the bombers. Midway down the field, a big, camouflaged Gotha was turning up. Both cars curved toward it. Canton started to cough as they pulled alongside.

They got out. Von Kunnel was helped to the ground. The man beside the chauffeur of his machine stepped down, Mauser in his gloved hand. A third figure stepped from under the shadow of the Gotha's nose. For a brief moment, the three stood together, and in that moment, Art Crain knew they were brothers.

For the former two were almost duplicates of the smiling figure shaking hands with von Richthofen in the portrait in von Runnel's office, except that they were not smiling, were severely stern. And the one who'd stepped from under the Gotha prow was taller with a waxed, straw-hued mustache.

Crain and Canton were moved forward. The interpreter from Intelligence took a stiff step out, bowed slightly, began to speak.

"Captain the Count Karl Eitel von Kunnel of His Imperial Majesty's High Staff!" he announced.

The brother who'd ridden with the circus leader saluted, inclined his head curtly.

"Baron Joachim Emil von Kunnel, commander Kampfflug F-205!"

The taller brother with the straw-colored moustache went through the same motions. Only his teeth were bared in a smile, and the smile was cruel. He swung back his military cloak to show a Mauser in his grip.

"You will ascend into the ship," the interpreter said woodenly to the Yank prisoners.

Just before he followed Canton up the short ladder to the patch-painted fuselage of the giant Gotha, the young Boche officer who had ridden with them shoved another cigarette into Art's fingers.

Inside the Gotha cockpit, the kid stared at it—lone, paper-wrapped tube of tobacco. One! It was a time-clock on his life.

As the Gotha rumbled down the smooth field and swept up with Lothar von Kunnel, crippled leader of the Black Tigers, at the controls, Art Crain slipped the cigarette into his mouth—but he didn't light it—*yet*.

CHAPTER VI "CHOOSE YOUR WEAPON!"

TWENTY MINUTES LATER, the Gotha nosed down. It was light in a yellowish way upstairs. The earth still lay wrapped in the shadow of night. One of the von Kunnel brothers released a magnesium flare. It drifted down, flaring, revealing the spires of an ancient chateau. Art stared down. It was all like something in a dream.

Then the big bomber with the camouflage - patched prow was bumping down on the vast expanse of greensward before the chateau. They were kilos behind the Boche lines. When they stepped to the ground, it was as if no war existed.

The lawn was laid out in a series of terraces that slowly tapered down to huge iron-work gates in the distance. The rising sun had already begun to play on these. It was almost daylight. Up near the chateau itself stood the masonry of a long dry fountain with a poised Cupid in the center. Beyond that were the rusting remnants of the backwires of a tennis court where lords and ladies from the chateau had once played.

Art saw two figures take form as they appeared crossing it. One was a black-bearded medical corps officer, with a black bag in his hand. Behind him came an orderly carrying a long, flat case. They approached. No words were spoken.

The doctor stepped gingerly in the soft turf to an appointed spot half a hundred yards from where the Gotha had landed. Opening his case, he spread a towel, then a dozen gleaming operating instruments on it.

The orderly marched to a spot opposite, laid down the black case he carried, opened it reverently. The rising sun glinted on the carved steel barrels of a set of duelling pistols. Canton coughed hollowly. Art felt something rising up inside him and choking his throat. He knew then how Kent had died.

Like a spiteful ghost, the words that Bloody Doll had said to him when they'd first met in that *estaminet* came back to taunt him: "Kill or be killed," had been Doll's warning, neither knowing who the other was at the time. "Every man you kill means one less who might kill you," Doll had said.

If he had only killed Doll that first day

Lothar von Kunnel, twisted form hidden in the black cape, was speaking. He stood alone. Behind the two Yanks stood the other brothers, Mausers in their hands. The Intelligence man interpreted in his monotone.

"His *Excellenz* says that the House of von Kunnel has its code and its honor. Justice comes first—honor second. *Herr Hauptmann* von Kunnel says he was once challenged to the duel at a time when he was unable to accept the challenge. He accepts now. Everything will be conducted according to the *code duello*." He nodded toward the hunched Canton. "You first."

With the baron at his side, Canton walked forward, rubbing his bald head. The orderly took two of the long-barreled duelling pistols from the case and held them butts foremost across his forearm.

Von Kunnel of the Black Tigers said something, his lone eye blazing.

"Choose your weapon," intoned the interpreter.

Canton took the nearest one as if it made little difference. Lothar von Kunnel, the cripple, took the other. They turned back to back. Baron Joachim Emil von Kunnel stood to one side, drawn Mauser in one hand, spotless white silk handkerchief in the other.

"The duellists will take ten paces," said the interpreter, "turn, and fire at the drop of the handkerchief."

Von Kunnel, the cripple, dropped his cane. Then both men began to walk away from each other. Art's eyes followed Canton for a moment. The Bat pilot walked stooped and with dragging feet. His eyes seemed closed. His bald head gleamed with dampness. There was no sound as their feet moved over the soft greensward.

The kid's eyes flicked to von Kunnel. It was almost a miracle, his walking. It was only by dint of supreme will power. This was his moment. He represented the honor of his house. He was prepared to deal with his

enemies. Legs moving like wooden stilts, hobbling a trifle at every step of the shorter one, he took his ten paces. Then he about-faced. And his strange face, red on one side, dead white on the other where new skin had been grafted, glowed with genuine happiness for that moment.

Baron von Kunnel, his brother, tall, straight, dropped the handkerchief.

Canton fired blindly. Von Kunnel brought his barrel horizontal and fired simultaneously. Then—silence.

NEITHER man stirred for a moment. Lothar von Kunnel's black cape trembled in the breeze. Somewhere a cock crowed.

Canton moved. His left hand crossed his body and clutched his gun arm. Like a penitent sinner, he stood regarding the ground. Slowly the duelling pistol slipped from his grasp. Art Crain's lean body relaxed with relief. It was over and . . . but it wasn't.

Lothar von Kunnel very deliberately fired again.

That shot tore the half-born day apart. Canton's left arm fell limply, and von Kunnel motioned to the orderly. The latter took him two more duelling pistols. Twice von Kunnel fired with one of them. Each shot took one of poor Canton's legs. The bald-skulled pilot flopped down on the turf.

He twisted his head around a little toward Art, smiling faintly. "Tell the blond down in Vacauleur that I—that I—"

Lothar von Kunnel lifted the third weapon, smiled glassily from the one eye, fired a fifth time. He was a perfect marksman. Captain Canton of the Bats died then—died as he would have wished to live, facing a foe and with a gay jest on his lips.

And Art knew how Kent James had died, then, too.

They were urging him forward. Count Karl Eitel von Kunnel strode at his side, Mauser ever ready. Art walked up to the twisted, stumpy Lothar von Kunnel. Unhurriedly the kid put a match to his cigarette. Von Kunnel nodded.

Art nodded, too. Inside, he was cold, afraid. There had been something so inhuman, like a plotted execution, irrevocable as the descent of a guillotine blade, about Canton's passing. The crippled von Kunnel had fired as calmly as if he'd been potting clay pigeons.

The interpreter repeated word for word what he had told Canton. Ten paces, turn, fire at the drop of the handkerchief. In a daze Art listened, nodded that he understood. He turned, felt Lothar von Kunnel's

humped shoulderblades against his back. A shiver ran through him. Baron Joachim's smile widened. The Yank was in a daze.

He started to stride off the ten paces. He thought of how they had carted Canton's body toward a peasant's cart standing at the side of the chateau. He thought of the time long before when Kent had confessed he was afraid to do it, then climbed the tree over the river and dived from the topmost limb. Kent had been afraid, but no coward.

Almost at the end of the ten paces, Crain saw the orderly coming back from the cart. He was a hulking giant of a fellow, and the bundle he toted beneath his arm looked like a small package. It was Canton's uniform, to be dropped on the Bat tarmac—Canton's uniform with its five bullet holes.

Art Crain really knew how Kent had died then, how it must have been to him. In an instant, all of him was rebelling furiously against that maimed, crack-brained little devil who exacted such a savage vengeance.

The kid had always had an almost unbelievable knack with guns. He balanced that long-barreled duelling pistol in his hand. It was the tenth step. He whirled, a boyish-faced avenger with a smoking cigarette clipped in one corner of his lips.

He saw Lothar von Kunnel. The man seemed all head, with his leveled weapon spearing like a malignant spike from his one eye. The handkerchief fluttered groundward. Both fired.

Art's gun arm lowered slowly. Von Kunnel had plugged him neatly through the bone, breaking the arm. The Yank's boyish face darkened, but his fingers remained locked around the pistol butt—and his left arm swung over and took the weapon.

A guttural oath escaped from under the neat straw moustache of Baron Joachim. For Lothar von Kunnel, sky master of the Black Tigers, was struck. On his stiffened legs, he stood lopsided and swaying. The cape slipped from his uneven shoulders. His face twisted as if he'd been struck unexpectedly. Art Crain had neatly broken the shoulder of his right arm.

Von Kunnel, too, grabbed his gun with his other hand. He waved it once across before his eyes as if to clear his vision. The Yank kid blinked, spat out his cigarette. Once again, they both leveled weapons. Von Kunnel's bony finger tightened on the trigger first.

There was a clearly audible but dull snap on the silent dawn. It was the pistol's firing hammer against the percussion cap of a dud bullet. A cry tore from von Kunnel. He wrenched his body forward and cocked

the gun again. Again the hammer fell harmlessly as he pulled the trigger.

Art stood sighting at him. He could have dropped von Kunnel then with a bullet right through the heart, but he hesitated.

Von Kunnel tried to make the gun fire again, but he couldn't. In a fit of rage, he slammed it at the ground. Then he remembered his foe. Proudly, as befitted a member of his house, he drew himself up straight, lifted his ghastly face.

But Art Crain had lowered his weapon. War was war, as bad as they said it was and worse, but he hadn't yet learned how to shoot down an unarmed foe. He didn't fire.

SECONDS passed before little Lothar von Kunnel realized what had happened. The baron stopped cursing. Count Karl Eitel, who stood a few yards to Art's left to keep him covered, lowered his Mauser.

"*Mein Gott!*" he said.

Single eye staring, Lothar von Kunnel came hobbling forward. The orderly jumped out with his cane, but Lothar paid no heed. He panted as he came. Then he stood straight in front of Art Crain and spoke.

"His *Excellenz* says you could have killed him," the interpreter broke out. He was as imperturbable as ever.

Crain nodded. Once again he remembered Bloody Doll's warning about kill or be killed, but still he nodded. The crippled von Kunnel kept staring up at him as the blood blotch on his shoulder spread. His lips moved once. He couldn't seem to believe it. He looked at Crain's wounded right arm. He looked at the duelling pistol he still had. He grabbed it and glanced at the percussion cap. Slowly his head began to shake. "*Nein,*" he breathed once. He said more.

The interpreter put it in English. "His *Excellenz* says that you could have killed him then and did not. Now he knows you were not one of those who tried to kill him before."

Von Kunnel meant the time Doll had filled him with lead after a forced landing. Half-turning, he beckoned the physician, told him to bandage their arms.

"Joachim! Karl!" he cried, hobbling toward the bomber.

The baron ran up beside him, demanding an explanation. Von Kunnel only hobbled onward, leading the Yank kid along at his side.

"Justice—honor," he mumbled once in German, repeating the watchwords of his house. "Justice . . ."

CHAPTER VII GOTHA VENGEANCE

THE THREE VON KUNNELS and Art Crain of the Bats were alone in that Gotha as she roared up over the abandoned chateau. There was a wrapped bundle of uniform, too—Canton's. Art couldn't keep his eyes away from it. Kent's must have looked that way once.

Crain's hate for that little crippled ace, Lothar von Kunnel, flared again. He wanted to kill him, to do the things to him that he had done to Kent. He wished the Boche's old-fashioned duelling gun had not refused to fire.

The kid's eyes lifted. And it was only then that he saw that Joachim and Karl von Kunnel were seeking to argue with Lothar of the Black Tigers through the rumbling roar of the Gotha's twin Benz motors. The two brothers worked their lips in screams, gestured fiercely below. And Lothar von Kunnel only shook his head calmly.

Art Crain stared below. They were passing over the drome of the Black Tigers and the bombers, and the big Gotha had not started to descend. The kid couldn't believe what he saw, what he guessed. His eyes kept swinging from Lothar von Kunnel's misshapen back to the field dropping behind and back again.

Von Kunnel, the wolf, the heartless killer who prowled the heavens and bathed them in blood, had his code, the code of his house—justice and honor. He was living up to it.

Count Karl Eitel stopped talking as the Gotha cruised on toward the lines. Joachim looked at Karl, pointed to his own head, then nodded toward Lothar. Joachim started to lift his Mauser. Karl's eyes got like steel; he shook his head slowly, and Joachim lowered his gun with a shrug. He considered it suicide.

The lean Bat replacement watched with popping eyes. Below, the Boche trenches appeared like minute seams in the brownish waste. Still the Gotha roared westward. Lothar von Kunnel was going to take him back. The kid who had not learned to kill was being saved because of that very thing.

High up, they swung over No-Man's-Land. Crain made out the steeple of Regneville through a streamer

of low-lying mist. Benz motors droning in their unsynchronized singsong, the Gotha ploughed onward. Aboard her was a throbbing tension.

Lothar of the Black Tigers was mad, but Joachim and Karl weren't. Neither was Art Crain. Condemned to die, he saw the hope of life again. But if an Allied flight should spot them and attack, he would be doomed with the Boche.

That was what happened.

Von Kunnel at the Gotha wheel reached down and brought up a pair of binoculars with his good arm. He fastened them to his miserable mimicry of a face, and a cry escaped his lips. He turned back into the cockpit. With his finger he described an imaginary line down the center of his forehead.

The man with the scar in the middle of his forehead!

Out of the north they hurtled, a five-ship flight of the Bats, the dawn patrol. The man at the echelon head was Bloody Doll himself. He felt good that morning. For the first time in almost a year, fear had left him. The day before, he had seen those two, Canton and Crain, grabbed off by von Kunnel and his Tigers. Doll had nothing more to fear. Three would have paid the score. He knew how.

The heavy-set C.O. of the Bats lifted one big arm up over his head, then swung it forward and down. The signal of attack! The five Nieuports came around in a short bank, seemed to hesitate, then slashed upward in formation. It was too late for escape for the great, lumbering Gotha. And Lothar von Kunnel at the controls had no thought of escape.

An instant before they struck, one of the Nieuports swung westward, dropping rapidly with engine trouble. Doll at their head, the other four broke like an exploding star shell and ripped from four different points at the Gotha.

ON HANDS and knees, Count Karl of the House of von Kunnel wormed his way to the gunner's pit in the prow. A moment later, a spade-grip Maxim was ploughing the sky with lead. Baron Jake scurried to the rear guns where the floor trap was. He did not appear in sight immediately.

One of the audacious Nieuports drove in close on the tail. It ducked under to get a shot at the Gotha's belly. Baron Jake spoke with the floor-trap guns. The Nieuport began to fall, turning over and over as an ebon plume of smoke inked its trail.

Hunched in the main pit beside Lothar von Kunnel, Art saw it all. Saw the Bat bus that looped over to come

down and batter Karl von Kunnel to the floorboards with lead through his brain. Saw Doll himself come screaming in at a tangent to rake the pilot's pit.

Once Lothar, the vengeful cripple, shot a glance at the Yank kid. There was a smile on the one side of von Kunnel's countenance that could smile. He had gone stark mad, madder than ever, but he was still living up to the dictates of his house—justice!

He pointed westward and nodded. He was trying to tell Art that he'd get him there.

The Gotha rattled under a sudden, fierce *rafale* of fire. One of the big Benzes went dead. The bomber lurched. Little Lothar threw himself at the controls, setting them against the uneven drag. Art stared back at the rear pit.

The aft Maxims were silent. Baron Jake had joined the count. But he had not passed alone. Far below, a Nieuport streaked in a race to earth, flaming like a torch. The other beside Doll was circling slowly in the east. Art saw the halfstanding pilot pounding at jammed guns. The kid hesitated a moment longer. His position was peculiar. He hadn't wanted to help shoot down his own squadron's ships.

Then Doll was buzzing in again, on a wing tip, fish-tailing to rake the mighty Gotha's hulk. Lothar von Kunnel was running for it, but still running westward. The Nieuport's Vickers tore at his craft and he began to maneuver. He did things with a Gotha that would have done credit to a pursuit ship. One fanatic idea ruled his twisted mind. Germany had nothing to do with it. Lothar von Kunnel had not been fighting for the *Vaterland* for a long time.

Twice he evaded Doll's stabbing rushes. Then he flew straight as an arrow for his objective once more. Art Crain had made up his mind. "Kill lest you be killed" had been Doll's advice. Art was back at those rear guns beside the fallen body of Joachim von Kunnel.

Three times he found Doll's dancing Nieuport with the stabbing lead of the Maxim, but the kid could not get in a direct, damaging burst. One arm broken, he could not steady the big pot-bellied Maxim and fire accurately as well.

The last act was played. Doll blasted straight in from the rear. Art couldn't risk a shot lest he shoot away the Gotha's own rudder assembly. Doll sliced down. Cursing the pain of his cracked arm, Art dived for the floor-trap guns. The sky was blank below.

Doll had whipped up past the left side of the ship. Art whirled and spotted him. He struggled with the

swiveled Maxims as Doll darted like a hornet up over the Gotha's left wing tip. The kid got a couple of bursts off. Then the recoil of the pot-bellied weapon tore it from his feeble grasp.

And Doll came burning down, Vickers spewing a swarm of steel-jacketed lead into the pilot's pit, into the lone revving Benz.

Doll took that hand. The Benz exploded sharply, coughed twice, then conked, and at the pilot's wheel, little Lothar von Kunnel, who'd been flying to save a life, instead of to kill, for the first time, inch by inch folded over the controls.

The sky seemed suddenly empty of noise. With a sougning sound, the big Gotha nosed over and dived. Wires moaned. The fat fuselage, vibrationless with its dead engines, slid downward with the swish of a coffin diving into the sea.

Across the steep-slanting cockpit flooring, Art Crain tried to work to the controls. The right wing dropped. He was flung across on his broken arm. On knees and one hand, he tried again. Past von Kunnel's sagging head, he could see the up-rushing ground.

The kid's face screwed up. With one mighty effort, he shoved himself down the tilted boards, rammed his face against the splintered instrument panel. He got the wheel. Somehow he hauled the diving Gotha out flat. Its ponderous landing trucks fouled a tree, breaking the momentum. Then it went sledding ahead through old barbed wire entanglements, crashing, smashing, and hit.

WHEN Art opened his eyes, it was all over. Broken-backed, one wing bank completely ripped off, the Gotha lay with its crumpled nose half-buried in a field. Down the field stood Doll's Nieuport. Doll came striding down from it, sneering, one big hand clapped over his side where Canton's bullet had nicked him. Doll carried his automatic. There was purpose in his approach.

Dazed, Art stood up slowly so that Doll could see him. Doll stopped and stared, then came walking on again as deliberately as ever. He hoisted his automatic up. The kid was the last one who knew of his crime. Doll was going to strike once more as he had before. The kid felt his time had come.

There was a faint sound beside him. He looked down. Huddled on his knees, a twisted gnomelike thing rising from the wreckage, was von Kunnel. His face was hidden and resting against the crumpled nacelle of the Gotha. Only his lone eye looked over. That eye glittered.

Von Kunnel had but a few seconds of life left, and only his last ounce of strength, but his purpose was still strong. The man with the scar in the middle of his forehead had come. The cripple's warped mind directed his relentless will once more. With agonizing slowness, he worked his left arm up and up. It bore the duelling pistol he'd taken from Art's hand at the chateau.

Almost to the rim of the nacelle, he got that gun. Doll's boots squashed in the mud as he drew close. The two in the Gotha heard the safety catch of his automatic click off.

Von Kunnel's gun was almost at the nacelle edge. His lone eye bulged, then closed. He crumpled, gun falling back.

Doll's automatic crackled. Lead ricocheted off the Gotha wreckage. Almost point-blank, he fired at Art. Bending, the kid tore the duelling weapon from von Kunnel's convulsed fingers. He whipped up, drew bead, fired.

Doll stopped as if he'd walked blindly into a wall. He grabbed at his gun arm as the automatic slid to the mud. Red bubbled through his fingers. He looked at it, at Art Crain. A wordless scream tore from Doll's thick lips. Shaking his head, wild-eyed, he began to back up.

Doll, the butcher, was afraid. Doll, who'd sent up kids as sky fodder, was a coward. He was showing it. He kept backing up, moving faster and faster, running. His terror possessed him, yet he was afraid to turn his back on it. Doll knew how to shoot in the back, how to shoot an unarmed, wounded man.

But Art Crain didn't. Heaven and he, himself, knew how Doll deserved killing. The kid's unshaven, grimed face wrenched. What Doll had done to Kent . . . yes, he had to kill Doll! Doll himself had warned him about how a man had to learn to kill if he wanted to live. The kid raised his duelling weapon again, inspected it. Thanks be to Boche efficiency, it had been reloaded.

Doll kept running backward, faster and faster. Right toward his still revving ship. Art Crain leveled his gun. Doll deserved to die in the name of the pilots he'd sent to their death. Doll must die. Then the kid's gun arm slowly lowered. He couldn't do it . . .

Doll was close to his own Nieuport. Crain saw the danger, yelled, waved. Doll only hurtled himself backward faster.

A yard from his ship, his boot caught the stub of a former barbed-wire post. He tripped headlong, backward, and his head passed into the orbit of the slow-revving prop. But it was turning fast enough for

the first clip of the blade to beat his brains out.

After a while, slim Art Crain put the duelling gun down beside the late Lothar von Kunnel. The latter's lone eye was closed, but his face bore a set smile as if he had witnessed his own avenging.

From the forest at the upper end of the field, a platoon of infantry appeared. Climbing stiffly from the Gotha, the kid walked toward them. In the van, a bright-eyed lieutenant gazed admiringly at the big Boche bomber.

"That's a real *descendu* to claim, sir!"

Borrowing a cigarette from him, Crain lit it slowly as he stared at the spot where Bloody Doll had met the whirling prop of his own ship.

"A victory, lieutenant," said the kid, "that I don't think I'll claim credit for. For somehow, Bloody Doll belonged to so many—to von Kunnel—and Canton—and Kent. To the sky fodder!"

The infantry lieutenant was speaking again. "We admire you boys with the wings. There's a chivalry—the way you fight. Something sporting, y' know."

Crain smiled a little. "Yes-s. There'll be a big improvement along those lines in these parts from now on." And he went walking down toward the road.

"You can see he's a regular flyer, a veteran," the lieutenant told one of his men. "See how nonchalantly he takes a thing like this!"

A veteran . . . Perhaps Art Crain was, then.