



AIR CRIMES, LIMITED

by DONALD E. KEYHOE

A mysterious message from the Chief of the Flying Corps—an organization of master air criminals—red-hot gangster guns—furious breathtaking cloud battles—all woven into a smashing sky yarn by a pilot writer whose articles on aviation are famous!

CHAPTER
ONE

WHY HAD the Chief of the Air Corps sent for him—and in such a mysterious way? Captain Jack Collins puzzled again over this question as he bent over the stick of his roaring Boeing fighter, and mechanically checked his course for Washington. Orders usually came by radio, wire,

or letter—but this one had been given him in a most peculiar manner.

Major Brenneman, aide to the Corps Area Commander, had dropped in early that morning at the Boeing Company's Illinois factory, where Collins was stationed as test pilot for ships built on Army orders.

"Just going by," he had explained indolently, including the company pilots in his nod. "Thought I'd tell you it's all right on that leave request of yours."

A quick flicker of his eyelids had warned Collins against showing any surprise. Collins had made no request for leave.

"How long before you'll be ready to turn these ships loose?" the major had continued, pointing to ten modern fighting planes nearby.

"Tested the last one yesterday," Collins had said. "As soon as the painters put on the insignia and numbers they'll be all set for Headquarters to send pilots after them."

"Good. Then you can shove off on leave right away, if you want to. The old man's in a good humor, and I put in a word for you."

"Thanks," Collins had managed to say, though his mind was in a whirl. What was back of all this? Then he caught Brenneman's signal and strolled with him to the door.

"May I borrow a match?" asked the major. Collins produced a lighter. Brenneman leaned close to Collins as he drew on his cigarette. Then had come the surprise, in a swift whisper. "Get to the Chief of Air Corps today, without fail. But keep it a secret."

Then, aloud: "Thanks, Jack. Well, I must be pushing along. Have a good time on leave—and don't come back married."

Collins, after an effort, had overcome his daze, and had worked quickly, following the lead given by Brenneman.

"I'm going to dig out of here for a place where there's a party going on," he had told the others. Within the hour he had taken off, first heading west to avoid suspicion, then pointing the nose of his fast ship straight for Washington.

Get to the Chief of the Air Corps today without fail—and keep it secret!

A strange order, certainly, in a time of peace. What was wrong? He could think of nothing, either personal or official. There had been that incident when he had been reported for flying under a bridge. Then there had been that landing in a street in Iowa after a rather

dizzy show. But those weren't serious enough to get him an order to headquarters—especially an odd call like this.

Everything had gone well at the factory. There had been one delay, not his fault, when a carload of engines had been lost in transit, necessitating a new shipment's being rushed from New England. But he had worked hard, putting every one of the new fighting planes through a severe test, including a straight dive at 300 miles an hour. Well, there was no sense in worrying about it. He'd find out the reason soon enough.

HE HAD PASSED Uniontown and was on the last stretch to the capital when he saw another ship ahead. He swung slightly off his course, intending to pass by with the usual airman's wave. To his surprise the other ship turned sharply away. He followed. In a moment it was clear that the second plane was trying to avoid him. His curiosity aroused, Collins opened his throttle and sent the fighting plane hurtling after the stranger, which proved to be a commercial cabin ship.

Two men were struggling with a third man in the cabin as Collins drew alongside. The pilot of the plane quickly drew his goggles over his eyes, and then turned to watch Collins, who had ruddered in wing to wing.

Suddenly the third man broke free from the two that held him. He hurled his fist against a window, but it did not shatter. As his two attackers threw themselves upon him he made one last frantic gesture, plainly a signal to Collins for help. Then he collapsed under a savage blow from one of the two. His other captor, a swarthy, thick set fellow, looked over at Collins and then tapped his forehead significantly, pointing to the one they had subdued.

Collins was not satisfied. The captive had fought like one in fear for his life, and the others were none too prepossessing.

Had there been a landing field beneath, he would have forced the other ship down to make sure that all was right. But there was no clear spot, and it was getting late. Brenneman's whispered order came back to him: "Get to the Chief today without fail." Reluctantly, he gave up the idea of investigating what he had seen and headed back toward Washington after noting the number of the other ship.

This new riddle gave him something to think about, so that it seemed only a short time until he reached Washington. It was almost dusk, and the lights of the city twinkled a pleasant welcome. He

glided over the lighted dome of the Capitol and made an easy landing on Bolling Field.

Hardly had he climbed out of the ship and stretched himself when a car hurriedly drove up and Major Arnold, the Field Commander, stepped out.

"Hello, Jack," he greeted the test pilot. "I've been watching for you. Get in—I've something to tell you."

The car started quickly away from the Operations Office.

"General Farrington is waiting to see you at his home. It must be something very important. He told me to keep mum. This car will take you there. That's all I know. Good luck."

Arnold climbed out as they reached his quarters. And Collins was on his way again—still completely in the dark as to the purpose for which he had been summoned. In the rush he had forgotten to tell Arnold about the incident of the commercial ship. But he could report it to the Department of Commerce air inspectors next day. It was more in their line, anyway.

AT THE GENERAL'S home he was ushered speedily into the library. General Farrington, a grizzled, kindly veteran, old in service, but still not too old to fly his own ship, came in a moment later. There was a troubled look in his keen eyes, but his greeting was hearty.

"Glad to see you, Collins," he said. "More than ever now, because we're in a jam and I'll need you. Did anyone suspect the nature of your journey?"

Collins shook his head.

"I think not, sir."

"You encountered nothing unusual—no one seemed to be following you?"

"No, except that I saw a queer thing over the mountains."

He related briefly what he had seen in the commercial plane. The general looked startled at first, then his worried expression deepened.

"Collins, you happened on something connected with my reason for getting you here. You have seen Air Crimes, Limited, in operation." Collins stared at him.

"Air Crimes, Limited?"

The general nodded.

"This afternoon's paper has a story about Archibald C. Lambert, multimillionaire, being cleverly kidnapped by airplane. He must have been the man you saw in that ship."

Collins uttered an exclamation. "Then I should

have fought it out with them—I might have saved him in some way."

"No, you did right," Farrington told him. "My need for you is more important. Besides, he can save himself by directing that the ransom they demand be paid. But that is only one small event in the whole scheme. What bothers me is that the pilot so hastily pulled down his goggles. It confirms my fears that some of the country's well-known pilots have joined Air Crimes, Limited,"

He sighed, then went on in a lowered voice.

"Collins, I had you sent to my home because I am not even sure of secrecy in my own office. And what I have to tell you is in strictest confidence. Some time ago a Department of Justice operative stumbled on a plan of an unknown criminal ring to use airplanes on a big scale for various crooked schemes. But it was impossible to get any further. The operative did learn that the ring is known to a few in the underworld as Air Crimes, Limited. It must have powerful connections, for the few who did know of it were too frightened to tell anything."

Collins was listening, wide-eyed. "Before that operative could report again, he vanished," Farrington continued. "Others were assigned. Two of them also have disappeared. The others have met complete failure. But in the meantime odd things have happened. For instance, the night air mail ship from New York to Boston was forced down by a plane armed with a machine gun, and was robbed. The pilot offered fight and was killed."

"But that was reported as a crash!" interrupted Collins excitedly. "The papers said the mail was burned and the pilot was killed in the crash."

THE GENERAL smiled sadly. "Yes, because the Government is trying to keep all this from the public. There have been a dozen other peculiar crimes, all committed by means of airplanes. Today you saw an example."

"We can check the number of that plane," suggested Collins.

"It will prove to be a dead license," said the general. "That occurred last week when a plane landed near a highway, two gangsters stepped out with Thompson guns, held up a pay-roll car, and got away in a few seconds. The pilot was left waiting with the engine running. He must have been an expert from the description of his fast take-off."

He paused. Collins waited in silence.

"Those are only a few of the things we know about," said the general. Probably they are only one-tenth of all the crimes they are committing. However, we would still have no connection with it, but for one thing. A week ago two carloads of Army bombs, machine guns and ammunition were cut out from a fast freight, at a point between Rock Island and here. And the next morning the cars were found empty. The same thing occurred the next day on the West coast. There is only one conclusion—the criminals are more powerful than we supposed, and they must be planning to arm their air fleet with guns and bombs."

"Maybe that's where that car of engines went," exclaimed Collins.

"Yes, I know about that," nodded Farrington. "The railroads have failed to find a trace of the material. Fake orders caused the trouble, but we can't find who gave the orders. The situation has become serious enough for the President to take private notice of it. I have been ordered to prepare for an emergency, and also to ferret out what I can. That's why you are here."

Collins leaned forward eagerly.

"I am going to have you relieved as test pilot. Then you will be issued orders to act as liaison officer between the civil aviation industry and the Air Corps. In carrying out the orders you will fly wherever you desire, ostensibly to learn commercial practices and see if they can be applied to the military air services. You will really be watching and listening—trying to turn up some connection with this almost invisible gang of air criminals. When you do turn it up, you will follow it to the end of that trail. Be in my office at nine tomorrow, and I'll issue the liaison officer order. There is no time to be lost."

Collins returned downtown. He avoided the Army and Navy club and went to a hotel so that he could be free to think over all that had transpired since that morning. But he had little success, for hardly had he entered the dining room when he heard his name called. He turned and saw Ralph Grimes, a major in the air corps reserve, a man with a keen, satirical mind, who wrote feature stories on aviation and made Washington his headquarters.

"Jack Collins!" said Grimes, with pleased surprise. "What luck. Here I thought I'd have to eat dinner alone. Come over to my table. Thought you were pushing the crates around at the Boeing place."

"Oh, I needed a rest," Collins grinned. "And I wanted to get far enough away. How's the writing game?"

Grimes shrugged.

"Fair. I'm gunning for a lieutenant-colonelcy and then some active duty. I have a fair drag, you know. I know all the gang here in Washington." The conversation drifted into flying subjects, unusual flights, narrow escapes and the one and a thousand things that pilots talk about. Grimes rose first.

"Lot of work to turn out tonight. See you soon—and I'll bet you have something up your sleeve besides leave, you old fox."

Collins thought swiftly. Not even his own comrades were to suspect anything, the general had said. Then he thought of the liaison officer trick, and laughed.

"To tell the truth I heard of a plum," he said. "I took a chance on picking it—didn't even ask the Corps Area Commander permission to come here."

Grimes looked curious, but Collins bade him a cheerful good-night without further explanation. He was suddenly tired, and when he went to bed he slept soundly.

CHAPTER TWO

HE WAS AWAKENED at eight. After dressing, he glanced at the morning newspaper which had been left under his door. Then his head swam, as his eyes rested on the flaming headlines:

FOUR AIRCRAFT FACTORIES ROBBED!
FIFTY AIRPLANES STOLEN.
NO TRACE OF CROOKS FOUND.

A most stupendous robbery of four airplane factories was carried out last night in four widely separated parts of the country, and at precisely the same hour. Fifty airplanes were stolen, including ten pursuit planes just completed for the Army by the Boeing Company; six pontoon Hawks; ten of the latest bombers; and the remainder fast commercial types, including four tri-motor transports.

The amazing robberies were accomplished in exactly the same manner at each factory. A strange transport plane landed silently with dead engines on the test field at each factory, all four of which

were a mile or two from the nearest city. Watchmen were overcome, two being seriously wounded and one killed outright. Then fifteen men from each plane threw open the factory doors, pushed out the planes and hurriedly started the engines. The strange transports carried powerful lights by which each of the stolen planes was flown off the field. The transports then followed.

Perfect familiarity with the factories and location of doors, planes, etc., was shown by the robbers, according to the watchmen. Each of the robbers was fully masked, and no names were spoken.

At a late hour no word had been heard of any of the missing ships, except that one unit of six planes landed at a Government intermediate field, forced the caretaker to unlock the fuel supply house, and took off again after refueling their planes.

Federal, State and local police officials are investigating what is certainly the most startling and unusual robbery in history.

Collins' eyes were bulging as he finished reading.

He sat down weakly and stared at the paper for several minutes. Gone—all those ten ships he had just finished testing! That hurt worst. That he should have tested each one of those beautiful ships so thoroughly for a gang of criminals, instead of for his brother pilots in the Air Corps. For he had no doubt that this was another coup of the mysterious Air Crimes, Limited.

THEN SUDDENLY he jumped to his feet, grabbed his cap, and dashed for the elevator. He arrived at the Air Corps offices ten minutes later and hurried into the aide's office.

"I want to see General Farrington," he said breathlessly.

The aide gazed at him oddly, with a coldness that Collins did not understand.

"He is waiting to see you," he replied. "In fact, Captain Collins, you will consider yourself under arrest, according to his orders.

"Arrest!" gasped Collins, staring. "Why—what the devil—"

"That is enough, captain," said the aide, icily. "The general is waiting!"

Utterly bewildered, Collins followed him into the general's office. Farrington was standing at a window, gazing out into space. He did not turn for a moment, but when he did his face was drawn and pale.

"Captain Collins," his deep voice boomed

accusingly—"What do you know about the robbery at the Boeing factory last night?"

Collins was taken completely aback. Was Farrington losing his mind?

"Why—nothing, sir," he faltered. "How could I—I—"

The General's cheeks flamed into an angry red.

"Don't lie, sir!" he shouted. "You know damned well you had a part in that despicable affair. Sneaking away on leave—after seeing all was dear—dashing to Washington to put that much distance between you as an alibi. Why you—"

He choked for an instant and his hands clawed the air wildly. Dumbfounded, Collins could only stand and look from him to the aide, who was watching him like a hawk. He had been brought to Washington to be framed? Was Farrington crooked himself? But no, that was unthinkable. What then? He found his voice with an effort.

"General—please believe me. I was as amazed as anyone when I read of that—"

"Where are those ships?" Farrington broke in with a roar, as his breath came back. "My God! To believe that an officer, an ace, one of those I trusted most, should turn out to be a crook—a dirty, damned crook!" Something seemed to snap in Collins' brain. The room swam for an instant. When it stopped he was standing before Farrington with doubled fists, words strangling him, fighting back a terrible desire to smash those fists into the face that glared back at him.

"Take that back, sir," he cried, and his breath was almost a sob. "Take it back. Not even you, sir, can say that! Take it back!"

The aide caught at his arm roughly. Collins threw him off.

"Stand back—captain! You forget—"

Collins whirled savagely.

Crash! The aide went spinning backward, striking a chair with his head. From where he lay he let out a shout:

"Orderly—get the guard—"

Collins turned back to the general. And in that second the strangest thing of all happened. Farrington's enraged look was gone. In its place there was an expression of pity and regret. He made one brief, warning sign with his eyes, then the angry look came back as the aide struggled to his feet.

"Place Captain Collins under close arrest in the inner office," he directed coldly. "When he has calmed down, I will talk with him alone."

CHAPTER
THREE

HALF AN HOUR LATER the door opened, and Farrington came into the room where Collins was detained under guard. He dismissed the orderlies.

Collins was watching him with mingled resentment and eagerness. What had that signal meant? What lay back of that bitter attack?

Farrington came close to him, looked cautiously about the room, and then laid a gentle hand on Collins' shoulder.

"My boy—I know your feelings, but I must ask you to forgive me. They had to believe I distrusted you. You saw the newspapers. Of course you knew nothing about this. You didn't dream of that, nor I. It was too colossal, too immense for me to foresee.

"But it showed me one thing—that Air Crimes, Limited is a vast organization. It has many expert pilots.

The very fact that those ships have vanished from sight shows they have gone to incredible lengths in preparation, and will stop at nothing."

"There is only one way to break the power of this ring. These criminals will need more pilots—especially experts in night flying and in fighting. I believe they will be glad to add to their forces when they can get a man of your ability, and your nerve."

"But, general—" Collins cried impetuously.

"Wait—I know it is repulsive to you, but it is your duty, sir." The general's face was stern now. "This is war, Captain, war as dangerous as that in which you gained those decorations." He indicated the D.S.C. and flying cross ribbons on Collins' military blouse. "Collins, you must make a great sacrifice for a while. You are going to leave the Army under a black cloud—disgraced in the eyes of your comrades. And they must not know the truth until you return, successful."

Collins paled at the import of Farrington's words.

"You mean—kicked out, sir?" he whispered, hopelessly.

The general nodded sadly. "As far as the rest of the world will know, yes. It is the only way you can ever

pierce the inner ring of that organization. As Captain Collins of the Army you wouldn't have a chance now. They will be on guard against any ordinary kind of investigation, even by experts. But as Jack Collins, ex-captain of the Air Corps, once a star pilot, but now an outcast, bitter and resentful, perhaps even smarting for revenge, you will probably be given a chance to join that gang."

"In plain words, sir, I shall have to be a spy," said Collins, dully.

"A spy, Collins," the general agreed gently. "A spy chosen because his chief believes him the best man for a supreme test. Now one last instruction. You cannot communicate with me again. It would be fatal to our plan. When you have learned what we want, and are ready to act, go to any Air Corps unit, or Army post. See the Commanding Officer and tell him this: I am X-13. They will be secretly ordered to obey the instruction of X-13. Have you enough money to carry on?"

Collins nodded silently.

"Then that is all. We can only hope for success. Are you ready, my boy?"

"Ready, sir," he said, and smiled. They shook hands gravely. Then Farrington stepped to the door and threw it open. The aide stood outside.

"ONE MORE CHANCE, Captain Collins," snapped the general, and his face was again a hard mask. "Tell me who is back of this robbery."

"I don't know anything about it," said Collins defiantly, though his heart was like lead.

Farrington turned to the aide. "Bring a sheet of paper and a pen," he ordered. Then he looked wrathfully at Collins. "I know you are guilty, Captain. I will not have a lying traitor in the Corps. Take your choice now. Sign your resignation, or I shall Order a general court martial."

With hands that trembled with no effort on his part, Collins wrote the brief words that separated him from the Service which was to him his whole life.

Farrington snatched up the paper when he had signed.

"It will be accepted for the good of the service!" he said sternly. "Now get out of here. And if you are seen in that uniform after today I shall order your immediate arrest."

Collins stumbled through the anteroom, where officers and clerks eyed him curiously. The general had made no attempt to lower his voice. Already the

brand of shame was upon him—a brand that could not be more real and soul-sickening if he had actually committed the crime linked with his name.

He hurried from the building and went quickly to a men's shop, where he purchased civilian clothes and accessories. Then he made his way back to his hotel. A newsboy's cry caught his ears as he entered the lobby. He saw his picture on the first page of an extra.

"Army pilot linked with Air Robbery," ran the headlines. Underneath was a story of his supposed treachery, and his resignation "for the good of the service."

He felt suddenly faint, and realized that lack of food was contributing to his state of misery. But he could not face the crowd in the dining room, so he had his dinner sent up. While he was eating, a reporter called on the phone. Collins hung up without a word. A little later there was a knock at the door. It was Grimes.

"Jack, old man," he said with genuine regret in his voice, "I know this is a damned painful affair—but I also know they're crazy. And I thought maybe if you'd give me your side of the story I could help by defending you in my papers."

Collins gripped his hand.

"That's white of you. Grimes," he said gratefully. "But I can't prove a thing. I'm not guilty—but Farrington never gave me a chance." Then he remembered the part he must play and went on in a more vindictive voice. "The old hypocrite, pretending to be my friend all these years, and then to let me down like that Disgraced—thrown out for the mob to laugh at. What can I do now? Who'd hire me? I'm done for—damn him!"

GRIMES LOOKED on as Collins strode up and down the room, making vitriolic attacks on the Chief and all those connected with the Corps office. Collins had a definite purpose. Grimes might speed matters by publishing the story of his resentment. But when he stopped talking Grimes shook his head.

"I wish I could help, Jack," he said, "but I've been thinking it over. The people will raise a howl about this. Somebody had to be the goat, and you're it."

He stood up.

"I'm going down to Headquarters. This robbery is a big story and I'll have to see what I can worm out of the boys. See you later. Maybe I'll have some news."

But there were no further developments that day. The stolen planes remained unfound, in spite of

frantic attempts by Government and private planes to search out their hiding places. The press still made wild guesses as to the motive back of the robbery, but not one suggested what Collins knew to be the truth. Probably official Washington was keeping the lid on that story, fearful that a panic might result if all were known.

The next day Collins went across the Potomac to Hoover Field and to Washington Airport, though he dreaded meeting those who knew him. Aided by one or two highballs, he managed to play the part of the broken, disgraced officer, telling his story several times with a revengeful spirit that plainly impressed his listeners.

Then, suddenly sick of it all, he was leaving the field, head down and eyes on the ground, when he heard a sneering laugh.

"Well, look at our pretty captain," jeered a voice. He looked up and recognized Milt Bowers, a cadet he had recommended for "washout" when he was an instructor at Kelly Field. Bowers had an ugly grin. "How the mighty have fallen," he said tauntingly.

For the second time in two days something gave way in Collins' brain. Blind-mad, he lunged forward. A sledge-like fist crashed on Bowers' jaw. He went down like a rock. A crowd gathered hastily.

"Just stunned," said someone, leaning over the inert figure. "Collins, you'd better get out of here. Don't blame you, old fellow, but—"

His rage gone, Collins nodded wearily and strode away, oblivious of the stares and whispers of the crowd. That night the story was on all the front pages.

"Just a quarrelsome bum, to read that," he said listlessly to Grimes, who had dropped in. "I saw friends—fellows I even taught to fly—all turn their heads when they saw me today."

"It's a rotten mess," Grimes said. "I hate to say it, but the worst of it is that they've tagged you for life. It's the dirtiest trick I've seen played, and I've seen plenty in Washington. But moping will drive you crazy. Come on out in my car and get some fresh air."

Collins assented absently. How long would he have to wait before the unknown air bandits approached him? Or would they ever try to reach him? Perhaps Farrington's plan was too fantastic after all. His sacrifice might be in vain.

"We'll head out beyond Silver Springs," said Grimes, as they started. "It's good to get away from the town."

CHAPTER
FOUR

HALF AN HOUR LATER, as they drove slowly along a quiet Maryland road, the engine began to miss. In a minute it stopped entirely.

"Out of gas," said Collins, tersely.

"The gauge shows plenty," returned Grimes. "I'll put a rule in the tank." He went to the rear and came back. "Hell, Jack, you're right. That blamed hand doesn't work."

"There's a gas station half a mile back," said Collins. "I'll go and get some gas."

"No," objected Grimes quickly. "You stick with the car. I'll go back. Sorry this happened."

Busy with his thoughts, Collins failed to notice the silent approach of a huge car ten minutes later. Not till he saw a dark figure alongside did he realize that he was not alone.

"Keep quiet," warned a low voice, and the side-lights gleamed on the ugly snout of an automatic. A half-mask covered the man's face. "Now get out of there."

Collins obeyed without argument. Another masked man joined the first, and the two followed him to the limousine. The curtains were drawn, and the front curtained as well, so that the interior was completely black.

One of the gunmen passed his hands swiftly over Collins' body.

"No gat," he reported tersely. Then to Collins, "Get inside."

"Good evening. Captain," a guttural and strangely emotionless voice greeted him as he stumbled into the car. "Sit down at the right. If you are sensible we shall not bind you. Otherwise—"

"Oh, you've got me," said Collins sourly, but his heart was leaping. This was no ordinary holdup. Was Farrington's plan to succeed, after all?

The two gunmen climbed in swiftly, and the car started. Collins strained his eyes to penetrate the darkness, but failed. In a second the voice spoke again. There was something vaguely familiar about its heavy

tonelessness, something of an unspoken menace, too. The atmosphere was charged with menace—and Collins' realization of it had nothing to do with the two gunmen, though once he felt a pistol touch against his side.

"Captain Collins," said the unseen speaker. "My time is of utmost value. I cannot waste words. You have been dismissed from the Army. What do you intend to do now?"

Again Collins felt a thrill of exultation. But his voice was hard and bitter as he answered.

"I don't know. I haven't thought much about it. Maybe I'll go into commercial flying—or I might try it over in Europe."

"No one will want you," replied his questioner. "You have been disgraced before your whole nation. That will follow you everywhere. I have an alternative. I can offer you power, eventually wealth and perhaps even a chance to revenge yourself on those who wronged you. For I know you had no part in the Boeing affair."

"You know?" repeated Collins. "How?"

"Because I planned it myself," was the startling reply, but still in that deadly quiet tone which made Collins uncomfortable. "I know every man who took any part in it. Collins, I am the head of a powerful air legion. I have fine pilots—but I need men who have fought. I know more about you than you might think. And I can use you very well."

COLLINS' MIND was racing from one expedient to another. Here beside him was the man he had been sent to find, whose capture would mean the exposure and downfall of this strange air legion. Yet he was helpless. His first wild hope of making the leader a prisoner died as quickly as it had come. He could only go on with the plan. But he must not seem too eager.

"What if I refuse?" Collins said.

"You will be set free. The newspaper men would not believe your story. Besides, the Government is not anxious to have the truth come out. And you have not learned anything that could harm us. If you agree, I promise you a life never lacking in adventure, and one leading to wealth. Against that you have nothing but the sneers of the public."

There was a long silence. Then Collins laughed suddenly, a laugh that was more of a bitter snarl, as of one who breaks at last under some heavy strain.

"All right, I agree," he said in a hard voice. "I'll join."

The gunmen relaxed with exhaled breaths. The leader was silent. Collins' nerves tightened. Had he misplayed it, agreed too soon? Did the other man suspect?

"Be very sure, Collins," came the toneless voice finally. "Remember, there is no going back."

"I'm sure," said Collins harshly.

The car moved again, evidently along a near-deserted road. When it stopped, Collins was blindfolded and then led by one of the gunmen for some distance, up a flight of steps and into a house. In a moment the blindfold was removed. He found himself in a well furnished drawing-room, with tightly curtained windows.

"Wait here," said his guide briefly, still wearing his mask. Then he disappeared into another room. Ten minutes passed. Collins could hear sounds of movement, but he saw no one. Then the door at his right opened silently. He turned nervously, and stared as he saw the woman who stood in the opening.

She was little more than a girl, and rarely beautiful—with Titian hair and eyes like sapphires. Just now those eyes were wide with fear. She put a warning finger to her lips.

"Who are you?" she whispered. Her eyes darted to the door beyond him. "You are the one who just came with them?"

Almost hypnotized by her beauty, and the pleading, fearful look in her eyes, Collins nodded mutely.

"You must get away!" she said hurriedly. "You do not know—you cannot know the terrible thing you are about to do. Quick, you must!" she said, in a frantic whisper. "In a minute it will be too late."

SOME INSTINCT told Collins they were being watched. He wheeled suddenly. In the door stood a commanding figure, that of a tall man, with broad shoulders, but whose face was hidden by a gray mask. Again Collins felt the subtle menace he had experienced in the car. The girl gave a cry of fear.

"Nita," said the newcomer—and Collins recognized the heavy voice of the leader. "Why are you here?"

Before she could answer there was a sound of a commotion outside. Then a shout, followed by a crash. One of the gunmen dashed, into the room.

"Dicks, two cars of 'em, Chief!" he panted. "We've got to beat it!"

The leader sprang to one side of the room. He touched a mantel, and a section near it swung open. A

stairway leading downward was disclosed. From out in the hall came a sound as of breaking doors. The girl and the gunmen ran into the passage. The leader turned and thrust a pistol into Collins' hand.

"Close this mantel—and stand them off!" he ordered swiftly. "I'll clear you later."

A thought raced into Collins' brain. Kill the leader—now! It might be his only chance to succeed. But even as the idea seethed into his mind there came another thought, a wild inspiration. Something was wrong about this. Things had happened too quickly. This was but a test, a frameup to see if he had lied!

He gripped the pistol. The leader was staring at him through the gray mask.

"I'll stop them!" he snapped. Then the mantel rolled back and Collins turned to meet the invaders. He could hear them charging along the hall. He raised the automatic. It was a desperate gamble—if he were right he held the whip hand. If not, he would be shot down instantly.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE DOORWAY was filled with burly men. A hard, red face glared at him behind a gun. The gun flashed as he pulled his own trigger. The man stared stupidly, and slumped down. Others surged through the door at Collins. He fired twice, then hurled the gun in the face of the nearest man. The victim howled in pain and covered his jaw. Collins whirled on another, landing his fist on an unprotected nose. The man went over backward. Then four of them were on Collins at once, pinning him down, till he was quiet at last, breathless.

"Where did they go?" demanded one of his captors. "Come through or—" Collins glared back at him. He was sure of the situation now, and under it all he was enjoying himself for the first time in three days. The man blustered again—but Collins remained silent.

Then the mantel slowly opened and out stepped the leader, followed by the girl he had called Nita and the two gunmen. At a signal the men released Collins. He got to his feet, his face a picture of astonishment.

"But you—I don't understand—" he stammered.

"It was only a test of you," explained the leader in his toneless voice. "You are to fill an important place, Captain Collins—and there was still some doubt of you. Two men have tried to shoot me down in this Berne test, not realizing the pistol I gave them was filled with blank cartridges. They were of the Secret Service. You will note I say 'were'," he added impassively.

The man who had been struck with the pistol lay groaning in a corner. Another massaged his nose tenderly. The leader glanced at them through his mask. There was no pity in his manner.

"Get bank to your port," he ordered curtly. Then he turned to one of his gunmen. "Have the ship ready to take off in ten minutes."

Fifteen minutes later Collins was looking down from a huge three-engined Fokker into the light-dotted darkness that was Maryland. In the cabin were the girl, Nita, the two gunmen who seemed to be the leader's constant bodyguard, and four others who had been in the ship when the pilot taxied it up.

At first sight of it, Collins began to understand the ease with which this criminal air legion carried out its plans. The three Wasp engines were completely muffled, so that they could hardly be heard. The special-pitch propellers created only a slight drone, not sufficient to attract attention. An elaborate radio sending and receiving outfit was installed, and special powerful lights for landing. Yet nothing marked it as a criminal ship.

The leader himself made the take-off, and Collins saw in a moment that he was an accomplished pilot. He was still curious to see the face of this strange man who had created such a fantastic organization.

Collins caught Nita's gaze on him once—an oddly speculative look that made him wonder whether she believed completely.

He glanced over at the girl again. She was staring out of the window, her delicate profile etched against the lesser darkness outside. Who was she? What part did she play in the game, so close to the one they called "chief"? An adventuress—of course. Yet the thought caused him to frown. An adventuress, yes—but what a beautiful one. He was still gazing at her when she turned suddenly and caught his glance. He could not be sure in the dark, but he thought she smiled faintly.

JUST THEN the pilot who had been sitting beside the leader came back and signaled him to go forward.

He climbed into the second pilot's seat. The leader's mask was gone, but huge sponge-rubber goggles covered his eyes. Collins experienced the feeling again that he had seen this man before, someplace, and he racked his brain to think where.

"Take the ship," directed the leader, after a moment. "Hold the same course."

The huge ship cruised on swiftly at 140, with Collins at the controls. He found it perfectly balanced and extremely responsive, though the utter silence was disturbing to him. Finally the leader spoke.

"We move rapidly in the legion, Collins. And after tonight I shall have little time to explain matters. Not that you are to know everything; I am the only man in the legion who has the key to all its operations. You are to be at Base A, which is my headquarters. There are three other bases, but all four operate independently, unless I order otherwise in an emergency. Few know the location of all four; you will not need that information. Nor do all those in the legion know each other. I find it best that only those be acquainted who must work together closely.

"At Base A you will find a base chief, a squadron leader and two flight commanders. There is a unit of fighting planes including some of the Boeings you yourself tested. Then there are four bombers, two transports like this ship, and several miscellaneous planes. The base has a complete repair shop, and some things you will find unusual.

"The routine work of bringing in narcotics, liquor and aliens is on a regular schedule. The transport planes will be guarded from now on by fighters, and we can operate more boldly. But that is only one phase of the legion's work.

"I have chosen my pilots carefully. Some are Americans and some are not, but not one has had less than 1500 hours. And the mechanics are experts, for our ships must not fail."

Something in the man's voice stirred Collins as he listened. In spite of that ever-present hint of menace, there was a vibrant magnetism that had a fascination. Clearly, this mysterious flyer had within him a tremendous power, a mighty force of leadership, though Collins sensed that he ruled through the great fear he had created in those under him.

"At present almost all our ships are concentrated at the bases," the leader continued. "A few scout pilots are situated at ordinary airports, where they pose as private owners who fly for sport. They report to base chiefs, and receive orders from them. Later, I intend to

keep more ships outside the bases, for only the fighters and bombers can be told from the average commercial ship.”

HE GLANCED at the dash clock and then turned to signal the radio operator. Collins looked back and saw the operator busy with his key. Five minutes Later a beacon blinked three times from a point almost directly beneath. The leader took the controls from Collins and sent the big ship down in a wide spiral, its engines hardly throbbing.

In a moment boundary lights were switched on below. A large clearing became visible, apparently an ordinary airport, with the typical small hangar and office shack. The field itself was situated in a sparsely settled region, for there were no houses or lights to be seen nearby. Collins was puzzled. Surely this could not be the base.

But the leader was landing, turning on the powerful wing lights as he came in. He landed with the ease of a master, applied the brakes, and then swung away from the hangar toward the end of the field. The boundary lights went out at once. The ship taxied for 300 feet and stopped near a fence, beyond which was a clump of brush.

The leader shut off the gas, and the engines died in a few seconds. Dim figures waited outside the ship. Then an amazing thing happened. As though on some gigantic hinge, a section of the ground including part of the fence and brush before them raised slowly upward, leaving a gaping dark opening a hundred feet wide.

Collins gasped.

The leader was watching him, in a kind of bored amusement.

“Just a large cantilever door,” he explained with a shrug of his heavy shoulders. “It’s the same kind as they have at some of the airports. We simply mounted the fence and brush on it so it would look like the rest of the field.”

“And the ships are down in there?” exclaimed Collins.

“Certainly. There’s nothing so strange about that. The Germans had a similar ’drome in the war, more crude, of course, because they had to hide it only from airplanes. You could land here and never find this door unless you knew where it was. All the operating mechanism is below.”

A ground crew appeared from the aperture, and began pushing the Fokker toward the incline, using flashlights to guide them. The leader jammed on the

brakes as the ship began to roll. It stopped in a few seconds, in what Collins saw was a huge subterranean hangar. There came the sound of an electric motor, closing the big door behind them.

“Main lights!” shouted a voice. The underground base flashed into brilliance. Collins was struck dumb at what he saw. This was no crude cave. It was a well engineered excavation, the roof reinforced and supported by steel uprights, the floor of macadam, and tiers of storage rooms, shops and ammunition supply sheds along both sides. At least a dozen planes were arranged in orderly fashion in the center. In the rear were what appeared to be quarters. A radio shack was situated near the entrance, and beyond that two or three offices. Blowers whirred softly, bringing in fresh air from some outside source.

“Good Heaven!” muttered Collins. “I don’t see how you ever built it without everyone knowing about it.”

“That was a problem,” admitted the leader. “But you can do much when you have millions behind you. We bought up the few farms nearby. This is a section seldom traveled, besides. Then we started a small airplane factory about an eighth of a mile from here. That gave us the excuse to bring steel girders and supplies along the road.

“The digging was begun from inside that factory—which has since failed and has been abandoned. We trucked away the dirt at night. When it came to mounting the door we put a camouflage tarpaulin over the opening, so that it couldn’t be seen from the air. It was hard work—but the results have already justified it.”

CHAPTER SIX

HE STEPPED BACK into the cabin. Followed by the girl, Collins, and the two gunmen, he went straight to the nearest office. Here Nita and the guards disappeared. In a moment the leader turned and removed his huge goggles, revealing a face of rare strength and determination. Collins started as he saw the steel blue eyes fixed on him from under bushy brows.

“Reichendorf! Good Lord, I thought you were dead!”

"On the contrary, I am very much alive," said the man he had called Reichendorf. "You should certainly remember that I am very hard to kill."

Collins' thoughts sped swiftly back to an eventful day in 1918, when he and the stalwart German now smiling sardonically at him had fought an unforgettable battle over No-Man's-Land—a battle that had ended only when his rudder had been shot away, and Reichendorf himself had gone spinning down with a bullet through his shoulder. Both had lived through their crashes, to meet on American soil ten years later, when Reichendorf had attempted the Atlantic flight alone and had never been seen again.

"We seem destined to be fighting," said Reichendorf, with a grim and heavy amusement. "But this time it will be together. As for the hop across the Atlantic, that was only a move in this game. I had to vanish without creating any question. What more logical way than by an ocean flight?"

He made a careless gesture.

"I went out to sea in the afternoon—and same back at night, flying high. Hidden at another base, I read the notices of my death with great interest—and was free to make the final plans for the legion. Tomorrow you will go on your first raid, so you had better get some sleep now. Maletti will give you your orders. Nita will explain anything it is necessary for you to know. I shall not be here."

He paused, then turned back.

"One last point. Reichendorf is dead. I am 'The Chief' to those about me. That's all. You will have room C, straight down this runway. Goodnight."

For an hour Collins lay and tossed while he tried to accustom his mind to all that had taken place. It seemed a weird dream, but he knew it was not. Nor was his work made simpler, for the cleverness with which the underground base had been built showed that the legion contained brilliant men. It would be almost a miracle if he succeeded where experienced Secret Service men had failed.

His thoughts of the girl, Nita, were strange ones. Her beauty had already cast a spell over him, yet he told himself she could be nothing but a criminal. He still felt that she vaguely distrusted him, that she sensed something wrong. He was still wondering about her when he fell asleep.

THE NEXT AFTERNOON he had his first taste of action, a welcome change, though he flew against law and order, a gangster of the air. The base chief, a dark

wiry fellow named Maletti, outlined to Collins and two other pilots the plan they were to follow. Collins found himself liking the little base chief, whose eyes had a reckless gleam as he spoke.

Four ships were to be used, two Boeing fighters, a Lockheed cabin plane, and a single-engined bomber.

"A car is waiting near the richest bank in this town," said Maletti, pointing to his map. "The bomber will approach the town at 2000 feet, and will roll its wings as a signal to those in the car. The plane will then dive steeply toward this street. Go clear below the level of the buildings before dropping your gas. Drop the four small explosive bombs to scare the crowds. The men from the car will already be in operation, using gas masks as they leave the bank."

He turned to Collins.

"Here is where you come in. As soon as the bomber is clear of the street you will follow in a fast dive to 20 feet, to drive traffic to both sides, and open up a lane for the car. I will follow in the other fighter. The Lockheed will stand by to land at the field marked '1' on this map. When the car approaches, the Lockheed will land and take on six men, and then get back to Base A as quickly as possible. In case of trouble you and I will protect that ship. The bomber will return at once, after releasing the gas." Collins felt his breath coming faster. Try though he might, he could not repress a savage thrill at the thought of a fight. At Maletti's signal he climbed into one of the Boeings. It had been equipped with guns. The base chief took the other, and in a minute they were taxiing up the incline into the sunlight. When Collins looked back he could not even see where the door had opened.

At first realization of his freedom, he began to plan some way to turn it to account. He could pretend to be forced down, race to the nearest airport and radio an Army squadron and ground forces to go to Base A. Then he saw the futility of that. Reichendorf was gone, and there still remained the three other bases. No, he must wait till he knew the location of all four, and could be sure of the Chief.

At 12,000 feet they cruised westward for an hour. A town appeared ahead, and Maletti zoomed as a signal to the bomber. All four ships descended quickly, the bomber straight to 2000 feet. Collins' fingers were tense as he pulled his throttle back and sent the fighter whining earthward. Soon he could see the streets, could tell the intersection where he knew a powerful car was waiting.

The bomber's wings tilted twice, then with a burst of smoke it dived at full throttle.

A wide street lay ahead. Straight into this street roared the bomber, while ahead of it terrified motorists swerved cars to the curbs and pedestrians fled madly into nearby buildings. A black object hurtled downward, then another.

COLLINS, SHOOTING like a bullet after the bomber, saw the huge gas-bombs strike. Staring over the nose of the racing fighter, he saw nearby pedestrians stagger and collapse as the gas reached them. The street flashed up at 250 miles an hour. The wires shrieked as he hauled back the stick and sent his ship like a screeching arrow through the wide thoroughfare. The last remaining motorists leaped from their cars and ran. It was over in a few seconds, and he was zooming up at a dizzy angle to a thousand feet.

A cold perspiration poured over him, but he hardly knew it. He looked down and saw Maletti streaking through the deserted street like some strange winged monster in search of prey. Beneath Maletti's fighter he saw a car moving at terrific speed. Maletti zoomed up steeply. A minute later, the Lockheed settled for a quick landing in the field near the highway.

Five minutes afterward the car stood deserted. The Lockheed was climbing in a fast turn. In its cabin were the six gunmen with the loot from the bank. The bomber was a speck against the eastern sky, as it headed for Base A.

Collins stared back at the city. A mad confusion reigned in the main street. Along the highway leading to the deserted car clouds of dust grew rapidly, as pursuers followed the already cold trail.

In obedience to Maletti's signal, the Lockheed pilot and Collins climbed high once more, till a broken layer of clouds lay between them and the earth. Half the distance had been covered when through a break Collins saw something that made his heart leap.

Not two thousand feet below was an Army P-1, climbing steeply, while a few miles away, and lower down, cruised two other planes, apparently slow cabin ships.

The alarm had been broadcast!

This was not unexpected. Maletti had mentioned it before starting, but he had not counted on a pursuit ship. Where had it come from? Had Farrington found out something of the legion's plans, or was it chance?

In that P-1 was one of his comrades. In an instant Maletti would see him and the battle would be on. And the P-1 was no match for the other ship.

Collins jammed his stick forward and dove. He reached for his gun trips without taking his eyes from the Army ship. Then a swift glance backward told him that Maletti had seen. He was coming down in a fast dive, engine wide open.

The P-1 swung around valiantly to meet this unequal attack. Collins' hopes rose. The maneuver had not been expertly done. Perhaps he could succeed, and Maletti would never know.

He tripped his guns for a short stuttering burst. Back into his blood came the old heat of war days, visions of a black cross between his ring sights, of hurtling ships that suddenly blazed into flaming coffins.

The P-1 was trying desperately for altitude. Collins could see its insignia now. It was a National Guard plane. That was the answer. Armed hastily, and flown by a reserve pilot short on fighting practice, it was an easy target for his guns. But he held his fire, carefully keeping out of the other's range. Maletti had pulled up and was waiting, leaving Collins free.

The P-1 shot up in a loop. Collins' guns rattled above the engine roar, but he fired into space. The P-1 was in an Immelman now. It fell off, suddenly, so that Collins had to kick hard rudder to avoid a collision. And in that second he had his chance. His fingers closed hard. Again his guns flamed, this time straight across into the P-1's propeller. With a screech the blades shattered, one piece ripping through Collins' wing, leaving a jagged tear.

Vicious bullets traced a line of holes through the under wing before Collins could relax his taut fingers. The P-1 fell off and dived like a wounded bird.

He watched it pull out in a few seconds, gliding on down toward a field below. Maletti swept by at 50 feet, his hand raised in a gesture of approval. The two commercial ships had turned tail and left precipitously.

COLLINS SETTLED BACK in his seat, wiped his forehead and pointed his ship after the Lockheed, which had not deviated an inch from its course. In half an hour they had reached the Base, landing after one last survey of the sky to see that no one observed their movements.

"Good work," said Maletti enthusiastically, when they were once more in the hidden hangar. Then he became serious. "I am sorry that fool had to be there. You brought him down like a master, but it means a nasty feud with the Army, though you didn't bump

him. We'll have to be on guard. But our ships are as good as any of theirs."

Nita had come in while they were talking.

"You shot down an Army pilot, then?" she said, and Collins thought he detected surprise in her manner. Perhaps this would make her less suspicious of him.

"He landed safely," he replied, indifferently. Maletti went on to attend to the money brought in by the Lockheed. Nita glanced after him and back at Collins. This time he was sure he saw a faint relief in her eyes.

"I am glad you did not kill him," she said softly. Then she quickly changed the subject. "I have to go on a special mission tonight. You can help me—if you will."

"Another try-out?" he asked, ironically.

"Please forget my part in that," she pleaded earnestly. "I didn't like it. Tonight will be different. I need someone to go with me to Cleveland. The Chief has asked me to find out the country's reaction to today's raids."

"Raids?" Colling said.

"Base D was operating, too," she explained. "They just reported by radio that they succeeded. But will you go with me?"

"Certainly," he said. "It will be a relief to get away."

CHAPTER SEVEN

THAT EVENING they left the base by one of the smaller exits, which opened into the abandoned factory. A closed car was waiting on the nearest road. In two hours they were in Cleveland, where they dismissed the car until midnight.

They found that the day's raids and the unsolved factory robberies held everyone's attention. Hotel lobbies buzzed with excited conversations. Newspaper extras were filled with wild accounts. Collins smiled grimly as he read of his dive into the street behind the bomber.

"The Chief will be pleased," commented the girl later, as they sat in the Music Box restaurant, listening to a dance program. "The raids served their purpose."

"What do you mean?" demanded Collins.

"Why, to cover up the smuggling, of course. That's where most of the money comes from. But to keep people from thinking about that the legion does a few spectacular tricks now and then. And, of course, whenever there is big money involved, the Chief will take on any kind of a deal."

She glanced at him sidewise. He again had the feeling that she had not accepted him as easily as Reichendorf. Yet if she really suspected him, why had she not told the Chief?

"Nita," he exclaimed, "how did you ever come to join this outfit?"

When she looked up she had an odd expression, as though she were laughing inwardly at him.

"You don't seem to belong to—well, with a gang like this," he blurted out.

"Lots of people aren't what they seem," she said quietly. Then she gave him a suddenly mocking smile. Her quick change of mood bewildered him. He thought of Reichendorf and his jaw hardened. What was this girl to him?

She was, watching him.

"What is it?" she asked, as he scowled.

"I was thinking of the Chief," he said curtly. "Perhaps he would not like to have you here—dancing with me."

She stared for an instant, then flushed.

"Oh—I see," she said, and her voice became listless. "And I was thinking—" she broke off abruptly. "I am tired. We had better be starting back."

Collins thought he saw tears in her eyes. But when he looked again her face was hard.

THE RETURN to the base was made almost in silence. Reichendorf was there. Nita reported briefly and went to her room. Reichendorf caught Collins' eyes following her.

"A beautiful woman, Collins," he observed, and the menace in his voice was not subtle now. "I sometimes wish she were not. She distracts the attention of my men—until they are reminded."

Collins stiffened. A hot retort was on his lips, but he checked it and left the room.

Two uneventful days passed. Collins avoided Nita, though it took an effort. He hoped for a chance to follow Reichendorf when he went to the other bases, but none came. He decided to search his office at the first opportunity. The information he sought might be hidden there.

Everything seemed favorable on the evening of the second day. Reichendorf was absent. Maletti was to lead a night raid on the rum patrols near Detroit. Collins was not listed to go. But at the last moment Maletti hastily sent for him.

"Thompson just got sick. You'll have to take his place. We're going to sink every patrol boat on the border. Three of the Fokkers are going along. They'll get full loads while we're busy and we'll guard them on the way back."

Collins hid his disappointment and climbed into Thompson's ship. It was the same Boeing he had flown before. It had been equipped with small but powerful landing lights, and its engine was muffled. Four small bombs hung under the wings. He glanced at his guns and saw they were ready for action.

As they were about to leave he saw Nita standing nearby. There was a curious expression on her face. Somehow she seemed less gay. He was watching her when she turned and saw him. Her eyes widened in some emotion he could not fathom. She moved as though to come to the side of the ship, but just then Maletti gave the order to start. Collins turned and reached for his throttle. When he glanced back Nita's eyes were still fixed on him with a look he could not understand.

TAXIING UP THE incline, the six ship formation left the base with the precision of a military unit. From ten thousand feet Collins watched familiar country slip by, until at last the lights of Detroit appeared in the distance. Slightly below, the three Fokker transports headed off into the darkness toward Canada. Following Maletti's lead, Collins and the other Boeing pilot glided toward the river.

Collins was trying to think of some plan for saving the Government boats without arousing suspicion, when without warning a searchlight beam stabbed a long finger of light up into the dark. Then a second beam, and another, until six powerful rays were shooting back and forth across the three planes.

Collins rolled out swiftly at the first sign of danger. But the roar of bursting shrapnel he had expected did not follow. Maletti and the other pilot had pulled out of the beams when suddenly there came a blinding glare overhead. Collins' head came back with a jerk. He stared upward.

Parachute flares! Two—no—four of them, now. All swinging slowly down, flooding the three fighters with their intense brilliance. For a moment he was

dazed. Then he frantically shoved the stick forward, diving at full gun. Above the hum of his muffled engine came the sound he had expected—a sinister roar, like the angry drone of gigantic hornets.

He twisted his head around. Out of the pitchy black above the flares burst six Army combat ships, nose down in hot pursuit.

They had been betrayed!

His ship was trembling from the terrific dive, but he dared not pull out yet. Maletti had followed his example and was hurtling after him, two ships almost on his tail. The other pilot attempted to zoom out into the protecting blackness beyond the flares. Like an avenging monster, the nearest Army ship roared after him. Collins saw its guns send twin flames spitting straight toward the fleeing ship.

The legion pilot looped, swinging over furiously. But his pursuer had guessed his thought. He yanked his straining plane up on its tail and poured a blast of fiery death into the doomed fighter. The Boeing fell off crazily, then burst into flames, roaring on down into the night like a meteor. Fast as it came, it was not as fast as Collins' ship, which shuddered in its mad, screaming dive.

Soul-sick, Collins turned his eyes away, unable to watch that falling inferno that was a pilot's funeral pyre. Perhaps, in a few seconds, he, too—

What savage irony! To be shot down by those he loved best, brother pilots of the Corps. His ship was faster. He could fight back. But the thought left him cold. He could not fire on them. There was only one chance.

A searchlight beam flashed across his face, then back. It held him easily. He was pointed straight down that blinding white ray. But the Army ships dared not fire now—they would shoot straight into the light crews.

His lagging altimeter showed a thousand feet. He gritted his teeth, braced his feet on the rudder and pulled the stick back. God help him if wood and metal did not stand that test. A screeching as of a tortured soul rent the air, as quivering wings and wires shrieked under the strain. A faintness came over him. He forced his waning strength into one last pull at the stick. His body drove straight down into the seat. Then came oblivion.

CHAPTER
EIGHT

SECONDS LATER, his eyes opened and he stared dully for an instant. Only by a mighty effort could he clear his sluggish brain. Out of that amazing dive the ship had zoomed up at a sharp angle. It was out from under the flares, slipping steeply on one wing. He seized the stick and righted the ship. Then he shot a look back of him.

Close by a searchlight truck a blazing wreck sent orange flames leaping into the sky, while men ran frantically from its searing heat. Malletti? No—that must be the other pilot. He stared upward. Only one flare remained lit. Under that eery light a fierce battle was being fought. He saw Maletti, fighting like a fiend with two ships that closed in on him. Like winged phantoms, the three planes looped and dived while red-hot guns sped fiery tracers across that ghastly sky.

But where were the other Army ships? Surely Maletti had not brought them down. The answer came in a vivid flash from the north. There, by another flare, he saw two of the legion Fokkers, twisting and diving in desperate attempts to escape their snarling enemies. An Army ship closed in. One of the huge transports wavered, then plunged headlong out of the ring of light. A hellish flame blazed up from the ground. Collins shivered. The pursuit ships swept down on the remaining Fokker, like hunters mad for the kill.

Collins climbed up steeply in the darkness to where he could watch Maletti. Once the base chief almost reached the fringe of darkness under the flare, but his attackers drove him back. Reason told Collins to race back to the base, to learn what had happened there. Perhaps in the excitement he would have his chance to carry out Farrington's orders.

But suddenly he knew he could not turn his back on Maletti. Criminal though he was, the little base chief would have fought for him. He must save him. Yet the Army pilots must not be endangered.

He jammed open his throttle and soared above the single flare, which by now had drifted down to 2000

feet. With a quickening of breath he sent the Boeing straight toward that glowing light. If he missed the 'chute and caught the flare it would mean a horrible death by fire. The flare leaped out at him. He jerked the wing up. It raised too far, and the tiny 'chute shot beneath him.

He flashed down into the light before he could turn. Two hundred feet away Maletti was fighting a losing battle. Collins dived straight into the melee. The Army pilots, startled, swerved off to one side. Maletti shot up into an Immelman, raking the nearest ship as he did so. It slipped off wildly and dived out of control. Bitter regret filled Collins until he saw a white spread of silk blossom out above the falling plane. The pilot had jumped.

AN OMINOUS THUDDING of tracer bullets into his wings snapped his mind back into action. But Maletti was already seeking the tail of the other ship. The Army pilot frenziedly tried to roll out into the darkness. Collins, free for the moment, zoomed up again at the flare. This time he did not miss. His speeding wing severed the 'chute as though by a knife.

The flare dropped. He smiled grimly. No pilot would try to fight against an enemy he could not see. Both Maletti and the Army pilot were safe now. He climbed straight to 8000, circled to get his bearings and was off like a bullet for Base A.

When he reached the base he looked carefully, but there was no sign of disturbance, so he landed. Within a minute he was telling his story to Reichendorf. The Chief listened, white with fury, his compelling eyes searching Collins' face. He made no comment, until Collins had finished.

"There is a traitor among us," he said, and his voice was thick with suppressed rage. "But it will be easy to find who he is."

Then his eyes narrowed.

"You took someone's place. Why?"

"Thompson was sick," Collins told him.

Before Reichendorf could reply, the door guard came running in.

"Maletti is back, Chief," he reported. "His ship's full of holes; and he's got a bullet in his leg."

Maletti was carried in to a hastily improvised first-aid room. He smiled up at Collins, wanly.

"You saved me, my friend. If I had had your nerve in that first dive, I would have escaped, too. But I pulled out too soon, and they got me."

Reichendorf looked on coldly.

"Time for talk later," he snapped. "We must get this traitor, before he can tell any more. Thompson must be the man."

Maletti nodded wearily.

"It seems likely. He really looked sick, but he may have been acting." Out of the corner of his eye Collins saw Nita standing in the doorway. Her face was pale. She smiled at him, then went over to Reichendorf and handed him a radio message.

"This just came from Washington," she said.

Reichendorf glanced at it and his scowl deepened.

"Why didn't he tell us before? We would have been on guard."

He sent for the main door guard. "Inform the ground lookout to be ready for Washington ship C-8941. It will arrive in about an hour."

A legion man was coming from Washington. And he suspected someone in the legion! Was that someone himself? Had Farrington's trick been discovered. Would the surprise attack on the border be attributed to him as a result?

ONE HOUR. In one hour he would know—and if his guess were right, he would be caught like a rat in that underground hangar. Then he thought of the rear exits. He might escape yet. But he shook his head. Even if he succeeded, his absence would be a warning. Reichendorf and his force would evacuate Base A and would carry on from the other three. He would have to go back and confess his failure to Farrington.

He had an hour yet. He might do a lot in that time.

He left Maletti's room soon after Nita, and went over to his ship, pretending to examine it for damage from the flight. In a few minutes Reichendorf came out. He glanced at Collins, and paused. "Collins, you have twice performed valuable service for the legion. I shall not forget it."

He turned to the door-guard.

"Call me the instant the Washington ship arrives."

Collins watched him go to his room. Two minutes later he stole cautiously to Reichendorf's office. The entrance was in darkness, as nothing on that side but the radio room was used at night. Then his heart sank. A light showed faintly under the door. But who could be there? He tried the handle gently. The door was unlocked. He opened it a fraction of an inch and peered inside.

Nita was seated with her back toward him. She was busily copying from a paper that lay before her. At her elbow was a map. Collins strained his eyes and

saw that four crosses marked as many locations on that map. One was Base A. His blood went pounding through his veins. The map of the bases!

What was Nita doing with it? Probably making sure of her hold on Reichendorf, by gaining the information he guarded so jealously. She worked feverishly with pencil and paper.

Suddenly Nita stiffened. Before he could move she whirled around. A pistol, snatched up from the table, was pointed at him. Her eyes had a terrified expression.

"Oh—it's you!" she whispered, and there was relief in her voice. Then she stared. "What are you doing here?"

Collins stepped inside and closed the door. He hated the part he was going to play, but he had no choice now.

"I wanted to talk with you. I saw you go in there. Why did you look at me so strangely before we took off tonight?"

A wave of color rushed into her cheeks. She lowered the pistol. Under his questioning gaze she averted her eyes for a moment. He made a rapid movement, and seized the gun. She gasped.

"Keep quiet, Nita," he commanded, though he could hardly meet the hurt eyes that stared at him. "Now give me those."

"Wait," she whispered. "You don't understand. I—"

He snatched up the map and the paper. Her copy was crumpled in her hand.

"Nita, I don't like this," he said doggedly, "but I've got to tie you up and gag you."

"Please, oh please listen to me," she begged. "I have something to tell you. I am not really one of them. I came here to steal the plans, like you."

Collins was stunned. He gazed at her open-mouthed.

"You must believe me," she cried, catching at his arm. "We have only a few minutes left. We can both escape, before the legion's spy comes from Washington. We must hurry—"

CHAPTER
NINE

BUT EVEN AS SHE SPOKE, there was a sound of steps outside. The girl's eyes dilated in fear.

"Give me the gun," she whispered hurriedly. "And trust me—oh, please believe in me—"

There was no time for more. The door swung open and Reichendorf stood watching them, his steel blue eyes glaring from under their bushy brows. Behind him were two or three men.

The pistol in Nita's hand did not waver as she covered Collins. She smiled, a smile that was more a sneer.

"So you see, Captain—you are not so smart after all." She turned to Reichendorf. "Chief, I saw our new pilot steal in here and followed him. He was working fast."

She indicated a corner of the rug which had been lifted. A small section of flooring had been removed, disclosing a tiny compartment.

Reichendorf's face was a bitter mask.

"So it has been a frameup, Captain?" he said heavily. "No wonder you were not hurt tonight. Perhaps it would have been better if you had been."

Collins was silent. There was still a vague doubt of Nita in his mind. Was it possible that it was all a lie? Then he remembered that look she had given him. No, surely she had told the truth.

"I have to thank you for one thing," said Reichendorf, with grim mockery. "I shall not be foolish enough to leave these things here again."

He took the map and paper from Collins and put them in his pocket. One of the mechanics came in just then.

"The ship's in from Washington, Chief," he announced.

Collins saw a frightened look cross Nita's face. She stepped toward the door. But Reichendorf stopped her.

"Wait a minute, Nita, I want to see you."

She nodded, but as her eyes met Collins' he saw in them a sudden hopelessness.

HE HEARD THE main door opening. Someone came along the passage. He glanced up, and started in astonishment.

"Grimes!" he cried.

Grimes smiled easily and looked about the room. He nodded to Reichendorf, and then his eyes rested on Nita.

"You are too late," said Reichendorf. "I've already caught the traitor. There he is."

Grimes shook his head.

"No, Chief, for once you are wrong. I'll vouch for Collins. Here is the one you want."

Nita stood up, deathly pale, as Grimes made her an ironic bow.

"I—I do not understand what you mean," she exclaimed.

"Surely your clever mind has not failed you," Grimes answered. He turned to Reichendorf. "I got wind of the leak this afternoon—but I couldn't find what they had learned. I did squeeze out the information that it was a woman operative. I checked up and even got a description from a private source of mine. Result—Nita equals Secret Service."

For once Reichendorf's self control failed him. He lunged toward the girl, and would have struck her down, had not Collins and Grimes thrown themselves between.

"Wait, Chief," counseled Grimes calmly. "You can take care of her later. I've something else to tell you—alone."

Reichendorf hesitated, then drew back, though his venomous eyes did not leave Nita's face. He gestured to his men, who were watching with open mouths. "Take her to her room. Lock her in, and keep a man on the door."

Grimes glanced over at Collins.

"I'll try to see you before I leave, Jack. I'll be starting back in half an hour."

Collins nodded and went out, glad to be alone so that he could think. He understood now the part Grimes had played in getting him into the legion. It was fortunate he had acted his own role so well. But Nita—she was in serious danger, and suddenly he found that danger more important than any orders of Farrington's.

Grimes would keep Reichendorf occupied for but a few minutes. In that time he must save Nita. He went to his room, slipped a pistol in his coat pocket and stepped into the passage leading to Nita's room. A burly mechanic stood before the door.

"The Chief says to watch out she doesn't try to kill herself," Collins said bluntly. "He's got a score to even up."

"She ain't got anything to bump herself with," said the mechanic. "I took her gat."

"Better look in and see, anyhow," advised Collins, carelessly.

THE MECHANIC took out the key and turned toward the door. Collins' strong fingers instantly gripped his throat, cutting off any outcry. The man struggled fiercely, but Collins' fingers were like iron. In a few seconds he slumped to the floor. Collins dragged him into the nearest storage room, bound and gagged him, and rolled him into a corner under a wing section. Then he hurried back and opened Nita's door. She uttered a startled cry.

"Jack—they will catch you here. You must go away—quickly!"

"Not without you," he whispered. "I got the guard—we'll try the rear exits."

"We can never make it," she said hopelessly. "There are three men on each one. You might—alone. And it is your duty. Here—"

She held out a crumpled paper. "They did not search me—I managed to hide my copy. If you can escape you can have all bases attacked at the same time."

"But I can't leave you here—they'll kill you!" he protested. He caught her to him. "Nita—I love you. I can't do this!"

"I am glad," she said softly. She clung to him for a moment, and then resolutely pushed him away. "You can not save me by staying here. Perhaps—if you hurried—"

Her voice faltered. She made an effort and smiled bravely. Collins held her close for an instant, then turned and ran.

But despair took hold of him at the first exit. The guards had just been ordered to let no one through. He was desperately considering the chance of shooting his way out, when he heard an engine start. He hurried back toward the entrance.

Grimes was pulling on his helmet. He was standing beside one of the legion Boeings, talking to Reichendorf. Collins stole forward in a shadow and waited. The mechanic warming up the engine stepped from the ship. A gong rang and the huge cantilever door began to rise. As it opened fully Collins leaped from the shadow, his gun in his hand.

A shout went up behind him. Grimes turned. Collins struck with the butt of his pistol, full in Grimes' face. Grimes went down like a log. Collins vaulted into the ship and seized the throttle. Instantly bedlam reigned.

"Close the doors!" Reichendorf thundered. The door started down. Collins gave the ship full gun. It lurched forward and shot up the incline. Behind him a pistol roared. Splinters flew from the nearest strut. He bent low as bullets whined by his head.

At the top of the incline a running figure hurled itself at his wing tip. He leveled his automatic and fired. The man fell and rolled down the slope. The ship raced out onto the field and up into the cool air. Five seconds later he was in a steep climbing turn, while from the gaping entrance below streamed a score of widely excited figures.

The fever of his triumph cooled swiftly. The thought of Nita made him fearful again. There was a chance that his escape might make both Grimes and Reichendorf believe they had been wrong, that he had been the traitor all along. But he must lose no time. Selfridge was the nearest pursuit base—but Selfridge was too far. Suddenly he remembered. The First Pursuit Group was at Columbus, for maneuvers. He snatched out the map from its pocket, and set his course.

ONE HOUR LATER he shot down across Norton Field, zooming low as a signal for lights. As they flashed on he slipped in for a fast landing. He ran into the field office. A sleepy sergeant came to life in a hurry at his cyclonic entrance. Two minutes later he was pounding on the door of the Commanding Officer's house.

"What the devil do you want?" demanded a querulous voice, after a minute. A pajama-clad figure opened the door. Collins recognized Major Sullivan."

"Collins!" said Sullivan, amazed. Collins gave him no time for thought.

"Listen—I'm X-13!" he cried. "Get that—X-13. And there's a hell of a job to be done in a hurry."

"You—X-13!" exclaimed Sullivan. "By God—I knew there was something fishy about your kickout."

"We haven't a second to waste," snapped Collins. "Is the First Pursuit Group here?"

"I can scare up six of 'em," said Sullivan. "The rest are out on a party."

"Give me the six," Collins demanded. "And send for the rest. I'll be at your office—I've got to radio Washington."

CHAPTER
TEN

THE FAINT LIGHT just before dawn was creeping into the sky as he and his six excited followers roared off of Norton Field for Base A. He had radioed Farrington the information on the bases, and had rushed through a long distance call to insure their instant delivery. No matter what lay ahead, he had cleared his name.

He had tied a white streamer to the Boeing's tail, so that the Army pilots would not confuse his ship with one of the legion's. As they neared the base he anxiously scanned the sky, in which dawn was lifting now. No ships were to be seen. Had Reichendorf fled to another base, anticipating the attack? It seemed likely, for he could not know that Collins knew the location of the others too.

He circled over the base, and then in his anxiety about Nita, he forgot caution and started a rapid descent. The six P-1's followed. In a moment some instinct told him to look up. His blood almost froze. Nine legion ships had shot out of the gray clouds high above.

He signalled frantically to his formation, and they separated for the fight. As he zoomed steeply for altitude he cursed his stupidity for falling into the trap. This time it would be a fight to the finish. But Reichendorf was already on top!

GUNS BELCHING, the legion swept down on them. In a flash the air was filled with twisting, diving ships. Collins pulled up savagely as the leading ship closed in. A second Boeing skidded around to his tail. Reichendorf had marked him for first blood!

He snapped his stick full back. His fingers pressed his gun trips. The ship stood on its tail, raking the nearer Boeing as it raced by. Then he was over, and the pilot behind was kicking out to avoid collision. The first ship slipped off, but came around instantly in a vicious turn. Collins recognized the glaring pilot. It was Reichendorf.

Beyond him, Collins saw a P-1 fall off suddenly. A Boeing dived almost into the spinning ship, and yellow

tracers drilled mercilessly into the helpless plane. The doomed pilot stood up in a last attempt to jump, but fell back in an inert heap as the hail of slugs found his heart. The P-1 thrashed wildly for another turn, then burst into flames.

Bitter anger gripped Collins as he swerved around to meet Reichendorf's attack. A life for a life! Reichendorf would pay for that!

But there came a sudden interruption. Down on Reichendorf's tail shot a P-1. Collins ground his teeth Reichendorf was his! But the break was short-lived. The second Boeing that had dived on Collins charged in madly, unseen by the Army pilot. In the same moment Reichendorf zoomed up and over into an Immelmann. The P-1 whirled about in a rapid reversal, directly into the path of the legion ship. With a terrific crash that drowned every other sound, the two planes met head on at 200 miles an hour.

Locked in a smoking mass of wreckage, the two ships hung trembling for an instant. As in some dreadful dance, the mass began to rotate downward, slowly at first, then faster and faster, till it became one dizzy whirl.

Collins hastily tore his eyes away and looked for Reichendorf. Another Army ship was engaging the legion chief. Collins was zooming up to join the fight when he saw a second P-1, caught in a fierce crossfire between two legion ships.

With a fast half-split he kicked about, checking his roll as the first Boeing flashed into his ring-sights. In savage exultation, he watched his guns trace a deadly pattern across the fuselage, straight into the cockpit. The pilot's body jerked crazily. He slipped against the side of the plane. Collins swerved clear as the Boeing plunged into a last sheer dive.

Freed of one attacker, the P-1 made a fast recovery. The legion pilot had cut sharply to the right, putting the P-1 between himself and Collins. Before he could swing again to the P-1's tail, the Army pilot shot up in a tight loop. The Boeing followed, but as Collins skidded around to bear dead on he desperately kicked away. The P-1 flattened out swiftly, guns blazing. Blood streamed down the ghastly face of the legion pilot.

As Collins watched, a look of terror seemed to freeze on the dying man's face. The legion ship shook under a sudden explosion. A tongue of flame licked out from the engine. The ship fell off and spun down toward the mist-covered ground. As it fell, a crimson blaze streaked clear to the tail. Below, the angry red of the dawn matched that lurid light.

Collins made a quick survey of the sky. Four P-1's remained against six legion ships. They must break those odds swiftly. But even as he dived for the nearest Boeing he saw Reichendorf send his attacker careening down wildly on one wrng. The Army pilot leaped out. His parachute opened at once. Down swept Reichendorf. Sick at heart, Collins saw him pull up as he passed the swinging figure, and pour two short bursts into the unfortunate pilot under the 'chute.

WHITE-HOT RAGE shook Collins. Like a demon, he hurled his ship after Reichendorf. Off to his left, a legion ship broke away from the fight with the remaining P-1's and cut in at him. It was a fatal move. Collins's savage lust to kill gave him a super-power that robbed him of all caution.

In one flashing turn he whirled straight into the path of the Boeing. The legion pilot zoomed up in terror. The Boeing's wheels passed a scant yard over Collins's prop, but in that moment his guns tore into the heart of the legion plane. He was about in an instant, and his withering fire sprayed the already crippled ship. Then he was gone, plunging once more at Reichendorf, who had by now regained his lost altitude. Behind him, the Boeing faltered and began its earthward dive of death.

The two Boeings came together madly. Reichendorf seemed to have lost his cold self-possession in that strange, frenzied battle above the mists. Guns silent now, both pilots fought grimly for each other's tail. Collins' rage had gone—in its place a cold hate that was far more deadly. In tightening circles the two ships swept around, like fighters seeking an opening.

Reichendorf struck first. Kicking his nose down from a vertical bank, he skidded swiftly and caught Collins before he could pull out. The cowling splintered a foot from Collins' face. An instrument dial shattered to bits as he yanked up out of Reichendorf's fire. Reichendorf dived beneath him, but zoomed again before Collins could come around.

Collins snapped over into an Immelmann. The legion ship was in his sights now. He saw its tail quiver as both his guns spat across the short space. Reichendorf looped crookedly, coming in at an angle. Bullets thudded into Collins' wing, then back as he jerked out in a fast split-S. He felt a fiery pain shoot up his left leg. His foot trembled on the rudder, but he gritted his teeth and forced it firmly against the pedal.

Earth and sky swam before his eyes. He fought against the nausea that gripped him and hurriedly

looked for Reichendorf. The legion chief was on his tail! Even as he frantically shot upward a line of sinister black holes crossed the fuselage before his eyes.

His faintness was forgotten now. He must get Reichendorf! He hurled his ship into a steep turn, closing on the legion chief. His wounded leg was numbing fast, but he held it hard on the rudder. Reichendorf hauled up in a sharp right split to come around. Collins raked him hard in passing. Reichendorf slumped visibly for a second, then pulled himself up again in the cockpit.

Collins' teeth were set in his lip. Blood oozed out and down his chin. He must not let go now—not till Reichendorf was gone!

In a last effort he swerved around on his wing end and stared with dulling eyes through his sights. Reichendorf twisted off easily to the right. Collins felt the faintness coming fast. His right foot jammed hard against the rudder. But almost at the same instant his injured left leg gave way. The Boeing lurched around in a violent skid. Reichendorf's ship loomed up swiftly. They were going to collide! But Reichendorf would go, too!

HE CLOSED HIS throttle in a vain attempt to clear. His fingers froze to the gun trips as Reichendorf's white face stared fearfully over at him. Suddenly a horrible set smile came into that face. Reichendorf had fought his last battle! The cockpit swept from Collins' view as his propeller crashed into the other's tail. Half-conscious, he felt the steel blades grind into the legion ship, while his faltering fingers reached for the switch. His engine raced and shook as the propeller flew into bits.

Then he was falling, while below hurtled a gyrating wreck in which a dead man sat at the stick, Reichendorf was gone. The Army pilots had been avenged. He watched the ship plunge into the layer of mist that shrouded the earth. A dull boom drifted up to his ears, and the mists were pierced by an ugly yellowish blaze.

His ship was diving fast. He eased it out gently as he neared the earth. The ground leaped up through the haze. He leveled off blindly. The plane struck and bounced. When it hit again, it ground-looped wildly. A wheel gave way and the ship went up on its nose. Coffins crashed against the instrument board and knew no more.

CHAPTER
ELEVEN

WHEN HE OPENED HIS EYES he was lying on a stretcher. Someone was kneeling at his side. Gradually his blurred vision cleared.

“Nita!” he cried. “Thank God—you are safe!”

There were tears in the girl’s eyes. “Oh, Jack,” she whispered. I have been so afraid. I saw all those ships crash—and burn. And each time I prayed it was not you.”

“Reichendorf is dead,” he told her. “But he almost got me.”

“It is all over,” she said. “Five other Army planes came after you landed. Two of the legion pilots were brought down, prisoners. The others were shot down. And the other bases have been captured. We just heard from Washington.”

Coffins turned his head and saw that a force of soldiers and state police had taken over Base A and the field. At one boundary of the field a wrecked plane was still smoldering.

He closed his eyes for a moment.

“How did you get away?” he asked suddenly.

“They were too busy to bother about me,” she explained. “After you escaped they went crazy. Reichendorf didn’t know about your having the plans. He thought if he stopped you he’d still save the legion. While he and all the pilots were in the air, waiting for you, the police came. The field caretaker squealed on the promise of a light sentence, and let them into the Base. They freed me and arrested the others, after they found who I was.”

“So that is the end of Air Crimes, Unlimited,” said Collins, musingly. “I can go back now and prove I was not a crook.”

“I knew all the time you weren’t,” Nita said. “I knew that I couldn’t—”

She stopped, blushing.

“Couldn’t what?” said Collins.

“Fall in love with a crook,” she said softly.