

THE HURRICANE KID

by ALFRED HALL STARK

Meet Crashing Kid Sperry, the Crack-Up King of the Caribbean, on the payroll as a curiosity. He got sore at the boss, became an air bandit and flew with sensational audacity right into a raging hurricane. Did he come out alright? Read it and see!

IN O FLYING TODAY," Slim Geraghty growled. "Know what that means, Kid?"

He jerked his head toward the wind indicator. It was behaving wierdly on the top of its staff.

"Nope. That is, not exactly."

Kid Sperry cocked a weather eye skyward, then eyed the sausage distrustfully.

"Well I suppose you do know that this is the hurricane season, doncha? Seen the weather reports?"

"No," the Kid admitted, "But I think the old man's looking at 'em now. Anyway, I'm going in, so I suppose I'll get a look at 'em."

"Me, I don't have to look at 'em. That sausage tells me all I want to know. There'll be no cloud climbin' done in this storm so it's me for a look at the town. Wanta come along?"

"Nope. Can't do it, Slim. Gotta see the old man."

"What's amatter—still holdin' out on you?"

"Well—yes."

"Swell chance you got o' collectin', Kid," Bill grinned. "Why hell, the old man would have fired you long ago if he could've paid you off."

"I know it," the Kid agreed ruefully. "But there's worse things than being fired with six months' back pay in your jeans. Anyway, I'm gonna hit him for it again."

"Lots o' luck, Kid. So long!"

As Slim swung off along the road to town the Kid made his way toward the temporary shack that housed the Haitian office of the West Indian Air Transport Company. He'd hated to tackle the job ahead of him but a hollow feeling around the pit of the stomach steeled him to it.

"It'll be the same old story, I suppose," he grumbled. "I'll hit the boss up for back pay and he'll

loan me a buck to buy rice and beans. Rice and beans, beans and rice—that's the romance of the tropics that they forgot to put in the book. Gee, and they say they still eat beefsteak back in New York!"

He paused to look at a strange plane that squatted on the rough strip of stubble field that was Haiti's lone airport. Guests had been known to drop in before from time to time but the Kid could not remember ever seeing this one before A Junkers F. 13. Aluminum paint glistening freshly on her metal fuselage and single, underslung wing, she was the airworthiest looking job the Kid had seen hereabouts for an age. And she didn't look like a pleasure craft either—too businesslike.

"Phew! That's a ship and a half, I'd say. Now with a sweet little cloud-bustin' crate like that—" The Kid's critical gaze drifted over to the *Santa Ana*, the high-flying white elephant of the West Indian outfit. White paint peeling from her fuselage, her wings patched and loggy, the big, tri-motored Keystone looked cranky and awkward beside this shiny new European plane.

BILL RUDD, the only mechanic the company could afford since his shady past made him leery of law courts and he stayed on in the hope of collecting his back pay sometime in the dim future, left off tinkering with the motor on the right wing of the big plane and strolled over to the Kid. As the youngster saw Bill's inevitable wad of tobacco roll over into one cheek out of the way, he set himself for the usual appeal.

"Listen, Kid—"

"Don't say it," the Kid cut him off. "I haven't got a thin dime on me."

"I knowed that aforehand. Twouldn't be natcheral if ya did. But keep yer shirt on. I wasn't agoin' to mooch ya, this time," Bill grinned. "Jes goin' to ast ya if yer life's insured, tha's all."

"Naw. What'd I go and give a lot o' jack away to insure my life for, even if I had any—money, I mean. Why? What's on your mind?"

"Well, that there motor on the right's about through, is my guess. You kin tell Slim he kin be lookin' for it to conk out on him most any time now. I already told the boss, not once but a million times. That there motor's done nine hundred hours. She shoulda been yanked out an' overhauled six months back.

"But the boss says wait till we got another one to put in her place.

Guess he's waitin' till the Wright people starts givin' 'em away to the trade. And t'other two ain't runnin' none too rosy either, if ya ast me," Bill added dubiously. "Say, where's Slim?"

"Off to town on a binge," the Kid replied.

"Yeah?" Bill's eyes widened. "Say, the old man'll be wilder'n one o' them Haitian cacos that drifts in here onct in a while. I think he's figgerin' on sendin' the *Santa* on to San Juan today, spite o' the weather."

"The hell you say!"

"Yeah. Seems like there's somethin' in the wind about a contract fer carryin' air mail. Both the *Santa* and that Heinie bus has got dummy mail sacks in 'em, one fer Santo Domingo City and t'other fer San Juan, Porto Rico. Looks like a race to decide who's to get the contract."

The Kid whistled softly.

"Sure does. Say, Bill, if we could get that air mail contract it would put the company on its feet. You and I might even stand a chance o' collectin' some o' that back pay."

"I'll tell the cockeyed world," Bill chimed in. "And that ain't the half of it. We'd get new planes on the run, hangars, a steam roller on this so-called landing field, an' maybe even a coupla o' real helpers for yours sincerely."

"But hell, Bill," the Kid was suddenly wistful, "if it's to be a race between old *Santa* and that Junkers bus our crate hasn't got a prayer. Far as that dough's concerned we might as well check out right now. Still, I wish the old man'd give me a chance to fly her!"

"You!" Bill was indignant. "Think he wants the *santa* cracked up like ya done to that little Waco job we had? The big baby's the on'y crate we got left now. Swell chance you got!"

Bill roared with laughter. Crimson anger leapt to the Kid's face and he recoiled as if from a blow. He thought Bill would have been the last one to kid him about that unfortunate accident.

"So's your Aunt Fibian," he growled as he made for the office.

Still seething with anger the Kid pushed noisily through the door of the shack and the next moment was sorry he had not knocked. The boss was in solemn conference with three men.

ALL of them were strangers to the Kid, who looked curiously around the circle of serious faces, his own face scarlet with embarrassment. There was an elderly man with a pale, lined face, and a thin lock of white hair smoothed down across his forehead in an ineffectual attempt to hide a bald spot.

The other two looked like foreigners, and the Kid instinctively linked them up with the strange plane outside. One of them was young, with hard, weather-beaten features. He wore the leather tunic of a flyer. The other was somewhat older, a vast hulk of a man with bristling iron-gray hair and a fat, florid countenance.

The older of the two looked up as the Kid came into the room and the youngster noticed that he had remarkably bright blue eyes. His whole bearing betokened good humor and the habit of laughter. His nationality was no longer in doubt the moment he spoke.

"And dis young man—*ach*, vot a sudden fellow—iss it von of your men, Mr. MacSweeney?"

He turned to the company boss. MacSweeney laughed.

"Oh him? That's Crashing Kid Sperry, the Crack-up King of the Carribbean. He can be absolutely counted on to crash a plane when no one else can. He's on our payroll as a curiosity," MacSweeney said deprecatingly.

"Kid, this is *Herr* Heinzmann, who's competing with us for the air mail contract between here and San Juan, and," he added sadly, "it looks like he'll get it.

"And this is *Herr* Muller, his pilot. And this gentleman is Inspector Hatton of the Postoffice Department, who's here to see how we propose to deliver air mail to Santo Domingo City and San Juan."

Muller nodded dourly, Hatton murmured a gruff "glad to meet you," and Heinzmann, much to the Kid's astonishment, got up and put out his hand.

"I wish to compliment you, Mr. Sperry. Your chief he tells me you are a bick dumpell for crashing mit dot liddle Waco airship over by Porto Rico but Mr. Beel, your mechanic, he tells me in vot conditions vas she dot machine, and I know if you vasn't a fine pilot you vould haf killt yourself. I always gif credit vere she iss due."

THE KID looked up at the big German suspiciously, suspecting sarcasm, but the man was evidently in dead earnest.

"Sure has all the earmarks of a white man even if he is a Heinie," was the Kid's silent comment as he shook hands.

"Thanks," he murmured aloud. "I think you must have caught the wrong impression about that plane, Mr. Heinzmann," MacSweeney growled. "She was in perfect running order when the Kid took her up. If it hadn't been for his eternally damned smart alec monkey business—"

"Look here, Mr. MacSweeney," the German shook a fat finger at the Kid's boss, "I belief in being vot you Americans call a goodt schport. Dot plane is gesmashed already. Votever you make of hardboildt remarks to young Sperry don't bring her back, nichtvahr? Vhy go on making him de life miserable? It 'vasn't his fault anyway, vas it, Kid?"

"No sir, it wasn't. As I told Mr. MacSweeney before taking off that day—"

"Never mind, Kid," MacSweeney cut him off sharply. "We'll drop the subject."

"Hear dot? Dot's vot I call being a goodt schport!" Heinzmann chuckled in high glee.

The Kid felt like falling on the German's neck just then. He knew MacSweeney didn't mean half he said, but it was beginning to get the Kid's goat just the same.

Things were going from bad to worse with the company and MacSweeney's tough breaks ran mostly to his temper. Now his last faint hope, the hope that he might land the contract to carry air mail in this corner of the Caribbean, was going aglimmering in the light of this competition from the German company. No wonder the boss carried around a perpetual frown.

"Well, it's settled then—a gentlemen's agreement," the boss was saying. "There'll be no take-off until this storm blows over. It would be suicide to try to make it through to San Juan before." He thumbed over a sheaf of government weather bulletins. "Mr. Hatton, do you think your department would countenance an emergency change of schedule?"

"Frankly, I don't know. I'll make my report as favorable as possible. Of course what the Postmaster General would like to see is an exact schedule, strictly adhered to—"

"Vait!" the big German boomed. "Dis conference iss vot you Americans call de bunk. No agreement iss necessary between Mr. MacSweeney and me. Ve vill each take off ven ve can, and dot's all dere iss

to idt. Mr. MacSweeney vill not his plane away trow and neider vill I, so I suppose ve both vait until de hurricane finishes."

MacSweeney thought for a moment.

"You're right, Heinzmann," he said. "There's no need for further discussion. Each of us will run his own outfit and we'll take off as soon as we think weather conditions permit. Maybe the storm will pass to the North of Porto Rico and won't strike here at all.

"Kid," he added, "you'll go as relief pilot, as usual. No work, and you get a look at all the pretty scenery—that ought to make you happy. Is Slim standing by?"

The Kid scowled as he heard the words "relief pilot." That's all the boss had felt like offering the Crack-up King for weeks now.

"No sir, Slim's in town. Don't think he expected to come back out here today. Say Mr. MacSweeney," he added impulsively, "If you'd only give me a chance on the *Santa*—"

"Hell! You! Not today, Kid Crasher. Some other time maybe, when we've got crates to burn and crack up!"

The Kid colored to the roots of his hair. The boss had been riding him for weeks and the constant insults were getting under his skin. The three strangers were watching him narrowly, curiously to see how he took it. There was a taunting sneer on the hard face of Muller, the German pilot.

A red haze rose before the Kid's eyes. He felt every nerve and muscle in his body go taut and quiver. For a minute he could not speak, anger choked him. He could only glare down at the boss.

MACSWEENEY looked up at the transformed face of his young pilot in surprise. A startled glance told him he had reached the limit with the Kid.

"Mr. MacSweeney," the Kid's face was convulsed with rage, "this has gone far enough. You owe me—"

"No need to go into that, Sperry," MacSweeney cut him off with a nervous glance at Hatton and the Germans. "There's not a chance in the world today. Tomorrow perhaps—"

"Wait a minute!" the Kid rapped out, his mad idea carrying him along on wings that left common horse sense far behind, "I was just going to tell you that I'm collecting!"

"Wh-a-at?"

"Yes sir, I'm paying myself off—right now. Guess the old *Santa* will just about square our debt. It might be beatin' the gun a little on all the legal technicalities but you're the guy that'll have to worry about that after

I get her over to Kingston, Jamaica. Yes sir, *Santa* and me are going places, and I don't mean manana!"

"The hell—"

Kid Sperry saw MacSweeney's right hand dive into the drawer of his desk. But the Kid's hand was quicker. It made the trip to his hip pocket and back in just ten seconds less than no time. On the return trip it gripped a small, short-snouted object of blue steel and MacSweeney let whatever it was that he had in his hand fall back into the drawer with a heavy thump.

He looked into the gaping muzzle of the Kid's automatic steadily enough, though.

"Act your age, Kid," he said quietly. "Maybe I've been a little hard on you but—say, listen to reason will you?"

The sudden change of tone toward the Kid only served to infuriate him more.

"I've been listening to your kind of reason for a good while now, MacSweeney," he said slowly. "This tomorrow stuff doesn't go over any more. Beside, I'm just aching for the feel of a stick under my hand again.

"Now all of you gentlemen will kindly keep your seats until you hear the sweet sound of three Whirlwind motors passing over this building. That'll be me and *Santa* off for Jamaica. Then you can start running around in circles all you want to."

"Veil Mr. MacSweeney, so far as de contract iss concerned, dis leafs you—how do you Americans say—in de lurch, no?"

THE KID heard Heinzmann's chuckle as he backed out the door. Somehow it made him mad. So Heinzmann thought his German company had that contract sewed up, eh? Well, he'd see!

"All set for gas and oil, Bill?"

"Why—yes, she's full."

The mechanic looked up in surprise.

"Not thinkin' o' hoppin' off are ya? Slim ain't here, an' besides—"

"Never mind Slim. It's me that's flying her. Me, get that?"

Bill's mouth sagged open in stupid astonishment "Did the boss say—"

"He hasn't said no. Come on, make it snappy. Get that gang o' yours onto the props! Let's go," the Kid snapped as he mounted to the cabin of the big ship and dodged forward past the rows of creaking wicker chairs to the cockpit.

As he dropped into his seat he kept one eye glued to the door of the office. There was no sign of movement there so far.

"Hey there you stiffs, snap out of it!" Bill bawled.

"*Oui oui, Monsieur!*"

The two black Haitian boys who served as Bill's helpers stepped forward. Each of them grabbed the tip of a prop.

"Contact!"

The Kid threw the switch over and the three motors coughed and roared into pulsating life.

MacSweeney's white face appeared in the dark frame of the office door. The Kid saw him waving his arms frantically and knew he must be yelling to Bill to stop him. In the brief instant that Bill stared at the boss in bewilderment the Kid gave her the gun.

The plane strained forward hard, and then settled back. Would she climb the chocks before they could stop him? He pumped the throttle once more, desperately.

Out of the corner of his eye the Kid caught a glimpse of the two Haitians, grinning from ear to ear, each with a chock rope gripped in an ebony paw. Not understanding English, they had missed the cause of the excitement entirely and had jerked the chocks from under the wheels as they had been taught to do.

MacSweeney was running toward the crawling plane, brandishing his pistol. The doorway of the shack framed Heinzmann's broad grin. The big ship seemed to pick up speed with tantalizing sluggishness.

"Damn! I forgot—"

The Kid twisted his neck to get a look at the wind sausage. Even as he looked, the wind indicator bellied out suddenly and was torn from the pole, catapulting into the murky air. There was no steady wind then, only those erratic cyclonic puffs that might catch a plane in any stage of the take-off and set her down on her tail in a fatal crash. Kid Sperry swore softly under his breath.

The storm haunted skies boded sudden death and the ground was becoming rapidly more perilous with red spurts of flame stabbing at the Kid from MacSweeney's pistol and Bill, galvanized at last into action, chasing wildly after the plane.

The Kid tugged at his universal control. The *Santa* rose a few inches and then bounced heavily back. A pane of glass in the enclosed cockpit smashed suddenly into fragments and a bullet whined past the Kid's head, burying itself in the instrument board.

AGAIN the Kid tried desperately to raise her from the ground. This time he breathed a sigh of relief. He could no longer feel the bumping of the undercarriage over the hummocky field. She was in the air!

As the big plane rose slowly over the field the Kid

could see MacSweeney shaking his left fist in futile despair and sending wild shots into the air.

"Kind of tough on you to have your harmless, easy-goin' Kid Crasher turn into an air bandit all of a sudden isn't it," the Kid grinned, but there was no humor in the grin. "Maybe he'll thank me for it some day, though," he added mysteriously.

All the resentment the Kid had felt against the pitiful, helpless figure vanished and he felt a vast pity surge up within him.

But suddenly he had other things to think about. A gust of wind caught the ship, big as she was, and hurled her backward. A sickish sensation rose in the Kid's throat at the sudden change of direction.

Breathless, hands clamped over the controls, he waited for her to slip over on one wing. She'd do that and then crash. Backward and upward the *Santa* leapt for what seemed to the Kid's speeded-up brain like an hour.

Miraculously she held an even keel. Now she was going forward, answering to the pull of her three motors. The Kid stared back at the ground. The puff of wind had given her at least a hundred feet of extra altitude! He held the control column back as far as it would come.

"Need plenty of altitude if you're goin' to cut up high jinks like that. And gee, what'll you do when the damned hurricane does break!"

For the Kid had no intention of flying before the storm to Jamaica and a safe haven from the fury of the hurricane.

"Said I was going to Jamaica, did I?" he laughed. "Now why in hell did I say that? I might get there safe, probably would, but then where'd I be, with a stolen plane and no money?"

THE boss had been hard on him but the Kid was for him and the West Indian in a pinch every time and he wanted MacSweeney to know it. After all the old man was fighting for a noble cause, a cause the Kid and all the rest of the legion of Yankee cloud-busters would lay down their lives for—to make America first in the air.

Heinzmann seemed like a good enough fellow personally, but he represented foreign aviation interests. It would be a bitter pill to have to swallow, to see him grab off the Haiti to Porto Rico mail run for the Fatherland, right from under the nose of the West Indian.

"No, Mr. MacSweeney, your air mail's being flown to Santo Domingo and San Juan, on schedule—whether you know it or not!"

The words were scarcely uttered when another gust of wind shook the *Santa*. It struck the plane from the side

this time and every strut and longeron in her tired old body groaned as the big machine was bowled over on its side. The kid brought her out of it feeling weak and dizzy.

Soon as the little white ball in the dial of his bank indicator showed an even keel back went the control column against the Kid's chest and he fought for more altitude.

He knew that these puffs of wind were a phenomenon set up by disturbances in the air many miles from the actual storm center. They were no more the real hurricane than the kitchen spigot of the immense power of Niagara Falls.

"This is really nothing," his troubled thoughts ran. "It's bound to get rougher and rougher. By the time I get her over Santo Domingo City it'll be just plain and fancy hell."

For a moment he regretted the rashness of what he had done. Whatever had been in his mind, it had not been suicide, and that's what it looked like now. But he fought down his misgivings as weakness and drove the quailing *Santa* on and up.

The narrow, winding streets of Port-au-Prince were deserted, the Kid noted. These people knew the signs of approaching hurricanes and feared them with a superstitious dread. The surface of the bay was glassy as usual but the dirty gray-green of the water looked ominous, reflecting the grim warning of the misted sky.

The south shore of the peninsula stretched away in the gloom before the Kid's straining eyes. He had only to follow that shore line for a hundred miles or so to Cape Tiburon, then a water hop of a hundred or so more, steering by compass. Then on to Kingston and safety. He could get there hours before the storm.

If he felt it, it was only to laugh at the thought. No such ignominious flight for him!

Fingers clenched resolutely around the wheel, he turned the nose of the ship eastward. Somewhere off there in the East the worst hurricane ever recorded in the history of the Weather Bureau was crawling steadily toward him over the harried surface of the Caribbean. And the Kid, white lips drawn into a hard line, kept his lumbering charge speeding right into its path. Where would they meet, he and that tumultuous peer of all the demons of destruction? Fervently he wished he had taken a look at those weather reports.

He tried to remember all he had ever heard about the titanic hurricanes of the Antillean islands. A few bits of information came back to him. He knew that such storms usually moved in a great, whirling circle. The wind within the area had been known sometimes

to rise as high as a hundred and fifty miles an hour—a speed unheard of in other parts of the world—but the whole spinning ring never moved along its path at more than fifteen miles an hour.

“That doesn’t seem very fast,” he reflected. “Maybe I’ll beat it to San Juan, if it isn’t too close. But if I ever get inside it, good night!”

MacSweeney and Heinzmann had said there was no chance. And they had looked over the weather reports carefully. What a fool he had been!

The slim thread of hope that still remained was snapped when he realized that head wind resistance was increasing every second. His air speed indicator showed air speed of hundred and thirty miles an hour while a glance at the ground showed he was going much slower than that. The difference was wind! The storm was closer than he had thought.

THE little town of Neiba flashed dimly by fifteen thousand feet below and he knew he was well over the border into Santo Domingo. Flying the straightest course he knew he pressed on toward the capital.

Where the peaks of the Sierra de Cibao should have loomed tremendous on his left, he could just barely make out the foothills in the gathering gloom. The jungle, usually a glossy green carpet, unbroken for miles, was an ugly blackish mass like a glacier of muck that had flowed down over the level land from the mountains. Sky and land vied to see which could look most menacing.

An hour and a half of bucking head winds and Santo Domingo City crawled into view out of the mist. A glance out to sea made the Kid curse under his breath. Ships of all types and sizes were hurrying like mad to make port before the storm broke. Already they had felt its first, fetid breath astern. In half an hour the harbor would be crowded with them.

The Kid remembered that the baggage compartment held a dummy mail sack to be delivered to Santo Domingo City. He brought the ship down in a steep, circling glide.

At five thousand feet he flattened her out, deciding not to land. Seconds would mean life or death in the race against time that lay ahead. Squirming out of the deep seat he set his controls in neutral and trusted to luck to keep them there while he scrambled back to the baggage compartment aft.

A large tag identified the sack that was meant for Santo Domingo. Dragging it behind him the Kid made his way back to the cockpit.

It was the work of a few seconds to seize the seat-

pack parachute from Slim’s empty seat and tie the laces of the sack to the harness.

Looking first to see that the controls were in neutral he dashed back to the cabin door. A lusty kick and it flew open. Jerking the rip cord the Kid heaved sack and parachute out through the opening. A sudden lurch from the unpiloted ship and he almost followed the sack into empty space but his out-flung arms saved him in time as he was flung at the open door.

Back at the controls, he saw the parachute mushroom out and fall away behind and below as the forty mile gale carried it back over the city. A Dominican flag with its white cross and red and blue squares marked the mail building. The Kid grinned as he saw the falling mail sack was making right for that flag.

CIRCLING, he saw the bag come to rest in the street right in front of the building. He glanced at his wristwatch.

“U.S. Mail delivered at postoffice building in Santo Domingo City at 10:17 A.M.,” he chuckled, “on schedule.”

He thought of MacSweeney, back in Port-au-Prince. He could picture the boss still circling his dingy office with long, nervous strides, cursing Kid Sperry out of the depths of his despair.

“Well old man, I guess you’ve had your last chance to ride the ‘Crack-up King,’” the Kid muttered. “If I make it, I guess maybe you won’t ride me for that, eh? And if I don’t—hell, I won’t be there to listen!”

But with the head wind holding the big crate back more every minute the Kid knew instinctively he’d never make it with the ship. He thought of bringing her down on the company’s field near Santo Domingo City and carrying on after the storm had passed. That would have been the logical thing to do. Yet something Inspector Hatton had said about “an exact schedule” urged him on.

Even as he turned the *Santa’s* nose grimly into the wind he cursed himself for a fool.

“Now I know I ought to come down, why don’t I?” he cried. “The old *Santa’ll* never even make the water hop over Mona Passage and tomorrow Heinzmann and Muller’ll hop over nice and easy, and probably bring home the contract. A swell wash-out I’m turning out to be!”

Yet reason as he would he could not turn back. There was something ahead there that was egging him on to the fight of his life, and the Kid had never turned down a scrap yet. Then he recalled that this mad flight would only be a fitting end to the career of a pilot they

called Crashing Kid Sperry, the Crack-up King of the Caribbean. And he had hoped to shake that name at all costs!

“Well, if they do call me that afterwards, I won’t be hearing it, anyway.”

Instinctively he glanced over his instrument board. Everything seemed right. No! The needle of his tachometer jiggled queerly. On top of everything else, was that damned motor on the right going to conk out when he needed it most?

Punta Espada passed below and the Kid was out over the water of Mona Passage. It was such water as he had never seen. Mona Passage had a reputation for being rough but now it boiled and churned madly under the lash of the rising wind. Even from that height the Kid could see that the waves were like seething mountains, inky black, with churning foam for snow caps.

They seemed to be clutching upward at the struggling plane with slime-dripping fingers, unwilling to wait until it should give up its hopeless fight against the wind and drop in a last, howling dive into that heaving fury of black water.

The Kid could dimly make out two little island trading schooners, hatches battened down and storm sail set, trying to ride out the storm. He knew that long before the wind quieted down the hurricane would have seized them and dashed them to flinders somewhere along the Dominican coast.

He shook his head sadly. There was nothing he could do. They were as far beyond human help as he himself would be when the hurricane finally had him.

His air speed indicator still showed a hundred and thirty yet the water below dragged by with painful slowness. For entirely too long a time he could see the two schooners, which must be fairly flying before the wind.

Suddenly something went wrong with the plunging *Santa*. The Kid eyed his yawmeter narrowly. The plane was veering steadily around to the right yet he was sure his wheel was dead-centered.

EYES glued to his compass, he threw the wheel to the left. The plane responded, came sluggishly around to her course, two points north of East on the compass dial. He eased the wheel back to center. As if it had a perverse will of its own, the ship swerved to the right again.

“Damn!” the Kid swore. “Things are beginning to happen to that motor on the right, and the other two keep pulling her around.”

With a muttered curse he threw the wheel over again and held it there. The *Santa* staggered back on to her course but the air speed dial showed the Kid that the loss of power had cost her thirty miles an hour.

“Thirty miles—each one worth a million bucks,” he moaned. “And I could use a couple hundred extra right now!”

It seemed an eternity before the dim outline of the coast of Porto Rico crept into sight, an eternity of fighting wind that made the flying wires on the *Santa* scream as if in pain. An eternity through which the plane rode like the wildest of bucking bronchos. The heat inside the enclosed cockpit was keen torture in itself but the perspiration rolled unheeded down the Kid’s tense face.

He thought he would never reach that dim line of coco palms that hung in the distance as if to tantalize him. The plane was loggy from the pitiless buffeting of the wind and seemed to gain no headway. Ominous creaks and groans came from beneath the floor board and from overhead every time a fresh gust struck her.

Then at last the water was behind and the long, straggling line of buildings that marked the town of Aguadilla swam past in the thickening gloom.

He was on the last leg of the trip to San Juan now, seventy miles over a country that boasted not a single level field big enough for a forced landing even in the best of weather. But a landing anywhere would have been out of the question in that gale. And with one motor dead he knew the ship could not hold the air for many minutes more.

Peering ahead through the half-light, he saw what made his blood chill as though a huge lump of ice were pressed suddenly against his spine. In fifteen hundred hours in the air the Kid had seen some evil looking storm cloud banks. But he had never seen anything like the nightmare that rode the skies in front of him now.

Black as pitch, it blotted out sky and earth alike, a rolling, pitching mass like the puff of smoke that spreads just at a canon’s mouth at the moment of firing. And it was rushing toward him as fast or faster than he was hurtling toward it.

Too late now to swerve the plane out of its path. Already the Kid could see the ground only in dim, fleeting patches. Gripping the wheel tensely, he braced himself for what was to come.

His breath whistled in his throat as he felt the monster thing catch the staggering plane in its relentless grip. The *Santa* leaped skyward shuddering,

stood back on her tail and tumbled over backward into a dizzy loop. The control column was wrenched roughly from the Kid's grasp.

Gasping, he grabbed for the wheel with one hand while the other, groping behind him, gathered up the harness of his 'chute, flung the straps over his shoulders and buckled them at his chest.

"*Santa*, you're a gonner for sure now," he breathed.

THE plane followed her wild loop with a series of crazy, screeching gyrations that made the Kid's head ring as he clung desperately to the wheel with both hands. It took all his strength to keep his seat as the machine rolled, sideslipped, stalled and spun all in the same breath.

Straining his eyes to see through the dripping windshield he saw that the air was full of strange objects, flying back past the struggling ship at a dizzy rate. He made out small palm trees, bits of thatched huts, bits of lumber, sheets of roofing—all at more than two miles above the ground!"

He whistled through clenched teeth.

"Kid Crasher, this is the—"

Bang! Something struck the nose of the plane with a frightful impact. The tachometer sagged. A flying bit of debris had smashed one of the propellers!

With only one motor left to fight the fury of the storm the *Santa* became just another of the countless pieces of wreckage that were being hurled along end over end through the air.

The Kid was thrown clear of the seat at the moment of impact. For a moment he was tossed helplessly around the narrow space of the cockpit, up and down and from side to side. Everything on walls, floor and ceiling seemed to fly at him at once and land on his aching body with stunning force. Finally he lay, gasping and nearly unconscious, on the floor wedged between the two seats.

Moving in a fog of semiconsciousness and acute pain he quitted the cockpit and crawled back along the heaving floor of the empty passenger cabin. He tried the door with his hands. It would not budge. Turning around, he kicked at it desperately with his feet. It was jammed, could not be opened.

Then he remembered that dummy mail sack marked "San Juan, P. R." He must get it or it would be lost in the wreckage of the plane. He crawled the rest of the distance to the baggage compartment. The door of the baggage room hung open, swinging wildly from side to side. The Kid knew the plane must be spinning

earthward, else that door would have stayed shut. Could he force his way out of the trapdoor in the roof of the baggage room before she struck?

Crawling through, he felt around for the mail bag and found it in the darkness. Then he began painfully to climb the ladder to the trapdoor. As he did so he wondered dully whether any bone in his body remained unbroken.

EVERY rung was an acute agony in itself. If he could only leave that heavy sack behind! But he steeled himself and inch by inch hauled himself upward until his head touched the trapdoor. He reached upward weakly. He hadn't enough strength to open it!

With only one hand to grip both mail sack and ladder, he felt himself losing his hold. His senses were leaving him. It was only a question of seconds until he slid back to the floor of the baggage room, unconscious.

Then the plane went over on her back, the trapdoor flew open and the Kid, wrenched loose from his grip on the ladder, was pitched head first into empty space.

"Goodbye *Santa* old girl," he groaned as he groped for the rip cord of his 'chute. "Guess we've ridden our last hurricane hop."

His dimming senses just barely managed to guide his roping fingers to the ring. Then everything went blank.

He came with a painful start to the tune of the howling of the wind and the bang and clatter of falling wreckage in the street around him. He was lying on a hard pavement outside what looked as though it might once have been a store. Looking down he saw the mail sack still gripped in his hand.

Struggling out of the tatters of his parachute harness he lifted himself to his feet with a groan. The first thing he remembered was that he'd crashed the *Santa*.

"Gee, I'll be known as the Crack-up King for the rest of my life," he moaned. "And the old man—hell, he'll skin me alive!"

Dizzy as he was, he could scarcely keep his feet in the fierce gale that howled down the street. A sheet of tin roofing whirled through the air and banged to the pavement uncomfortably close to him. He couldn't see a living soul anywhere, only roofless houses and a litter of debris that covered everything. He made for the wrecked store.

In a cubbyhole in the rear huddled a group of terrified Portoricans.

“*Bienvenido*—welcome,” one of them called in a strained voice. “You can find shelter here.”

“I’m not looking for shelter,” the Kid answered in Spanish. “I’ve got mail to deliver to San Juan. What town is this?”

“Rio Piedras, as good a place to say your last prayers as any,” the man quavered.

“Not so bad. Can I get a car?”

“Car! Car! Listen to him!” the Portorican laughed wildly. “Surely this man is crazy. Listen, my friend, everything is destroyed—everything! There are no cars. I do not think there is even any road!”

The Kid spun round on his heel. He must get to San Juan somehow.

“Seize him! Hold him! Do not let him go out again into the storm! The hurricane has made him mad!” a woman screamed behind him.

The Kid ran.

He could never have told how he made that trip. Afterward he dimly remembered trudging on for miles and miles—they seemed endless—with scarcely strength enough to climb over the heaps of fallen trees and around transplanted houses that cluttered the road.

A driving, tropic rain came twice, three times, he couldn’t just say how many times, drenching him to the skin. Excited women dashed out into the road, screaming at him in rapid Spanish, and tried to drag him to shelter. Men squatted stolidly in the shelter of unroofed basements and concrete culverts and let him pass.

IT SEEMED to his fevered brain that eternities were elapsing instead of minutes. He was some weird, half mad creature in a dream, doomed to trudge on forever in the midst of that howling fury of the elements thrown into chaos.

The storm was still raging when he dragged himself up the gray stone steps of the post office in San Juan and staggered drunkenly into the office of the postmaster. The dummy mail sack slid from his nerveless fingers as the Kid sagged into a chair.

Vaguely he saw the astonished face of del Valle, the postmaster, trying to pierce the gathering mist before his eyes.

“U.S. mail being delivered to the postmaster of San Juan—by the Hurricane Special—for West Indian—get that, del Valle—West Indian Air Transport Company—on schedule—”

He grinned weakly. Then for the second time his lights went out.

A burning sensation in his throat brought him to. He opened his eyes. Del Valle was forcing raw canita between his lips. The fiery stuff sent new life coursing through him.

“He lives! He lives!” he heard someone yell in Spanish.

“Sorry to leave, gentlemen. Gotta file a cable,” he muttered doggedly, struggling to his feet.

“Wait. You can’t go out now!” del Valle shouted excitedly.

For the second time that day the Kid ignored the warning.

“Can’t go out! Well, I’m out, ain’t I?” he mumbled as his stumbling feet reached the dripping pavement.

A block away the steel radio tower of the French Cable Company was bent over double, the base still in place on the roof of the building, the top lying over in the street. The Kid pushed his way through the tangle of aerial wires and into the office.

“Cable working? Can I get a message through to Port-au Prince?”

“Yes, sir. The radio’s wrecked but the cable’s still working.”

The Kid scribbled a message. Then he slumped over in a chair and slept.

It seemed he had scarcely closed his eyes when he was awakened by someone shaking him violently.

“Mr. Sperry! Mr Sperry! There’s a message for you!”

The Kid took the slip of paper drowsily. He blinked at the message in astonishment, glimpsing the signature. It was not like MacSweeney to use so many words in a cable.

“He must be up in the air right about my crashing the *Santa*,” he thought.

THEN as the mist of sleep cleared away he began to get the real import of the cablegram. It read:

Hurrah Stop Hatton assured delivery SD City and San Juan gives us contract Stop Dont worry Loss of Stanta means nothing We can get all planes we want now Stop Heinzmann says will be goodt schport Provide funds for developing our Company Stop Says will become American citizen as admires American sportsmanship and daring as represented by you Stop Forgive me No hard feelings Stop You have job with us for life Stop Crackup King sure crashed thru this time

—MacSweeney