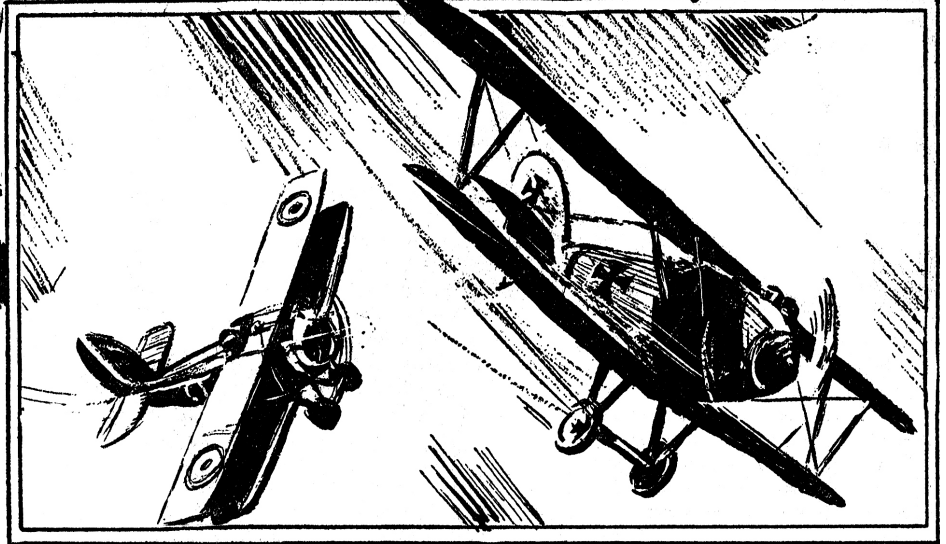


Each man looked at Quinn with red murder in his heart — but Captain Quinn was the devil's fair-haired boy.



THE DEVIL LOOKS AFTER HIS OWN

by ANTHONY FIELD

CHAPTER I

IT WAS RAINING—a thin, nasty drizzle that ate into men's souls. There was mud, the foul odor of burnt castor oil, the nerve shattering booming of the big guns.

And the coffee. . . .

With a savage oath, Jack Quinn, Captain, 40th Pursuit Squadron, sent his heavy mug spinning across the mess table. With a resounding crash it fell to the floor, shattered to a hundred bits. As one, the half dozen flyers seated at the battered table flinched as if acid had been poured on nerves too finely drawn and raw. No one spoke; no one looked up from his plate after that

first involuntary start. The men of the 40th were on edge.

“Swill!” roared Quinn. “Swill!” he bellowed again, assaulting the table with his fist by way of emphasis. He glanced belligerently about him as if he dared—as if he hoped—some one would challenge his statement. No one did. “On a morning like this they serve us belly-wash like that!” he continued with a roar. “By God! I’ll have . . .”

On the far side of the table from Quinn, Babe Parsons raised his eyes from his plate. His face was drawn and haggard—old before its time. He had seen too much—too much of war and sudden death. He had lived too long with Death leering over his slim shoulder.

“Cut it, Jack,” he said.

Quinn looked at him curiously. The bitter savagery went out of his face. His eyes softened.

“For God’s sake cut it!” rasped Parsons, two points this side of hysteria. His hands shook, his lips trembled; he fought valiantly for self control.

“What’s the matter, kid?” asked Quinn gently.

“I had a dream.”

“Forget it,” barked Quinn. “The whole bloody war is a dream—a nightmare.”

Parsons shook his head, held up his hands before him. He smiled bitterly as he saw the tremble in his fingers. “I got a hunch,” he muttered in a dead voice.

“You’re screwy,” said Quinn harshly. “Listen here, kid, what you need is a stiff shot of rye.”

The kid laughed but there was no humor in it. “What are you trying to do, Jack,” he asked. “Kid me? You—the great realist—the hard boiled guy getting sentimental.” His voice suddenly broke, rose to a strained pitch. “Damn it, don’t try to kid me,” he screamed. “I can take it. I know—we all know when our number is up.”

The door to the mess shack banged open, letting in a gust of biting wind and a lash of rain. Major Sharpe, the kiwi commander of the Squadron, stood erect in the doorway. He was immaculate, spic and span, his puttees polished to an insulting brilliance. A martinet for military discipline, form and routine, he surveyed the group of aces lounging at the table with a jaundiced eye. They had no snap; their uniforms were awry . . . damn them, just because they were flyers, they thought they could get away with anything.

He drew himself up to his fullest, starchiest, supercilious height. “Tention!” he roared.

There was a shuffle of feet, the scraping of hard-

wood benches as every man in the room snapped to attention. Every man, that is, but one. Captain Quinn still remained seated. With insolent contempt he rolled a Bull Durham cigarette, lit it, flicked out the match and tossed it on the floor.

Major Sharpe went white to the lips. The veins in his forehead stood out like whip-cords. The tension in the mess shack built up charge upon charge until an explosion was imminent. The strain was broken just in time by the crash of motors, as out on the soggy tarmac, the grease monkeys warmed up the engines of the dawn patrol.

THE Major’s voice was ice when he spoke. “Captain Quinn, I must tell you for the last time that I cannot brook . . .”

Quinn rose slowly from the bench, stalked over to the Major, his cigarette dangling from his mouth. “Nuts, Major,” he said succulently. “I’m not a school boy to be disciplined. Gorilla fashion he pounded the spread of wings on the breast of his tunic. “I’m a flyer.” The Major’s fingernails dug deep into the palms of his hand. “And I’m your superior officer,” he said frozenly.

“Worse luck,” said Quinn. “So what?”

“Report to my office after the patrol,” snapped Sharpe. “That will be all now.”

“Not quite all,” said Quinn. “The kid, there—Parsons. He’s in no condition to go up this morning. He’s cracking—and no wonder! He needs a month’s leave—Paris—the Riviera—England. Any place to get away from this mess for a while.”

Young Parsons took an involuntary step forward. His face was flushed with anger and an insane fever burned in his eyes. “Shut up, Quinn, damn you!” he said.

Major Sharpe surveyed him, his shaking hands, his flushed face, the feverish eyes. Then he sneered, tossed his head and confronted Quinn. “Captain,” he said mockingly, “until I am relieved by higher authority, I would have you understand that I am commanding this Squadron. When I want advice from you I will ask you for it. Until that time, *I* am giving the orders here. Lieutenant Parsons will take up his ship, this morning.”

The two men, Major and Captain, confronted each other squarely. This one dapper, frigid, made of ice. The other, tall, raw-boned, and muscled like a wrestler. His hair was unkempt, his uniform shabby and soiled. But there was a dominating force and drive in his blazing eyes and homely features that made the Major turn away.

The door closed behind him with a bang. The roar of the motors on the tarmac rose to a high crescendo.

“Damned kiwi!” snarled Quinn. “So help me, one of these days. . . .” He left the threat unfinished and with an audible breath the men in the room relaxed.

Parsons stumbled forward. “Sorry, Jack,” he said in a husky voice.

Quinn threw an affectionate arm around the kid’s shoulders. “Forget it, Babe,” he said. Then, after a moment: “But don’t forget this. Keep in the clear today, understand? Don’t tangle with anything. I’ll do your fighting for you. That’s an order, see . . . an order from me!”

Parsons smiled wanly. “Thanks, Jack,” he said simply. “You’re a pal.” His hand went out and was gripped in the mighty one of Quinn. “So long, Jack.”

“So long, kid—and good luck. One of these days, when this is all over, we’ll be breaking a bottle together and dragging Sharpe over the coals.”

“Right,” said Parsons somberly. “In hell.”

Quinn shuddered. Then abashed at his unaccustomed show of sentimentality, he wheeled on the men. “Well, come on, you guys,” he bellowed. “What are we waiting for? Let’s go.”

CHAPTER II

PROPELLERS SLASHED VICIOUSLY at the resistant air—chocks were pulled—and motors wide open the dawn patrol of the 40th roared across the soggy tarmac. Quinn in the lead, one by one the trim Spads leaped into the air as if glad to be free of the oozing mud. But there was no gladness in the heart of Captain Quinn as he led his flight arrogantly into the east. There was dark foreboding in his heart—a heaviness, and the remembrance of a final fervent handclasp.

Babe Parsons with his strained face, his jumping nerves, his prematurely white hair was too young to die. But what did the great God Mars care about that? What did he care about anything? Youth—life—love. . . . Bah! War was a sorry mess. It was not life that counted. Only death. And in his sentimental moments, when he had first joined the outfit, the kid had spoken of a girl back home, who was waiting for him.

Something told Quinn as he hurtled his plane

across the leaden skies that she was destined to wait in vain.

He flung a curse to the slip stream. It was a miserable dawn, gray, leaden. No weather at all for a flight of ships to be aloft. Quinn hoped that the flight would not tangle with the Boche that morning. He was not thinking of himself. He was thinking of Parsons’ dream—of Parsons’ hunch.

He glanced once swiftly over his shoulder. Behind him winged his flight in perfect formation. Below, the war torn earth lay sullen, devastated, brutal in its stark ugliness. A wave of indistinct movement in the jagged scars that criss-crossed the earth, marked the front line trenches. Poor devils, muttered Quinn. Anchored in the mud and filth. Better—far better—to die a clean, quick death in the air.

In tribute to the millions of gallant, unsung heroes in the trenches, Quinn dipped the nose of his Spad in salute. Then the flight had crossed, was winging brazenly across the desolate strip of no man’s land, headed for the German lines. For the space of a moment, its roaring advance was undisputed. Quinn grunted, shifted his wad of cut plug from one side of his mouth to the other. Maybe the kid would get a break after all.

Then he cursed savagely. His jaw set, his eyes narrowed and his hairy finger licked around the trip of his Bowden gear. He should have known better. For there, tearing the skies wide open as they hurtled out of the east, came a flight of grim Fokkers to challenge the advance of the Yanks.

Quinn picked out the foremost of the onrushing foe as his own special prey, then flipped his ailerons in signal for the flight to break formation. It was every man for himself, and the devil take the hindmost. It was every man for himself, except that Quinn, as he rose to meet the Fokker, kept one narrowed eye on Parsons’ crate.

The clouds thinned out and with ironic brilliance the sun broke through as the two flights tangled. Chaos enveloped them in a maelstrom of slashing propellers, sizzling lead and sudden death. Ships careened, dove, zoomed. Death was dealt and death was taken in the same instant, no quarter asked or given.

Quinn’s hand was steady enough on the stick but a strange foreboding was clutching at his heart. Somehow his stomach felt empty with a sensation akin to the first apprehension he had known when making his initial flight across the lines.

But this time it was not the age-old inherent fear of sudden, physical death for himself. He had long since schooled himself to fight that down. He was thinking of the kid—of a bad dream—of a weird hunch.

FROM the corner of his eye he caught the waving of a gauntleted hand. It was Parsons. For a moment he felt reassured, then he realized that Parsons was waving a last farewell. Quinn cursed, watched the kid as he zoomed up at the black belly of a Fokker, gun spewing a livid burst of tracers.

But Quinn didn't have the opportunity to watch long. A hail of lead spattered against his instrument board. Instinctively he pulled hard back on the stick, zoomed up, winged over and then, slapping on all the sauce he had, dove down. Stays and guy wires wailed like a legion of lost souls in the rushing roar of the slip stream. He rocketed through a barrage of tracers, arrowed out of a protecting screen of tracer smoke. Directly beneath him was his quarry.

His finger convulsed on the trip of the Bowden gear. The mechanism whirred, clicked avidly and stuttering death belched from the nozzle of the Vicker's gun. Following the streaking flares of his bullets he saw that his burst had fallen short. He cursed, took time out to cast a swift glance about for Parsons' crate.

Parsons was still aloft and fighting. A ray of hope was born in Quinn's heart. Then, as swiftly as it had come, it died. A lump formed in his throat, his eyes strained and he found himself screaming at Parsons at the top of his voice.

But Parsons did not hear. Even if the heavens had not been filled with the thunder of the slashing ships, he would not have heard. He had suddenly gone rigid at the controls—frozen to them. Quinn had seen that thing happen before. Parsons' overwrought nerves had snapped. He sat rigidly behind the stick, a strange smile on his lips as he looked full into the spitting Spandau of an onrushing Fokker.

Quinn saw the danger. He wrenched his crate around, risking a sheared wing, and rose to cut off the German. The Spad responded gallantly, but in his heart Quinn knew that he was too late—knew that nothing could save the kid.

"Dive! Wing over! Do something!" he screamed.

But Parsons' Spad did none of these things. It sailed on serenely on an even keel, as if pulled by some irresistible magnet into the maw of the German's coughing gun.

The pilot of the Fokker could not miss. He dove suddenly, nosed up under the belly of the Spad. The Spandau chattered hysterically. Avid lead chewed the tail assembly of the Spad.

There was still a chance for Parsons to escape the Nemesis that dogged him.

"Dive! Dive!" screamed Quinn.

But Parsons did not dive. His nerves were gone, his muscles paralyzed. There was no coordination between brain and body. Hot tears of sheer frustration welled in Quinn's eyes. He blinked them back. Watched with a strange fascination as the lead from the German Spandau crawled slowly up the belly of the Spad, unerringly seeking out the vital spot.

Quinn saw Parsons' body jerk before the impact of a burst of lead, saw the crate stagger. Then it fell over on one wing, nosed down and completely out of control plummeted down to earth in a mad power dive.

Quinn's heart turned to stone. He raised his hand in a final salute. Then something snapped within him. Bitterly he heaped curses upon himself. What a pal he had turned out to be. Idly he had stood by while the German's lead had riddled the helpless kid.

He winged over, pulled hard back on his stick and shot upward for the blind spot of the black crossed Fokker that had downed Parsons.

"I'll get him, kid," he roared. "I'll give him the same dose he gave you."

THE German ace, however, had a different idea concerning the matter. He saw the onrushing threat in time and executed a swift Immelman, sending a thread of bitter, vindictive fire whistling through the struts of the Spad.

Quinn's crate staggered, recovered. Quinn's eyes became bitter and his jaw hard, but somehow, he found it in his heart to cast an admiring glance at the German. This was no novice he had crossed swords with. He was in combat with a Sky Devil no less skillful than himself.

Quinn had no complaints to make on that score. Let the best man win. But of one thing he assured himself. Crash he might but before he went down to join Parsons he would blast the German from the sky.

He vaulted wildly across the sky in pursuit of the Fokker. His Vickers spat venom and his heart pounded a bare octave lower than his racing engine.

The German was tricky. Achieving an almost vertical bank he charged back to battle. But even as he made the turn his blind spot was exposed for one vital

second. Quinn didn't ask for more than that. His gun leaped to life.

Jerry lurched in the cockpit of his crate. The Fokker staggered drunkenly, nosed over, began the final, mad plunge to earth. But Quinn was relentless, he wanted to make sure of the kill. Thrusting the stick forward he plunged after it in a power dive. He held his fire a moment until he should be in perfect combat position. But he held his fire too long. The Boche suddenly whipped up the nose of his Fokker, zoomed vertically upward and as Quinn flashed by in his power dive, dropped his spinning propeller dead on the Yank's blind spot.

A barrage of hungry tracers chewed at the struts and guy wires of the Spad. Quinn cursed himself for a fool. He had been tricked like any novice. A moment before he had been sure of the kill. Now it was Jerry who was sure—and with reason.

Lead whistled ominously by his ear. Leaden fingers plucked at the sleeve of his tunic. Along his spine the flesh quivered as at any moment he expected the next burst from the Fokker to blast him from the cockpit and into eternity.

He had to act—and act fast. Instinctively he analyzed his situation. The chances a thousand to one against him, there was only one maneuver that might possibly save him—an impossible stunt that would very likely crumple the Spad under the strain. Quinn did not hesitate. Kicking his rudder bar hard over, he jammed his left aileron and pulled sharply back on the stick. The gallant Spad shuddered in every strut and guy, wobbled crazily in mid air, threatened to explode into a thousand pieces like a shattered alarm clock.

Beads of sweat popped out on Quinn's brow as he counted the agonizing seconds. At any moment he expected the wings to sheer off. Then, slowly, with a spasmodic lurch, the Spad answered the controls. She rolled over out of line of the diving Fokker, hung suspended in the heavens by her straining propeller, then dropped, nose down on the Boche.

For the second time in as many minutes Quinn found himself riding the blind spot of his enemy. Though his brow was still damp with sweat his hand was steady on the trip of his gun, his nerves well under control.

The German rolled, dived, zoomed, but with relentless eyes and an implacable heart Quinn rode him hard behind.

Slowly, carefully he took aim. His finger constricted on the trigger as he fired a short, tentative burst. He

smiled grimly, slapped on his last ounce of sauce and then slowly, but surely the vulnerable blind spot of the Fokker swam into the ring sights of his Vickers.

His finger convulsed on the trigger. The gun shuddered to a long burst. The Fokker staggered. Quinn's lead still ate avidly at the stricken crate. He had made no mistake this time.

Like a stricken bird the Fokker hung perilously in mid air, then as the propeller shattered it nosed over and plummeted down to earth.

THE Kid had been avenged; but even so, Quinn was sick at heart. He looked about him, wiped the sweat and oil from his goggles. . . . The dog fight still waged and there was no telling how his men had fared. He thought of Parsons—he thought of Parsons' girl who would wait no more. . . . And then a black shadow flitting across his cockpit snapped him out of his reverie. He glanced swiftly up, even as he sent his Spad into a dive. A black crossed Fokker was hurtling by scarcely a hundred feet above him.

A frown puckered Quinn's brow. What the hell was the idea? The Jerry had had him at a distinct disadvantage and still there had been no burst of lead. What new trick was this? He winged over, pulled back on the stick and zoomed up above the tail of the Fokker. Swiftly he dropped the nose of his crate. Eagerly his finger licked around the trip of his gun as the head of the German loomed clear and distinct in his ring sights.

But something stayed his finger. It came to him with sudden realization that this was no trick at all. Either the Jerry was a novice making his first flight across the lines—or his nerves had gone like Parsons!

The pilot of the Fokker must have sensed the impending doom behind him. He turned in the cockpit. Even behind his oil splattered goggles Quinn sensed the horror, the helplessness, the mute appeal in the wide eyes.

Quinn felt suddenly sick. He had had enough of this butchery. It was one thing to shoot down an enemy who was your equal with a machine gun. But to slaughter some mother's son who was absolutely helpless, who could not fight back . . . it went against the grain. Quinn shook his head and his finger relaxed on the trigger of the Bowden gear.

Wearily he raised his arm and waved the German pilot back towards his own lines. He pulled back the stick, soared up in search of more sporting game. But the deadly sport was over for the day. The German

flight was winging its way swiftly back to their lines, leaving the sky of battle to the Yanks.

Quinn looked swiftly about him, counted his loss. There were but seven planes where there had been eight a few minutes before. He grunted with bitter satisfaction. His flight had not done so badly. Three ships they had crashed and Parsons had been the only one to pay for them. Wearily he shot a Very light into the heart of the sun and the dawn patrol of the 40th headed for home.

CHAPTER III

IT WAS A WEARY, DISPIRITED FLOCK of sky devils that dropped their wings on the muddy tarmac of the 40th. Eight men had left the drome a short half hour before. Eight men—reckless, gallant, with the joy of life surging swiftly through their veins. Only seven returned.

Quinn's flight was a crew of hard bitten aces. They had been tempered to a man in the cauldron of war. Death they had seen many times before, unflinching. But the death of Parsons, the baby of them all, threw a shroud of gloom over them.

Hail and farewell! A wreath of laurel for the victor. A name, a number on some dusty military record for the vanquished. But Quinn and the others knew that the kid had already been admitted into the ranks of the immortals in Valhalla's Halls.

Before the wheels of his crate had stopped rolling, Quinn wearily climbed from the cockpit and vaulted to the ground. He barked a terse order at the grease monkey who came running up and then with unseeing eyes strode with long strides across the field to the canteen.

Two others of the flight had reached the sanctuary before him, Lieutenant Steele and Twist. Sam Steele, thin, wiry, with eyes as hard as the name he bore, looked once at Quinn as the Captain entered and shoved the bottle of cognac down the bar. For once the eyes of Jerry Twist were not laughing and his usual good-humored mouth was set in hard lines. No word was said between the three until Quinn had filled his glass and downed it with a bang on the bar.

"God knows I needed that," he said hoarsely.

"We all did," said Steele. "You saw the kid take it?"

"Saw?" snorted Quinn scornfully. "I never took my eyes off him during the whole dog fight. The kid's nerves were shot. He was paralyzed. He couldn't move. I tell you he never had a chance."

"I know," nodded Twist. "Just sat there, grinned and took it. Never tried once to get away from that Heinie." He paused a moment, then continued slowly, "You know, he had a funny look on his face as if he was almost glad."

The slate blue eyes of Lieutenant Steele turned a somber gray. A muscle bulged along the edge of his hard jaw. "He was a swell kid," he said simply. "One of the best," muttered Twist. "Fill 'em up, boys," said Quinn with an unaccustomed catch in his voice. "A toast—a toast to the kid—and may he have a happy landing in. . . ."

"Heaven," said Lieutenant Steele firmly.

"Amen," said Captain Quinn.

Three glasses were raised as one. There was a moment's silence—a moment's tribute to the memory of the kid. Then Quinn banged his glass back on the bar. "I tell you," he bellowed, "the kid should never have gone up. It was murder. It was that murdering kiwi Sharpe!"

Unheard, the door had opened behind him. Quinn was in the midst of continuing his tirade against the C.O. when Lieutenant Steele's hard elbow, nudging him in the ribs, warned him of danger. He pivoted slowly. Confronting him from the open doorway stood Major Sharpe.

THE Major's face was a ghastly white, a twisted mask of hate. Beads of sweat stood out on his upper lip and his right hand hovered precariously over the automatic holstered at his hip. With a mighty effort he controlled himself, forced his voice to a dead, even monotone.

"Did I hear you mention my name, Captain Quinn?" he asked frigidly.

Quinn straddled his legs, back to the bar. "Never mind the polite formalities, Major."

The Major was icily formal. "The Captain did not answer my question."

"You heard," said Quinn heavily. "But just in case you didn't . . . just so there will be no mistake, Major, I'll repeat. The kid should never have gone up this morning. You sent him to his death."

A spasmodic twitch crossed the Major's face as if some unseen hand had slapped him. For a moment it seemed that his fingers must leap to the automatic

at his hip. The muscles of Quinn's belly bulged and tensed but he did not move. To have moved would have been fatal—the one spark that would have galvanized Sharpe into action and gun play.

Seconds passed. Five . . . ten . . . fifteen. Twist thought his lungs would burst from the effort to keep from breathing. The cognac glass had been crushed in Steele's fist but he was not aware of the gash across his fingers.

Major Sharpe's hand was like a clawed talon above his automatic. Quinn's narrowed eyes had calculated the distance between him and the Major to a nicety. And thus the two men confronted each other . . . rank, authority, discipline, everything forgotten but the blazing hate that consumed them both. Something had to break, and in that psychological second before it did, came a distraction.

From high overhead came the droning roar of a motor. It grew nearer, louder, until the galvanized iron walls of the canteen vibrated in response to the surging power of the engine. And by the sound of it, each man knew that it was a German Fokker that was pounding down on their tarmac.

A great hope surged in Quinn's heart.

"It's a Fokker," he cried. "Maybe—maybe the kid didn't die. Maybe he . . ."

With one concerted leap the four men cleared the doorway of the canteen and bounded out onto the field. A hundred yards before them, a bullet scarred, black painted Fokker was rolling to a stop in the center of the field. From the hangars, mess shack and barracks men raced pell-mell.

"By God! It's von Sprey's ship," shouted Quinn running forward.

Steele and Twist were by his side and as they pulled up by the Fokker, a tall, be-goggled figure uncoiled himself from the office and vaulted nimbly to the ground. With a careless gesture of his hand he swept the goggles up on his head, snapped to attention, saluted smartly.

"Von Sprey!" said Quinn in unbelief.

"Captain Quinn, I believe," said the other, in perfect, Oxfordian English.

There was an eager light in the eyes of both men—an eager note to their voices. Enemies of old—a score of times they had tested the metal of one another in some thrilling sky duel. And out of their battles had been born a kinship, an admiration, a keen appreciation of the talents and abilities of each other. Both men were recklessly gallant; both men subscribed

to the same high code of the sky, generous in victory, uncomplaining in defeat.

THEY looked at each other as two old friends might have done, after a long parting. They might have even shaken hands there on the drome of the 40th if Major Sharpe had not come up on the run just then.

"What—what's this? What's going on here?" demanded the Major sharply.

Von Sprey clicked his heels, saluted.

"*Ober Leutnant* Von Sprey pays his respects, Major."

"Respects be damned, Lieutenant," snorted Sharpe. "You—you have deserted to our side?"

Von Sprey's lips curled slightly, then hardened.

"The Major does not understand," he said slowly. "I see the Major is not a flyer."

Major Sharpe flushed an angry red but before he could find words, Quinn spoke. "Von Sprey is here as a gentleman and a gallant foe. In like manner we receive him."

"Exactly, Captain," said Von Sprey. "You—you bring some message from Parsons?" asked Quinn eagerly. "The kid's not . . . not . . ."

Von Sprey heaved a regretful sigh. "I saw this morning, Captain Quinn, the gallantry you displayed to one of my replacements. It was his first flight across the lines. The experience is—ah—to say the least, a little disturbing."

"I guessed as much," said Quinn.

Von Sprey bowed in acknowledgment.

"Then you bring no message from Lieutenant Parsons?" said Quinn, his heart heavy within him.

Von Sprey lowered his eyes to the ground. "I bring Lieutenant Parsons, himself," he said quietly. "Lieutenant Parsons is dead."

Silence. A lump rose in Quinn's throat. No one spoke. No one moved.

"I understand," said Quinn at last.

"He was dead when he crashed," continued Von Sprey. "Because of the German life you spared today, I wish I could bring your friend back alive. But the gods of war have decreed otherwise. From the way you fought for him, I know how you must feel . . . and so . . . in my name and in the name of the Third German Pursuit Squadron, I return him to his friends."

Slowly Von Sprey turned back to his Fokker. Reaching long arms down into the cockpit, he straightened up a moment later with the limp and battered body of the kid in his arms. Reverently, as if he were performing some ritual, he passed the still form into Quinn's waiting arms.

Caps were yanked from heads. In a hushed silence von Sprey snapped to attention, saluted. "To a gallant foe," he said simply. "May we all die as bravely."

No one answered. There was no need for words. Once more von Sprey turned to his Fokker. He had one foot in the stirrup, one hand on the combing, when Major Sharpe's voice rang out: "Wait!"

Von Sprey turned, a half smile on his lips. "The Major has something to say?" he asked politely.

"Yes," replied Sharpe. "I put you under military arrest—make you a prisoner of war."

But it was not von Sprey who answered. It was Captain Quinn and his voice and words were backed by the authority of a heavy service automatic that projected from beneath the body of the kid.

"You're wrong, Major," he said curtly. "Wrong on all counts. Lieutenant von Sprey goes as he came, a friend and a gentleman. Whoever thinks differently will have to talk to this gun."

For a moment it seemed as if the Major would choke. For another moment it seemed that he would throw himself on Quinn's gun. But he did neither. Only the smouldering hate in his eyes flamed higher.

Von Sprey took in the little tableau for a moment, bowed to Quinn and vaulted into the cockpit of his plane. He jazzed the throttle a moment, then slapping on all the sauce he had sped down the tarmac and leaped into the sky.

Not until the black ship was a tiny speck in the blue high above the lines did any one move. Then Captain Quinn broke the strained silence. His automatic clattered metallicly to the ground.

"Consider yourself under arrest, Captain Quinn," snapped Major Sharpe. "We shall see what G.H.Q. has to say about this."

"Very good, sir," answered Quinn, and with the body of the kid still in his arms, strode slowly towards the barracks.

building. Captains whispered a few words in a discreet aside to Majors as they went through the routine of waging a war. And the focus of all the attention, all the excitement was the tiny, smoke-fogged office of Colonel Jason Flagg in charge of Air Operations, American Expeditionary Force.

Colonel Flagg, himself, was not unaware of the interest centered on his office. He didn't like it. It made his decision all the harder to make. In all his thirty years service in the army he had never been confronted with such a difficult problem. Military law, rules and regulations told him that there was only one thing to do. But damn it all, he had a war on his hands—a war that the Allies had to win.

With long, impatient strides he strode the width of his narrow office, trailing a sulphurous cloud of tobacco smoke behind him. He mangled the stub of his cigar for a moment, then kicked out his chair and sat down heavily at his desk. It was littered with official papers, documents and military forms. He picked up the nearest, studied it a moment, then tossed it impatiently aside. He was sick of reports, forms and red tape. Damn it all, the man was a fighter, the best ace in the service.

Colonel Flagg came to a sudden decision. With a broad thumb he squashed the buzzer on his desk and before the raucous buzz had died away the door swung open and an orderly stepped into the office.

"Captain Quinn," rasped Flagg. "Send him in."

"Yes, sir."

A few moments later Quinn swaggered into the Colonel's office. His eyes were sullen, his manner arrogant. He looked for all the world like a rebellious child who is going to be punished and who resents it. He snapped at attention, saluted.

"Captain Quinn reporting, sir," he said.

The Colonel did not reply. Slowly he removed the cigar from his mouth, balanced it precariously on the edge of an ash tray. From beneath shaggy brows he studied the man before him. There was nothing apologetic either about Quinn's face or his bearing. He stood like a man, firmly defiant on two legs, ready to take it.

"At ease," said the Colonel.

Quinn relaxed.

The Colonel's restrained emotions broke out in a torrent of words. There was more hurt in them than anger. "Sit down, Quinn. Damn your soul, haven't I got enough worries without you giving me more?"

"Sorry, sir," said Quinn. And he meant it. This

CHAPTER IV

GENERAL HEADQUARTERS in Paris buzzed with an undercurrent of suppressed excitement. Shave-tail lieutenants whispered to Captains as they hurried down the musty corridors of the ancient

wasn't the first time he had been up on the carpet before the Old Man. He knew that Flagg was a soldier—fair, honest, just—and he admired him for these qualities. There was a strong bond of understanding and mutual friendship between the two men. But Quinn knew, nevertheless, that the Colonel had a job to do. And that he would do it, no matter where the chips fell, no matter who got hurt in the process.

Quinn pulled up a chair, sat down, started to roll a Bull Durham cigarette. Colonel Flagg poked at the sheaf of papers on his desk with a rigid forefinger.

"What are we going to do about all this?" he demanded.

"I don't know, sir," answered Quinn. "That's for you to decide."

"Sharpe is raising hell," said the Colonel. "Every ten minutes I get a new memo from him. Aid to the enemy . . . insulting a superior officer . . . armed resistance to arrest. . ."

"I know," said Quinn gloomily.

Flagg pushed back his chair, strode his office impatiently a few minutes. He stopped before Quinn's chair, looked down at him. "Damn it all, man!" he exploded. "There's enough here to hang you—to put you up against a brick wall."

QUINN shrugged philosophically. "I can take that, too," he said soberly.

"Rot! Poppy-cock!" snorted the Colonel. He flung himself into his chair again. "Quinn, you and I understand each other. We're—we're friends, I might say. We like each other."

"Thank you, sir."

"But surely, Quinn, you must understand that this sort of business cannot continue. You're in the army, along with two or three million other men. We must have discipline."

"Yes, sir."

"Damn it all, you told me that the last time you were up here. And now look what's happened."

"I guess it is a mess," sighed Quinn.

"It's a stink," growled the Colonel savagely. "I've saved your hide on a dozen occasions before. But this time . . ." He shrugged, then continued more calmly. "Tell me, just what is wrong with you—the army—with Sharpe that you are always up for disciplinary action."

"Sharpe is a louse," said Quinn evenly. "But I guess it's really all my fault."

"You've had trouble with other Commanding Officers," said Flagg.

"Well, Colonel, I'll tell you," said Quinn, "I'm a fighter—not an office boy."

"And because you're a fighter you think you can disrupt the entire service, is that it?"

Quinn smiled. "Not exactly, sir."

"Then what?"

"I've got an idea."

"It better be good."

"It is good."

It was Quinn's turn to rise from the desk and pace the floor. After a moment he turned back to the Colonel.

"I'm always raising hell," he said. "I'm a bad egg. I disrupt the service. I'm hard boiled. I won't take orders. I plead guilty to all that but . . ."

"But what?"

"I can fly."

"No one ever denied that. You're one of the best men we have. But what's that got to do with your idea?"

"Everything," said Quinn. He suddenly became earnest. "Listen, Colonel, I can talk to you. But don't think I'm trying to excuse myself. I'm not. I know my failings, my limitations. I've always been in a mess. But this is the point. I'm not the only one. There are a dozen other flyers in the service like myself—Black Sheep. They won't stand discipline; they're bad eggs; they're always in trouble. But damn it all, they've all got guts. They can fly."

"So what?" said the Colonel shortly.

"So this," said Quinn slowly. "It's my idea to form a squadron of the Black Sheep."

The Colonel rose half out of his chair, then collapsed. "What?" he shouted. "A squadron of black sheep? Why, man, it's been my policy to keep them separated."

"I know, sir," said Quinn. "But that's where you've been wrong."

"Wrong? Why, it's been hard enough to keep them in hand a hundred miles apart. What would happen if you put all these hard nuts together in one outfit? They'd explode. Where's the man who could handle 'em?"

Quinn rose to his full height. His jaw hardened; his eyes narrowed. "I'll handle 'em, Colonel," he said grimly. "Maybe not according to military rules and regulations but I'll handle 'em."

The Colonel studied his face for a long moment in silence. "By Jove!" he murmured at last. "I think

you could. It's an idea." He drummed on the table a moment with his fingers. "Hmm. A squadron of black sheep."

"Sure," urged Quinn. "I'd take all the problems off the hands of the other C.O.'s. Everybody would be happy."

"Yes," agreed the Colonel doubtfully. "But granted that you could lay down the law to your black sheep—who would lay down the law to you. Who would you take your orders from?"

"You, sir."

Colonel Flagg rose from his desk. "The more I think about it the better I like the idea," he said. "It would save everybody concerned a lot of headaches."

"And give a big one to the Boche!"

Flagg nodded. "It's an idea," he muttered, "an idea." Then he looked sharply at Quinn. "But I want you to give me your word, man to man, that when an order comes through from me—no matter what—it will be carried out without question."

"To the absolute last letter," said Quinn. "My word on that."

The hands of the two men met in a firm clasp. "After all," said the Colonel, more to himself than to Quinn, "we have a war to win."

"Yes sir," said Quinn, "that's what I'm trying to do."

"Who have you in mind for your Black Sheep?"

Quinn thought a moment. "Sam Steele and Jerry Twist from my own outfit. Abe Solomon from the 64th. Killer Dake from the 12th. . . . Oh, there'll be a round dozen, don't worry—and a pretty lot they'll be. Every C.O. along the line will give you a vote of thanks for taking them off their hands."

The Colonel smiled. "That would be something." Then he became serious again. "Very well. I'll put through the necessary orders. I am going to create a special squadron, the Black Sheep. You will be top man until . . ."

"Until I crash or a better man takes the job away from me," finished Quinn.

"Exactly," said the Colonel. "But no matter who is top man, he will have to take his final orders from me. That must be understood."

"Of course, sir."

"You know, Quinn," said the Colonel with a sly smile, "I was something of a black sheep myself, in my youth."

"I'm sure of it, sir" said Quinn.

CHAPTER V

ALL DAY LONG, lorries, motor cycles with side cars and mud bespattered cars had been churning up the narrow, rutted road that led to the small field behind the shell torn village of St. Omer. It had once served as pasture for the six skinny cows of an honest farmer but now a white painted sign with a black sheep emblazoned on it, proclaimed it the 'drome of the Black Sheep Squadron, free lances in war.

The lorries, the motorcycles and the cars had deposited in turn a crew of hard bitten sky devils, pirates of the air, who would have done the heart of Old Morgan good.

Quinn had hand-picked his men well. There was not one of them who was not an ace of aces with a dozen or so victories to his credit. There was not one of them who did not have a vile record from a disciplinary point of view. There was not one of them who did not think that he was just a little bit tougher, a little bit more hard boiled than the next.

It was getting well on towards evening when Quinn lined up the sky devils in the mess shack. Including himself there were a full dozen men and as his shrewd eyes ranged down the line of faces a grim exultation filled his heart. Some of the men he knew in person, others by reputation only. But if ever there had been a tougher conglomeration of ruthless fighting men gathered together before, Quinn did not know of it.

With an outfit like that to back him up, he could bust things wide open. Twelve men, each man different. Different background, different heritage, different temperament. But they had one thing in common. They were Black Sheep all.

Quinn referred to a soiled scrap of paper in his hand.

"Lieutenant Sam Steele," he called. Steele stepped a foot forward from the line. "Here."

"Lieutenant Jerry Twist."

"Here."

"Sergeant Abe Solomon."

A short, swarthy man stepped forward. He weighed no more than a hundred and twenty pounds. His

hands were small, his eyes twin coals in his narrow skull and his lips were bitter. Quinn appraised him swiftly. Solomon was on the defensive immediately, then shifted to the offensive. "I'm a shrimp," he said venomously. "So what?"

"I don't give a damn if you're a Mohammedan," snapped Quinn. "I've heard about you. You can fight. And don't take any lip from these other mugs because they have shoulder bars." Solomon grinned crookedly. "Not even from you, Quinn," he said and stepped back into line.

And so the roll was called. Major Nordstrom— heavy, thick set, brutal. Lieutenant Murphy, a mad, wild Irishman with a bull voice that put Quinn's to shame. Captain Percy Dake, ex-ganster, ex-killer. Lieutenant Krueger, man of mystery who never talked and who walked silently like a cat. De la Roche, Captain in the French Army, an oily dandy who would have slit a throat without batting an eye, yet who had twenty planes to his credit. Von Goetz, German born, who had an undying hatred for the Prussian Military Machine. Lieutenant Janko, heavy, stolid, too lazy to move until he was behind the stick of a fighting plane. And lastly, Lieutenant Stephen Arden, a Britisher and a toff. He was reported to have broken a bottle of Scotch over a General's head, his only regret being that the liquor had flowed away. Record, eighteen German planes, a half dozen machine gun slugs in his body and hard to handle when drunk.

Quinn had a few words with each man as the roll was called. No polite exchange of courtesies, this. The words were few, pungent, and to the point. And just to keep the records straight it must be said that the men shot back just as good as they received. If Quinn had heard of them, they too had heard of Quinn—and nothing too much in his favor.

IT WAS Killer Dake who spoke up first. "Well, what's it all about, Quinn?" he demanded.

"That's a fair enough question," answered Quinn. Then he smiled as his eyes ranged down the line of men. The smile broadened into a laugh. "If you guys will only half live up to your faces and reputations, what an outfit we'll have. What a sweet bunch of mama's boys you are!"

"Of course Captain Quinn has a perfect record," said Arden mockingly. "He is so gentle—so genteel. . ."

"As gentle as a machine gun," said Quinn. "But I guess you fellows want to know what it's all about. I don't blame you, so I'll tell you. First, we all of us

here have the reputation of being fighters and bad eggs generally. Tough to handle, see? And the brass hats kind of intimate that we're lousy for military discipline.

"Well, I've talked Colonel Flagg into the idea of letting us form our own squadron. The Black Sheep Brotherhood. I've hand-picked you all. You take orders from no one except me in the matter of military objectives to be obtained. And those orders come from Colonel Flagg. How does that sound to you?"

Each man, in his own peculiar distinct way, expressed his approval. There was a buzz of excited conversation for a moment, then Solomon spoke up, "And who's going to be top man here on the tarmac?"

Quinn's eyes narrowed and the laughter faded from them. "I am," he said. "That is, until a better man takes the job away from me. Have you got that, you mugs? I said a better man!"

No one answered.

"But don't get me wrong, Solomon," continued Quinn. "Rank doesn't count in this outfit. I don't care if a man is a buck private rear rank:, or the highest brass hat of them all. They look all the same to me. The only thing that counts here is guts and the ability to fight." He paused a moment, then continued in a slow drawl, "Of course, if any of you men want to back out; if any of you men don't like the set-up—you're free to return to your old outfits."

He paused again, waited. Not a man stepped out of the line.

"I didn't think so," said Quinn. "Good! I'm not hard to get along with. What you do here on the ground is your own business, just so long as you're fit and ready to fly when I give the word. But up in the air, I'm boss. I give the orders. And God help the man who disobeys them. That's General Order Number One. Has anybody anything to say?"

"Sure, 'tis fair enough," grinned Murphy.

"They've given us the rottenest 'drome along the lines," continued Quinn. "The rottenest quarters, the crummiest mess shack. But they'll give us the best planes. We can't ask for any more than that. And I guess that's about all. The grease monkeys and the planes will ferry in tonight. Until then, do as you damn please. Anybody got anything to say?"

"Yeah," drawled Killer Dake—Major Dake. "I think you're on the level—and I'm on the level. I just want to let you know that I'm out after your job."

Quinn frowned, then smiled. "Fair enough, Dake. Go to it. I like a little competition."

FOR an hour there was a determined stir of activity on the 'drome of the Black Sheep Squadron as the men settled in their quarters, investigated the mess shack, sampled the stores of the canteen. Then, along about sundown, the crates began to come in. Trim Spads they were, sleek and shining in their newness. A lorry, loaded with duffle bags and mechanics rolled up and Quinn watched the grease monkeys alight. They were no beauties. But Quinn wasn't looking for matinee idols. They were a good ground crew to match his flock of Sky Devils.

With the arrival of the crates and mechanics the real work began. Ships were assigned to flyers, mechanics were assigned to ships and for long hours after the sun had gone down in the west, the 'drome of the Black Sheep stank with the odor of burnt castor oil—trembled to the thunder of a dozen roaring motors, a dozen whirling props, as the ships were tuned up.

With the happy heart of a man who has achieved a minor miracle, Quinn surveyed the scene of activity about him. He turned to Steele who was standing by his side. "Well, what do you think of them?" he asked.

"A tougher bunch of men couldn't have been made to order."

"And they're all flyers—fighting fools."

"None better," agreed Steele. Then he added somberly: "But that isn't what's bothering me,"

Quinn looked at him sharply. "No? Then what is?"

"I smell trouble in the offing."

Quinn thumped him enthusiastically on the back. "So what?" he challenged. "I've smelled trouble in the offing all my life. So have you. We've even looked for it—together."

But Steele could not be kidded out of it. "Yeah, I know," he said dourly. "We've asked for trouble in the past and gotten away with it. But this time I think you've asked for more than you can handle."

"Why?" asked Quinn shortly.

"Any one of these men in an outfit is enough to give a C.O. gray hair. To have twelve of them, all together, on each other's necks, hell is bound to pop loose."

"I can raise a little hell on my own," said Quinn savagely.

"I know. But what if they gang up on you? This man's outfit is tough. They've seen things, done things . . . I mean before the war. Each one of 'em's got a past and no future."

Quinn eyed Steele shrewdly. They had been friends for months and he knew that he could trust him. "What really is on your mind?" he demanded. "You know something."

Steele shrugged. "Nothing you can put your finger on. Only I saw Solomon, Dake and Nordstrom with their heads together. When I drifted by they clammed up, gave me the fishy eye. Those three mugs don't get together for nothing."

"Maybe not," said Quinn thoughtfully. "But I asked for the job. Either I handle them or I don't. If I can't, some one will. At all events the Black Sheep Squadron is going to carry on."

An orderly emerged from the Squadron office and hurried across the tarmac towards Quinn. He saluted smartly. "G.H.Q. on the phone, sir. Colonel Flagg."

Quinn nodded, strode into the office and snatched up the phone.

"Well?" came the Colonel's crisp voice ovpr the wire.

"They're beauties, sweethearts, little angels—every man jack of them," chortled Quinn.

"Good," said Flagg tersely. "I'm afraid I'm going to send a couple of them back to heaven. Listen!"

Quinn listened and as the Colonel's insistent voice drilled into his ear his jaw hardened and the light of battle glowed in his eyes.

"Very good, sir," he said, when the Colonel had finished. "It's a nice assignment to begin with."

CHAPTER VI

THE SUN HAD YET TO CLEAR the rim of the horizon in the east when Quinn strode into the mess shack the following morning. He was greeted casually, warmly, coolly, indifferently or not at all by the men. But Quinn did not mind. He was not looking for snappy salutes. He had something to say and he said it.

"Special orders from the Colonel," he said brusquely. "Intelligence reports that the Boche are stringing a bridge across the Ohembach River at Meckleburg. The location is heavily protected by anti-aircraft guns and a German 'drome. If they succeed in spanning the river Ludendorf will be able to march a hundred thousand men across and sew the French troops up in a pocket. It's our job to destroy that bridge, to destroy those gun emplacements, and to see that they don't succeed. Got it?"

The men nodded.

“Okay. Load the bomb racks full. We take off in five minutes.”

The glint of battle already in their eyes, the men started for the door.

“Hold it,” called Quinn. “I just want to remind you again that what goes on down here on the tarmac is just between us. But up there in the air, I’m boss. We’re all responsible to Colonel Flagg.”

Quinn’s heart was filled with a proud exultation as at the head of his Sky Devils he took to the air that morning. Once clear of the ’drome and headed for the lines, he looked back over his shoulder at the sleek ships following him in perfect formation. What an outfit! What a crew of fighting men! With that bunch to back him up he could make history. There was a song in his heart, a smile on his lips. The propeller, even, seemed to have a new song of triumph.

The sun, too, that morning shone with a dazzling brilliance to hail the first flight of the Black Sheep. Quinn knew that the mission he and his men were embarked upon was a dangerous and difficult one. But that was what he had asked for—that was what they all had asked for. There was no doubt in his heart; no fear of failure or death. There was only a stimulating exhilaration at the prospect of proving the confidence Colonel Flagg had shown in him. But if he had known of the thoughts going through the heads of several of his men, he would not have felt so confident, so sure of himself.

He checked his tachometer; cast an eye at the altimeter, waggled his ailerons and climbed another thousand feet. As one the eleven ships that followed executed the maneuver.

Ten thousand feet below men fought and died in the trenches, disputing the narrow strip of No-Man’s-Land. Unchallenged Quinn winged across the German lines, kicked right rudder and headed for Meckleburg. And as the flight swiftly put the miles behind them his mood changed from one of happy exultation to one of grim anticipation. Mentally he reviewed the plan of attack he had decided on with his men. The only way that their light bombs could be effective, was in mass attack. If each man did his part they could not fail.

A somber bank of clouds obscured the sun. Quinn smiled. Even the Gods of war were with him that morning. He arrowed upward and a moment later he and his flight were swallowed up.

From an altitude of ten thousand feet Quinn and his Sky Devils circled over Meckleburg. Below them was the river. A thin, spider-like web marked the

progress of the bridge the German engineers were constructing. It was a difficult target. It would be a more difficult one in another ten seconds when the Fokkers took the air.

Quinn waited for no more. He waggled his wings, yanked open the throttle and plummeted towards earth. Behind him rocketed the Spads, banners of flame licking from their exhausts.

THE sudden dive of the Black Sheep was heralded by a shattering burst of machine gun fire. A siren screamed above the bedlam and on the instant a flight of Fokkers zoomed upward to intercept the plunging charge of the Yanks.

Quinn had anticipated that. But he had issued strict orders to his men. They were to ignore the Fokkers. They were to engage in no dog fight until they had unloaded their cargo of bombs. For once the reckless dive of the ships was checked they would find it impossible to get into position again above the bridge. The order was dive! dive! dive! no matter how many Fokkers stood in the way.

Grimly, in the lead, Quinn carried out that order. He ignored everything with the utter calm of a man who delivers himself into the hands of the gods. Closer and closer loomed the bridge. Then below him all hell popped loose. His crate rocked from the concussion of bursting Archies; its wings were torn to shreds by the blistering anti-aircraft fire. His dive carried him past the rising Fokkers,

Quinn was momentarily in the clear, but behind him things were not going so well. The order he had issued had been flagrantly disregarded. Major Nordstrom, following Quinn down in that reckless descent, suddenly swooped up and attacked the nearest Fokker.

The unexpected maneuver caught Steele in the following crate off guard and to avoid crashing into Nordstrom’s crate, he, too, was compelled to zoom.

In a moment that beautiful diving formation had been turned into a confusion of tangled Spads and Fokkers. What had started out to be a bombing of a bridge had turned into an insane, meaningless dog fight.

Quinn was not aware of this, as yet. His dive had carried him straight across the bridge and when he was in dead center he tripped the bomb releases.

Water, planking, beams and trusses spouted skyward. To his right and left two other geysers mounted towards the heavens as two other attacking

planes let loose their cargoes of destruction. But of all the flight, those were the only three ships to get through.

After unloading his bombs and scoring a perfect hit, Quinn zoomed. It was then, for the first time, that he realized that his plan had miscarried. One glance about him at the tangling planes and he knew what had happened. Nordstrom had willfully, purposely disobeyed orders.

A terrible anger welled in his heart; an anguish that he had failed—that he had let the Colonel down. He would settle with Nordstrom later, but first. . . .

He was caught in a barrage of Archie fire. Lead splashed against his instrument board. The ship hobbled around drunkenly. Desperately he looped and dove to evade the circle of bursting shells that was slowly closing in on him.

From the corner of his eye he saw that his flight had headed back for their own lines. A half hour before he had been proud, exultant. Now a searing shame ate like acid into his soul. Sky Devils, were they? Bah! They had not only failed Colonel Flag, they had failed him. He would break every last man of them. He would. . . .

Then sanity returned. It was not the fault of the men. It was the fault of one man—Major Nordstrom. He had to get back to his lines, if for no other reason than to settle his score with the Major.

His face was a bitter mask. Sweat oozed down from beneath his helmet and fogged his goggles. A flying splatter of oil from his straining engine gave a satanic leer to his face.

He tipped back his stick a trifle. His crate veered off on a zig-zagging tangent. The flaming nose of a Fokker cut across his horizon. More gun! The Spad nosed upward. Three Fokkers charged down from behind, Spandaus roaring.

A burst of searing bullets cut into the tail assembly of the staggering Spad.

Quinn became calm. Grimly he determined that if he couldn't get back to his 'drome, he would send a few Germans to hell along with himself. Hard and bitter lines formed around his mouth. He kicked his rudder viciously. The Spad wheeled around in a vertical bank. Surprised, the nearest Fokker was caught off guard. Before it could recover, Quinn was roaring at the unprotected side of the ship. The Vickers stuttered a crimson song of death. Lead leaped across the smoking sky. The Fokker dived.

Quinn shot full gun to the Spad. A Fokker came pounding down from nowhere and settled for a

fleeting second over his tail. He yanked at the controls violently and tried a swift Immelmann, but before he could complete the maneuver an angry wasp creased his shoulder. The blood trickled crazily down inside the leather tunic.

He came out of the Immelmann and found himself face to face with the last of the German crates. Centering his gun he unleashed a thin thread of murderous fire. The pilot of the Fokker half rose to his feet, then fell, a huddled, bloody heap, on the cockpit floor as his ship lunged nose first to its last landing.

Quinn's head swam madly, but on he pressed towards his own lines. He was hardly aware—nor did he care—that the sky was clear before him.

CHAPTER VII

QUINN WAS BEING CONSUMED by a slow burning rage when he dropped his lead spattered Spad down on the 'drome at St. Omer. The first mission assigned his squadron of Sky Devils had turned out a bust. Well, if not exactly a bust, it had fallen far short of complete success. And all because one man had been bull headed, stubborn. Well, by God, he, Quinn, would show him.

But Fate, in the guise of a telephone call from Colonel Flag just then, postponed the showdown until later. Scowling, Quinn tramped across the tarmac to his office, where he dressed the slight crease on his shoulder. He had a good idea what the Colonel would have to say, and he didn't blame him. He picked up the telephone, barked a gruff "hello" into the transmitter.

Flag's voice rumbled over the wire to him in reply. "I've just got a report from Intelligence at Brieaux."

"Yes?" said Quinn.

"Intelligence reports that your squadron caught the Germans completely off guard, but that something miscarried, there was no co-ordination between your ships. They were not effective."

"That's right," said Quinn. "We only half did the job. One of my men went hay wire and we . . ."

"Listen," snapped Flag, "I'm not asking for excuses. I'm asking for results. Either you or your men can carry out orders or you can't. If the job is too big for you, Quinn . . ."

“Hold it,” said Quinn. “This is the first flight we’ve made. They don’t know yet that I’m boss.”

The Colonel growled at that, went on at great length and in great detail as to just what would happen if Quinn couldn’t whip the Black Sheep into shape immediately.

Quinn listened, said nothing as his anger mounted. The Colonel rang off at last and Quinn stalked out of his office. But what with one thing and another that day he didn’t have his chance to say his little piece to Nordstrom until early that evening. The scene of the little session was in the honky-tonk cafe in the Village of St. Omer.

It was nine o’clock. The tiny, smoke fogged cafe was crowded with a hundred soldiers in as many different uniforms. Rows of bottles stood on the bar; glasses clinked. In the corner, a *poilu*, in a dirty, mud bespattered uniform, banged out raucous ditties on an ancient piano.

Around a small table set against the wall sat Nordstrom, Solomon and Dake. A bottle and glasses were before them, but they drank sparingly. Their eyes were wary, their nerves tense, on edge. They said little to one another, but each knew what was in the other’s mind. Each one was waiting for the same thing—the arrival of Captain Quinn.

No matter what else they might have thought of Quinn they knew that he had guts; knew that he was not one to be bluffed or scared. And they knew, too, that he was bound to call for a showdown over what had transpired that morning.

Nordstrom poured himself a stiff four fingers from the bottle, had his glass half way to his lips, when the door opened, banged shut with a loud detonation. Quinn shouldered his way into the room. His towering six feet two dominated the cafe. There was a sudden, unreal silence after the babble of many voices. The *poilu* ceased banging on the piano, a girl giggled half hysterically, and Nordstrom placed his glass of whiskey on the table untasted.

Slowly Quinn’s eyes swept down the bar, jumped from table to table, met at last the cold eyes of Major Nordstrom at the far end of the room. No one spoke. The room was electric with tension. Instinctively men pressed back against the wall. Then, with long strides, roughly elbowing aside those who were in his way, Quinn strode across the cafe and pulled up before Nordstrom’s table. He leaned against it lightly with one hand.

NORDSTROM’S heavy face was cold, implacable. Not a muscle moved. The only sign of his tension was the dull throbbing of a vein in his temple.

“Well?” he said and the word exploded in the room like a bomb.

Quinn’s voice when he answered was deceptively mild and cool. “You’re a fool, Nordstrom.”

“What else?”

“You double-crossed me this morning.”

“So what? What are you going to do about it?”

Quinn’s voice hardened. “You and I are bound to have a showdown later. So it might as well be now.”

“Suits me,” grated Nordstrom.

Quinn nodded his head thoughtfully, then turned to the man behind the bar. “Emile!” he called sharply. “The key to the cellar.”

Emile was white with fear. His teeth chattered. Beads of sweat stood out on his brow. “But *M’sieur, Le Capitan*,” he began excitedly.

“The key!” roared Quinn.

“*Oui, M’sieur. Oui, M’sieur.*”

In his nervous agitation Emile knocked over three bottles before he managed to pick up the key. He tossed it. Quinn caught it deftly. Then, with a sudden, impetuous gesture he ripped the silver bars from his shoulder and tossed them on the table. Nordstrom accepted the challenge and ever keeping his eyes on those of Quinn, ripped the twin maple leaves, the insignia of his rank, from his own shoulders and tossed them on the table beside the silver bars. He rose slowly.

“No one will disturb us,” said Quinn, scowling at Solomon and Dake, who thus far had said not a word.

“No one will disturb us,” echoed Nordstrom.

With an icy politeness they bowed to each other to proceed first. Then, neither one accepting they strode shoulder to shoulder to the door that led down to the cellar. Quinn unlocked it—opened it. The two men disappeared down a black cavern. There was a loud, metallic click as the bolt was shot home again.

The terrific tension that had built up in the cafe—the brittle silence was shattered by a hundred excited voices. One short burst, then the hub-bub subsided as swiftly as it had come. Silence for five never ending seconds—then from below in the cellar, muffled, hollow, unreal, came the swift rush of feet, the sound of heavy bodies colliding violently together. The cafe shook. There came the sound of grunts, groans and curses, heavy blows. Occasionally there was the crash of a falling body. Then again the rush of feet, the dull

sickening thud of iron fists sinking into yielding flesh.

And the tense patrons of the cafe strained their ears and listened, not knowing how the battle went.

There was a loud crash as a wine keg was shattered. There was a swift patter of feet, the shock of collision—then a dull thud as a body hit the floor. Silence a moment from the cellar, then the sound of a body dragging itself slowly across the floor, climbing wearily to groggy feet.

The thud of bodies meeting again, the dull sock of blows, the hoarse and labored breathing of men. For a wild minute the sounds of the mad struggle raging down in the cellar filled the cafe. Then there was a thud louder than any before, the crash of breaking glass—a groan, a curse—then silence.

That silence lengthened . . . ten—fifteen—twenty seconds . . . lengthened ominously. The patrons of the cafe fidgeted nervously, looked at each other with wide, questioning eyes. In an anguish of sweat, Emile wrung his hands. Had the two titans knocked each other out? Had something more dark and sinister taken place down there in that dark cellar?

Then there came again the sound of movement from below. There were footsteps followed by the dragging of a body. Those in the cafe stiffened; their ears strained. The footsteps grew louder, echoed hollowly on the stairs. The key grated in the lock, the door banged open and Captain Quinn stepped into the room. In his arms he carried the battered body of Major Nordstrom.

BOTH men gave mute evidence that the struggle had been a terrific one. They were bruised, battered, bleeding. Their uniforms were torn and rent. But without a word, without a glance about him, Quinn strode to the bar, still carrying Nordstrom in his arms.

Almost tenderly, as a mother might have done with a sick child, he propped the Major against the bar, steadied the swaying figure with one arm.

“Whiskey!” he called to the trembling Emile. “Two glasses!”

Emile hastened to obey, stood two glasses and a bottle before Quinn.

Quinn filled the glasses, held one to Nordstrom’s lips and forced it down.

The raw whiskey burned the fog away from Nordstrom’s brain. He shook his head, his knees stiffened.

Quinn downed his own drink. He needed it.

Then, hooking one arm beneath Nordstrom’s, he

led the still wobbly Major back to the table where Solomon and Dake still sat. He propped Nordstrom into a chair, looked at the two men opposite. Dake’s face was a frozen mask. Only his eyes burned. Solomon sat rigid, one hand frozen around a whiskey bottle. He glanced at Nordstrom’s battered face, once, then turned quickly away. For a moment he toyed with the silver bars on the table, then handed them to Quinn.

“You’ve taken on a Major,” he said quietly. “Maybe some day you’ll give a sergeant a chance.”

“Any time you want, Solomon,” said Quinn. “And now, good evening, gentlemen.”

CHAPTER VIII

IN THE BEATING he had administered to Major Nordstrom, Quinn had done his duty as he had seen it. He had no personal feeling in the matter. Outside of the heat and pain of battle his own emotions were not involved. Nordstrom had challenged his authority and he had accepted the challenge. If he had refused to accept or if he had lost the battle in the wine cellar of Emile’s cafe, Nordstrom would have been top man of the Black Sheep. And rightly so, according to Quinn’s philosophy.

As it was, he promptly forgot the matter as soon as he eased his tired body down on his cot. With the free and innocent conscience of a baby he went promptly to sleep.

An hour later he was roughly awakened from sweet dreams of a binge in Paris. Jerry Twist was shaking him by the shoulder. Quinn yawned, stretched, growled and sat up in bed. Standing by Twist’s side was Lieutenant Steele. The faces of both men were long and dour.

“What’s the matter with you fellows?” demanded Quinn. “What’s the big idea of waking me?”

“You’re a sap, Jack,” said Twist without any formality. “What was the idea of beating up the Major?”

“And then buying him a drink,” put in Steele.

“He asked for it and so I gave it to him.” Quinn rolled a cigarette with deft fingers. “If he had carried me out of that cellar. . . .” He shrugged, lit up.

“Sure, I know,” said Steele. “He would have been top dog. But do you think that Nordstrom is going to take it?”

Quinn kicked his feet over the side of the bed and

sat up. "Nordstrom's all right. He fought like a man. He can take it."

"Maybe," said Twist, "but the story of that battle is all over the front lines by now—been relayed to G.H.Q."

"I'm not worried about G.H.Q."

"Maybe not," said Steele, "but the last I saw Nordstrom he was still in Emile's joint. Solomon and Dake were with him. They were hatching something Better watch out."

Quinn puffed silently for a few moments. "Those guys will be all right if I once convince them that I'm boss," he said. "I'd act the same under the same circumstances."

"Dake's got a rep for being a killer," warned Twist.

Quinn smiled disdainfully. "Haven't we all? What do you think this bloody war is all about?" He flicked his cigarette out the window. "Shove off, you guys, and let me sleep. Let me handle Dake, Solomon and Nordstrom." He crawled under the covers again. "Flagg raised hell this morning about the job we bungled. We got to finish it tomorrow. Better turn in."

He was asleep with the last words. Twist shook his head sadly from side to side. "What a guy," he said.

"He's playing with dynamite and doesn't know it," growled Steele.

OUT that is where Lieutenant Steele was wrong. Quinn knew exactly with what dynamite he was playing. And in the gray of dawn the following morning, just before his Sky Devils took off, he lined them up and said his little piece.

"Men," he began, "just so there will be no misunderstanding, I want to say this about last night's little affair between Nordstrom and myself. Nordstrom fought like a man. He's got what it takes. I admire his courage. I'm forgetting last night. I'm not sore and I'm hoping the Major sees it the same way." There was a long moment of silence. The men shifted uncomfortably in line. Solomon and Dake cast a frozen eye on the Major. But at last Nordstrom stepped forward. He held his head erect and his eyes met Quinn's squarely.

"I just want to add to that, Captain, that I was sore, but I'm sore no longer. Damn it all, you're regular. You're getting under my skin."

Quinn exhaled a long breath of relief. "Thanks," he said brusquely. Then he turned to his men, growled: "Now get this, men. Flagg gave all us Black Sheep a break with this outfit. We can't let him down. We got to finish this morning the job we bungled yesterday.

Let's go, and let's give 'em hell!" But it was not to be as easy as that. Riding high at ten thousand feet, still some ten miles from Meckelburg and the partially destroyed bridge across the river the Fokkers came like black-crossed bats out of hell.

Quinn waggled his wings, let his motor out full, cursed. His Black Sheep would have to fight their way through down to the river this morning. He hurled himself at the oncoming Fokkers. But the German *Vogels* had blood in their eye. Their flight did not waver. They came in recklessly tripping their Spandaus long before they were within range, orange and green flames leaping about spinner caps.

There was a breathless moment when it seemed inevitable that the two flights would crumple, one against the other. Then the two formations broke up and it was every man for himself. The sky was ripped wide open with tumbling, slashing crates. So desperate was the tangle that it seemed a miracle that the ships did not lock wings.

Men, Yank and German alike, thumbed their noses at death and fought their ships through sky-holes that seemed only half high enough for their passage.

Vickers belched lurid flames and stuttering death. Spandaus sang staccato melodies of doom. Guns grew hot under blistering hands as they worked frantically. For a jam meant death by searing lead and a mad plunge to the shell pocked earth below.

Of all the flight, only Quinn, Solomon and Murphy managed to slash their way through the defending German crates. Contemptuously ignoring the ground batteries they swept low over the bridge and dropped their eggs with unerring marksmanship. The river erupted in geysers of shattered planking. And when it subsided again a month's work of the German engineers lay ruined beyond repair.

Solomon was grinning like a demon as he zoomed up above the bridge out of range of the ground batteries. Then the grin froze on his face. Two Fokkers had plunged down from the sky above and now they were riding him hard, pinning him down to destruction by Spandau lead or by some bursting shell from the ground.

Solomon knew that he was doomed, that he didn't have the proverbial chance of a snow ball in hell. But he didn't quit. His strained grin melted into an ugly laugh; he tripped his guns and with desperate abandon, tried to fight his way clear and up to the safer altitude above.

It was no go. He knew it. In another few minutes

it would be all over. In his heart he felt a momentary regret, not that he was to die, but that he was to leave the Black Sheep. Angry leaden wasps stitched holes along his fuselage, hungry for the taste of his blood. In a mad vortex the three crates spun around the circle, ever tightening. Lead splattered against Solomon's instrument board, spewing slivers of glass into his face. Stays splintered; guy wires snapped.

And then, when the next burst must have blasted him from the cockpit a battered Spad crashed into the fight, gun roaring. The insane circle in which Solomon had been forced to fly was broken. He had a chance—and it was Quinn who had given him that chance. For it was Quinn's Spad that had cracked the circle open.

In one fleeting second Solomon saw Quinn's gauntleted fist wave him a friendly assurance. Something snapped in him. Instead of being grateful that his C.O. had saved his life, he saw red. Making a monkey of him, was he? Well, by God, he'd show him.

But Quinn was not aware of this. His gun was stuttering with deadly accuracy. One of the Fokkers fell out of his line of sights and never recovered. For a dead hand was behind the stick and the crate spun down to earth out of control.

Quinn leap-frogged the tumbling crate without taking his finger off the trip of his gun. Recklessly he slashed at the second Fokker. The German saved himself by a swift wing over and Quinn shot the belly out of the ship, missing the pilot's seat by inches.

Quinn's eyes were hard. He squinted through the ring sights for a final burst, squeezed the trip—and then with a sickening splutter the gun jammed.

He cast an anxious eye aloft. His Black Sheep had already scattered and were headed for home. There was only one thing to do, follow after them.

He dived to the tree-tops as he headed for the lines, hedge-hopped over the trenches and nursed his coughing motor. His body ached; his mouth was hot and dry. But in his heart was a song. For his Black Sheep had not failed him a second time. They had come through.

CHAPTER IX

BACK ON THE 'DROME of the Black Sheep, Solomon was waiting for Quinn when the latter climbed out of his ship. Before Quinn, had a chance to raise his goggles, Solomon threw himself on him. He gave the impression of a nervous, cocky terrier attacking a huge mastiff. Quinn, too, played the role to the hilt. With one big paw he yanked Solomon by the slack of his tunic and lifted him clear of the ground.

Solomon's eyes flashed dangerously in the white mask of his face.

"What's eating you?" growled Quinn.

"Damn your soul!" snarled Solomon. "What was the idea?"

"What idea?"

"Of taking advantage of me up there in the air?"

"I saved your life."

"I know you did, damn it. And that's what burns me. Why? You knew I was bucking you—that I was out to stop you. So why did you give me a break?"

Quinn sneered. "So playing the game that way is against your code, eh, kid?"

"I'd go to hell for a pal . . . but you're no pal. You mean nothing to me and I mean nothing to you."

Quinn shook his head. "That's where you're wrong. You mean plenty to me, Solomon. You're a crack flyer. There's no one better in the outfit with a machine gun than you. I saw what you did today before three Jerries ganged up on you. I need you, and this outfit needs you. That's why I saved your life."

It took some time for Solomon to assimilate these words. He cooled down at last and the fire died from his eyes.

"Then you didn't save me just to rub it in?"

Quinn threw a heavy arm around his shoulder. The hundred and twenty pound Solomon sagged beneath the sudden weight. "Kid," said Quinn evenly, "you don't know me. But I gave you a break, now why don't you give me one? I said you meant something to me because I needed you for this outfit. Well, maybe you mean more to me than that. What the hell! You're a Jew and I'm an Irishman. The Jew and the Irish have always gotten along. What do you say?"

Solomon's hand shot out but in that second before it was clasped by Quinn, a third voice projected itself into the conversation. A nasty, cutting voice, and it said but one word: "Nuts!"

Slowly Killer Dake stepped from behind the plane. There was a sneer on his lips. "Just two little love birds, eh?" he mocked. "The Jew and the Irishman getting together. Ain't that sweet?"

Solomon's eyes became venomous slits. His voice was a dead, even monotone. "Don't you like it, Dake?" he said.

Dake never took his eyes off Quinn. "No, you little punk. I don't like it."

Solomon stepped up to him. "That's just too bad," he said evenly.

Dake still ignored him; kept his eyes on Quinn. "Beat it!" he snarled. Then his hand dropped swiftly to the gun at his belt. Solomon leaped in fast. His left fist shot out, sank inches deep into Dake's stomach. Dake doubled and as his head came down, Solomon's right fist moved a scant six inches through space and rocked against the killer's jaw. Dake dropped to one knee.

Quinn's eyes blinked and his estimation of Solomon went up several notches. He couldn't have delivered a cleaner knock down, himself. But the little affair was not over yet. Dake had gone down to one knee with his hand on the butt of his gun. But before he could draw, with surprising strength and agility, Solomon had twisted his arm up to the small of his back.

Dake snarled—pain, hate and humiliation crawling across his face in turn.

Solomon laughed shortly. "A killer, eh?" he mocked. "You're over rated." He reached down swiftly, snatched the gun from Dake's holster, examined it disdainfully for a moment, then passed it back to Dake.

"Next time you go for that," he said coolly, "make damn sure you can finish the draw. I could have beaten you to it by seconds."

He left Dake standing there with the automatic still clutched in his fist. Then coolly turned his back on the killer, hooked his arm under Quinn's and started off across the tarmac.

"What were you saying, Quinn," he asked, "about the Jew and the Irishman?"

The breath whistled from Quinn's lungs in a long, drawn-out sigh. "Well, kid," he answered, "I know one Jew and one Irishman who are going to get along. They may fight—they may call each other a lot of hard names—but in the pinch . . ."

"You said it," said Solomon. "Let's have a drink."

QUINN had never entertained any such foolish idea that he could whip his crew of sky devils into shape over night. He wouldn't have wanted the men if they knuckled under that easily. But he had made progress. Two of the hardest nuts, Nordstrom and Solomon, had already been cracked. He had converted potential dynamite against him into valuable twin assets.

True, he had his work cut out for him. He was on his toes twenty-four hours a day. There were brawls, petty intrigues, plots. But slowly the men began to realize that Quinn, in addition to being a hard hitting two-fisted fighter, was absolutely on the level. He played no favorites. His cards were always on the table and what he thought he said in plain, unvarnished English. More than that, he encouraged everyone else to use language as plain and understandable as his own.

The only serious problem that remained to him was Dake. Killer Dake. Dake stalked the tarmac with sullen eyes and bitter lips. He brooded, trusted no man and nursed his own plans for revenge. Both he and Quinn knew that the final, ultimate show-down had to come soon.

Within a week the Black Sheep had established for themselves an enviable or unenviable reputation, according to how you looked at it. In the air, in combat, there had never been a more reckless, more slashing squadron of men. They started out to achieve the impossible and they succeeded by the sheer audacity of their purpose.

They were a crew of Sky Devils without nerves, each man thumbing his nose at Death while he tried to outdo the other.

Intelligence and G.H.Q. had no complaint to make about Quinn's Black Sheep so long as they were in the air. But on the ground—ah, that was a different matter altogether. Every good flyer up and down the lines, French, British, and Yank were putting in applications for transfer to the Black Sheep. But that was not all. The stories of what went on on the 'drome of the Black Sheep—the gambling, the fights, the lack of military discipline, became the one topic of conversation from the lowly dough boy in the trenches to the brass hats, snug and safe in their clubs in Paris.

Actually, the stories had a stimulating effect on the men who did the real fighting. They proved that after all the men were not merely numbers, cogs—parts of a vast machine of destruction. The stories proved after all, and gave the men a ray of hope, that there was still something human about the war.

Quinn became a legendary hero, a Sky Devil, indeed. But as the stories began to drift into Paris, the brass hats began to frown. Military discipline had to be upheld at any cost. It was unthinkable that a commissioned officer should consort with an enlisted man! Dignity, rules and regulations, military red tape . . . That fool Quinn was becoming a menace.

Insidious bugs were placed in the unwilling ear of Colonel Flagg. Pressure was brought to bear on him with the net result that a few days later Quinn was seated opposite him at his desk in G.H.Q. in Paris.

With irritating persistence Quinn whistled the latest music hall ballad in an off key minor while the Colonel paced the floor. Quinn had a good idea of what he was on the carpet for this time. Flagg stared out the window a moment at the teeming streets of Paris. He frowned, turned impatiently.

“Stop that damn whistling, will you.”

Quinn grinned. “Sure, Colonel.”

Flagg strode back to the desk. “Listen, Quinn,” he said without preliminaries, “you’ve got to put a stop to all that business.”

Quinn’s voice and eyes were innocent. “What business?”

“Damn it all. You know what I mean. They’re bringing pressure to bear on me. The hell raising of you and your men, the lack of discipline—the . . .”

Quinn’s jaw hardened. He snuffed out his cigarette, stood up. “The only hell raising I know about has been in the air. That’s what you wanted and that’s what we gave you. As far as the men are concerned, they’ve been as tame as lambs.”

The Colonel suddenly relaxed, grinned. “You mean sheep, don’t you. Black Sheep.”

“Just what do you brass hats want?” demanded Quinn. “You send us out to kill and be killed, to live dangerously, to take chances, to flirt with death every minute of the day and then, By God, you expect us to act as if we were on a Sunday School picnic. This is a war. You can’t run it by a book or copy book rules. You know that, Colonel.”

Colonel Flagg nodded. “Yes, I do know that.” He drummed on the desk a moment with his fingers. Then he looked up. “Forget it. I’ll back you up to the limit, even if I have to appeal to Washington.”

“Good!” said Quinn, heaving a long sigh of relief.

“I have vague plans for you and your Sky Devils brewing in the back of my head.”

“You back us, Colonel,” said Quinn, “and the Black Sheep will back you to the last man.”

“I know you will. My special plans will come later. But now, in the immediate future . . . Here. Pull up your chair. Listen carefully to what I have to say. Reveal it to no man until you are ready to take the air.”

For the next ten minutes Colonel Flagg talked swiftly in a low urgent voice. Quinn listened closely, interrupting occasionally to ask a pointed question. At last he rose. His face was stern and there was a far away look in his eyes.

“It’s a desperate undertaking altogether,” concluded the Colonel. “The chances are fifty to one that the men will never return. But if they succeed, a great blow will have been struck for the cause of the allies. I hesitate to ask any man . . .”

“Forget it,” snapped Quinn. “We’re soldiers—not babies.”

“Exactly,” said Flagg. “You will ask for volunteers, of course.”

“Volunteers, nothing,” answered Quinn. “Every one of my men would jump at the job.”

“Then you have already decided on the men?”

“Yes.”

“Who, may I ask?”

“Myself, for one, and Captain Dake.”

CHAPTER X

QUINN SAID NO WORD to any man all the next day. But by the special tuning up he gave a two seater Dorand, the Squadron suspected that something of more than usual importance was on foot. Satisfied at last that his crate was keyed up to the ultimate of perfection, Quinn loaded it, not with bombs, but with four heavy ten gallon containers of gasoline.

It was not until night had fallen and a hundred wild stories had circulated on the tarmac that Quinn called the men into his office. They sensed that they were on the verge of an important revelation and for once an utter silence greeted Quinn when he rose to talk.

“Men,” he began, “Colonel Flagg has entrusted to this Squadron a highly important, and I need not say, a highly dangerous mission. But mere danger would not stop any of us. It is this. By some genius of mechanics the Germans have developed a super gun.

There are two of them. They are forty miles behind the lines, well concealed, well guarded. But so powerful are they that even from that distance Jerry has been bombarding Paris. If the Germans can build two such guns, they can build others. Paris is in danger, of a merciless shelling with its resultant loss of life to women and children. But G.H.Q. is more worried about the adverse effect such a shelling would have on the morale of the civilian population. In short, it is the job of the Black Sheep to destroy those guns."

A hubbub of excited conversation arose at the conclusion of Quinn's words. It was immediately stilled as the Captain raised his hand for silence.

"Our intelligence operatives working behind the German lines have located the position of these two guns." From the breast pocket of his tunic he extracted a map and smoothed it out on the table as the men crowded about him. "They are located here at Metz, well fortified, well protected with a flight of Fokkers to guard them by day from aerial attack.

"Consequently, our plan is to attack at night, by air, catching Jerry off guard."

"But how?" protested Steele.

"The plan is daringly simple," continued Quinn. "Here, look at the map again." He illustrated his words with the point of his finger. "Here are the gun emplacements—here the town of Metz. On the far side are woods and here a cleared field. Intelligence reports that it is possible to bring a plane down there and take off again."

"At night?" asked Twist doubtfully.

"Of course, that is one of the risks," said Quinn. "At all events it has to be attempted. The plane will land there in that field, carrying four drums of gasoline. Then the two men who fly the plane must make their way to the gun emplacements, come hell or high water, plant the gasoline drums and light them.

At three A.M. on the dot. Colonel Flagg has arranged for a Squadron of bombers to be over the vicinity at that time. When we spot off the guns with the gasoline, the rest is up to the bombers. Simple?"

"Simple and utterly mad," said Steele coolly. "But I nominate myself as one of the men to go."

A dozen other voices chimed in immediately, each one claiming the privilege of making the foolhardy attempt.

Quinn looked at the men fondly, then shook his head. "Sorry," he said, "but I'm going to have to disappoint a lot of you. I'm flying that plane over and I've already decided on the man to accompany me."

"Who?" The word came as an angry chorus.

"Captain Dake," said Quinn evenly. "Take the map, Dake. Study it. Be ready in half an hour."

"Thanks," said Dake and for the first time there was a note of respect in his voice.

IT WAS twelve o'clock to the dot when Quinn and Dake left the mess shack and started across the tarmac towards the waiting Dorand. Quinn cast a speculative eye aloft. The night was dark and overcast; there was a smell of rain in the air. He grunted with satisfaction. The Germans would not be expecting any Yank trick that night. Behind him trooped the Black Sheep, talking in low tones. Each man had wanted to take on the dangerous mission but since the breaks had not come their way, they were out to wish the lucky ones success and a happy landing, going and returning.

The motor of the Dorand purred with restrained power as the propeller cut a glistening arc through the blackness of the night. Swiftly Quinn checked the ship for the last time. There were final, hurried handclasps, then he and Dake vaulted into the cockpits. Quinn took over the controls, while Dake in the rear office ran a loving hand along the cold barrel of the Vickers, mounted there on a swivel.

Quinn jizzed the throttle, then eased it down. He raised a hand in signal to the ground crew, and the chocks were pulled and swiftly the Dorand rolled forward. It was difficult enough taking off from the soggy tarmac by daylight. By darkest night it was a matter of sheer genius, luck and flying instinct. Quinn had his share of all three that night and he needed them. He cleared the hangars at the far end of the field by a scant foot.

"Nice going," shouted Dake in his car from behind. "I couldn't have done better, myself."

Quinn laughed. "You may have to do better before the night's over," he replied.

He sent the Dorand into a gentle, spiraling climb and when the altimeter showed ten thousand feet, levelled off and headed into the east—and destiny. Like a meteor they streaked across the dark dome of heaven, trailing twin banners of flame behind them from their exhausts.

Quinn was suffused with a strange thrill of exhilaration. Never before had the dark world seemed so mysterious. Never before had it seemed so good to be alive. Yet he smelled danger in the air—and thrilled to it. It was danger that gave zest to his life.

He glanced back over his shoulder at Dake. The

Killer was lolling at complete ease behind the Vickers as calmly as if he were enjoying a taxi ride down Fifth Avenue. His brow was unruffled, his eyes calmer than Quinn had ever seen them before. He seemed not to have a care in the world, to be completely indifferent to the fact that they were flying blind at night, that they would have to achieve a landing on a strange field . . . that the probabilities were that they would not return.

Quinn turned back to the controls. A thin whistle sprang to his lips. He was more convinced than ever that in Dake he had picked the right man for the job.

The minutes raced by. They were deep in German territory, now. Dake tapped Quinn on the shoulder and pointed downward and to the left. Following the direction of his finger Quinn made out in the middle distance, a faint glow of light low against the horizon. It was Metz, their objective. He kicked the rudder bar, eased back on the stick and went into a long, angling climb. At fourteen thousand feet he reached the absolute ceiling of the Dorand. Below them now the lights of Metz stood out clear and distinct.

Quinn cut the motor, went down in a glide that was calculated to cross the city at an elevation of some three thousand feet. Clearly now, in his mind, he saw the map of the terrain below in every detail. Somewhere below him on the near side of the town were the super guns. On the far side the woods and beyond that the cow pasture that was to be their landing field.

Suddenly from below a long, probing finger of light flashed upwards. Some wary, watchful Boche had heard the drone of their prop and was searching them out in the sky with a powerful searchlight. Quinn cursed, caught his breath and kicked right rudder hard. The searchlight swept by where they had been but a second before. Then they had cleared the town. The probing finger of light went out.

Quinn relaxed. "Close," he called over his shoulder to Dake.

IT HAD been close indeed but Dake was still unruffled. "Yeah," he shouted back. "But it's my guess that searchlight tipped off the position of the guns."

Quinn didn't have an opportunity to answer then. Below him the earth and the things upon it began to take shape and form. He levelled off at a thousand feet, squinted his eyes downward. An occasional house, a light, a crooked road, then a wall of towering trees swept towards him. He threw in the switch again and

the motor picked up. Dropping another five hundred feet, he hedge-hopped along just clearing the tops of the trees. Then abruptly there loomed below him a shadowy well of blackness.

Cautiously Quinn circled twice around the field, getting the feel of it as best he could. Then coming up into the wind, he breathed a muttered prayer to his guardian angel and set the Dorand down sharply. There was a jolt, a bump, a lurch. Quinn fish-tailed rapidly to reduce his speed. Everything was proceeding smoothly. Then, without warning, one wheel dug deep into a rut, slewed the crate around. The Dorand rose on one wing, started to go over. Swiftly Quinn shot her full gun. For a second she lifted, shot ahead, then as the engine was cut once more, jolted to a stop against a barbed wire fence at the end of the field.

The breath escaped Quinn's lips in a long, drawn out whistle. He pushed up his goggles and wiped the sweat from his brow.

"Nice going," said Dake, still calm, still unruffled, as if death had not plucked at his shoulder a moment before. "Now the real fun begins."

Swiftly they climbed from the ship, turned it around ready for a take off if their hundred to one shot came through and they returned to the field again. This accomplished they hurriedly unloaded the four drums of gasoline and concealed them in the dense undergrowth twenty paces from the ship. Then, automatics drawn, they crouched tense and waiting in the dark shadows nearby.

The erratic landing of a Yank ship forty miles behind the German lines at 12:30 A.M. of a dark night might not have been seen. But it was too much to expect that it had not been heard. Surely some suspicious or some curious native would come to investigate. Quinn only hoped that a detachment of infantry would not turn out. That would rather complicate things. One—two—even three men he and Dake were prepared to handle with speed and dispatch.

CHAPTER XI

SIDE BY SIDE THEY CROUCHED in the shadows, their automatics reversed in their fists. The crickets sang a weird accompaniment to the distant booming

of the guns. From somewhere far off came the faint and muted tolling of a bell. Quinn glanced down at the illuminated dial of the watch strapped around his wrist. One o'clock. They had two hours in which to negotiate five miles of difficult enemy territory, where the slightest miscue or misstep would mean disaster. He itched for action, became impatient. Ten minutes had passed since they had landed and no one had come to investigate. Thus far the breaks had been with them.

He whispered a word in Dake's ear. Dake nodded and still keeping their automatics ready, they moved cautiously down to where they had concealed the gasoline drums. They were in the act of hoisting them when off to their left a twig snapped sharply. The sound exploded like a bomb in the utter silence of the night. Quinn eased his drum silently to the ground, straightened up, listened. Dake's nostrils flared wide and like a hunting dog he sniffed the air.

Silence. The crickets had ceased their song. It seemed that nothing stirred or moved on earth. The utter stillness had a menacing quality about it that began to get on Quinn's nerves. He was just on the point of moving forward to investigate when from off to the left again came the muffled tread of feet. They came closer.

Quinn stiffened and his eyes glinted brightly. Dake's body tensed like a steel trap. Poised on the balls of their feet, ready for instant action, they waited. One by one they counted those cautious footsteps growing nearer. Then suddenly, stepping from the shadow of the trees a dark form loomed up.

In the obscure light Quinn made out the bulk of a man, caught the glint of a gun in his hand. Warily the newcomer crept up on the Dorand. When he moved, Quinn and Dake moved with him. It was a cat and mouse game and Quinn's muscles ached with tension.

It could be seen now that the stranger was in uniform. There were bars on his shoulder. He reached the tail of the Dorand, at last, moved down along the fuselage, paused a moment at the forward cockpit. By the same, common instinct, Quinn and Dake knew that the psychological moment to attack had come. Without a word having been said between them, they launched themselves forward through the air.

The German heard them coming, but too late. He whirled, swung up his automatic but even before his finger could constrict on the trigger, Quinn's hard fist had crashed into his jaw. He staggered back. The automatic flew from his hand in a wide arc. Then Dake

had closed with him from behind.

The German didn't have a chance. Dake's fore-arm pressing savagely against his wind-pipe, effectively cutting off any outcry, he was borne to the ground. Quinn did the rest by tapping him none too gently behind the ear with the butt of his gun. The German went limp.

It was the work of but a minute to tie him hand and foot and to stuff a gag into his mouth. It took but another minute to carry him deep into the underbrush and to dump him there.

"That will teach you, Jerry," muttered Quinn, "not to come butting into something that does not concern you."

Dake grunted in agreement, reached down swiftly and rifled the papers from the pockets of the unconscious officer.

A moment later he and Quinn had picked up the gasoline drums and headed cautiously towards Metz. Their objective, they knew, was on the other side of the town. Quinn figured that their best bet was to head directly toward the village, then circle about it as closely as they dared.

It was not easy going. They stumbled across uneven fields, negotiated a thin, bare strip of woods, almost fell into a sagging old fence. The rotting timbers cracked loudly in the stillness of the night as they crawled over, passing over the gasoline drums. That brought them into a narrow, rutted lane.

They proceeded cautiously, their ears strained. The soft swish-swish of the fluid in the cans was a steady accompaniment to each stride. And the cans themselves grew heavier with each step.

FINALLY Quinn pulled up to an abrupt halt, set his cans down on the road. He cursed, softly but fervently.

"Of all the infernal contraptions . . ." he began hoarsely.

The ghost of a grin flitted across Killer Dake's thin lips. "Me, too," he admitted. Then suddenly he stiffened.

Quinn heard, too. For a brief moment the two flyers stood rigid. From down the lane, in the direction from whence they had come, they caught the faint creak of wheels and the muffled thud of a horse's hoofs. A swift glance of understanding passed between them, then without a word they melted into the shadows on opposite sides of the road.

When the vehicle finally lumbered into view it proved to be a dilapidated wagon. On the driver's

seat, huddled in a shapeless great coat, dozed a weary German. His horse was a sorry animal and judging from his stumbling gait, was weary and dispirited as his master. They reached the spot where the two flyers had stood a few moments before.

It was over almost as suddenly as it started. Twin shadows leaped out, vaulted onto the wagon. There was a guttural oath as the German was dragged from his perch, a brief struggle. His shapeless coat was ripped off, he was reduced to a silent and helpless bundle and unceremoniously dumped some six yards in from the roadside.

The heavy gasoline cans were hastily loaded into the back of the wagon. Killer Dake flattened himself down behind them, while Quinn, with a chuckle of satisfaction, climbed up on the seat and grasped the reins. When the wagon jogged onward again, he was merely a huddled figure in a shapeless great coat and except for the swishing cans, the wagon looked as innocuous as it had before.

The outlying cottages of Metz were in view when Quinn turned off on a road toward his left. They made the rest of the journey without interruption. Once they passed a steel-helmeted figure. But the Boche apparently recognized the beast and the wagon, for he called out a brief greeting. Quinn managed a guttural grunt without raising his head and passed on unchallenged.

The subdued lights of Metz were behind him when a patch of woods loomed blackly ahead. The road he was following, he could see, skirted the woods on the left. According to the map he had studied, the monster guns lay hidden just behind that strip of trees.

Jerking back the reins, he pulled his horse to a halt. He reached over behind him, poked Dake in the ribs. "The joy-ride's over," he whispered. "Bail out."

Dake climbed agilely out, dropped to the road, looked about him. There was not much to see.

"What about this nag?" he asked, as they swiftly unloaded the drums of gasoline. "Do we hide him for the getaway?"

Quinn smothered a snort. "Hell, no! This plug? Listen, Dake, when we light out of this place you'll think I sprouted wings."

"Yeah," drawled Dake, turning the horse around. "Maybe you'll have wings—and a harp."

He gave the horse a smart crack across the rump, started the weary animal jogging back toward the village. Then picking up their burden, the two flyers headed for the woods.

The first few drops of rain sprinkled them, warning of more to come, then ceased again. They plunged into the fringe of the wood and Stygian blackness enveloped them.

In absolute silence now, they moved forward more slowly. Dake followed close at Quinn's heels. Roots and stumps lay like traps in their path, waiting to catch an unwary foot. Despite all their caution an occasional twig crackled under foot. They stumbled into a tangled barricade of barbed wire, wasted precious time getting the drums safely over it.

They were making good progress when the blast came. Without warning the night was suddenly torn to pieces. There was a lurid glow up ahead, an explosion that screamed in their ears. The earth trembled beneath their feet and for a moment they could not draw breath.

As the rumbling echoes died away, Quinn heard the killer exhale sharply. It was the first sign of emotion Quinn had ever seen him show. And Quinn could well appreciate his feelings. So that was one of the mystery guns? So that was the great steel monster that could hurl death and destruction into the streets of Paris so many miles away! The Colonel had been right. It had to be destroyed.

They went on, reached open space before they were aware of it, pulled up to an abrupt halt. As though the gods felt sorry for them on their dangerous mission, the clouds that hid the moon thinned out. For a brief moment silvery light filtered through, lit up the scene before them. Just a glimpse, then the moon pulled the veil across her face again. But that glimpse was enough. Every detail of the scene was etched indelibly on their memories.

CHAPTER XII

NESTLING IN THE ENCIRCLING TREES was a wide, shallow pit. Surrounded by a low concrete parapet was the enormous base of the guns. Projecting from what looked like an oversized pill box were two long, black snouts—the biggest guns they had ever seen. Sleek, shining, enormous, they were the most terrible engines of destruction that man had ever produced.

"You saw?" whispered Quinn in disbelief.

"I saw," muttered Dake. "What a pair of babies. If only . . ."

He never completed the sentence. A long tongue of flame lashed out from the muzzle of one of the guns. The earth heaved, shook and settled back again and Quinn and Dake found themselves sprawled on the ground. A brass gong beat inside their skulls. Their bones ached as if they had been crushed in some huge vise. It was difficult to breathe.

Slowly Quinn crawled to his hands and knees, recovered the gasoline drums. So terrific had been the concussion that his eyes ached as if they had been pulled out on springs and then snapped back again.

"Lord help us," he muttered in Dake's ear, "if they let loose while we're planting the gasoline."

Dake nodded grimly. "Your ear drums will go." From his pocket he whipped out a handful of oily waste, handed half to Quinn. "Stuff your ears," he said. "Not as good as cotton but it will have to do."

They stuffed their ears as best they could, then Quinn glanced down at his watch. He received a start when he noted that the crystal had shattered, but was reassured a moment later when he held the watch to his ear. It still ticked. The hands pointed to twenty-five.

"We made it in good time," he said. "In another half hour Flagg's bombers should be somewhere overhead."

"Then for the fun," grunted Dake. "It's going to be a sweet job getting out of here."

One of the super guns blasted again and it was a minute before they could resume their conversation. "Our best bet," said Quinn, "is to lay low here for another fifteen minutes, then crawl up on the emplacements. If we can plant the gasoline and fire it at the last minute, the less chance of the plan going hay wire."

Dake agreed and they crouched down in the thick tangle of bushes to count off the dragging minutes. Six times while they waited the ominous steel monsters erupted, belching tons of steel skyward. Quinn remembered the Colonel's words. If the Germans could build two such guns, they could build more.

He glanced at his watch. It was fifteen minutes to the hour. He nudged Dake. "Our only chance is to plant the drums at the rear of the concrete wall," he whispered. "You circle around from the left. I'll come up from the right. If anybody gets in your way, let 'em have it. But quietly."

Dake nodded. The two men looked at each other questioningly for a moment, then instinctively their

hands shot out, met in a firm clasp.

"So long, Dake," said Quinn simply.

"Good luck," answered Killer Dake.

That was all. No show of maudlin sentiment, but Quinn was satisfied.

Without another word both men picked up their loads and crouching low to the ground began a swift but cautious approach on the gun emplacements. Within the space of a few seconds the night had swallowed Dake. Quinn pressed steadily forward, cursed inwardly when one of the containers banged against his knee with a metallic clatter. What a spot to be in! Forty miles deep in German territory and not a chance in the world to draw his gun if he bumped into any one.

A HUNDRED feet before him loomed the dark bulk of the concrete parapet surrounding the gun pit. He glanced at his watch. Seven minutes to three. He wondered how Dake was making out. And then he froze. A shadow darker than the surrounding gloom, detached itself from the sheer wall of the emplacement and started towards him. Quinn's heart pounded dully against his ribs. Either he had been seen or heard. For a moment he was undecided as to his best course of action. He dared not draw his gun and fire—make a fight of it. For at the first shot, the first outcry a squad of soldiers would be on him like a flock of angry wasps and not only he but Dake would be discovered.

Yet if he stood there and did nothing . . .

A second shadow leaped swiftly out of the gloom. Swift and silently as death it flung itself on the first. Quinn saw an upraised arm, the glint of metal describing a swift arc. Then both shadows collapsed to the ground. A moment later one rose and hurried towards him. It was Dake.

"I got the other guard at the far end," he whispered. "I was watching you crawl up and saw the spot you were in."

"You're a pal," whispered back Quinn.

"Forget it. I would say we got just about two minutes to do the job up right."

"Two minutes will be enough," answered Quinn.

Each one carrying a drum they snaked swiftly up to the rear wall of the gun pit, planted the containers some ten feet apart, unscrewed the caps.

"I'm all set at the other end," said Dake.

"Good. Take your cue from me. When you see my match . . ." He broke off sharply, cocked his head aloft. "Listen!"

From far off came the faint drumming of motors. And as they crouched there tense, expectant, every nerve and muscle on the alert, the droning of the motors grew louder. "On time to the dot," whispered Quinn urgently. "Hurry!"

Dake waited for no one, faced down to the far end of the emplacement. Quinn's hand was steady as he snatched a packet of matches from his pocket. He waited another ten seconds until the sound of the onrushing bombers had changed from a drone to a roar. Then, with a triumphant gesture he struck a match. It burst brightly in the Stygian gloom of the night. From the far end of the emplacement a second match spluttered. Quinn waited for no more. Shielding his eyes with his arm, he dropped the sputtering match into the open gasoline drum. There was a puff, a roar—then an enveloping blanket of orange flame. The identical phenomenon was duplicated from the far end of the emplacement.

Face scorched, hair and eyebrows singed, Quinn raced to his second drum. His hand was shaking now with excitement as he struck his second match, sent it sailing in a spluttering arc into the gasoline drum. For the second time he was enveloped in a sheet of livid flame. He leaped back. His clothes were on fire. Swiftly he threw himself to the ground to smother the flame, but as he rolled there in the dust he knew that he and Dake had done their part.

Four roaring torches flamed twenty feet into the sky, turning night into day. The gun emplacement and the ominous barrels of the super-guns stood out in a stark relief.

Then from the front side of the pit rose a shrill clamor of confusion. Men shouted, orders were given and retracted, running feet thudded dully on the ground. But loud and clear above it all was the thundering roar of the bombers sweeping down on that brilliantly lighted target.

Quinn rose to his feet, started to run swiftly for the protection of the woods. Behind him a rifle cracked venomously, then another and another. Lead whined over his head, whistled past his ear. He put on another burst of speed, another hundred yards to go to safety. Then without warning his knee buckled and he plunged headlong to the ground.

He tried to get up, failed. Save for a searing pain in his thigh, it seemed that he had no leg at all. But then, all thought of himself, all thought of his pain, was wiped from his mind. Behind him the world seemed suddenly to have gone to pieces, in a series of

devastating explosions. The bombers were laying their eggs.

Quinn sighed. His leg was giving him hell, but he was not unhappy. Even if he died against a brick wall before a German firing squad, he had the satisfaction of knowing that the Black Sheep had come through. He started to fish in his pocket for tobacco and papers, when a body dived to the ground beside him. It was Dake, though it was hard for Quinn to recognize him. The Killer's face and hands were livid and scorched; his uniform was charred and tattered. But he was grinning despite it all.

"I was waiting for you in the woods," he said. "I saw you fall."

"Leg," said Quinn laconically. "Bad?"

"Shattered."

"Well, let's get going," said Dake urgently. "I'll carry you."

Quinn smiled at him. "Thanks, old man, but it's no go. You've done your bit tonight. Get the hell out of this while you can."

"And leave you here?" snarled Dake. "Nuts!"

Quinn shook his head. "You're a gent, Dake. You've got what it takes. But lugging me, you'd never make it."

"The hell I won't," said Dake firmly. "There's so much hell popping back there by those guns that Jerry will never worry about us."

As if to back up his words, the bombers swept low over the gun pit and unloosed another shattering barrage of high explosives. Huge chunks of twisted steel and concrete spewed upwards, while the still brightly blazing drums of gasoline lit up the scene of destruction in sharp relief.

Dake wasted no time in further discussion. Bending swiftly, he swung Quinn's hundred and ninety pounds over his shoulder and started off for the protecting screen of woods.

Behind them the torches they had set still blazed fiercely. Behind them the bombers still rained down destruction.

CHAPTER XIII

THE FIVE MILE TRIP BACK to the cow pasture on the far side of the town was a nightmare of gruelling torture for both Quinn and Dake.

Quinn's shattered leg became a torment of pain. Dumbly, uncomplaining, Dake staggered through swamp and bog. A dozen times he stumbled, tripped, pitched his burden to the ground and plunged headlong after it. A dozen times he picked Quinn up again, continued doggedly oft.

A faint dawn was breaking in the East when Dake staggered through the last three yards of woods that hemmed in the landing field and eased Quinn gently to the ground. His body was racked by a long, convulsive shudder.

"Only God knows how—but you did it," choked Quinn.

Dake gasped for breath. "Did you think I was going to give Jerry the satisfaction of lining us up against a wall?" His thin lips cracked into a smile. "And then, I want to tell the rest of those Black Sheep of yours just how good I am, see?"

"Don't worry, I'll tell them plenty," said Quinn.

The tramp of feet and an excited buzz of guttural German from the other side of the barbed wire fence, snapped them to attention.

"Dutchmen," said Dake. "Stick here, I'll investigate."

He wormed himself forward on his stomach, returned a moment later cursing to himself.

"Just our blasted luck," he muttered. "We get here a couple of minutes too late."

"What's up?" asked Quinn anxiously.

"A squad of Heinies. They just got here. They're jumping around the Dorand like a pack of fleas."

"How many?"

"I counted eight," said Dake dourly.

"Well," said Quinn, with a philosophic shrug, "there's only one thing for it." He eased out his automatic and examined it swiftly. "I hate like hell to do this, but it's either them or us . . . us, probably. But it's better going out fighting than before a firing squad."

"Hold it!" said Dake. "I got an idea."

"What?"

"That German looney we knocked out and gagged."

"What about him?"

"Stick here," said Dake. "By God, Quinn, I got you this far and I'm not going to lose you now."

He turned swiftly and dodged off between the trees and disappeared. As best he could, Quinn hitched himself up on one hip and nursed the automatic in his fingers. He had been a louse, he told himself, to have permitted Dake to make the sacrifice for him. But in his heart he knew that Dake would not have

done otherwise. Dake had not staggered across those brutal five miles from a sense of duty. He had done so because he had wanted to.

SOMETHING stirred behind him. He twisted his body and saw a tall figure towering over him, in the field-gray uniform of a German officer. His gun whipped up.

"Hold it—you sap!"

Quinn's eyes widened. It was Dake's voice. It was Dake who stood by his side in that German uniform.

The Killer's lips twisted in what was supposed to be a grin at his surprise. "How do you like the fit?" he asked. "A little tight across the shoulders and too big in the pants, but it'll do in a pinch."

"What are you going to do now?" asked Quinn.

"Simple," said Dake. "I'm a German looney and you're my prisoner, see? I've wounded you. You're unconscious. I'm going to carry you out to the Dorand with my gun in my fist and dump you into the rear cockpit. Once you're in, grab that machine gun and turn it on them. No—you won't have to fire."

"It's a swell idea," beamed Quinn. "But what if you don't get me to the crate?"

Dake shrugged. "We'll be no worse off then than we are now. It'll be a matter of bullets and a quick death. Are you game to try it?"

"Try and stop me. You'll get a medal for this one, Dake."

"To hell with the medal—I want a shot of Scotch."

He stooped swiftly and once more swept Quinn into his arms. Then with his automatic clutched in his fist, he strode to the barbed wire fence. He made all the noise he possibly could to announce his coming, spluttered a few angry words of profanity in German as he cleared the wires.

The squad of soldiers looked up with startled glances at his unexpected appearance. Rifles were raised. But at sight of the officer's uniform they were quickly lowered again. The men fell back. In true Prussian style, Dake swept them all with a contemptuous glance, then strode up to the Dorand.

Unceremoniously he dumped Quinn into the rear cockpit, then leaped back.

The squad of soldiers were muttering among themselves. But before they could decide on what to do, Quinn swung the Vickers around on its swivel. The gaping mouth of the machine gun cut across the breasts of the Germans in a slow, fan-like arc. Their jaws sagged—their eyes popped, the rifles clattered from nerveless fingers.

Dake waited for no more. Snapping on the contact in the front office, he jumped to the propellor. He swung the prop down sharply once. The engine caught with a roar and as the ship lumbered forward he ducked beneath the wing, vaulted into the cockpit and jammed himself behind the controls. Ripping the throttle wide, he gave the bus full gun.

From behind, came a splattering barrage of shots. Dake laughed, pulled back on the stick and shot for the tops of the trees at the far end of the field.

CHAPTER XIV

BUT EVEN AS THE DORAND cleared the trees, three roaring Pfalz Scouts took off after him. Abruptly the frozen calm that had held Dake throughout the long and bitter night was snapped. For the first time he seemed to realize that he and Quinn had a chance for life—a fighting chance.

Dake pulled back on the stick and eased on right rudder. The Dorand sheered off on an erratic tangent as a flock of Fokkers rose up before him. The song of the motor rose to a high crescendo of power. And ever closer behind thundered the Pfalzes, Spandaus spitting their leaden messengers of death.

Suddenly, no more than a half a mile ahead, a curtain of bursting fire spread. Dake's eyes became bleak. Archies! A livid curtain of them—a solid wall. Then he understood. The Fokkers before him were gaining altitude to pin him down—to force him through that curtain of flame and steel.

It was a neat trap. He appreciated it. He turned around in the cockpit, laughed brazenly in Quinn's face. "Hold tight," he called. "We've got to fight for it."

Quinn laughed back. "You'll get two medals if you get us out of this."

"Not for the medals. Just for the hell of it," called back Dake. Watch!" The Dorand slewed around on its tail in a vertical bank, caught the pilot of the nearest Pfalz off guard. He never had a chance to recover. Dake gunned his buss straight for him. Both he and Quinn went to work simultaneously with their vickers. Lead licked across the crimson skies drummed a skeleton's dance along the fuselage of the German crate.

The Pfalz had had enough. It dived. Dake pulled

back on the stick and roared up another thousand feet. Twelve thousand—thirteen! The Pfalz was pulling out of its dive . . . now it was leveling off . . . now zooming up. The needle on the altimeter of the Dorand jerked crazily at fourteen thousand feet. The Pfalz came roaring up at the laboring Yankee crate, Spandau flaming. Dake thumbed his nose at the German pilot and gunned his crate towards the scarlet aerial barrage, no more than a half mile away.

THEN the Boche threw caution to the winds and charged blindly. Dake still ignored him, continued to nurse the Dorand in its wabbling climb. The air was thinning rapidly. His chest grew tighter. The motor of the Durand pounded crazily, coughed and sputtered for air.

Fourteen-five! Ceiling!

Without warning Dake whirled on the Pfalz. A swift surge on the trigger sent the German veering off out of range. Then he swept the Dorand around, plunged the stick forward to the instrument board and went into a dive. Straight for the wall of Archie fire he hurtled the crate under full gun. Behind him the Pfalz was roaring across the heaven in mad pursuit.

"Follow me, Jerry," he bellowed into the slip stream, "and we'll have breakfast together in hell!"

The Dorand plummeted down as if it were completely out of control. At any moment Quinn expected to see a wing go sailing off into space. But Dake did not pull out of the dive, nor did he ease up on the throttle.

With a rush the ship lashed through the flaming barrage of Archie fire. Below on the ground, the German gunners sweated over their guns and redoubled their efforts. Straight into the inferno Dake drove his ship.

Long since the Pfalzes behind had found it too hot and had given up the chase. And wisely, too. Bursting balls of fire rained all about the Dorand. The sky was shattered by the fury of the guns. Steel splinters drummed against the fuselage of the crate. The engine coughed, missed—then caught again.

And then they were through, lurching across their own lines and headed for the 'drome of the Black Sheep.

Dake turned easily in the cockpit, leered at Quinn. "How about tonight off?" he bellowed. "Say, I know two of the swellest dames in St. Omer."

QUINN came out of the hospital a week later, a bit shaky on his pins but none the worse for wear. To celebrate the occasion Colonel Flag came down from

Paris. And that night there was the swellest binge at Emile's cafe that St. Omer had ever seen.

A glow of pride suffused Quinn as proudly he surveyed his Black Sheep ranged down the bar. Solomon, Nordstrom, Dake; Twist, Steel and Murphy. What an outfit! What a crew of Sky Devils!

He turned to Flagg. "Well, Colonel," he said, "what do you think of them?"

"Precious lambs, all of them," grinned the Colonel. "I've never seen such a murderous, cut-throat crew in my life."

"Sure," agreed Quinn with a fond, paternal eye. "But they'll come through for you, to the last man. It's the fighting that counts—not the snappy salutes. You know, I'm beginning to feel this war isn't a bad racket after all."

The smile died from the Colonel's face. Words came to his lips but he did not utter them. Quinn was happy. Why remind him that tomorrow was another day? Why remind him that already Death was marking certain of these roistering Sky Devils—certain of these Black Sheep—for his own.

Hail and Farewell! Laugh and be merry, for tomorrow. . . . What does it matter . . . Let the devil take the hindermost.