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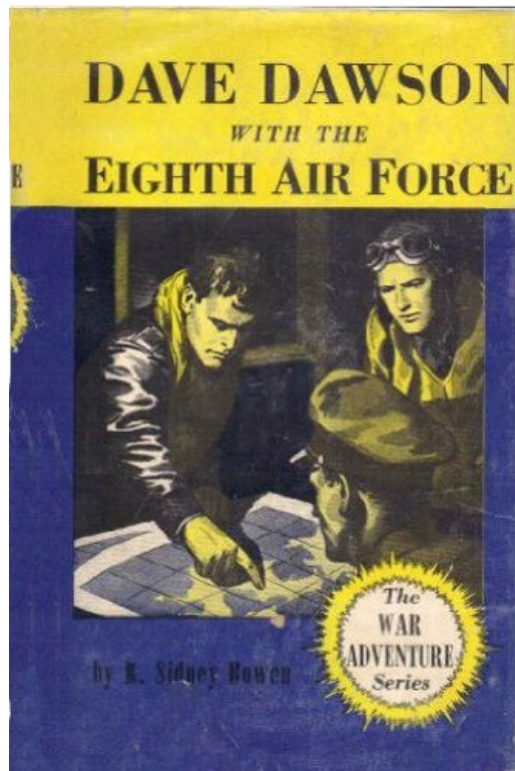
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK DAVE DAWSON WITH THE EIGHTH AIR FORCE ***



DAVE DAWSON WITH THE EIGHTH AIR FORCE

by

R. SIDNEY BOWEN

The War Adventure Series

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Dedicated to
Joel Stivers

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DAVE DAWSON WITH THE EIGHTH AIR FORCE

CHAPTER ONE

Junk Wings

With one eye on the instrument board, and the other on the lookout for other planes in that area of cloud-filled sky over England, Dave Dawson hauled the Lockheed Lightning around to the left at a fast clip, and then deliberately pulled the nose straight up, and let the fighter plane take the bit in its teeth until it stalled. It did just that eventually, and at practically the same time the starboard Allison engine sputtered badly and started to throw black smoke.

"What gives with this heap of junk, anyway?" Dawson grunted, and eased off the throttles as the Lightning fell off the stall and went whanging down in a dive to pick up flying speed. "Talk about your cranky crates! This baby is certainly something. Or maybe it's me. Let's try it again and see."

Once more he hauled the ship to the left, and then pointed the nose toward Heaven. The fighter aircraft power climbed to the stalling point, and then the starboard engine repeated its little performance. It sputtered and started to throw smoke. And just to make it unanimous, the port engine started doing the same thing.

"Well, that's that!" Dawson said with a nod for emphasis, and eased back the throttles again. "Maybe this is a very fine airplane, but I sure don't want any part of it. No, not even for a joy hop."

And with another nod for emphasis he slanted the plane earthward, after he had pulled it out of its stall drive, and went coasting down through the drifting patches of cloud toward the home drome of the Two Hundred and Fifth Squadron, Fighter Command, U. S. Eighth Air Force. He got Operations on his R.T., received permission to land, and went sliding in. After he had braked to a stop he trundled the plane over to its dispersal bay. His mechanics were there waiting for him, and the technical sergeant in charge of the group gave him a questioning look as he killed both engines and legged out of the pit and down onto the ground.

"Is there a foundry near here, Sergeant?" Dawson asked as he pulled off his helmet and goggles.

"A what, Captain?" the other echoed.

"A foundry," Dawson repeated, and jerked a thumb back at the plane. "We could take it down there and have a brass handle fitted on so we'd have something to hold on to when we throw it away."

The technical sergeant blinked and then grinned.

"Not so hot, eh, sir?" he said.

"Very snafu!" Dawson said with emphasis, using the Air Forces slang for snarled up. "And you've got me as to what's wrong. Both engines practically cut out on me as I reach the stall after a power zoom. Pressure just falls right downhill. There's a bug in both systems somewhere."

"I know, sir," the technical sergeant said, and shook his head sadly. "The darn thing just hasn't been right since we got it. I thought maybe we had got it licked, but I guess not, if she does that. Looks like she's got to have two new engines."

"More than that, I'm afraid," Dave said. "She's tail heavy, and she insists on scooting around to the left on her own. She needs a complete re-rigging from tip to tip."

The technical sergeant groaned and heaved a long sigh.

"I guess she's just an out and out lame duck," he said as he gave the aircraft a reproachful look. "We've put in more time on her than all the other ships put together. Just a dud, that's all. One of those misfits that come along every so often. Okay. Thanks, Captain, for testing her out. But until we get a replacement plane, sir, I'm afraid you won't have anything to fly. We haven't got a single spare at the field."

"Well, that's war for you," Dawson said with a faint grin. "But not a very good beginning for me. I've been with Two Hundred and Five for just three days, and now I haven't got anything to fly. Maybe I'm my own jinx."

The technical sergeant looked at the decoration ribbons under Dawson's pilot's wings, and chuckled softly.

"Oh, I wouldn't say that, Captain," he said. "Those ribbons sort of indicate you've done more than your share."

"Wrong, Sergeant," Dawson said grimly, and stared at the cloud-filled skies to the east. "Nobody can do more than his share in this mess. It's—Oh well, let's skip it. Sorry I couldn't tell you that she's a honey, Sergeant. But she isn't. She's got the misery in lots of places."

With a nod and a smile the Yank air ace turned and started walking over toward pilots' mess. His throat was dry, and he wanted a coke. After he'd had one he'd go to see Major Starke, the C.O., about getting a replacement plane. He was about halfway there when suddenly he became conscious of the fact that everybody about the field was staring at a lone Lightning circling about three or four hundred feet overhead. He took a look himself, and instantly felt very sorry for the pilot in that plane. Two of his wheels were down, but the other was still up in its recess. It was the starboard nacelle wheel that was obviously stuck, and as the plane circled slowly about Dave could see the pilot struggling desperately to get his third wheel down. But he wasn't even beginning to meet with any success. His starboard nacelle wheel was up in its recess to stay.

"Now there's a sweet thing!" he heard a voice in back of him say. "He can't get his third wheel down, and he can't get the other two back up so he can come in on his belly. Tough luck for the guy."

Dawson turned to see one of the ground officers from Operations standing just behind him. The man was staring at the plane, and absently speaking his thoughts aloud.

"Who is it up there?" Dave asked.

"A captain by the name of Farmer," the other said without taking his eyes off the circling plane. "He just joined us a couple of days ago. A heck of a thing for him to bump into on his first test hop, I'll say."

"Farmer?" Dawson gasped after a moment of stunned silence. "Freddy Farmer! Boy, are the two of us running in luck, I don't think. Me with a lame duck, and Freddy with a jammed landing gear!"

"You know him?" the other officer grunted. Then, as he looked at Dave, "Oh, you're Dawson, his pal, aren't you? Well, cross your fingers, Dawson. Just now as I left Operations he was pleading with the Old Man to let him come in on two wheels. But those things come in very hot, and the Old Man wants him to fly off and hit the silk. Only a screwball would—"

But Dawson didn't wait to hear the rest of the officer's opinion. He spun around and went legging it over to the Operations Office. The door was open and he heard Major Starke talking over the R.T. to Freddy Farmer in the air.

"I know, Farmer," the C.O. was saying. "You might get away with it, but it's too risky. Pilots are more valuable than planes to me. So long as you save your neck, writing off that plane doesn't matter so much. Head east and get some altitude; then cut your switches and go over the side, Farmer. I'll send a jeep out to look for you, and pick you up."

"But I've got half an hour of gas left, sir!" came Freddy's voice through the panel speaker unit. "Give me fifteen more minutes, sir. Maybe by then I can get the blasted wheels up, and come in on my belly. She's really a pukka ship, save for the blasted landing gear, sir. I don't want to have to hit the deck and burn up for a total loss if I can possibly help it. Just fifteen minutes more, sir?"

Dawson saw the squadron C.O. scowl, bite his lower lip, and then shrug.

"All right, Farmer, if you insist," he spoke into the R.T. "Do what you can, but only for fifteen minutes. We can always get another Lightning. But an experienced combat pilot is something else again. Fifteen minutes, Farmer. And I'm looking at my watch."

"Right you are, sir!" came Freddy Farmer's cheerful voice. "I'll see if I can't do something with this cranky blighter."

"For *only* fifteen minutes!" the C.O. had the last word. "And I mean just that!"

It seemed that Freddy Farmer was content to let his commanding officer have the last word. At least the English-born air ace made no further comment. Dawson waited for a couple of seconds, and then stepped back from the Operations Office door, and fixed his gaze once more on the plane that was circling the field at cruising speed.

"Don't be a dope, pal!" he breathed softly. "The Old Man wasn't trying to kid you. Pilots *are* worth more than planes. And though you wouldn't catch me telling it to your face, sweetheart, you're worth more than all the Lockheed Lightnings they ever made. So don't be a dope, little man. But definitely, don't be a dope!"

Seconds ticked by and became minutes, and the minutes increased in number, but still two of the Lightning's wheels stayed put in their down position, while the third continued to stick fast in its recess. As the end of the fifteen minute period drew near, young Farmer took his plane up for a little more altitude, and began kicking it about the sky, no doubt in a last desperate effort to shake loose whatever was jamming the stuck wheel and get it down into landing position.

"No soap, Freddy!" Dawson grunted, and gave an unconscious shake of his head. "That crate just doesn't like you, or something. It's stuck, and—"

At that instant he cut himself off short as he heard the C.O. call Farmer on the R.T.

"Time's up, Farmer! Too bad, but I guess there isn't anything you can do. Get altitude to the east of the field, head the plane toward the Channel, and bail out."

"Yes, sir, very good, sir," Dawson heard Farmer's slightly choked reply. "I guess the blasted thing still—Wait a minute, sir! The retractable gear is working. I can get the two wheels up. Can you see me, sir? They're up, and they're staying up. I can come in on my belly now, sir!"

It was true. Whatever had jammed the two down wheels was no longer jamming them. They were up in their recesses, and staying put. Dawson caught a movement at his elbow and turned his head to see Major Starke dash out of the Operations Office. The C.O. looked up at the plane, and seemed to sigh heavily.

"Certainly hates to lose an airplane, bless him!" he grunted. And then he spun on one foot and dashed back into Operations to speak over the R.T. "Okay, Farmer, have it your way!" he called out. "Come in on your belly, but come in on the north side of the field. It's softer there. Keep clear of the runway, by all means. The metal skin of your ship might strike sparks and touch off your gas. Come in easy, and—But I don't need to tell you how to do it. Good luck, Farmer."

"Thanks, sir," Freddy called from the air as he circled his plane around and into position for his landing run. "Be down there right away, sir."

"Save your breath, Freddy, and pay attention to your flying!" Dave Dawson breathed fiercely as he walked toward the north side of the field. "Just cut the chatter and get that thing down, boy!"

As the crash and fire truck went streaking by him he swallowed hard and unconsciously clenched both hands tight. It wasn't that he was really afraid that Freddy Farmer wouldn't make it. He'd seen his English-born pal in too many tight spots, and seen him get out of them slick as a whistle. And of course the crash and fire truck was simply routine precaution. Just in case, so to speak. Still, as he hurried his steps and watched Freddy come sliding down, a clammy chill seemed to take hold of his heart, and his mouth and throat went strangely dry.

Was their assignment to the Fighter Command of the Eighth Air Force a jinx move? Two weeks ago they had completed a very important mission in North Africa, and they had put in the request for assignment to the Eighth Air Force based in England. True, it had been mostly Freddy Farmer's doing. Dawson hadn't cared much where he was sent just so long as he could keep swinging at either the Japs or the Nazis. But Freddy longed for a look at his native country again, and so Dawson had agreed that that was okay by him.

But then trouble seemed to begin to dog them. For four days the worst spell of weather ever to hit Casablanca kept their Air Forces transport plane grounded. They had finally taken off on the fifth day, only to have engine trouble force the pilot of the transport to turn back when he was only two hundred miles out. It took thirty-six hours to fix the plane. Then they had taken off again and finally reached England in a pea soup fog that was forcing even the birds to walk. Luck, plus sweet beam and instrument flying by the pilot, saved them from hitting the deck and being washed out of the world and the war right then and there.

That had been four days ago. The next day they arrived at Two Hundred and Five and were given the only two replacement planes the Squadron had. And both had to be fussed with considerably before they could be taken aloft for test flight. Dawson's had turned out to be a complete lame duck. And now Freddy Farmer was bringing the other one in on its belly.

"It must be old age creeping up that lets the jitters get me!" Dawson muttered as he finally came to a halt close to where he judged Freddy's plane would touch the ground. "I'm acting like an old woman over a simple wheels up landing. Easy does it, Freddy, boy. Slide her in sweet and smooth. You can do it, kid, and—"

He let the rest trail off into silence. Farmer was close to the ground now, and coming in as slowly as he dared. Without realizing it Dawson took a deep breath and held it locked in his lungs as there ceased to be air space between the belly of Freddy Farmer's Lockheed Lightning and the

ground. The Lockheed touched with a sound like that of a giant slapping the palm of his huge hand on a tin roof. And then it went rocketing forward, sending up a shower of dirt and dust that almost completely hid the plane from view. Then suddenly the left wing seemed to strike something and snag. The Lockheed flat-spun violently on the ground, crabbed off to the right, and seemed about to buckle and pile up in a heap of twisted metal. But at the last split second it managed to shake itself free, and slide forward another few feet, and come to a dead stop.

By then the crash and fire truck was right along side of the plane, and Dawson and several others, including Major Starke, were legging out there as fast as they could go. A panting gasp of relief burst from Dawson's lips as he saw Freddy push up out of the nacelle pit and climb down onto the wing, and jump to the ground. That was proof enough that Freddy hadn't been hurt, and Dawson ran the few remaining yards with a stinging sensation at the backs of his eyeballs. But when he finally reached young Farmer, the question popped from his lips just the same.

"You all right, Freddy?"

Farmer turned to him, gave a wry smile, and nodded.

"Quite," he said. "But I certainly made a blasted mess of it, didn't I? Something caught the left wing, and I couldn't do a thing. Maybe I should go back to training school. I was certain I could get her down all right, blast it!"

"Not your fault, Farmer," Major Starke said as he came up. "There was a little hump in the ground that tripped your wing tip. Hit it once myself and it practically bounced me off for a take-up. No, not your fault, Farmer. Thank God you were able to hold her from cartwheeling and catching fire."

"But look at her, sir!" Freddy cried, almost with tears in his voice. "She's twisted bad. She'll have to go to the repair depot for quite a spell before she'll fly again."

"And that'll be all right, too," the C.O. said grimly. Then, suddenly turning to Dawson, he asked, "What about your plane?"

"No good, sir," Dave replied. "Both engines have a lot of bugs, and the rest is not much better."

"That's what I was afraid of," the C.O. said with a frown. "I had a hunch that both were junk ships. Well, we'll send both of them back. And you and Farmer can go down to Replacement Depot at Kingston, and each get yourself a new plane."

"Kingston, sir?" Freddy Farmer echoed excitedly. "You mean down beyond London, sir?"

The C.O. looked at him, grinned, and nodded.

"That's right, Farmer," he said. "You'll pass through London on the way down there. And if you'd like to stop off for say twenty-four hours, that will be all right with me. Things are a bit quiet, and I expect you both could do with a look at London."

"*Could we!*" Freddy Farmer exclaimed, and grinned happily at Dawson.

Dave sighed and shrugged.

"Okay," he said. "But look, I know the whole history of your wonderful little village by heart. You've talked of it enough. So just take your look, and save the comments, huh?"

"Such tastes some people have!" Freddy growled, but his eyes were still dancing.

CHAPTER TWO

Blitz Scars

His face all alight with the joy and happiness of a little boy seeing his first Christmas tree, Freddy Farmer took in every detail of the Savoy Hotel dining room. Every now and then he took a mouthful of the food the waiter had set in front of him, but mostly he let his eyes roam all over the huge room. He grinned at everyone who happened to look his way, whether he was a general or a civilian office clerk. In short, Freddy Farmer's heart was bubbling over, and he didn't care who knew it.

"Well, have you finally decided?" Dave Dawson presently asked him. "Or are you simply giving your neck muscles a workout?"

"Eh, what's that?" the English youth echoed, turning his head to look at him. "Have I finally decided what?"

Dawson waved a hand at the room at large.

"If you've ever been in this place before," he said. "Because you have, in case you've forgotten, or can't make up your mind. Remember? And I've got a hunch that we were sitting right at this same table, too. Remember?"

Young Farmer frowned, and took a moment out to collect his thoughts. Then suddenly his face lighted up.

"Why, yes, of course!" he exclaimed. "The night we met Soo Wong Kai, the Chinese Minister of War. That meeting certainly resulted in something, didn't it!"^[1]

"Yeah, and how!" Dawson murmured. Then a shadow seemed to pass across his sun- and wind-bronzed face as he added, "Right now I'd like to be feeling as contented with things as I felt that night."

Freddy Farmer stopped a piece of muffin halfway to his mouth and looked at his flying mate and dearest pal in marked astonishment.

"You mean you don't?" he ejaculated. "Good grief, why not? Why, everything's much better for the United Nations now than it was then, and— say, Dave, old thing, what's up with you? Ever since we arrived you've acted like you were attending a blasted funeral, or something. Don't you feel all right?"

Dawson scowled, and then forced his lips to stretch into a smile.

"Sorry, kid, my error," he said. "I'm a heel to spoil your visit to London. Sure, I feel swell. It's— Oh, skip it, huh?"

"Not by half, I won't!" Freddy said quickly. "Tell it to Pater, old thing. Just what is bothering you?"

Dawson toyed with his fork for a moment before replying.

"I don't know," he said. Then, with a little shake of his head, he added quickly, "I mean, I don't know just how to put it in words. I've just got a funny hunch, that's all."

"Praise be, then!" Freddy Farmer breathed in relief. "For a moment I thought it was something serious. Just another one of your hunches, eh? But pardon me for interrupting, my good man. What's the bad, bad hunch about this time?"

"Okay, I can take it." Dave grinned at him. But the grin quickly faded. "Maybe it isn't a hunch," he said. "Maybe it's just me. But I'm wondering if Old Man Jinx isn't catching up to us, Freddy?"

"Rubbish!" the British-born air ace snorted. "Positively ridiculous. Just because I had a little trouble with that Lightning, and brought it in for a terrible landing? Why—"

"And my crate couldn't fly for beans!" Dawson interrupted. "Plus the fact that it took us years to finally get away from North Africa. Plus the fact that we almost cashed in our chips in that pea soup fog. Plus—Oh nuts! Don't pay any attention to me. I've just turned into a wet smack of late. Call me Old Woman Dawson, pal."

"I'd call you a lot of things, only there are ladies at the next table!" Freddy Farmer said, and gave him the stern eye. "You're just wound up a bit, Dave. Relax, old thing. Lord knows that's what you've told me enough times. Look, I've got a surprise, Dave!"

"Hold it!" Dawson cried, and raised both hands in protest. "If you think you're going to drag me halfway across London to see some weather-beaten joint where one of your famous kings stopped for tea and crumpets, you're—"

"The Holborn!" Freddy stopped him. "It's a theatre, and there's a very funny show playing there. Part American cast, too. I got the tickets this afternoon without saying anything to you. Well, what about it? Shall we go, or just sit here and mope about your blasted hunches?"

"Part American cast?" Dawson echoed.

"Yes, but they don't spoil the show too much, I hear!" Freddy snapped at him. "Well, is it a go?"

"On one condition," Dave said, and gave Farmer a very grave look.

"And that is?" the English youth walked into the trap.

"That you wait until it's over before you ask me to explain the jokes and tag lines!" Dawson said with a chuckle. Then quickly, "Now, now, little man! Food's scarce in England. Put down that plate!"

"As if I'd waste a crumb on the likes of you!" Freddy Farmer growled, but he did release his sudden hold on his plate. "Now if there were a hammer or a length of lead pipe handy. Oh well, probably neither would make an impression on your thick skull!"

Dawson laughed at the look on Freddy's face, and as he resumed eating his meal he suddenly realized that his mood of gloom and depression had gone. He felt swell; sitting right on top of the world.

As it was still early evening, the two aces took their time finishing the meal. But finally they settled the check and wandered out into the blacked out streets of London. As they reached the Strand they both impulsively paused and peered at the shadowy sky line. It was a long time since the Luftwaffe had given up the attempt to force stout-hearted London to its knees, but many scars of those weeks and months of nightly sky horror were still visible. No, there were not heaps of bomb rubble all about. On the contrary, Londoners had pitched to with a will and cleaned up their beloved city. The scars that Dawson and Freddy Farmer saw were simply the gaping holes where once a building, or a theater, or a row of shops, had been. In other words, it was not what they saw that sent their thoughts flying back to the blitz of London; it was the familiar things that they didn't see. And would never see again.

"The dirty beggars!" Freddy Farmer said in a low, strained voice. "The dirty dogs for doing this to London!"

"Yeah," Dawson murmured. "But they're getting paid back, pal. And how they're getting paid back! Before we're through they'll wish they'd never been born."

"What a pity," young Farmer grunted.

"Huh, pity?" Dawson echoed sharply. "Because we're smacking them plenty, and—"

"No," Freddy interrupted. "I mean, what a pity any of them were ever born in the first place. So help me, I don't believe I'll ever live to see the day when just hearing the word Nazi won't make my blood boil, and make me see red."

"And that goes for millions of people, Freddy," Dawson said. "But right now, nuts to the future. Shall we try to flag a taxi in this sprawled out coal mine, or is the Holborn near enough to walk?"

"It's not far, so let's walk," young Farmer said. "It will be like old times, perhaps."

"Okay, Grandpa!" Dawson laughed. "But watch your step, and don't trip over your beard. And by all means, don't let us get lost, see?"

"Lost?" Freddy Farmer snorted. "Why, you could dump me down in any part of London, and I'd—"

"Which might not be such a bad idea at that!" Dawson chuckled. "Okay, my handsome guide, let's get going."

Keeping close to each other, they strolled up the Strand toward Aldwych Circle and Kingsway. They took their time, which was the best thing to do in London's blackout. Time and time again they almost bumped into persons coming their way. And more than once their teeth clicked as they went down off a curbstone they didn't see until too late. Eventually, though, they turned into Kingsway and started along toward High Holborn where the theater was located.

After a couple of blocks, however, they ran into a detour. And after a block or so the detour ran into another detour. And some ten minutes after that Dawson nudged his shoulder against Freddy Farmer's.

"I don't want to imply anything, kind sir," he said, "but you do happen to know where the heck we are, don't you?"

"Of course!" the English youth snapped. "This is Serle Street close by Lincoln's Fields. Second right and then first left will bring us right out on High Holborn at Chancery Lane."

"Well, all those names make it *sound* as if you knew what you're talking about," Dawson murmured.

"Don't be silly!" Freddy snapped. "Would you get lost in a blackout in your precious New York?"

"Could happen, could happen," Dawson grunted. "But I'm just hoping it isn't happening here."

"No fear of that, my little man," Freddy assured him. "Take hold of Pater's hand, and he'll lead you."

However, Dawson refused to do that. Fifteen minutes later, as the pair came to a cross street, Freddy Farmer paused and rubbed a hand down the side of his face.

"Blast it, there shouldn't be a cross street here!" he muttered.

"Oh, oh!" Dawson groaned. "And my mother warned me, too!"

"Oh, shut up!" Farmer growled. "It's probably a new one they've made since I was here last."

Dawson didn't say anything. A small metal plate on the step post of the first building of the cross street caught his eye. He moved closer and snapped on his small pocket flashlight for an instant. When he came back to Freddy his voice was brittle.

"And how were things in 1810 when you were here last, pal?" he snapped. "That's when that post plate says that building was built. Made the street since the blitz, huh? Or was there a blitz in 1810?"

"Oh, good grief, Dave, I'm afraid—!" Freddy Farmer began.

"I'm not *afraid* we're lost!" Dawson cut in. "I'm dead certain, dope. Give me a shilling!"

"Why?" Freddy demanded.

"I'm going to toss it," Dawson said. "Heads we go to the right, tails we go to the left."

"But what about straight ahead?" Farmer asked.

"I've had enough of going straight ahead on this street!" Dawson growled. "For all you know it may go right off the edge of a cliff. But okay. If the shilling lands edge up we go straight ahead. Flash your beam on the sidewalk, Freddy."

Young Farmer did that. Dawson flipped the coin, which made a tinkling sound as it hit the sidewalk and bounced around. Finally it came to rest with the King's head showing.

"We turn right," Dawson grunted, and picked up the shilling. "And I'll just keep this as a little souvenir of the night's travels. Of all the—!"

"I'm sorry, Dave, blast it all!" Freddy Farmer groaned. "I guess the London streets aren't what they used to be."

"In more ways than one, pal!" Dave murmured. "But dry your tears, little fellow. It's okay. Maybe we'll bump into a taxi at the next corner, or one of your London Bobbies who can give us a bearing and put us on the beam."

If the two air aces had turned left at that cross street they would have met a patrolling Bobbie within the next two hundred yards. But they turned right, and in so doing walked straight into the

beginning of their greatest battle with Death, and Satan's forces of evil and ruthless destruction!

CHAPTER THREE

The Dead Can't Breathe

It was no doubt their imagination, but as Freddy Farmer and Dave Dawson walked along the street to the right they both felt as though it was even more blacked out. They could hardly see a dozen steps in front of them. On both sides the street was lined by a solid row of four or five story city dwellings, not one of which showed so much as a tiny pin point of light. Perhaps they were filled with men, women, and children, but as far as Freddy and Dave could tell they might well have been lost in the very heart of a completely dead city. They didn't even meet anybody on the sidewalk. In fact, they didn't meet anything but darkness, and more darkness. Clouds had crawled across the face of the sky, so it was only by straining their eyes that they were able to make out the silhouettes of the building tops. And to add to all that, the street seemed to go on and on, with not one single intersection.

Finally Dave drew to a halt, and made sounds in his throat.

"Well, I guess we're even now, kid," he said with a groan. "Because if you didn't lose us before, I sure have lost us now. This doggone street is like a subway tunnel with no end."

"Quite!" Freddy murmured. "I almost wish the Luftwaffe would come over, so we could have some light and maybe see something. This is definitely a mess."

"With all the trimmings," Dawson added. "Look. Let's put it that that shilling gave us a bum steer. Let's go back and try the other way for a while. We're not going to meet anything this way, that's a cinch."

"Right-o with me," young Farmer said. Then suddenly he grabbed Dawson's arm. "Wait a minute!"

"For what?" Dave grunted. "You got to sneeze?"

"Shut up!" Freddy snapped, and exerted pressure with his fingers. "I thought I heard footsteps back there, coming our way."

They both listened intently and heard nothing but their own breathing.

"You and your big ears!" Dave finally growled. "Footsteps on this street, my eye! There can't be two *other* dopes in London tonight. Let's go, and—"

But Dawson never finished the sentence. At that instant two shadowy figures seemed to appear by magic right out of the darkness.

"So?" a deep voice growled. "You would try to escape us?"

For a moment Dawson stood like a man struck to stone, his eyes popping, and his mouth sagging. It had stunned him to see the two shadowy figures appear out of thin night-black air. And it stunned him to feel the firm pressure of a gun muzzle against his ribs. But what stunned him most was to hear the voice *speaking German!*

"What, what?" he finally blurted out in English. "Hey! What's the big idea? Is this a stick-up?"

"Silence, dogs, both of you!" the voice hissed. "You are fools to try to make jokes. We have followed you all the way from the hotel. We *know!* You are stupid to think you could escape us!"

"But see here, you're altogether balmy!" Freddy Farmer spoke the first words that came to his lips. "We're not trying to escape anybody. We're lost, and—"

A sharp hard slap cut off the rest of Freddy Farmer's words. Dawson started to leap forward instinctively, but an arm was hooked about his neck, and the gun muzzle was practically snapping one of his ribs in two. For a brief instant colored light spun around in front of his eyes, and blind rage tempted him to risk a bullet from the gun as he attempted a Commando trick to rid himself of his attacker. But in the darkness he couldn't see how Freddy was making out, and there was the chance that Freddy might pay for the trick with his life. And so he let his coiled muscles relax, and stood perfectly still.

A moment later the hooked arm was removed from about his neck, but the pressure of the gun muzzle remained the same.

"That is good," the voice growled in his ear. "My orders are not to kill you unless I am forced to. So do not be foolish, as I do not feel patient tonight."

Dawson ignored the man's words and strained his eyes to see the spot where Freddy Farmer and the other shadowy figure were standing so close together they looked like the form of one very fat man.

"You okay, pal?" he asked, keeping his voice steady.

"Quite, old thing," Freddy Farmer replied calmly. But to Dawson Freddy's voice sounded very muffled.

"Silence!" Dawson's "playmate" rasped, still speaking in German. "Not a word, or a sound, you swine. I warn you. Hans! Make your dog silent so that he will not trouble me! And then go back

and get the car. Hurry."

A cry of instinctive alarm rose to Dawson's lips, but before he could let it out it was all over. There was blurred lightning-like movement, then a sickening *thud*, and Freddy Farmer slowly sank to the sidewalk. Blazing rage flared up in Dawson, but cold, common sense held him in rigid check. This was no moment to be a blockheaded hero. The odds were far too great against him. And so he continued to remain perfectly still as the second shadowy figure faded away to become instantly lost in the darkness.

Seconds that seemed minutes long ticked by, and an almost uncontrollable urge to yell at the top of his voice seized hold of Dawson. He curbed the urge, however, and was suddenly of half a mind to speak in German to the man cracking his ribs with the gun muzzle. In fact, his lips moved to speak the words, but he stilled them at the last split second as something seemed to tell him not to speak in German.

"I don't know what this is all about, Mister," he said in a low voice, "but you've got the wrong two guys. Just who do you think I am, anyway?"

"I *know* who you are, Karl Stoltz!" the other grated. "It is no use. Nothing you can say or do will help you!"

Dawson started to tell the man to put it in English, as he did not understand German. But suddenly he realized that Freddy and he had both plainly shown that they understood German. So to act ignorant would simply be stupid.

"So I'm Karl Stoltz, eh?" he finally echoed in German. Then switching to English, he said, "And just who in heck is Karl Stoltz? Reach into my upper left pocket, Mister, and you'll find all my papers. And you won't find the name of Karl Stoltz on any of them!"

"Of course not, you stupid fool!" the other retorted. "But we know who you are. And so does Herr Baron. He will be glad to see you, Karl Stoltz. *Ja, ja! Very glad!*"

Dawson started to speak, but at that instant he saw the two slit headlights of a car coming along the street. It slid up to the curb with no more than a soft mechanical whisper of sound, and came to a stop. The door opened, and a shadowy figure stepped out, gathered the limp Freddy Farmer up in his arms, and dumped the English-born air ace down onto the floor of the car, as though he were no more than a wet sack of meal.

"You—!" Dawson began savagely.

But that's as far as he got. A crack on the side of his head sent stars and comets spinning, and seemed to paralyze his entire body from head to foot. By the time he was able to shake off the paralytic spell, and take stock of things, he found himself beside Freddy Farmer on the floor of the car. A pair of heavy booted feet were resting on the small of his back, and the car was in motion and pulling away from the curb.

The first thing he did when complete consciousness returned was to move his head as close to Freddy as he could, hold his breath, and strain his ears. Almost instantly a great wave of relief flooded through him. He could hear Freddy Farmer's regular breathing. At least the blow Freddy had received had not cracked his skull and killed him. He was just out cold, that was all.

Was that all? It was more than enough. It was too much. And as the car rolled on almost silently down the pitch dark street Dawson mentally promised himself that the instant he was given the opportunity he would pay it all back to these two rats, and with plenty of interest.

However, his flash of silent anger died as various thoughts concerning the utterly incredible business began to pass through his brain. Utterly incredible, maybe, but a very definite reality just the same. That it was a case of mistaken identity was as plain as the nose on anybody's face. But that the two kidnapers were obviously Nazi agents right there in London was something you just couldn't laugh off. Nor could he laugh off the fact that Freddy and he had stumbled into something that was deadly serious. The reasons, and what have you, were completely beyond him. He believed that they were being taken to someone known as Herr Baron. But from there on it was all just a lot of blanks that no amount of imagination could possibly fill in.

He checked his rambling thoughts as he felt Freddy Farmer stir, and then heard him groan and mumble.

"Blast the dirty blighter!" young Farmer got out. "Good gosh, my head!"

"Take it easy, Freddy," Dave murmured. "You got clipped good. But if you can talk, it can't be too bad. Just try—"

The two heavy booted feet clumping down made Dawson feel for an instant that his spine had been snapped.

"Silence, dogs!" a harsh voice said. "You will have your chance to talk later!"

Dawson cut short the blistering retort that rose to his lips. Then, after he had got full control of the seething anger within himself, he inched one hand over until he could feel Freddy Farmer's right leg. Then, using a short jab of a finger for a dot, and a longer jab for a dash, he signalled his pal in International Morse code....

"Chin up, pal. It's all very screwy, but we can't do a thing about it yet. Just play dumb, and wait for the break."

A couple of moments passed, and then Dawson felt Freddy Farmer signalling a reply message.

"Right you are. But when and if the break does come, I'm going to give it to the dirty beggars. I think they are Nazi agents."

"You can say that again!" Dawson signalled. "And a couple of tough eggs, too. So watch it. Play it their way until we find out what's what."

Young Farmer signalled back that he would do just that. And then the two air aces stopped their silent signalling, and grimly waited for further developments.

However, they had to wait quite a while. A good forty-five minutes passed before the car's speed was slackened. Then it turned sharp right, bumped over something, and went down a steep incline, after which it traveled a short distance on the level before it finally came to a full stop. From the movements of the car Dawson was pretty sure that they had turned off a main street into a short inclined driveway that ended at a garage. And when a moment later he heard the sound of doors rolling shut he knew that he had figured correctly.

And then a switch was snapped, and the interior of the car was filled with yellow light.

It blinded him for a moment, even though he was lying down face to the car floor and away from the light. But as soon as he could adjust his eyes to the sudden change he turned his head and looked at Freddy Farmer. Freddy was a little pale around the edges, and there was a tiny trickle of blood from his nose, but the hard, glittering look in his eyes indicated that his feelings had been hurt far, far more than his cracked nose and clipped head.

"Atta boy, Freddy!" Dave whispered softly. "Just hold it that way, but *hold* it!"

Young Farmer had only the chance to nod slightly. Before he could whisper in reply the heavy booted feet were removed from the small of Dawson's back, and harshly spoken German words filled their ears.

"Get up, and get out, swine! Herr Baron is waiting! Get up, dogs—or must I help you?"

An altogether fitting comment hovered on Dawson's lips, but he did not permit himself the satisfaction of saying it. Instead he pushed up onto his hands and knees, and then up onto his feet and stepped out through the car door that a pale, thin-faced man was holding open with one hand. In his other hand was a small but wicked-looking Luger automatic, the muzzle of which was trained dead on the Yank air ace. And when Dawson stepped down onto the cement floor of the garage and started to turn around and give Freddy Farmer a helping hand the man snarled and jammed the muzzle of the gun against him.

"Step back, swine. Your little comrade is all right. He can get out by himself!"

Dawson backed up and watched Freddy Farmer get out. There was nothing about the English youth to indicate that he didn't feel any too steady on his feet, save his unnatural pallor. His chin was up, and his eyes set and unflinching as he stepped out of the car. The thin-faced man gave him a sneering smirk, and motioned him over to stand beside Dawson. And when the two youths were standing shoulder to shoulder a bullet-headed, thick-set man came around from the other side of the car. His small, close-set eyes seemed to glitter like those of a deadly snake about to strike.

"Well, well!" he growled. "Herr Karl Stoltz, and Herr Paul von Heimmer! You stupid fools. So you thought that we would not remember, eh? That we would not try to find you? *Gott!* So you would be swine traitors to the Fuehrer? But Herr Baron will teach you about that. Hans! Lead the way. I will be right behind the dogs!"

The thin-faced man called Hans nodded, turned and pushed open a door. Dawson saw a lighted stairway leading up, and then a clenched fist struck him in the back and sent him stumbling toward it. He heard Freddy Farmer gasp sharply, and then his pal was stumbling into him. He managed to keep his balance and follow the thin-faced man up the stairs. At the top the man did not pause. He walked along a narrow hallway and went up a second flight of stairs. As a matter of fact he did not come to a stop until he had mounted four flights of stairs.

Just at the top of the fourth flight he stopped in front of a door, fished a key from his pocket, and put it in the lock. When the door was opened there was darkness beyond. But the thin-faced man flicked a switch, and Dawson found himself staring into the foyer of an apartment. The thick-set man herded Freddy and him inside, through the foyer, and into a well appointed living room that was heavy with the smell of stale tobacco smoke and cooking.

"Make them comfortable, Hans," said the thick-set man with a little hoarse chuckle. "I will telephone the good news to Herr Baron."

The man called Hans echoed his friend's chuckle and waved Dawson and Farmer to a couple of straight-backed chairs placed side by side. Dawson hesitated a brief instant, saw the man's fingers on his gun tighten, and walked over and sat down in one of the chairs. Freddy Farmer seated himself in the other chair. And as the thick-set man went through a door leading off into another room, Hans took up a position about ten feet in front of the two youths and leered at them invitingly.

"If you would like to try to escape, go ahead!" he suddenly spat at them in German, and made a little gesture with his gun. "No doubt Herr Baron would be just as pleased to see you dead as alive."

"That is perhaps so!" Dawson shot right back at him in the man's native tongue. "But he will not be pleased with *you* whether he sees us dead or alive. And who is Herr Baron? Herr Baron what?"

A brief flash of doubt showed in the German's eyes. Then he laughed harshly.

"So you are not Herr Karl Stoltz?" he said with a smirk. "Is that what you are trying to make me believe, eh?"

"I'm not trying to get anything through your thick head!" Dawson said evenly. "I'm just wondering who Herr Baron is, because he's in for one big surprise. And, numbskull, I'm *not* kidding you!"

As the other's eyes lighted up with a murderous gleam, Dawson instantly regretted that he had let his tongue run away with him. However, when the light suddenly died and was replaced by a look of bafflement and not a little worry, a tingling sense of grim satisfaction rippled through him.

But not for long. It was now definitely a case of mistaken identity by the two thick-headed Nazis. But that did not in the slightest alter the fact that Freddy and he were perched right on the edge of a volcano, and that at almost any moment they could be toppled off and down into the middle of complete oblivion as far as living out the rest of their lives was concerned. They both knew only too well what the Nazis do with their victims, whether they are the intended victims or just a couple of other guys.

CHAPTER FOUR

Herr Baron No Face

Believing that he had said more than enough, and that to so much as open his mouth would invite sudden disaster, Dawson ignored the worried, questioning eyes fixed upon him, and let his own gaze wander about the room. The first thing he noted was that there were windows on two sides. Windows that had steel shutters for blackout curtains. They were so fitted into the sash frame that when drawn they kept out both light and air. And bullets too, no doubt. But apart from the windows the room wasn't any different from scores of London apartment living rooms that he had seen.

But no! There was one big, big difference. Hanging on the wall to his right was a framed photograph of the lowest form of life ever to be born. A framed photograph of Adolf (Slaughter the women and children, too) Hitler. Just to see the photograph made Dave Dawson sick to his stomach, and he quickly took his eyes from it.

And then the side door opened and the thick-set man came into the room.

"In a few minutes, dog traitors!" he rasped at the two prisoners. "In a few minutes Herr Baron will be here."

"And after that where will *you* be, I wonder!" Dawson couldn't keep himself from saying.

The thick-set man blinked, frowned, and turned to his partner. Hans frowned, too, and his voice sounded definitely worried as he spoke.

"The swine is trying to make us believe it is all a mistake, Erich," he said. "But there is no mistake, no?"

The man called Erich switched his beady eyes back to Dawson's face again. It seemed as though he had a moment of doubt; then it was gone as his lips slid back in a cruel smile.

"No, there is no mistake!" he said harshly. "Too long were we together in Herr Himmler's training school not to recognize you at once, even though you have changed a lot. No, Hans. Do not let what the dog says worry you. Come, Hans. Let us enjoy some schnapps before Herr Baron arrives. Keep your eye on them. I will get the bottle and the glasses."

Smiling and rubbing his hands together in anticipation of the drink, the man called Erich moved across the room to a little wall cabinet and pulled open the door. Dawson saw Hans' eyes follow the movements, and he impulsively steeled himself for a leap toward the Luger that was now pointing not at him but at the floor. At that instant, though, two things happened simultaneously. Freddy Farmer's knee bumped against his in a sign of caution, and Hans' eyes and Luger returned their attention to him. Dawson slowly let the clamped air out of his lungs and stared absent-eyed up at the ceiling above Hans' head. The Nazi smirked and then reached out with his free hand to accept the glass of schnapps that Erich of the bullet head held out. Together they raised their glasses, gave Hitler the usual Heil, and drank noisily.

"To the Fuehrer's secret weapon, Hans!" Erich said hoarsely, and refilled their glasses.

"*Ja, ja!*" Hans echoed loudly. "To the Fuehrer's secret weapon, and death to all enemies of the Third Reich!"

"Prosit!" the bullet-headed one shouted. And once more they drained their glasses in typical sloppy, noisy German style.

A moment later when Erich was about to refill the glasses again, the sound of a door buzzer froze him, bottle in hand in mid-air. He made a gasping sound, snatched Hans' empty glass from him and went swiftly to the wall cabinet. As he turned from it he swiped the back of his big hand across his mouth, then hurried to the foyer door. As he went through, closing it behind him, an electric charge seemed to invade the room. Dawson could feel, and almost hear, his heart pounding against his ribs. The blood in his veins seemed like liquid fire, and his mouth and throat

were bone dry.

How many more minutes were Freddy and he to live? The crazy question cut through his brain like a sword of fire. He tried to shake his head and drive the maddening thought away, but it kept coming back to taunt him. Seconds were as years hanging on the edge of nothing. Had Hans taken his eyes off them for even an instant Dave knew that he would have hurled himself forward in a frantic, desperate effort to overpower the man and get possession of that Luger before it was too late. But Hans' eyes never wavered for a fleeting split second, nor did the gun in his hand move a fraction of an inch.

Then there came the sound of footsteps and voices outside, and a moment later the inside door knob was seen to turn. Dawson sat staring at it as though it were some powerful magnet that his eyes could not resist. In fact his gaze still clung to it as the door was swung open, and it was not until he heard Freddy Farmer's half choking gasp that he was able to tear his eyes from the doorknob and look up.

And when he did, when he stared at the uniformed figure framed in the open doorway, it was akin to a blow right smack between the eyes. For there in the doorway stood a man in the uniform of a colonel in the U. S. Army Air Forces. He wore on his tunic the wings of a command pilot, and there were two rows of decoration ribbons under the wings. But it was the officer's face that stunned Dawson the most. The man *looked* American. The clear light in his eyes, the good old U. S. A. rosininess in his cheeks, and the friendly grin that curved his lips. And when he spoke, spoke in perfect German, it was like the ceiling falling down on top of Dawson.

"Ah! So the two swine traitors have come to the end of their run? That is good. That is very good, Hans and Erich! My compliments. I shall inform Herr Himmler of your good work. And no doubt he will tell the Fuehrer himself. Your rewards will not be small, I can tell you."

"To serve Herr Baron and the Fuehrer is reward enough!" Erich said as he beamed and clicked his heels. "It was so simple, too. We saw them eating at a hotel restaurant. We recognized them at once. We could see that they were restless and uneasy. We followed them in the car we had waiting outside. That was easy, too, even in the cursed blackout. They became suspicious and tried to escape us by turning down a street that led nowhere. But we caught up with them, and captured them easily."

"And that's a blasted lie!" Freddy Farmer blurted out. "If you're this Herr Baron they've been jabbering about, then you're balmy to believe them. I never heard of either Karl Stoltz or Paul von Heimmer in my life. And neither has my friend. You've made just another one of your confoundedly stupid Nazi mistakes! You're not in Berlin now. This is London!"

Considering the situation, all that was not exactly the thing to say, and Dave Dawson stiffened and waited for all three of the Nazis to hit the ceiling. Particularly the one known as Herr Baron, who was cloaking his true identity in the uniform of an Air Forces colonel.

Oddly enough, though, Herr Baron's face did not change expression one single bit. He looked at Freddy Farmer with the pleasant grin still on his lips. To Dawson it seemed a little stiff. In fact the man's whole face seemed stiff. It was almost as though his features had been stuck on a blank area of skin. The Yank air ace peered hard, his heart thumping against his ribs. And then suddenly something seemed to click in his brain, and he *knew*. Or at least he was quite positive that he knew. Knew that what he was looking at was not the true face of the man who wore the uniform of an Air Forces Colonel. It was a mask. No, it was even more than that. Every feature had been built up separately and fitted over the original feature. Each bit separate but so cleverly formed and blended in, that the whole gave the impression of a single one-piece mask. No, it was not the true face that Dawson stared at, and he wondered what was behind that conglomeration of make-up paste, and putty, and whatnot.

However, he did not have much time to wonder about that. Herr Baron took a step or two toward Freddy Farmer, his lips still smiling.

"So you have been in England so long, a traitor to the Fuehrer, Herr von Heimmer, that you even talk like one of the swine?" he murmured in a soft voice. "But isn't that a stupid way to try and convince me of something that is not true? You fool! Why have your voice speak as an Englishman, and your body wear the uniform of an American pilot?"

"Because I *am* English, you idiot!" Freddy shouted. "You've made a balmy mistake, and no doubt you'll end up by having your hired thugs there shoot me. But I'll be blessed if I'll die as a dirty Nazi. I'll die as an Englishman, and the devil to you!"

"That's telling him, kid!" Dawson cried impulsively. Then, looking at the still grinning man, he said, "Believe it or not, he's dead right, Herr Baron. Your boy friends have pulled a boner. I'm not Karl Stoltz, or Karl anybody. I'm a Yank. And no matter what happens, I'm not going to die as any Nazi, either. And just what is behind that masquerading face of yours? Let's have a look, if it doesn't hurt too much to pull that stuff off?"

As Dawson simply spoke words that came into his mouth he moved his knee over slightly and gently pressed it against Freddy's knee. The answering pressure he received started his heart to pounding harder than ever. It meant that young Farmer understood perfectly, and wasn't missing a single bit of the picture. In other words, doubt was closing down on the three Nazis like a thick fog. Particularly upon Hans, and his thick-set playmate, Erich. They stood staring open-mouthed, their eyes puzzled, worried, and not a little afraid. Erich's hands were hanging limp like a couple of hams at his sides. Hans was fiddling with his gun with both of his hands, and without the slightest knowledge that he was pointing it straight down at his feet. Herr Baron's stiff lips were

no longer smiling. The rest of his face was the same, save for the eyes. They had suddenly clouded over, and in a crazy sort of way Dawson had the feeling that he was looking into the eyes of a dead man, or perhaps a ghost.

An eerie sensation rippled through him, but he shook it off. If there ever was a time in his life when emotions and sensations were to be ignored, this was it. Whether the three Nazis believed, or not, Freddy and he were facing death in triplicate. Hans, Erich, and Herr Baron. A ten-year-old child could have figured that this place was a Nazi agents' nest in London. And although Freddy and he had proved their true identity beyond all semblance of a doubt, it was sheer madness to think that the three Nazis would give them a smile, an apology, and let them go their way. Not a chance. The Nazis had the habit of flaunting their triumphs to the four corners of the earth, and of burying their mistakes. Sometimes they didn't bother with the burying part. They simply left their "mistakes" where they fell. Stone dead, but definitely! So Dawson didn't pay any attention to his emotions. He knew just what the score was. And so did Freddy Farmer.

"Well?" Dawson said, when Herr Baron just stood there looking at him. "Want proof? But wait a minute! Did this Karl Stoltz have any mark or scar on him that would prove his identity to you?"

"Yes, he did," Herr Baron said slowly. "He had a saber scar on his right arm. Near the elbow. Let me see your right arm. Come, swine traitor! Show me your right arm, at once!"

Herr Baron barked out the last because Dawson had hesitated, and started to shake his head. But his actions were simply to hold the attention of the three Nazis while he once again pressed his knee against Freddy Farmer's. Then he shrugged and stood up, and reached over with his left hand to shove up the right sleeve of his tunic.

"All right," he said, and looked Herr Baron straight in the eyes. "Take a good look, and see if you see any saber scar!"

Dawson drew back his right arm slightly as he pushed up his tunic sleeve. Then when he saw Herr Baron's eyes drop from his face to his arm, he lashed out with his clenched right fist, took a quick half step forward and brought up his right knee. His fist caught Herr Baron a savage blow on the side of the neck, and his knee went deep into the man's groin. It was Commando stuff for keeps, and Dawson didn't stop there, either. He let momentum carry him forward and down. His feet left the floor, and like a projectile his body shot through the air toward the wide-eyed, sagging-mouthed Hans.

The thin-faced Nazi probably didn't know what had actually happened until Dawson's charging body slammed into him and sent him crashing backwards against the wall. The Yank caught him in the chest with his left shoulder, and as the two of them went crashing back and down, Dawson grabbed hold of the Nazi's gun and twisted it free. His ears rang with the scream of pain, and he felt Hans' trigger finger break as it got caught in the trigger guard. But neither bothered Dawson in the slightest. He had learned from blood and fire experience the Commando's code. And no part of it is to feel anything but hatred for the man you're after.^[2]

The instant he had the gun in his own possession Dawson heaved himself up onto his hands and knees and chopped down hard with the gun barrel on the side of Hans' head. Hans was reaching for Dawson's throat with clawing fingers, white pain and seething rage showing in his face. But the gun smash on the side of the head nipped everything in the bud. The Nazi made hoarse gurgling sounds in his throat, and instantly went as limp as a wet dishrag.

But Dawson hadn't waited to see the effect of his blow. Out the corner of his eye he had seen the thick-set figure of Erich charging at him. Black murder was in the Nazi's eyes, and he was tugging a Luger out of his jacket pocket. Dawson tried to spin around and pull his trigger before the Nazi pulled him. But he half tripped over the limp Hans' body, and the muzzle of Erich's gun seemed to loom up right in front of his eyes like the black mouth of a tunnel.

Then suddenly there was a shot! Dawson flinched instinctively, but his eyes saw no flame stab from the mouth of that Luger, and no white hot spear of flame cut into his body. What his eyes did see was the blank, slightly stupid look that spread over Erich's face. Then, as though invisible strings holding him up had been cut, Erich fell in a heap on his face.

"Well, thanks for letting me in on the show a little, at least!" the words filtered into Dawson's spinning brain.

He gaped for a second at the prostrate Erich, and then turned his head to see Freddy Farmer standing a few feet away with a still smoking Luger in his hand. The English-born air ace was smiling, but there was nothing but grimness in his steady eyes.

"Boy, are you a right guy to have along!" Dawson mumbled. "But I sure didn't figure you for a gun. I counted on you to give him the old one-two Commando stuff."

"His nibs, here," Freddy said and pointed a finger at Herr Baron, who was face down on the floor at his feet. "I fancied all along that he had a little gadget like this in his tunic pocket. So when you bashed him I immediately investigated. Saves time and trouble just to shoot the beggars, instead of knocking them about. But, good grief, Dave, you moved so fast. You were a bit of all right, old thing. Quite!"

CHAPTER FIVE

Satan's Pawns

Dawson took a deep breath, and slowly got up onto his feet. Then he grinned over at Freddy Farmer.

"I don't care how you did it, kid," he said. "Just doing it was okay by me. And if I haven't mentioned it, thanks, pal. I was sort of close to getting lead poisoning just about then."

"And we were both close to getting heaven knows what," young Farmer said. His face became hard, and deadly serious. "To me it's still like a mad dream. Imagine it, Dave! Right here in London. It just can't be true! Balmy things like this just don't happen!"

"I know, of course not," Dawson grunted, and dropped to his knees beside the prostrate Hans. "But Erich, there, wouldn't believe you, Freddy. *He* found out. Let's search these rats for anything we can find, and then get out of here fast. I guess British Intelligence would like to hear what we have to tell them."

"There's a phone in the next room, Dave," Freddy said, as he recalled the fact. "The one that Erich used. Let's just tie them up, and then get on the phone. Intelligence may want them just as they are."

"Maybe, but I'm a curious cuss," Dawson said with a dogged shake of his head. "Truss up that bird with his belt, and then go phone the big shots. Me, I'm going to see what these birds have on them, if anything. I—Ye gods! Did Herr Baron's face slip!"

Dave gulped out the last as he got his first really good look at Herr Baron's face. Freddy had half rolled the limp figure over, and at first look Herr Baron seemed to have been hit square in the face by a pan of soggy bread dough. His nose was over on one cheek, and his jaw was twice as big on one side as it was on the other, his eyebrows pointed straight up, and his lips looked twisted all out of shape.

"Good grief, the floor must have done that!" Freddy Farmer gasped as he looked down. "Make-up paste, no less, Dave. Why—why, he hasn't really got any real face. It's horrible!"

"Just truss him up and leave him, Freddy," Dawson said, and swallowed hard several times. "I guess the rat was in some kind of an accident, and did his own plastic surgery with make-up paste, or whatever that stuff is. Sweet tripe! This thing gets screwier and screwier. Truss him up, and then get British Intelligence over here in a hurry. We'll—Hey, I'm nuts! We don't even know where we are!"

"That's simple, old thing," Freddy said, and lashed Herr Baron's arms behind his back with the man's own belt. "A fine detective you'd make. British Intelligence can simply trace my call, that's all, and be over here in no time."

"Call me dunce, and get going, pal!" Dawson said with a sigh of relief. "Sure, of course, kid. Boy, maybe old age is slowing me down at that."

"Not judging from what I saw just recently!" Freddy Farmer said, as he got to his feet, and headed for the side door of the room. "Be back in a jiffy, old thing."

Dave just grunted, completed his job of making sure that Hans would give no trouble should he come to, and then went systematically through the man's pockets. He collected the usual amount of personal belongings, but the man's papers were very interesting. They were all made out and officially stamped to identify him as a born Englishman, by the name of John Dobbler, with an East London address.

Dawson thumbed through them for a moment, and then stuffed them into his pocket and moved over to Erich's dead body. And what he found in the dead man's pockets made him realize all the more to what pains Nazi agents go. There was nothing on Erich's person to indicate that he was a Nazi. But everything to prove that he was one Harold Cabot, an Englishman who lived at an address in the Cheapside part of London. As a matter of fact, Erich's papers went Hans' one better. Erich also had identification as an Air Raid Warden.

"An Air Raid Warden, the dirty skunk!" Dawson grated, and put Erich's papers into his pocket, too. "I wonder how many of the poor devils he left to die under piles of bomb rubble?"

With a look of scorn and loathing for the dead man, he got to his feet and went over to the prostrate form of the man referred to as Herr Baron. The false face still looked the same, and the Yank air ace tried not to look at it as he went through the pockets of the man's uniform. What he found so amazed him and angered him that for a moment he trembled with loathing and blazing anger. Herr Baron's papers, all strictly official and military, showed that he was an American colonel in the Yank Air Forces, that he was commanding officer of such and such group, but that of recent date he was attached to Air Forces Intelligence in England.

"The dirty—!" Dawson began, and then words failed him.

He put a hand to his forehead, and closed his eyes tight for a moment. Like Freddy Farmer, he was almost inclined to believe that all this just hadn't happened. That he was having a wild, crazy dream, and that he would wake up soon to find that everything was all right. But it wasn't a dream; it was cold, stark truth, incredible as it seemed. Three Nazis of no less than Herr Himmler's brood, yet two carried perfect identification as Englishmen. And the third, definite identification as a colonel serving in the U. S. Army Air Forces.

"But it just doesn't make sense!" Dawson muttered, and stared at Herr Baron's picture with the

official Air Forces stamp imprinted on it. "How in the world did he get away with it? If I could tell that his face was faked, anybody else could have spotted the same thing. I don't see how the—"

He cut the rest short as something peculiar about the man's left tunic lapel caught his eye. He reached out a hand and felt of the lapel. His heart leaped, and in the next instant he had whipped out his jackknife and was slashing at the lapel seams. When he had cut an opening big enough, he thrust his fingers inside and felt a thin inch by inch and a half leather-covered book. He pulled it out to see that it was a worn address and memo book that had several pages missing. And when he thumbed through those that were left it was to discover that they were filled with countless numbers. Some of them in groups, and some of them but a single number. All were written in a fine hand with a needle-sharp indelible pencil.

"Code, of course," he grunted. "British Intelligence will break it down soon enough, and—"

Dawson stopped and sat up straight.

"Speaking of British Intelligence," he grunted, "what's Freddy doing on that telephone? Making a date with the operator?"

As there was only one way to get the answer to his question, he got to his feet, went over to the side door and pushed it open.

"Hey, Freddy, what—?" he began, and stopped short.

The room beyond was a well furnished bedroom. Included in the furnishing were twin beds with a little night table between them. On the night table there was a French phone, but the instrument was in its pronged cradle. Most important of all, though, there wasn't hide nor hair of Freddy Farmer. Dawson gaped for a moment as though he couldn't believe his eyes. Then he shook himself out of his trance and leaped into the room.

"Freddy!" he yelled, and looked wildly about. "Hey! Where are you, Freddy?"

Four walls sent back the echo of his voice, and that was all. There was no other reply to his yell. He noticed what was obviously the bathroom door on the other side of the room, and to the right of the twin beds. In three leaps he crossed the room and yanked the door open. It led to the bathroom right enough, but there was still no Freddy Farmer to be seen.

"What the heck?" he gasped, and his heart started to chill slightly. "Where is the guy, anyway? He couldn't have just disappeared through solid walls. Ah!"

The last slipped off his lips as a blast of cool night air blew against his face, and he saw that the window over the bathtub was open. A split second later he saw the prints of more than one pair of feet on the edge of the bathtub. One look and he was up on the edge of the bathtub himself, and sticking his head and shoulder out the window. For a moment he couldn't see a thing because of the darkness of night. Even the light that poured through into the bathroom from the bedroom, and out the opened window, didn't reveal anything in those first few seconds.

Then as his eyes quickly adjusted themselves he saw that there was a flat roof some four feet below the level of his eyes. It was really the main roof of the building; the apartment he was in being the English conception of a penthouse. To the right and left were the motionless darker shadows of chimneys and building ventilation vents. He opened his mouth to call out Freddy's name when suddenly off to his right came the scuffing of feet on the gravel-topped roof, and then the clear bark of a gun and a sharp cry of anger or pain.

The bark of the gun was still ringing in Dawson's ears as he went head first through the opened window and landed heavily on all fours on the gravel roof. He paused a second to get his breath; then, with Hans' Luger clutched in his hand, he went sneaking silently forward toward the spot whence had come the scuffing of feet, the sharp cry, and the shot. He bumped into a vent pipe that he didn't see in the darkness, and almost went to his knees. As he fought to maintain his balance he plainly heard running feet a short distance off to his right. He jerked his head around in time to see a running shadow etched against the London sky. He whirled and brought up his gun.

"Hold it!" he rasped out. "Hold it, and get your hands up!"

The running shadow ducked down, and in practically the same instant the night stabbed red flame, and a wasp of death whined by Dawson's face almost before he heard the crack of the shot. He ducked instinctively, and lost the running shadow before he could return the fire.

"Keep low, Dave!" he heard Freddy Farmer's voice to his left. "Two of the beggars, and they are both armed. Keep low and watch the fire escape on the rear side. Only way they can get off—"

If Freddy Farmer said any more Dawson didn't hear it. He was in the act of turning and moving toward the rear of the building roof when something moved in front of him, and a thunderbolt slashed down out of nowhere to hit him on the head. As his knees turned to rubber, and buckled, he flung out his arms in a desperate effort to grab hold of something that would help him remain on his feet. But there was nothing but thin air there to grab hold of, and he fell headlong on the roof. Whether he was hit by another thunderbolt, or it was just hitting the gravel-topped roof, he didn't know, but in the next second he had lost consciousness of everything. Everything, save that he was spilling down into a huge bottomless hole that was filled with pitch darkness and utter silence. And then even that was no more.

CHAPTER SIX

When England Stood Alone!

A thousand little demons romping through Dave Dawson's head with sharp pointed spears gradually dragged the Yank air ace back to consciousness. He opened his eyes, and then instantly closed them as the sun itself seemed to be perched on the end of his nose. He groaned and sucked air into his aching lungs.

"Steady, Dave, old fellow," he heard Freddy Farmer say. "You got bashed a good one that time. Anybody else's head would have been caved right in. But just take it easy. Everything's all right now."

"Yeah, everything's just dandy!" Dawson heard his own voice mutter. "What happened? Did I jump without my 'chute, or—Hold everything!"

Dawson choked out the rest, opened his eyes, and forced them to stay open until the so-called sun perched on his nose didn't bother him any more. It was then he found himself stretched out on one of the twin beds, with the ceiling light directly overhead. Freddy Farmer, whose uniform looked as if it had been passed through a meat chopper in a terrible hurry, was seated on the edge of the bed with a damp towel in his hands. Dawson started to sit up, but Freddy pushed him on the chest to force him back, and then put the damp towel across his forehead.

"Stay put, Dave," he said. "I guess you didn't hear me tell you to keep low."

"Sure I did," Dawson grunted as the cool towel on his forehead seemed to drive most of the little demons from his brain. "But some guy was keeping even lower, and he let me have it. But, look, I'm okay. I've got to sit up. That ceiling light is burning holes in my face. No, Freddy. I'm really okay. I'll feel better if I just sit up. Gosh, I wonder what that lug used, a sledge hammer?"

Despite Freddy Farmer's disapproving look, and his restraining gesture, Dawson sat up on the bed, and struggled silently for a moment until the room stopped going around. Then when he could see clearly he looked at his flying pal.

"Okay, what's the story?" he said. "And what bunch of cats did that clawing job on your uniform? Boy, you sure look like you'd been through something!"

"More than I could handle, blast it all!" Freddy Farmer said, as a red flush started up his neck. "I had just made my phone call to British Intelligence at the War Office when I saw that bathroom door move. I yelled and told whoever was there to come out, or I'd fire. Silly, of course, but the blasted words just popped off my tongue."

Young Farmer paused for a moment for breath. The redness was in his face by now.

"Of course, whoever it was didn't oblige," he continued bitterly. "I heard scraping noises beyond the door, and leaped over to it gun in hand, and all that sort of cinema hero stuff. I kicked open the door just in time to see some chap's hand disappear from the bathroom window sill. I pulled the door shut to cut off the light in here, and scrambled out the window myself. Nothing happened for a bit, and then I heard two voices whispering. Couldn't make out what they said, or in what language they were saying it. I leaped in that direction and bumped square into a blasted chimney. Then I heard running feet to my right. Rather than bother calling out I just gave a snap shot in the general direction. I hit one of them, because I heard a yelp of pain. And—"

"And that was just about the time I reached the roof," Dave Dawson said as Freddy ran out of breath. "One of them fired at me. Then you called out. And then, bingo! One of them must have circled around to my side somehow, and let me have it on the head. Then what?"

"Then the very unsatisfactory ending," Freddy Farmer said gloomily. "I heard them both at the rear of the roof. I went toward there as silently, and as fast as I could. I bumped into you. While I was trying to find out if you were dead, both of the blighters went down the fire escape and lost themselves. The only thing for me to do then was to get you back through the window and in here where I could have a look at you. And that took some doing. You weigh a ton, Dave. I sincerely recommend a strict diet. Lord, but you're heavy when you're unconscious."

But Dawson wasn't listening. He was scowling at his scratched and dirty hands, and at his own uniform that was almost as badly torn as Freddy's.

"I wonder who they were?" he presently said aloud. "You didn't get a look at either of them?"

"Only that one chap's hand," Freddy replied. "The rest was just moving shadows. It was my fault for making a mess of it, Dave. I shouldn't have let that chap get out the bathroom window. How—?"

The fuzzy note of the front door buzzer stopped the rest of Freddy Farmer's sentence. Both boys looked at each other, and then got up off the bed in a hurry.

"The guys from British Intelligence!" Dawson said, and headed for the living room door. "From the time it took them to get here, this joint must be up in Scotland!"

"Well, we'll soon know where it is, anyway, thank heaven!" Freddy Farmer breathed as he followed Dawson through the door into the living room. "I certainly—*oof!*"

Young Farmer's lungs were emptied of air as he plowed face first into Dawson, who had pulled up to an abrupt stop. With an effort Freddy held his balance and stared past Dawson.

"What—?" he began. Then, with a gasp, "I say, Dave, what did you do with them?"

"I didn't!" Dawson mumbled, and stared popeyed at the completely vacant living room. "I—They—I mean, one was dead, and the other two were trussed up for keeps. But they *aren't here*, Freddy! They've gone! Doggone it! That guy, Erich, was dead, I tell you. But he's upped and walked away. Away where?"

The door buzzer rang again, more insistently this time, but neither of the youths paid any attention to it. Like men struck dumb they gaped at the living room floor where the figures of three Nazis should have been, but where actually there were only some bloodstains to mark where they had once been.

"I think I'm going nuts!" Dave mumbled, and drew a hand across his forehead. "Stark raving nuts. Now you see it, and now you don't. I—Hey! The buzzer!"

With a yelp Dawson snapped out of his trance, raced to the foyer door, went through it and hurried to the front door and unlocked it. And just in time, too. A British colonel out in the hallway was just stepping back, service revolver in hand, preparatory to shooting out the lock. The officer lowered his gun the instant he saw Dawson, but his eyes widened at what he saw.

"What the devil's going on, Captain?" he demanded. "We traced a phone call from this apartment. We're British Intelligence."

The officer nodded to a captain and a lieutenant standing just behind him. Dawson swung the door open wider and stepped to one side.

"Yes, sir, I know," he said. "And plenty's happened. You'd better come in, sir."

"Quite," the colonel grunted, and walked into the foyer, followed by his two junior officers. "Where to now?"

"This way, sir," Dave said as he led the way toward the living room. "But I guess there's some explaining to do first."

Dawson was continuing talking, but decided not to and led the way into the living room. Marked relief showed on Freddy Farmer's face as he saw the snappy British uniforms. He stiffened and clicked his heels, but did not salute as he did not have his hat on. Then suddenly his dirtied face cracked in a glad and welcoming smile.

"*You*, sir!" he cried. "Did you take my call, sir? But it's so long, sir, that of course I wouldn't have recognized your voice."

"What's that?" the colonel said sharply. Then his jaw dropped and his face lighted up. He looked from Farmer to Dave Dawson, all smiles. "Well, bless me!" he cried. "It has been years and years, hasn't it? And what you've two done for the cause since then!"

As the colonel grasped Freddy Farmer's outstretched hand Dave looked at him in puzzled amazement. Then memory came rushing back in a hurry.

"Well, knock me for a—!" he gulped, and then checked himself. "Colonel Fraser, Chief of British Intelligence! Gee, sir, but it's good to see you. Why—why, it was way back in Forty that you sent us on that show at Antwerp, wasn't it?"

"Absolutely, Dawson!" the colonel said as he shook hands. "And a splendid job you two did. My word! Fancy meeting you two. I heard you were with the Yanks and going great guns. But let me introduce my officers. Captain Small and Lieutenant Faintor, I want you to meet two chaps who did an awful lot for England back in the dark days. Captains Farmer, and Dawson."

There was hand shaking all around, and then Colonel Fraser got right down to cases again.

"But what's all this?" he demanded, and waved a hand at their torn uniforms. "What happened? You said something on the wire about catching three Nazi agents, and needing help at once. We came hopping it across London, but the blasted blackout, and the detours, took time. Now, what's it all about?"

"That's the sad part of the story, sir," Dawson said, making a wry face. "But we'll give all of it to you that we can."

Some ten minutes later Dawson and Freddy Farmer had finished their combined word picture of their crazy adventure. Colonel Fraser and his two junior officers listened in wide-eyed silence. By the time the two U. S. Army Air Forces aces finished speaking a strange look had come into Colonel Fraser's eyes, and his face was noticeably paler and more strained than it had been when he arrived. He stared at them for a moment without speaking, then put out his hand to Dawson.

"Mind letting me see those papers you say you took from them?" he said.

"Sure, of course, sir," Dave replied, and fished them from his torn tunic pocket and handed them over.

Colonel Fraser spent a good five minutes going through them while the other four in the room waited with mounting impatience plainly stamped on their faces. Finally, Colonel Fraser stacked them all together and stuck the lot in his pocket.

"The rotters!" he said in a withering voice. "The dirty rotters. But that Herr Baron is a clever devil, blast his black heart. I'd give my crown and pips to lay that one low. And you had him right here all tied up? What rotten luck!"

"I could cut my throat for not making sure he was trussed up for keeps!" Dawson said bitterly. "But as a matter of fact I was so sure that he was there to stay put."

"Well, I feel even worse because I tied up the beggar," Freddy Farmer said. Then, with a little gesture of one hand, he added, "But I wonder?"

"Wonder what?" Colonel Fraser asked when the English youth didn't continue.

"I wonder if he did get loose by himself?" Freddy said with a frown. "After all, we know that there were two more of them on the roof. Perhaps there were others. Others who sneaked in here and freed the two live ones, and helped cart the dead one away."

"No soap on that, I'd say," Dawson said slowly. "I mean, I don't think they'd have lighted out without finishing us off first."

"No, I think you're wrong there, Dawson, old chap," Captain Small said with an apologetic side glance at his superior. "I don't think they bothered about you two because they knew the jig was up. I mean, you see, they knew that Farmer had phoned us, and that we were on the way. I fancy that their first thought was to get away from here as soon as possible."

"But why take the dead man?" Dave argued.

Captain Small shrugged and smiled.

"You have me there, old chap," he said. "But no doubt, it was so that we wouldn't be able to obtain positive identification of the beggar."

"But how they did it, and where they went, is really the important part," Freddy Farmer said with a frown. Then, looking at Colonel Fraser, he said, "If I may make a suggestion, sir, why not have this whole building searched? There's no telling what you might gather up."

"Ahead of you there, Farmer," the senior officer said. "I have men doing that very thing right now. They are going from floor to floor, and checking up on everybody. They'll be up here to report before long, I expect."

"Do you mind a direct question, sir?" Dawson suddenly asked him.

"Why, no, not at all. Fire away, Dawson."

"About this Karl Stoltz, and Paul von Heimmer, sir," Dave said. "Do you know if your department has ever heard of either of them?"

The colonel smiled broadly, and nodded.

"I've been waiting for that question," he said. "Yes. We know all about Herr Karl Stoltz and Herr Paul von Heimmer. They arrived in England about six months ago. By parachute from a German night reconnaissance plane. But they didn't get very far because we had been informed by one of our own agents in Germany of their coming. They were given a military trial, and shot. Unfortunately, though, we were unable to learn anything of the work they planned to do in England. However, it undoubtedly was to have something to do with the American Air Forces, because they were both dressed as captain pilots when we gathered them in."

Colonel Fraser paused, and a slow smile curled his lips.

"And you need not ask the next question," he said. "I'll answer it for you now. Stoltz and von Heimmer bore a very startling resemblance to you two. I can quite readily see how Herr Baron and his two henchmen mistook you for them."

There was a moment of stunned silence; then Dave burst out laughing and looked at Freddy Farmer.

"Well, what do you know!" he chuckled. "Here I've been palling around all these years with a guy who has a mug like a Nazi's. No wonder my best friends wouldn't tell me! And me worrying because I was afraid it was B.O.!"

"Very, very funny!" Freddy snapped, and then looked at Colonel Fraser. "Von Heimmer was rather a good-looking chap, wasn't he, sir? And Stoltz had a face like a jammed bomb bay door?"

The senior officer looked puzzled for a moment, and then raised both hands in protest, and shook his head.

"Now, none of that, Farmer!" he said with a laugh. "I can see that you two haven't changed much in that respect. Oh, no! I'm jolly well not going to let you drag me into this thing. Fact is, I've quite forgotten what either of them looked like. So don't either of you try to trap me into being on your side."

"Speaking seriously for a moment, sir," Dawson said, "what about this Herr Baron? You spoke as though you knew quite a bit about him, too."

"I know a lot about that cunning devil!" the colonel said as his face darkened. "But how much is truth, and how much is fiction, I must confess that I do not know. I do not even know what his real name is. No doubt it is one of the dozen or more that we have in his file at the office. But which one I don't know. However—"

The sound of the door buzzer interrupted the colonel. Everybody looked startled for an instant; then Colonel Fraser nodded at Captain Small.

"Haines, no doubt," he said. "Answer it, will you, Small?"

"Yes, sir," the captain said, and went out into the foyer.

He was back in a moment or two with a slightly disappointed frown on his face.

"It's Haines reporting, sir," he said to the colonel. "Save for this apartment the entire building is

vacant. They forced entrance into all of them. Not so much as a stick of furniture, sir. They found a Daimler in the garage, and Haines has detailed a man to watch it. The rear door was open, and there's an alley that leads to the street in the next block. No doubt our little friends made their exit that way, and there was a car waiting."

"Of course," Colonel Fraser nodded gloomily. "Too late, again. But I'll lay that blighter by the heels some day soon. Very well, Small. Tell Haines to keep searching around. Might come across something that will help us. I think you'd better lend a hand. I'll be at the office if you want me."

"Very good, sir," Captain Small said, and went out again.

As the man closed the door behind him, Dawson glanced at his wrist watch, and started. The hands showed that the time was well after midnight.

"Migosh!" he gasped. "We've been here for hours. We'll never make that Kingston train, Freddy."

"Don't worry about the Kingston train," Colonel Fraser said, before Freddy Farmer could open his mouth. "I want you two with me for a spell. I'll phone your C.O. and explain. Right now we're going down to my office. There's a chap whom I want to hear your story. All right, let's be off, eh?"

Some five minutes later Dawson, Farmer, Lieutenant Faintor, and Colonel Fraser were out in front of the building on the sidewalk. Dawson looked back up at the place where death had whispered by so close, and then looked up and down the blacked out street in a half-hearted effort to determine what part of London they were in. He saw nothing but shadowy outlines and silhouettes that didn't tell him a thing.

"Just where is this place, sir?" he asked the colonel as Lieutenant Faintor slid in behind the wheel of a car at the curb.

"Out Golders Green way," the senior officer replied. "Get into the car, you two."

"Golders Green?" Freddy Farmer gasped as he climbed in back. "The start of the Midlands Road? Lord! They did give us a ride, didn't they?"

"Well, this night has spared me one thing, at least," Dave Dawson grunted, as he sank down on the leather cushion beside Freddy.

"What, I'd like to know?" the English-born air ace demanded.

Dawson looked at him and grinned in the blackout.

"I don't have to worry about explaining the jokes in that show to you now," he said gently.

Freddy Farmer didn't even comment. He simply kicked Dawson in the ankle as though it were accidental, but omitted an apology.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Uncle Sam Steps In

The long ride back to the War Office Building was made more or less in silence. And when Colonel Fraser ordered Lieutenant Faintor to put the car away, and led Dawson and Freddy Farmer up to his huge office, he simply waved them to comfortable chairs and promptly disappeared into an adjoining office.

Dawson looked at his own uniform and then at Freddy's.

"Boy, I hope he's gone to call a tailor!" he said. "Come the light of day and we'll be picked up by the first M.P. who spots us."

"Frankly, I hope he's gone to get us something to eat," Freddy replied. "I'm absolutely famished."

"You always are!" Dawson grunted. "Even at the time you're just paying the check. But that reminds me, Freddy. Remember the funny hunch I had at dinner tonight? Maybe the old feeling wasn't so far off at that, eh? Me, I must be psychic, huh?"

"Perhaps!" Freddy snapped. "But you're also a whole lot of other things that we won't bother to mention here."

"I'll ignore that crack, and simply take it from whence it comes," Dawson said loftily. "But would you like to make a bet, my little man?"

"A bet about what?"

"Never mind about what," Dawson said. "You want to bet?"

"No!" Freddy said firmly. "I'm too tired to be roped into anything by you. By the way, though, how is that cast-iron head of yours? You're certainly acting chipper enough."

"We Dawsons can take it," Dave grinned. "But lay off unpleasant memories, will you? So you won't bet, huh? Well, just the same, I'll bet you anything you like that we don't go on to Kingston from here. Or back to the Squadron, either. Now, what do you think of that?"

"I think you're balmy!" Freddy snorted.

"Okay, so he thinks I'm balmy," Dawson said, and waved a hand. "But I'm just telling you, that's

all."

"Another one of your wonderful hunches, I suppose?" Freddy growled.

"Call it that if you like," Dawson shrugged. "But it's really a certain look in Colonel Fraser's eyes that makes me feel as I do."

"And just what do you feel, if I may be so bold as to ask?" young Farmer snapped.

Dave put a forefinger alongside his nose, winked, and nodded very mysteriously.

"The colonel has something cooking," he said. "And you can take it, or leave it!"

And no more than five seconds later Colonel Fraser came into the room followed by an orderly with a tray bearing a tea pot, cups and saucers, muffins, Army issue jam, and, miracles of miracles, some of those English midget-sized country sausages.

"Well, for once you were right, Dave," Freddy murmured softly. "He did have something cooking. And do those sausages smell good!"

"On the desk there, Parks," Colonel Fraser said, and then turned to Dawson and Farmer, smiling.

"A little spot of tea and food to appease the inner man, Gentlemen," he said. "Pull up your chairs to the desk, here. I've called your commanding officer and explained that I'm borrowing you for a bit. I've also called the chap I want you to meet. He'll be along shortly. But first, a little refreshment, what?"

"By all means, sir!" Freddy Farmer exclaimed, and moved his chair over to the desk.

For the next few minutes there was an absolute minimum of conversation in the colonel's office. All three of them truly were hungry, and they fell to, to do something about it. Then eventually the colonel began to ask questions about what the two air aces had seen and done since their last meeting. And Freddy and Dave told him, though every instant of the time questions of their own hovered on the tips of their tongues. It was evident to them, though, that the colonel had put the night's doings to one side for the moment, so they continued to let their questions hover on the tips of their tongues unspoken.

Then, about fifteen minutes later, there came a knock on the outer door. The colonel bade whoever it was enter, and an American Air Forces major came into the room, smiled, and saluted the colonel.

"Good evening, sir," he said. "I came as fast as I could."

"Come in, come in, my dear Major," Colonel Fraser said as he stood up. "We're just having a spot of tea. Won't you join us? Plenty of fresh tea, you know."

"Thank you, but no, sir," the major said, and let his eyes flick across Dawson's and Farmer's face. "I had some about an hour ago. Full up as it were, Colonel."

"Right you are, then," Colonel Fraser said. And then, gesturing a hand toward Dawson and Freddy Farmer, he said, "Let me introduce Captains Dawson and Farmer. Gentlemen, Major Crandall, of your Air Forces Intelligence."

Both Dave and Freddy shook hands with the major and murmured their pleasure at meeting him. His grip was firm, and his smile genuine, as he replied:

"The pleasure is really mine, Captains. I've heard so much about your fine work that this is really a red letter day for me. Or should I say, red letter night?"

Everybody laughed, and the major pulled up a chair and sat down.

"Positive you won't, Major?" Colonel Fraser said, and motioned to the tea pot.

"Positive, thank you just the same, sir," the Yank Air Forces Intelligence officer replied.

"Right-o, then," the colonel said. Then, his face becoming grave, he continued, "Let's get on with it. I didn't give you any facts over the phone, Major, because I thought it best for you to hear it all first hand. Tell them all you told me, you two chaps. And then we'll see what's what."

For the second time that night Dawson and Farmer related their experiences, from supper at the Savoy Hotel up to Colonel Fraser's arrival, with his men, at the apartment building out near Golders Green. Major Crandall listened attentively, but with no other expression on his good-looking, sun-bronzed face. And when Dawson and Freddy Farmer came to the end of their story the major arched one eyebrow slightly, but gave no other indication as to whether he was impressed or unimpressed.

"And here are the papers Dawson took from them, Major," Colonel Fraser said, and pushed the pile across the desk. "My man is right now checking on the two so-called Englishmen. And I imagine that your office will want to check on the Yank Air Forces colonel that Herr Baron pretended to be."

"Yes, we'd like to, sir," Major Crandall said as he took the papers. "We can do it very easily, too, as we—"

The American Intelligence officer cut his sentence off in the middle, and his face went white under his heavy tan. Dawson, watching him closely, saw the major's hand holding the papers shake a little. And he also saw that it was Herr Baron's picture on the top paper that made the officer pale.

"Colonel Frank Bowers?" the officer suddenly bit off. "Why, the low-down, dirty skunk! Posing as

old Frank Bowers! Poor old Frank. I wonder just what did happen? We never heard a single word. And I personally asked Swiss Red Cross to check and double check."

"Obviously you knew him, eh, sir?" Freddy Farmer murmured politely, when the other made no effort to explain, but simply stared fixedly at the picture.

"What's that?" he suddenly said, raising his eyes. "Knew Frank Bowers? Of course I knew him. Like a brother. He was one of the best friends I, or any other man, ever had. He's been gone now almost a year."

"Do you mind telling us about it, Major?" Colonel Fraser asked quietly.

"Not at all, sir, though there's not much to tell," the Yank Intelligence officer replied quickly. "Frank Bowers was the C.O. of a Flying Fortress Group. And the right kind of a C.O., too. I mean that he flew on just as many raids as anybody else, and did his paper work as C.O. to boot. I knew him back home in Detroit, where we both hail from. Always crazy about flying, and when the big chance came he soon showed his worth, and went up the promotion ladder fast. Well, it was May of last year to be exact. I believe the date was the seventeenth. He led a Fortress raid on Lorient, in Occupied France. Flak and enemy fighter opposition that day were extra heavy. We lost several planes, Frank's among them. Pilots who got back reported that his ship suffered a direct flak hit. The thing went down in pieces. One pilot said that he saw some parachutes float down from Frank's plane, but he wasn't positive, as there were a lot of our boys going down by parachute that day. Well, we received no word at all about the fate of Frank and his crew. I gave their names to Swiss Red Cross, but they reported that they could locate none of the fellows in any of the German prison camps. That was that. A man who was as fine a leader as he was a pilot was gone forever, with all the members of his Fortress crew. But—"

Major Crandall stopped, tapped the picture with a finger, and looked questioningly at Colonel Fraser. The British Intelligence chief nodded slowly.

"Quite, Major," he said quietly. "Perhaps your friend was killed, but the Nazis *were able* to get hold of his papers. But tell me, Major? Would you say that those papers were the property of the real Colonel Bowers?"

"Definitely," Major Crandall said, and held one up. "All but this one. This one stating that he was of recent date attached to Air Forces Intelligence is faked. Frank wouldn't have served with Intelligence, unless by Presidential order. He wanted to get out into the open and fight. He was that kind of a man."

"And to think I let that stinking, no-faced Nazi slip through my fingers!" Dave Dawson groaned. "I should be sent to the rear rank for that blunder!"

"Oh, no, not at all, Dawson," Colonel Fraser said. "After all, had you not gone out on the roof after Farmer, he might have met with a very nasty finish. There were two of them, you know, and—"

The colonel suddenly choked off the rest and gaped wide-eyed at Dawson. And well he might, for Dave's face had suddenly become the color of a four alarm fire, and he looked for all the world like a man seeking a hole into which he could crawl before pulling the hole in after him.

"Good heavens, man, what's wrong?" the colonel cried, and started up from his chair.

"Me, sir!" Dave replied with a grimace. "I guess I should be broken and sent back to the rear rank. I clean forgot. Funny, too, considering I remembered everything else so clearly. Maybe it was that smack on the head."

"Forgot what?" Colonel Fraser demanded. "Come, come, Dawson! What the devil is this all about?"

"This, sir," Dave said weakly, and fished a hand into his tunic pocket to pull out the little black leather book he had taken from the inside of Herr Baron's tunic lapel. "I felt it in his tunic lapel, sir," he said. "But I clean forgot to mention it. Here, sir. It's all in code, I think."

Dawson held it out and Colonel Fraser practically pounced on it like a tiger upon a hunk of meat. He flipped through the pages rapidly, and the look in his eyes got brighter and brighter.

"Praise the powers that be you didn't forget any longer than you did, Dawson!" he snapped. Then, with a quick shake of his hand, "I'm sorry for that, old man. I apologize. You went through enough to make a man to forget 'most everything. It's just that I'm so excited to get hold of this."

"That's all right, sir," Dave said with a smile. "I should have thought of it sooner. You think you can break down that code?"

"With ease," the colonel said, and reached out a hand to press one of a row of buttons on the edge of his desk. "It's one of the numbers codes. The Nazis go all out for that type of code, for some unknown reason. Naturally, though, we're grateful to them for that, because they are so simple to break down. I remember once when—"

But the side door opened to admit a rather tired-eyed lieutenant, and the colonel didn't continue. He turned and handed the little black book to the officer.

"Get everything out of this, Wilson," he said. "Put two or three on it, if you have to. I want it as soon as possible. By the way, anything yet on the other business?"

"Yes, sir," the lieutenant said. "I was about to ring you when you buzzed. Henderson just called in. Both John Dobbler and Harold Cabot are listed in Records as having been killed during the blitz. Neither has been seen at the address given since then, sir. Fact is, sir, Henderson says Dobbler's block was completely destroyed, and nothing's been put up there as yet."

"Thank you, Wilson," Colonel Fraser said with a nod of dismissal. "Now, get right at that thing, there's a good chap."

"Quite, sir," the junior officer said, and hurried out of the office.

Colonel Fraser turned to the other and clenched his fists in a helpless gesture.

"If only we could devise some means of civilian identification that couldn't be stolen by Nazi scoundrels!" he said bitterly. "No doubt that Hans and that Erich have been walking around London bold as brass and posing as poor Dobbler and Cabot ever since the Blitz! It's enough to make a man weep."

"I wonder how they got hold of the papers." Dawson murmured.

"A hundred different ways," Colonel Fraser said. "Took 'em off the poor devils as they lay dead in the bomb rubble. Or when they were in a casualty station, or a hospital. Things were very much in a stew during blitz nights, you know. Everybody was helping everybody else, and nobody was asking the next chap why he was there, or what he was doing. There wasn't any time for that, or any need. London was in a desperate state, and little things didn't matter at all. No, they simply got hold of the papers somehow, and then steered clear of those addresses. Civilians carried no pictures on their papers for identification, you know. That is, save an important few in charge of Air Raid Defense work."

"Well, that's one satisfaction, at least," Freddy Farmer said grimly. "That beggar, Erich, will steal no more papers. We sent that blighter where he belongs."

"You mean, *you* did," Dawson corrected with a grin. "And saved my hide at the same time!"

Freddy Farmer shrugged that off and looked at Colonel Fraser.

"There's something I'd like to ask if I may, sir?" he said.

"Who has a better right, Farmer?" the senior officer smiled. "Go right ahead."

"That Hans and Erich drank a toast to the Fuehrer's secret weapon, sir," Freddy said. Then, with a little embarrassed smile, "I know the Nazis have been putting out a lot of silly scare propaganda, now that we're blasting their cities. Threatening to use a secret weapon, and all that sort of thing. But—well, frankly, sir, is there anything to this secret weapon business, that you know of?"

The British Intelligence officer didn't reply to the question for a moment. He drummed his fingertips on the desk, and pursed his lips as though he were carefully selecting the words to speak.

"Propaganda, or not," he finally said slowly, "we are firmly convinced that the Nazis are arranging some kind of a surprise for us. Fact is, we've felt that way for some time now. Just what it is, we frankly do not know. I know for sure that British Intelligence hasn't obtained sufficient information as yet to give us so much as an inkling as to what it is. But what about you, Major? Has Yank Intelligence got wind of anything of that sort?"

"Yes and no, sir," Major Crandall said with a crooked little smile. "Like you, we've received some confirmed reports from inside Germany that something is brewing. I mean, that Hitler has become so desperate that he's going to take a desperate gamble, and play his final cards. But whether it will be against the Russians, or against us, or both, we don't know. Nor do we know if it's a new plane, a new gun, a new kind of tank, or what. But it's pretty certain that the Nazis are not going to take the terrific air beating they are now receiving without striking back with something very special they've been saving until they were forced to use it."

"You speak of confirmed reports, sir," Dawson spoke up. "Just what do you mean by that? Confirmed reports of what, may I ask?"

"Of unusual things taking place inside Germany, and inside Occupied France," the major replied. "As an example, we have received a report that a certain factory making landing gear parts has suddenly become a very hush-hush place. No one can get within a mile of the spot without being shot. The working force has been doubled, and no worker is allowed to leave that area. They eat, sleep, and work there. Why? We haven't the faintest idea. We've known since the very beginning of the war that that particular plant made landing gear parts. Nothing secret about it at all. One of our agents even went through the plant. But he can't get within a mile of it now. Nor can anybody else, without the proper authority. And that plant is but one of at least a dozen that of late have become forbidden ground, you might say. By itself, the report means nothing, but when added to other scraps of information we have been able to collect, it all points to the Nazis working up something very special. For the want of a better word, we call it a secret weapon."

"And the little item that gives it even greater importance now, Major?" Colonel Fraser said, and smiled knowingly.

"Yes, very much so," the other said grimly. Then he looked at Dawson, and tapped the picture of Colonel Frank Bowers. "This," he said. "Rather, that rat, Herr Baron, who posed as Colonel Frank Bowers. Both English and Yank Intelligence have been able to find out that the man called Herr Baron was directly connected with whatever is taking place in these suddenly double guarded factories. Don't ask me, Herr Baron who, because I don't know. Nobody seems to know. Not even in Germany, or the occupied countries, where he seems to be feared as much as Himmler, if not more so. Obviously he is a skilled actor, and an expert quick change and make-up artist. Also, he is clever, and has a heart of stone. But that's about all we know. At least, all that Yank Intelligence knows. Perhaps, Colonel, you can add to—"

But Major Crandall didn't get the chance right then to finish the question. The side door opened, and Lieutenant Wilson came hurrying in. In one hand he held the little black book. And in the other he held two sheets of paper, and Dawson could see that they were both filled with closely typewritten lines. And Dawson could also see that Lieutenant Wilson was striving hard to be typically English, and not let his wild excitement show on his face.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Sixteen Kholerstrasse

As Lieutenant Wilson quickly crossed over to the desk Colonel Fraser turned his head and looked at him in mild surprise.

"What is it, Wilson?" he asked. Then catching his breath, "Good grief, you've done it so soon, man?"

"Yes sir," Wilson replied. "A very simple numbers code. Matter of fact, sir, I fancy it's one he made up for his own use. I've decoded and typed out everything, sir. Mostly personal notes for his own use. It seems like the chap didn't care to trust to memory, so put it all down in code. But most, *most* interesting, sir!"

"Thank you, Wilson, and jolly quick work," Colonel Fraser said, as he took the little black book, and the two sheets of typewritten lines. Then, with an apologetic smile at Major Crandall, and Dawson, and Farmer, he murmured, "Excuse me, Gentlemen, while I glance through this stuff, will you?"

All three replied that that was all right, but even though they had shouted, "No!" in a loud chorus it wouldn't have made any difference, for the colonel was already giving his concentrated attention to the reading matter. Dawson tried to be polite and not stare at the man, but when Colonel Fraser suddenly gasped sharply, muttered something under his breath, and a look of angry bewilderment flooded his face, neither Dawson or the other two could possibly keep their eyes off him. It was almost comical, the picture. Major Fraser, Dawson and Freddy Farmer were like three eager dogs who were having the dickens of a time controlling themselves until they received the signal.

Eventually Colonel Fraser slapped the papers down on the desk with an oath, and didn't even bother to apologize. His face was flaming red, and his eyes glittered like ice cubes in the sun.

"Incredible, unbelievable!" he finally exploded. "Good heavens! There's almost as much information about things here in England as we know ourselves. That Herr Baron is a devil, I swear. He's—he's almost superhuman, the rascal!"

"Information about what, sir?" Major Crandall asked, after he had waited a polite moment.

Colonel Fraser slapped a hand on the little black book.

"About American and R.A.F. forces in England!" he cried. "The location of every drome, the types of planes, the commanding officer, signal codes and—everything! Why, I can hardly believe it! It must have taken his agents months of blastedly clever work to gather all that data!"

The colonel suddenly cut himself off short. A lot of the anger and the red faded from his face, and in the next moment he actually smiled.

"But not too clever, I fancy," he said. "The Nazi is a strange creature. He can make himself perfect in all things except one. I mean that in his make-up there is always one very strong failing. And that's why they never win in the end, because they always make one costly slip. The weak link breaks, you might say, and all the rest goes to pot. In Herr Baron the weak link was his tendency to put details down on paper. As Wilson said, the chap didn't care to trust to memory. Listed here are the names and addresses of every one of his agents in England. He even has listed the contact points that his agents use to get across the Channel to Occupied France."

"You unearthed a gold mine for the colonel, Dave!" Freddy Farmer cried excitedly. "Now British Intelligence can throw out a dragnet and catch every—No?"

Young Farmer checked himself and spoke the last as Dawson made a wry face and shook his head.

"No, Freddy," Dave said sadly. "Unless Herr Baron is a complete dope, which he sure isn't. You're forgetting that the rat got away from us, Freddy. He'll discover that his little book is gone, and the first thing he'll do is to make sure his agents clear out and clear out fast. Am I right, Colonel?"

"I'm afraid you are, Dawson," the senior officer agreed with a heavy sigh. "He'll do just that, unquestionably. Now, if only we had captured him with this little book, then—But we can't expect everything to go in our favor. But let me continue with what is perhaps the most important item in this little black book. This will interest you particularly, Major. There are several references to Number Sixteen Kholerstrasse!"

Major Crandall sat up straight, as though he had been shot.

"No?" he gasped. "You mean—?"

"Exactly, Major," Colonel Fraser interrupted. "Number Sixteen Kholerstrasse in the city of Duisburg, Germany. He has listed here certain dates when his agents are to report to Number Sixteen Kholerstrasse. And the last date, which he has underscored several times, is the twenty-fourth of this month!"

"So the rats are all going back to the same hole!" Major Crandall said softly, as though he couldn't believe his own words. "But—but to tell the truth I've been doing a little thinking about Sixteen Kholerstrasse lately. Four of the mystery factories are located in the Duisburg area. The nerve of those rats! Using the very nest we thought we'd smoked out for keeps. Right now I don't know whether that's being clever, or being damn fools, to tell you the truth."

"It was being blasted clever, until Dawson got hold of *this!*" Colonel Fraser said, and held up the little black book. "Frankly, I'd never have suspected that they would use the same place again. But that's the Hun for you. They are very likely to do the totally unexpected, ingrained as they are with routine. But they're a queer race, anyway."

"And one the world could well do without!" Dawson said grimly. "But is it permitted to ask questions at this point, sir?"

"Quite," the colonel smiled. "But don't bother, because I'll explain. All this certainly must sound like so much gibberish to you two. Well, Number Sixteen Kholerstrasse, in Duisburg, Germany, was for a long time the Western Germany Headquarters of Himmler's Gestapo, and the German Intelligence, and secret police. The clearing house, you might say, for all of the occupied countries, as well as the British Isles. Well, a few months ago we got wind of its existence. Also word that Himmler himself, and several of his important key men, were going to meet at Number Sixteen—for a little discussion of policy, no doubt. Anyway, it gave us a very bright idea, though the idea failed to turn out one tenth as bright as we had hoped. To make a long story short, we formed a sort of Commando squad of British, American, and Russian agents operating in Germany, plus a few members of the French Underground. The idea was, of course, to storm the place and wipe out Herr Himmler, and several others, and perhaps capture valuable papers and such."

The colonel paused for a moment, and a look of bitterness and sadness came into his eyes.

"The raid was made, but luck was not with us," he presently continued in a low voice. "Something went wrong. Nobody seemed to know just what, or why. But it appeared that the Huns had been tipped off. Neither Himmler nor his key men were there at the time of the raid. Our men killed a few of the lesser lights that were present. But five of our men died, and not one slip of paper of any value was obtained. Hand grenades and rifle fire made a mess of the place, so the report stated. But that's about all the raiding party accomplished. It was just another one of those rotten bits of luck that couldn't be helped. Like the time the Commandos raided Marshall Rommel's Headquarters in Libya, only to find that the Desert Fox had flown to Germany the day before for a meeting with Hitler. No, we are not very proud of the Sixteen Kholerstrasse affair. The Hun beat us at every turn that time. And now the beggars are obviously using it again. *That* is indeed interesting."

"And four of those mysterious factories are in the Duisburg area," Major Crandall murmured. "Don't forget that, sir. I'd like to make a bet that Number Sixteen is the nerve center of whatever the Nazis are cooking up for us."

"And I wouldn't take that bet, Major, because I quite agree with you," Colonel Fraser said firmly. "And here's one more thing. Not only has Herr Baron underscored the date when the last agent is to report to Number Sixteen, he has also referred to it as *Der Tag*. The big day for whatever it is they are preparing."

"And it will be a blow against the combined American and British air forces in England," Freddy Farmer murmured. "Unless, sir, there's more in the little black book than you've told us?"

Everybody looked at young Farmer in puzzled surprise.

"What's that?" Colonel Fraser echoed. Then, with a shake of his head, "No, there's nothing else here. Just his agents, the dates they are to report to Duisburg, and the data on our air forces in England. But what makes you think, it's to be a blow against our air forces?"

"A hunch, Dawson would call it, sir," Freddy Farmer replied. Then, leaning forward with a very earnest expression on his face, he continued, "On the face of it, sir. I mean, all his agents are to report to Duisburg at certain dates. Very well, it's obvious that he can't rely on his memory. He has to put details down on paper. In code, true, but still down in black and white. Well, doesn't it strike you that Herr Baron planned to go to Duisburg, too, and that *his* report will be *complete* information on our air forces in England that he and his agents have collected? *If* there is any secret business being prepared for us at Duisburg, doesn't it seem logical that it will ultimately be directed at our air forces? Is there anything that we have that the Nazis would rather smash than our air power? Of course, I may be all wrong to—"

"But you're not all wrong, far from it!" Major Crandall broke in. "I think you've hit the nail right on the head. Now that you've put it that way, a lot of things seem to check. And one item is something that it hurts to mention. It's that I haven't been able to contact a single one of my men posted in the Duisburg area for over a month. I am afraid they're dead. They found out the secret, but paid with their lives before they could get word through to me."

"Farmer must be right!" Colonel Fraser said, tight-lipped, as though he were speaking to himself. "Both Hall and Perkins were to have reported from that area days ago. And there hasn't been a single word from either of them."

Silence settled over the room as the Colonel's words were lost to the echo. Presently Dawson opened his mouth to speak, but seemed to think better of it, and reddened and closed his lips. A few moments later, though, he gave a little stubborn shake of his head.

"Would it help if Farmer and I took a crack at it, sir?" he asked.

Colonel Fraser looked at him in frowning bewilderment.

"A crack at what, Dawson?" he demanded.

Dave hesitated, and his face was fiery red when he spoke.

"Getting to Duisburg, sir," he said slowly, "and trying to find out just what's to happen on the seventeenth of this month."

The colonel blinked, looked just a trifle annoyed, and opened his mouth to speak. However, he changed his mind and smiled faintly.

"I admire your courage, and your splendid offer, Dawson," he said. "But it would be impossible, old man. You just couldn't bring it off, though not through any fault of yours, mind you. But the whole place is double guarded, as Major Crandall explained. And, not to take away one bit from the splendid services you have rendered Intelligence in the past, both the major's men and mine were the very best in the game. They have been there on the spot for weeks, and have obviously failed, and paid with their lives. Heaven knows I'd grab at your offer if I so much as thought there was the ghost of a chance, but—Well, you see, old man?"

The colonel smiled kindly, and gestured with his two hands, palms upward. Then he blinked as Dawson smiled back at him, and shook his head.

"No, sir," he said, "I don't see it your way. I don't mean that Farmer and I would walk right into Number Sixteen Kholerstrasse and find out what was what. Chances are that we might neither of us get to within a mile of the place. However, if those mysterious factories are linked up with Number Sixteen, then maybe we could do something about it. Learn a little something, anyway."

"Eh?" the colonel murmured. "I—I don't quite think I follow you. Do you mean, get a look at what's in those factories? But, good heavens, my dear chap! How on earth—?"

"Something like that, sir," Dawson interrupted quietly. "But not, perhaps, the way your agents, and Major Crandall's agents, tried it. I wouldn't be so conceited as even to begin to think that I could walk in their footsteps and accomplish something they failed at. And I know Farmer isn't that conceited either."

"Oh, definitely not," Freddy said. "But what in the world are you driving at, Dave?"

"Yes, Dawson, speed it up, will you?" Major Crandall said with a frown. "What's it all about?"

Dawson hesitated and drew in a deep breath like a man about to make a high dive into icy water.

"Briefly, this, sir," he finally said. "Two Luftwaffe pilots fighting off an R.A.F.-Eighth Air Force raid on Duisburg are shot down. They bail out and come down close to one of those mystery factories. They seem to be injured, and are probably taken inside the factory to be given first aid. Or maybe they just stumble in like dazed men not knowing where they are going. Anyway, they get inside and they certainly see something of what's going on inside. Well, those two Luftwaffe pilots will be Farmer and myself."

"My word!" Colonel Fraser almost choked, as Dawson paused. "But—but it's too utterly fantastic, Dawson!"

"I don't know, sir," Major Fraser broke in quickly. "Maybe he's got something there. Yes, maybe he *has* got something there."

"But, my dear Major!" Colonel Fraser exclaimed, and stopped. Then, beginning again, he said, "Assume, if you like, that they can float down by parachute as Luftwaffe pilots. Assume that one of them does get into a factory. What then?"

Major Crandall didn't reply. He looked at Dawson instead.

"Well, what about it?" he asked quietly.

"If we get in as wounded or fight-dazed Luftwaffe pilots," Dawson said with a shrug, "the chances are that we can get out, too. After all, Farmer and I read, write, and speak German. Also, we've been in that part of the world before. Of course, I'm giving just a brief outline of the set-up. It will take some thinking over, and planning. But I sincerely believe we'd stand a fair chance for success. As you well know, after an air raid things are in pretty much of a confused state. During that confusion we might be able to cash in. We might even be able to get a look at this Number Sixteen Kholerstrasse."

"But about getting back to England, Dawson?" Colonel Fraser said, as the look of disbelief began to fade from his eyes. "How would you get back?"

"That would take some thinking over, too, sir," Dawson smiled at him. "But, offhand, I'd say there were a couple of ways that might work. One, a Yank or R.A.F. plane could make a night or early dawn landing at a certain spot near Duisburg at a prearranged time, and take us aboard. Or we might cross the border into one of the Occupied countries and get in touch with the Underground, and have them send us home through the usual channels."

"Or even contact one of my men, if any are left, and let him get you out," Major Crandall murmured, as though to himself. Then, looking at Colonel Fraser, he said, "Dawson is dead right,

sir, when he says that it requires a lot of thinking over and planning. But, frankly, I'm convinced more than ever that he really has got something workable. And after all, time is short, and we've got to do something at once. The twenty-fourth is Friday, you know, sir."

The senior officer didn't reply at once. He turned his head and looked at Freddy Farmer.

"What do you think about it?" he asked. "Would you want to go on such a mad mission?"

"Even if I didn't want to, sir, and I most certainly do," Freddy replied, "I'd go along anyway to make sure that Dawson didn't blunder into any trouble."

"I was misunderstood!" Dave cried. "This would be strictly a solo venture. I couldn't possibly meet with success, if I had to carry Farmer around on my back, too!"

Colonel Fraser looked at him, then switched his gaze to Major Crandall's face, and smiled faintly.

"Maybe that is the secret of their past successes, Major," he said. "The ability to pull each other's leg, when actually death is staring them in the face. Well, I suppose that settles it. Only it seems too utterly impossible. It—"

"Just a minute, sir, if I may?" Dawson interrupted. "That job you sent us on in Nineteen Forty was also a parachute over enemy territory job. What did you honestly think of our chances then, sir?"

"Frankly," the senior officer replied gravely, "very slim indeed."

"But we were lucky enough to get back, sir," Dawson said quickly. "So why shouldn't we be just as lucky this time?"

"No reason at all," Colonel Fraser said. "Only you put it wrong when you speak of luck. With you two luck plays only a minor part. Very well, then, let's get down to thinking out this thing, and planning the operation right down to the minutest detail. I have here all the latest maps and Recco plane photographs of that area."

The sun had long since burned through London's early morning overcast when Lieutenant Faintor drove Dawson and Farmer to a hotel and secured rooms for them. He hung around until they had downed a good breakfast and were tucked away in bed. Then he grinned, gave them the V salute and went his way.

"Well, did I win my bet, or did I win my bet, pal?" Dawson yawned, and pulled the covers up around his neck.

"Eh?" Freddy Farmer mumbled. "Oh! That we wouldn't go to Kingston, or back to the Squadron, because the colonel had something in mind for us? Well, you lost it!"

"What do you mean, lost it?" Dave demanded.

"Quite!" Freddy said sleepily. "It was you who had something cooking for us, not the colonel. And now that we're alone, old thing, let me say that you are definitely mad, and absolutely balmy. But I'm quite used to that side of you by now. So don't feel hurt. And go to sleep, will you?"

Maybe it was intentional, or maybe not, but the comment Freddy Farmer received on his words was a gentle snore.

CHAPTER NINE

Eagles' Take-Off

"The one thing I simply adore about dear old England is the weather," Dawson grunted, and stuck both thumbs toward the ground. "So delightfully refreshing. Now take this perfect spring night. Why, where else in the world could you—?"

"Oh, shut up!" Freddy Farmer growled, and fiddled with the radio-jack of his helmet. "What's a little rain? Besides, it doesn't extend over Europe, the weather blokes assure us."

"Little rain is right!" Dawson snorted. "So little it's practically a falling mist. But it falls, and falls, and falls. Boy, there's going to be two great songs come out of England, but the second one hasn't been composed yet. Too bad I don't know C sharp from a three dollar hat, or I'd compose it myself."

"Well, thank goodness you won't!" Freddy snapped. "Your singing voice is bad enough. But what's the first song?"

"*There'll Always Be An England*," Dave replied. "And the one that some guy is bound to write before this is over, will be entitled: *There'll Always Be Rain In England, Too!*"

Freddy Farmer opened his mouth to make a fitting retort to that, but before he could release any words the door opened and an Air Forces lieutenant stepped inside.

"Major Crandall would like to see you in the C.O.'s office, Captains," he said.

"Major Crandall?" Dawson echoed. "He's down here?"

"That's right, Captain," the lieutenant assured him. "And he would like to see you both."

As the officer left, Dawson looked at Freddy and arched an eyebrow.

"Now what?" he grunted. "I thought that neither the major nor Colonel Fraser were going to

come down here to see us leave. But maybe there's something he forgot to tell us."

Freddy shook his head and looked at the rain-spattered window of the mess lounge of a certain R.A.F.-Yank Eighth Air Force airdrome located on England's east coast.

"I doubt that," he said. "Up there in London they both told us as much about Duisburg as any two men could possibly know. And there isn't a map or a photo of the place that we didn't see. No, it just can't possibly be that he has anything to add. Most likely he's become a trifle worried about you, and has come down here to see if you'd rather stay behind while I carried out the job alone. And after all, that would be one thing less I'd have to hinder me."

"Listen to the guy rave!" Dave jeered. "Go it alone when he's often admitted that he's been afraid of the dark all his life? Fat chance! Come, little fellow! Take my hand and I'll lead you through the nice rain. And don't fret. There'll be other lights just as soon as we reach the C.O.'s office!"

Freddy made an appropriate face, and drew back his right foot. Dawson frowned sternly, and wagged his finger in warning. But just the same he went out the mess lounge door well in front of his flying pal.

They found Major Crandall alone in the field commandant's office, and the Intelligence officer gave them both a keen, searching look as they entered. He seemed to like what he saw, for his face immediately relaxed in a smile.

"Surprise, surprise!" he said. "But it's not because I was nervous, and just had to see you take-off. Something a darn sight more important to you two than that. Two hours ago I received contact word from one of my agents in the Duisburg area. One that I was afraid was gone for good. True, word that he's still alive was a good ten days in reaching me. And a lot of things can happen to an agent in enemy territory in ten days. There was no message. Just that he was alive and still on the job, but using a different address. Whether that means that Nazi counter-espionage agents got their eye on him, and are watching his old address, I don't know. It may mean that he was captured but managed to escape before he could be tried and shot. However, he is the only one that Colonel Fraser or I have heard from in weeks. So I flew down here in a hurry to tell you, just in case it develops that he can help you."

The major paused for a moment, then moved a step closer to the two air aces, as though he feared that the very walls had ears.

"The address," he said in little more than a whisper, "is Number One-Five-Six Kholerstrasse. Yes, the very same street. He goes by the name of Heinrich Weiden. I can't tell you how he looks now, but he was a big man. A six footer, with straw hair and blue eyes. The fourth finger of the left hand is missing at the first joint. But he may be wearing a fake fingertip. I'd try to get word to him to expect you, but it's too much of a risk. Only the colonel and I know of your mission, and it's safest to keep it that way."

"But he must have a number, or a code name, sir," Dawson spoke up quietly. "And how can we let him know—if we do contact him—that we're okay? After all, you know the uniform we're wearing under our flying suits."

"Don't worry about that," Major Crandall said. "His code name is Dartmouth. Where he went to college. And he will know that you are to be trusted when he hears you speak the words: 'Harvard Nothing.' A few years ago he captained a Dartmouth football team that blanked Harvard in a top-heavy game, so that explains the Harvard Nothing touch. Well, that's all. I'm going to get out of here right away so that your flying mates won't suspect anything strange going on. A million in luck, as I said before. But just one last word of caution."

Major Crandall paused and grinned at both of them.

"If things get hot when the raiding planes reach their target," he said with a twinkle in his eye, "don't forget that you're to fake getting shot down, and bail out. By that I mean, don't get so tied up slapping German fighters down that it will be so light by the time you jump that ground observers will see that you bailed out of Yank planes, and not Nazi ones."

"We'll keep that in mind, sir," Dawson grinned at him. "But if a Jerry should happen to slide into our sights I've got a hunch that we won't just blow a kiss and let him go his way."

"I know darn well you won't!" Major Crandall chuckled. "But just don't waste too much time blowing kisses. Well, God bless you both!"

The major fairly blurted out the words, saluted them smartly, and then ducked out of the commandant's office.

"A nice guy," Dawson murmured. "We can't let him down, Freddy. Or the colonel, either."

"Then why let the thought even enter your brain?" Farmer snapped. "Come on. Let's get out of here. I want to take another check look at my plane."

"Me, too," Dawson grunted, and followed him toward the door. "I wonder if they've got any sponges or towels around here. By now my poor crate must be drenched to the skin. And through it, what I mean!"

But Freddy let that one go without comment, too, and the pair went outside and onto the field.

Some three hours later that part of England's east coast shook and trembled to the thunder of many powerful aircraft engines. On one side of the field R.A.F. and Yank Eighth Air Force bomber pilots were giving final warm-ups to their bomb-laden chariots of the skyways before taking off for the combined operation against Hitler's fast crumbling European fortress. And on the other

side of the field R.A.F. and Yank escort fighter pilots were doing the same thing with their fleet, deadly escort aircraft.

Not all the fighter pilots would escort the big fellows to their targets and back, because of the great distance to some of the plotted targets. It was arranged that no one spot in Hitler's fortress would feel the full bomb weight of the planes on this field, or of the planes that would take off from other fields. A dozen targets had been marked up, and, though it must have perhaps puzzled the pilots and crews, the raid upon Duisburg was to be light. Mostly incendiary stuff. The "eggs" were to be dropped at a spot farther on.

How Colonel Fraser and Major Crandall had arranged for the Duisburg raid to be light, without divulging the true reason, neither Dawson nor Farmer knew. And, in fact, neither of them cared. All that mattered to them was that they would fly as a part of the Duisburg escort. Their ships were the new North American P-Fifty-One B Mustangs that had a range that could take them well beyond Duisburg, and back to England. Only they weren't going back to England. At least not in the Mustangs they were about to fly to Duisburg.

"Seems a shame, doesn't it, Freddy?" Dawson murmured as they stood together between their two parked planes, with propellers idling over.

"What does?" young Farmer asked. "Or is it supposed to be more of your warped humor cropping up? If so, forget that I asked."

"No, not funny at all, pal," Dawson said gravely. "I mean, these two planes. Best things ever to have wings. Yet we're going to fly them into Hitler's front yard, and then ditch them and let them dive down to hit the deck. It's going to hurt to see these two babies hit and burst into flame."

"Quite, if either of us can take the time out to look," young Farmer murmured. "However, you're right. It does seem to shame to expend them that way. But what is nice about this war, anyway?"

"What's nice about any war?" Dawson grunted. "But I've got a hunch that this war is just about running out, and—"

"And keep it to yourself!" Freddy cut in. "Right now I want to think only of our private war, Dave. And speaking of this little job ahead, do you think it would help to check over the details together again?"

"No, it wouldn't help a bit, Freddy," Dave said with a firm shake of his head. "We've both talked ourselves blue in the face as to just exactly what each is going to do, or hopes to do. If we haven't got it in the old brain by now, going over it once more won't make any difference at all."

"No, I guess you're right, it won't," Freddy Farmer murmured. "However, in case I haven't mentioned it, old thing, happy landings, and all that kind of rot. I'm quite sure that I'll be frightfully busy, but I'll do my best to look out for you."

"Now I call that right nice of you, neighbor!" Dawson chuckled, and put an arm about Freddy's shoulders and squeezed. "And the same goes for me to you, kid. And double. But we've gone through some tight spots together, and I've got a hunch that we'll get through any tight spots this time, too. And with flying colors."

"If only you hadn't used that blasted word, hunch!" Freddy Farmer groaned. However, the grin on his face belied the tone of his voice.

A moment later signal lights began to flash from the Operation tower, and one by one the big bombers were trundled down to the far end of the runway. The first swung around into position, the pilot received the green light, and the mighty aircraft moved forward, picking up more and more speed until it was hurtling along the flare-marked runway. Hardly had it cleared and began nosing up into the night sky than the pilot of the next bomber in line opened up his throttles. One by one the powerful ships took to the air until only the fighters were left.

A signal blinked for all pilots to get into their pits. Dave reached out and gripped Freddy's arm.

"Be seeing you, kid, at Duisburg," he said. "And have a nice ride. But don't star gaze too much."

"I won't, Dave," young Farmer replied, and pressed Dawson's arm in return. "And you watch out for yourself, too, old thing. A very queer chap at times, you know, but I'm really quite fond of you."

"And I guess you'd do in a crowd, too, little man," Dave said with a gentle gruffness in his voice.

And that was that. The two air aces parted company, and each climbed into his plane. Some seven minutes later Dawson rocketed his Mustang across the field, cleared, and went power climbing up toward the star-hidden heavens. At a certain altitude he leveled off, and then circled slowly until he found, and was in, his formation position. His was the tail cover plane, so a moment later the formation swung eastward and out over the English Channel.

"Well, Duisburg, here we come!" Dawson murmured softly. "And here's hoping you're not too tough a nut to crack."

If the war gods on high heard Dawson's words they must have winked slyly at each other, and then burst out with roaring and hooting laughter! They *knew*! And so did the Grim Reaper, who was already waiting!

CHAPTER TEN

No Man's Sky

After carefully checking the readings of his "black light" instruments, Dave Dawson raised his eyes and scowled out at the ocean of inky darkness that seemed to sweep in on him from all sides.

"Right on course, unless these instruments are haywire, which of course they're not," he murmured. "But just the same, I'd sure like to get out of these darn clouds. The stuff must stretch all the way to China. Anyway, it's not raining. And that's something. But of course, Dawson, old chap, this isn't England, you know!"

As he spoke the words he absently fingered the switch button of his radio flap mike, but when he suddenly realized what he was doing he snatched his hand away as though the thing were red hot.

"Radio silence, at any cost, chump!" he growled at himself. "Not that all of Europe can't hear the racket the raiders are making. But orders is orders. And stop worrying about Freddy Farmer, too. He's right back there in this soup some place. You spotted his plane not over half an hour ago. So take it easy."

Yes, only half an hour ago Freddy Farmer had been right there in back of him, and a little to the left. Sure! But kingdoms have fallen, and nations crumbled in less time than half an hour. Was Freddy still back there in formation position, and was he simply hidden by the clouds? If only he could but speak a few words over the R.T. system, and find out. But he couldn't do that. On this flight he had to observe radio silence, at least until the target had been reached. True, Nazi aircraft detectors had picked them up long ago, and knew just where the gigantic aerial armada was even right now. But that wasn't why radio silence had been ordered. What the Nazis didn't know was that the armada was not heading for simply one target, but several targets. At a given time the armada would split up and follow several different courses. Radio silence, however, had been ordered so that no thoughtless slip of the tongue by anybody would reveal to Nazi ground stations, listening on the same wave band, that more than one target was to be bombed.

Yes, radio silence was the order, yet if anything happened to Freddy Farmer, if Dawson lost contact with his pal, and found Freddy's plane nowhere to be seen, come the first light of dawn, then things would be gummed up right at the start. One definite plan they had made was to stick almost wingtip to wingtip all the way to Duisburg. They planned also to fake being shot down at practically the same time. That way they would bail out close to one another, and it followed that they would not land very far apart on the ground. And just where they planned to land was all planned too. They had decided it after a careful study of the aerial photos of the Duisburg area. And from the detailed information that Major Crandall and Colonel Fraser had been able to give them concerning the sizes and locations of the so-called mystery factories in the Duisburg area. They had chosen the largest factory of the lot, not for its size, but because it stood alone on flat ground, and with a minimum of trees about it on which they might foul their parachutes, and be forced to dangle helplessly at the ends of their shroud lines until somebody came along and cut them down.

But it would be "spot" parachute jumping, and no question about that. Before hitting the silk they would have not only to locate their "objective" but to gauge the wind direction, and speed, and then bail out so that drift would not take them beyond their target, or cause them to drop far short. They had come right down practically on it. At least well within the double ring of guards posted about the place.

"And it's going to take some doing, too!" Dawson breathed, as he thought of the job ahead. "Some doing, and I don't mean perhaps. But that will be only the beginning. Jeepers—!"

He let his voice trail off, and gave a little half worried shake of his head.

"Was I a dope to think that maybe Freddy and I could pull this thing off?" he grunted a minute or two later. "It looked like a swell idea back there in England, but how does it look now? Don't ask, my friend, don't ask!"

With another shake of his head he shrugged off the bothersome thoughts and gave all of his attention to his flying. His watch told him that actually dawn wasn't very far off. And he felt pretty sure that if he were suddenly to fly out of this ocean of clouds into clear air he would be able to see the first faint thread of light on the eastern horizon. But it seemed as though he would never come out of the clouds. That he had been flying through them on instruments for all his life, and that he would go on that way forever.

"Of course it's nice to have this cloud protection against Nazi ground gunners," he told himself, and laughed a little nervously. "But there are a lot of us up here, and not a sky traffic cop in sight. Wouldn't it be sweet if I should suddenly tangle wings with some guy in this muck, and have to hit the silk? Or Freddy! That—Oh, cut it, Dawson! Don't be a jumpy old woman all the time, for cats' sake. After all, you've—"

But Dawson never finished the rest, for at that moment the clouds over Occupied Europe suddenly came to an abrupt end. He streaked out into clear night air, and as he had expected the new day was beginning to dawn far, far to the east. After making sure that he wasn't crowding the tail of the next ship in front of him, he twisted around in the pit, and stared back. Instantly a happy grin curled his lips, and a thin layer of ice slid off his heart and melted away. There to his

right rear was the shadowy shape of Freddy Farmer's Mustang cutting along right with him as though the two planes were tied together.

"And me stupid enough to worry about Freddy, the hottest pilot ever to take off any field!" he chuckled. "Boy, would he ride me if I ever let him know about it. Okay, Freddy boy, so far so good!"

Well, maybe it was so far so good, up to that moment. A moment later, though, it seemed as though all the flak guns the Nazis possessed started to hurl up everything, including the kitchen stove. Dawson's formation was riding high ceiling cover, and as he peered down at the bomber formations a good five thousand feet below him the bursts of red, orange, and yellow flak fire gave him the impression of a huge fire-works factory exploding.

"Hitler's welcome!" Dave murmured. "Only I don't mean he's glad to see us. He'll be even less glad when—"

A bursting flak shell right under Dawson's left wing seemed to spew a shower of red and gold straight into his face. The Mustang lurched crazily off to the other side, and for one heart-chilling moment Dawson feared that the aircraft had been hit, and badly crippled. But such was not the case, fortunately. The bursting flak was farther away than it had looked, and it was simply concussion that sent the Mustang sliding off to one side. A touch of stick and rudder, and Dawson had it back into position in no time.

And then the radio silence was broken.

"Bandits ahead at six o'clock, fighter aircraft!" came the escort leader's voice over the air waves. "Same level but starting to dive on the big boys. Green and Blue Fighters go down and engage. Don't let the bums get through. Smack 'em. Other flights hold your altitude and course."

Dawson was flying in Red Flight of the formation, so he obeyed the latter order and held his altitude and course. Just the same it was not with a little envy that he watched Green and Blue Flights peel off and go wing-screaming downward. At first he couldn't pick out the Nazi planes against the eastern sky. But suddenly he did see them and his heart contracted slightly. There were at least a hundred of them, and even in the bad light he could tell that they were Focke-Wulf One Nineties, and the new Messerschmitt One-Nine F's.

"Just sitting up here waiting for us to come along," he grunted. Then, glancing down at the diving Mustangs, he said, "Give them the works, pals. Show them how we do it where we come from."

And as though the Mustang pilots had actually heard him, they pulled up out of their short dive and went thundering in at the Nazis with all guns blazing. And hardly had Dawson seen the silvery paths of tracer bullets cut across the sky before two Nazi Messerschmitts exploded in twin sheets of brilliant red flame that seemed to light up the entire sky for miles and miles around.

"How's that for apples, you mugs?" Dawson shouted spontaneously. "No like, huh? Well, there's more where that sample came from!"

"Down a thousand feet, all escort Flights!" the leader's voice barked in Dawson's earphones. "Number one point ahead. Get down a thousand feet, and stay there. Everybody keep their eyes peeled for bandits."

Dawson's heart skipped a beat, and he unconsciously turned his head and looked back at Freddy Farmer's dawn-blurred Mustang. Number one point ahead was the signal that the first break-up of the huge formation was about to take place. Some bomber formations would go south, and southeast, some would go north and northeast, and the bomber formation of which Dawson was a part of the escort would bang on dead ahead for the incendiary raid on Duisburg, and after that to its bomb target even farther east. And not only did the words, "Number one point ahead" mean the break-up of the gigantic formation, but they also meant that in twenty minutes by his watch Dawson, and Freddy too, would be directly over the Duisburg area.

"Twenty minutes more, and then it starts for keeps!" he breathed as he looked back at Freddy's plane. "Twenty minutes more, and then we show that we're good, or just a couple of bums. Boy, wouldn't I like to ask Freddy how he's feeling, and what he's thinking about just now. It's a cinch, though, he isn't feeling any more jittery than I'm feeling. And probably not half as much, knowing him as I do. Oh well, twenty minutes more."

Yes, twenty minutes more, but each sixty seconds seemed well nigh a lifetime to Dawson as he guided his Mustang eastward. At the end of two of the minutes somebody sang out the alarm that he had spotted another flock of Nazi planes at a higher altitude. And he was not wrong, as Dawson saw for himself a couple of seconds later. At least a hundred Nazi planes were circling about three thousand feet higher up. But as the minutes wore on they made no effort to try and slice down through the fighter umbrella and get at the big bombers. Maybe they saw that the fighters were the deadly Mustangs, and they wanted no part of them. Or maybe they were simply waiting for a more favorable moment in which to start their attack. Or maybe they were even waiting for reinforcements. At any rate they stayed right where they were and tagged the bombers and their Mustang escort eastward.

"Come on down and fight, you rats!" Dawson muttered time and time again. "If you think we're going to leave our big boys unprotected and go up after you, you're nuts. So come on down here, and mix it up, if you dare. Come on!"

Minutes, and a few more minutes, and then as Dawson glanced downward he discovered that they were over the Duisburg area. Because the light was still bad he could not pick out definite landmarks, but the general picture was that of Duisburg across the Rhine River from Krefeld.

And even as he looked downward he saw the first shower of incendiary bombs strike and create the impression of a thousand street lights suddenly being switched on.

"This is it!" he heard his own voice cry. "This is the end of the line!"

And as though the Nazi fighters higher up in the sky had been waiting for just that instant, they peeled off and came down with guns blazing!

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Winged Fury

"Here they come!" rang the voice of the Mustangs' leader in Dawson's earphone. "Don't let a single tramp down through, or you'll hear from me. At 'em, fellows! Shoot their whiskers off!"

Young Farmer saw him look, nodded, and waggled his wings. And then in perfect team formation they hauled their two Mustangs right up on their props and went up toward the diving Nazis. As though by secret signal they fired their guns and air cannon together. Nothing that flies could have withstood that concentrated blast of fire, and the leading diving Nazi ship was certainly no exception to the rule. The plane seemed to stop dead in mid-air, and then broke up into a million flaming bits that went slithering down like the sparks from a spent rocket.

"One, Freddy!" Dawson shouted, though he didn't know whether young Farmer heard him or not. "Now one more to make it one apiece, and then we go to work."

"Right-o, old thing!" came Freddy's instant reply. "The beggar to the left with the blue nose. Give it to him, Dave!"

Dawson had already spotted the blue-nosed Focke-Wulf One-Ninety, and was kicking his Mustang that way. A split second later his guns, and Freddy Farmer's, sang their song of concentrated destruction. This particular Nazi plane didn't blow up, however. It simply lost a wing, and what was left went screaming earthward like ten ton of brick in high gear.

Neither Dawson nor Freddy Farmer took time out to watch their second victim hurtle downward. If they had, the Grim Reaper would have tapped them both on the shoulder right then and there. The remaining Nazi pilots, infuriated by the loss of their leader and one of their vulture comrades, veered toward the two zooming Mustangs and let go with everything they had. That is, they started to do that little thing, but that's about as far as they got. By then the other Mustang pilots were up there with Dawson and Farmer, and when they opened up Nazi planes started fluttering earthward like dried leaves in a stiff autumn breeze.

Before the Nazis broke off the fight Dawson and Farmer had nailed one more apiece. By then, though, dawn was coming up fast, and there was no more time left to fool around. With a feeling of deep regret Dave looked at a Nazi plane not over a quarter of a mile away, shook his head, and waggled his wings to attract Freddy's attention. Young Farmer saw him make the wash-out sign with his free hand, and nodded.

"Sure would like to wish you luck over the radio, kid," Dave whispered as he shoved open his glass hatch, and knocked down the catch of his safety harness. "But maybe it's best to keep mum, this time. No telling who might be listening in on the ground. Just the same, pal, a million in luck. A trillion, what I mean!"

With a faint nod for emphasis, and a wave of his hand at Freddy Farmer, Dawson peered over the cockpit rim and carefully studied the shadowy ground below. Recco plane photographs of the area were indelibly stamped on his brain, so it did not take him more than half a minute to spot the exact location of the factory where Freddy and he would touch ground by parachute. As luck would have it, the spot was about a mile off to his right, well on the eastern outskirts of the city, and the drifting flak-burst smoke that still was in the sky told him that the wind direction was just as he wanted it. That knowledge made his heart pound with wild hope.

"Almost as if it had all been made to order!" he breathed softly. "For once the elements are cooperating, and that, at least, is something. Okay, here we go. And don't be far behind, Freddy!"

For a few seconds longer Dawson remained in the pit of his plane, making doubly sure that he would take nothing American-made down with him. From head to toe he was garbed in German uniform, and German flying gear, with even the conventional German Luger automatic at his belt. But rather than take chances he checked the contents of his flying suit pockets, found all of them empty as a matter of fact, and then took a deep breath.

"And this time we mean it!" he grunted.

Slamming the Mustang down in a shot dive, he fired all of his guns at thin air, and then leveled off and jammed open the compensator throttle. The result was that a wrong mixture was fed to the engine, and the power plant started spewing back a long trail of oily black smoke. The instant it showed in the air, Dawson rolled the Mustang over on its back, let go of the stick, and allowed gravity to pull him down into the open air. With the fingers of his right hand curled about his rip-cord ring, he let his body free fall down through the air, and counted slowly.

When he reached twenty he yanked the rip-cord ring and let his body relax. He was upside down then and looking toward the pale heavens, so he saw the pilot 'chute whip up past him, and pull out the silk folds of the main 'chute. And an instant later invisible hands seemed to grab hold of

him, spin him over until he was feet first to the ground, and then jerk him slightly skyward. And right after that he was dangling comfortably at the ends of his taut shroud lines, and floating slowly toward the earth.

"Okay, Freddy, where are you, kid?" he murmured, and threw back his head to stare upward.

It was not until that moment that he realized that the Nazi fighters had come whirling back to try again to break through the Mustang umbrella and get at the bombers that were now some distance east of the Duisburg area. There they were, and there were the Mustangs, too, zooming and whirling all over the sky with guns yammering and pounding, and tracer smoke making a crazy crisscross pattern in the dawn air.

No more than a couple of seconds after Dawson stared upward he saw a Mustang explode in a tremendous flash of blood-red light as a dozen Nazi pilots caught it in a withering cross-fire. In nothing flat all that remained of the Yank fighter plane was a shower of bits smoking earthward. Icy fingers curled about Dawson's heart; and he slipped his 'chute this way and that in a frantic effort to get a look at that patch of sky directly above him but blocked out by the spread of his own 'chute envelope. By slipping his 'chute, however, he managed to get a look at it a section at a time. And when he had seen it all his heart seemed to stop beating, and become nothing but a solid chunk of ice in his chest.

For there was not a single sign of Freddy Farmer floating down by parachute anywhere in that tracer bullet and flak burst-filled sky. There wasn't even a sign of a Mustang plunging earthward. His own had struck solid earth by now, but there was no other Mustang, that might be Freddy's plane, diving earthward. There was nothing but the showering debris of that one Mustang he had seen blasted into oblivion with his own eyes.

"Freddy!" he choked out. "Freddy, boy, was that you? Did they nail you as you rolled over to bail out? Oh, dear God, please, no! Please, *no!*"

Hot tears stung the backs of Dawson's eyes, and for a moment or two everything was just a great swimming blur before him. He ripped up his goggles, brushed both eyes with his hand, and peered at the air above and about him. He saw two Nazi planes, and one more Mustang, go hurtling earthward in a mass of flame, but there was not a soul in the air, save himself, floating earthward by parachute. All the other pilots, Nazi and Yank alike, had been killed in their pits, or so wounded that they were unable to throw themselves clear of their blazing planes.

"Freddy, boy, where are you?"

Dawson's own words echoed back to taunt him. In that moment he felt as though a part of him had actually died. And presently it took all the courage and will power that he would ever possess to stop scanning the heavens for a sign of Freddy Farmer, and give all of his attention to himself. He was close to the ground now, and if he was to carry out his end of the job, and touch earth close to that large factory, he would have to forget all about Freddy Farmer's fate and concentrate on himself.

In spite of his determined efforts to do just that, it was quite impossible. No man on earth could have given every thought to himself, had he been in Dave Dawson's shoes. A memory picture of that single Mustang exploding into bits was constantly before his eyes. In the matter of seconds countless memories of Freddy Farmer paraded across his brain. It all seemed to sap the strength right out of his body; to turn his muscles to rubber, and his bones to jelly.

It was almost as though he were two separate persons. One was striving to slip his 'chute so that he would drift closer to the factory that now stood out in clear detail just a little ahead and below him. And the other person was living over again in memory, heartbreaking memory, the many, many things that Freddy and he had done together. So certain was he that Freddy Farmer had gone to a hero's reward that he was almost overcome by a wild, mad urge to unsnap his 'chute harness and let his body drop straight down like a rock to his doom. Only a fighting heart, and the determination to carry on for Freddy's sake made it possible for him to retain his sanity, and guide his movements.

And then the ground was close, very close. The factory was like a gigantic mountain looming up in his path. He saw figures running toward the spot where he would touch earth. Some were in uniform and some wore the unmistakable clothes of factory workers. There seemed to be quite a number of the factory workers, and in an abstract sort of way he wondered for a moment if it was the rest period, or the changing of factory shifts.

But only for a brief moment did he absently wonder about that. In the next moment, just as his feet were about to touch earth, Fate in the form of a crazy cross wind played its dirty trick. His 'chute seemed to lunge to the left, and drag him with it. As he jerked his head around he caught the fleeting glimpse of a parked truck. Then the crazy cross wind slammed him up against that truck. He flung out both hands to soften the blow, but that action didn't help much.

From out of nowhere something slammed him on the chest. Something else crashed down on his head. And something else hit him a terrific blow in the middle of his back. The side of the truck, seemingly no farther away than the end of his nose, exploded in a mighty display of colored lights, sparkling pin-wheels, and golden rockets. Then as though by magic a black curtain was drawn down over everything—and all was as silent as the grave!

CHAPTER TWELVE

War's Flotsam

A throbbing drone penetrated Dave Dawson's brain, and slowly stirred him back to consciousness. The first few moments were ones of utter confusion and pain. The throbbing drone developed into the sound of spoken words. Words spoken in both French and English. Despite the pain that seemed to extend throughout his entire body, an inner sense of caution warned Dawson to keep his eyes closed, and to lie perfectly still. He knew that he was propped up in some kind of a padded chair, and that he was in a room filled with people. There was the smell of them in his nose, and there was also the half tangy, half sweet smell of hot oil and grease. In an instant he placed it as the smell one gets inside a factory that is equipped with many machines for working on metal.

A joyous sense of satisfaction flooded through him when he told himself that he had obviously been taken inside the factory to be given first aid. But a split second later, as terrible memory returned in full, there was not one bit of joy left in him. Freddy Farmer! Where was Freddy? Dead or still alive? He hardly dared think that the last could possibly be true. Yet hope does spring eternal within the human breast, and he clung to that tiny hope with all his heart and soul.

And then through his bitter thoughts came the sound of spoken words. Words that registered upon his still slightly stunned brain, and made sense.

"Stand back, you fools!" a voice snarled in German. "Can you not see that he needs air? Stand back! We must do all for this gallant hero of the Luftwaffe."

"*Ja, ja!*" a second voice echoed hoarsely. "With my own eyes I saw him destroy five of the swine before he was forced to abandon his airplane. Look at him, you French dogs. There is a German hero. After such a thrilling experience he is not hurt at all. Just a bump or two, and a little winded. By this time tomorrow he will again be in his airplane and again destroying those who would war with us. Look at him. See the medals of bravery, and gallant service to the Fuehrer, that he already wears? Five of them, I saw him destroy. With my own eyes!"

"Hold your tongue!" the first voice snarled again. "We all saw it, so you do not need to tell us. Here, make yourself useful and soak this towel in cold water again. He will be conscious in another moment or two. Has anybody heard from the city? Did those swine dogs do much damage?"

"A few fires from incendiaries," Dawson heard somebody reply, "but they are all out, or under control by now."

"Good, good!" the snarling one said. "The swine dogs! But we will show them. Wait and see! Ah! So you have finally brought the towel? Now we will help our Luftwaffe hero."

Dawson sensed movement very close to him, and then suddenly his face felt as though it had been buried in an iceberg. He had, of course, expected a cool towel to be placed on his face, but actually the towel was so icy cold that he gasped in spite of himself, and made as though to brush it away with his hands. The towel was quickly removed and he found himself staring up into the smiling face of a fat, double-chinned German. The man wore civilian clothes, and a badge on the right lapel of his coarse cloth jacket indicated that he was some kind of a factory official.

"Ah, you are better now, yes?" he said, and beamed at Dawson. "You had an accident with your parachute just before you struck the ground. But you are safe now, and in good hands. I personally ordered you to be brought inside and made comfortable. But, my pardon, *Herr Leutnant*, there is perhaps something you wish?"

The way the man waved his puffy hands, and obviously tried to create the impression that he personally had done a great service to an officer of Hitler's Luftwaffe, instantly typed the man for what he was, as far as Dawson was concerned. Dave sat up straighter in the padded chair he was in and eyed the man coldly. And he also took a brief moment to sweep the faces of the ten or twelve others crowded into what looked like a factory office. He saw some faces that beamed with pride, and even a little awe. Their owners he knew were German.

But there were a few that stared at him practically expressionless. Deep sunken eyes were fixed on his unwinkingly. Deep sunken eyes in faces that had a skin color of a sort of yellowish gray. The faces of men who, though alive in the body, were dead of soul. He did not have to look at them twice to know that they were Frenchmen. Frenchmen uprooted from their native land and transported to Germany to perform slave labor in Hitler's war factories.

Then Dawson brought his cold stare back to the double-chinned man.

"Yes!" he bit off in German, and drew a hand across his eyes. "Where am I? What is this place? Who are you?"

"You do not know?" the puffy-faced one asked in surprise. "Then I will tell you at once. This is the Farbin Factory, Number Six. You are in my office, *Herr Leutnant*. I am the general manager. I am Herr Kurt Krumpstadt. When I saw that you were in difficulties I at once took personal charge."

Dawson grunted, and then saw that his flying suit had been removed and placed over the back of a nearby chair. He looked at it and nodded again.

"Yes, it comes back to me now!" he said in a harsh voice. "I had shot down several of the swine, and then my guns jammed. Many of them came at me, and I was forced to leave my plane."

"Ja, ja!" Herr Krumpstadt cried eagerly. "We all saw you. It was wonderful. Never have I seen such bravery as you displayed."

"It was good of you to come to my assistance," Dawson said to him in a flat voice. "Herr Kurt Krumpstadt, eh? I will remember that name. I have a friend who is high in the Party. I will tell him how quickly you gave assistance to a member of the Luftwaffe."

Herr Krumpstadt almost wept with joy at hearing those words.

"It was nothing, *Herr Leutnant*," he said. "It was a duty to be performed, and I performed it. But I am overwhelmed with gratitude that *Herr Leutnant* will be so kind as to mention my little act to his important friend."

"As soon as I meet him, which will be soon," Dawson grunted. Then, with a puzzled frown on his face, he said, "Farbin Factory Number Six? What do you make here, Herr Krumpstadt?"

The German's beam of joy instantly faded, and he looked like some fat, oily creature that is suddenly cornered, and is very much afraid. Dawson glared at him, and snapped his fingers.

"Well, are you deaf?" he barked. "Did you not hear a Luftwaffe officer's question? Or do you make nothing here? Well?"

"Oh, no, no, no, *Herr Leutnant!*" the German fairly wailed, and raised his hands in a pleading gesture. "We used to make treads for the Fuehrer's tanks, but now it is something else. Something special. Something very secret. I do not know if it is permitted for me to tell even a hero of our wonderful Luftwaffe. I do not know."

On impulse Dawson made a quick decision not to press his point. He had a feeling that he was perhaps skating on very thin ice, and that it would be best to "test" out the ice a bit before really getting tough with Herr Krumpstadt. And so, instead, he asked a question that had been on the tip of his tongue since shortly after he had regained complete consciousness.

"Did you see any of my comrades come down with their parachutes?"

Herr Krumpstadt frowned as though deep in thought. A moment later he shook his head.

"No, *Herr Leutnant*, you were the only one I saw," he said. Then he swung around and snarled at the others. "How about you? Did any of you see one of *Herr Leutnant's* brave comrades come down by his parachute? Well? Have you tongues? Speak up!"

Almost everybody shook their heads, but Dawson thought he saw a tall Frenchman start to open his mouth as though to speak, then snap it shut and start at Herr Krumpstadt unwinkingly. The double-chinned German turned back to Dawson and shook his head.

"No others were seen, *Herr Leutnant*," he said. "Only you. And now, can I be of further service? You wish me to drive you to the nearest Luftwaffe field? I would invite you to use the phone, only —only all the phones have been taken out. An order of the Ministry of War Production. But perhaps I can do something for you?"

"Yes!" Dawson snapped, and jerked his head. "Get these others out of here. Is there no work to be performed in this place? Do you all drop your tools, and stare, simply because a Luftwaffe officer comes down with his parachute?"

Herr Krumpstadt shook his head so violently that some of the little beads of sweat that had formed on his forehead flew off like fine rain.

"Oh, no, not at all, *Herr Leutnant!*" he gasped. "But we were all here at a conference when we saw you descend in your parachute. I will dismiss them at once."

The German played the factory big shot to the hilt. He swung around on the others, and stabbed a thick finger at the door.

"Get out!" he shouted. "We will talk of that matter later. Now I am busy. Get out! Heil Hitler!"

He received a mumbled reply to this vocal salute, and then Germans and Frenchmen alike shuffled out of the office, the last one to leave softly shutting the door. Dawson didn't watch them go. Instead he spread his feet apart a little, hooked his thumbs in his uniform belt, and stared fixedly at the back of Herr Krumpstadt's head. The German presently turned around, a boot-licking, oily smile on his fat lips. But when his eyes met Dawson's steady stare his smile faded, and a worried look crept into his face.

"There is something, *Herr Leutnant?*" he asked in a strained voice, and swallowed hard.

Dawson nodded coldly.

"Yes, Herr Kurt Krumpstadt, there is something," he said.

And with that he turned his back on the German and walked coolly over to the nearest window. The window looked out on a broad expanse of ground, that had before the war been rather artistically landscaped, but since then had been allowed to go to seed. Withered shrubs sprawled all over the place. The grass was dull brown and at least a foot high. That is, the patches of it that were not trampled flat by truck wheels, and countless feet. A half mile away was a woods, and Dawson could see two German Army cars parked by a road leading into the woods. Helmeted figures stood near the cars. And although Dawson wasn't sure, he thought he saw a machine mounted by one of the cars.

Beyond the woods was the skyline of the City of Duisburg, and three columns of smoke that he saw mounting from it toward the morning sky he sincerely hoped were from burning buildings,

and not from other factory chimneys. One thing was certain, however. He was in the middle of a strongly guarded area. The mounted machine gun and the parked Army cars and the helmeted soldiers guarding one of the approaches to the factory were proof enough of that truth. It would probably take more than just bluff to get away from this place, once he had learned its secret, *if* he ever did learn it.

And there was something else, too. Something, heaven forgive him, that was as important to him as the secret of that factory. Freddy Farmer. Freddy's fate. At the thought of his pal Dawson's heart seemed to weep a little, and his whole body felt so weak that he impulsively put out a hand and braced it against the window frame. A moment later he heard the very timid voice of Herr Krumpstadt.

"You do not feel well, *Herr Leutnant!* I beg you, sit down. Here, at my desk. You will find the chair most comfortable. I bought it long before the war. It is like an old friend. Sit down, *Herr Leutnant*, and I will get you some brandy. I have been saving it for the victory celebration when our enemies are no more. But who is more entitled to it than a hero of our glorious Luftwaffe?"

"No brandy," Dawson said coldly as he turned from the window. "You may keep it for the victory celebration, Herr Krumpstadt. No, no brandy. I feel perfectly well. Instead, I will ask you a few questions. You have papers of personal identification, perhaps? Let me see them, then."

The German looked dumbfounded, and perhaps even a little angry, but Dawson pretended not to notice. He turned from the man and went over to the huge desk that completely filled one corner of the office, and sat down in the most comfortable chair he had encountered in many a day. When he relaxed with a gruff grunt of approval he turned his head toward Herr Krumpstadt to see the German walking over to him with a folder of papers in his hands.

"Here they are, *Herr Leutnant*," the man said. "You will find them all in order. I prize them above everything I own. I am a loyal and trusted member of the Party. But, forgive me, *Herr Leutnant*, I do not understand. Why do you ask me for my—?"

"Is it for you to understand *all* the methods of the Gestapo?" Dawson barked at him, and snatched the papers away.

For a brief moment Herr Krumpstadt held his empty hand out in front of him as his face seemed to turn yellow, and then green. Then he clapped his outstretched hand to his mouth for all the world like a man about to become violently ill. And as Dawson saw the terror mount in the man's eyes he knew that he had the fat, puffy-faced German in the palm of his hand!

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Blank Wall

For several minutes Dawson pretended to study Herr Krumpstadt's papers carefully, though actually he hardly gave them more than a glance. The idea was to make the German sweat it out for a bit, and that's just what the Nazi did do. When Dawson finally tossed the folder of papers on the desk and looked at the man, Herr Krumpstadt was practically dripping sweat from every pore. His face was flushed like a sunset, and he kept "washing" his hands as he stared at Dawson out of very frightened eyes.

"There is something wrong, *Herr Leutnant?*" he asked in a quavering voice when Dawson simply looked at him and through him. "But I do not understand! What have I done that someone should see fit to report me? I swear that I am a loyal Nazi. Heil Hitler!"

"The report made about you is our affair," Dawson said sternly. Then, with a wave of one hand toward the closed door, he went on, "You were in conference with them? Do you take me for a fool? Several of those who were here in this room are swine French dogs! What is a good German doing talking with Frenchmen? Frenchmen are only for work. A little conference, eh? Perhaps you made a slip-up there, Herr Krumpstadt?"

The German was so eager to talk that the words spilled off his fat lips like flood waters over a broken dam.

"But of course, *Herr Leutnant!*" he exclaimed. "The swine French are for work only, and that is why they are here in my factory. Over a hundred of them, *Herr Leutnant*. Sent here by the Ministry of War Production. And it is necessary to hold a conference every now and then to explain the work that I wish them to do. They are swine French, yes, but they are expert welders. And if I am to produce what I have been ordered to produce, then I must have them work for me."

Dawson acted as though he were giving the German's explanation careful thought. His heart was beginning to pound against his ribs, and the blood surged through his veins as he realized that he was very, very close to learning the guarded secret of this mysterious factory. If only Freddy Farmer were there with him. Freddy, among other things, was very clever with words. Freddy would make this fat-faced German talk, without realizing that he was saying a thing. But Freddy wasn't there. For a brief instant, as sharp grief and bitter despair ripped through Dawson like a two-edged knife, he almost lost the grip he had on himself. With a mighty effort, though, he forced thoughts of Freddy Farmer to the back of his brain and once more fixed Herr Krumpstadt with a cold stare.

"French welders, eh?" he murmured. Then, with a sharp ring in his voice, he snapped at the German, "And what are these French welders making for you, Herr Krumpstadt?"

For one fleeting second the German hesitated, and almost made as though to shake his head and refuse to answer. However, the terrible fear that every German has of the Gestapo was too much for him. Perhaps his orders from the Ministry of War Production had been to let no word pass his lips to an outsider. But a member of the Gestapo? That was something very, very different.

"They are making the metal cylinders for the American and British planes, *Herr Leutnant*," the German finally said. "And they also make repairs on landing gear parts that are shipped to us. They are swine dogs, all of them, but they are expert at welding. If I could get a hundred more of them I could double the output of my factory."

Dave Dawson didn't allow a single change of expression to come into his face, but inwardly he was all on fire. And considerably puzzled and confused, too. Metal cylinders for *American and British* planes? What in heaven's name had the Nazi meant by that? And the Frenchmen also made repairs on landing gear parts that were shipped to this factory? At the moment it made no sense at all to Dawson, but although a hundred questions hovered on the tip of his tongue, he didn't voice a single one of them. He didn't because once again he knew that he was skating on very thin ice. His little Gestapo act had filled Herr Krumpstadt with terror, but he could very easily overplay his part and plant the seed of shrewd suspicion in the man. After all, as a member of the Gestapo seemingly come to make a check on Herr Krumpstadt, it would be only natural that he would know all about what was taking place in the German's factory. To ask too many leading questions might prove very disastrous.

And then suddenly Dawson was hit by a very bright idea. Instead of asking questions here in Herr Krumpstadt's office, why not take a look for himself, and perhaps obtain the answers to his questions that way? So he nodded curtly, pursed his lips, and stood up.

"I know, Herr Krumpstadt," he said. "I know all about what you are doing here. It is not what you make, but those who make it, that interests me. I have been meaning to pay you a little visit before now, but other things were more important. But now that good fortune brought me down here by parachute, I might as well take care of the matter."

Dawson paused, and for a moment cocked a thoughtful eye at the far wall, then quickly switched his gaze back to the Nazi's face.

"There is one French dog that we want very much," he said. "He probably goes by a hundred different names, but his real name is Pierre Duval. You have perhaps in your records a man by that name?"

"It is not familiar to me, *Herr Leutnant*," the German said with a frown and a slow shake of his head, "but I will look in my war prisoner file and make sure. One minute, please, *Herr Leutnant*."

Dawson simply grunted and watched Krumpstadt walk over to a wall filing cabinet and pull open one of the drawers. He studied its contents for several minutes and then turned back to Dawson with another shake of his head.

"No, *Herr Leutnant*," he said. "I have not one of them listed by the name of Pierre Duval."

"I did not expect that you would," Dave grunted with a shrug. "The dog would naturally not be that much of a fool. The man may even be dead by now. We do not know for sure. But as I am now here I will check them over and make sure. Herr Krumpstadt! Conduct me about your factory and I will take a look at these French swine."

"But of course, *Herr Leutnant*!" the German beamed. "It will be an honor and a pleasure."

"But one word of caution, Herr Krumpstadt!" Dawson snapped, and leveled a stiff forefinger at the man. "The one you will conduct through your factory is a Luftwaffe pilot shot down in battle. He is your guest, and you are doing him a slight honor. There will be no mention by sign or word of who I really am, or the reason for my little visit here. I hope you understand me, Herr Krumpstadt?"

"Oh, yes, yes, *Herr Leutnant*!" the German made haste to reply, and bobbed his head violently. "My lips are sealed. Why, I wouldn't dare, *Herr Leutnant*!"

"I'm sure you wouldn't," Dawson said dryly. "Very well, let us take a look around."

Herr Krumpstadt nodded, beamed, and led the way to his office door.

It was almost two hours later before Dave Dawson found himself back again in that very same office. There was a faint frown on his face, and it wasn't entirely for Herr Krumpstadt's benefit. On the contrary, it actually reflected the turmoil going on within him. In other words, he was more mixed up and confused now than he had been before. The factory was five floors high, and Herr Krumpstadt had conducted him to every floor, and had pointed out every French war prisoner performing slave labor. To keep up his part Dawson had keenly studied each new face, but he actually gave more attention to what each man was doing than to his face. And they were almost all doing spot welding on metal cylinders that varied in size from some that were a foot long and three inches through to others that were six feet long and two feet through. One end of every cylinder was left open. And try as he would to convince himself that Farbin Factory Number Six was turning out bomb casings, Dawson knew that they were not. At least, he was as sure they weren't as he could possibly be sure of anything.

Yes, the French war prisoners were working mostly on the spot welding of varied sized cylinders, but there were a few who were working on aircraft landing gear parts. And it was that work that

puzzled and confounded Dawson far more than the cylinder welding. The landing gear parts were all stripped down, but even at that he was quite sure that he recognized certain parts that were definitely of either British or American make. Repairing British and American plane landing gears in Farbin Factory Number Six? The question seemed to hang in Dawson's brain in letters of fire a foot high as he traveled with Herr Krumpstadt from floor to floor. And he would have given anything he ever hoped to possess if he could but have obtained the answers to the questions that crowded his thoughts.

And now he was back in Herr Krumpstadt's office, more confused than ever. And with a sense of frustration that flooded through him like a dank fog. Information; information of goodness knew what value right at his fingertips, and yet he couldn't pick it up without running the risk of falling through the very thin ice over which he was skating. Herr Krumpstadt had regained considerable of his composure, and Dawson could tell without being told that a certain "Gestapo agent" was fast wearing out his welcome at Farbin Factory Number Six. Herr Krumpstadt kept looking at his watch, and there was a faint gleam of annoyance in his close-set pig-like eyes.

"Well, I guess he is not working in my factory, *Herr Leutnant*," the German suddenly said with an undertone of impatience. "But I did not think so in the first place, as the Ministry of War Production carefully checks every prisoner worker they send to me. And now, is there anything else I can do for *Herr Leutnant*?"

Dawson scowled in deep thought, and then tried a cold stare or two for Krumpstadt's benefit, but it didn't seem to change anything. Time was running out fast, and Dawson knew that to linger any longer might result in growing suspicion on Krumpstadt's part. The Nazi was over his original fright. Nothing had been charged against him, and some of the arrogance that is a typical German trait was coming back into his manner and speech. And so Dave Dawson made his decision. His decision to get out of Farbin Factory Number Six, and to get out as quickly as he could.

"Did you say you had a car, Herr Krumpstadt?" he suddenly snapped.

"That is so, *Herr Leutnant*," the Nazi replied. And then, with just the faintest of frowns, "You wish to be driven some place? To your Staffle Headquarters?"

"Yes, but not to my Staffle," Dawson said. "There is one to whom I must report in Duisburg. Order your car, Herr Krumpstadt, and you can drive me there. And I mention it again. My friend who is high in the Party will hear of the courtesy and consideration that you have shown me."

That accomplished what perhaps threats would have failed completely to achieve. Herr Krumpstadt was suddenly all smiles again, and eager expectancy showed in his eyes. After all, it was not every day that one's name was mentioned to one in high authority. All in all it pleased Herr Krumpstadt very much.

"At once, *Herr Leutnant!*" he said. "And of course I will drive you. No one else here is permitted to leave the area. As you know, there are guards all about. But with me it is different. Holding the position I do, I am permitted to come and go as I wish. No questions are asked of me."

It was all Dawson could do to refrain from heaving one great big sigh of relief. How he would pass through the cordon of guards had been a problem to be faced. But not any more. With Herr Krumpstadt he would obviously sail right on through, and even get saluted on the way by Hitler's soldiers.

"Of course," Dawson said, and even favored the Nazi with his first smile. "Let us leave at once. Heil Hitler!"

"Heil Hitler!" Herr Krumpstadt fairly screamed, and whacked his arm up in a rigid Nazi salute. "Follow me, *Herr Leutnant*."

Fifteen minutes later Farbin Factory Number Six, and its ring of guards, were far behind the rear wheels of the Benz touring car that Herr Krumpstadt guided toward Duisburg in the distance. It had been absolutely comical to see the soldiers manning the guard posts to stiffen and salute as the Benz rolled by them. However, Dawson kept his face expressionless, returned each salute in the mechanical Nazi way, and simply smiled inwardly.

"This address where you wish me to drive you, *Herr Leutnant*?" the Nazi behind the wheel presently broke the silence between them.

Dawson hesitated, and then made his decision.

"Kholerstrasse," he said. "It is on the east side of the city. You can drop me off as soon as we reach it. I will walk to my destination from there."

Dawson was not sure, but he thought that the Nazi stiffened slightly and gave him a quick side glance. But perhaps that wasn't so. Perhaps to Herr Krumpstadt, Kholerstrasse was just the name of a street in Duisburg. Perhaps it meant no more to him than just that.

"Yes, I know where it is," the Nazi replied a moment later. "I will go straight there. And I thank you again, *Herr Leutnant*, for speaking to your friend."

"I will not forget," Dawson grunted.

And that was that between them until Herr Krumpstadt swung the car into a long, broad street and rolled to a stop at the curb.

"May good luck follow you, *Herr Leutnant*," the German said as Dawson climbed out. "And may we have the pleasure of meeting again soon. If one by the name of Pierre Duval should come to

my factory, I will instantly inform the nearest Police Post. Heil Hitler."

"Good, and a reward will be yours, Herr Krumpstadt," Dawson replied gravely. "Heil Hitler!"

The German smiled, shifted gears and drove away from the curb and on down the street. Dawson watched the car disappear and then slowly took his German cap that he had stuck under his belt and put it on his head. A moment later he turned and started walking along the street. He carried himself like a soldier, but his heart was heavy as lead in his chest. He felt as though he were the last person alive in the world, and it was a battle to keep back the tears when thoughts of Freddy Farmer kept crowding back into his head. Good old Freddy gone! He apparently hadn't bailed out soon enough, and the finger of Death had touched one of the finest persons ever to be born. Freddy gone, and—?

"But it can't be!" Dawson told himself fiercely. "It just can't be. Not Freddy! He wasn't born to go out that way. Yet—!"

He let the rest go unspoken and groaned softly. It was as though his own life were slowly trickling out of him, leaving little more than a dead man to carry on. But that was the thing. Carry on he must, in spite of everything. But how? What next? Getting inside one of the secret factories had seemed so important once. But now? Well, he had been inside Farbin Factory Number Six, and so what? French war prisoners spot welding metal cylinders, and repairing landing gear parts, some of which he was certain had been made in the U.S.A., and in England.

So what? What good was that knowledge to him now as he walked aimlessly along Kholerstrasse? Freddy was gone, and he was alone in Duisburg. The day after tomorrow, by arrangement, a British Recco plane would land at a certain spot and pick him up and take him back to England. The day after tomorrow. But tomorrow was the twenty-fourth of the month. The day when Herr Baron's last agent in England would report to Number Sixteen Kholerstrasse. Or would he? Would Herr Baron change all his plans the instant he learned that he didn't have his little black book any more? And the secret weapon Hans and Erich had toasted with schnapps? What secret weapon? Spot welded metal cylinders, and stripped down landing gear parts? In the name of—!

"I think I'm just going stark, raving nuts!" Dawson breathed, and clenched his two fists helplessly. "It's all mixed up. No part of it makes any sense at all. Oh, dear heaven, if only Freddy were here. If only Freddy were still alive. I can't believe that he is gone. I can't!"

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Sinister Silence

Night had come again to the German city of Duisburg. As yet the air raid sirens had not given their terrifying warning that the R.A.F. was on the prowl once more, but the streets of the city were practically deserted. Many of the inhabitants had gone underground to spend the night there whether there were bombs dropped on Duisburg or not. Only a scattering of soldiers and patrolling guards were to be seen on the streets. One of them, though, was an officer. An officer of the Nazi Luftwaffe, as a matter of fact. At least he was dressed that way, and being a Luftwaffe officer none of the patrols stopped him for questioning. Or if they did they instantly saw his rank, his decorations, and gave him a snappy salute, and a loud "Heil Hitler!" in the very next breath.

All afternoon, and during the early evening, that "Luftwaffe" officer had strolled about the Kholerstrasse section. Every now and then he had stepped into a restaurant for a bit of food. And in Duisburg a *bit* of food was just about all that one could get at a sitting. Whether private soldier, or field marshal, it didn't matter. There just wasn't enough. But after going into several spots Dawson was able to get filled up. Getting filled up, however, was not the entire reason for his many visits to Duisburg restaurants and food shops. Into each one he walked with the burning hope that he might see Freddy Farmer trying to fill that perpetually hollow leg of his. But it was all in vain. There was no sign at all of Freddy Farmer. His English-born flying mate and dearest pal had simply vanished from the face of the earth. Or rather, vanished from the face of a dawn sky where Dawson had last seen him alive.

And now with the darkness of night closed down over Duisburg, he was standing in what was left of the doorway of a bombed out house directly across Kholerstrasse from Number One Fifty-Six. Several times during the afternoon and evening he had passed by Number Sixteen in the faint hope that he might be able to see or hear something that would help him in deciding his next move. Once again, though, his hopes were in vain. From the outside Number Sixteen looked as though it hadn't been occupied since the start of the war. All of the window shades were drawn down, and half of the window shutters had been closed and bolted. The front door, which contained no window, was closed and locked. And not once had Dawson seen a single person go up or down the short flight of stone steps. If Number Sixteen was Intelligence headquarters in Duisburg, one certainly would not guess it from the looks of the outside of the building.

Eventually convinced that he would gain nothing by parading past Number Sixteen, and having finally given up hope of spotting Freddy Farmer in any of the Kholerstrasse section eating places, Dawson had fallen back on his final and last hope. If this hope proved to be false and no good, then he was at the end of his rope. His mission to Germany would end in failure right there on the streets of Duisburg.

And so he was playing his final card. From a good vantage point he was carefully studying the

building that was Number One Fifty-Six Kohlerstrasse. The address of Major Crandall's agent, who was believed to reside there under the name of Heinrich Weiden. But did he? That question taunted Dawson as he surveyed the place, and half a hundred times he was tempted to go boldly over there, bang on the door of Number One Fifty-Six and demand of whoever answered that he be shown to Herr Heinrich Weiden's rooms at once. A tiny voice of caution warned against that move. For one thing, after two solid hours of watching the place, he had not seen anybody go in or come out. There wasn't so much as a single crack, of light showing, but of course that was probably due to the strict enforcement of the blackout regulations.

In other words, Number One Fifty-Six was pretty much like Number Sixteen. No sign whatsoever that anybody occupied the place. Just the same, Dawson made no move to go over and find out for himself. He told himself that such a thing was silly. That he could probably wait all night, and not see a single thing of interest. And yet there was something that made him determined not to leave his place of concealment. Silly? Perhaps. But how was he to know if real Gestapo agents weren't watching the place? Ten days ago Heinrich Weiden had sent word through to Major Crandall that his old address was not good, and that he should be contacted at a new one. Ten days ago, but what had happened since?

As a matter of fact, it was a mounting conviction that he was not the only one who was hiding in the darkness and watching Number One Fifty-Six that caused him to stay where he was. No proof. Nothing tangible. It was just that a few times he would have sworn that he saw shadowy movement across the street. Maybe it had been his imagination, the strain on his eyes. But maybe not. It was almost as though he could actually feel somebody over there on the opposite side of the street. And so he remained hidden and watching as another hour dragged itself off into the eternity of forgotten time.

But by the end of that hour he had reached the limit of his endurance. Gestapo agents or no Gestapo agents, he just had to go over there across the street and find out for sure if Number One Fifty-Six was occupied or not. If it wasn't occupied, then—

He gave a little shake of his head in the darkness and wouldn't let himself complete the rest of the sentence.

"It's my only hope!" he whispered fiercely to himself. "As things are now, I'm right up against a brick wall. Weiden's *got* to be living there, and *I've* got to contact him. He's the only one who can possibly help me now. Come on, Lady Luck, give us another little break, please."

For a moment he bowed his head as though in prayer, and then, silent as the very darkness of night itself, he moved out of his place of hiding and started across the street to the other side. When but halfway across the street he heard a faint sound ahead of him that made his heart stop beating, and his hair practically stand up on end. It was just a sound, one of a million different kinds of sounds that anybody might have heard. Maybe it was a door closing, or someone taking a step, or knocking against something accidentally in the dark.

The sound had come and gone before he could even begin to figure what it might have been. But as he froze motionless in the street, with his service Luger clutched tightly in his free hand, he was convinced beyond all doubt that the sound had been made by a human being. There were no stray dogs or cats in Duisburg to go around nights making sounds. They had long since disappeared, and no doubt more than one German housewife, who had stood in front of the butcher shop all day only to learn that there wasn't a scrap of meat left, could tell where those stray dogs and cats had "gone"!

No, the sound had been made by a human form, a human being. And in a crazy sort of way Dawson expected to see the night spurt flame, and to hear the bark of a gun in his ears, expected his body to feel the sting of a bullet from the gun of some Gestapo killer who had mistaken him for one Heinrich Weiden. It was perhaps a completely mad thought, but in that instant Dawson experienced more cold fear than he had in all his life before.

However, no unseen gun spat flame and sound, and presently Dawson got his pounding heart and jangled nerves under control and started moving forward silently again. Then presently he had reached the opposite sidewalk, and the front door of Number One Fifty-Six was not over fifteen feet away. He could actually see the little metal frames made to hold name cards, but there were only the frames, and no name cards. It was obvious that if anybody did reside at Number One Fifty-Six he was not announcing it to the chance passer-by.

And then suddenly, as Dawson moved toward a little clump of scrub bushes that had been planted to take the place of the iron fence that had long since gone into Hitler's melting pot, he sensed rather than heard movement. Movement came from the other side of the bushes. For a fleeting instant his keyed up nerves snapped, and he was undecided whether to take to his heels as fast as he could go, or to jerk up his gun and pump bullets through the clump of bushes.

He didn't do either, however, because in the next moment there was swift movement right behind him and the muzzle of a gun was jammed into his back.

"Not a move, not a sound!" a whispered voice told him. "Just stand perfectly still if you don't want to die!"

The inside of Dawson's head seemed to explode. He went hot and cold all over, and it was all he could do not to spin around. But he didn't move a muscle even though he recognized the voice instantly.

"Freddy!" he said in a soft whisper. "Freddy, boy! For heaven's sake don't shoot!"

There were tears in Dawson's voice as he whispered. And there were real tears in his eyes, too. Like a man in a dream he felt the gun muzzle being removed from the middle of his back; then strong fingers grasped his arm and turned him around.

"Good gosh, Dave!" Freddy's broken whisper came out of the darkness. "Why, I—I—"

Young Farmer's voice faltered and stopped. And not for all the money in the world could Dawson have spoken a single word at that moment. The two of them just grabbed each other there by the bushes, and simply hung on, as words utterly failed them. But presently Freddy Farmer dragged Dawson around in back of the bushes, and down close behind them.

"It's true, Dave, it really is?" he whispered. "I thought you were dead, old thing. Thought the Jerries had got you. Dave, this has been the worse day of my whole life. It really has. I mean it!"

"And my worst day, too, kid!" Dawson breathed, as he kept squeezing Freddy's arm to reassure himself again that it was true, that Freddy wasn't dead but very much alive. "But what do you mean, you thought the Jerries got me? I thought they got you, Freddy. I saw a Mustang catch it square and blow up. I was sure it was you. And I didn't see another single parachute in the air. I—Gosh, Freddy! You just can't imagine what this moment means to me."

"Oh yes, I can, because I feel the same way, old chap," the English youth said in a choked up voice as he lightly brushed the knuckles of one fist across the point of Dawson's chin. "But about that business this morning. Just as I was getting set to jump, two or three of the Focke-Wulf beggars came in at me, and I had my hands full for a few moments. I managed to get one of them, and broke off action with the other two. I looked around for you, but there was nothing but burning planes in the air, and flak bursts. I thought then that you had caught one, Dave. I jumped anyway, but didn't judge the wind right at all. Perhaps I should have practiced a couple of times, eh?"

"Then you didn't come down close to that factory we had picked?" Dawson asked.

"Close?" Freddy whispered in self-scorn. "I didn't come within miles of it. Landed right in the middle of a little lake, no less. Imagine it! I ditched my parachute and swam ashore right head on into some German troops from a nearby camp. They had a car and their officer insisted on my going along with him. What else could I do? If I had refused to let them assist me in my drenched condition, they would have become suspicious. After all, a Luftwaffe officer doesn't go wandering about town soaked to the skin. So I went with them, and it wasn't until a few hours ago I got them to drive me into town. I pleaded that I was meeting my Kommandant at a certain place. Lord! I thought I'd never get away from those blighters. Their blasted guest most of the day, and all the time me going near balmy wondering what had happened to you. Can you imagine such a silly business, Dave? But when I did manage to get rid of them, I came down here hoping that I might at least contact Major Crandall's man. That was the only thing I could do, having lost complete touch with you. I—But here! What about yourself, Dave?"

"A full day, too, and just about as non-productive as yours, Freddy," Dawson said. And then he gave his pal a brief report of his own movements and experiences. "And so there was only one thing left for me to do," he finished up. "Try to contact Weiden to see if he knew anything of what's going on. My gosh! To think that we've both been watching this place for hours, and each of us thinking that the other had caught his this morning."

"And very unpleasant to think about, too," Freddy murmured. "But we've had some luck, Dave. At least we've joined up together. And that is a lot. But that Farbin factory business is certainly devilish queer, Dave. It just doesn't make sense, I mean."

"You're telling me?" Dawson groaned softly. Then turning his head and staring at the night-darkened front of Number One Fifty-Six, he murmured, "And if we can't contact Weiden, or if he can't give us any more of the picture, *if there is a picture*, then we will be sunk. The only thing we can do then is lie low until tomorrow night, and then make our way to where the British Recco plane is to land early the next dawn, and go back to England a couple of chumps. Particularly me, because I was the one with the bright idea that we come on this wild goose chase in the first place. Boy! Will I feel a fool when I tell Colonel Fraser that I didn't even get to first base. He thought the idea was cracked and impossible right at the beginning. Wind-Bag Dawson, that's me. The guy with the bright ideas—I don't think!"

"Rubbish!" Freddy Farmer breathed at him. "I was just as much for it as you were. Just simply didn't get the chance to suggest it before you did. But blast it, let's not do our weeping and grinding of teeth yet. Maybe Weiden is here, and maybe he does know something that will help."

"Yeah, maybe," Dawson echoed, but not very convincingly. "What do we do, though? Bang on the front door, or just stay where we are and wait to see if anybody goes in or comes out? And that last I think is a very punk idea."

"Both ideas are punk," Freddy told him. "I've been doing a little snooping around. There's an alley that leads to the back. And the rear door is open. I really think the only thing for us to do is search the place, room by room. After all, you played Gestapo with a certain amount of luck once today. Let's both try it and see if it works a second time. After all, isn't it a strict Gestapo rule to break in on people at night, and go thumping and tramping around? At least, if anybody lives here, he'll be too scared to ask questions. And if we meet with no luck searching the place, we can simply leave the way we came."

"Well, it's worth a try," Dawson grunted. "Gestapo or Luftwaffe, what difference does it make to civilians in the middle of the night? Okay, lead on, Freddy. Get your gun and flashlight?"

"Both," young Farmer replied. "But don't use your flash until we get inside. Right you are; follow me. I know the way. And luck, old thing."

"And *how* we both will need it!" Dawson echoed under his breath.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Living Dead

Making no more noise than a couple of cats walking across a velvet rug, Dawson and Freddy Farmer slipped down the narrow alley to the rear of Number One Fifty-Six Kholerstrasse. There at the rear door they paused for a moment, holding their breath and straining their ears for the slightest sound inside or outside the house. There was not one single sound to be heard, however. All of Duisburg seemed truly a city of the dead. No sound, no light, no anything.

"Eerie spot, isn't it?" Freddy Farmer breathed. "Gives a chap the creeps."

"Anybody can have my share," Dawson grunted. "Okay, let's go inside."

Young Farmer nodded in the darkness, eased open the rear door, and slipped inside without making a sound. Dawson went in right at his heels, pulled the door shut, and for a moment both youths stood there motionless in the dark. Presently Dawson pressed the button of his flashlight and sent the beam roaming about a rear entry hallway. Dust and dirt seemed to be everywhere, and there was a smell in the air that made Dawson think instantly of Death.

He started to mention it to Freddy when suddenly the beam of his flashlight came to rest on some brownish red smears on the plaster wall to his right. He caught his breath in a sharp gasp, and Freddy Farmer echoed the sound. For a long moment neither spoke, their eyes held by those reddish brown smears as though by a powerful magnet.

"Bloodstains!" Freddy finally whispered. "Some chap came in here badly hurt, and he braced his hand against that wall to hold himself up."

"Yeah!" Dawson said, and swallowed hard. Then, as he lowered the beam of his light, "Look, Freddy! More stains on the floor. Boy! Somebody was hurt bad. He spilled blood all over the place. Oh my gosh, Freddy! Do you suppose—?"

Dawson didn't finish. The rest seemed to stick in his throat as he looked at Freddy. Young Farmer's face was tight and drawn, and the look in his eyes was proof that he had the same thought. That the man who had made those blood smears was one Heinrich Weiden. Why they both thought that, neither youth bothered to question. They just *knew* it, and that was that!

"Let's get—" Dawson began, and then cut himself off short as both he and Freddy went rigid.

They did so for the simple reason that from out in front they heard the protesting scream of rubber on the pavement as a car was braked to a violent halt. And almost before the sound had been lost to the echo there came the sounds of heavy booted feet pounding up the front steps. And almost no time after that the front door shook and then crashed open under the impact of somebody hurling his full weight against it.

Split seconds before that door crashed open Dawson and Farmer were already in action. Dawson killed his flashlight, and the two youths, without a word to each other, both darted toward a hall closet door, yanked it open and slipped inside. And not a second too soon, either. It seemed to Dawson that he had hardly pulled the door to within a quarter of an inch of being closed when the hallway they had just left was flooded with light, and a voice spoke hoarsely in German.

"Swine dog! He will not escape us this time. See! There on the wall! Bloodstains. I knew I had wounded him. He cannot be far. We will try these rooms first. Be ready with your gun. We will not talk this time. We will simply shoot the dog!"

The voice seemed to speak almost in Dawson's face, and as he peered through the crack he saw a black-uniformed and booted figure advance upon a door directly across the hall. A second black-uniformed and booted figure was right at his heels. The man in front turned the doorknob, then shoved the door open, and jumped back a step as he played the beam of the flashlight in his hand through the door opening.

"Ah, swine dog! So there you are!"

As though from a thousand miles away Dawson heard the German snarl those words, and they hardly registered on his brain. He was looking past the two Germans and into the room beyond. There stretched out on a bed that boasted of only one dirty blanket was the figure of a man who at first glance looked stone dead. His face was like wax under the dirt and half dried blood. And his fingers that clutched the single blanket looked almost toothpick thin. But he was not dead. As the light hit him in the face he opened eyes that seemed to be sunk two inches in his head. They glowed for a brief instant in fierce defiance. And the thin lips twitched as though the man were about to speak.

At that moment, though, Dawson saw one of the Germans raise the wicked-looking Luger that he held clutched in his right hand. And Dawson didn't wait to see what would happen next. He jerked back one hand to give Freddy Farmer the signal for lightning-like action, and then he went out of that hallway closet like a shell from a naval gun. In one great leaping stride he crossed the

hallway. He kicked up with his right foot and connected with the German's gun hand. The gun went spinning from lifeless fingers, but Dawson wasn't watching its flight. He brought his own gun over and down in a vicious chopping motion. The barrel practically buried itself in the German's skull, and the man folded up silent as a mouse and sank to the floor.

Spinning around and ducking down at the same time, Dawson started to rip his gun upward, but he instantly checked the movement. There wasn't any second German there to receive that gun under the chin in more or less brass knuckle style. Not a bit of it. Freddy Farmer had not been simply an interested spectator. He had "taken care" of the other German. And in very definite style, too. Dawson hadn't heard so much as a single sound, but when he looked down he saw Freddy's victim stretched out cold as an iced mackerel across the threshold!

Without a word both air aces grabbed their respective victim and hauled him inside the room, and closed the door. Then, shielding his flashlight so that the beam wouldn't strike the man on the bed in the eyes, Dawson moved over to him. A great lump was in his throat, and it was difficult for him to speak.

"Hello, Dartmouth," he said. "I'm right, aren't I?"

The deep sunken eyes stared at him; then the man moved his head from side to side.

"I do not know what you are talking about," he whispered in German.

Dawson smiled and kneeled down beside the bed. For some unknown reason he was positive now. The man in the bed was well over six feet tall, but his hair was not straw-colored. It was almost snow white. But his eyes were blue, and it was perhaps the eyes that made Dawson so certain. They were defiant as they stared at him, but in their depths there seemed to burn a tiny spark of faint hope.

"Harvard Nothing," Dawson said softly. "We're Yanks, Dartmouth. Yank Air Forces, but trying to do a job for Major Crandall, your chief. He only got word of your new address yesterday, just before we took off. It was ten days getting through to him. Look, Dartmouth, you've—"

Dawson stopped speaking as the other's eyes became aglow with a wild light of unbounded joy, and tears welled out of his eyes and trickled down through the dirt and caked blood on his face. Then his thin lips moved, and he whispered words that were like the bells of doom in Dawson's ears.

"You are too late! Too late! They cannot be stopped now. By dawn they will be in the air. I tried, but they saw me. I ran, but one of them shot me. I thought—if I could only get back here. Perhaps a little rest, and then I could try again. But I lost too much blood. I—I can't make it now. And—and it is too late—too late...."

The words trailed off into a gurgling sound in the dying man's throat. His eyes fluttered closed, and a horrible fear curled icy fingers about Dawson's heart. He turned to speak to Freddy Farmer, but the English-born air ace was not there in the room. In alarm Dawson started to his feet, but at that instant Freddy Farmer came slipping through the door.

"Freddy! What—?"

"Making sure, naturally," young Farmer cut him off, and quickly crossed over to the bed. "Slipped outside to see if there were others. We could be caught like rats in a trap in this place. But there were just these two. They've a small Army car outside. I took the ignition keys, and straightened the front door as I came back in. How's—?"

Freddy stopped and groaned as he fixed his eyes on the man in the bed.

"It's Dartmouth," Dawson said softly. "He talked for a moment, but about all he said was that we were too late. That nothing can stop them now. And that by dawn they'll be in the air. Before I could ask him what he meant, he passed out. He's dying, Freddy. Look at that neck wound. It's a miracle that he's lasted this long. He's—Wait! He's coming to again."

The last was not necessary. Freddy Farmer also saw the eyes flutter open, and the thin lips move. But no sounds came from between them. Dawson leaned close.

"You've got to hang on, Dartmouth!" he whispered fiercely. "You've got to hang on and tell us about it. Maybe we can help. Maybe we can still lick them. Why can't they be stopped? Who are they? And *what* planes in the air by dawn? Hang on and tell us, Dartmouth! Hang on, please."

The sunken eyes stared, and the thin lips continued to move without making a sound. Dawson clenched both fists helplessly.

"If there were only something we could do for him!" he groaned. "A couple of sulfanilimide pills, or even a First Aid kit. But we haven't a darn thing. And I'm afraid it's too late, anyway. Dartmouth! Please! Hang on, fellow, hang on. You've got to tell us what it's all about."

As Dawson's pleading voice died away to the echo the very silence of Death seemed to hang in that room. Then, suddenly, sound began to come from between the dying man's thin moving lips. Both Dawson and Farmer leaned close so that they would not miss a single word.

"Fire!" the man said. "Fire bombs that destroy everything within a mile of where they strike. It is true! I—I have seen it with my own eyes. Flame throwers of the air. That's what they are like. But they are dropped like bombs. Special chemicals. Nothing can extinguish them. They must burn themselves out. But—but they explode and spread out in all directions. It is liquid fire. Nothing can stop it. Nothing can stop those devils now. Their secret weapon. That devil! That Herr Baron. He is back in Duisburg again. I know! I saw him. He cannot fool me, no matter what he does to

his face. The twenty-fourth—tomorrow. Tomorrow they strike, and we will be helpless to stop them. It—it will not win them the war, no! They will never win. But our planes—our pilots—our crews. Hundreds—thousands! Three fourths of England's and America's bombers—wiped out in minutes. It will make the war go on five years longer. Dear heaven, I was so close. So close to stopping them!"

The dying man stopped speaking and his eyes became glazed. A hundred thousand questions sprang to Dawson's lips, and to Freddy Farmer's lips, too. But neither youth dared to speak them. Death was so very, very close, now. They could almost smell the Grim Reaper's clammy hand reaching out. They hardly dared breathe for fear that doing so would speed the end. They were helpless. The battle had to be fought alone by that man under the single dirty blanket. No other power on earth could help him. He would win his own fight, or he would lose, and his knowledge of the horrible doom poised to descend upon England would be sealed in his brain.

Tears of helpless agony stung Dawson's eyes, and his lips moved in fervent, silent prayer. He could feel Farmer's breath on his cheek, and he knew that Freddy was also praying with all his heart and soul.

And then, as though a curtain had been drawn aside, the glaze vanished from the dying man's eyes. They were bright and clear as they looked at Dawson and Farmer. The man drew breath deep into his lungs, and there was no longer the heart-chilling rattle of death in his throat. It was as though in his greatest moment of need he had reached out and received new strength from his Maker.

"Do not speak," he said in a clear voice that made Dawson's heart leap with joy. "Just listen to me, because I cannot last long. I know it—inside. I failed, but perhaps it is not too late. Perhaps you will succeed. You must. Listen to me! Ten miles along the Duisburg-Dortmund highway there is a little group of hills. They form a ring, and the valley in the middle is flat as a table. You cannot see it from the air because it is perfectly camouflaged. The spot has never been bombed because it is out in the country. Our bombers wouldn't give it a second look.

"But it *is* a military objective. The most important this moment in all Germany. In that camouflaged valley there are a hundred British and American heavy bombers. Yes! British and American heavy bombers, I tell you. I have seen them. For months the Nazis have been planning this blow. They call it their secret weapon. It came out of the mad brain of the one they call Herr Baron. Who he is no one seems to know. But it is rumored that he was a famous Luftwaffe pilot shot down in the Battle of Britain. That he was horribly burned about the face. But he lived, and became the man of many faces. Some say he was a great actor before the war. I do not know. But I have seen him many times, and every time he looked different. Once I was almost able to kill him, but I failed then, too. To think, if I had only succeeded, this terrible thing might not be hanging over England, as it is."

The man stopped talking and stark terror gripped Dawson and Farmer again. But the man only paused to draw breath into his dying body. He went on speaking again, a wild light flaring up in his eyes.

"A hundred British and American heavy bombers! Some of them those that were forced down and captured before their crews could destroy them. But most have been remade from salvaged parts. Think of it! For months German factories have been repairing and making parts for British and American planes. *Our* planes that they will fly against *us* at dawn. They will not carry high explosive bombs, but a new liquid fire bomb. A bomb that floods liquid fire for hundreds of yards, and destroy everything that it touches. Herr Baron and his men have done their work well—the devils. They have selected our biggest fields in England. R.A.F. and Eighth Air Force fields. They know our identification signals. Heaven help us, they seem to know everything. And tomorrow at dawn they will take off. All the hundred of them. A suicide pilot and suicide crew in each bomber. They will fly to England, and give identification signals as though they really were our own planes returning. Three of them for each of the thirty-three fields selected. They will go in low, as though landing, and then dump their terrible destruction. In the matter of seconds each of the selected air fields will be flooded by the fire. The devils and their planes will perish, too. But our loss will be staggering. It will be months and maybe years before we can replace our losses. Yes, Hitler's secret weapon. A great victory to give his home front. A long, long lull in the bombing of Germany. The Nazis do not fight to win the war now. They fight for time. Time to reorganize, and rearm. If Hitler can stop the bombing of Germany, then three fourths of his Luftwaffe can be sent to the Russian Front where he needs air power so desperately. And by this hideous, devilish blow against us at dawn he can accomplish just that!"

The dying man stopped talking. He fought for breath, and his very eyes seemed to be on fire. Stunned, Dawson gaped at him in utter disbelief. The man was mad, raving mad. What he had told them was fantastic, impossible. It couldn't be true. A hundred American and British heavy bombers salvaged by the Nazis? Repaired and put in condition to fly against England? It was the craziest pipe dream that—But what about Krumpstadt saying that Farbin Factory Number Six was making metal cylinders for British and American planes? And those landing gear parts he had seen with his own eyes? Landing gear parts, being repaired, that he was certain had been made in the U.S.A., or England? Yes! What about his experience in Farbin Factory Number Six?

"It can't be!" he heard Freddy Farmer's voice explode beside him. "It's mad—insane! You don't know what you're saying, old chap. Why, they couldn't! They—they wouldn't dare!"

The dying man turned his head and fixed flaming eyes on Freddy's face. His thin, almost bloodless lips drew back over his teeth, and his thin fingers clutching the blanket looked as

though they would snap.

"Mad?" the man gasped hoarsely. "Insane? It's true, I tell you! With my dying breath, I swear it is true. Five of us learned the secret, but four died before they could get word to England. Only I was left alive, and I had been arrested. I was to be shot, but I escaped. Ten days ago. I tried to get word through to Major Crandall, to anybody, but only part of my message must have arrived. The address of this place. Mad? Insane? Today I learned that Herr Baron and his agents had returned. They are to celebrate the take-off at dawn. Himmler is expected to be there. Perhaps even Hitler. No word came to me from England. I watched the sky for hours, and prayed for our bombers. But none have come. I went there to that camouflaged field. Mad? Yes, I was mad. I went there to try and defeat them alone. To start a fire. To do *anything* that would destroy what they have here. But I was discovered. It was that devil, Herr Baron. He was dressed as an American flying officer. His men fired. Hit me. I escaped and came back here. Perhaps it would not be too late. Perhaps there would be some word—some help from England. But they followed me, found me, and—"

The man choked on his own words. Tears streamed down his cheek as he raised one hand and pointed a quivering finger at Dawson and Freddy Farmer. His voice was little more than a dry cackle in his throat.

"Mad, insane? Go there—the Duisburg-Dortmund highway. See for yourselves. Give *your* lives, but, whatever you do, *stop them!*"

The last word was almost a dry scream. Then something seemed to let go inside the man. His half raised head fell back. His eyes went glassy, and then blank. His thin lips quivered, and then they were still forever.

"Dear heaven, forgive me!" Freddy Farmer whispered brokenly. "Tell him that I do believe him. That I do!"

"And tell him that we will try, dear heaven!" Dave Dawson breathed as he brushed tears from his smarting eyes. "If his life was worth the try, then our lives are, too!"

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

We Who Must Die

As Dawson pushed slowly up onto his feet, with his eyes still fixed upon the face of the dead man, he felt as though a great weight were pressing down on his heart. Memory of the words that the Yank Intelligence agent had spoken whirled and spun around in his brain until it seemed as though he would never be able to think straight again. The torch had been flung down to him, and to Freddy Farmer, from the hands of a dying man. Lips that were actually stiffening in death had begged them to give their lives that hundreds of others might be spared, and the world be made a little bit better place in which to live. But how could Freddy and he accomplish the impossible? *How?* Where would they begin? How could they possibly—He cut short his spinning thoughts as he felt Freddy's hand gripping his arm, and heard his pal's voice.

"There's precious little, if any, time to lose, Dave, old thing," Freddy spoke in a tight, emotion-filled voice. "The least we can do is try—as he did, poor devil."

"Try?" Dawson echoed with a little harsh laugh. "Try what? Try—Hey, Freddy! You mean—?"

"Quite," young Farmer said, and began peeling off the Luftwaffe uniform he wore. "Those two Gestapo rats, there. We'll borrow their uniforms, and their car outside, and go find that ring of hills, and its camouflaged field. The Duisburg-Dortmund highway is not far from here."

"And when we reach the field?" Dawson said, as he stripped off his own Luftwaffe jacket. "Then what? Most likely the guards are five deep around the place!"

"No doubt!" Freddy Farmer said grimly, and for an instant let his gaze rest on the dead man. "But even if the whole blasted Nazi army is there, we've got to try to get in there somehow. Perhaps these uniforms will help us get by the guards. I hope so. But look, Dave, if you don't—"

"Who says I don't?" Dawson interrupted angrily. "I was only wondering if you had some kind of a plan."

"None at all," young Farmer replied. "Have you?"

"No," Dawson replied, and went over to one of the unconscious Germans in black uniforms and heavy boots. "Maybe we can think up one on the way. Set the place on fire, he said, eh? Of course he must have meant that fire would touch off the rest of what's there. But, boy! If we only had a plane. Any kind of a plane, just so long—"

Dawson suddenly let his voice trail off, and an agate gleam leaped into his eyes as he knelt down beside one of the Germans and quickly relieved him of his uniform. And that gleam was still in the Yank air ace's eyes when a few moments later Freddy and he bound the Germans hand and foot, gagged them, and then stole silently out of the room, and along the hallway to the front door.

There they paused a moment, eased open the battered door, and peered out. Duisburg was still in darkness, and there was no sound to be heard save that of their own breathing. It took Dawson a

second or two to pick out the small Nazi Army car at the curb. When he had, he touched Freddy lightly on the arm, went out the door, and down the short flight of steps. Without a word he slid behind the wheel, and held out his hand to Freddy. Young Farmer nodded and handed over the ignition keys. A minute later Dawson slid the car away from the curb. And ten minutes after that he was rolling it along the highway between Duisburg and Dortmund.

"Have any ideas clicked yet, Freddy?" he presently broke the silence between them. "I figure we've got about five or six miles to go. Keep your eyes skinned, because we could very easily slide right by those hills in the dark."

"No, I haven't the ghost of an idea," Farmer replied. "If only some of our planes would come over we might be able to signal them to dump some bombs around. Small chance of that, however. It's close to midnight, and if any of our planes are out they've jolly well reached their objectives by now. Good grief! It's almost as though the Devil himself were watching over the Nazis this night."

"This night, and a lot of other nights, I guess," Dawson said, tight-lipped. "Look, Freddy, are we awake, or *is* all this just a crazy nightmare? I mean, I want to believe that poor fellow ... I mean, of course, he wasn't off his beam; he told us the truth. But—suffering catfish! Fire bombs that throw liquid fire for hundreds of yards? And British and Yank planes flown by German suicide pilots and crews? And *if* they succeed, three fourths of our combined air forces in England will be so much burned out junk? It—well, it just seems almost too much to believe. It's like stuff you'd read about in a ten-cent blood and thunder thriller. Doggone it! This is a war with guns, and tanks, and ships, and planes...."

"And a lot of *other* things that most of us never dreamed of before the start of the war, Dave," Freddy Farmer said quietly, as Dawson struggled for words. "Radar, for instance. The Nazi rocket gun. And our own jet-propulsion plane for another. And that's saying nothing at all about the miracles in medicine that have come out of this war so far. Yes, I know how you feel, Dave. That it just can't be true. That it isn't possible. But when you think about it for a moment, you find yourself asking, why isn't it true, and why isn't it possible? And the only answer is, that it is, and could be. War knows no limits. And that goes for the minds of men who create the devilish weapons of war. Or do I sound silly?"

"No, kid," Dawson said. "It just got me for a moment. The seemingly fantastic part. No, you're right. Anything *can* happen, or be cooked up in an all out total war. And the Nazis are just the breed to cook up something like liquid fire bombs. But—"

Dawson choked off the rest as at that exact moment a small searchlight suddenly became visible not fifty yards along the highway in front of them, and its beam became trained directly on the car. In the side glow Dawson could just make out the ugly snout of a mounted machine gun, and the booted feet of the men who operated it. Then a uniformed figure, with a sub-machine gun hung over one arm, stepped out into the beam of light and rapidly winked a red-shaded flashlight as a signal for the car to stop.

"Keep your gun ready!" Dawson whispered between stiff lips as he slackened the car's speed and applied the brakes. "Here's the first test, kid. Maybe this is the end of the line, but on the other hand, maybe we can shoot it out with them and skip off cross-country. Hold everything until we make sure."

"With you, old chap!" Freddy Farmer replied in a voice so low that Dawson almost didn't catch it.

A moment later Dawson stopped the car full in the beam of the searchlight, and rested his hand on his gun on the seat beside him and watched the uniformed figure carrying the red-shaded flashlight walk around to his side of the car.

"Show me your—!" the figure said harshly, and then stopped with a grunt. "Oh, you two, eh? Back again? Very well, proceed. But keep your speed to thirty miles or the others will open fire on you. The second turning on the right has been left unblocked. *Gott!* So many cars tonight! It is like a parade. It must be nice to be of the Gestapo. You will probably be given all the schnapps you can drink. All right. Go ahead. Pass to the left of the light!"

For a split second Dawson was tempted to play his Gestapo part to the hilt and snarl a few words at the uniformed figure backing away from the car. On second thought, though, he instantly decided to let things stand as they were. The unpopularity of the Gestapo with this particular soldier was none of his affair. He would be a fool to get tough about it. The one with the sub-machine gun might decide to get even tougher.

And so, sweating with relief, Dawson meshed gears and tooled the little Army car around to the left of the searchlight, that winked out as he went by, and got back into the middle of the night-darkened road again. It was then that both Freddy and he let the clamped air from their lungs.

"Jeepers!" Dawson gasped. "I know I've got gray hair now. Praise be that that dope simply remembered two Gestapo rats in an Army car, but *not* what they looked like."

"Amen!" Freddy Farmer whispered. "And may Satan bless the blighter for telling us about the second turn off on the right. Gosh, Dave! Do you really think that we'll be lucky enough to—?"

"Don't say it!" Dawson said hoarsely. "It might break the spell, or something. Just pray, Freddy, that's all. Pray as you never prayed before. I know we haven't a hope, but—"

"There's the first turn off, Dave!" young Farmer stopped him. "Slow up a little so we won't miss ... Dave! Look! There ahead to the right. There's the spot. You can see the tops of the hills. There's a glow of light, that's why. Dave! Do you hear something? Like the rumbling of thunder?"

But Dawson didn't reply at once. He couldn't possibly have replied at that moment, even had it cost him his life not to do so. Every nerve in his entire system was twanging like a snapped violin string. His heart was striving to hammer its way out through his ribs, and the blood surging through his veins was like ice water one instant, and liquid fire the next. Yes, he could see the tops of the ring of hills, and the faint glow of orange-yellow light behind them that made them stand out against the night sky. And above the sound of his own engine he could hear that other rumbling sound that seemed like thunder to Freddy Farmer.

Yes, but it was thunder caused by high voltage leaping across storm skies. It was the thunder of many powerful engines being revved up. Aircraft engines. And as Dawson leaned forward a little over the wheel and strained his ears, he knew in a flash that the thunder was from British and American-made aircraft engines.

"They're revving them up!" he heard his own voice say. "Maybe the take-off's near. Must be, or they wouldn't show so much light. Yeah! They've removed the camouflage covering from the plane, and that light is from runway flares, and maybe exhaust plumes. Dear heaven! Let us get through. Let us get through in time to do something. Don't let this terrible thing happen, please. I beg of you! Don't—!"

Dawson's voice clogged up in his throat, and his heart seemed to shrivel into nothing as his own beseeching voice echoed back to mock him. And then, even as Freddy Farmer touched his arm, his straining eyes saw the second turn-off. There were three or four uniformed figures at the corner of the turn-off, and Dawson instantly tightened up inside. But there was no need of that A flashlight winked on, and its moving beam signalled for him to make the turn and keep going. Perhaps the car was recognized, but he doubted that because of the darkness. It was probably that any car that passed the first barrier down the road, and there had apparently been many of them tonight, was being allowed to continue on unchallenged to the secret field hidden behind the ring of hills.

A great sigh of relief slid off Dawson's lips as he drove by the signalling flashlight beam and made the turn. A moment later, though, as he drove along a bumpy dirt road that led straight toward the ring of hills, his heart leaped up his throat to smack hard against his back teeth, and beads of nervous sweat stood out on his forehead. He heard Freddy groan softly, and that groan was echoed in his own heart.

A short distance ahead he could see several cars parked off the dirt road. Several flashlight beams were moving about, and the road itself was blocked by several figures in uniform. In the bad light Dawson could not tell if all carried sub-machine guns, but he saw at least six, and to him that was six too many. No wonder his car had been allowed to turn off into the road leading to the secret field!

"No cars allowed on the field, of course, because of the danger of fire," he muttered. "They're all being ordered to park outside, and those moving flashlight beams mean just one thing. That everybody is being checked before he can go the rest of the way on foot."

He swallowed hard, and turned to young Farmer as the parked cars in front forced him to apply the brakes and slow down.

"It's been nice knowing you, Freddy," he said in a dull voice. "This is the end of the line, and I mean the end. But I'm going to take some of the rats with me, that's certain!"

"Cut it, Dave!" Freddy whispered back at him. "Don't be a blasted fool, old thing. This isn't the end. We can't let it be. I've just got an idea. It's got to work. Stop the car and get out with me. Stick at my shoulder, and have your gun in your hand. But for goodness' sake don't use it. No! No questions. There isn't time. Just do as I say!"

Dawson hesitated a split second, and then shrugged.

"Okay!" he murmured. "That's one more idea than I've got. Lead on, Freddy!"

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Satan's Wings

Slipping the car out of gear, Dawson braked it to a final stop, and automatically switched off the ignition. The moving flashlight beams were not more than twenty yards ahead now, and even through the rumble of many aircraft engines beyond the hills he could hear harsh German voices ordering unseen figures to get out of the cars in front and show their papers. A great sense of bitter defeat welled up within him, and he impulsively turned to Freddy. But young Farmer was already getting out of the car on the roadside and violently motioning to Dawson to follow him.

"Leave it to me, Dave!" he whispered. "You've got to, old chap!"

There wasn't anything else for Dawson to do but just that. Throat dry, and heart pounding, but with a sort of reckless, devil-take-the-hind-most spirit welling up in him, he got quickly out of the car and took his place beside Freddy. Young Farmer seemed to pause and breathe deeply. Then he nudged Dave with his elbow.

"Start running with me, but don't say a word!" he breathed fiercely. "I'll do all the talking. Let anybody that we meet see that you've got a gun. And try and get a very nasty Gestapo look on

that face of yours. Right-o! Here we go!"

The comment that Freddy had obviously gone stark, raving nuts rose up to Dawson's lips. But he didn't have time to speak it, even if he had wanted to. Freddy had broken into a run, had snapped on his flashlight beam, and was sweeping it back and forth across the road in front of him. In three swift strides Dawson caught up with his pal, and shoulder to shoulder they ran straight for a group of shadowy figures standing in the middle of the road.

At the sound of their approach a couple of flashlight beams were turned their way, and Dawson's heart seemed to stand still in his chest as the order rang out in German:

"Halt!"

But by then Freddy Farmer was almost stepping on the toes of the German who had barked the order. He flashed his light straight in the man's eyes, and Dave caught a flash glimpse of small close-set eyes, and lips curled back in an angry grimace. Then Freddy Farmer was barking at the man and pushing him to one side.

"Stop him, you blockhead! That one ahead! Herr Baron's orders! We have followed him all the way. We're Gestapo, under Herr Baron's orders. Get out of the way, you dumb-witted cow. Out of the way, or Herr Baron will hear of this!"

Dawson's brain was spinning with confusion, and he tried to follow Freddy's words. But the only thing that really sank in was the fact that several seconds later Freddy Farmer and he had plowed right through the group in the middle of the road, left them standing there, and were racing along in the half darkness at top speed. With every step he took Dawson expected to hear angry shouts behind, and hear the bark of guns. Nothing happened, though, and presently Freddy and he were running through a narrow passage between two of the hills. And there spread out before them was a sight that caused them both instinctively to slow down to a stop and gape in horrified amazement.

As far as Dawson was concerned, he might have stood rooted in his tracks forever staring at the sight. But suddenly Freddy Farmer grabbed his arm, and pulled him off to the side and behind some heavy shrub growth. Winded, the two youths sank down onto the ground, and for a full minute not a word passed between them. Presently, though, Dave reached over, found Freddy's hand, and pressed it hard.

"I won't even say, nice going, pal!" he whispered. "Because I know darn well that it just didn't happen. Holy smoke! Right smack through the bunch, and not one of them so much as opened his mouth to stop you!"

"Credit it to the power of the Gestapo," Freddy murmured. "Plus the fact that a Jerry's mind never moves very fast. I know, though, that I'll go on being scared stiff for the rest of my life. I'll never get over these last few minutes. But, Dave! Look! It *is* all true. Just as Weiden told us. But—but what can we do, now that we're here?"

Dawson didn't reply to that question. The power of speech failed him as he peered through the shrub branches, and out across the mile square area of billiard table flat ground completely ringed by hills. It was like looking at some weird picture conjured up in the mind of a mad artist. It just wasn't possible to believe, even though he was staring at it with his own eyes. The picture of at least one hundred R.A.F. and Eighth Air Force heavy bombers, complete with insigne and unit markings. *But* with German uniformed figures swarming all about them. It was so fantastic, so utterly unreal, that Dawson impulsively closed his eyes tight several times, and then opened them quickly, fully expecting the crazy scene to vanish in thin air.

But it did not. It was still there every time he opened his eyes. The planes were arranged in a line that extended halfway around the edge of the field. The first plane in line was poised at the end of a runway that cut straight through the middle of the huge disc-shaped airdrome in an east to west direction. And when he looked toward the west side Dawson saw that the runway pointed straight at a wide opening between two of the ringing hills. In other words, the heavy bombers taking off would not have to gain more than usual take-off altitude in order to clear the ring of hills. That opening was plenty wide enough for them to pass through. Room to spare, in fact. And in a crazy, abstract sort of way Dawson realized that completed planes had passed down through that opening between the hills when the pilots came in for a landing.

"Lancasters, Wellingtons, Flying Fortresses, and even a few Liberators! And with props ticking over, ready for a take-off. Gosh! I wonder how they camouflaged this spot during the day? I don't see any nets, or anything. But they probably used nets, which are now rolled back against the hillsides."

Freddy Farmer's voice was low, and there was a queer note in it that made Dawson turn his head quickly and peer hard at his pal in the pale flickering glow that came from the take-off flares, and, so it seemed, from at least five hundred flashlights that were moving about all over the place. Impulsively Dawson reached out a hand and placed it on Freddy's arm. Freddy was trembling like a leaf, and Dawson didn't have to be any doctor to realize that reaction to all that had happened was setting in in Freddy with a vengeance.

"Steady, Freddy!" he whispered. "Take it a bit easy, if you can. You've been aces, what I mean, pal. And now it's my turn to do some fast and heavy thinking. And get results like *you* did. Look, Freddy! Do you see anything different about those planes?"

"Different?" young Farmer echoed softly, and scowled hard at the scene before him. "No! And that's what tears me up so inside. Why, this is just like it is in England. Just before the take-off for

a raid on Germany. But, good grief, Dave! This is Germany, *right here!*"

"I know, kid, I know," Dawson soothed him gently. "But let's skip that part for a moment. Now look. I don't see any difference either, so that means that their fire bombs, or whatever they really call them, are stowed away in the bomb bays just like any TNT eggs. And if so, they are to be released from the bombardier's nook, just like regular eggs. Now here's what I mean. They don't plan for any air fighting, so the chances are that each ship isn't taking along more than, say, three men. A pilot, a navigator, and a so-called bombardier. Call it four, and make the fourth a flight engineer. But it's to be a one-way flight, so maybe a flight engineer isn't going along."

"Yes, yes, you're probably right, Dave," Freddy said with an impatient nod of his head. "But what difference? It's unimportant to us. The important thing is, how can we *possibly* stop them? How in the world could we start a fire of any kind? The blighters are all over the place. Even though we did manage to sneak up and fire one of the planes, that wouldn't mean the lot would go. They must have fire equipment here, in case of accident. Dave, we're as helpless as Weiden was. We—"

"Shut up, and let me finish!" Dawson muttered, and pressed Freddy's arm hard. "Okay. I'll agree that even though we got away with touching off the gas tanks of one plane, it might not do us any good. I mean, that those cockeyed fire bombs may have to be dropped, and detonated before they really do their stuff. Maybe heat doesn't affect them at all, though I've got my doubts about that. Anyway, just setting one of them afire is out. Okay, then, we set the whole darn bunch afire! In short, we wipe out the works. Maybe you and me, too. But we still wipe out the works."

"Don't, Dave!" Freddy Farmer groaned. "You're talking insane. How can we possibly wipe them all out? Heaven knows I'd give my life, and gladly, if there were any way—"

"And I keep trying to get it through your head that there *is!*" Dawson cut in, tight-lipped. "Look at that end plane, Freddy. Do you see many of them milling around that ship? No. Only a couple, and they're mechanics. 'Most everybody is up front, where the goodbyes are being said, I guess. Gosh! Do you suppose Hitler and Himmler are in that bunch?"

"Hitler!" Freddy Farmer echoed in a strangled gasp, and started to push up on his hands and knees. "If I could just get close enough to that filthy baby killer, I'd—"

Dawson grabbed him and hauled him back.

"Don't go haywire!" he snapped. "Ten to one he's miles from here. But supposing he was here, and you got close enough for a shot—which you darn well wouldn't! You'd get nailed, too. And *these planes would take off!* Stop it, Freddy, and bend an ear. That end plane. That's our baby, see? You and me! With a couple of good breaks we can roll it down and onto the runway, and still have room to get off and pass through the hill opening on the west. It's a Fortress, Freddy, and we know all about those sweethearts. Well? We've swiped a couple of Nazi planes in the past, so how about swiping one of our own for a change, huh?"

"If we only could!" Freddy Farmer breathed fiercely after a long moment of silence. "If we only could!"

"We can, and we've *got* to!" Dave said grimly.

"But there may be some of the beggars inside the plane, that we just can't see," young Farmer said slowly.

"Oh, so what?" Dave snapped. "Use the old brain, Freddy! Are you and I carrying water pistols? With this rumbling and shouting all over the place, you wouldn't hear a shot three feet from the ship. Those three mechanics are our only worry. Then, plus the distance to the plane, and the little item of getting it off, and getting altitude."

Freddy Farmer turned his head and looked straight into Dawson's eyes.

"Right you are," he said quietly. "Anything to stop them all from taking off. And even if we can't get enough altitude—"

Young Farmer stopped, then tried to continue, but all he seemed able to do was swallow rapidly. Dawson forced his own lips to pull back in a forced grin, and nodded.

"Yeah, Freddy," he said softly. "The least we can do, for Dartmouth's sake. If we can get enough altitude to give us a fighting chance for our own hides, then we slam the plane down into the middle of them, and go up with the whole works. Tough on us, but—but a lot of swell guys have died for far less, Freddy."

Freddy continued to look at Dawson without speaking. Then presently he simply smiled, and pushed up onto his hands and knees.

"Let's get on with the blasted thing, Dave," he said with all the calmness of voice of a man going down to the post office to buy a stamp. "Always did hate to sit around jawing when there was something that had to be done. So let's get on with it—one way or the other."

"And it's going to be the way we want, kid!" Dawson whispered as they stepped out from behind the shrubs, and started walking along the rim of the field. "I've got the old hunch."

To that Freddy Farmer groaned, crossed two fingers of his left hand, because he was carrying his gun in his right, and kept on walking.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Something For Hitler!

Twenty yards. Sixty feet. Just seven hundred and twenty inches. That was the distance Dave Dawson and Freddy Farmer finally were from the Flying Fortress at the rear end of that half-circle of bombers. Twenty yards more to go, but there were two Luftwaffe mechanics between them and the plane. And at that distance a blind man could see that each of the mechanics carried a holstered Luger. A Luger that was in a holster and *not* in the man's hand. And it was the realization of that that made Dawson breathe a faint prayer of thanks, and then suddenly snap on the beam of his flashlight, and walk the last twenty yards at a rapid pace.

As one the two mechanics spun around, blinked at the light that hit them in the eyes, and started to open their mouths. But Dave didn't give them a chance to say anything. He took a page out of Freddy Farmer's book, and played it for all that it was worth.

"We're Gestapo, sleeping swine!" he snarled at them, fairly throwing the words in their flat moon-shaped faces. "Is this the way to guard a plane? We could have killed you both minutes ago, and with ease. What have you to say, fools?"

One of them opened his mouth again, but Dawson quickly spun him around and pushed him into the shadow cast by the body of the Flying Fortress.

"Silence, swine!" he rasped, and practically shoved his flashlight into the mechanic's face. "Stand motionless!"

As Dawson spoke the last he half turned his head to see that Freddy Farmer was carrying out his end. Freddy had spun the other mechanic, and was shoving him up against the side of the Fortress.

"This for sleeping swine!" Dawson grated, turning back to his fear-frozen mechanic.

And with that he whipped up his gun and chopped it down on the mechanic's head just in back of the left ear. The German went down without so much as a tired sigh. And no sooner had he sprawled in a heap on the ground than the other mechanic folded up on top of him.

"Now we move, kid!" Dave whispered, and ducked down and under the plane toward the little ladder leading up into the belly door of the aircraft.

He waited there the millionth part of a second, just long enough to make sure that Freddy was right at his heels, and then he went up the ladder like a monkey and into the plane. He entered the plane just forward of the bomb compartment, and was turning toward the steps to the pilots' compartment when suddenly a figure loomed up in front of him on the catwalk, and German-spoken words hit him in the face.

"Halt! Who are you? Herr Captain's orders were that no one was to—"

The voice was cut off in a snarling gasp, for the speaker had seen Dawson's face in the pale glow that filtered into the plane from outside. But in that same instant, also, Dawson saw the face of the speaker. It was the thin face of the man called Hans, whom he had last seen in that apartment living room out near Golders Green in London. For a split second both gaped at each other. Then Hans' face twisted with rage, and he dived a hand into the pocket of the flying jacket he wore. But Dawson did not play the Wild West movie hero. He did not wait for his opponent to get his gun out and take the first shot. This was no time for heroics. This was cold-blooded war, with civilization itself hanging in the balance.

So Dawson simply fired from the hip and saw Hans' head jerk back as the bullet hit him between the eyes. Almost before the Nazi agent's body had crashed down onto the catwalk Dawson had leaped over him and was mounting into the pilots' compartment. Without waiting for Freddy Farmer to catch up, he slid into the pit, ran anxious eyes over the instrument panel and other gadgets, and breathed a sigh of relief when he saw that all was in readiness for the take-off. Then he cast a swift glance out through the windshield glass. The plane in front, a British Lancaster, blocked off most of his view, but he saw no running figures coming his way, so it seemed apparent that his single shot had not been heard. Countless figures carrying flashlights were walking all over the field, and there was a large crowd gathered about the leading bomber.

"Boy, what a sitting duck target for our bombers, if only some of them would come over now!" he heard his own voice mutter. "But ten to one these rats made sure that neither the R.A.F. or the Eighth Air Force were headed this way before they so much as lighted a match. Anyway, so far, so good, for us!"

As he spoke the last he turned his head, expecting to see Freddy Farmer climbing into the co-pilot's seat beside his. But the seat was empty, and there was no sign of Freddy Farmer. Cold fear gripped him, and he impulsively started up out of his seat to go back through the ship. By the time he was half out of it, though, young Farmer came into the compartment, panting like a winded bull.

"Take her up, Dave!" Freddy gasped. "Doors all buttoned tight. And I dumped out both of the blokes. Let's get on with it quickly!"

"*Both* blokes!" Dawson gulped. "You mean—?"

"A second chap popped up from the rear just as you shot that Hans," Freddy said. "I took care of him without using bullets. Afraid I broke the blighter's neck. Serves him right for trying to

interfere. Fancy, though, meeting that Hans again. Small world as you often say, what? But don't sit there listening to my chatter, Dave! Take her up, or—or do something. My nerves won't stand for much more of this thing!"

A nervous and sort of crazy laugh spilled off Dawson's lips as he turned front.

"Release the wheel brakes, while I gun her, Freddy!" he said in a voice that he hardly recognized as his own. "Here we go—somewhere!"

By the time the last had left his lips the four engines of the Flying Fortress were singing a loud song of power, and the huge craft was moving over the ground and off toward the left so that it cleared the Liberator just in front. The roar of the engines was loud in Dawson's ears, but the roar didn't seem half as loud as the mighty pounding of his heart. Cold sweat formed on his forehead and trickled down his face. His hands gripping the controls became clammy, and his mouth was so full of "sawdust" that he could hardly breathe.

In the next couple of seconds it seemed as though everybody on the field carrying a flashlight froze stiff for a brief instant, and then turned the beam of his light toward that trundling Fortress. To Dave's strained nerves those barbs of light looked like machine gun, or aerial cannon flashes, and had a burst of sudden death, in the form of fatal bullets, come crashing through the windshield or window glass he wouldn't have been in the least surprised. Inside of him a voice was screaming wildly that he and Freddy Farmer were doing something that just couldn't possibly be done. They were suicidal fools to so much as try it. If die they must, then let them feed the four engines every drop of high test they would take and taxi the Flying Fortress straight into the center of that curved line of heavy bombers. But try to get it in the air? Never! It just couldn't be done!

"Maybe not!" Dawson heard his own voice echo back to him. "Maybe not! But, by heaven, we're going to give it a try, and how!"

"Dave, look!" Freddy Farmer's voice suddenly screamed wildly in his ear. "They know something's wrong. Up there at the front of the line. Troops with machine guns, and they're racing our way. They're going to try and block the way!"

But Dawson had seen the running troops at the same time as Freddy Farmer. His lips went back flat against his teeth, and he swerved the Fortress more to the left, and eased all four throttles forward a bit more.

"Let them try!" he shouted wildly. "The rats can get out of the way or be run down, guns and all. We're non-stop until something really stops us. Hey, Freddy, what about our load? Did you get time for a look? Ye gods! Wouldn't it be a fine mess if we're not—"

"Don't worry about that!" young Farmer cut him off. "This plane isn't empty. All bomb racks are filled with those cylinder things such as you saw being welded. Each is fitted with a detonator bomb. I got a quick look as I came by. Get us off, Dave. I'm going down into the bombardier's nook. Cheerio. And if we don't meet again—"

Freddy Farmer didn't finish the rest. He didn't because at that exact instant he saw what Dawson saw. The running figure of a man, well out in front of the troops. A tall figure garbed in the uniform of a colonel in the U. S. Army Air Forces. His face was in a shadow, so neither Dawson nor Freddy Farmer could see his features. But they didn't have to. The very silhouette of the running figure was enough for them.

"Herr Baron, the rat!" Dawson shouted wildly. "Look at him wave his arms for us to stop! If he only knew who was in this ship I bet he'd throw a fit and drop dead right in his tracks. Nuts to you, Herr Baron No-Face. You lose again. And this time, by gosh, you really *lose*. Just a minute, you stinker, and we'll give you something for Hitler. Yeah! Something for the whole rotten bunch of you. Hang on, Freddy. Now, we're really going to roll. Tally-ho!"

Shouting the last Dawson swerved the Fortress around until it was headed west along the take-off runway. Above the thunder of his engines he could hear bursts of machine gun and rifle fire behind him. In fact some of it was coming from the right, and he heard the bullets thump and clunk into the sides of the Fortress. But naval guns trained dead on him could not have stopped him, then. Shouting and yelling at the top of his voice, he opened all throttles wide, and thrilled to the core as the propellers "bit" into the air and started pulling the Fortress forward faster and faster with every rev they made.

Hunching forward, air clamped in his lungs, hands gripping the controls with every ounce of his strength, he guided the Fortress forward straight for the opening between those two western hills that actually seemed so terribly, terribly close. Seconds whipped by into time's eternity, but each seemed an hour to Dawson as the Fortress still clung to the runway, and still hurtled full out toward the end of the runway.

As a matter of fact, though, time as something definite had ceased to exist for him. It was as though he were in a world of one, himself, and riding a thundering monster toward the opening between two hills at the far end of a white-painted cement strip on the ground. If there was still shooting behind him, he didn't hear it. Or if bullets were pounding into the Fortress, he wasn't conscious of it. He wasn't even conscious of the fact that Freddy Farmer was no longer in the co-pilot's seat at his side. That Freddy had gone halfway down toward the bombardier nook in the glass nose, and was waiting there until Dawson got the plane clear. He just wasn't conscious of anything, save his hands and feet on the controls, and the powerful engines that were driving the Flying Fortress forward.

And then as though invisible hands had pulled the ground away from beneath the wheels the Fortress cleared and went mounting up higher and higher. In a rapid succession of movements Dawson trimmed ship, adjusted propeller pitch, and re-set engine fuel feed. And then the crest of a hill was just off each wingtip and the black sky of night was ahead.

"Chalk another up for us, kid!" he shouted wildly at Freddy Farmer.

But Freddy Farmer wasn't there to reply. He had ducked down into the bombardier's nook, and was getting set to carry out his share of the job. And when Dave didn't receive any reply he remembered the inter-com system. Still climbing at maximum pitch for altitude, he hooked the inter-com phones over his ears, plugged in the jack and threw the switch.

"Freddy, Freddy!" he called. "Can you hear me?"

"And about time, too!" came back the instant reply. "Did you just remember this gadget? But don't waste too much time climbing, Dave. Three thousand feet is more than enough. No telling what those beggars down there might do. Can't let any of them get off. Make a diving run, and we'll pray we can get clear before our own stuff can touch us. Hurry it up, Dave. The place is ablaze with lights now. I haven't the faintest idea what they're up to. Hurry it up!"

But Dawson was already banking the big bomber around. For an instant he got a flash glance down at the hill-ringed field they had just left, but it looked like no more than an ocean of pale yellow light. Then the Flying Fortress' nose blocked out the spot, and Freddy Farmer's eyes alone could see what was going on.

"Dive five hundred, Dave!" came Freddy's order over the inter-com. "Then level off for a second, and give her all she'll take to get altitude. Neither of us know what these fire bomb things do when they hit!"

"You telling me?" Dawson muttered through clenched teeth as he slanted the Fortress downward. "I only hope that some day we can tell our grandchildren about it. Okay! Down we go, and—Hey! They're slinging up flak!"

The last was because the night air off to the right had suddenly become spotted with two gobs of red and orange flame. They were way off to the right, so Dawson didn't even hear the sound of their explosion. But an instant later two more burst off to his left. They must have been set at zero; Dave heard not only their deep throated bark, but he also heard bits of shrapnel strike against the sides of the Fortress.

By then, though, he had completed his five hundred foot dive, and vibration was shaking the mighty bomber from prop to tail.

"Leveling off, Freddy!" he yelled into his inter-com, and eased the controls back. "Do your stuff!"

It seemed that he had no sooner sucked air back into his lungs than his earphones rang with the words that are balm to all bomber pilots.

"Bombs away! Let's get out of here!"

Dawson replied to that order instantly. He hauled the nose of the big ship toward the sky, and hand heeled all four wide open throttles, as though in so doing he might get even more power out of the engines. And then suddenly the darkness below became lighted up like high noon. Yet so blinding was the light that he could see nothing at all. Nothing but white blinding light that seemed to cover the earth to all four horizons, and make his eyes ache as he stared down at it.

Then on impulse he leveled off his climb, and banked around toward the northeast. In that position he could stare down off to his right toward the ring of hills about the secret flying field. But as his breath caught in his throat, he saw neither any ring of hills, nor any secret flying field. The brilliance of the light all around had died down some, but not where the secret flying field *had* been. The ring of hills was just faintly visible, but from their center, that was like a seething maelstrom of liquid white fire, a great column of flashing and flickering whiteness towered high up into the sky. Not red flame, nor orange flame, or even yellow. All was a sort of silverish white that increased in seething fury and brilliance with every passing second. No hill-ringed flying field any more. Nothing but a boiling volcano of white death.

"Good grief, what a way to die, even for Nazis!" Dawson choked out.

"Blast it, it's awful, horrible!" he heard Freddy Farmer speak from the co-pilot's seat at his side. "Get us away, Dave quickly! I don't even want to look at it. I—I almost feel sorry for those devils down there, even though they were planning to do the same thing to England. Horrible! They were like white water when they hit, Dave. Splashed out in all directions like waves. Saw some of the devils just fall in their tracks. Then everything was covered by the stuff. I couldn't look any more. I can't now. Get us home, Dave. To England. I want to forget this night. To try and make myself believe that it never happened. It's not war. It's—it's—"

Young Farmer let the words trail off, sank back in the seat and closed his eyes. Dawson nodded silently, licked his lips, shuddered a little, and banked the Flying Fortress around on a course toward the English Channel, and Britain beyond.

Dawn's light was chasing up out of the east after them when they reached the English Channel, and Dawson began to let down toward the ground. Over the radio he called Coastal Patrol, identified himself and asked for escort to the nearest field. After all Freddy and he had been through, it would be indeed the irony of fate for a chance Yank or R.A.F. fighter plane to mistake him for a Nazi, and perhaps shoot him down. So he played safe by calling Coastal Command, and a moment later he saw half a dozen Spitfires prop-winding up to meet him.

He turned his head to Freddy Farmer only to see that Freddy was looking at him, and grinning.

"Well, old thing," Freddy said. "That chap who was to go over tonight and pick us up will be glad to see us. He won't have to go, now. But what are we going to say in our reports? Nobody will believe us, I'm sure."

"Probably not," Dawson grinned back. Then, as his grin faded, "But we're going to make a report, and all the credit is going to that lad, Dartmouth, and those four others, too."

"Quite!" young Farmer echoed. "Without his help, we'd—But that's blasted war for you. The chaps that are really responsible for the victories never get back to enjoy them."

"And I'm making a report, plus suggestions, to Bomber Command." Dawson said with a grim nod. "We spoiled that party tonight, but only yesterday I saw them making those fire bomb cylinders in Farbin Factory Number Six. Maybe they figured to pull the stunt a second time. Yeah, I think Bomber Command would be interested to hear about Farbin Factory Number Six, and a couple of other spots around there."

And Bomber Command definitely was interested. It is a matter of record that two nights later Duisburg, and Dortmund, too, received the most devastating aerial blasting of the war thus far!

THE END

[1] Dave Dawson With the Flying Tigers.

[2] Dave Dawson With the Commandos.

BOOKS BY R. SIDNEY BOWEN

Dave Dawson at Dunkirk
Dave Dawson with the R. A. F.
Dave Dawson in Libya
Dave Dawson on Convoy Patrol
Dave Dawson at Singapore
Dave Dawson with the Pacific Fleet
Dave Dawson with the Air Corps
Dave Dawson on the Russian Front
Dave Dawson Flight Lieutenant
Dave Dawson with the Commandos
Dave Dawson with the Flying Tigers
Dave Dawson on Guadalcanal

A Page from DAVE DAWSON AT TRUK

Stretching his arms lazily over his head, Dave Dawson drew in a deep breath, and then let it out in a long drawn out sigh of complete contentment.

"Some night, hey, Freddy?" he grunted. "Boy, this is sure a swell spot, war or no war. Me for this place in my old age, and no fooling. After I make my million in civilian life, of course. How about you, little man?"

There was no answer. He turned, and opened his mouth to repeat his words, but shut it tight. For a full five seconds he gaped blank-eyed at the spot where Freddy Farmer had stood by his side. But Freddy wasn't there any more. He was gone; completely vanished as though the ground had swallowed him up.

"Hey, Freddy?" he yelled. "Where the heck are you?"

Silence echoed his words, and then suddenly there came the strangled cry from out of the darkness off to his left.

"Dave! Help! Come quick! Dave—Dave!"

The last died out in a gurgling moan that made Dawson's heart stand still, and the blood

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK DAVE DAWSON WITH THE EIGHTH AIR FORCE ***

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