

Strange

STORIES

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OCT.



DEATH IS
FORBIDDEN

By DON ALVISO

13
STORIES
IN THIS
ISSUE!

Strange STORIES

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*Did this Man-Muddle,
Made by a Wizard
Surgeon's Scalpel, Have
a Soul?*



*He had the abhorrent feeling of
firing into a corpse*

DEATH

CHAPTER I

The Surgery

PERHAPS it is the coward's way: to put on paper what one cannot put into spoken words. Forgive me for leaving you so abruptly last night. You knew I loved you; and you asked the question I could not force my lips to form. Forgive me, too, for that. Before we meet again you must know a part of me which now you do not know, and be-

A Complete Novelet
By **DON ALVISO**
Author of "Marshal of Hell," "Killer
Sign," etc.



IS FORBIDDEN

yond that, my future is in your hands.

So—this letter, which will take time to write, because my right hand is not entirely healed and I cannot write legibly with my left. Have patience with me, Diane. . . .

Two newspaper clippings lie before me as I write this letter. One is crumpled and tawny with age, and the other smells freshly of ink from the speeding presses.

The first tells briefly of the sudden death of an American aviator while

flying for Britain in the dark days of the World War.

The second clipping records, just as briefly, the fact that one August Weiss was beheaded in the historic fortress of Glust.

One is dated 1916, and the other 1939. Twenty-three years between, but to me they read as consecutive scenes in a fantastic and macabre drama in which I played a puppet's role.

No urge of confession impels me to

set down these facts, Diane. Rather, I proceed with the conviction that the work of so unusual a man as August Weiss should not go unrecorded; but far more than that, I have a definite though nebulous desire to put myself right with the soul of that famous adventurer, Jerry Knight—if, as I knew him, he had a soul.

In this letter, Diane, I am attempting neither to explain what happened nor to excuse myself. When you have finished reading, it is possible that you will have found your own explanation—and perhaps forgiveness for me.

IN JUNE, 1916, I was studying with August Weiss in his hospital in Burkhafen. To me, Weiss was almost God. I was so submerged in my desire to learn what Weiss could teach, so grateful for the rare opportunity of completing my training under so advanced a surgeon, that I scarcely knew there was a war. I could have forgotten it entirely had it not been for the unending stream of "special cases" flowing continually over the white-topped surgery tables at Burkhafen.

There we did not deal with the ordinary tragedies of war. Weiss had no time for amputations, riddled bodies, dragging entrails. Such simple casualties were left to lesser men, and that suited me, for I had covered that phase of surgery in an American university and had come to Burkhafen for higher, more complex things.

At rare intervals Weiss spoke his thoughts to me in queerly broken English, and each time my opinions of him became more confused. I used to watch his hands, strong and narrow, slim-fingered, dexterous and sensitive to the slightest touch. He said I had hands like that.

Once he remarked that surgeons' hands make good pilots' hands; strong fingers are efficient on the controls, and firm on the synchronized fire release of a machine gun. The scientifically trained brain can create and weigh thought with more speed than there is in the power dive of a Sopwith; faster than the lethal flight of a Vickers tracer.

You have asked me, Diane, why I

have given up surgery. I will try to tell you. During my stay at Burkhafen I saw approximately three hundred "corpses" wheeled into Weiss' glass-roofed surgery.

I saw over half of these leave under their own power.

All these cases had been carefully selected. Germany's cry was for highly trained men; men skilled in the art of dealing death. Generals, captains, and the fighters of the air. These were the special cases rushed by plane to Burkhafen.

For instance: General Goerlach was inspecting field artillery in action when a Krupp shattered its breech. Goerlach was brought to us and when I saw the exposed faintly pulsing cerebrum protruding from the shattered skull, I was sure that even Weiss could do nothing for him. I assisted during that operation. For three hours I saw a thread of life untangled, spliced and suspended in the surgeon's graceful hands; saw brain-graft, nerve-replacement, and the complete transfer of half a human skull.

It never occurred to me then to wonder whence had come the anatomical replacements necessary for this seeming miracle.

I saw Goerlach leave three months later for the front.

I came to regard Weiss with a blend of fear and awe.

"The brain—the eye—the heart," Weiss used to hiss softly, as he indicated those organs by jerks of his long-fingered hands toward his own body.

Once I asked: "How about the soul?"

He chilled me with the beam of his mouse-gray eyes. "Ach! Iss it a surgeon you would be—or a preacher? A good soldier hass got no soul!"

I must pause, Diane, to rest the ache of my hand. Perhaps in time it will grow strong again.

IT WAS in December, 1916, that they brought Baron Eric von Goelke to Burkhafen. The baron and his Hell's Circus were the dread of the Western front. Allied sky fighters and Allied planes lay dead and burned

in the wake of this devil's crew. Seemingly invincible, the fetid breath of death followed in their propeller blasts.

Von Goelke was the Fatherland's hero, and his well known toast was repeated often by the fighting men of Ludendorff's armies.

That toast was: "*Der Tod ist verboten*"—"Death is forbidden."

But, as happens eventually to all such, the steely kiss which bore his name found its way to von Goelke's heart, and his plane went down. The crash shattered his legs and one arm, and spattered his post-central sulcus over the instrument panel of the crumpled Albatross.

And so—they brought him to Burkhaften.

I remember it well, because it was the same day that the English Sopwith was shot down behind the German lines. I have good cause to remember, Diane.

The Sopwith's pilot was the only Allied fighter who ever came to Burkhaften, and at the time I thought it was a little strange.

Von Goelke had been brought in first, and while Weiss was completing a retina graft on a submarine commander, I myself administered adrenalin to von Goelke, sterilized the tweezers and picked away the shattered bits of skull. Then I lifted the emergency dressing that had been applied at the evacuation hospital and saw that a fragment of shrapnel had torn half the left ribs away. To get at those bone fragments I lifted the exposed heart.

I witnessed the weakening and fading of the organ's pulsations. Fading to nothing—and I wondered what this would mean to the German cause. Eric von Goelke was the inspiration, the driving force of the flying Circus of Hell, and the Circus was Germany's ace card in the lethal game, the momentary balance between victory and sudden defeat. And I stood there holding von Goelke's *still* heart in my hands!

To the experienced, Diane, death is no deceiver. In the year I had spent with Weiss I had learned that there in his glass-roofed surgery no man

was dead until *rigor mortis* claimed his flesh, and even then—but I will tell only what I saw.

Yes, I had learned many things there at Burkhafen. The most important to me, though I did not realize it till long after, was the certain eventuality that comes from constant contact with blood, the incessant touch of mangled flesh and pulsing human vitals. I was losing my touch with humanity. I was acquiring that lack of personal feeling which may be a distinct advantage to a successful surgeon, but which to me constituted a mental shock and changed the course of my life. I lost all sympathy with human suffering. I grew to regard death not as a catastrophe, but as a goal.

I became so calloused that a shattered body was no more to me than a group of cells in a test tube.

So I viewed the baron's remains without emotion. I knew the man was dead.

THEN they wheeled the Sopwith's pilot into the surgery. I saw the black hair, cut short, and curling close to the top of his head. I saw the indistinct pattern of perforations which had riddled his face. A concentrated hail of bullets had practically obliterated his features and passed through his brain. An orderly motioned me aside and the Sopwith pilot's table was moved over beside the baron. Doktor Weiss came in with Adolf Eberwalde, who was there at Burkhafen for the same reason as I.

Weiss looked at me sharply from his small mousy eyes, through thick lenses.

He said: "Ach! It iss nervous you are. See, your hand trembles. By surgery you are no goot today. To the convalescents upstairs you go. Eberwalde will assist me—with this."

I left the surgery, my disappointment smothered by another emotion. August Weiss was no man's picture of the mad genius, though even then gruesome things were being covertly whispered of him in the village. Under forty, Weiss was a man in advance of his time. He was, for a stolid Teuton, more or less given to normal hu-

man emotions. He had three loves: Surgery, Germany, and Katterin Weiss, his wife.

I never saw Baron von Goelke's body again. I did not enter the surgery for two days and two nights—nights during which the glare of the powerful overheads showed through the glass roof, casting grotesque shadows on the leaf spread of the sprawling lindens above. Nor did I see Weiss or Eberwalde during that time. Then an interne was placed on guard at the door of a special room opening directly off the surgery. No one passed that guard except Weiss and one trusted nurse whose name was Gretchen. I could only guess at the identity of the patient within that room.

Please understand, Diane, I am concealing nothing; neither am I intruding into this letter any wild conjectures.

I will record the facts; and you will judge them—and me.

Two weeks later, one midnight, while a storm raged outside and a deluge of rain battered down on the glass roof, I was busy in the surgery. The door of the special room was a little ajar and from the room came first a choked gasp, then a strangling, gurgling wail like the first cries of an infant newly born. Weiss was at the time in his own rooms in a far wing of the hospital. The sounds from the guarded room continued; became a voice. The guard looked once into the room, then closed the door and when his gaze swung to me I saw the glazed fright in his eyes, the trembling of his stocky body. Through the closed door the eerie voice drifted to my ears. A delirious babbling; meaningless words mouthed haltingly in German, and then a familiar phrase uttered with a strange and unearthly accent:

"Der Tod ist verboten!"

A scream cut into the night's stillness; a feminine cry that shrilled with hideous fright, frenzy, and fear-born madness. The door flung open and nurse Gretchen fled from the private room, her face twisted into a pitiful mask, her staring eyes wavering in an uncontrolled and insane gaze. I looked past her through the open door and

saw the top of a curly black head encircled in an aura of bandage.

THEN Weiss came hurrying in with two orderlies. Weiss gave the nurse one short, all-appraising glance, jerked his gaze from her and stared through the open door. He barked a curt order: "Take her away! She has gone mad!"

Two orderlies pinioned nurse Gretchen's wildly flailing arms, a rough hand stifled her cries, and she was led forcibly from the surgery. Weiss flayed me with a long, warning stare, and passed on into the private room, closing the door softly behind him.

The next evening von Goelke's wife, or rather widow, came to the hospital at Burkhafen. She was then about the age you are now, Diane. I was alone in the reception room when she entered. Her body was not clothed in mourning, but her soul was. Her face was drawn, her eyes tired, the tones of her low voice hopeless and defeated. She was weary, it seemed, of trying to conceal the emotions evoked by a loved one's passing. She looked at me closely, and said:

"So, you, too, are an American."

I said: "Yes, Baroness. You wish to see the Doktor?"

A little color swept over the chalky whiteness of her cheeks, and she glanced apprehensively around the room. She spoke haltingly: "I would like to see—to look at the—enemy pilot. His name, I am told—is—Jerry Knight."

I led her to the surgery and turned her over to the guard, wondering the while why I had so quickly and involuntarily assumed that the patient in the guarded room was the one she had asked to see. Wondering if she would be admitted, and if Weiss would upbraid me later for bringing her. As I walked away I heard Weiss' voice, angry, protesting. A half hour later the baroness came out and walked along the hall beside Weiss, and I saw the glare of some unspeakable hate in her dark eyes as she bade the Doktor a curt farewell.

I will skip a little unimportant time, Diane, and rest that hand again.

CHAPTER II

The Man-Muddle

CHRISTMAS EVE, 1916. August Weiss' son was born. The battle of Wurtz was at its bloody height, and German officers were falling like flies. By special order of Ludendorff, Weiss remained at the surgery. He did not sleep for three days and three nights, nor did I. We did not rest. We fought with forceps and scalpel in the surgery, while armies grappled with steel and explosives at the front. During that bloody Gargantuan struggle, Weiss' son was born and Katterin, his wife, died.

Thereafter during the first turbulent months of the new year, I saw a change in August Weiss, an emotional upheaval which tore him apart even as he had dissected other men. But Weiss still had three loves, deeper loves now, and they were Surgery, his dead wife, and little Fritz.

Came April, 1917, and America entered the war. Your country, and mine, Diane. I should have left Burkhafen earlier, but my ambition had held me. With Weiss I was learning what I could not learn elsewhere. The death grip on the Western front had not been a personal thing to me. Human bodies, shrapnel-ripped; human lungs, gas-burned; human lives snuffed out by thousands. These were not men to me; only material for the laboratory, "cases" for the surgery at Burkhafen.

Then it was too late. I was interned for duration. I was transferred to purely technical laboratory duty where I came in contact with none of the patients. I was watched. News was kept from me, and I did not know when the first doughboys ploughed their bloody way into the mud of Flanders' trenches. Eddie Rickenbacker and the others grappled with winged death in the clouds above me and I never knew.

One bit of information filtered through the barrier. Late one night as I left the hospital to go to my nearby rooms, a slim shadow glided from

among the lindens and came toward me. I heard the low strained voice of Marthe von Goelke.

She was calling me from the darkness, and then from her bewildered lips I gleaned a hint of the secret of that ghastly December interlude during which Weiss and Eberwalde had labored two days and nights behind the locked surgery doors over the bodies of the German and the American. The flying Circus of Hell was in the air again, and their leader was—Baron Eric von Goelke!

"All Germany knows it," Marthe told me unbelievably, and sadly. "And the men on the ground take new heart."

"And you?" I asked, striving to be casual. "You have seen him?"

She shuddered and for a moment I could feel the chill that surrounded her. She said: "No, only that one time—before Christmas. They will not let me see him." Then she gave way to ghastly remembrance, and the throb of her broken heart came into her voice: "Oh, Eric—why didn't they let you die. I—I think I am going mad—"

Hardened though I was, I trembled, and went cold thereafter when I heard von Goelke's name, the sound of it bringing back to me that scene in the surgery when I had held his still heart in my hands. I saw Marthe occasionally and she brought me news. Hell's Circus won new victories in the shot-torn air, and the Fatherland rejoiced.

MARTHE met me secretly, and an elusive comradeship crept into our clandestine meetings. Her manner told me that she sought me out as the only one who could possibly understand. She lived, I knew, with but one frail hope, clinging to all that was left for her of Eric von Goelke.

Then, during a disastrous infantry counter-attack, I was sent to a hospital near the front. The drone of motors drew my gaze overhead and I saw the tight wedge of Albatross fighters winging its way toward France. I could see the red devil's masks on their bellies; Eric von Goelke's coat of arms on the lower wing surfaces.

They flew low, and the black head and red beak of the vulture bird showed clearly; the centerpiece of the Baron's coat of arms.

The bats of Hell's Circus on their way to spit death in the air. There were seven of them going over—and six when they flew back. One crashed on the trenches in flames, and its pilot was brought in with the cooked flesh falling from his bones. The head surgeon forgot that I was an enemy American, or perhaps he depended on threat of the firing squad to ensure my loyalty. With torn bodies waiting in an endless line; with emergency surgery tables dripping gore while amputated limbs cluttered the floor around our feet, there was no time for puny precaution.

I looked down at the roasted body of the Albatross pilot. He was scarcely more than a boy, and he was beyond my aid. Even to me, a protege of August Weiss, it seemed impossible that any spark of life could remain in that seared flesh. But his charred lashless lids opened and I saw the dry skin crack like old parchment. I stared down into his wild, pain-crazed pupils, and felt the ghastly, hypnotic pluck of death in his set gaze. His voice came like the dry cackle of rattled bones and I withheld the opiate-charged needle, listening to his last words.

"That devil-charmed flying corpse—mask-faced cadaver—he—he iss not—von Goelke!"

My hand cramps on the pen, Diane, but I must hurry on. You will remember how on November Eleventh, 1918, the welcome hour of eleven was gonged throughout the world. As all things, even time, must end, so did this maelstrom of murder. The Skodas and Krupps haunched silently on their spades along the Western front. The drone of the Fokker, the Gotha and the Albatross faded from the sky, and the hateful tattoo of the Vickers was stilled. It was all over. The end of the war had come, and with it came the end of something for me.

Somehow I knew my hand would never hold a scalpel again; my fingers never prod the needle of mercy into quivering flesh. What I had seen and

what I had been had sickened my soul. The words of August Weiss kept haunting my eardrums: A surgeon's hands make good pilot's hands; strong fingers—the trained mind—

I saw Marthe von Goelke once before I left Burkhafen. Her low husky voice had become the toneless echo from a tomb. Some chaotic hope gleamed in her deep dark eyes, and that hope seemed to manipulate the muscles of her death-pale face like skeleton fingers at the strings of a corpse marionette.

SHE spoke quickly, as though the words which hurried past her thin lips hastened to utterance before the hope which bore them should die unspoken:

"They have given him back to me. We are leaving Germany. We will go away—anywhere—far away, and so leave all this behind."

I noted that she said *him*, not *Eric*, and as she talked I could see her strong will struggle for sanity; could feel the warmth of her undying love for the Eric von Goelke she had known. I remember that the baron's hair had been straw blond and straight and that the bandaged head I had seen for that brief instant in the guarded room had been covered with short curling black locks. Wonderingly, I tried to reason: what, after all, made *Eric* the man Marthe loved? The brain which dictated his every thought and action? Or the arms that had encircled her; the flesh and bone and blood which could cast a stalwart visible shadow against the sun?

Perhaps you, Diane, being a woman, can find an answer to those questions. Perhaps it is neither the mind nor the flesh, but that elusive something which is part of each and yet foreign to both. I have heard it said that it is a man's soul which loves and is loved, but there, talking to Marthe, a haunting doubt assailed me. What if this man-muddle, this strange blending perpetrated by Weiss's scalpel, had no soul!

I asked cautiously: "He—he remembers you?"

She shook her head, a slow, barely perceptible motion. "He is, of course,

changed. But I have him now—*he is mine!* Perhaps in time—”

I heard myself saying: “Baroness! You are mad!” And then she left me, while I regretted my words, hated myself for any weakening of what frail hope she had. But each time I thought of her, a cold mockery crept into my thinking. Perhaps she would hear Eric’s *words* in her ears, but the mouth which uttered them would be that of the American, Jerry Knight. While her love clung to a macabre memory of her husband, the arms that encircled her, the lips that pressed hers, would be those of another.

Then—home, and the contradictory, turbulent and fast-changing years after the War. Years which found many of us wandering, restless, unable to pick up the raveled strands of life. My eyes turned to the sky; my thoughts to the air, there seemed no other palliative for my uneasy and unsettled spirit. Surgeon’s hands make good pilot’s hands. I found that to be true.

There were months of skidding on the edge of eternity while flying a war-salvage Jenny. Barnstorming; test flights. Then a resurrected Bristol Scout and more hours and days and nights of precarious flying. Somewhere along the tortuous path of those uncertain years I met *him*.

CHAPTER III

The Sickle

HE said his name was Duke Bainlee, and his manner of saying it was the same as that of a man who gives him name as John Smith or Tom Brown. His life, like mine, was in the sky. He was silent as to his past and I did not question him. He too, had lost something, some part of him, and the loss had left him out of tune with the world.

He had a mask of a face, smooth and beardless; short black hair which curled close to his skull; and his eyes were unmatched and of no describable color. When I looked into those eyes

something hypnotic swept over me; something which sealed my lips and my mind, preventing me from even wondering who or what he was. At the same time I felt drawn to him, and the casual quality of the strange comradeship which grew between us seemed a thing of destiny. Somehow it seemed that I had been waiting for him to come. He never wanted to talk about the war, and we got along.

The time came when Duke dragged me unconscious from the wreckage of the Bristol. There followed an interlude of pain spent in the now unfamiliar surroundings of white-painted walls, white-robed men and the nostalgic smell of disinfectants. Delay. Beyond that I didn’t care. Duke had plans and when he spoke of them to me I agreed numbly, as though his will controlled the thoughts and desires of us both. Through cloud banks of delirium I heard motors droning in the sky. Spads and Avros and Sopwiths, and always that wedge of Albatross fighters with the devils’ masks on their bellies, and the black, red-beaked vulture head on the wings.

Soon I realized that just flying wasn’t enough. Duke’s thoughts and desires were mine, and it seemed natural for us to seek out war. Any war, big or little, so long as there was strife. That quest led us through fleeting years during which I viewed passing time and events as an unreal panorama for which I had no feeling. I will not burden you with all of it, Diane; only that portion which I feel that you must know.

Duke was forever poring over old books of legend; the mysterious, and the occult. One night he read to me a passage translated from a Toltec inscription, and there was a strange light in his unmatched eyes. I still have the book and I set down that passage for you here, Diane, because I know that to Duke it had prophetic meaning, and it strongly influenced what was to follow.

The black bird of Death marks only the end of life in the flesh. To the fallen warrior the red-beaked reptile is the after-life; for within its black winged body the soul of the warrior comes to rest. Therefore let no man harm this bird-thing; for its curved

beak has been dipped in warrior's blood; its white-rimmed eyes are sacred emeralds, and all-seeing; its talons all-powerful, and its strong jet wings an armour, shielding the departed warrior's soul.

THE idea of the black bird seemed to obsess Duke Banlee, and because his will was mine, I obeyed his wish. We ventured on that ill-fated flight to the Southern jungles. We set down with a cracked cylinder too many miles from any hope of aid. We waited for despairing hours during which Duke neither spoke, nor seemed aware of my presence. Then the jet-black creature spiraled down from nowhere and lighted on the leading edge of the left wing.

It was larger than a raven, and yet not so large as a vulture. Its talons looked strangely like human fingers, oriental fingers with long, translucent nails. Its thin, streamlined body was surmounted by a buzzard-like head with white-rimmed greenish eyes and a down-curved, blood-red beak.

Duke tossed it a fragment of bread and it fluttered down off the wing. We began that nightmare journey to the coast, and during the first day the bird-thing circled over us. Now and then it settled on a dead, twisted limb ahead to stare blankly at us with its white-rimmed jungle eyes. The second day was the same and the third it lighted on Duke's shoulder. I had a haunting fear that it would pluck out his eyes, but at the same time I knew that in some mystic manner the bird-thing had become a part of him. Not that Duke became more understandable; rather his strange life-processes became more obscure. He seemed more complete, as though some missing part of him had returned, and yet the whole had the unearthly feel of the dead.

Duke stroked the shiny black wings, gave the bird his last crust of bread, and named it *Sickle*.

There followed seven days and nights of hell; exhausting days while we fought on, tearing our way through the unknown. The sting of insects and the bite of serpents. Days of moist oppressive heat, and nights of gelid horror when the fetid breath of the jungle brought the hideous yowl

of prowling carnivores. When I was certain the end had come, I tried to laugh it off.

I said: "Well, a man can only die once."

And Duke stroked Sickle's shiny black wings and looked at me queerly. He answered, and he didn't laugh. "Of that, one should not feel too sure." There was the faintest suggestion of a hiss to his speech.

His words and tone jerked me up from a creeping lethargy of mind and I began to remember things about him which had heretofore been passed over by my thoughts. He seemed numb to either joy or misery. None of the clinging jungle things molested him; neither the heat of the day nor the cold of the night. But remembering brought only torture of the mind; even as the jungle tortured my body. It was something like delirium. My words sounded as an incoherent babble.

"That reminds me," I said, "of something—that happened a long time ago—at Burkhafen—"

HE whirled on me then, and the thing that was in his unmatched eyes whipped me like a spine-studded lash. Black Sickle slid down from his shoulders to grasp his shirt front with eerie talons, and spread its jet wings in a protecting fan across Duke's suddenly heaving breast.

"Burkhafen!" Banlee hissed. "Burkhafen! You—you were there?"

I nodded, dumb.

He drew a leather folder from his pocket and took from it what looked like a worn newspaper clipping. He glanced over the bit of paper as if to refresh his memory and spoke again.

"You were there—in December—1916? With August Weiss?"

I nodded again and tried to speak.

He stepped close to me, and spread his arms, and I quailed before him. He said: "Then you must know. Look at me! If you know, you must tell me or I will seal your lips forever!"

My stricken gaze went from his mask-like face to the bird-thing sprawled protectingly against his breast. A pathetically pleading note came into his voice and he went on:

"My hair—it should be light, and straight—but look—it iss dark and curling—" He snatched the leather helmet from his head and ran frantic fingers through the short-cropped mass.

I said weakly: "You were dea—you were desperately near to death there at Burkhafen. You were burned with fever. Men's hair has been known to change color after a serious illness—to grow in again curly after it has burned out and dropped from fever."

His voice rose to a scream. "You lie—and you know you lie! Look at this face! Iss it mine? And these eyes! Mine were once blue—or does my half-memory trick me yet again!"

I struggled for reason and calmness. My voice became steadier, but my wide-eyed gaze would not be torn from his mask-like face. That face shouted of grafted flesh, and in the technique of the plastic surgery I saw the mark of a familiar hand. I said:

"Those were frantic days, back there in December, 1916. Perhaps Weiss did the best he could—with your face. And your eyes—well—we worked with the materials we had at hand. Perhaps—"

"Tell me!" he commanded. "You were there! You should know! Who am I?"

I shook my head. Had I known positively at that moment that the mere telling him the truth as I saw it stood between me and death, I still could not have told him. I said: "I don't know. I was at Burkhafen, but I was not in the surgery—then."

He flung out his arms in a final gesture of exasperation. He turned and strode forward on the dim trail muttering audibly to himself:

"To have a little memory—so little—and no more." Then abruptly he switched to German, and despair reeked in his voice: "*Nein—nein! Es hat nicht sollen sein!*" ("No, no! It was not so to be!")

I struggled to my feet and followed him. When I drew near I summoned courage and asked: "The Baroness? Marthe?"

He gave me no direct answer, but hurried on. When a cobra lashed

at us from an overhanging snag, he caught it around the throat in his bare hands. He flung it from him and it went slithering through the dank growth and I thought I saw fear in its saffron, lidless eyes. A prowling jackel faced us on the trail. Its quivering nostrils touched Duke's scent and as though pursued by racing fire the hungry beast went slinking off among the tangled vines and reeds. Even now I remember those things about him, Diane, and I know that quality about him, whatever it was, saved us both. He kept tramping on like a soulless zombie when I would have given up. We came at last to a village by the sea.

My hand again, Diane. I wonder sometimes; will it never grow strong?

CHAPTER IV

"Why Don't You Die?"

THERE followed interludes of danger and thoughtless daring. Time flowed past us; months and years; meaningless years. Then it was spring, the year 1935. Duke and I had been in China for almost a year. The two of us, and another flyer for the Chinese, Dick Walling, sat in a crude canvas shelter. Walling, a newcomer, peered out through a rent in the canvas, casting his eyes over the three ships crowded into the make-shift hangar. Then his eyes rested for a moment on the form of black Sickle, perched on the left wing of Duke's ship. "How long does a ship last in this man's war?" he asked. "That is, on an average?"

Duke answered: "As long as the pilot—on an average." And I knew he wasn't just being short. Young Walling hadn't learned that we didn't talk about such things.

The roar of a motor burst suddenly upon our ears. Duke took a fresh cigarette from the pocket of his leather flying jacket, and lighted it from the stub he snipped from his lips. The stuttering spat of machine gun fire kept time with the wet perfo-

rations that ploughed the tin roof of our hangar.

"A Jap," Walling said, excitement burning in his eyes. "And just one, all alone, by the sound of it."

Duke pumped a cloud of smoke from his lungs. His mask-like face showed no emotions as his thin lips moved mechanically. "They don't travel alone. Not Japs."

Again the wire-whine of a diving pursuit ship; the sudden deep voice of a powerful motor, followed by more leaks in the sagging tin roof as the second enemy plane came over. We stepped from the shelter as the third dived and zoomed past the hangar, its gun spitting steel-jacketed death. Duke tossed his cigarette to the damp earth and carefully ground it beneath his booted heel.

"Hell of a day for upstairs, but that I will haf to stop."

Walling cocked a curious ear to Duke's strangely twisted speech and then let his gaze stray over to the black bird-thing perched on the left wing of Duke's Boeing. "Going it alone again, Duke?" Walling asked.

Duke nodded briefly. "There's only three Japs." He called Sickie down from the wing, and with the bird cradled in his arm, crawled into the cockpit.

I went around front to spin the prop, and Walling said to Duke: "God! You want to fight the whole damn' war by yourself, and carry bad luck in your lap while you do it!"

The motor caught, coughed, and turned over. Duke pulled the throttle back to idle and let the easy propeller blast carry his words back to Walling. "Don't ever call Sickie bad luck again, kid. Remember."

A minute later Duke was on his way, roaring from the earth in a steep climbing turn.

WE gazed after Duke's ship, saw it engage the three Japs.

"That damned black feathered beast," Walling muttered. "Have you noticed how it crawls to his breast and clutches there while he's in the air? It hangs there with the wind pressing it close to Duke's body—like it was protecting him. God! The

chances he's taking up there with those Japs—and they don't get him! I can't—understand!"

"Don't try," I said shortly.

Ten minutes later we watched one of the Japs go down—falling—burning. Dick muttered to himself: "God! See how he fights! Like a—machine—or a man without a soul!" And again I could hear August Weiss hissing: "A goot soldier hass got no soul."

The other two enemy planes retreated over the far rice fields, Duke eased to a muddy landing on the sodden runway. We helped him wheel the Boeing back under shelter. Sickie fluttered up to take his perch on the wet left wing. Walling lingered for long minutes by the fuselage, thoughtfully running the tips of his fingers over the gaping holes around the cockpit.

The next day six Japs came over. Duke nodded to me and then said to Dick Walling: "Take it easy, kid. Don't try to do it all. Keep close to the edge so you can ease out if it gets too tough."

We took off on cold motors. By the look on young Walling's face I knew Duke's advice had been wasted. The young ones were always too eager.

We came back, after it was over, Duke and I—alone. Then, in that sagging hangar sixty miles out of Keng Chow, Duke held a bottle between his knees while he took a worn newspaper clipping from his pocket. As he gazed at it he was utterly unaware of my presence; some unearthly look stole over his face, and his mask-like features were drawn taut with poisoned bitterness.

My hand grips the pen aimlessly, Diane. I must rest the fingers so you will be able to read these lines.

Time passed, and we lived on. But something was getting me, and it wasn't the risks of the game we were playing. I saw Duke's plane raked from propeller to fin by a steel-sheathed hail of certain death. I saw him land at our field with the lenses shot from his goggles; saw him carefully fold his shot-torn helmet and

stuff it secretively into his jacket pocket. I stared for an instant at the short-cropped black hair curling close to his skull, and then swung my gaze to watch Sickie flutter up and settle on the bullet riddled left wing.

Duke got a gourd full of native liquor from somewhere and we began to drink. With nerves already taut to the breaking point, the native potion only served to bring my fatalistic thoughts to the surface. I raised my cup and said:

"Death—is forbidden."

Duke said: "*Verboten—ja. Gott-for-dam!*" He drank and I sat back wondering. I didn't believe in Toltec legends and I didn't believe in immortality. Something was keeping Duke Banlee alive against all odds; something I didn't understand—and it wasn't luck.

WHEN I spoke again my own voice sounded strange. "Out there I saw the smoke of tracers fanning your jacket several times. It's getting me, Duke! Why in hell don't you die?"

A fluttering sound came from the tent flaps. Sickie made its awkward way to Duke's shoulder and perched there. After a while Duke said: "You saw strange things there at Burk-hafen. But did you ever see a man die twice?"

I held myself rigid against the impact of his words. I thought of August Weiss's ghoulish delight in his skill in brain-graft. How much did Banlee remember? Enough to drive him to futile insanity; or only sufficient to steep him in a brooding desire for revenge, a lust to kill?

I chanced a question. "Do you remember about the war—about your part in it?"

"In a way I remember, yess," he answered promptly. "Perhaps as one remembers a nightmare. I remember my part in it—vividly—but it seems—it seems like something that happened to someone else."

"And after the war," I questioned further. "For that little time when you traveled with—with Marthe—"

A bitter curse shot from his thin lips. He sprung to his feet, facing me, his shaking arms outspread, his strong fingers tensely curved and trembling.

"Marthe!" he hissed, "her body was like an angel crushed in my arms! But her mind! How it tortured me! Always lashing me to remember—prodding a torment of questions at my brain till it ached!" He sank back to sit on the edge of the cot again, weary and exhausted.

"Where is she now?" I asked. "Do you know?"

The only answer he gave me was a blank and uncomprehending stare. He took the worn newspaper clipping from his pocket, held it to the light and his thin stiff lips moved slowly, as the lips of a child who reads something he can neither understand or believe. I had another drink and stared out into the black African night. Sickle rubbed his shiny wing against Duke's smooth, hairless cheek.

I must put down the pen, now Diane, lest the pain of my cramped hand make these words illegible. There is, after all, but a little more.

CHAPTER V

Bird in Hand

THIS was in December, 1938. The Spanish front out of Velez. We had been at this base five days. Some strange intuition that the end was near had made me keep track of time. It was the evening of the fifth day that I saw Duke and the Spanish girl talking, over in the shadows of the shell-wrecked cathedral. Her name was Valere Estanez, and she looked childishly young and terribly beautiful when I saw her face for a moment in the dusk. The way her eyes went up to Duke; the way she fluttered around him. With their homes and lives in ruins, there wasn't much for these people to cling to—except love. And Valere thought she was in love with Duke Banlee.

Two days later came the new recruit for our death-loving squadron. Again we were three. He came in the dusk of the evening and my heart sank a little when I saw how young he was. A German boy; another one who had gotten out of the Fatherland just in time. I didn't know then the cause of his disfavor. He was just one of the unwanted.

He had clear, honest gray eyes and a well-formed face where a strong, sandy beard showed against the tanned skin. His manner told me he wasn't in this for adventure alone.

He was looking for something; some part of him that had been lost.

When I read his name from the identification card my glance went involuntarily to the fallen column of the cathedral where Duke sat talking with Valere Estanez, and for a full minute I didn't breathe. I saw how Valere's wide eyes were held fascinated, almost hypnotized by Duke's blank, compelling gaze. I pitied her. She was searching for love and had found only dominating fear. I read the name on the card again just as Duke and Valere started toward us. While they were still yards away I saw the German boy's gray eyes set on Duke's mask of a face.

A moment later I said: "Duke, this is our new man. His name is—Fritz Weiss."

Heavy silence shrouded us while Banlee's unmatched eyes clung like leeches to Fritz's face; his strong young body. Long moments while no one spoke and I saw Valere's deep dark eyes stray to the German boy, flutter away and stray back again. Duke turned momentarily to me. A new understanding marked his graven features, but when I looked into his blank eyes it was like peering into the empty caverns of a bleached skull—like gazing into phantom eyes where there was no substance; no soul to halt the beam of my stare.

Duke spoke suddenly to the German boy: "You fool! Why did you have to come—here?"

Then Duke stamped away toward the village and I knew he was going to the Cantina Mañana to get drunk. Valere Estanez faded into the shadows of the ruined cathedral and a few minutes later I saw Fritz Weiss wander that way. Later a rumbling cart drawn by a weary mule came laboring up the slope from the direction of Velez. I sat on an upturned oil drum, thinking and waiting.

The cart drew near and the figure of a bent and withered old Basque became clear in the half darkness. A woman sat beside him. The weary mule slowed to a stop and the woman climbed down and came toward me. She came close, peered at me and said:

"Don't you remember me? It is I—Marthe."

I nodded, and couldn't speak. The shivers of premonition ran up and down my spine. Things had been quiet around Velez. Franco was battering at Madrid; it seemed only a matter of time until his legions would win through, and then our turn would come. The strained quiet before carnage and storm. Through months and years I had watched the battle going on within this creature I knew as Duke Banlee. Opposing forces, unwisely thrown together, struggling for assertion. And here on the eve of battle was Baroness Marthe von Goelke, wife of the man whose still heart I had held in my hands, and Valere Estanez, and there was Fritz, the son of August Weiss.

Marthe whispered: "He is—here?"

I said: "Yes. Over at the cantina. You don't give up easily, do you?"

She leaned back against the wing tip of Duke's pursuit. Black Sickle eyed her menacingly, shuffled farther over on the wing and the lids drooped over his white-ringed emerald eyes.

"For a little while," Marthe said, "after we left Germany, I think he almost remembered. For a little time he was my Eric—almost. I thought I could hold him—keep him remembering. Perhaps I tried too hard. Soon he was no longer Eric, and he wasn't—the American. He lives—he can think and act—but he cannot love, because he has no soul!"

"Doktor Weiss?" I questioned. "Have you heard of him?"

She nodded wearily. "He has never been the same since Katterin died. He is bitter with hate for his country, now ruled by tyranny. Fearlessly bitter—and that is dangerous. Even now, he is in prison."

I looked past her and in the pale light of the newly risen moon saw Fritz and Valere standing close over by the ruins. After a silence Marthe turned, followed my gaze, and said: "That is why I have come. Fritz came searching for—for *him*, hoping there would be something he could do to right the wrong of his father. Fritz would have been a great surgeon too, if the purge had not made of him an

exile. But Fritz must be saved from this. He is innocent of wrong; he is not to be blamed for the misguided patriotism of his father."

Marthe was gone when Duke stalked back into camp. The next evening, with the moon, Valere strolled back to linger by the ruins. Duke was there waiting for her with black Sickle perched on his shoulder. In the moonlight I could see Duke's mask face, and at times even a ghost of a smile played there. A suggestion of pleading warmth crept into his toneless voice, but Valere seemed afraid; afraid of Duke and of Sickle. Fear and awe were in her eyes when she looked at the black bird-thing. Its beak was so red, as if it had dipped stealthily in blood, and the wafted breeze from its fluttering wings was heavy as the gallows breath.

I SAW Fritz Weiss come back from the village. He looked terribly young and alive, walking straight in the moonlight. Valere heard his step, and turning, ran madly to him. Duke stared for a moment and then whirled away, walking woodenly toward the cantina.

Two nights later Marthe came again. She spoke a low greeting to Fritz and he rose, smiled and bowed stiffly. Marthe walked straight toward Duke Banlee and said softly: "Eric!"

Poured into the tones of that spoken name was all the hope, the pleading and the love of Baroness von Goelke. The man before her only stared silently. She spoke again: "Eric. Don't you—can't you—remember?"

A strange inner emotion shook Banlee, something gigantic, tearing and rending. Then Sickle moved. From his perch on Duke's shoulder the black bird-thing flung its body forward with the speed and force of a diving plane. Marthe winced and staggered backward but made no sound as the bird crashed against her breast, sinking its finger-like talons into her flesh. I sprang forward but Fritz Weiss was faster. His strong hands gripped Sickle and tore him away, flung him roughly aside.

An animal sound that was neither word nor wail came from Duke's thin lips. For moments our eyes welded to his mask-like face. His features twitched and worked to the play of his searing emotions, and noted the drawn and stretched smoothness of the skin. My racing memory bridged the long years between Burkhafen and the present, and all that had gone in between. I remembered all the monstrous things I had been afraid even to think, and taken together they made a pattern, unbelievable perhaps, but clear.

The blankness had gone from Duke Banlee's eyes and instead the fire of madness burned. I led Marthe back to the village, bade her farewell, and begged her not to come again. Word had reached us that Franco had smashed through. Tomorrow, or the next day at the latest, his Italian Capronis and German Fokkers would be free to sweep over us at Velez.

Christmas day, 1938. I have nearly finished, Diane, and over this, the last scene, I will hurry quickly. The zero hour had come. While I hunched over the controls in the cockpit of the Sikorsky I glanced over at Duke Banlee and knew fear for the first time in years. The unfeeling shell I had grown at Burkhafen was broken away. Again I could feel and know compassion and sympathy. I was afraid for myself, and for Fritz Weiss who sat straight in his seat on the other side of Duke Banlee. I felt release; I was no longer a thanatophile—in love with death.

The Capronis and Fokkers already filled the air when we took off. We were three against a sky-full of Franco's mercenaries. I saw at once that Weiss was a real flier. I noticed his hands. Strong, sensitive hands, that might have been dexterous with scalpel and forceps. Now they were firm and efficient as he gripped the stick and the fire-release of the cowl-gun.

DUKE used to tell the kids to stay on the edges. He didn't say that to Fritz. In that last struggle there weren't any edges. They were all around us and Fritz was in the thick of it. He would dive in with throttle

wide, motor roaring and gun belching a stuttering challenge on the Fokkers and Capronis. Duke Banlee fought as he always fought; as only Jerry Knight and Eric von Goelke had ever been able to deal death in the air. Duke fought as a gambler plays; without fear, without mercy, and without emotion. He dived on a Caproni and it went down. Two Fokkers tailed him, spitting futile steel into his back. Duke's motor roared into an Immelmann and as he came over on his back I saw the high-speed Conrad vomiting chrome-steel messengers with unerring aim.

The Fokkers fell off, drunkenly, throttle wide, earthward with corpse-hands at the controls. Duke zoomed out of a loop and passed me. I saw kill-lust in his eyes; saw his dagger stare slant to Weiss, who was engaging another Fokker. As Duke sped past I saw Sickle, clutched against Duke's breast, held there by the force of rushing air. Next a Caproni faltered in the range of Duke's cowl-gun. There was a fluttering of fabric as tracers ripped it back and forth. I saw the youthful face of the Caproni pilot. Another kid. Dark olive skin, wide eyes. He would have a mother over in Calabria, and brothers and sisters. Perhaps a sister as youthfully bewitching as Valere Estanez, almost as beautiful as yourself, Diane. The Italian's helmeted head jerked back. Blood gushed from drawn-back, pain-twisted lips. The Caproni went down, a hell of flame.

Duke eased away from the thick of the fight. He came out of that maelstrom of wings and guns and roaring motors along with Weiss, a little behind and above. I thought: the moment has come. Duke's cowl-gun let out a short blast as though feeling for the target. Weiss turned his head and looked back at Banlee. Fritz's face; wide, ruddy and alive. Something in the expression of that face; bewilderment, surprise, but no fear.

For a speeding instant Duke Banlee's face flashed before me and I saw a visage I shall never forget. I saw it first against the white surgery table at Burkhafen; it was the face of Baron Eric von Goelke, and now on

those suddenly transformed features, I read hate, and the lust for revenge—and madness.

Came a stuttering blast from the gun of a diving enemy Fokker. The sound of Fritz's exhaust cut off like a played out record. I saw Fritz's Sikorsky slip off to the left and away from Banlee; saw Banlee follow. He cut in toward me to keep on Fritz and again I saw his mad face and the clutching bird-thing pressed to his breast. It seemed that all his hate welled up to vengeance on the son of August Weiss for the thing that had been done to him in the hospital at Burkhafen. Just as Sickie had pounced upon Marthe von Goelke, so was Duke diving now toward Fritz Weiss in the helpless Sikorsky.

THERE was no time for sane reasoning, Diane. Somehow I remember Fritz and Valere as I had seen them in the moonlight by the shattered fragments of the marble column at the shell-razed cathedral. Duke shoved the throttle wide open and dived on Weiss's powerless, falling Sikorsky. I heard the staccato stutter of Duke's gun, and then—

He was turning in a sharp bank directly before me. I saw that red-beaked black vulture bird clutched to his breast and I recalled dimly the weird Toltec legend of the black birds and the souls of departed warriors. It wasn't marksmanship; there was no time to aim. Two fast pursuit ships, whirling in a merry-go-round of death.

I squeezed the release in a crushing grip, heard the bark of the gun on my cowl, and while my insides became a vacuum, fetid waves ran up and down my back. I had the abhorrent feeling of firing slugs into the putrefying flesh of a corpse.

The black bird on his breast fluttered and its horrific death-cry was heard over the roar of motors; over the crash of guns. Jet black feathers were whisked out into the wind by the propeller stream. A small cloud of black feathers that bobbed and floated on the troubled air. Duke's ship seemed to go out of control. I saw his face once as he spun past

me; his bloodless head hanging over the cockpit edge. His limp arms lax, dangling.

I saw Fritz Weiss gliding earthward, to safety. Then a Fokker and two Capronis cornered me. I felt the stinging numbness of projectile impact; bullets grazing my skull and tearing the bones and flesh from my right hand which fell helpless from the control stick. Dizzy nausea and waves of darkness, rolling down out of the sky to engulf me. Stalling, spinning, falling, and always in the dim background a hellish phantasmagoria of whirling propellers, black feathers, and swooping wings. I do not question the Fate which brought me consciousness barely in time.

Later, I learned what little there was to learn from a family of Basques back in the mountains where Duke's ship had landed. It had floated to earth in a normal glide, as if some ghost hand manned the controls, and the Basques had found the body, unmarked and without wounds, with nothing to show why he died. Black animal blood clung murkily to the breast of his jacket, and he held the corpse of the strange red-beaked bird in his dead hands. He was buried according to the name on his identification card—as Duke Banlee, and the remains of Sickie rest with him in the grave.

So you see, Diane, how it was. That strange bird. Were the Toltecs right? Was the baron's soul in that ungodly feathered beast? Or—the soul of Jerry Knight? How can I know? When the black bird-thing was killed, all that was left of two men died. And—I killed that bird, Diane. So perhaps I ended the half-life of Jerry Knight.

I FOUND the clipping in Duke's duffle bag at the hangar. It was cut from the *Kansas City Tribune* of December 13, 1916. Since you lived in Kansas City at the time, you doubtless saw the same news item yourself. A picture of a young man with short, black hair which curled closely to his scalp; under the picture the brief announcement:

Word has been received through the British Embassy of the death of Jerry Banlee Knight, formerly of this city. Knight joined the Royal Air Force in January of this year, and at the time of his death held the rank of Lieutenant.

Details of the embassy's information are meagre, stating merely that Knight was shot down behind the German lines during the forenoon of December 11th, in an engagement with enemy planes.

Leftenant Knight leaves a mother, Mrs. Hanna Knight, and a ten-year-old sister, Diane Knight, both of this city.

I shall burn the clippings, now, Diane—this one and the one briefly dealing with the beheading of August

Weiss by a Nazi executioner—for I want to forget them if I can. If, that December day at Velez, I had known there was a Diane Knight, I might not have killed the bird—and *him*. How can we ever know what we *would* have done? I saved Fritz Weiss, saved him for the great good he can do mankind with those surgeon's hands of his—his father's hands. And saved him—for Valere. They were married this morning, and their hopes are high. They are coming to have dinner with me tonight, Diane. Can I—dare I hope you will be here too?