

# The WINGED DOOM

By Kenneth Gilbert



**N**INE hundred miles an hour! A speed almost half that of a rifle bullet, yet the torpedo-shaped plane driving along the upper air-lanes, its fin-wings out-thrust stiffly, was going that fast. As early as the first quarter of the twentieth century, airplanes had attained a speed of three hundred miles an hour with the old-style

combustion engines; but now, with electric motors energized by power-transmitting radio stations, there seemed scarcely any limit to the rate at which planes could be shot through space.

Up there in the thin, rarefied atmosphere, the cold had almost a brittle, snapping quality, yet the man who sat in the

control-cabin of the plane knew a sense of comfort and well-being. Air struck the curved nose of the machine and swept along the narrowing body with but little resistance, yet at such tremendous speed, this slight resistance created heat which was felt within the cabin. It was a ghostly flight and a silent one, except for the nearly inaudible humming of the powerful motors within the plane's nose. The whole of the night void, for that matter, seemed faintly beaded with this same high-pitched humming, as though the heavens were alive with a mighty swarm of bees. Now and then the twilight seemed to deepen at a focal point ahead, and a keen eye could have glimpsed the shadowy outlines of another plane. The fact was that the atmosphere was literally alive with aircraft, all darkened, and scarcely to be seen as they fled across the star-pricked sky.

The significant thing of their flight was that they were bound in one direction—East! It was the Hour of the Air, and America, after helping maintain world peace until late in the twenty-first century, had sprung aloft to resist aerial invasion from across the Atlantic, an attack that was being made without warning.

And he who was called The Kingbird, erstwhile buccaneer of the air-lanes—cleverest, most daring and most resourceful of all the free-booting falcons—had cast his lot on the side of law for once, and of his country, that the hostile death-cloud rolling up from overseas might be broken. Swifter even than the police-planes, those gray arbiters of the air, his small, clean-lined ship was shaming likewise the military craft, with their whizzing, bullet-like flight; and as for the luxurious private machines and passenger-carriers, both of which classes had been commandeered, their winging progress seemed heavy-bodied and sluggish.

As The Kingbird sat at the levers, his rather thin and colorless face more pallid than ever in the guarded light from the gyro-control

which, once set, held the plane automatically to its course, he reflected that this might well be the last gamble of the many he had taken with death. Perhaps this was a good way to die. He smiled grimly at the thought that if die he did, he would have at least once more outwitted old McLaughlin, head of the aerial police. There had to be an end to their feud some day; and this was as good a way as any.

Within the hour he had made a laughing-stock of the flying police. Almost under their eyes he had cast his net for spoils, and the haul had astonished even him. In his hands had been a military secret beyond price—no less than the formula for *coridium*, that new combination of metallic elements which had the amazing power of levitation, or nullification of gravity. Possessed of such a secret, one nation might easily dominate the world. *Coridium* would scrap every radio-driven aircraft; it could be made to wreck cities, destroy populations. A fragment of it placed beneath the greatest skyscraper, or even a mountain if that could be accomplished, would send the huge mass skyward with all the force of the revolving planet behind it. Gravity having been overcome, earth-dwellers next would be voyaging to other planets if the terrific power of *coridium* could be controlled.

The formula and the lone placque of *coridium* in existence—the placque a grayish substance sandwiched between two layers of insulating metal, which kept it subdued and intact—were the cause of this present attack by an ambitious and warlike overseas power. American chemists had compounded *coridium*, and under the international pact signed in 1987, America was obliged to share her secret with the world, that the balance of military power might be maintained and peace preserved.

And this was what America was planning to do when the placque of *coridium* and the more precious formula had been stolen

by a secret agent of the predatory foreign power. To possess itself of the discovery before other nations could learn the secret, and at the same time deliver a stunning blow at America, largest and richest nation on earth—and the most powerful potential enemy, therefore—this was the coup decided upon by the hostile power. Upon word being received that the agent had the precious secret, and was on his way home with it by airplane, the hostile war-birds of the overseas power had taken to the air, and headed for the American shore.

It was sheer chance that The Kingbird should hold up the agent's plane, and seize the *coridium* and formula. Thereupon, the buccaneer underwent a change. The secret agent and the latter's plane were sent crashing to destruction. But instead of The Kingbird keeping the priceless booty, he swung low over McLaughlin's headquarters, and dropped it, with a curt note of defiance. Thereafter, he shaped his course to meet the enemy winging across the Atlantic.

Freebooter of the skies though he was, The Kingbird yet had a peculiar loyalty to the country which had outlawed him. His life, held cheaply enough, and the marvelously-swift machine he possessed, were in that instant dedicated to the cause of his clan.

YET his plane was unfitted for service as a war-craft; he possessed no weapon save a flash-pistol, which had the power to blind, harmlessly and but temporarily, any human being at which it was aimed. The enemy, he surmised, was coming equipped with all the death-dealing devices which a super-civilization had evolved since the World War early in the twentieth century. The army planes of the American flight would doubtless give a good account of themselves, but he and his tiny machine could scarcely hope to be more than sacrificed.

He realized now that he had

outdistanced the American flight, and was now between the two opposing forces, virtually in No Man's Sky. Thereupon, he stilled the whirling propellers, and reversed them, braking his machine to a stop. At the same instant, the helicopters on the wings took up the task of keeping the machine aloft.

Like the dauntless little feathered flyer for which he was named, The Kingbird and his machine hung motionless in the air—perhaps fourteen thousand feet above the sea. This was his famous poise, which he used while watching for prey passing along the air-lanes beneath him.

Save for the quiet purr of the motors operating the helicopters, the night void now was a place of vast silence. In the gloom ahead nothing could be seen, nor in the rear; the advance guard of the American flight apparently having stopped at the coast-line to await the enemy.

He twisted a small brass knob on the instrument-board, and instantly, on the opaque glass screen of the television box before him, a panorama of the heavens in a wide arc was revealed. The tele-vision, a device of harmonized radio and light-waves, had the faculty of seeming to sift darkness from daylight; it intensified the weak vibrations of lightwaves, making it possible to see in the dark. And what The Kingbird did see, galvanized him into action!

Across the sky ahead, like the wide-spread wings of some gigantic bird, were moving, nebulous shapes. The enemy! The watchful outposts on America's eastern shore, by means of long-distance tele-vision, had been right, then, when they suspected that the cloud of planes, rising like the first smoke of a threatened world conflagration over Europe, had a sinister portent.

The Kingbird's hands moved swiftly here and there among the controls, and he shot earthward, for the penalty of his peek by tele-vision was that it revealed him at the instant it

had revealed the enemy. As he went into a steep volplane, gliding only on the resistance of air against the fin-wings, a beam of light stabbed the spot in the heavens where he had been but a moment before.

The beam swung back and forth, as though searching for him; and to his ears came a slight, hissing sound, as might be made by the swishing of a whip. Pale blue was that light-beam, with a faint yellowish tinge, like harmless, diffused moonlight; yet The Kingbird knew it for the terrible death-ray, which withered life and substance as though at the touch of a white-hot flame.

Though his eyes widened a little at thought of what would have happened to him if he had remained poised up there a few seconds longer, nevertheless rage burned in him at this exhibition of ruthlessness by the enemy. The death-ray had long been banned by international agreement as being too barbarous; yet the enemy was using it. No doubt the hostile planes were equipped with other deadly devices more horrible than this. His plane dropped more swiftly.

Yet in that rapid descent there came to him the glimmering of a plan. The foe had seen him, yet it was doubtful if they would pause to destroy him; they were passing on to engage the American planes waiting above the sea-coast. He would strike first; one glorious blow, and then he would have joined the list of historic martyrs, which have marked each successive generation since the dawn of mankind.

Therefore he checked abruptly his earthward drop, and planed ahead on an even keel, the flight-motors whining in a high, unaccustomed key. If luck was with him, he had already passed out of the arc of television by the enemy. A half-minute later he knew that his guess was correct.

High over him in the heavens, somberly driving toward the American shore, passed the dark fleet. There were many

thousands of planes, for the blended drone of their motors came down to him like the persistent diapason of a mighty pipe-organ. He dared not use his television again, for it might betray him to a scout plane winging along at a lower altitude. Yet the enemy planes were not traveling fast; rather they seemed to keep their formation in grenadier-fashion, until they met the shock-planes which the Americans had thrown out ahead of the main wall of the defense.

The Kingbird was going to the rear of the enemy, yet now he went into a breathtaking turn, doubling back in a magnificent loop that left him flying upside down, until he righted again, and began to climb. Unknown to the foe which was now ahead, he had become a pursuer; a swallow chasing a vast flock of eagles. Up and still up he went, until he reached the chill level along which the enemy moved.

Then he straightened again, and shot ahead. Gradually, the swelling volume of sound from the enemy motors began to din painfully upon his ear-drums, and he knew that he was overhauling the grim flight. Far below him, the Atlantic tossed uneasily; but he had no thought of it. At last, on the chance that the enemy would be looking ahead and not behind, he flashed on his television for a brief glimpse. What he saw, before he allowed darkness to envelop him protectingly once more, was what seemed to be the beaded girdle of a giant—a shape which appeared to stretch from horizon to horizon—being flung shoreward upon a well-massed but comparatively small phalanx of American machines. He readjusted his controls, and his motors whined with a new note, while the shell-like body of his machine became astonishingly hot under the increased pressure of the air through which it cleaved.

Seconds clicked by, with The Kingbird praying that the foe would not look back and observe him. Closer and closer he came,

without slackening speed. Then he saw something which crystallized decision.

It was an unusually large and broad-winged plane well to the rear of the flight. If size counted for anything, surely this was an important machine, kept well back of the line to avoid that first shock of onslaught. For another instant he dared snap on his television, and he observed that the great machine ahead rolled slightly as it struck an air-bump too pronounced for its gyroscopic compensators. Likewise the television revealed in that momentary roll, that the enemy monster was painted a grayish blue on its belly, as a camouflage color to blend with the neutral hue of the heavens, while its upper side was mottled with vivid designs which would make it practically invisible to any machine flying above it.

Darkness came as he snapped off the television, but now the swiftly-moving bulk ahead was visible to the unaided eye. Closer and closer his little machine swept. Now he was directly above the foe, and he slowed his speed to correspond with that of the other.

Then, gently, his lighter craft began settling. Without shock or jar it touched the sheathed upper-deck of the big plane. A faint sigh of escaping air as rubber vacuum-cups fitted to the under side of The Kingbird's plane, took hold of the bigger machine, which continued to drive on through space, all unconscious of the fact that the small adversary, like some parasitical insect, was riding with it. The motors of The Kingbird's plane continued to revolve, for he did not wish to betray himself just yet by disturbing the equilibrium of the machine below.

Out of the control-cabin he climbed, and dropped easily over the gunwale to the roof of the strange craft. He moved silently, though with precision, for now and then as he exposed himself to the rushing air, it seemed that a fierce gale tore at him, sought to wrench him loose. But in a moment he was sheltered

in the lee of a cabin on the enemy machine, and his fingers groped for the knob of a door just before him.

WHAT lay on the other side of the door permitted the wildest guess he could make. Men were there, ready to slay him the instant he showed himself, perhaps; yet he dared not falter.

As he turned the knob gently and felt the lock disengage, he drew from beneath his coat the flash-pistol, with its long, oversized barrel. This was the relatively harmless weapon he always carried on his aerial forays. The Kingbird was no killer; all he desired was to insure his own safety through intimidation of his victim. Slowly he opened the door an inch; then suddenly threw back the panel. And had he conjured himself out of thin air in the center of the cabin, his appearance could have been no more startling.

There were a dozen men in the compartment; officers in all the gorgeousness of gold-braid and showy epaulets, and they were seated about a carved table secured to the deck. Or rather, they had been, for now they were on their feet, staring at him in open-mouthed amazement. Elderly men for the most part, yet with here and there an evident young fop. The cabin was perhaps thirty feet long and twenty feet wide, and at the far end of it a pilot sat at the controls, a watch-officer beside him. Ranged along its walls were mechanical devices which The Kingbird could not at that moment classify, but which suggested, in their business-like array, that this was a war-craft.

Yet it was not these which claimed The Kingbird's attention. At the moment of his entrance, the group at the table had been facing one who sat apart from them; a youngish man, slender and dark, and more brilliantly-attired than the others. Young he was, though at first glance he seemed middle-aged; his hair was wispy and thin on top, and

his rather staring eyes were marked with dark pouches which told of long dissipation. He had been speaking when The Kingbird entered; a jest, perhaps, for his mouth was now frozen in a grimace that suggested humor. But now he was on his feet with the rest of them, his full lips and weak chin trembling.

As for The Kingbird, he suddenly felt faint as the astounding audacity of the thing he had done smote him. *He had captured the plane of The Heir—the Crown Prince!*

Of all that vast and sinister fleet bound on its mission of destruction, fortune had decreed that he should board the one most precious craft of all, the plane carrying the son of The Autocrat, that stern and war-like old ruler whose grandest gesture of defiance at peace-loving humanity was this flight of death-laden craft!

MORE than that. Here, too, was the brains of the flotilla. This weakling was in full command, although no more than the puppet of the wise old councillors who surrounded him. A heaven-sent opportunity for any martyr! In one instant, The Kingbird could strike a blow that would break the spirit of the old conqueror overseas. Without a qualm, The Autocrat might see ten thousand of his subjects perish in his behalf—yet the kingdom itself was not too great a price to pay for the safety of this shivering youth who was his son. World domination would not solace the warlord, if The Heir, pampered wastrel, did not come back alive.

No word was spoken; none was needed, for these high officers were of the intellectual class to which The Kingbird himself belonged, and they scorned speech when thought-transference was so much more rapid in such a critical situation as this. A barrage of hostile, challenging questions was hurled at the interloper who had materialized from nothingness, yet who was clearly master

of the scene, as he stood there, flash-pistol in hand. Masking his own thoughts so that they could read no more than he chose to convey, he shot at them one command:

“Hands up!”

The group saw the weapon The Kingbird held, and decided that it was that deadly and contraband side-arm, the ray pistol. The Heir gasped, and impulsively lifted his hands, the others hastily following suit.

For the moment, The Kingbird held trump cards. Yet at any instant, the radiophone might give the alarm to other hostile craft. It was an exigency which he had considered in planning this coup, relying upon the probability that the delicate microphone secured to the roof of the cabin would have been switched off, so that idle conversation—thought-transference being used only when speed was necessary—would not be broadcast through the ether. A moment later The Kingbird knew that his guess had been correct.

For he saw one of the pilot’s hands reach for a black knob on the wall—and The Kingbird surmised that it controlled the switch to the radiophone. As the man touched the switch, The Kingbird’s flash-pistol swung toward him; there was an intense white flare lasting not more than the thousandth part of a second—and the pilot staggered back, hands clapped to his eyes. One of the group of officers, furtively reaching with his foot for a push-button beneath the table, gave a muffled cry, and dropped to the floor, as that blinding flare of the flash-pistol came once more.

“G-G-God!” stuttered The Heir in a horrified whisper, his throat working convulsively. But he kept his hands aloft.

Still The Kingbird held trumps. The plane was now pilotless: but its automatic control kept it to its course and speed. Nevertheless, the situation called for swift decision. The Kingbird’s eyes roved about the cabin. He saw the gun-carriage mechanism of

the death-ray, but he was unfamiliar with its operation. True, he might compel one of the prisoners to turn the ray on the enemy ships, but only a few of the craft could be thus destroyed before the others would discover what was happening, and retaliate. Too clumsy.

There were, too, other implements which he did not recognize. Particularly was his attention drawn to a row of pear-shaped metal containers stowed in racks along the walls. He shot a thought-question at the nearest officer, compelling answer. What he learned was startling.

Atomic bombs? Outlawed by nations as the death-ray had been were these fiendish contrivances, yet apparently the butchers from abroad were overlooking no weapon, however horrible, in their determination to conquer the world. Let but one of the innocent-appearing, fragile things be broken, and the object which it touched would vanish. A tall building struck by one of these bombs would disintegrate into thin air. Held in leash beneath the thin, metallic skins of these little bombs was a combination of mechanical and chemical principles which achieved the goal so earnestly sought by scientists even as far back as the early years of the twentieth century—the destruction of atoms; and in a moment of black anger, The Kingbird knew the impulse to crash one of the bombs to the deck, and wipe out not only himself, but The Heir and the latter's officers. Yet that impulse passed as quickly as it had come. A better plan occurred to him.

He would deliver one stupendous, magnificent stroke at the enemy! He would send this huge plane, laden with atomic bombs, into the midst of the hostile war-craft, to wreak what havoc it could. His mind formed the words of a command, but before he could convey it, a voice spoke hollowly within the cabin:

*“Highness!”*

The Kingbird jumped involuntarily, as his taut nerves twanged at the unexpectedness of it. The voice seemed to come from the roof of the cabin, where a bell-shaped horn was secured. The pilot had succeeded in connecting the radiophone after all! Someone on another of the enemy ships was calling The Heir.

“Silence!” The Kingbird hurled the telepathic command at the group. The Heir had opened his mouth to reply to the call from the radiophone; but he closed his lips again, resolutely, as the flash-pistol's muzzle was fixed ominously upon him.

*“Highness!”*

AGAIN came the voice; conciliating, respectful, yet with a rising inflection that indicated mild puzzlement, if not worry. But The Kingbird was already firing telepathic questions and orders at the group in the cabin.

“You have an air-raft?” he queried them silently. Before going into action, a war-craft usually discarded the double-pontoons of thin, toughened aluminum which, charged with a highly-buoyant gas, were slung on the underside of a craft as large as this. But they had kept their air-raft, it seemed, because The Heir was on board this ship.

“Into it, then!” commanded The Kingbird. The group hesitated, looking for confirmation from their prince. “Quick!” was the telepathic order, as The Kingbird leveled the flash-pistol. The Heir made an inarticulate sound, and the officers sprang to obey. In the hands of this desperate stranger, whose eyes had the chill of ice and whose mental processes leaped ahead of theirs, they had become as children.

One of them lifted a trap-door in the deck, and then all stood back respectfully for The Heir to descend first. As the distraught prince sought to do so, The Kingbird gripped his arm.

*“You stay with me!”* His words

showered the group with a mental barrage. "His life depends upon your quick obedience," The Kingbird told them. He could feel the arm of the royal captive shaking. Still, one of the officers demurred; but it was significant that he did not utter his complaint aloud.

"We are above the sea," said his thoughts. "We shall drown—"

*"Highness!"*

The voice again! Suspicion, alarm was in it. The Kingbird's features hardened. He faced the hesitant officer.

"You dare not take such a chance?" he began. "Very well, then—" The flash-pistol was turned full on the face of the crown prince.

But the first of the group had dropped through the trap-door, and his action broke the resistance of the others. The Kingbird slammed down the trapdoor, and an instant later the big plane jerked upward slightly; there was a muffled cry which ended abruptly, and The Kingbird knew that he stood alone with his royal captive.

The voice from the radiophone spoke no more, but The Kingbird, peering through an observation-port nearest him, saw that a change was taking place in the enemy fleet—the ships were slowing down, massing to right and left of the royal plane.

With no fear of The Heir, the buccaneer jumped for the controls. The big plane speeded up, overtook the enemy ships, was at the forefront of the immensely long line. And when this happened, he jammed the controls hard over.

Instantly the great machine banked sharply, swung half around and, gathering speed quickly once more, went charging at right angles at the nearest enemy machine. The Heir was pawing at The Kingbird in sudden terror, but the next moment the sky-pirate was driving him aft, and out of the cabin. Up over the gunwale of the small plane they scrambled, and The Kingbird kicked at

the lever controlling the vacuum-cups which fastened his craft to the doomed ship below.

A lurch, and the little plane was free. The Kingbird, brain and muscles working at top speed, sent his machine into a volplane. Yet as they went down, with the frantic prisoner literally hanging on for his life, the buccaneer caught a glimpse of a dramatic thing taking place in the air above.

The enemy planes were striving desperately to escape from the terrible fate about to overtake them. There was no time to consider what had happened; it was merely apparent that the plane of The Heir was beyond control and, laden with its atomic bombs, was coming at them like an aroused demon. Like a flock of birds startled by a swooping hawk, they broke formation, darting this way and that.

So skilled were their aviators, that it seemed the purpose would be accomplished; but luck deserted them at the last moment. One side-slipping plane hooked a wing-tip into that of a neighbor; and other machines, driving close behind in the race with death, were forced to change course. Within the space of a second, they became a wildly disordered mass—and the careening plane of The Heir struck full in the center of them. The Kingbird saw an astonishing thing happen.

What seemed like a broken cloud obscured the spot for a moment, and then the air was clear. But where more than two score great enemy ships had been milling an instant before, there was nothing but space. There had been no flash, no sound of an explosion; nothing more than a single vaporous puff, as the atomic bombs, jarred by the collision, had been set off, consuming everything they had touched. The Kingbird shuddered, suddenly sick at the pit of his stomach.

And now consternation ran the length of the mighty rank. Nearer and nearer, the flight was approaching the American defenders; but for the moment the attackers

were numbed by the thought that The Heir was gone, and with him a number of the finest war-craft. What would The Autocrat, the royal father, say and do when he learned of it? Not an officer in that vast armada who did not blanch at thought of it.

YET The Heir's death could be avenged! With his own radiophone switched on now, The Kingbird heard commands going from ship to ship, as some ranking officer took charge. Only the sudden confusion of the enemy, and his own swift drop earthward had saved The Kingbird from discovery.

Down the long line of the flight, pale beams, like ghostly fingers, crept forth, groping for victims. He saw one of these death-rays touch an American machine that was well out in front; saw it crumple, and go down, glowing at white heat. It seemed that his hopes went down with it, for surely there could be no withstanding such a terrible force as this.

Now the two forces were fairly engaged. Flickering here and there among the American machines went the hostile death-rays; but so close had the opposing squadrons come together that occasionally the enemy's death-rays caught one of its own craft. But the Americans were not escaping these deadly shafts of light. Now and then the gloom of the heavens would be lightened by the sudden glow of a stricken plane; and the machine, with its crew dead in a heat of more than seven thousand degrees Centigrade, would describe a curve earthward like a gleaming comet.

Yet of a sudden the odds of the battle clearly being carried against the defenders up to this point, swung back. As the American machines closed in, queer things began happening to the enemy. The hostile machines, driving ahead or hanging poised in air, would abruptly hurtle down, end over end, and then crumple.

The Kingbird thrilled at sight of it. America had given her military secrets to the world as rapidly as her scientists had perfected them, yet she was not utterly destitute of defensive tactics. The Kingbird knew that he was witnessing a demonstration of the new vacuum-grenades, as yet in an experimental stage, and not fully developed to a point where their discovery would be made public. It was known that when shot from magnetic guns at close range, they created a perfect vacuum in a radius of several hundred feet from where they exploded. The sudden change from normal air pressure to a perfect vacuum, and the ensuing concussion when the air-envelope collapsed again, would be fatal to any human being. A plane, relieved suddenly of supporting air-pressure, would drop—to crumple when it again struck the wall of air as though it had smashed on a rock. Heavy detonations that came to The Kingbird's ears, as the air rushed again into the vacuum, told him that his guess was correct.

Yet there could not be many vacuum-grenades on hand; there had not been time to manufacture them in quantities. Already, The Kingbird saw, the fury of the defense was waning; once more the tide of battle was going with the invaders. Yet both sides were losing planes; wrecked machines were fairly raining out of the air, but the Americans were vastly outnumbered.

These things he saw during that fearful plunge toward earth; but now he leveled out, with some three thousand feet still to go, and swung well to one side of the danger zone, which was immediately below where the battle was going on. As he came around in a wide loop, he sensed that the supreme moment of the struggle had come; that in his hands lay the balance of power in this sanguinary conflict, and if he could use it, all debts he might owe his country would be repaid.

He shut off the flight-motors, and with helicopters going, holding the plane poised in

air, he turned to the royal captive who, apparently, was near the point of collapse. But the grim intensity of The Kingbird, as he faced the prince, was like a deluge of cold water which shocked the captive back into normality. With a sort of fascinated horror, The Heir stared at the flash-pistol which the buccaneer pointed toward him.

"I give you five seconds to decide," said The Kingbird calmly. "Stop this battle, or—" and he fingered the flash-pistol suggestively. He had fallen back upon actual speech, to make his demand more emphatic, having snapped off the radiophone so that he would not be overheard.

The Heir lifted terror-stricken eyes to his captor. The prince understood what a ray-pistol did, and he believed that it was such a weapon that was now trained upon him. But—stop this battle? When his royal father had planned for years for this very thing? It was too much! He'd die first.

"Then die you shall," said The Kingbird, reading the other's thoughts. "Humanity will be the better for it. And the spawn of your dynasty dies with you." He raised the pistol until the thing pointed directly at the prince's eyes.

"First, I blind you," said The Kingbird, meaning every word of it, "and then we both die. We'll crash with the plane when it goes down, and they'll find your body on the soil of the country you have sought to destroy. Compose your thoughts now, for they are to be your last!"

HIS own face had become strained, drawn, and he saw a like expression reflected in the face of The Heir. It was a contest between two wills—and one was strong and the other weak. Yet the prince fought against the thing; fought a fear that was seemingly at that moment greater than fear of death—the realization that he would have to face his terrible old father, and confess.

What would The Autocrat say? How would he choose between victory and his son's safety? If The Heir died, the dynasty would end—would The Autocrat choose that rather than forego triumph at this moment? Almost The Heir blubbered as he considered it.

His father loved him! Better than all else in the world. Besides, this war was not of The Heir's choosing; he had opposed it from the start. A flush of indignation swept over him as he reflected that this terrible predicament had been forced on him against his will. If his father had not been so headstrong, this would never have occurred.

Life was sweet—and more precious than a kingdom. And this sky-pirate who confronted him was determined. Ah, yes, The Heir must consider the future of his people; the dynasty must not end. Not though he must pay such a humiliating price as this.

And so resistance went out of him; and The Kingbird, reading his thoughts, snapped on the radiophone, indicating it with a gesture. Nervously, The Heir faced the transmitter; and The Kingbird could not help smiling grimly as this scion of decadent royalty struck a pompous attitude.

"Marshals, attention!" he cried. "It is I, The Heir!"

Silence in the cabin of the little plane, while to the ears of both men came the intermittent thunders from aloft which told of the awful conflict going on. "Marshals!" cried The Heir louder, and stamped his foot impatiently, "I will have you listen to me. It is I, THE HEIR!"

The rumbling in the heavens lulled a little. The Heir's language was The Kingbird's own; thought-transference had long ago made all tongues one, for the mind speaks in universal terms. Then, suddenly, a voice boomed in the cabin:

*"Highness?"*

The same heavy intonations The

Kingbird had heard before.

“Aye, Herenye!” cried The Heir joyfully. “It is your prince!”

“God!” came back instantly the reply, in awed tones. “Yet we saw your plane go to destruction!”

The Heir smiled in superior fashion, as though he could recount a clever exploit of his own.

“You saw the plane crash, Herenye, but I was not on board. I shall tell you the story later.

“Attention, now! This is very important. It is my wish that you cease fighting. Withdraw!”

“Highness!” Shocked surprise, disbelief were in the voice. The Heir scowled, plainly irritated.

“Dumbhead!” he cried. “You heard my command! I mean it, sir!”

“Highness! We have the enemy beaten! They are still fighting—stubborn dogs, they do not seem to know when they are whipped!—but we are rapidly wiping them out. The unexpectedness of our attack has caught them napping. And soon we shall rain fire on their cities. I cannot believe that Highness would put aside victory when it is already within our grasp!”

The Heir fairly quivered in his rage and anxiety.

“Stupid sheep! I have told you. Is not that enough, son of a pig?”

“My orders, Marshal Herenye! You shall obey. God, man, I plead with you! It means my life. Cease fighting!” He screamed the last words.

Almost a sob came back from the old air commander.

“It shall be as you say, Highness. You are supreme in command here. But I beg of you to remember, when His Majesty, your august father, holds me to account, that I obeyed promptly, although against my will. It shall be as you say—and, thank God, you are

safe!”

Silence again, and The Heir leaned weakly against a stanchion, head bowed. Then, from the receiver, came a peculiar droning sound. It began on a low note, and soared up the scale to a swelling, high-pitched crescendo. To The Kingbird’s fanciful mind at that moment, it seemed like the enemy’s wail of despair.

“The recall,” said The Heir quietly. “You have won, sir!”

IT was chill in the upper air-lanes, and lonely, but The Kingbird was content. As he hung poised up there, he could observe the endless streams of aircraft flowing beneath him—pleasure-craft, freight and passenger-carriers, and occasionally a swift police-plane in somber gray. He remarked to himself that so far he had observed no luxurious and costly air-yacht which promised booty; on such as these he preyed, but the shock of the recent war, even though the latter had lasted but twenty-four hours, probably had yet to wear off before the over-wealthy would resume their normal ways.

Since morning he had been hanging up there in the sky, so high that he could not be observed on earth. Since sending The Heir to earth in a parachute, to be held as hostage until the final details of peace should be worked out, he had resumed his old station; there to remain, even though the radio newsservices all day had been crying of his exploit, hailing him as “The Man Who Won the War.” The Kingbird heard it with a grim smile, but gave little heed to it. Probably this sudden adulation of him as a hero was no more than a trick of McLaughlin’s. The chief of the flying police was doubtless playing a game to get The Kingbird into his hands, to answer for a long list of offenses against society. The aerial news-service had asked that The Kingbird make himself known, to receive the homage of a grateful nation; for

The Heir himself had recounted the exploit and described his captor, and old McLaughlin had supplied the identification. Nevertheless, the aerial buccaneer continued to remain shyly aloft.

Now the radio told the latest news. "Full Amnesty Promised." The Kingbird straightened up as he heard it. Even McLaughlin, with all his tricks, could scarcely go behind that offer. "Amnesty!" That meant freedom to go and come as he chose. An end to this ceaseless game of Fox and Hounds. The thought thrilled him.

At the controls once more, he went shooting earthward. It had been years since he had renounced his status in law-abiding society; it would be good to claim it once more, to be what the world called an honest man. To look McLaughlin straight in the eye,

and smile. Amnesty! It was worth trying, and he'd claim it.

But at that instant, he spied immediately below him a large and rich-appearing plane, moving leisurely through the air. Its refinements were such that they fairly shouted wealth. Aboard it were pleasure-seekers, doubtless, the nation's wealthy—easy prey for such a skilled freebooter of the skies as The Kingbird. Money, jewels, valuable furnishings—there was no telling what booty the plane might give up. At sight of it, The Kingbird quivered like a hunting-dog which strikes the hot scent of game.

The next second his plane went shooting along in pursuit of the other. After all, he was a sky-pirate, and could never be anything else, until the game was played out. McLaughlin's amnesty would have to wait.