

# **Pirates of the Sky**

**by Louis L'Amour, 1908-1988**

**Published: 1941**



Turk Madden came in toward the coast of Erromanga at an elevation of about three thousand feet. The Grumman amphibian handled nicely, and flying in the warm sunshine over the Coral Sea was enough to put anyone in a good mood. Especially when Tony Yorke and Angela waited at the end of the trip in the bungalow by Polenia Bay. A night of good company, especially Angela's, would take his worries away. The war in Asia was expanding. Someday soon America would be involved, and all this—the express freight and passenger business he had worked so hard to build—would be no more.

Curiously, Turk's eyes swung to the interior. The island was only about twenty-five miles long, and perhaps ten wide, yet it was almost unknown except for a few isolated spots along either coast. Several times, he had considered taking time out to fly over the island and down its backbone.

Madden shrugged. Flying freight, even when you were working for yourself, didn't leave much time or gas for exploring. When he saw Traitor's Head looming up before him, he banked slightly, and put the ship into a steep glide that carried

it into Polenia Bay. Deftly, he banked again, swinging into the cove, and trimmed the Grumman for a landing. It was then he saw the body.

The ship skimmed the water, slapped slightly, and ran in toward the wharf, but Turk Madden's eyes were narrowed and thoughtful. Violence in the New Hebrides was bad medicine and there, floating on the waters of the cove, almost in the bay now, was the body of a native with his head half blown away.

None of Yorke's boys came running to meet him. Instead, a white man in soiled white trousers and a blue shirt came walking down to the wharf. He was a big man, and he wore a heavy automatic in a shoulder holster.

Turk cut the motor, and tossed the man a line, then dropped his anchor. He was thinking rapidly. But when he stepped up on the wharf, his manner was casual.

„Hello,” he said. „I don't believe I've met you before. Where's Yorke?”

„Yorke?” The big man's eyes were challenging. He lit a cigarette before he answered, then snapped the match into the water with studied insolence. „He sold out. He sold this place to me. He left two weeks ago.”

„Sold out?” Madden was incredulous. „Where'd he go? Sydney?”

„No,” the man said slowly. „He bought passage on a trading schooner. He was going to loaf around the islands awhile, then wind up in Suva or Pago Pago.”

„That's funny,” Madden said, rubbing his jaw. „He ordered some stuff from me. Told me to fly it in for him. Some books, medicine, food supplies, and clothes.”

„Yeah,” the big man nodded. „My name is Karchel. He told me he had some stuff coming in. My price included that.”

„You made a nice buy,” Turk said. „Well, maybe I can do some business with you once in a while.”

„Yeah,” Karchel said. „Maybe you can.” His eyes turned to the plane. „Nice ship you got there. Those Grumman amphib do about two hundred, don't they?”

„Most of them,” Madden said shortly. „This was an experimental job. Too expensive, so they didn't make any more. But she's a honey. She'll do two forty at top speed.”

„Well,” Karchel said, „you might as well come up and have a drink. No use unloading that boat right now. An hour will do. I expect you want to get away before sundown.”

He turned and strolled carelessly up the path toward the bungalow, and Turk Madden followed. His face was expressionless, but his mind was teeming. If there was one thing that wouldn't happen, it would be Tony Yorke selling out.

Tony and Angela, he was sure, loved their little home on Polenia Bay. If they had told him that once, they had told him fifty times.

Now this man, Karchel, something about his face was vaguely familiar, but Turk couldn't recall where he had seen it before.

„You don't sound Dutch,” Karchel said suddenly. „You're an American, aren't you?”

„Sure,” Turk said. „My name is Madden. Turk Madden.”

Instantly, he realized he had made a mistake. The man's eyes came up slowly, and involuntarily they glanced quickly at the brush behind Turk. Another guy, behind me, Turk thought. But Karchel smiled.

„I heard that name,” he said. „Weren’t you the guy who made all that trouble for Johnny Puccini back in Philly?”

Sure, Turk thought. That would be it. How the devil could he ever have forgotten the name of Steve Karchel? Shot his way out of the pen once, stuck up the Tudor Trust Company for \$70,000, the right-hand man of Harry Wissler.

„If you want to call it that,” Turk said. He stepped up beside Karchel. „Johnny was a tough cookie, but he wanted to organize all the mail pilots. I was working for Uncle Sam, and nobody tells me where to get off.”

Karchel dropped his cigarette in the gravel path.

„No?” he said. „Nobody tells you, huh?”

Two men had come out of the brush with Thompson submachine guns. They looked tough. Covered all the time, Turk thought. Those guys had it on me. I must be slipping. Aloud, he said:

„You boys got a nice place here.” He looked around. „A right nice place.”

„Yeah,” Karchel chuckled coldly. „Lucky Yorke was ready to sell.” He motioned up the steps. „But come on in. Big Harry will be wanting to see the guy who thumbed his nose at the Puccini mob.”

Turk walked up the steps and then the mosquito netting flopped from the door, and a man stepped out. He was a slim, wiry man with a narrow face. His eyes were almost white, his hair lank and blond. He was neatly dressed in a suit of white silk, and there was a gun stuck in his waistband.

„Who’s this punk?” he snapped. „Didn’t I tell you if you found any more to cool ’em off?”

„This guy’s different, Chief,” Karchel said. „He’s a flyer. Just flew in here with some stuff for Yorke. I told him how we bought the place, and the stuff would come to us.”

„Oh?” Big Harry Wissler sneered. „You did, did you?” He stepped up to Madden, his white eyes narrowed. „Well, he lied. We wanted this spot, so we just moved in. Some of these damned niggers got in the way, so we wiped ’em out.”

„What about Yorke?” Turk said. „And Angela?”

Wissler’s eyes gleamed. „What? What did you say? Who’s this Angela?”

Madden could have kicked himself for a fool. Somehow then, Angela Yorke had managed to get away.

„What d’you mean?” Wissler snapped. „Speak up, you damn fool! Was there a woman here? We heard she’d left!”

„She had,” Madden said quickly. „I didn’t think.”

„Oh? You didn’t think!” Wissler sneered. Then he wheeled, his eyes blazing. „You idiots get out an’ find that woman! Find her if you tear the place apart. The one who finds her gets a grand. If you don’t have her by night, somebody gets killed, see?”

The man was raging, his white face flushed crimson, and his small eyes glowed like white-hot bits of steel.

„Take this punk away. Put him somewhere. I’ll take care of him later.”

Karchel’s hand was shaking when he took Turk’s gun. The two men with tommy guns covered him so he was powerless. Then, they hurried him from the verandah and down to a big copra shed.

„The chief’s got the willies,” Karchel said. „We better watch our step.”

„Why stick with him?“ Turk said. „You’ll get it in the neck yourselves, if you aren’t careful.“

„You shut your trap,“ Karchel snapped abruptly. „I would’ve burned if he hadn’t helped me out of the pen. You couldn’t leave him, anyway. He’s got eight or ten million hid away. He’d follow you till the last dime was gone. He’d get you. Nobody ever hated like that guy.“

Behind the Copra shed a steep cliff reared up from the jungle growth, lifting a broken, ugly escarpment of rock at least two hundred feet. Here and there vines covered the side of the precipice, and from the rear of the shed to the foot of the cliff was a dense tangle. Once, three months ago, Turk had helped Yorke find an injured dog back in that tangle.

A sudden thought came to him with that memory.

„Damn! My plane’s sinking!“ he shouted.

Karchel stopped abruptly, staring. Madden swung, and his big fist caught the gunman on the angle of the jaw, then he leaped around the corner of the copra shed and ran!

Behind him rose a shout of anger, then one of the men who had been with Karchel sprang past the corner and jerked up his submachine gun. Turk hit the ground rolling, heard bullets buzzing around him like angry bees, one kicking mud into his face. Then he was around the corner and into the brush. He dropped to his hands and knees and crawled between the spidery roots of a huge mangrove, wormed his way around the bole of the tree, and then on through another.

He halted, breathing hard, and began to work his way along more carefully. This was the way the dog had come, trying to find a place to die in peace. Almost before he realized it, he found himself at the foot of the cliff.

Again he halted, pulled aside a drapery of vines. He stepped quickly into a crack in the rock and found himself in a chimney of granite, its walls jagged and broken. It led straight up for over two hundred feet. Carefully, taking his time, he began to climb.

It was nearly a half hour later that he came out on top, and without waiting to look back, walked quickly into the jungle and started for the top of Traitor’s Head.

He had been climbing for some time when he heard the movement. Instantly, he dropped flat on his face and rolled over into the grass beside the trail. The movement came to him again, and he edged along in the brush, peered out.

A girl was coming down the trail, moving carefully. In one hand she gripped a sharpened stick, a crude weapon, but it could be a dangerous one.

„Angela!“ he gasped.

„Turk!“ Her eyes brightened and she ran toward him. „I saw you flying in, tried to warn you, but you didn’t see me. I was on the summit of the Head.“

„Where’d they come from?“ he asked. „How long have they been here?“

„They came in about three days ago. They’ve got a steam yacht hidden, with a lot of gunmen aboard. They’ve two planes, too. They killed Salo, our foreman. Tony came running down the beach and knocked one of the men down. They grabbed

him then, and started beating him. I knew I couldn't help him by going down there, so I hid."

"A good thing you did," he said. "That blond-headed man? He's Harry Wissler, a gangster from the States, and as crazy and dangerous as they come. The big man is Steve Karchel, he's almost as bad."

"I heard them say they were going to hijack some ships," she told him. "They have a fast motorboat and two planes. They want to use this for a base, and loot ships going to and from Australia."

"That's absurd!" he said. "They couldn't get away—" He hesitated. "They might, at that. They wouldn't leave any survivors, and they'd sink the ships. There's a war on now, that might make the difference."

"What are we going to do, Turk?" Angela said. Her gray eyes were wide, serious. "We've got to do something! Tony's down there—they may kill him any time. And then some ship will come along... it would be awful!"

"Yeah," he replied, nodding slowly. "Where's their yacht?"

"In Cook Bay. But they won't leave it there long. It is too exposed."

"So's Polenia, as far as that goes. But the cove is okay. That is sheltered enough. Did you hear them mention any particular ship?"

"The ERRADAKA. I remember her very well because I once went from Noumea to Sydney on her. But they expect to get her before she reaches Noumea."

The ERRADAKA was a passenger liner of some fifteen thousand tons, running from San Francisco to Sydney. She passed within a comparatively short distance of the island.

"Our problem now is to hide," he told her. "They've got orders to find us—or else."

"We'll go where I've been." She walked faster, and he was glad to step out and keep moving. "It's in a place they'd never discover in years!"

They reached the round top of Traitor's Head, and she walked straight forward to the very edge of the precipice. Then she stepped carefully over the edge!

He gasped and jumped to catch her arm, but she laughed at him.

"Come on over!" she said. "See! There's a ledge, a few steps, and a cave!"

An instant his eyes strayed out over the edge. It was a long drop to the sea, and yet a more secure hiding place couldn't be found. The cave was invisible from above, and one had to dare that narrow, foot-wide ledge before they could see the black opening. Inside it was dry and cool, and somewhere he heard water running.

"How in the world did you ever find this?" he demanded, incredulous.

"I climbed the Head one day, just to be doing it, and saw a rat go over here. I hurried up to see why a rat should commit suicide and saw him disappear in the rock. I decided to investigate, and found this. Even Tony doesn't know it's here!"

Turk Madden looked around the bare, rock-floored cave. A perfect hideout if ever there was one. Their greatest danger was to be seen from the sea when coming or going. A boat or plane might see them, as it was coming through the entrance to Polenia. Otherwise, with food and water, they could remain indefinitely.

He stepped toward the opening, then stopped dead still. A low murmur of voices came to him, and Turk tiptoed to the cave entrance, motioning to Angela for silence. Above on the cliff edge, two men were talking.

„They aren't up here, wherever they are,” one man growled. „The chief 's in a sweat about the dame; it's a waste of time, if you ask me.”

„There's worse ways of wasting time, Chino,” a second man said. „I'd like to find her. A grand is a lot of dough.”

„What d'you think about goin' after these ships?” Chino asked. „I don't know a damn thing about ships.”

„It's a steal. A war goin' on, lots of ships missin' anyway, an' if we don't leave anybody to sing, what can go wrong? Durin' the last war, a German tramp freighter did it for a couple of years. If they did it, why can't we? It's like Harry says. When everybody is fightin' there's always a chance for a wise guy to pick up a few grand.”

„Well,” Chino said. „I'm going back down in that jungle. I want to see if I can't find something. Coming?”

„I'll stick around,” the man said, slowly. „I'm fed up crawlin' through the brush.” Turk Madden tiptoed back to Angela.

„One of them's leaving,” he whispered. „There may be a chance!”

He picked up the stick Angela had carried. Then he turned and slipped back to the cave entrance. Stopping, he felt on the rocky floor to find a loose fragment of stone. Suddenly, there was a gasp behind him and he looked up.

A burly, flat-faced man was standing in the cave entrance, his eyes gleaming with triumph.

„Hold it, buddy,” he said softly. „I don't want to take no dead meat back to the chief. All you got to do is come quiet.”

„How'd you find this place?” Turk demanded.

The man chuckled wisely. „I seen your tracks back a ways. I said nothing to Chino, because I want that grand for myself. Me, I done some huntin' as a kid, so I figured the lay. I seen half a heel print from a woman's shoe right on the rim where there was a little dust.”

„That's clever, plenty clever.” Turk took a firm grip on the stick. Half concealed by the darkness of the cave, he had inched himself forward to striking distance. Suddenly, like a striking adder's head, the sharp stick leaped forward, the point tearing a jagged gash through the gunman's wrist!

Involuntarily, the man's hand jerked up and his fingers opened wide. He dropped the gun and stepped back with a cry of pain. And in that split second, Turk Madden stepped in.

Slugging the man in the belly with a bludgeoning right, he knocked every bit of breath from his body. Then a short, vicious left hook slammed the man on the chin and drove his head against the jagged rock beside the cave entrance. The man staggered and then fell clear. Where the leering gunman had stood an instant before, now the cave entrance was empty and behind the falling man a cry trailed up through the still air.

Quickly, Turk stepped outside and up the narrow ledge. It was the work of an instant to brush out the tracks, then he retreated as swiftly as he had come forth, picking up the heavy automatic as he returned to the cave.

„That was close,” he whispered.

For three hours, they waited in the cave, hearing the sounds of the searchers above. The gunman’s cry had obviously carried far enough for Chino to hear, yet when they came searching, there was nothing. The men came and went, then darkness began to gather, and finally Chino spoke up.

„To hell with it!” he snarled. „I must’ve been dreamin’! Buck probably went off huntin’ in the brush.”

„No tracks left here,” Karchel insisted. „Where could he have got to?”

„If you ask me,” one of the men said abruptly, „I don’t like it. No guy as tough as Buck vanishes into thin air. If he ain’t here he went somewhere, didn’t he? Well, I don’t like it!”

„Afraid of ghosts?” Karchel sneered.

„Maybe I am,” the man said doggedly. „Funny things happen in these islands! I been hearin’ plenty!”

„Oh, shut up!” Karchel snapped, disgusted.

They left. „You know, Angela,” Turk said softly, „we’ve got something there. Those guys may not think they are superstitious, but all of us are a little. And maybe—”

„Maybe what?” Angela asked anxiously.

„I’m going out,” he said. „I’m going out to get Tony. And I’m going to throw a scare into those guys they’ll never forget!”

It was two hours before he slipped through the brush near the house, and paused on the edge of the jungle, studying the layout thoughtfully. Yorke might be imprisoned in the copra shed, and he might be held in the bungalow itself.

Several windows were lighted, and Turk could see men moving about, apparently getting ready to leave. One of the men came out and stood near the roots of a giant ficus tree. Madden glimpsed his face in the faint glow of a lighted match as the man touched it to a cigarette.

With a quick slice of his pocketknife, Turk cut a strip of liana from a long vine hanging near him. Then, soundlessly, he made a careful way over the damp earth to the giant tree. Like a ghost he slipped into the blackness among the roots. Before him, he saw the man stir a little, saw the faint gleam of light on the metal of a gun. He stepped closer.

He made a crude running noose in the end of the liana, and with a quick motion, dropped it over the man’s head, jerking it tight! With a strangled cry, scarcely loud enough to be heard a dozen feet, the man grabbed at his throat. Then, Turk stepped in quickly, and slugged him in the stomach. Without a sound the man tumbled over, facedown in the mud.

Taking his gun and cartridges, Turk slipped off the crude noose and slipped back among the roots. Working swiftly, he had almost completed a semicircle around the house when he heard the man cry out.

Someone ran past him swearing, and Turk saw lights go out suddenly in the house. In the darkness, he could distinguish a stream of shadowy figures, starlight gleaming on their guns, as they poured from the house.

„What the hell’s wrong now?” Wissler was demanding.

„It was Gyp Davis,” Karchel said, with disgust. „Something jumped on him in the dark, or that’s what he says. Some slimy thing got him by the throat, he says, then kicked him in the belly.”

Wissler made an ugly sound, half a snarl.

„These yellow-bellied tramps!” he sneered. „Gettin’ scared of the dark! You tell Gyp and Brownie to get those ships ready. We’re taking off before daybreak. See that there’s plenty of shells in those crates. And a half dozen of those bombs the Doc makes. We won’t have any time to waste on this job!”

Suddenly, there was a burst of excited voices, and stepping forward in the brush, Turk Madden saw a cluster of figures coming toward the house. One of them was dressed in white, and his heart sank.

„Got her, Chief!” Chino exclaimed, eagerly. „We found the dame. She was in the brush up on Traitor’s Head. Do I get the grand?”

Wissler stepped toward the girl, and grabbed her roughly by the arm, pulling her toward him. Then he stepped back again and let the flashlight travel over her from head to foot.

„Yeah,” his voice was thick. „You get the grand. You take her up to the house and lock her up. Make sure she’s there to stay.”

Turk wet his lips. Well, here it was. There was only one answer now. He slipped both guns from his waistband and clicked off the safety catches. Go out there shooting, get Wissler and Karchel, anyway.

He took a step, then stopped dead still, feeling the cold chill of steel against his neck.

„Hold it, buddy!” a harsh voice said. „And don’t get funny with that gun.”

The man reached out from behind with his left hand to get the right-hand pistol. Then Turk dropped the other gun into the brush, speaking quickly to distract the man’s attention so he wouldn’t hear the sound of its fall.

„Okay,” he said. „You got me. Now what?”

The man prodded him into the open and marched him across the small clearing to where Wissler and Karchel were standing.

„Got the guy, Chief. That Madden fellow.”

Wissler stepped toward Turk. „Tough guy, are you?” He slapped Madden across the face with one hand, then with the other. But Turk stood immovable. A wrong move now, and they’d kill him. If they did, then Angela and Tony were done for, to say nothing of the hundreds of innocent people on the ERRADAKA.

Wissler laughed coldly. „All right, tie him up an’ lock him up. I’ll tend to this guy and that dame when we come back.”

Somewhere down the beach, the motor of a plane broke into a coughing roar. It wasn’t the Grumman. Probably one of the aircraft they were going to use for the attack on the ERRADAKA.

Three of the men hustled him away to the copra shed. He was hurriedly bound, then thrown on the floor. The three men left, and it was only a few minutes until



Madden heard two planes roar away toward the sea. It would be dawn soon, and the ERRADAKA with several hundred passengers would be steaming toward a day of horror and bloodshed.

He rolled over, trying to get to the wall. Reaching it, he forced himself into a sitting position and managed to get to his knees. This done, his fingers could just reach the knot behind his ankles.

It seemed that it took him hours to loosen the knot, although as he realized afterward, it could only have been a few minutes. When the ropes fell loose, he staggered to his feet. It was growing light outside and it was gray in the shed. He moved the length of the building, searching for something he could use to free his hands.

In a corner of the shed, he found an old wood saw. By wedging it into the crack in the end-boards of a worktable, he managed to place the saw teeth in the right position. Then he went to work. Finally, a strand of the rope fell apart and he hastily jerked the loosened ropes from his wrists, rubbed them violently. Now—

„Pretty smart, guy,” a voice sneered.

He turned slowly. Chino stood in the door laughing at him, a gun in his hand. Turk Madden's brain went hot with rage. Now, after all this struggle, to be deprived of escape? Chino was coming toward him, chuckling with contempt.

With one sweeping movement of hand and arm, Turk grabbed the saw and hurled it flat at Chino's face. Chino leaped back with an oath, and the gun roared. Turk felt the bullet blast by his face and then he sprang. The gun roared again, but Madden was beyond all fear. Chino's face was bleeding from a ragged scratch of the saw, and he lifted the gun to take aim for a killing shot when Turk dove headlong in a flying tackle. They hit the ground rolling, and Turk came out on top, swinging both hands at Chino's face.

The gun blasted again, and he felt the searing pain of a powder burn, then he knocked the gun from Chino's hand and sprang to his feet. The gunman scrambled up, his face livid with rage. Turk threw a punch, short and hard, to the chin. The gunman went down. Turk swept up his gun and started running for the door.

A man loomed in the doorway, and Turk fired twice. The man staggered back, tumbling to the ground. And another stepped up behind him, taking careful aim with a pistol, but Turk fired from the hip, and the man staggered, his bullet clipping a notch in a beam over Madden's head. Then Turk fired again, hurled his now empty automatic after the shot, and grabbed another from the man in the doorway.

He made the house in a half dozen jumps, felt something tug at his clothes, then felt the whiff of a bullet by his face, the reports sounding in his ears, flat and ugly. A big man with a scarred face was standing in the door of the bungalow firing at him. Dropping to one knee, Turk fired steadily and methodically, three shots hitting the man, another taking a stocky-built blond fellow who came around the corner.

Then Turk scrambled through the door over the fallen man's body and rushed inside. There was no one in sight, but on the table was a tommy gun, a Luger automatic, and several other weapons. Turk sprang past them, and seeing a

closed door, tried it. It was locked. He shot the lock away and stepped inside, gun ready.

Angela Yorke was tied in a chair in the center of the room. Tony Yorke, his face white and battered around the eyes, was lying on his back against the wall. Hurriedly, he cut the girl loose, handing her the gun.

„You two watch your step. I think I made a cleanup, but if any more show up, shoot—and shoot to kill!”

Angela caught his arm, her face white. He brushed something away from his eyes, and was startled to see blood on his hand. He must have been shot.

„What are you going to do?” the girl exclaimed.

„I’m taking the Grumman. She’s got guns that came with the ship, and I never bothered to dismantle them. I’ve got to stop those guys before they get to the ERRADAKA!”

„But you’ll be killed!” she protested.

He grinned. „Anything’s possible, but I doubt it.”

The Grumman took off after a short run, and Turk Madden swung the ship out to sea. The gunmen would land somewhere and wait there for the psychological moment. Their best chance was when the crew and passengers were at breakfast. And the first thing would be to get the radio room. Then sweep the decks with machine-gun fire, board the ship from the yacht, and kill the passengers.

Turk climbed to six thousand feet and opened her up. The Grumman responded perfectly, her twin motors roaring along in perfect time, fairly eating up the miles. The other ships were well ahead of him, he knew, but they would be in no hurry, for the yacht had to come up before they could attack.

Switching to the robot controls, he carefully checked the tommy gun and the other weapons he’d brought along. His ship carried two guns anyway, and with the additional armament he wouldn’t lack for fighting equipment. He left Tanna off to the east, then swung the ship a bit and laid a course for Erronan.

Erronan! His eyes narrowed. Why hadn’t he thought of that before? It was the perfect base for an attack on the shipping lane. There was a good landing on Tabletop, the flat mountain that was the island’s highest point, nearly two thousand feet above the sea. From there it would not be much of a jump to the course of the ERRADAKA. No doubt the attacking ships had settled there to await the proper hour of attack. Well, he grinned wryly, it wouldn’t be long now.

He cursed himself again for letting the sending apparatus on his radio get out of whack. He slipped on the earphones and could hear the ERRADAKA talking to another ship near the coast of New Caledonia. He turned his head, watching the blue expanse of sea beneath him and searching for the yacht. Then, suddenly, he picked it up, and a moment later, the ERRADAKA.

The yacht was taking a course that would bring her up with the ERRADAKA, and he heard the passenger liner calling her, but the yacht did not reply. Suddenly, a flicker of motion caught his eyes, and he turned to see two ships closing in on the liner. They were flying fast, one slightly above and behind the other.

Then, even as he watched, the first ship dipped a wing, and glancing down, he saw a tarp suddenly jerked from a gun on the yacht's fo'c'sle-head. The ERRADAKA's radio began to chatter fiercely, and then the gun roared and the shell crashed into the radio room, exploding with a terrific concussion. Fired rapidly, the second shell exploded at the base of the fo'm'st, dropping it in wreckage across the deck.

Then the first ship dove, and he saw the mass of people who had rushed out on deck suddenly scatter as the plane's machine guns began chattering. He had time to notice the ship was an older Fiat. Not so bad. At best they'd do about two hundred miles per hour, which would give him a little margin. The other ship was a Boeing P-26, somewhat faster than his own ship.

He swung her over hard and put the Grumman into a steep dive. He came down on the tail of the Boeing, both guns firing. The Boeing, seeming to realize he was an enemy for the first time, pulled into a left chandelle.

Madden let it go and swung after the Fiat. For just an instant, he caught the outlaw ship full in his sights and saw a stream of tracers streak into his tail. Then Madden swung up in a tight loop, missing a stream of fire from the Boeing by a split second. He wheeled the Grumman around in a skid, but the Boeing was out of range, and the Fiat was climbing toward him.

He reached for altitude, saw pinkish tracers zip across his port wingtip, and went into a steep dive. Suddenly, he realized the yacht was right below him, her deck scattered with figures and a cluster of them around the gun. He pressed the trips on his guns and saw a man stagger and plunge over on his face.

The others scattered for shelter, and his guns swept the yacht's deck with a flaming blast of machine-gun fire. Three more of the fleeing gunmen fell headlong. One of them threw up his pistol and fired, then his body jerked, fairly lifted from the deck by the burst of bullets. Madden banked steeply and saw the topmasts of the yacht miss him by inches.

His stomach felt tight and hard. He was in a spot, and knew it. Only a few feet above the water and the Boeing above and slightly behind, closing in fast. There was no chance or room to maneuver. He saw a stream of tracers cross his wing, missing by inches, then he glimpsed the looming hull of the ERRADAKA dead ahead. He clamped his jaw and flew straight at the huge liner.

His twin motors roaring, he swept down on the big ship, the Boeing right behind him. Then, just as it seemed he must hit, he jerked the Grumman into a quick, climbing turn, saw the starboard davits of the ship slip away beneath him, and he was climbing like a streak.

He glanced around, but the Boeing pilot had lost his nerve and swung off. Now he was desperately trying to close on the Grumman before Madden could get too much altitude. The Fiat suddenly loomed before Turk's sights and he pressed the trips, and saw a stream of tracers pound into the fuselage of the plane. He saw the Fiat's pilot jerk his head back, saw the man's mouth open as from a mighty shout, and then the Fiat swung around and plunged toward the sea, a stream of orange fire behind it!

Turk Madden swung the Grumman around, driving toward the Boeing with all he had. The Boeing held, guns flaming, and steel-jacketed bullets punched holes in the Grumman's wing, cracked the canopy and tore at the rudder. Then the other plane pulled up abruptly. In that split second the Boeing's belly was exposed. Turk fired a burst past the undercarriage and into the body of the ship. Yet still the Boeing seemed unharmed.

Turk did a chandelle, brought himself alongside her even as he saw the pilot jerk off his goggles and hurl them from him. The ship was wavering drunkenly, and the pilot fell over the edge of the seat, arms dangling. With a long whine that cut across the nerves like a tight board shrieking in an electric saw, the Boeing spun and dropped, a huge pear-shaped flame stretching out and out as the plane fell into the sea.

Turk Madden swung the Grumman and headed toward the yacht. If only he had a bomb now. He shrugged—no use thinking of that. He saw the yacht's gun was ready for another shot at the liner, and even as he went into a shrieking dive, he saw the flame leap from the muzzle of the gun and saw the gunners grab for another round. Then, he was spraying the deck with bullets, and he saw two men fall. Then something happened to the Grumman, or to him, and he jerked back on the stick and lifted the ship into a steep climb. But he felt sick now, and dizzy.

The ship wobbled badly, and he circled, let the ship glide in for a landing. It hit the waves, bucked a little. He cut the motor and tried to get up. The plane pitched in the sea and he slid to the floor.

He forced himself to his knees, startled to see the deck was red where he had rested. But he held himself there and pulled the tommy gun toward him. Even as he waited, he saw he was a little astern of the two ships, and about halfway between them.

Wissler wouldn't sink him. He would need the plane now. His eyes wavered to the liner, and he saw she had a hole through her forepeak and another on the waterline. He wondered why she wasn't moving, then looked aft and could see the steam steering-engine room was blasted. The splutter of a motor drew his attention and as the hull of the Grumman pitched up in the mild swell he saw a motorboat speeding toward him from the yacht.

He let the door swing open in case he fell and couldn't lift himself to see, and then leaned against the edge. Below him the water was stained with a little red. He didn't know where he was shot, and didn't even believe he was. Yet there was blood.

This was going to be close. If Wissler wasn't in that boat—but he would be. Leave it to Wissler to be there to kill the man who had hit so hard and fast. If he could cook Wissler, and maybe Karchel, there wouldn't be any raiding of peaceful ships, nor any attacking of plantations. The others would scatter without leadership.

The speedboat swung in alongside and cut the motor. Just beyond the plane. They'd ease her in slowly now. Maybe.

Turk Madden grinned. Puccini tried to get tough with him back in the States, and Puccini was a big shot. All right. Now let Wissler see what it meant to cut himself a piece of this cake. He felt sick, but he lifted the machine gun. Then Steve

Karchel saw him and yelled, his face dead white and his gun coming up. As the body of the plane slid upward and the boat sank a foot or two into the trough of a wave, Turk grinned.

There was the roar of the gun, and suddenly Steve Karchel's chest blossomed with crimson. The man sagged at the knees and sat down, his chest half shot away. Madden turned the gun and swept the boat. Flame leaped from somewhere, and there was a shocking explosion. Madden felt himself getting sicker, and he clung to the door. When he opened his eyes, the motorboat was drifting just beyond the Grumman's wing, and all aflame.

Then he saw Harry Wissler. He was standing in the stern, and his face was white and horribly red on one side from the scorching of the flames that were so close. The man's lips were bared in a snarl of hatred, and he was lifting his six-gun carefully.

Funny, what a fellow remembered at a time like this. That Wissler always stuck with a revolver. No automatics for him. Well, okay. Possibly he'd like this one.

The tommy gun was gone somewhere. Slipped out the door, maybe. But not the Luger. Turk lifted it. The gun felt terribly heavy.

He heard a report, and something smashed into the doorjamb. Then he began firing. From somewhere another boat was approaching, but he kept shooting until the gun was empty.

Slowly, the hulk of the speedboat tipped, and with it all that was left of Harry Wissler slid into the sea.

When Turk opened his eyes, he was lying in a clean white bunk and a couple of men were standing over him.

„Live?“ one man was saying. „Sure, he'll live. He was shot, but it was mostly loss of blood from these glass cuts in his head.“ The doctor shook his head admiringly. „He certainly made a grand cleanup on that bunch of would-be pirates.“

Turk smiled.

„*Has-been* pirates, now,“ he murmured as he passed out again.

