



By George Armin Shaftel

*Whenever the Legit Goes Sour and Grand Opera Nosedives,
Show Business Just Yells for Vodvil (Vaudeville)*

JUST ten minutes ahead of us a big bomber took off from Reykjavik with a bunch of touring brass hats and State Department officials. I still believe that it was because of them that we later ran into the trouble we had, though I can't prove it.

Here in Iceland it was still dark at 8 in the morning. Across the sky the long colored streamers of an aurora borealis were fluttering like a fan dancer's plumes. Lights shone in the windows of Nissen huts bordering the landing fields. As the engines of my big C-47 warmed up, I signed flight orders and made a final weather check and waited impatiently for my passengers to show up. From Reykjavik we were flying south with a load of morale. Sweetness and light for isolated army posts at the tag end of creation. Entertainers.

My big Army C-47 was assigned to Special Services, ferrying a group of show people to bases where American forces were suffering drudgery and boredom,

which cause plenty of casualties if they aren't fought. After leaving La Guardia Field, we'd made a one-night stand at St. Johns, Newfoundland; another at Julianehaab, on the tip of Greenland; and then we'd come on to Iceland. Here we'd stayed four days. Leaving Reykjavik now, we were headed for London—just for a breathing spell before junketing down the west coast of Africa as far south as Brazzaville, then loping eastward to air bases at Khartoum and Asmara and Baghdad. To the boys in the faraway places we were bringing a load of gags, gams and jive. Used to be, when *Variety* mentioned "the sticks" it meant the whistle stops along the I. C. and the Wabash, the tank towns where you might find deer in the gallery. Nowadays it's ivory, apes and peacocks you find in the back rows. Or polar bears and pandas.

I didn't ask for this chore. But since I'm a decrepit graybeard of a commercial pilot all of 36 years old, the Air Force figured I was best fitted for taxi work of

this sort. *Good old Joe Blake—he'll bring 'em back alive.* Oh, well.

"Here they come," my co-pilot, Sammy Hawes, murmured. "Feet dragging and yawning clear to their belly buttons." He said it fondly. We liked our cargo of show business. They had hearts big enough to feel the homesickness in the kids they entertained, and they gave their best.

Spry old Pop Daly, as usual, was first to the plane. He was 60 but chirpy as a cricket. He was a veteran of vodvil when Jack Benny was sawing a fiddle on the Orpheum circuit. Pop can be a one-man band, spin a rope, tap dance, juggle pool balls, and take a joke about an old maid in Peoria and switch it to fit a top sergeant in Yuma. He's got the raucous voice and breezy manner of a slightly mildewed William Gaxton. He's MC of our troupe.

I said, "Well, Pop, did you like Iceland?"

"Why not? Here I celibated my sixtieth birthday."

He climbed into the plane, and I gave a hand to our opera singer—Madame Roma Fanti. Madame Roma was a slim, quiet woman who didn't seem to have the big-chested vitality you associate with the gals who get three grand for a broadcast—until she started singing, and then she came alive as if 2,000 watts had been turned on.

"You were in good voice here, Madame Roma," I said.

"Not really, Joe. I sang hard because I was afraid. This place is a sort of mild purgatory, where the Valkyries take souls that are only half-dead. So bleak and gray and barren! Joe, darling, take us away from here quick."

I laughed right out; she tickled me with her prima donna ways. She gave me a cute healthy grin, and climbed on into the plane.

OUR two movie starlets came mincing along then: Marice Bryant and Lucia Lane. I didn't christen them, so don't look that way at me. They sang and danced. And though their talent was of the common or garden variety, they were so young and healthy and luscious to behold that they were a double-barreled shot in the arm for the boys. They said hi, tapping back yawns with magenta-colored fingertips.

"How'd you like to settle down in Iceland?" I said.

"I'd rather go to sleep in the Time Capsule!" said Lucia, who can read. But Marice widened her sultry eyes at me and said, as if she were open to suggestion, "With you, Red?"

I gave her a spank as we helped them up the ladder and she squealed delightfully. Both of them wore nylon stockings, up here just under the Arctic Circle; but Lucia had remarked that it was a sheer waste of our scenic resources for her and Marice to wear slacks. She had something there.

"Good morning, Miss Gary. Your migraine better?"

"Oh, much better," Graziella Gary said, lying heroically.

Miss Gary was our dramatic reader. Peace times, she was a lady professor at a women's college. She might have lied herself into the WAC but for her white hair. Since that was impossible, she joined us to read poetry to the boys. It was amazing how the G. I.'s went for her, too. She'd read classics to them, and verse written by service men all over the world about their gripes and yearnings and their pride in P-38's, pin-ups, bazookas and jeeps. Nobody in the troupe rated higher decibels of applause. And believe me, you've got to be mighty real to read poetry to the boys.

Behind her came our two xylophone players, Tom and Tim Baylor. Dapper, good-looking fellows, they looked thirty but were fifty.

That was the whole gang, except for Judy Daly—old Pop's daughter, who was our piano accompanist. We carried a tiny aluminum piano along. I looked around and discovered Judy standing behind me, gazing back over the base and the town. I stood and looked at her, my pulse skipping a beat. Judy was smart and pretty. She was so easy and natural and real that when, all of a sudden, you realized that she was an amazingly lovely girl, it was a jolt. I'd never met her before this trip; but I was very much in love with her.

"I want a good last look at this place," she told me, low-voiced. "If anybody had ever said to me that I'd fall in love with a swell guy in Iceland, I'd have burst right out laughing."

"Judy! Say, wait—" But she pressed my arm and hurried into the plane. Four days I'd been taking her riding on the stocky little Iceland ponies. Taking her swimming in the hot spring. Taking her strolling down the busy modern streets of Reykjavik. She'd been lots of fun. We clicked. She made me feel like a youngster with all the world before me again. But she hadn't once hinted how I stood with her. Until just now.

I walked through the plane to the pilots' compartment as if the aisle was paved with clouds—and just one thing laid a shadow on my thoughts.

I'd have to tell Judy about my Eddie.

FORTY minutes later we saw the first Focke-Wulf *Kurier*.

We had taken off without trouble, and climbed up through fog and come out above it at seven thousand feet. I leveled off into the south.

It looked like a routine flight ahead of us, and my co-pilot hauled out a western story magazine to read. Lieutenant Sammy Hawes grew up on a ranch in Texas, yet he likes to read western yarns, and I can't kid him out of it.

Sammy spotted the *Kurier*.

I wasn't swiveling my neck as I should've been—I was deep in a rosy glow of daydreaming bout Judy, and wondering how to I tell her about Eddie. You see, my first wife died several years ago. Eddie, my son, is twelve. On account of him I haven't remarried. Eddie is a very special kind of kid. He has his mother's good looks and her brains, too, thank goodness.

He thinks I should marry again. He's told me so. And when I brought Amy Barron to see him, he tried his darndest to make her like him. She happened to remark that she loved flying. He got excited and started talking planes to her. But he got off on terminal velocity and power loading and compressibility, and her smile began to wilt around the edges. He's quick to notice, and he got out my checkerboard. Amy brightened up—but practically turned into a pillar of salt when he set out my chessmen on the squares. She begged off; so, trying desperately to be sociable, Eddie got out his beetle collection. But when he got enthusiastic and reeled off Latin names for a choice bunch of bugs that had got into my plane by infiltration tactics during a trip across Africa, Amy claimed that she had an allergy against insects. That simply fascinated Eddie. He's going to be a flight surgeon. He begged her to let him write down her symptoms. Amy suddenly remembered she had a sick aunt she had promised to look in on. She also remembered, next time I phoned, to be out of town.

WITH Bea Allyn, I'd been more hopeful. But when she brightly tried to show Eddie the North Star one night, Eddie corrected her and admitted that he knew by heart the little handbook on air navigation I had written. Bea threw up her hands. But don't get Eddie wrong. He doesn't wear his hair in curls, and I had to fan his britches the other day for hopping freights in the Santa Fe yards. Eddie is a product of the air age.

How, I was wondering, would Judy click with Eddie?

We were twenty minutes past the south tip of Iceland, out over the open sea, when Sammy Hawes happened to glance out his side panel. He grabbed my arm and yelled:

"Joe, look!"

I looked. It was a plane.

"Must be the ship that took off just before us."

"No! This is a four-motor." He brought it close with his binoculars. "Joe, that's a Focke-Wulf *Kurier!*"

"Let me see."

As I made out the tapered wing with irregular trailing edge, the four underslung motors and the torpedo-shaped underturret and bomb bay, set off-center, I knew that Sammy was right. It was a *Kurier*, the long-range bomber that the Germans were using to attack Atlantic shipping.

But I shrugged. We were due to cross the shipping route from the United States to Murmansk and Archangel, so I figured that this plane was just a raider out scouting for a convoy.

"But she *is* heading toward us," I realized then.

"Let's lose 'er," Sammy said. After all, we carried no guns and no bombs.

I nodded. Below us was fog, and I nosed down to slide into it easy without making anybody's ears pop.

And then, the altimeter smashed before my eyes and something knifed through my

shoulder and down my back and I saw tracers spitting past my side panel and machine-gun bullets were ripping in a big, tearing splash into my port engine. Swearing and not even aware of it, I dropped one wing in a hard turn out of the way of those slugs; and the next instant a black cloud of flame-tipped metal hurtled past, and gracefully banked for another run at us.

"Another *Kurier!*" Sammy yelled.

"Good Lord! We were in a pack of them!"

I NOSED down into the fog below like a sub doing a crash dive, then. And once in the white darkness, I banked in a steep turn northward. With just one engine ticking over, my best bet was to head back toward the south Iceland coast. Something warm and moist was spreading down my back; but I could use my left arm all right and I put thought of the wound out of my mind.

"Captain Joe Blake calling Reykjavik," I radioed. "Reykjavik. Joe Blake calling Reykjavik. Come in Reykjavik."

Then I snapped off my radio real quick—for I heard an excited jumble of German, something yelling "*Achtung!*" and reading off a compass course and ordering "*Schnell!*"

The Germans were tuned in on our wavelength, listening for us, and using a direction finder to get a fix. By broadcasting, I was simply guiding them right to me through the fog! I'd better wait, I figured, until the Jerries left us.

Just then we shot out of the patchy fog into an area of bright sunlight. The next instant the glass beside Sammy shattered and Sammy stiffened up in his seat and bullets stitched a line across the panel in front of me. I banked instinctively and nosed down, and then we were in fog again and hidden.

"Sammy, you hurt?" I yelled.

"Couple of slugs in my leg." For a bit then he did some fancy swearing through clenched teeth and I relaxed; he wasn't too badly hurt if he could put that much heat into his language.

"Joe, now the Jerries know we're headed back for Iceland."

"Yeah."

The door behind us opened and Pop Daly said at the back of our necks, "Everybody's got their safety belts fastened. Do what you got to do and don't mind us."

"Thanks, Pop. You catch any bullets back there?"

"Not a one. Hey, you boys are hurt!"

"Help Sammy put a dressing on his leg. I'm not in bad shape."

Old Pop was a cool one in a jam. He tied a first-aid dressing on Sammy. Meanwhile, I stared ahead. We hadn't been far south of Iceland when the *Kuriers* jumped us. We should be nearing land now. If I could find it at all in this fog!

We hit another gap in it, then, and I saw shore right ahead.

But finding a landing spot was something else again. Here the stretch of coast was fronted by jagged bluffs and rough low hills. Not a prayer of a chance to sit down.

I banked westward along the coast, and then I saw a wide cove opening into the bluffs, with a fringe of almost level beach. Not good, but it was all the choice I had. I banked the C-47 toward it.

Sammy had been peering out the side panel. He turned.

"Joe, they've sighted us! Those *Kuriers* are coming like bats out of hell!"

If we landed in the cove now, the Germans would bomb it from end to end. So I horsed back on my wheel and zoomed across the cove and up over the swell of rugged hills, into the white darkness of the

fog again. For three minutes I held my course. Then I pulled up again as sharply as I dared on one engine and made a wide sweeping turn, cold sweat popping out on my skin. *If I don't smash head-on into one of those Jerries! If I can find that cove again!* I was thinking desperately. *If I don't black out from loss of blood—*

"Thank the Lord," I breathed when we came out into sunlight right over that cove again. "Somebody in this plane lives right!" And I nosed for the beach in a hurry.

The far side of the cove was swathed in white mist. If there the stretch of sand ended abruptly against a cliff, against that cliff I was going to plaster this C-47 like a gory billboard.

Sammy had been getting the wheels down. We hit the beach and bounced and hit again. It wasn't sand under us but water-smoothed pebbles, and our tires flung them against the wings in a deafening clatter. There were boulders, too. I dodged one, then another, and gunned the motor to keep taxiing into the fog-hidden stretch ahead of us.

White mist, then, streamed past my side panel, thickening into pea soup. We were hidden from view again. But just as I sighed with relief and closed the throttle and let the tail wheel touch, my port wheel hit a boulder and crumpled, and the left wingtip touched, swinging us into a terrific ground loop. The opposite wing lifted up terrifyingly, and for an awful instant it looked as if we were going to topple right over onto our backs. But the ship balanced, and then settled back, coming down *hard*; and for a miracle the right landing wheel did not fold up. We were down! Battered and helpless, but down.

And I passed out cold.

WHEN I came to, I was outside, lying on the ground and Judy was

plastering a bandage on my back, and the crowd was gathered around, sort of huddled close together. Their faces kind of blurred to my eyes and I shut 'em a moment, and reached down inside of me and gathered every ounce of strength and savvy I had left. I was going to need it. Then I sat up.

"Must've banged my head," I said, and managed a grin at Judy. "Say, let's break out the lunch and get comfortable."

"Doesn't this hurt?" She pressed the bandage lightly.

"Of course it does, but those slugs didn't touch bone and I can handle myself all right. So don't worry about me, and don't worry about those Jerries. They won't find us here."

"But will anybody find us?" Roma Fanti asked.

"Of course. I'll radio our position to Reykjavik," I said reassuringly. "Right now, let's eat."

I must have sounded convincing, because they relaxed; but inwardly I was a-crawl with dread. Already the fog was getting lighter about us as the rising sun lapped it up. Once the air cleared, the whole bunch of us were right out in plain sight. Then the Germans, if they returned, could strafe the lot of us.

Pop Daly fetched the lunch boxes and thermos jugs from our wrecked ship and started passing out the grub.

And then I felt Judy lean against me, and saw her stare up into the mist. I heard it too, then, and froze, my sandwich an inch from my mouth. Motors again. Growing louder awfully fast!

"They're coming back?"

"Not exactly," I said.

A *Kurier* passed a little inland of us. There, I guessed, the fog already had lifted. So the Jerries knew we had come down somewhere here along the coast and were hidden from them by the fog. Now

they were back hunting for us, systematically sweeping the area.

I shrugged and bit into my ham-on-rye.

And then the second *Kurier* passed almost right overhead, so low that its motor roar lashed at our up-turned faces, though we couldn't see it.

Judy said, "They're awfully persistent about hunting us. Why?"

"Maybe German Intelligence got word of the party of brass hats to leave Reykjavik just ahead of us, and sent these planes to meet 'em. I figure these *Kuriers* think we're those bigshots."

"How long would it take for a flight of P-38's to get here from the Reykjavik base?"

"Twenty minutes, flying time, something like that."

Sammy said, "Joe, we've got to radio for help. Before this fog blows clean away."

"God'l'mighty, you think I haven't thought of that? Sammy, the moment we go on the air, the Germans'll take a radio fix on us with their direction finders and come straight back to this cove. They'll drop bombs through the mist, and circle until the air clears and they can see what's left of us. And if anything *is* left, they'll mop up. I say our best bet is to keep radio silence and figure that the *Kuriers* will go away soon."

"But up where they are, the Jerries can see that this fog is thinning out. Maybe they're just marking time now, figuring that in a half-hour or so they'll have full visibility?"

"Maybe," I said. Judy's hand tightened on my elbow. It was involuntary. She wasn't panicked, just facing the facts.

Pop said, "Maybe we better head inland?"

"Yes," I said. "Sammy and I will stay by the plane, and after a while we'll radio for help."

"I'll stay with you," Judy said.

"You will not!" I said, setting my jaw.

Pop said to her, "After we get you girls to the top of the cliff, we'll come back for Joe and Sammy."

SHE pressed my hand, then, and went off with the rest. A hundred feet away they were lost to our sight in the mist. I can't tell you what an awful feeling I had then! I was dead sure I'd never set eyes on Judy again. Or Reykjavik, either.

Sammy murmured, "I hope they find a trail to the top of the bluff. With my leg in this shape, I couldn't do any climbing."

A trail in this barren wilderness? A fat chance. But I didn't say anything.

And then I got an idea. It was a wild, risky scheme—but as a last resort I'd have to attempt it.

"Sammy, back at the Reykjavik base they monitor the whole short-wave band, don't they?"

"Yeah, they catch everything on the air. You figuring," he asked dubiously, "to radio for help on a different wave-length than the one the Germans are listening in on?"

"Yes—"

"Shucks, Joe, you know better than that. The Germans'll be fiddling with their radio dials, trying to tune you in no matter what wave-length you change to."

"Just the same, we're going to broadcast!"

"You nuts? You've just admitted that if the Jerries take a fix on us with their direction finders, we're gone goslings!"

"That's right. But I'm hoping that they won't think to take a fix on us."

He stared at me as if he thought I was slug-happy. But before he out and said it, we both turned abruptly.

We heard voices and footsteps. Our passengers were returning!

Judy sat down beside me without a

word. Marice and Lucia looked like they were going to cry. Pop Daly explained: "The bluff is a hundred feet high, straight up and down. And no trail: We can't climb it."

MORALE definitely needed a pick-up.

"Never mind. I'm glad you're back," I said. "We've got an ace to play. Quick, everybody get their musical instruments."

"What for?" Pop asked.

"We're going to broadcast and we haven't a minute to waste!"

I had them take from the plane the public address rig which we set up when the troupe performed out-of-doors for a big crowd. It operated on a small power plant that used gasoline from the plane tanks. Instead of connecting the mikes to the loudspeakers, however, we tied into the C-47's radio transmitter.

"We're going to put on a fake broadcast," I told them hurriedly. By this time, I guess, I had some fever from my wound. "But it's got to be good enough to fool those Germans. I'm going to say we're broadcasting from Reykjavik, and it's got to seem so real that the Germans will believe it, and not bother to take a radio fix. Because if they do guess that we're pulling a phony, they'll ride the broadcast straight to us! All right, Sammy—put me on the air!"

I gulped a deep breath as I squared up to one of the mikes. Sammy nodded—and I started off.

"Hello, everybody! It is exactly nine o'clock, Iceland time, and you are going to hear another program of the Yanks-Around-the-World series put on by a group of Special Services players at the Army base at Reykjavik! We are on a platform in the main hangar, and the personnel of the base is gathered before us and impatient for a solid hour of gags,

gams and jive! Friends, this Yanks-Around-the-World program is short-waved to every base, and camp, to every plane in the air and every subchaser at sea in the Greenland-Iceland area of operations. "All right, here we go! Tom and Tim Baylor, inimitable twins of the thud and tinkle, will give you the Army Air Forces song. Take it away, boys!"

They beat it out on their xylophones, Tom and Tim. In a way, I guess, they knew they were playing for their lives.

I whispered to Pop Daly, "Pop, you'll have to give out with gags. Can you ad lib without hunting up some scripts?"

"Whenever the legit goes sour and grand opera nosedives, show business yells for vodvil. Just leave it to me, Joe."

Tom and Tim pounded to a crescendo, and I broke 'em off with a jerk of my hand, and I said into the mike: "That was Tom and Tim Baylor, folks. And now, Madame Roma Fanti will give you George Gershwin's *I Got Plenty of Nothin'*. Give her a hand, boys!"

We crowded close to the mikes and whooped and clapped like mad. Judy hit the piano keys then, and Madame Roma took off.

And that great, grand voice of hers almost made me forget the jam we were in. Except that she sang it, 'I've got plenty of *trouble*' instead of plenty of *nothin'*. Which shows what was on her mind.

When she finished, I didn't have to tell the gang to applaud like they were going to bring a hangar down about their ears. When I got 'em quiet again, I said into the mike: "And now, pals, I'm going to give you that grand old veteran of the vodvil stage—Pop Daly, who claims he was born in a theatrical trunk on the original Slow Train Through Arkansas! Tell me, Pop. Why do radio comics always want to retire to a chicken farm?"

"Because they're used to making

money by laying eggs," Pop said into the mike. "Hello, everybody."

"Today I want to tell you about my nephew who's in the Army Air Force, stationed in Alaska. Special Services sent me up there some months ago and when I arrived in Fairbanks I went hunting for him. I found him in a store, where a clerk was trying to sell him a totem pole.

"*'I don't want a totem pole,'* he was saying. *'I want a book on how to speak Eskimo.'*

"*'You'd waste time, studying Eskimo,'* the clerk said.

"*'I'd waste more time kissing a totem pole,'* my nephew said.

"He was sure glad to see me, and showed me around the base, and gave me a present he'd bought to send down to me. It was a watch chain of nuggets of Alaska gold, darn near big enough to anchor a destroyer. Solid gold nuggets big as marbles!

"*'Gosh, boy,'* I said, *'is this genuwine gold?'*

"*'If it ain't I sure been gyped. I just paid six bits for it!'*

"But don't get my nephew wrong. He's a smart boy and he was studying hard to get some stripes. One evening he asked me, *'Pop, which is heavier, a ton of bricks or a ton of feathers?'*

"I said, *'Neither. They weigh the same.'*

"*'Yeah? But which would you choose to drop on a Jap? . . . Me, I'd drop the bricks, and let the Nip sprout his own feathers!'* "

And Pop Daly talked on, with some really good gags about the home front; and when he finally finished, and we had applauded, I sent Marice and Lucia, our pin-up girls, to the mike to render their itty bitty ditty they called *I'm Wacky about the Wacs*. It was sub-moron stuff, but their voices were clear and fresh and so darn

young. When they finished, I introduced Graziella Gary. She recited Bryson's poem about the P-38, *Lightnings in the Sky*, and some Robert Service poems. Robert Service goes over big with the boys in the cold latitudes.

And then I told myself, I'd done all I could do; I'd sent my message. P-38 fighters from Reykjavik should take some twenty minutes flying time to reach us here. Already a half-hour had passed. Maybe no planes were coming! All we could do now was mark time, hoping—and praying, through minutes that were long-drawn agonies of suspense.

Judy took over the mike, with a piano solo, playing *Kitten on the Keys* with a rollicking pep she pumped up out of sheer will power. Pop Daly, then, went back to the mike to stall off the inevitable with more gags.

The others were feeling the strain just as sharply as I was. Madame Roma's big dark eyes looked haunted; Marice and Lucia sat hunched up like refugee kids in a blitz picture, and Lucia was crying. Tom and Tim Baylor stood by their xylophones, watching me, alert to play soon's I signaled; and their lean faces were white and set.

Five minutes more ached past; then five minutes more.

Suddenly the bluff fringing the cove stood out sharp and clear—and overhead the sky was a sun-gilt blue. My innards tautened. I felt as if we were all naked and exposed and helplessly targeted here, with the wrecked C-47 lying like a huge billboard to draw attention to us.

Judy whispered to me, "Maybe the Germans've given up and gone away?"

I shook my head. "Judy, right now, I hear planes."

And a moment later, Sammy yelled and pointed.

"There they come. Hooray!"

Faintly, but growing louder by the heartbeat, I heard that motor drone. I looked at Judy, and my own conflicting feelings were mirrored in her lovely eyes. Were those planes the Germans returning? Or was help actually coming? For an instant I let myself hope and turned to look out to sea.

The fog was almost gone, and I could see the planes. Definitely they were racing straight toward us.

And then despair was like the taste of battery acid in my mouth. That wasn't the high-pitched propeller of P-38's I heard. It was the uneven rumbling growl of alien 4-motor ships. The *Kuriers*, headed back to us.

"Stop broadcasting!" I snapped. "Cut us off the air."

"I have," Sammy said, and now his voice was grim.

"Listen, everybody!" I tried to keep my voice calm. "We fooled the Germans for a while, but finally they've got wise to us, and they've followed our program broadcast straight here. Run to the base of the bluff and get flat on your stomachs behind rocks. Run like hell!"

I grabbed Judy's arm. I wasn't fooling myself—the way those *Kuriers* would bomb and strafe the beach, not one of us would ever leave here alive. I wanted Judy close by me now.

WE HADN'T a second to spare. We were hardly flattened down in the lee of boulders before the *Kuriers* were swooping at the beach, their motor thunder a hellish din that reechoed off the bluff at us. There's no terror I know of to equal the awful split-seconds while an enemy plane is diving down onto you. Whether you're in a gun pit or on a deck, when you hear those engines screaming into crescendo and see the planes growing in size so fast, as it seems they're pointed straight down

at you, and as you watch the innocent-looking vane bulbs drop away from their bellies, your heart nearly bursts inside of you. I put my arm tight about Judy's shoulders and she buried her face against my chest.

But it was at the C-47 that the *Kuriers* were swooping at first. Bombs from the first one's underslung bay bracketed my plane neatly. The beach quaked to the bursts; and when I looked, my ship was torn plumb apart. I ducked then as the second *Kurier* dropped her eggs: anti-personnel bombs that sprayed the beach with a level hail of hot metal.

Zooming up, the *Kuriers* came around for a second try. The Jerry pilots knew that the C-47's passengers must've scattered behind cover. This time the Germans started probing and stabbing at the whole beach with machine-gun fire, to sweep it from end to end while they laid a pattern of bombs to bury everything they scared out of cover. *This is it*, I was telling myself; and I was turning Judy's face toward me, hunting for her lips. *Judy, Judy, darling—*

An odd thing happened. It was so abrupt and unexpected for one wild stunned instant I thought I was imagining it, except that the roar and concussion pressed Judy and me together like the grip of a giant fist. That leading *Kurier* blew up as it was nosing toward us. First it was rocketing earthward, and then, in a brilliant glare of flame, it just tore apart. And an instant later, a twin-tailed pursuit ship flashed over it.

And I saw that the other *Kurier*, in a vertical bank, was twisting out to sea, was veering away in a desperate attempt to escape three other P-38's that were converging upon it!

And then I was standing up, I was yelling like mad—and around me, the others were jumping up and down,

screaming their heads off with joy. I hugged Judy, I kissed her, and I shouted, "They came! They came! Look at 'em. Lord, did you ever see anything as pretty as a P-38!"

That remaining *Kurier* made a real try for escape. But she didn't have speed to match the *Lightnings*. Fifty-calibre slugs ripped into her. None hit bombs, as they must have done in the other *Kurier*. But they knocked a couple of her engines out and then set her afire. Suddenly men were dropping from her bomb bay, their parachutes ballooning out; and then abruptly the huge German 4-motor slipped off into a wobbly spin and nosed down, crashing into the ocean like a whale thudding out of the sky.

The P-38's buzzed the beach, and the pilots waved to us. Then they lined out for their base.

"Everything's fine now, gang," I yelled. "They'll send a seaplane to pick us up."

THE seaplanes arrived presently, fine big PBY's. One picked up the drifting Nazi airmen and the other taxied close to the beach, and we all waded out to climb aboard.

It was a grand feeling when the *Catalina* took off and headed back toward Reykjavik. We all grinned at each other.

Lieut. Neely, skipper of the PBY, came to me and Sammy and asked if we needed first aid for our hurts. We told him no.

"We'll be okay until we get to the base. But tell me, Neely," I said, "was it just accident that the flight of P-38's came here in time to tangle with those two German *Kuriers*?"

"Shucks, no," Neely said. "Back at the base, the boys tuned in on your broadcast. Soon's you claimed that you were broadcasting from the very hangar we

were then sitting in, we knew something was wrong. Then you identified the various members of your party. We knew that, by rights, you should be far out at sea, en route to England. But you were coming in strong, as if you were very close. Something was definitely screwy somewhere. So we took a radio fix on you and realized that you must be forced down along the coast here. And Colonel Fessenden radioed a flight of P-38's out on patrol to swing past this way. So they did, and caught the Jerries cold."

"And saved all our necks," I said.

"That was a swell program you people put on."

"Of course," said Pop smugly. "Once again, vodvil saves show business."

I moved to a seat beside Judy.

The gun blister nearby had had a section smashed out of the plastic by bullets recently, so the roar of the motors was pretty loud and wind beat at us. Judy shivered; I put my good arm about her shoulders. She smiled and moved closer.

Words rushed to my lips; I checked them, telling myself to wait. And I did wait—minute after minute, as the plane neared Reykjavik. But I couldn't hold out entirely; the way I felt, I had to know now, at once.

"Judy, something I got to ask you."

"Yes, Joe?"

"Tell me—tell me, what do you know about b-beetles?"

Her brows lifted but she said matter-of-factly, "Quite a lot. My brother collected them, also stamps, coins,

cocoons, shinny clubs and assorted scabs and childhood diseases."

She smiled but I didn't grin back.

"How—how do you feel about model plane building?"

"Swell hobby for kids. Girls, too."

I swallowed hard. It was all or nothing on the next question.

"W-what do you know about small boys?"

She didn't exactly smile, but something awfully warm and tender shone in her lovely eyes. She said, "Lots of theory."

"Like' em?"

"Crazy about 'em."

"How'd you like a son?"

She gulped, and said, "Do you *guarantee* a boy?"

It was my turn to gulp. But I rallied and said, "I'm a widower. I've got a boy of twelve. D-does it make any difference?"

"You tell me. I never had a boy of twelve."

"I mean—oh, damn it, *will you marry me?*"

Her face became radiant.

"You bet I will!"

And then suddenly we both realized that the engines had been throttled back as the PBY nosed down for landing, and Judy and I had just shouted in a silence. Everybody was staring at us, and grinning, and applauding, carrying on like everybody approved in a big way.

"Are you a man or a mouse?" Sammy yelled. "Kiss her!"

Well, I'm no mouse. I proved it.

I still prove it. Every day.