

The
Vultures
of
Desolate
Island

George E. Rochester

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Frontispiece.

THEIR NOSES WENT DOWN FOR A LANDING ON THE WATERS
OF THE COVE

THE VULTURES OF DESOLATE ISLAND

BY
GEO. E. ROCHESTER

AUTHOR OF
'THE SCOTTY OF THE SECRET SQUADRON'
'THE SECRET SQUADRON IN GERMANY,' ETC.

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the waters of the cove” [Frontispiece](#)

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leaving a long backwash of creamy foam
in our wake” [Facing page 64](#)

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spewing flame and steel-coated lead” [Facing page 92](#)

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engine thundering at full revolutions” [Facing page 166](#)

THE VULTURES OF DESOLATE ISLAND

CHAPTER I

MY MISSION

“ERKUNSTELT?”

I think some of the astonishment I felt was apparent in my voice.

“Yes, Erkunstelt!” repeated Sir Douglas Malcolm, quietly. “You know him?”

“Only by hearsay, as a wealthy financier who has little love for England,” I replied. “I have never met him.”

Sir Douglas nodded.

“So much the better,” he said. “The fact that you have never met will render your task somewhat easier. But I warn you, Beverley”—and his voice was very grave—“that if our suspicions prove correct you will find it necessary to exercise the utmost caution and discretion, for you will be in deadly peril. But I will make the matter more clear to you.”

He picked up a paper from the desk at which he was seated, and resumed.

“One is so used to seeing a flat map of the world that one loses sight of the fact that the shortest route between Britain and the Far-East is not obtained by taking a ruler and drawing a straight line across the map. The shortest route is *viâ* the Arctic.”

I nodded in silence.

“It is ten thousand miles from England to Japan, *viâ* Montreal,” went on Sir Douglas, “and it is eight thousand miles *viâ* the New Siberian Railway. But by air, over the eastern corner of Ireland, then over Franz Joseph Land, Emperor Nicholas II Land and Cape Chelyaskin, it is only six thousand five hundred miles. You understand?”

“Yes,” I replied.

“Less than a year ago,” continued Sir Douglas, “the British Government decided to open up this Arctic air route. We have been wholly successful in the establishment of aerodromes, petrol dumps, repair depôts, etcetera, all along the route. But recently machine after machine has been reported as missing!”

“And you suspect foul play, sir?”

Sir Douglas nodded.

“Yes. At first such an explanation naturally did not occur to us,” he said. “However, a few weeks ago the skipper of a whaling vessel in the Barents Sea picked up floating wreckage which proved to be that of one of our missing machines. *That wreckage had been riddled by bullets!*”

“By bullets, sir?” I repeated, staring.

“Yes; the machine had obviously been shot down. Someone is raiding the Arctic air route, either with a view to plunder or with a view to driving us from it. We have already

lost one hundred and fifty thousand pounds in cargo and bullion alone.”

“And you suspect——”

“Erkunstelt,” cut in Sir Douglas, crisply. “Shortly after we had established our aerodromes and bases he approached us on behalf of a certain foreign power who wished to purchase from us our landing rights and hangars. In short, they wished to take over the air route for themselves.”

“And England refused to sell?”

“Absolutely.”

“But surely, sir,” I said, “there are other reasons, and stronger ones, for suspecting Erkunstelt of having a hand in this piracy?”

“The moment we were convinced that piracy was afoot,” replied Sir Douglas grimly, “we entrusted the necessary investigations to Harry Davies!”

“The Flying Beetle!” I exclaimed.

“Yes, the Flying Beetle. This morning I received, in code, a telegram from him asking me to instruct you to obtain a job at Four Gables—Erkunstelt’s country house in Berwickshire.”

“But what sort of job, sir?” I demanded.

“That,” replied Sir Douglas, “is obviously left entirely to you. But undoubtedly Davies thinks Erkunstelt is worth watching.”

“But, sir,” I expostulated, “supposing I cannot get a job there!”

“You must try,” replied Sir Douglas, a trifle curtly.

“Very good, sir,” I said, flushing, for I was conscious of the snub. “May I ask what *rôle* the Flying Beetle has adopted during these investigations?”

Sir Douglas rose and laid his hand on my arm.

“Do you not know by now,” he said with a smile, “that the Flying Beetle works in his own way? All I can tell you is that he wishes you to go to Four Gables.”

“Shall I meet him there?” I demanded.

“I cannot say, Beverley.”

“Well, sir, can you tell me where his telegram was sent from?” I asked.

“Yes, from the town of Berwick.”

“Then he is in that neighbourhood, somewhere,” I commented, “and my sole instructions are, sir, that I am to obtain a post of some description in Erkunstelt’s household and watch the man?”

“Yes,” replied Sir Douglas, “the Flying Beetle must be fairly certain in his own mind that Erkunstelt is involved in this piracy, otherwise he would never have sent that telegram. But remember, if Erkunstelt is indeed guilty, then he will not scruple to deal with you out of hand should he discover you to be a member of the British Secret Service.”

“I suppose a search has been made for the pirates’ base, sir?” I said, for I wanted to know as much as possible about this affair upon which I was embarking.

“Yes, our machines have carried out search after search,” was the reply, “but without discovering the slightest sign or clue as to the pirates’ headquarters. That base must, of

course, lie somewhere in or about the Arctic circle.”

“Then our only hope seems to lie in watching *Erkunstelt*,” I said.

“Yes. You will use your own discretion as to your procedure should any untoward happening occur,” replied Sir Douglas. “You will, of course, keep in constant touch with me.”

“Very good, sir,” I replied; “I will leave for the North to-night.”

CHAPTER II

IN WHICH I PASS THROUGH THE GATES OF FOUR GABLES

It was early the following morning when I reached Kirkrie, the nearest village to Four Gables. My attire consisted of a dirty, broken-peaked cap, a red cotton handkerchief knotted loosely around my neck, a well-worn jacket, and a pair of corduroy trousers in a tolerable state of repair.

The fact that I had not shaved for twenty-four hours in no way enhanced my appearance. I breakfasted on bread and cheese, washed down by a mug of strong tea, at a bench in front of the local inn.

The innkeeper came out more than once in order to take stock of me. I might add that he had insisted on payment before serving me.

“You’re a stranger around these parts?” he shot at me suddenly.

“Yes,” I replied, chewing at the leathery cheese.

“Trampin’, mebbe?” he ventured.

“No,” I retorted, “looking for work.”

This seemed to tickle him, for he laughed rumblingly.

“Aye, you all spin th’ same tale,” he growled, “but honest work would scare ye.”

“Try me!” I snapped, for I was in no mind to be taken for an idle tramp.

“I haven’t got a job I could offer ye,” he said, hastily. “Nary a job. Things is powerful quiet around here.”

“That’s a pity,” I growled. “I was hoping to pick up a job before long. Tramping’s not my profession, mister. I’m a gardener, I am, and an honest bit of gardening would suit me fine.”

“Aye, but folks does their own gardens in Kirkrie,” he replied.

“But is there no big house where a man might get taken on for a day or two?” I demanded.

“No-o, I can’t say there is,” he grunted, scratching his head as though to facilitate thought.

“What, ain’t you got no big country houses around these parts?” I reiterated.

“Well, there be Four Gables, now,” he admitted, “but I doubt if ye’ll get took on there.”

“And why?”

Having got the conversation to where I desired it I was all attention.

“Well, ye see, Four Gables belongs to a foreign gent,” explained the innkeeper, laboriously. “A powerful mean man what keeps one servant. And that servant is a fair terror, and meaner than his master.”

“Indeed!”

“Oh, aye. But folks say this foreign gent is powerful rich. Not that us folks in Kirkrie ever see much o’ the colour o’ his money.”

“What is his name?”

“Why, Mister Erkunstelt, they say. He’s abroad a lot and only comes here for a few months in the year.”

“And is this servant a male or a female?”

“He’s an owd rascal called Onry—an owd man.”

“Oh, an old man called Henri,” I replied. “Well, I’ll be getting along, and I might try my luck at Four Gables if you’ll tell me in which direction it lies.”

“It’s straight along the road there. Ye can’t miss it. But ye’ll be disappointed, so I’m tellin’ ye now.”

“Thanks,” I said, and rising to my feet, I set off along the road.

It was a long road, a hot road, and a dusty road. But it wound gradually closer to the sea, and I was grateful for the cooling breeze which came gently in from the sparkling waters.

I had covered a full three miles when a sudden bend in the road brought into view a large square house standing grim and solitary amidst a clump of trees and tangled shrubberies. It stood on the seaward side of the road, some little distance back from a pleasant cove, where tiny wavelets were rippling and murmuring on the beach.

I reached rusty iron gates set in square, cracked pillars of stone. The pillars bore, in black paint, the well-nigh washed-out name, Four Gables.

This then was my destination. I halted, staring up the winding stretch of unraked gravel drive which led to the weather-beaten front door.

Then, with a somewhat dubious glance at my attire—for I was afraid I might have somewhat overdone the effect of an honest out-of-work—I squared my shoulders and set off up the drive.

I didn’t get far. An old man, white-haired and bent of shoulder, appeared from somewhere at the rear of the house and came ambling towards me. He was clad in badly-fitting, and extremely greasy, butler’s garb.

“Be off!” he commanded shrilly, and waved a skinny hand as though to “shoo” me away. “Be off, you rogue!”

I halted and, doffing my cap, awaited his approach. At first I thought he was suffering from jaundice, so yellow was his lined and wrinkled face. But on second thoughts I unkindly put it down to too much indulgence in his master’s wine. Certainly his bleary, red-rimmed eyes did not belie the supposition.

“You’re trespassing,” he yelled as he reached me, and threw out a pointing finger towards the gates, “Go!”

“Sir,” I said humbly, “I seek honest work——”

“You’re a liar! You’re a lazy, good-for-nothing tramp!” was the reply to that. “Go away! Get out!”

“If you had a bit of gardening,” I persisted, “or a few boots to clean, or—or—or some wood to chop——”

“What d’you think this is?” he screeched, “a workhouse? Go away, you rogue, or I’ll set the dogs on you!”

I swallowed, almost visibly. Nothing would have given me greater pleasure than to have been able to have kicked the evil-tempered fellow into the shrubbery. But I put temptation from me.

“Sir,” I answered stubbornly, “I am not a rogue! If you would be so good——”

“Ah!” he cackled triumphantly. “You’re going to beg now. I knew it would come to that. Go on, get out or I’ll let the dog loose!”

I took one long last look as his yellow, cavernous face and angry red-rimmed eyes, then turned on my heel and strode back towards the gates.

“This,” I reflected bitterly, “is really an excellent start.”

I spent the remainder of that morning and most of the afternoon lying amidst the bracken on a gentle slope which ran down to the beach.

Four Gables stood less than half a mile away and I was able to command a view of its gates. But during those hours that I watched I saw no one pass either in or out.

I had much to occupy my mind. My first attempt to secure a job there had ignominiously failed. A second attempt must be made—but how? I racked my brains, but no answer to the problem could I find. If Erkunstelt desired privacy he certainly had a faithful and highly efficient watchdog in the wrinkled Henri—for such I took the old fellow to be.

Then where, also, was Harry Davies—that languid youth whom the world knew as the Flying Beetle? Was he somewhere in the vicinity, or had the following-up of some clue taken him out of the district? I was inclined towards the latter supposition, in that he had asked Sir Douglas Malcolm to send me to Four Gables in order to watch Erkunstelt. The Flying Beetle, I knew full well, was quite capable of watching Erkunstelt without any assistance from me. Therefore, I argued, he must have gone and, in his absence, I was to watch Erkunstelt.

That brought me back to the problem of getting some sort of footing in Four Gables. I hadn’t the slightest desire or inclination to dodge about in Erkunstelt’s shrubbery like some comic opera spy. That course, I felt, lacked dignity.

Dignity, forsooth! Little of dignity remained to me after my encounter with Henri.

It was late afternoon when I rose and, reaching the road, strolled leisurely back towards the village. The innkeeper was standing in his doorway when I reached that hostelry, and he gave me a friendly nod.

“No luck?” he commented, and there was a certain sympathy in his voice.

“No,” I replied, somewhat despondently, “but I still have some money left, and a man must eat.”

I fished out some coppers and placed them in his outstretched palm. Then, seating myself at the bench in front of the inn I waited whilst he brought me a hunk of bread, a slab of cheese, and a mug of tea.

“Ain’t much variety in your vittals,” he remarked, as he lounged in the doorway watching me eat.

“No,” I replied, shortly, for I had no particular desire to listen to his heavy and laboured wit.

“Did you see owd skin and bones?” he continued.

By this I took it he meant the aged Henri, and I nodded.

“He’s a fair terror——” he began, then stopped abruptly, staring up the narrow street. “By gum!” he burst out. “Talk o’ the de’il—here he comes!”

“Who?”

“Why, owd Onry himsel’!”

Sure enough the old fellow who had chivvied me out of the drive was ambling along the street, a basket over his arm.

“He’ll be comin’ for groceries,” explained the innkeeper. “He comes a’most thrice a week for groceries.” Then, with the pleased air of a showman, he added, “Fair terror, ain’t he?”

By this time Henri had drawn level with us. Although the day had been extremely warm he was wearing a shabby overcoat over his greasy butler’s garb. He squinted towards me, then half stopped as he recognised me.

“You?” he sneered. “And drinking?”

“Yes, tea,” I replied.

“No—beer!” he retorted.

I shrugged my shoulders but did not reply. For even now I had not entirely given up hope of getting into his good graces, and a hot retort would only have served to antagonise him further.

He passed on and disappeared into a small general shop. Ten minutes later he reappeared and came ambling slowly up the street again, his now laden basket obviously almost too heavy for him.

I saw my opportunity, and, rising, I walked towards him.

“Let me carry your basket,” I said, and stretched out my hand as though to take it from him.

“Get out of my way!” he snarled.

A passing yokel, a big burly fellow, stopped to listen and to grin.

“Why, ye owd lump o’ misery,” he drawled, “let th’ feller carry ye’re basket, if so be he’s daft enough.”

Henri glared at him with angry and bleary eyes.

“Mind your own business, you great hulking lout!” he snapped.

“Who’s a lout?” roared the fellow, flushing dully beneath his tan.

“You are!” cried Henri shrilly. “Get out of my way, both of you!”

Then he did an exceedingly foolish thing. He thrust out a skinny hand and pushed the yokel savagely aside. I saw anger flame in the latter’s eyes. Before I could make a move to intercept him he had swung a fist like a ham. It took Henri full in his scraggy throat, sending him staggering backwards to fall heavily on the road.

“You coward!” I cried, and gripped the fellow by the arm.

He wheeled, wrenching himself free. His blood was roused and his anger was all the more vicious in that it was begotten of his dull mentality.

“Be you wantin’ some as well?” he growled, with fists clenched.

“Yes, if you’re man enough to give it me,” I replied.

He lunged forward at that, and I ducked just in time to avoid his whirling fist. I will not dwell on the fight that followed. It was a far from edifying spectacle, neither was it enhanced by Henri, who had picked himself up and who hovered excitedly round us like some elderly bird of prey.

We trampled on his groceries as we slogged at each other, that yokel and I. I had learned to use my hands in a hard school and I was extremely fit. But I took punishment which I felt sorely for many a day to come, before a lucky blow sent the reeling yokel down. He stayed down, groaning and moaning like some great, wounded beast.

I turned away, tenderly massaging my bruised face. I had forgotten Henri for the moment, but he grabbed me by the arm, demanding shrilly:

“Did you hit him because he hit me—me, an old man?”

“I suppose so,” I answered wearily.

“Then I won’t be under any obligation to you,” he snarled. “If you want a job now, you can have it. But, mind you, I’ll make you work. Pick up those groceries, and put them in the basket and come on.”

“All right,” I replied, striving to hide the sudden elation I felt. “But first I’m going to bathe my face at the pump.”

CHAPTER III

I MEET ERKUNSTELT

I CANNOT say that I enjoyed the subsequent walk back to Four Gables with Henri. The sun was setting with a wondrous golden beauty behind the Berwickshire hills, and mists of evening were creeping up from pleasant vales.

But such things are not viewed to best advantage through puffed and swollen eyes. Moreover, to attune the mind to a proper appreciation one must walk alone in that strange, sweet, tranquil hush which comes with the eventide.

I did not walk alone; and any hush there might have been was rudely and most jarringly shattered by Henri's unmusical chattering.

Question after question he put to me as he ambled along by my side, whilst I carried the laden basket. My name, my occupation, from whence I hailed, what I was doing in Berwickshire—all these things he sought to be enlightened upon. I think I answered easily enough, for I had my plans well laid beforehand.

My name was John Smith—a good, honest English name with which none could quarrel. I was a gardener by profession, but could turn my hand to most things. I hailed from Godstone, in Surrey, and was tramping the country in search of permanent work.

“You'll not get permanent work with me,” cried Henri with a certain triumphant maliciousness.

“But if I give satisfaction——” I temporised.

“It doesn't matter what you give,” he rapped. “We leave England in a few days' time and Four Gables will be shut up.”

I pricked up my ears at that.

“Going abroad?” I ventured.

“Mind your own business,” he snapped.

I did as I was bid. But as we walked along I found myself wondering as to the nature of the work which would be found for me, in view of the fact that the house was being so soon shut up. And, somewhat humbly, I put this question to my companion.

“You will tidy the garden and help with the covering of the furniture,” he replied. “There's a lot of small jobs to be done. Mr. Erkunstelt wishes the place to be left in order because he hates it to stand empty, and he is trying to let it to anybody who will pay the price he wants.”

“Yes, and has been these fifteen years.”

“He might not like me about the place?” I commented.

Henri stopped abruptly.

“Why?” he shot at me, his head thrust forward, a world of sudden suspicion in his voice.

“Well, I'm a—a bit funny looking, you see, after that fight,” I replied weakly. “Gentlemen don't like servants who fight. At least, I've never found a gentleman who

did.”

Henri’s brow cleared.

“That’s all right,” he replied in a mollified tone. “Don’t let that worry you. Fifteen years I’ve been with master, and he won’t interfere with my taking on a bit of help to aid me in cleaning up.”

And thus we came to Four Gables and, passing in through the iron gates, walked up the drive and round to the rear of the house. Henri led the way into a large stone-floored kitchen. I placed my basket on the table, and doffing my cap, stood shuffling my feet in awkward expectation.

“You will come with me to Mr. Erkunstelt,” said Henri, hanging his seedy overcoat on a peg behind the door.

I followed him along a corridor and across a large entrance hall to a closed door, upon which he knocked.

“Come in,” called a voice harshly.

Opening the door, Henri ushered me across the threshold into a large room, comfortably furnished as a sort of library-*cum*-study.

A big, broad-shouldered man was seated writing at a desk littered with papers. He raised his head to stare at me as I entered.

His swarthy face was almost covered by a black, shaggy beard, which failed to hide, however, the cruel, thin-lipped mouth. A big hooked nose jutted out prominently, belligerently.

But it was his eyes which held me—cold, cruel, merciless eyes of vivid blue, surmounted by thick, bushy eyebrows. They seemed to bore right into me, and in spite of myself I could not suppress a shudder of repulsion.

This then was Erkunstelt.

I dropped my eyes beneath his gaze, for it did not seem fitting to me that a battered applicant for a humble post should have the temerity to stare back at the master of the household.

“Who is this fellow, Henri?” he demanded harshly.

“His name is Smith, master—John Smith,” replied the old man-servant whiningly. “He came here this morning seeking a job, but I turned him away. This evening, in the village, I was attacked by a hooligan and he came to my assistance. I took the——”

“You were attacked?” cut in Erkunstelt sharply.

“Yes, master.”

“Your own vile temper to blame, of course.”

“Master!” protested Henri.

“Continue,” rapped Erkunstelt. “You say this man came to your assistance?”

“Yes. He thrashed the man who attacked me, so I took the liberty of engaging him to help me for the next few days. We want someone, master, for there is much to do.”

“Yes, and you grow older every day,” remarked Erkunstelt brutally. “I wonder sometimes why I keep you on.”

From the corner of my eyes I saw a crafty grin wrinkle Henri’s face for an instant.

And Erkunstelt saw it also.

“Yes, smile, you weevil!” he said, and, curiously enough, there was little of anger in his voice. “But some day I think you will die quite suddenly.”

Now to a casual listener there was nothing in that remark save a callous prophecy as to Henri’s natural demise. But, to my hypersensitive ears, it contained a cold and deadly threat. And why not? For if Henri had been with Erkunstelt fifteen years, as he had said, then he probably knew enough about Erkunstelt to embarrass that gentleman painfully should he let his tongue wag. Always provided, of course, that Erkunstelt was a rogue. That fact had yet to be proved.

Erkunstelt stretched out a hand and pulled a writing tablet towards him.

“You,” he said harshly, turning to me and picking up a pencil. “What is your name?”

Then followed a cross-examination dealing with my utmost intimate domestic affairs. Erkunstelt jotted down all my replies.

“Very good,” he said at length, “you can go. You will assist Henri and will sleep above the stables.”

The old man-servant took me in tow and piloted me back to the kitchen.

“There,” he said triumphantly, “what did I tell you? Master leaves all these things to me.”

But I would have wagered that, in the privacy of his study, Erkunstelt was setting the telephone in motion to ascertain the truth of my answers to his questions. But my story was absolutely watertight. Sir Douglas Malcolm had seen to that. I was John Smith, of Godstone, and I was prepared to defy any inquiries by Erkunstelt to prove otherwise. Nothing is left to chance in the Secret Service.

After a meagre supper of bread and cold meat, Henri piloted me across a stable yard and up a wooden staircase, to what had obviously been intended as quarters for the grooms. He had supplied me with a stable lantern and, by its sickly illumination I glanced round the room which had been allotted to me.

I will not attempt to describe it, because there is little to describe, save that it had four distempered walls, bare wooden flooring, a rickety and rusted iron bedstead, and a lattice window which looked out across the sea.

“There, John Smith,” grunted Henri, “quarters fit for a duke. I’ll have you up at five in the morning, or maybe before. Don’t get prowling around in the night because the silver is locked up and the hound will be loose in the yard. Good-night.”

With that he ambled away, leaving me with the stable lantern and my thoughts. Here I was, then, established in Four Gables. And I had discovered that Erkunstelt was leaving the country in a few days.

Where was he going? Was he going to some secret pirate’s lair set in a cold and desolate sea within the Arctic Circle? Or was he merely going across to the Continent to direct the activities of the pirates from there by means of wireless or agents?

On the other hand, were the Flying Beetle’s suspicions false? What if Erkunstelt was not involved in this piracy and knew nothing of it? Where, also, was the Flying Beetle?

I crossed to the window and, leaning out, drank in the beauty of the night. A full moon had swung up over the sea, tracing a path of pure, shimmering gold to the far horizon.

Nothing disturbed the stillness save the eerie, plaintive cry of some wheeling gull.

I do not know how long I remained there, but suddenly I stiffened and caught my breath. The slim, helmeted, black-clad figure of a man was standing directly below my window, looking up at me. I had not seen his advent, so silent had it been. He had seemingly sprung out of nothingness unless, indeed, it were out of the shadows of a nearby clump of gorse. But I knew him.

It was the Flying Beetle!

Softly I called his name. He stood motionless, staring up at my window without reply. Then sudden doubt assailed me. What if it was not the Flying Beetle? Fool that I was to have thus shown my hand.

Turning, I ran across the room to the door which opened onto the wooden staircase leading down to the stable yard. But, as I wrenched it open there came from the yard a deep-throated growl. From the shadows stalked a great hound.

It stood looking up at me, its eyes glinting blood-red in the moonlight. Cautiously, tentatively I set foot on the topmost stair. Again came that growl, full-throated and menacing.

I retreated then, closing the door, and sped back to the window. But, when I looked out the silent, black-clad figure had vanished.

Fully an hour I waited, but it did not reappear. I turned in at length and I think my last coherent thought, before I fell asleep, was that I must make friends with that hound. Unless I did so I was virtually a prisoner at nights.

But I was certain that the figure I had seen below my window was that of the Flying Beetle.

CHAPTER IV

I INVESTIGATE

I THINK I have mentioned that Henri had expressed the intention of having me up at five o'clock, or maybe before. I forestalled him, for I was up with the dawn.

Dressing, I opened the door and passed out on to the staircase. The hound was still below in the stable yard. He was a great gaunt, liver-coloured brute, with an excellent array of gleaming fangs. He displayed them for my benefit.

After half an hour of coaxing on my part and sulky, vicious, unresponsiveness on his, I returned to my room. Pulling the iron bedstead up to the window I knotted a couple of blankets and slid down to the crisp turf below.

An ignominious exit, I agree, but infinitely preferable to a certain mauling by way of the stable yard. I ran down to the beach and, throwing off my clothes, plunged into the cool, inviting water.

That swim gave me new life, and when I returned to the house I felt fit for anything. I went up to my window *viâ* my blanket rope, and scarcely had I unknotted them and rearranged them on the bed than I heard the shuffling footsteps of Henri coming up the staircase.

I put on my cap, pulling it well over my damp hair, for I was not overkeen that he should know I had already made use of the window as a mode of egress.

"Thunder growled in the night," he greeted me.

"Did it?" I asked. "I didn't hear it."

"The dog, I mean," he snapped. "Someone must have been prowling about here."

"Some tramp, maybe," I replied casually.

"Aye, and maybe not," he snarled. "Come on. Thunder's chained up now. Plenty of work to be done."

There was plenty of work to be done. All morning I laboured mightily tidying up the garden, raking the gravel drive, taking up carpets, fixing dust covers over furniture, polishing floors and, in short, cramming about five days work into one long hectic morning.

I saw Erkunstelt only once, and that was when he came out of doors for a breath of the pure morning air. He threw me an indifferent nod, so I presumed I was being accepted at my face value, namely, as honest John Smith, of Godstone.

It was about three o'clock in the middle of that blazing hot afternoon when Henri called a halt. He had done little except querulously superintend my activities, finding fault here and complaining snarlingly there. I had grown to loathe the sight of him and the sound of his voice long before noon.

However, as I have said, it was about three o'clock when he called a halt, and I sat down to a cold lunch of meat and boiled potatoes. I thought it was time I ventured a protest.

"Anyone would think," I grumbled, "that Mister Erkunstelt was leaving here to-night."

“He is,” said Henri, and I was so taken aback at this announcement that I sat gaping at him with my fork half way to my mouth.

“Well, what are you staring at?” he demanded. “What has it got to do with you?”

It had a great deal more to do with me than he imagined. At the best I had but a few hours left now in which to find out something about Erkunstelt. And I had fondly hoped to have at least a few days.

“It hasn’t been a very long job, has it?” I commented bitterly, for I had to say something.

“Ah! That’s your gratitude,” sneered the old wretch. “I take you out of the gutter and give you a job, and then you start complaining about it. Aye, that’s gratitude, that is!”

“I am grateful——” I protested.

“No, you’re not!” he yelled. “But you needn’t worry. You won’t sleep under a hedge to-night; you’ll sleep in your bed. We’ve company coming and you’ll be wanted till last thing to-night.”

“But I thought you said Mr. Erkunstelt was leaving to-night,” I exclaimed.

“He’s leaving in the early hours of the morning, and that’s the same thing, isn’t it?” snapped Henri. “You should have been a lawyer, the questions you ask!”

I took the hint and got on with my meal in silence. There were many questions trembling on the end of my tongue, but to have asked them would only have made the old fellow suspicious.

In the first place I wanted to know more about the company which was expected. Also I was vastly intrigued by the fact that Erkunstelt was leaving Four Gables in the early hours of the morning. Why in the early hours?

The meal ended, Henri despatched me to the village with the basket and a list of commodities required for dinner that evening. I had strict orders to hurry, and I was in no way averse to obeying them. For I wanted to be on hand when the expected guests arrived at Four Gables. I wondered if the Flying Beetle knew of Erkunstelt’s imminent departure.

All day long, whilst I had laboured, the Flying Beetle had been in my thoughts. Why had he appeared below my window in that silent and mysterious manner the previous night?

Yes, I had plenty of food for thought during my journey to and from the village. But I arrived back at Four Gables before the expected guests.

The dining-room was at the front of the house, its French windows opening on to an untrimmed lawn. I glanced through the windows as I passed on my way to the rear of the house. Henri was busily engaged in laying silver and cutlery on spotlessly white linen.

Scarcely had I entered the kitchen than he appeared and set me to work cleaning knives and preparing trays. It was almost ten o’clock before I had finished the tasks he set me.

“You can take yourself some bread and cheese across to your room above the stable,” he said suddenly. “I shan’t want you any more to-night. Mr. Erkunstelt will have gone by morning, but his estate agent will be here from Berwick to look over the premises and take an inventory. If you care to wait for him outside the house he might find one or two jobs for you.”

Now here was a thoughtfulness for which I had not looked in the sour Henri, and I thanked him.

“You needn’t thank me,” he snapped. “Mr. Holmes, the agent, asked us to have some sort of odd-job man on the spot in case he wanted him.”

“And you will be here, of course?” I remarked.

“Of course?” he snarled. “What do you mean by saying ‘of course’? No, I won’t be here. I leave with Mr. Erkunstelt.”

“But aren’t you afraid of leaving me here alone?” I demanded. “I might clear off with the silver in your absence.”

“Yes, you might,” he sneered. “You probably would if you could. But the hound will be loose in the house, and pity help you if you set foot in it. All the doors will be locked, anyway. Mr. Holmes has a key of his own.”

“I see,” I replied, and set about collecting my supper.

“Shall I see you again before you go?” I asked, pausing in the doorway with a hunk of bread and cheese in my hand.

“No, you won’t,” he replied brusquely. “Good-bye.”

“Good-bye,” I answered politely enough, and set out across the stable yard.

But I had not taken a dozen paces when I heard Henri’s shuffling step behind me, and his hand closed on my arm.

“Just one word with you, my man!” he snapped, his yellow, wrinkled face thrust close to mine. “When you get to your room go to sleep, see?”

“What do you mean?” I demanded.

“I mean that the hound will be loose in the yard again to-night.”

With that he turned on his heel and ambled back to the kitchen. I continued on my way and mounted leisurely to my room above the stables. Seated on the rickety bed I thoughtfully ate my frugal fare.

I had not the slightest intention of turning in and going to sleep. Erkunstelt’s guests had not yet arrived and I was curious to see them. The fact that they chose the time of their arrival to coincide with the cover of night only served to deepen my interest.

I listened with straining ears to hear the sound of any car or vehicle approaching the house. An hour dragged by, but nothing stirred. More than once I opened my door, only to be greeted by a deep-throated growl from the hound in the yard below.

I had taken the precaution of putting out my light in case the watchful Henri saw that I was not yet abed. I stood long by the window, hoping against hope that the Flying Beetle would put in an appearance. But I waited in vain.

It was a glorious night. A golden moon hung in a cloudless sky, and there was not a breath of wind to disturb the calm serenity of the unruffled sea. The faint murmur of tiny wavelets rippling on the beach in the cove came softly to my ears.

Suddenly I tensed, listening with bated breath. From far to the northwards had come the distant drone of powerful aero engines. The noise grew in volume. Then, starkly silhouetted against the moon I saw the dark outline of four large seaplanes flying in from the sea at a terrific speed.

They roared low over Four Gables. Then the thunder of their engines died away and, as they circled, their noses went down for a landing on the waters of the cove.

They were piloted by expert hands, those seaplanes. That was very evident by the clean landings which they made on the water. Swinging, they surged in towards the beach, gradually losing way.

A heavy sea anchor splashed overboard from each machine. The pilots clambered out of their cockpits and, dropping into the shallow water, waded ashore. They stood conversing on the beach for a few moments, then moved towards the house.

As they approached I drew back from my window, for my face must have been plainly visible in the brilliant moonlight if one of them had chanced to glance upwards.

I heard the murmur of their voices, interspersed with an occasional rumble of laughter, as they passed close below the window, following the track which led towards the front of the house.

Waiting till they had gone, I took further stock of the four seaplanes, squatting on the waters of the cove like some strange birds of the sea. They appeared to be large double-seater machines fitted with single engines. The rear cockpits were untenanted, but the moon glinted on swivel gun-mountings.

I waited a full half hour, during which time I again fashioned a rope from my blankets. Then, judging that the four pilots would by now be closeted with Erkunstelt, I tied one end of the rope to the bedstead and slid down to the ground below.

I was chary at leaving the makeshift rope dangling where it was. One could not be sure that the aged Henri would not be on the prowl. And if his bleary eyes took in the rope, then I might find subsequent necessary explanations somewhat difficult. However, that was a risk which I had to take.

Keeping as much as possible in the shadows I worked my way round to the front of the house. Creeping through the shrubbery, I emerged on the untrimmed lawn which fronted the French windows of the dining-room.

A thin shaft of light streamed through a chink in heavy curtains drawn across the windows. I blessed the forethought which, during one of my trots to the dining-room whilst assisting Henri earlier in the evening, had caused me to slip back the catch of those windows. Fervently I hoped that my handiwork had passed unnoticed by whoever had drawn the curtains.

Crouching, I ran across the strip of turf and flattened myself against the curtained windows. Gently I pressed with the palm of my hand, and barely stifled an exclamation of delight as I felt the French window give inwards under the pressure.

Inch by inch I opened it, then slipped through and quietly closed it behind me. There was a space of about two feet only between the windows and the curtains, but, with my back erect against the windows I found it permitted me to stand there without noticeably creating a bulge in the curtains.

Voices in the room came distinctly to my ears, mingled with the clink of cutlery and occasional laughter. I moved my head, the fraction of an inch at a time, until, through a chink in the heavy curtains I could command a view of the room.

Erkunstelt and his four visitors were at dinner. Henri was waiting on them, and somehow I could not suppress a momentary grin. For he seemed strangely akin to some

gaunt and skinny carrion bird hovering over the feast.

Erkunstelt was seated at the head of the table and I had an excellent view of his bearded profile. His four guests were clad in well-cut grey uniforms, high-necked and tight-fitting. Two sat facing me, whilst the other two, seated at the opposite side of the table had their backs to me.

But let me here describe them and give their names as I learned them that night. The two who faced me wore small, glittering silver wings on the left breasts of their tunics. The one nearer Erkunstelt was a swarthy fellow with strong features, dark brooding eyes, and tight-lipped mouth. That was Zwolfe.

His companion was fair-haired and smiling, with an expression which bordered almost on the inane. Falze was his name, and the day was to come when I was to learn that those smiling features but served to mask a soul as cunning as that of a rat.

I could see little of the two who had their backs to me, but they also wore the small silver wings. One was lithe of build, with the olive-tinted skin of the Latin race. His cleanly-cut features, seen when he turned to address some remark to Erkunstelt, were in no way marred by a short, close-cropped, dark moustache. That was Vali di Sapi, languid, elegant.

The fourth fellow was heavily built, with cruel, thick-lipped mouth, squat, ugly nose, and coarse, brutish features. That was Vorsorge—sullen and uncommunicative.

So there, my masters, you have a pen picture of what I saw in Erkunstelt's dining-room that night.

It was a remark from Zwolfe which first riveted my attention—a remark rapped out in sharp, incisive tones and obviously carrying on with some topic which had been under discussion when I arrived.

“I tell you again, Erkunstelt, I do not like it.”

Erkunstelt laughed.

“But why, my Zwolfe? There is no danger.”

Zwolfe shrugged his shoulders.

“That may be,” he said dryly, “but, to me, our coming here to-night savours of putting one's head in the lion's mouth.”

“I admire your choice of simile,” replied Erkunstelt lightly, “but permit me to point out that the lion—the British lion—is an aged beast without a snap left in its toothless jaws.”

“Other fools have thought the same,” growled Zwolfe, toying with his glass, his eyes on the cloth.

“Your nerve is going!” said Erkunstelt harshly.

“You know it is not!” retorted Zwolfe.

“Then to whom do you refer when you speak of other fools?”

Zwolfe did not answer for a moment. Then he raised his head and looked Erkunstelt full in the eyes.

“I refer to Sir Jaspar Haines,” he said quietly, “to Petroff and Levinsky. Also to those who plotted at Zadan. You knew them—you knew them all, and where are they to-day?”

His companions stirred uneasily, and even the sour Henri plucked at his lips with trembling fingers as he stood against the sideboard, napkin over his arm.

“They were fools!” replied Erkunstelt harshly. “They were fools who bungled and, with their death, they paid the price.”

“You lie!” retorted Zwolfe evenly. “They did not bungle. They plotted against England and they were hounded down by one man.”

Crack!

Erkunstelt’s hand had tightened convulsively on the stem of his glass and, in those strong fingers the stem had snapped like a carrot. A drop of blood stained the white linen tablecloth.

“An omen!” tittered Falze, but his mirth was ghastly.

“Silence, you!” roared Erkunstelt, launching himself to his feet and crashing a mighty fist on the table.

With blazing eyes he wheeled on Zwolfe.

“You talk of the man who hounded those others to their deaths!” he shouted. “Nay, he is little more than a boy—that cursed Flying Beetle whom you mean. But mark this! Should he ever cross my path then I will settle the score which has steadily mounted against him. Aye, I swear on my oath that neither Petroff, Levinsky, not those others shall go unavenged——”

He broke off so abruptly that the words seemed to have been choked in his throat. As though turned to stone he stood staring, with great head thrust forward, at a small piece of pasteboard which was lying in front of him on the table.

It was the same size as a visiting card, absolutely devoid of any lettering, but embossed with a black replica of a flying beetle.

CHAPTER V

I AM TAKEN PRISONER

“THE Flying Beetle!”

The words came hoarsely from Erkunstelt’s lips.

His bearded face was livid. With shaking fingers he picked up the card.

“Then he is here—here, in this room!” cried Zwolfe, springing to his feet.

I stretched out a hand behind me and gently eased open the window. There was not a breath of air, that glorious night, sufficient to stir the curtains.

“Here? How can he be here?” snarled Erkunstelt. “If this is a practical joke on the part of one of you——”

“You talk like a fool!” cut in Zwolfe roughly. “We have no time for such grim jokes. I tell you the man is in the room!”

He glanced round the room and his eyes rested on the curtains behind which I was tensed. He came towards them with a rush. I did not dwell upon the order of my going.

I shot out into the night, leaving the window swinging open behind me. There came a roar from Zwolfe and an automatic barked viciously. Something whined past my head, but next instant I had gained the shelter of the shrubbery.

I doubled round to the rear of the stables in what, I will wager, was record time. I could hear the shouts of my pursuers in the shrubbery. Obviously they were uncertain as to which way I had gone.

Thankful indeed for the respite I swarmed up the rope to my window and, scrambling through, pulled up the rope. With feverish haste I unknotted the blankets, threw them on the bed, whipped off my clothes and, throwing my boots into a corner, leapt into bed.

Then, with straining ears, I lay listening. It had been a close shave. But I must have reached the cover of the shrubbery before either Erkunstelt or Henri could have reached the window. Zwolfe, of course, never having seen me before, could not have recognised my figure in the moonlight as I bolted across the lawn.

So I felt tolerably safe. But if they had caught me, undoubtedly they would have looked upon me as an accomplice of the Flying Beetle. And then what would have happened?

I lifted my head, listening intently. Not a sound was to be heard save the faint murmur of the restless sea. Suddenly I flopped my head back on to my pillow and closed my eyes. I even attempted to conjure up something approaching a snore.

For stealthy steps were coming up the wooden staircase which led from the stable yard to my quarters. I heard them pause outside the door and heard the handle gently turned.

Then the door crashed violently open and the massive bearded figure of Erkunstelt stood silhouetted on the threshold. There came a click, and a ray of light from an electric torch in his hand fell full upon my face.

The crash of that opening door would have roused anyone, so it was idle to pretend I

was asleep.

“Hallo!” I exclaimed, sitting up in bed with a jerk, and trying to appear as though I were but half awake and thoroughly astonished into the bargain.

“Hallo!” replied Erkunstelt grimly.

“Is—is it morning?” I inquired, painfully conscious of the utter futility of the remark.

“It is not morning,” replied Erkunstelt in that same grim voice.

“Were you wanting anything, then?” I said weakly, blinking at the dark forms of the four pilots who were now crowding in the doorway behind Erkunstelt.

“Yes, I am wanting something,” rapped the latter coldly. “Have you been out of this room to-night?”

His right hand moved forward and the ray of the electric torch, held in his left, glinted on the barrel of a squat automatic.

“Me? Been out of this room, sir?” I echoed.

“Yes, you! Answer my question.”

“I—I never crossed the door,” I answered, truthfully enough.

Erkunstelt did not reply. He stepped into the room, followed by Zwolfe and the others. He flashed his torch round the room and the beam of light came to rest on my boots lying in the corner where I had thrown them.

Stepping forward he bent down and touched them, then wheeled.

“Get him!” he roared. “Get him, you fools!”

With a rush those four pilots were on me. Falze’s fist crashed into my face with sickening force and his knee thudded into the pit of my stomach, knocking the wind and fight right out of me.

I found time in that hectic moment to curse myself for a fool. Those boots were wet with dew from the grass. But, looking back now, I wonder what else I could have done with them when I took them off. To have hidden them would have been fatal, and if I had thrown them out of sight under the bed I think Erkunstelt would have found them, knowing that they would prove whether or not I had been out.

“Take him to the house!” he snapped, and to the house I was marched.

I went protestingly, with a gun shoved in the small of my back and three pairs of hands holding me with vigorous grip, which was quite unnecessary. Zwolfe brought up the rear with Erkunstelt.

I was taken to the dining-room, where Henri greeted me with a snarl.

“Dirty spy!” he spat out and would, I think, have struck me had not Zwolfe pushed him aside.

“Get some rope, you!” said Erkunstelt, and Henri departed hot-foot upon the errand.

He returned, a quivering scarecrow of malicious humanity, and with the rope he had brought my hands were bound tightly behind my back.

I was then searched with a thoroughness which must have left nothing to be desired on the part of my captors, except that they found nothing at all, either in my pockets or upon my person.

Erkunstelt resumed his seat at the table, as did Zwolfe and Vorsorge. Vali di Sapi and

the blandly smiling Falze ranged themselves one on each side of me.

“Now,” said Erkunstelt, leaning forward across the table, his cold eyes on my face, “do you still deny that you have been out of your room to-night?”

“I never denied it,” I replied.

“You did! You said you never passed the door!”

“No, I went *viâ* the window,” I replied facetiously.

Falze tittered. Erkunstelt silenced him with a look.

“I should advise you not to play with me,” he went on harshly, turning to me again.

His hands were clenched on the table in front of him and somehow I received the impression that it was only by an effort he was keeping himself under control.

“Why did you leave your room?” he rapped.

But at that I was silent. How, indeed, could I answer him? Then passion flamed in his eyes. He leaped to his feet, crashing a clenched fist to the table.

“Shall I answer for you?” he roared. “Shall I tell you that at last you have made a mistake—a mistake which shall cost you your life?”

He whipped a quivering finger towards me.

“Far to the north,” he went on and his voice more subdued now, was hoarse with overwhelming fury, “in the midst of a cold and desolate sea, there stands a rock rising stark and grim from the grey waste of waters. And there you shall hang—aye, hang from the cliffs which face towards the eternal snows.”

I stared at him aghast, not so much at what he had said but at the almost berserk fury which was shaking him.

“He is a spy!” growled Vorsorge. “Why not kill him here and have done with it?”

“Kill him?” roared Erkunstelt. “Yes, I shall kill him—but at my leisure. I swore an oath this night that if ever he crossed my path——”

“Wait!” Zwolfe’s voice cut in sharply. “Who do you think this man is, Erkunstelt?”

“Who?” shouted Erkunstelt, wheeling on him. “Who but the Flying Beetle, you fool!”

“I do not believe it,” replied Zwolfe curtly.

Erkunstelt swung his great bearded face towards me.

“It is said of the Flying Beetle that he is a courageous and honourable man,” he said harshly, and how evident was the sneer in his voice. “I ask you, by that courage and on that honour, are you the Flying Beetle?”

“I am not,” I replied, and I look back with pride on the slight bow which accompanied the words, “but I thank you for the compliment.”

“He lies, of course,” chattered Falze, at my elbow.

“Yes!” snarled Erkunstelt, slumping heavily back into his chair. “He lies! He is the Flying Beetle!”

“You are wrong,” said Zwolfe doggedly.

“Why do you say that?” burst out Erkunstelt furiously. “You have no proof except his word,” and he indicated me with a contemptuous gesture.

“It is not a question of proof,” replied Zwolfe quietly, “it is a question of sheer

common sense.”

He turned in his chair towards me.

“Were you the man who was lurking behind those curtains?” he demanded.

“Yes, I was,” I replied defiantly.

With a gesture Zwolfe turned to the glowing Erkunstelt.

“I was sitting facing the curtains,” he said, “it would have been impossible for this man to have flicked or thrown the Flying Beetle’s card on to the table without my having seen from whence it came. Emphatically, this man did not—could not—have put the card on the table.”

“You might be an ally of his, the way you defend him,” growled Erkunstelt, but I saw indecision already in his face.

“Erkunstelt,” said Zwolfe, and of a sudden his voice had become deadly cold. “You will take that back! I have been loyal to you and always shall be until you, yourself, give me cause to be otherwise.”

“Yes, yes, Zwolfe,” replied Erkunstelt fretfully, “I did not mean it, my friend. But do you not realise what you are inferring? If this man is not the Flying Beetle, and is not responsible for the placing of that cursed card upon the table, then it must be one of us four, or Henri.”

And at that there was silence, whilst the four men glanced at each other uneasily and Henri, hovering near Erkunstelt’s chair, plucked nervously at his thin lips with trembling, claw-like fingers.

“Let us work on the elimination process,” continued Erkunstelt harshly. “It was not myself. I do not indulge in foolish jokes. It could not be Henri. He has been in my service for fifteen years and all humour, perverted or otherwise, long since dried up in him. As for you four who have come here to-night, I know your private histories too well to imagine any one of you is the Flying Beetle. Then, who did put the card on the table?”

Again there fell that uneasy silence; a silence broken suddenly by Erkunstelt’s short, rasping laugh.

“So you see, my good Zwolfe, it can only be he who stands there”—again he indicated me with contemptuous gesture—“For once your keen eyes failed you. He threw the card on to the table. He is the Flying Beetle!”

“I agree! I agree!” twittered Falze, at my elbow, and the brutish Vorsorge nodded his head in slow, ponderous manner.

“It was either he or a ghost,” he remarked rumbly. “And me, I do not believe in the supernatural.”

Zwolfe shrugged his shoulders.

“Very well, then,” he said, “have it your own way. But whether or not he is the Flying Beetle, it is perfectly evident, Erkunstelt, that the authorities have their eye on you.”

“You mean?”

“I mean here is a British spy in your house. For all you know the house may, even now, be surrounded.”

Erkunstelt licked dry lips with the tip of his tongue.

“They could prove nothing,” he said hoarsely, but his eyes flickered from the door to the curtained windows. “There is not a scrap of evidence in the house.”

“I am relieved to hear it,” commented Zwolfe dryly, “but I think, properly handled, this fellow will talk.”

He turned to me.

“Are you alone?” he questioned pleasantly.

“No, I am in the company of five uneasy blackguards,” I answered with fine bravado.

“Very humorous,” drawled Zwolfe coldly. “Permit me to put the question in a different manner. Are any of your companions waiting outside?”

“Find out,” I retorted.

The remark may have been childish, but at least it was final, or so Vorsorge seemed to think it, for he growled:

“He will not talk. Shoot the dog and let us be off!”

“I will give you one more chance,” said Zwolfe, drawing his gun from his pocket. “Are you alone or have you companions with you?”

He leaned his elbow on the table, the gun covering my heart.

“I will tell you nothing,” I replied, my eyes on the gun.

“I shall count three,” drawled Zwolfe, “then I shall fire!”

He was not bluffing. No one but a fool could have mistaken the deadly intentness in his voice.

“One!”

The word fell tonelessly from his lips.

“Two!”

I felt a bead of cold perspiration break out on my brow. I stared hypnotised at that finger curling slowly on the trigger.

“Th——”

Bang!

The gun exploded, the bullet burying itself in the ceiling. For Erkunstelt had leant forward and knocked up Zwolfe’s wrist.

“You fool, Zwolfe!” he snarled, “I did not think at first that you were in earnest. I tell you I will have no killing here. This is my house and if this man were found dead here I dare not show my face in any civilised country again. He comes with us to-night, and I will hang him when we reach the base, as I have said.”

“But his presence here proves that you are suspected,” rapped Zwolfe.

“Suspected of what?” demanded Erkunstelt. “I cannot be arrested on suspicion alone. They must have proof before they can arrest me, and they have no proof of anything. I tell you I have walked warily in England and I am not going to allow a cold-blooded fool like you to prevent me ever returning here.”

Zwolfe nodded coolly.

“All right, Erkunstelt,” he said. “But I think you are living in a fool’s paradise.”

He slipped his gun into his pocket and rose to his feet.

“Come,” he said. “Let us be off before the dawn. Who takes the prisoner?”

“He will go in the rear cockpit of your machine,” replied Erkunstelt, rising.

“Gentlemen,” he went on, “fill up your glasses and I will give you one last toast before we leave for the north. Success to our venture and death to the Flying Beetle!”

With that he hurled the contents of his wine-glass full in my face.

CHAPTER VI

WE FLEW NORTHWARDS

No time was lost in vacating the house and getting down to the cove where the seaplanes lay. Erkunstelt and his pilots walked with guns in their hands, quite prepared to greet any companions of mine who might be lurking in ambush.

But, unfortunately, I had no companions save one—the Flying Beetle. Where he was, and how that card had appeared on the table I had not the faintest idea. The exquisite irony of the whole affair was that I, who had done my best to carry out his instructions, was to act as proxy at his hanging.

The situation was so fantastic, so Gilbertian, that I laughed aloud. Henri, ambling by my side in the midst of the pilots, snarled a protest.

“Laughing!” he gritted. “You’ll have something to laugh at before long!”

He was clutching a carpet bag containing, I suppose, his own possessions.

“You left the dining-room in a mess,” I chided. “Mr. Holmes will have a lot of tidying up to do when he arrives in the morning.”

“Curse Mr. Holmes!” snarled the old wretch, a sentiment with which I could not agree.

Mr. Holmes, like others, doubtlessly imagined Erkunstelt to be a law-abiding gentleman. I knew otherwise now—knew that the Flying Beetle had been correct in his surmise that Erkunstelt would bear watching.

As yet I had no tangible proof that Erkunstelt was organising the attacks on machines flying on the Arctic air route, but I had little doubt in my own mind that such was the case.

I will not dwell upon the details of our embarkation. Suffice to say that Zwolfe’s strong arms hauled me up to the rear cockpit of his machine. He handled me easily enough and I had no thought of resistance, for my hands were still bound behind my back.

Henri and his carpet bag were ensconced in the rear cockpit of Falze’s machine, whilst Erkunstelt swung himself up to the rear cockpit of the machine piloted by Vorsorge.

Each of the four machines was fitted with a synchronised gun in front of the pilot’s cockpit, and also with a Lewis gun on well-greased mounting in the rear cockpit.

Zwolfe turned to me, drawing on his heavy flying gloves.

“We have a long flight before us and a cold flight,” he said. “It has never been a habit of mine to kick a man when he is down. If you will give me your word of honour not to attempt to interfere with either myself or the machine in any way, then I will release you from your bonds.”

“Thank you,” I replied. “I had not looked for such consideration—from you!”

Neither had I. For this was the man who, some little time beforehand, would have shot me down in cold blood. He seemed to sense my thought, for he growled:

“I was not bluffing when I drew my gun. To my mind it was very necessary. But there seems little need for you to travel in the maximum of discomfort, even if you do but journey to your hanging.”

“And you would take my word?” I demanded.

“Yes, your word of honour.”

“But,” I jeered, “would Erkunstelt approve?”

“I care nothing for Erkunstelt,” replied Zwolfe roughly, “you are in my charge!”

I stared at his grim, swarthy face, plainly visible as it was turned towards me in the moonlight.

“Then I give you my word,” I replied soberly, “but it only holds good whilst we are in the air.”

“I do not ask beyond that,” he replied, and leaning forward he severed my bonds.

There was a folded tarpaulin lying on the floor of my cockpit and I wrapped it around me, for I knew the slip-stream from the racing propeller would be icy cold at any considerable altitude.

“Are you ready?” came Erkunstelt’s gruff voice from Vorsorge’s machine.

“Yes,” replied Zwolfe.

Next instant his engine burst into life with a shattering roar. He throttled down and leant outboard to haul in the sea anchor. One after the other, Vorsorge, Falze, and di Sapi opened up their engines.

Zwolfe adjusted his goggles firmly over his eyes, glanced back towards me, then opened the throttle. The roar of the engine rose to a high, pulsating, thunderous rhythm, and as he pressed on the rudder bar the seaplane swung slowly away from the beach.

We moved forward with ever-increasing impetus, until we were tearing across the water, leaving a long backwash of creamy foam in our wake. Then Zwolfe pulled gently on the control stick and we took the air in a long, upward glide.

We circled at 200 feet and, looking down, I saw the three other machines were in the air. At 500 feet we fell into diamond-shaped formation and, with Zwolfe in the lead, thundered through the night towards the North.

We kept well out to sea, climbing as we flew. Far to the west I could see the black shadow of the Scottish coast. More than once we passed over the dark hull of some ship, surmounted by its masthead lights.

The machines held perfect formation. Zwolfe was leaning back in his seat, holding the control stick with that easy indifference which tells of the trained pilot. Occasionally he would turn his head, peering out into the night. But never did he turn to me, and, rogue though he undoubtedly was, I afforded him some grudging admiration for that.

He had accepted my word and it was evident that he intended to trust me. As we roared northwards I fell to pondering on my unenviable position.

There was not the slightest doubt that the Flying Beetle had been at Four Gables that night. Erkunstelt and his companions imagined I was the Flying Beetle, but they were wrong. I was not, and I wondered why that elusive personality had stood aside and watched me being marched off, to what most assuredly would be my death, unless something strangely unforeseen happened.

He must have been aware of my capture. Then why hadn’t he come to my aid? It might be that he had secreted his machine somewhere and was following.

Time and again, buoyed by that thought, I turned my head, peering into the moonlit

night behind. But no vestige of a pursuing machine could I see.

I could not blame myself for my capture. I had taken a certain necessary risk in entering Erkunstelt's dining-room. It had been quite on the cards that they would discover my presence. They had done so and I had been captured.

I had given my word of honour to Zwolfe not to interfere with either him or the machine in the air. It would have been to my own discomfort had I refused, for my bonds had been tied by expert hands, and I had been quite as powerless, bound by that rope, as I was now, bound by my promise.

And the Flying Beetle had not even attempted to aid me. I could no more understand that, than I could understand how his card had suddenly appeared under Erkunstelt's nose.

Well, here was a sorry ending to my quest. I was going to be hanged and Sir Douglas Malcolm would wait in vain for any word from me about Erkunstelt. But—and I found some solid consolation in the thought—I was not dead yet.

Whilst there is life there is hope, I told myself almost savagely. Then cold reason whispered that already the odds were six to one against me—if the aged Henri could be counted as one—and those odds would doubtless be vastly increased before long.

The first faint light of the coming dawn was streaking the eastern sky when we sighted the grim and lonely Orkney Islands lying far to port of us. Zwolfe pressed gently on the rudder bar and swung the formation a few degrees to the west.

The flaming ball of the sun had swung up above the horizon, making golden a cold, grey sea, when we passed over the Shetland Islands at a height of 10,000 feet.

It was cold indeed now, and I shivered as I crouched in the cockpit, seeking protection from the icy bite of the swirling slip-stream. Another hour passed as we thundered onwards. Continually now, Zwolfe's eyes behind his goggles were sweeping the waste of waters below.

More than once he took Zeiss glasses from a rack by his elbow and pressed them to his eyes. Suddenly he focused them on a tiny speck on the waters far ahead. For a few moments he gazed earnestly, then nodded as though satisfied, and whipped the glasses back to their rack.

His hand shot up in signal to his companions. Forward went the control stick, and he took the formation seawards in a thundering nose dive.

Then, as we roared towards it, the distant speck resolved itself into the long hull of a large oil-tanker. We thundered over its mastheads at 500 feet. I saw Zwolfe groping for his Verey pistol.

The next instant he fired it far outboard and, as the white magnesium cartridge dropped flaring towards the sea, the machines broke formation. The roar of the engines died away and noses went down for a landing on the water.

The "Denham" was the name of that oil tanker—a name which I read clearly in dingy white lettering on her bows as, landing, we surged in towards her.

She was riding low in the water, evidence of full tanks aboard. Her deckhouses and squat smoke stacks, set well aft, were separated from the towering for'ard bridge by a long stretch of iron deck.

The rusty plates of her hull were sorely in need of paint. Indeed, she looked a slow, heavy, lumbering craft. But this impression was strangely belied by her sharp, cutaway bows.

In the lee of the deckhouses stood a tarpaulin-covered gun. The port rail was lined with seamen staring down at us. Others were busily engaged in launching a couple of boats, and as the seaplanes gradually lost way, the two boats splashed into the water.

One headed towards Zwolfe and me, the other towards the machine which had aboard *Vorsorge* and *Erkunstelt*.

“In you get!” said Zwolfe grimly to me, as the boat bumped against our starboard float.

I took one look at the automatic which had suddenly appeared in his hand, another at his stern, grim face, and I dropped into the boat.

The seamen stared at me curiously. They were swarthy fellows of excellent physique and of undoubtedly foreign extraction. Waiting till Zwolfe had switched off his engine and joined me in the boat, they bent to their oars and we headed back to the ship.

Reaching it, I went up a rope ladder to the iron deck, with Zwolfe and his gun following at my heels. A short, squat, burly fellow, massive of shoulder, was standing at the head of the ladder.

He was clad in the uniform of a merchant service skipper, and was wearing knee-high sea-boots. He was heavy jowled and clean-shaven, his weather-beaten face almost the colour of leather.

With hat cocked at jaunty angle and hands thrust deep into the pockets of his reefer jacket, he raked me with little, pig-like eyes.

“Oho!” he exclaimed gruffly.

“How d’you do?” I replied; which might have been futile, but which was just as original as his remark.

He turned to Zwolfe, who had swung himself up to the deck behind me.

“A stranger!” he growled, but there was something in his voice which was akin to respect as he addressed Zwolfe. “A recruit, I suppose?”

“No, he is a spy, Kurz,” replied Zwolfe.

There came a rumble of surprise from the gaping seamen standing near. As for the squat Kurz, he switched his little eyes back to me and his ugly mouth opened to emit a hoarse chuckle.

“A spy, you say?” he growled. “I suppose we’ll be hanging him from the masthead?”

“Again you suppose wrongly,” replied Zwolfe curtly. “I hate to see you cheated of your fun, but *Erkunstelt* has other plans.”

“But he’s not going to allow the dog to live, is he?” demanded Kurz with an interest which, to me, bordered on the offensive.

“Assuredly he is not,” returned Zwolfe grimly. “But here he comes, Kurz, so question him yourself.”

Kurz turned towards where *Erkunstelt* was already stepping to the deck, followed by *Vorsorge*.

“Good-day to you, sir,” he said, knuckling the peak of his hat and shuffling forward. “I understand that——”

But he got no further. Erkunstelt pushed him roughly aside and confronted Zwolfe.

“What does this mean?” he rapped, gesturing angrily towards me. “Who freed this man from his bonds?”

“I did,” replied Zwolfe coolly.

“You had no right to take such a risk,” shouted Erkunstelt. “Why did you do it?”

Zwolfe threw back his head, squaring his shoulders.

“Because I chose to,” he retorted.

I saw Erkunstelt’s hands clench and passion glint in his eyes. I saw, also, the silent, staring seamen nudge each other.

“Zwolfe,” said Erkunstelt, and plainly visible was the effort he made to keep his voice under control, “you know who this man is. Are you mad that you deliberately unloosen his bonds?”

“No, I am not mad, Erkunstelt,” replied Zwolfe coldly, “neither am I ridden by vicious spite. Whether this man be the Flying Beetle or not, we know him to be a spy. He has pitted his wits against ours—and he has lost. Shortly he will die and, till then, I shall treat him as a man.”

“He is the Flying Beetle!” snarled Erkunstelt. “You know he is. And he is dangerous!”

“Dangerous?” repeated Zwolfe, and Erkunstelt’s bearded face flushed beneath the biting contempt in his voice. “Dangerous, you say? How could any man prove dangerous, unarmed aboard this ship?”

“Nevertheless, you were wrong to loosen his bonds,” growled Erkunstelt sullenly.

He wheeled on Kurz.

“Have him tied up and locked in a cabin,” he snapped. “Mount a guard over the door.”

“And screw up the porthole window in case he jumps through it,” sneered Zwolfe.

For a moment I thought Erkunstelt was going to strike him. He glared at him with fists clenched. But Zwolfe gave him look for look, then turned away with a short, harsh laugh and a shrug of his shoulders.

Kurz barked out a gruff command. Four seamen sprang forward. I was seized and hustled below. They thrust me into a cabin, bound my hands once again behind my back, then slammed the door on me and turned the key in the lock.

I spent the remainder of that day, till nightfall came, in either lying on the bunk or staring through the open porthole window.

The seaplanes had obviously landed in order to replenish their petrol and oil supplies. All morning, pumps clanked on the deck above me, fuelling the seaplanes which had been towed close inboard.

I was rather intrigued as to why the pilots did not take off again when fuelling was finished, but came to the conclusion that they were resting after their long flight through the night hours.

Then I fell to wondering about Zwolfe. Certainly he stood in no awe of Erkunstelt. He had treated me very fairly. But I knew his type, and knew that in such fashion would he

expect to be treated had our positions been reversed.

I had not the slightest illusions as to his feelings towards me. He would have shot me, back there at Four Gables, merely because I would not answer his question. He would doubtlessly be a cold and cynical spectator at my hanging. But, whilst I lived, I had claim to be treated as a creature of flesh and blood. This was his creed—the creed of many an adventurer before him.

My thoughts drifted on, and I wondered at the risk Erkunstelt was taking in keeping his seaplanes on the water by the tanker. A passing craft, sighting them, might feel inclined to make awkward inquiries about their presence.

But further thought convinced me that Erkunstelt ran little risk in that direction. I judged our position to be about 200 miles eastwards of the Faroe Islands. Few, indeed, would be the vessels in those lonely waters. No, Erkunstelt had chosen the rendezvous with excellent discrimination. Weeks might pass without our sighting sail or hull of any consequence.

At length the shadows of the coming night came creeping in across the sea. I retired to my bunk then, and lay wondering when those on deck were going to bring me any food—if, indeed, they intended to bring me any at all.

Slowly dusk deepened into night, and the cabin was in darkness save for the grey glimmer of the open porthole window. There was a guard outside in the passageway. I knew that, for more than once during the day he had lounged heavily against the door of my cabin or had exchanged some gruff remark with a passing companion.

As I lay, there came to my ears the sounds of increasing activity on deck and overside. I listened intently, and knew that the hour of our departure from the “Denham” was at hand, for the seaplanes were being towed away from the tanker by the boats.

Suddenly I tensed. From outside my door had come a hoarse, stifled exclamation, a scuffling, a dull thud—then silence. Seconds passed and nothing stirred. Then I heard the key turn gently in the lock, and sensed, rather than saw, that the door was opening.

I watched with straining eyes, and discerned a dark figure slip across the threshold into the cabin, closing the door behind him.

Then came a voice, a strangely familiar voice, even though it spoke but in a whisper.

“Beverley!”

I knew then, my masters, who it was that stood there in the darkness by the door. It was the Flying Beetle!

“Davies!” I cried hoarsely, sitting upright with a jerk.

“Ssh, man!” he said, and crossed to my bunk with swift and silent tread.

He groped for my bound hands, pressed them in boyish, unaffected greeting, then sawed at the thick rope with open clasp knife.

“Did you think I had deserted you?” he whispered, his lips close to my ear, a hint of laughter in his voice.

“Davies, I do not understand——” I began.

“I know you do not,” he cut in, “but we have so little time. Explanations must wait. Listen! The seaplanes are lying ready for the take off. Try and take one. Fly to the Arctic air route main aerodrome at Belfast. Get together a squadron of fighting scouts and

bombing machines. Be in readiness to take the air the moment you hear from me.”

“And you?” I whispered.

“I shall try to reach Erkunstelt’s base. I must ascertain its location.”

“Then he is actually the man behind the scenes—he is the leader of the pirates?”

“Yes, he is the leader.”

My hands were free now. Stiffly I rose to my feet, peering at the lad who stood so close to me in the darkness. But I could discern little, for he was wearing his black flying kit and black leather face mask.

“Will you not tell me how you come to be here?” I demanded, for in very truth I was sorely puzzled.

“There is no time,” he whispered urgently. “Every second is precious. Here, take this!”

He thrust an automatic into my hand, and oh, how good was the feel of the bulging butt.

“You have only one chance in a thousand of getting away with a machine,” he whispered, “but the passage to the deck is clear. I overpowered the guard and he is slowly recovering behind the locked door of an adjacent cabin.”

“I—I hate leaving you,” I muttered.

“You must, man,” he replied. “It is the only way. Remember, if you win through, fly to Belfast and wait for word from me. Go now. Good-bye and good luck!”

He pressed my hand in the darkness and pushed me towards the door. I hesitated no longer. With the gun in my hand I opened the door and passed out into the dimly lighted corridor.



[Facing page 64.](#)

WE WERE TEARING ACROSS THE WATER, LEAVING A LONG
BACKWASH OF CREAMY FOAM IN OUR WAKE

CHAPTER VII

MY DESPERATE VENTURE

I GLANCED to left and right. The passageway was deserted. From the other side of a closed door opposite me came a rumble of voices, punctuated by a sudden, harsh laugh, which I had no difficulty in recognising as emanating from Erkunstelt.

I wasted no further time in getting my bearings, but set off along the corridor with more boldness than I felt. I reached the foot of the deck ladder without incident and, taking a fresh grip on my gun, I commenced to ascend.

But scarcely had I got half way up than a whistling fool appeared at the top and came running gaily down. The whistling ceased abruptly as he cannoned into me.

I clutched at the iron rail of the ladder to save myself from making an ignominious backward descent. Recovering my balance, by an effort, I found myself glaring into the face of Falze.

That face was within inches of my own, and I do not recollect ever having seen a face which expressed astonishment as did his in that moment.

“You?” he yelled. “What——”

It was then that I hit him. I did not hit him gently, either. For apart from the fact that I disliked him intensely, he stood between me and my liberty. My fist took him under the jaw, and he went sprawling down the ladder to crash in a heap on the floor of the corridor.

There he lay bellowing strange oaths, which were, however, lost on me. For I negotiated the remainder of that ladder with an alacrity which only the urgency of the occasion could warrant.

A seaman, attracted by the noise, loomed up in front of me and stretched out detaining hands. But it was a half-hearted effort, for I do not think he had grasped who I was or what had happened.

I evaded him easily enough and, sprinting across the narrow deck, gained the port rail. The dark bulk of the seaplanes was plainly visible on the waters. They were lying within fifty yards of the ship. One boat had already been hoisted inboard on its derricks. The other was lying at the foot of the rope ladder, waiting to put the pilots aboard their machines.

All this I took in at a glance, then sprang on to the deck rail. I was only just in time for, like hounds in full cry, Erkunstelt and his companions came sprinting up the ladder and burst on to the deck.

“Stop him!” I heard Erkunstelt shout.

Simultaneously with the vicious report of a gun behind me, I flung up my hands and took a header into the sea.

The water struck icy cold, and down, down I went until I thought my lungs must burst. Then I came to the surface and struck out for the nearest seaplane.

They were firing at me from the deck rail, and I heard Erkunstelt bellowing frantic orders to get after me in a boat. I knew that the automatic which the Flying Beetle had

given me, and which I had slipped into my pocket on gaining the deck, was useless now after its immersion in the water. But I knew also that a certain confusion and jostling must prevail on board before enough men to man the oars had tumbled down the rope ladder into the boat.

The nearest seaplane was less than twenty yards from me when I ventured a backward glance. Already the pursuing boat was shooting away from the side of the "Denham". I redoubled my efforts. But the boat was propelled by lusty arms, and it was almost upon me when the black spread of the seaplane's lower wing loomed above my head and my hands touched the wet fabric of the starboard float.

Drawing a long breath into tortured lungs, I sprawled myself across the float, clambered on to the lower plane, and swung myself up into the cockpit. It was then that they opened fire on me from the boat. A bullet spanged dully against the engine cowling, another whined past my head, whilst a third tore through the fabric of the cockpit, within an inch of my leg.

Frenziedly my fingers closed on switch and self-starter. The next instant the engine burst into life with a shattering roar. I laughed exultantly as, crouched in the cockpit, I gripped the control stick and throttle handle.

I had won through!

Then, without warning, something like a red-hot iron seared my scalp. I have a vague recollection of leaping wildly to my feet before my world went black about me and I crashed forward over the controls.

It was daylight when next I opened my eyes. I was lying on a bunk in a well-furnished cabin. My head was throbbing agonisedly and, raising a shaking hand to my temple, I discovered my head was neatly bandaged. For some moments I lay, endeavouring to collect my thoughts. Then, as fuller consciousness returned to me, I painfully turned my head on the pillow.

Zwolfe was half leaning against, half seated on, the cabin table. A cigarette was between his lips and he was regarding me with sombre eyes.

"So you are awake at last!" he remarked.

I stared at him in silence, still only half grasping what had happened.

"You made a bold bid for liberty," he went on. "Unfortunately, for you, it failed."

"Yes," I replied bitterly, for now I was remembering it all.

"But even when unconscious you almost slipped through Erkunstelt's fingers," continued Zwolfe, and I saw grim humour for a moment in his eyes.

"I do not understand," I said weakly.

"You had switched on the engine," explained Zwolfe. "If one of the boat's crew had not possessed the presence of mind to jump on to the float and clamber up to the cockpit in order to switch off, the seaplane would have carried you away into the darkness—who knows where?"

He broke off with a shrug of his shoulders. I lay silent. I knew the machine had been almost on the move when that bullet had got me. Another second, perhaps, and it would have been clear of the boat, tearing across the water into the night.

There was little or nothing into which I could have crashed and the rush of cold air

would probably have quickly revived me. Then I could have taken the air and headed for the aerodrome at Belfast. I had, indeed, been just beaten on the tape.

“From a purely impersonal point of view I think fate treated you badly,” remarked Zwolfe, watching the blue spiral of smoke from his cigarette curl slowly upwards. “Erkunstelt, of course, is elated at your recapture.”

“He would be,” I replied.

“Yes,” nodded Zwolfe, “elated and—alarmed!”

“Alarmed?” I repeated, staring.

Zwolfe dropped his cigarette to the floor, grinding it beneath his heel.

“Where is your companion?” he demanded sharply.

“My companion?” I echoed.

“Yes, the man who released you from your cabin—the Flying Beetle!”

I did not reply for a moment. So they knew that the Flying Beetle was aboard the “Denham.” How had they discovered that?

“But I thought Erkunstelt was convinced that I was the Flying Beetle!” I said.

“He admits now that he was wrong and that you cannot be the Flying Beetle,” replied Zwolfe. “Someone overpowered the guard outside your cabin door, then entered your cabin and cut your bonds. That individual was the Flying Beetle.”

“How do you know?” I demanded.

“Because he made a neat heap of your severed bonds and left his card lying on top of it,” explained Zwolfe.

“Did he?” I exclaimed, then added with more composure than I felt. “That was very rash of him.”

“Not so rash as one might think!” retorted Zwolfe, eyeing me keenly. “Erkunstelt has had every inch of the ship searched and there is no sign of him. Where is he?”

“I haven’t the faintest idea,” I replied with perfect truth; then went on, “but it must be a great source of gratification to you, who never thought me to be the Flying Beetle, to have your opinion vindicated in such convincing fashion.”

Zwolfe laughed.

“You’re a strange fellow,” he said.

“And in stranger company,” I retorted.

I was feeling infinitely better now. The throbbing in my temples was perceptibly easing.

“Well,” I remarked, almost jauntily, “as you are all convinced that I am not the Flying Beetle, I suppose Erkunstelt has magnanimously cancelled my hanging.”

“On the contrary,” remarked Zwolfe drily, “he is looking forward to it with an even greater zest.”

“Indeed? And why?”

“Because he is of the opinion that when you feel the rope round your neck you will tell him all he wants to know.”

“And what does he want to know?” I demanded.

“The identity of the Flying Beetle and how he may be captured,” replied Zwolfe.

“Questions which I could not answer if I wished,” I retorted. “I suppose Erkunstelt will be barging in here shortly, to proceed with the cross-examination?”

“No, he has gone!”

“Gone?” I echoed.

“Yes, as I told you, your escape alarmed him, in that it gave token of the presence of the Flying Beetle. So he has gone, taking with him Falze, Vorsorge, di Sapi, and his servant, Henri.”

“And the carpet bag? Don’t say they went in such a hurry that they forgot Henri’s carpet bag!” I implored.

Zwolfe stared at me, puzzled for a moment, then threw back his head and laughed.

“It will be a pity to hang such an amiable fool as you,” he said, “for I like a man who can joke when the game has gone against him.”

“But seriously,” I demanded, “has Erkunstelt gone?”

“Yes, to a spot where he flatters himself he will be safe from the menace of this elusive and mysterious Flying Beetle. I but wait whilst my machine is being repaired, then I shall take you to that same spot.”

“I was not aware that your machine was damaged,” I remarked.

“No?” replied Zwolfe. “Yet it was my machine which you selected in your attempt at escape. One bullet from the men in the boat ploughed its way into the engine. Another almost severed the starboard rudder control wire.”

With that he turned away towards the door.

“I will send the steward to you with food,” he said, pausing on the threshold, “also your clothes, which I have had dried in the galley. We have a cold trip in front of us, so I am providing you with flying kit.”

“Thank you,” I replied, for again I was strangely impressed by the man’s scrupulous fairness to me.

Then, after a hearty meal which put new life into me, I was taken on deck by two seamen, and went down the rope ladder to the boat which was waiting to take me to Zwolfe’s seaplane.

The squat Kurz poked his head over the deck rail and glowered down at me as I sat in the stern sheets of the boat.

“Good-bye,” he snarled, “I wish I could attend your hanging.”

“Thanks,” I replied, “I feel exactly the same sentiment towards yourself.”

And with this pleasant exchange of compliments we parted. The boat shot away from the “Denham,” heading towards the seaplane, where Zwolfe was already donning his flying kit in the forward cockpit.

I scrambled up to the rear cockpit without any thought of resistance, for resistance was futile under the circumstances. My gun had been taken from me before I had regained consciousness, and I was totally unarmed.

I was wearing the flying kit which Zwolfe had given me, and as I dropped into the cockpit he turned to me. His face was very grim, and he spoke in sharp, incisive tones.

“This is the last lap of our journey,” he said. “South-west of Spitsbergen we cross the Arctic air route. It is possible that I may be attacked by some British machine patrolling the route. Consequently I am going to have you tied to the gun mounting. I am sorry, but it is necessary.”

He rapped out an order, and two seamen clambered up from the boat to my cockpit. My gloved hands were securely lashed to the swing mounting of the Lewis gun. Zwolfe supervised the operation, and it was directly through him that my hands were tied in a manner which did not affect the circulation in them and, in fact, he made certain that I suffered the minimum of discomfort.

The seamen dropped back to their boat and pulled away from the machine. Zwolfe switched on, and the engine burst into a sudden shattering roar. He ran it up to full revolutions, anxious eyes on the dashboard instruments in front of him. Thrice he tested his engine at full revolutions before keeping the throttle open and swinging away from the “Denham.”

Even then he did not take off. I saw his fingers curl round the trigger of the synchronised gun, and above the thunder of the engine there came the crackle of exploding cartridges. But at length both engine and gun tests were concluded. He glanced over his shoulder at me, then turned again to his controls, and his gloved fingers closed on the throttle. The roar of the engine rose to a high pulsating note, and we shot forward across the grey sea.

I looked back at the creamy wake of foam which was rapidly lengthening between ourselves and the “Denham.” The port rail of the vessel was lined with watching seamen. Then, as Zwolfe pulled gently on the control stick, we took the air in a long, upward glide.

Circling, Zwolfe headed back towards the ship. At less than fifty feet we roared over her mastheads. Zwolfe waved a gloved hand once in farewell, then settled in his seat and we thundered towards the north, climbing as we went.

Visibility was tolerably good, but the blue of the sky could find little reflection in the grey, sullen waste of waters over which we were flying. And ever it grew colder and yet more cold. An hour dragged by, then another and another. I was shivering miserably in the icy slip-stream from the whirling propeller, for it bit through the heavy flying kit to my very bones. And nothing occurred to break the long-drawn-out monotony. It was as though we flew through space, bounded only by a greyish-blue sky above and a desolate sea below.

I found coherent thought well-nigh impossible as I strove to still my chattering teeth, and strove also to forget the aching throb which had recommenced in my head. I had long since given up, in despair, the problem of the Flying Beetle. How his card had suddenly appeared on the table in Erkunstelt’s dining-room at Four Gables and how he himself had come to be on board the “Denham” were mysteries absolutely unfathomable to me.

I think it must have been about mid-day when I noticed a subtle change in Zwolfe. He no longer lolled negligently in his seat, the control stick held with easy confidence in his gloved hand. He seemed to become tensed, and continually his goggle-protected eyes swept the sky to port and to starboard. More than once he turned full in his seat and searched the sky behind with long, earnest gaze. Once, also, when his grim eyes met mine and held them for an instant he nodded. I knew then that we were crossing the Arctic air

route.

I found myself wondering what would happen should we meet a British machine. Then abruptly I ceased to wonder as I focused my gaze on two white-winged machines wheeling high in the sky, far to westwards. It was only a matter of seconds before Zwolfe saw them. He stared steadily, then whipped the Zeiss glasses from their rack and pressed them to his eyes.

The white machines seemingly had sighted us, for they swung in our direction. Zwolfe replaced the glasses in the rack and turned to me. I could not hear his voice above the thunder of the engine, but I saw his lips frame the word:

“British!”

Gone then was all sense of monotony. Gone was everything, on my part, save an intense desire to see those white-winged machines overhaul Zwolfe and drive him down to the water. I sincerely hoped they would refrain from shooting him down in flames. Such a course would mark the end of myself in no uncertain manner.

As for Zwolfe, he flew coolly onwards, but he kept a wary eye on the approaching machines. He did not attempt to increase his speed, neither did he attempt to change his altitude, which was about 12,000 feet. He might have been engaged upon the most lawful of flights for all the apparent notice he took of those other two, who, did they but realise it, were his deadly foes.

And would they realise it? I asked myself that time and again. After all there was nothing about Zwolfe’s machine which would serve to advertise it as a pirate seaplane. I admit I was lashed to the gun mounting by my wrists, but my bonds would be quite hidden at any distance. Neither was there anything extraordinary in the fact that we carried both Lewis and synchronised guns. We might be a foreign machine flying on the Arctic air route and carrying guns for our own protection.

The oncoming machines were within half a mile of us by now, flying at roughly 1,000 feet greater altitude than ourselves. They were white, single-seater fighting scouts, and I could see distinctly the red, white and blue circles painted on the bottom of their lower planes.

Minutes passed—minutes which lengthened into an hour, and still the scouts followed grimly on our tail. They made no effort to attack, neither did they attempt to close in on us.

Time and again Zwolfe turned his head to watch them. Suddenly his hand closed on the throttle and the thunder of the engine died away. Forward went the control stick and we dived seawards, with propeller barely ticking over. Zwolfe leaned far back in his seat, and his words came clearly to me above the whine of the wind through flying-wires and struts.

“Those machines are following me—to watch me land,” he shouted. “I dare not risk it any longer! I am going to fight!”

He slumped back in his seat and opened up his engine with a roar. I saw him pull gently on the control stick and the nose of the machine came up. But he did not wheel on his pursuers. Ah, no! he was a far cleverer air fighter than that. For another half hour we roared onwards towards the north, and during that time Zwolfe climbed, inch by inch, foot by foot.

The scouts were still hanging grimly on our tail. It was obvious that they suspected us, but such things as “international complications” must have caused them to act warily. If ours were a machine engaged on a lawful errand, and they interfered with us, then some very pointed questions might be asked.

So imperceptibly had Zwolfe climbed that it had passed almost unnoticed. We were practically at the same altitude as the scouts, when suddenly he turned in his seat, taking long and careful survey of their positions. Then he whipped savagely into action.

Forward went the control stick, and we tore seawards with engine thundering at full revolutions. But for seconds only did Zwolfe hold that dive. Back came the control stick, hugged close into his leather flying coat, and we went skywards in a wild, soaring zoom.

At the very top of a whirlwind loop, when our undercarriage was pointing up into the blue, Zwolfe whipped the stick across and we rolled in a perfect Immelman turn. Then forward went the control stick again and, from the height which he had gained, Zwolfe thundered downwards, straight at the nearest scout.

His synchronised gun roared into action, blood-red flame licking back from its black muzzle. So sudden, so utterly unexpected had been that attack that the pilot of the scout was taken completely by surprise. Every bullet from Zwolfe’s flaming gun was whanging into the vitals of his machine. I saw him crumple up in a heap over the controls. The nose of the scout dropped, a tongue of flame licked backwards from the burning petrol tank, and next instant the machine was tearing seawards, enshrouded in flames and black swirling smoke.

With lips asnarl, Zwolfe turned on the remaining scout. But the pilot of that machine was not to be taken by surprise as Zwolfe’s first victim had been. He was already coming at us, his gun spewing flame and steel-coated lead. I saw our lower port plane rip a full eighteen inches, as though riven by some invisible knife. Zwolfe pulled a sharp wing turn and went upwards in a zoom. Completing the loop, he roared downwards at the scout, and again his gun blazed into life. But that scout was piloted by expert hands. It fell away into a spin and, as Zwolfe thundered after it, suddenly pulled out of the spin and went upwards in a zoom.

Zwolfe kicked on rudder savagely and pulled back his control stick, essaying to follow his quarry. But the scout was already roaring down on us. Bullets ripped through our fuselage, and I saw splinters fly suddenly from a starboard strut, the gashed and riven wood showing white beneath the varnish.

Zwolfe took his machine seawards in a frenzied twisting dive, which severely tested every strut and bracing wire. Thundering grimly on our tail came the scout, and in that moment I thought Zwolfe had met his master and that we were doomed.

But he yanked the control stick back and we went soaring up into the blue, the scout sticking to us like a leech. Just in time to prevent a stall, Zwolfe flattened out. It was then that I saw him sag drunkenly in his seat and his nerveless hand fell from the control stick. He was hit!

The control stick jerked forward of its own volition and we fell into a spin. How long we remained in that spin I cannot say. I saw the cold, grey, desolate waters swirling up to meet us, and I writhed frantically in my bonds. The machine, out of control, would crash into the sea and go under. And I should go under with it, drowned without any chance at

all of life.

Zwolfe had sagged limply forward over the controls. I think I shouted at him wildly in that first unnerving realisation of what had happened. Then self-control came again, and I tugged at my bonds in savage silence.

We were less than 500 feet from the grey sea when Zwolfe stirred, lifting his head dazedly. I saw groping hand go out behind him, and he literally hauled himself off the controls back into his seat. His shaking hand clutched at the control stick, pulling it back, and his feet slithered on to the rudder bar. I knew he was doing it all by that instinct which comes to every pilot, and especially to those who won their spurs amidst the whine of bursting shrapnel over the battlefields of Flanders.

His foot pressed on the rudder bar to counteract the spin, and, at 200 feet above the sea we came out of the spin in a long, smooth glide. Zwolfe turned a livid face in search of his adversary. The scout had followed us down and was wheeling within a hundred feet of us.

Zwolfe's shaking fingers curled round the trigger of his synchronised gun. He pulled a slow, lumbering wing turn, then roared straight at the scout. Again his gun blazed into life, the cartridge belt whirling madly through the chamber. The scout made no effort to return our fire. He went upwards in a zoom and, grimly, Zwolfe followed.

Let me here pay some tribute to Zwolfe's courage. I hold no brief for him, but could you have seen him as I saw him then, it may be that you also would say that whatever else he might be, he was at least a man. His head lolled on his shoulders, and it was obvious that he was indeed sorely wounded. Yet he made no effort to run, no effort to capitulate. He was prepared to fight until nerve and muscle had ceased to function. Of such stuff are heroes made.

The scout looped, twisted, dived and rolled, but not once did he fire on us as we grimly pursued him. Then suddenly the truth flashed in on me. I strained forward towards Zwolfe, roaring at the full pitch of my voice:

“His gun has jammed! Don't you see—his gun has jammed!”

It was either that or else he had run out of ammunition. Zwolfe heard my voice above the thunder of the engine, for he turned his head towards me. Again I shouted, and this time I think he understood. For he nodded weakly, and his fingers released their grip on the trigger of the gun.

We circled cautiously, watching the wheeling scout. I wondered what the pilot of that machine would do—hoping that he would not be such a suicidal fool as to attempt to follow us further. I use the term deliberately. For it was, indeed, grimly evident that Zwolfe would not allow himself to be followed, and what was it but suicidal madness for an unarmed pilot to attempt it?

Zwolfe was holding his fire, giving the scout a chance to draw off in safety. But it was Zwolfe, himself, who settled the matter. He swung his machine on to its original course and, with engine thundering at full revolutions, we roared northwards.

Looking back, I saw the scout wheel away towards the south-west. It was obvious that the pilot had realised the hopelessness of further pursuit. No signs of his companion remained except a few charred and blackened fragments of wreckage floating on the surface of the grey waters.

For half an hour we flew, yet it did not seem that to me, for reaction had left me

strangely weary. Below us, on that cold and desolate sea, drifted small icebergs, which became more numerous as we steadily approached the line of seventy-five. The white, fresh snow on them stood out vividly against the greyness of the sea.

Suddenly the roar of our engine died away. The nose of the machine dropped as Zwolfe pushed the control stick forward. We went downwards in a long dive and landed on the water. Zwolfe switched off his engine and, as the seaplane gradually lost way, he dropped his hands from the controls and leant weakly back in his seat.

“Zwolfe!” I cried sharply. “Zwolfe!”

With fumbling hand he pushed up his goggles and slowly turned his head towards me. His swarthy face was livid, his lips bloodless.

“You can—pilot a machine?” he demanded huskily, haltingly.

“Yes,” I replied.

He nodded, and when he spoke again the words came with an effort.

“I thought so when—when you tried to escape.”

He groped in the pocket of his flying coat, and producing a pocket knife opened it clumsily. Then painfully he hoisted himself up in his seat and, leaning backwards, sawed weakly at my bonds.

“You—you must save yourself,” he whispered huskily, his face close to mine. “Make for either the coast of Greenland or Spitsbergen.”

“And what of you?” I demanded, staring at his drawn and haggard face.

“It does not matter about me—now,” he replied, “I am dying—shot through the back.”

The rope fell away from my wrists then.

“Get back into your cockpit,” I said, “and I will dress your wound.”

He stared at me, but gently I pushed him back into his seat, and clambering over the fuselage I dropped into his cockpit.

I found lint and dressings in the cockpit locker. I will not dwell on the clumsy job which I made of dressing his wound, for the bitter cold and the numbness which still lingered in my wrists aided me not a whit. I worked as expeditiously as I could for, undoubtedly, the man was sorely wounded. He protested at first, then suffered my clumsy ministrations in silence. But always his sombre, pain-filled eyes were on my face. And it was when my task was at length ended that he whispered:

“Why do you do this for me?”

Aye, why indeed, unless it was through sheer humanity? For was he not a merciless scoundrel who ran in harness with Erkunstelt? Had he not sent a fellow-countryman of mine to his death that very day?

I turned and stared out across the grey waste of water, over which was creeping the strange dullness of the Arctic night. But in my mind were only thoughts of this man’s treatment of me whilst I had been his prisoner.

“Tell me!” I demanded, turning to him. “Why did you seek service with Erkunstelt?”

“I but serve my country, as you serve yours,” he replied in a voice which was momentarily stronger.

“The country which wishes to wrest the Arctic air route from Britain?” I asked.

“Yes,” he replied.

“And does Erkunstelt also serve that country?” I persisted.

Zwolfe laughed harshly.

“Erkunstelt is attracted only by the money which is paid him by my country, and by the loot and plunder which the raiding of the Arctic air route affords,” he replied.

“So he serves for gold, whilst you serve for love of country?” I sneered, then could have cursed myself for those foolish and brutal words.

But Zwolfe answered quietly, without any show of anger in his halting voice:

“Yes, that is so—even though you do not believe.”

“I do believe you,” I returned, “and I beg your pardon.”

He nodded his head in silence.

This is a plain tale in which I have neither spared Zwolfe nor lauded him. You who read will form your own judgment of him, but I ask you never to forget that he was inspired by love of the country which had borne him. Be her quarrel right or wrong, he was prepared to serve her, caring little for the ethics of the case so long as adventure came his way.

“How far from here is the place to which you were taking me?” I demanded.

“You mean our base—our headquarters?” he replied. “I cannot tell you that.”

“Why not?”

“I will not betray my comrades.”

“Yet you will be dead before I can get you to either Spitsbergen or Greenland,” I persisted.

He looked at me strangely then, with wonderment in his eyes.

“What—what do you mean?” he demanded.

I faced him with hands clenched. I had made up my mind as to my course of action and I wanted to commit myself to it before my courage wavered.

“If your base lies not too far away,” I said, “I may be able to get you there in time to save your life.”

He sat staring at me dumbly.

“Do—do you mean that?” he whispered hoarsely.

“Yes,” I replied almost defiantly.

“But they will hang you and—and now the way of escape lies open.”

Yes, the way of escape lay open. But to take it would be to condemn Zwolfe to certain death. If his base lay not too far distant he had a chance of life. But he could never survive the long flight which would be necessary should I decide to make for the safety of Spitsbergen or Greenland.

And what of the Flying Beetle’s instructions to me? He had told me to try and make the aerodrome at Belfast and there wait for word from him. If he could get that word through to me, then he could get it through to the commander of the aerodrome in my absence. So no serious damage would be done by my failing to reach Belfast.

Would he, the Flying Beetle, wish me to act in a manner which was tantamount to deserting the dying Zwolfe? I could not think it. In any case, whether I was acting like a

quixotic fool or not, my mind was made up.

“Tell me, man, where is your base?” I persisted.

But Zwolfe shook his head.

“No—no!” he said. “I thank you—from my heart—for what you have offered. I had not—expected it. But Erkunstelt will hang you, so—so take the chance—and go!”

“Where is your base?” I reiterated.

He shook his head and would not reply. I took him by the shoulder.

“Do you not understand?” I demanded. “You are condemning yourself to death by your silence. You know you have a chance of life if we can reach your base in time. Where is it?”

And then he dropped his head, mumbling:

“At Desolate Island—a lonely rock—two hundred miles to the north.”

Two hundred miles! Infinitely closer than either the Spitsbergen or Greenland seaboard. I was sure enough of our present location to realise that.

“I will put you in the rear cockpit,” I said, “and we will get off at once.”

“To Desolate Island?” he whispered.

“Yes!”

“No—no——” he protested, but I cut him short by slipping my arm round his shoulders and raising him unsteadily to his feet.

He looked at me, his face close to mine.

“You are a brave man,” he said huskily, “if I live—I will not forget.”

A brave man, forsooth! When my every instinct was to make a bolt for the mainland. And most assuredly would I have obeyed those instincts could I have but done so with honour.



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HE WAS ALREADY COMING AT US, HIS GUN SPEWING FLAME
AND STEEL-COATED LEAD

CHAPTER VIII

I REACH DESOLATE ISLAND

WITH Zwolfe ensconced as comfortably as possible in the rear cockpit and swathed in the tarpaulin to help keep out the bitter cold, I slid back into the pilot's seat and sat for a few moments examining the controls. Then, satisfied that I had mastered them, I switched on the engine and opened up the throttle!

We roared across the water, and as I pulled on the control stick the seaplane took the air in a long, upward glide. I circled once, for no reason save to see how the machine answered to the controls. Then, pressing on the rudder bar till the compass needle was flickering at north, I settled back in my seat and gave the engine full throttle. The last stage of our flight had begun.

I reckoned on making Desolate Island well under two hours, as our flying speed was just over 120 miles per hour.

I flew at 100 feet, knowing that the higher I went the more intense would become the cold. The sea grew darker and more oily as we roared onwards. It seemed to be possessed of a strangely sluggish motion. The snowfields also became wider and more frequent, and but served to enhance the utter desolation of the cold, inhospitable sea. Well, indeed, had Erkunstelt named his base.

Less than an hour had passed when I saw ahead what appeared to be a solid pall of greyness extending from the oily sea up into the murk of the Arctic night. Wraith-like wisps of cloud eddied and swirled past the wing-tip of the machine, and with them came sudden, stunning realisation.

We were running into fog!

In a moment it was all about us, enwrapping us like a blanket. The temperature dropped accordingly, and I felt the deadly cold creeping through into my bones. What chance had I now of making Desolate Island? I could pass over it at less than fifty feet and never know I had done so. Far better to swing off before it was too late and endeavour to strike the mainland lying to the west. But then gone would be any chance of saving the life which was in my hands.

I kept on, hoping against hope, that the fog would lift, or that I should run out of it into clearer skies. But it grew denser and more dense, bringing with it the deathly chill of the Arctic wastes. It was as though we flew through a world of impenetrable greyness. I could not see my wing-tips, could scarce, indeed, see the nearby struts.

And the utter nerve-racking loneliness of it all. I had Zwolfe in the rear cockpit, but his presence brought no comfort to me. He was dying, and might even now be dead. I shuddered at the thought, peering ahead through the grey blanket of fog.

Nothing broke the stillness; nothing save the thunder of the engine. Even that seemed strangely deadened—strangely softened. I found myself listening to its regular, monotonous beat. It seemed the only companionable thing in that world of eerie greyness.

Again the thought came to me. Why not swim off in search of the mainland? It was madness to continue. The thundering engine seized on the word and beat it out in deep

pulsating rhythm.

Madness! Madness! Madness!

I pulled myself together with an effort, for I was close to losing any nerve which I possessed. My eyes sought the watch on the dashboard in front of me. I had to lean forward and wipe, with gloved hand, the frozen rime from its glass before I could see the tiny pointers.

In another half hour, if Zwolfe's reckoning had been correct, we should be somewhere in the neighbourhood of Desolate Island.

I glanced outboard. Nothing impinged upon my vision save the dark vague shadow of the struts aswim in the swirling greyness. Again came that feeling of utter loneliness—a feeling strangely akin to fear.

Crouched numbly over the controls, I drove on into the unknown. Certainly I had little thought for what lay in store for me at the end of the journey if I succeeded in reaching my objective.

Again my eyes strayed to the watch on the dashboard. We should be almost there by now if we had flown to schedule, and provided the fog had not affected the compass. I peered downwards, but nothing was visible save dreary, eternal greyness. I flew on, knowledge of failure already in my heart.

Suddenly I stiffened, tensing in my seat. Ahead, the fog was glowing with a strange and eerie ruddiness. There was only one thing which, to my knowledge, could cause that glow. It was the ray of a powerful Neon beacon, such as was used to guide aeroplanes to their landing ground in dense fog. Without a doubt I had reached my goal. Ahead of me lay Desolate Island, shrouded in the fog, and that beacon was aglow to guide Zwolfe home.

The brilliancy increased as I approached, but it was a diffused brilliancy, through which I could discern nothing tangible. I glanced dubiously at my altimeter. I had no knowledge as to what height Desolate Island reared itself out of the water, but my height was no more than 100 feet. I had no desire to crash into the face of some cliff, although now that I had reached Erkunstelt's base it was probable that, as far as I was concerned, I should but be hastening my own ultimate end.

I pulled gently on the control stick and the nose of the machine came up. I was none too soon, for there seemed to rush at me, out of the swirling fog, a red, glowing mass. I had a momentary vision of a fringe of black beetling cliffs, feet only beneath my undercarriage. Then it was gone, swallowed up behind me in the fog.

Banking, I came about, and passed again over the beacon. Then I eased the control stick forward and, as the nose of the machine went down, I closed the throttle to one-quarter. Lower and lower we dropped, through the fog, but I was certain that I was clear of the island and was over the sea.

Peering over the side of the cockpit I saw a sudden darkening and thickening of the fog below me. It was the sea. I moved the control stick back the fraction of an inch, and my fingers fastened on the switch. Then I felt a jar which almost jerked me from my seat as the floats took the water. It was a clumsy landing, but we were on the sea.

Giving the engine a burst of the throttle, I pressed on the rudder bar and swung in towards where the beacon glowed redly on the heights above. Dim and ghostly, I made

out dark cliffs which reared themselves from out the waste of waters.

A searchlight beam sprang into being from the base of the cliffs and struggled valiantly to focus itself upon us through the fog. At the same time, from its vicinity, there came a stentorian hail.

“Zwolfe, ahoy! Switch off your engine! We will tow you inshore!”

Gone then were any lingering doubts I might have had as to this being Desolate Island. Obediently I switched off my engine and, relaxing in my seat, sat grimly awaiting the boat which I saw creeping towards me through the fog.

It was as I sat there, fighting against the eleventh-hour temptation to forget Zwolfe and make a dash for safety, that there came to me an idea. Leaping to my feet I scrambled into the rear cockpit, where Zwolfe was lying curled in a limp heap on the floor.

I raised him as gently as I could and spoke his name. He did not reply, and I saw that he had drifted into unconsciousness. But he was alive, so after all my flight might prove not to have been in vain.

The oncoming boat bumped against the starboard float, and from the stern sheets came the familiar, chattering voice of Falze:

“That you, Zwolfe? You have the spy safe?”

I was clad in flying kit, and I knew that those in the boat could distinguish little of me except as a blurred and vague figure through the fog. Added to that, they could not possibly have the slightest suspicions as to what had happened.

So, gruffly, from behind the leather mouthpiece of my helmet I growled:

“Yes. Here, take him!”

With that I summoned all my strength into one prodigious effort and hoisted Zwolfe out of the cockpit, lowering him into the outstretched arms of the men in the boat below.

I knew I had, at best, but a few moments' grace. Releasing my grasp of the man the instant I knew their hands were holding him, I slithered back into the forward cockpit. Even as my fingers snapped on the switch there came a wild yell from Falze—a yell which was suddenly drowned in the shattering roar of the engine.

I gave the engine full throttle and the machine surged forward, leaving the boat rocking wildly in its backwash. To that, I think, I owe my life, for Falze was firing at me from the stern sheets. I glanced over my shoulder and saw the fog split by livid flame from his automatic.

Next instant I was tearing across the water away from Desolate Island. I laughed exultantly as, pulling on the control stick, I took the air in a long, upward climb. My idea, put into practice, had succeeded; succeeded through the very simplicity of it.

Again I laughed as I thought of what Erkunstelt would say to Falze when that individual returned to shore, bearing with him only the wounded Zwolfe. And I had come through with a whole skin and nothing to regret. Whether I had acted like a fool, or not, in bringing Zwolfe to Desolate Island, I had followed what I honestly thought to be the course demanded by duty and honour. Let me repeat, Zwolfe would never have lived had I made for either the coast of Greenland or the coast of Spitsbergen.

And I had got him to Desolate Island alive. The possibility of ever being able to use the information as to the location of the pirates' base had never entered my thoughts. But

now that I had won through I was fully entitled to use that information. In no way was it betraying Zwolfe's confidence. I had done my duty by him, and now I was heading for the mainland with the secret whereabouts of Erkunstelt's headquarters known to me.

I pressed on the rudder bar as I thundered through the fog, and swung the machine towards the south-west. I would make for the Greenland coast and attempt to pick up some wireless station, where I could get in touch with the Admiralty. An aircraft carrier with its machines would soon clean up Erkunstelt's gang of pirates, now that we knew where they were located.

Then suddenly I groaned aloud, for my engine with a spluttering gasp expired. I whipped the control stick forward just in time to avoid stalling. The petrol gauge on the dashboard in front of me showed that the tank was empty. Poor fool that I was. In my jubilation I had forgotten all about my petrol and oil supply.

I glided down through the fog, which was perceptibly clearing, and landed on the water. I was, I judged, about forty or fifty miles south-west of Desolate Island. I will not dwell on the hours of bitter, intense cold and utter wretched misery which I passed in the cockpit of my machine. The fog thinned and rolled away into nothingness shortly after I landed, and soon there came a lightening of the sky which told of the approach of the Arctic day.

Erkunstelt's wolves would be out searching for me. I knew that, for Erkunstelt would know I had not enough petrol to carry me very far. But one thing I was determined on—I would not be taken alive to be carried back to Desolate Island, so that Erkunstelt might have the pleasure of hanging me.

My synchronised gun was useless, as it was fixed along the engine cowling. But the Lewis gun swinging on its mounting in the rear cockpit might afford me yeoman service. I carefully overhauled it and fitted an ammunition drum in place.

I do not know how long I spent in my machine on the water. It seemed many hours to me but, maybe, it was no more than three or four. Then, from far to the north-east I heard the drone of high-powered aero engines. The roar of the engines increased rapidly in volume and four machines of the pirate squadron thundered overhead. They spotted me and, with noses down, circled for a landing.

As for myself, I lolled as negligently as I could against the gun mounting in the rear cockpit. I had no wish to let these wolves of Erkunstelt realise my intentions. I wanted the four of them to land safely on the water before I opened fire on them with the swinging Lewis gun. And, as I watched, the first machine landed and surged in towards me.

The other three machines landed on the water and manoeuvred, so that I was completely hemmed in. They were within a cable length of me when I sent a burst of bullets over the top plane of the machine which had landed first. That was to give them to understand that there was going to be no lamb-like surrender on my part.

The pilot of that machine, obviously the leader, leapt to his feet.

"Hold your fire, you fool!" he shouted. "We're not here to kill you unless you force us to!"

Well, that was good hearing, provided it was true. But I did not believe it was true.

"Keep your distance," I bawled, "and say what you want to say."

"Erkunstelt will give you your life in return for your surrender," came the reply. "If

you refuse to surrender, we will riddle you from the air.”

“Erkunstelt has promised to hang me,” I replied.

“He will not hang you. If you will surrender he will hold you prisoner till he vacates Desolate Island. That much is essential.”

Yes, that much was very essential from Erkunstelt’s point of view. He dare not let me go free, knowing that I was by now fully aware of his activities and of the location of his headquarters at Desolate Island.

“Why has he cancelled my hanging?” I demanded.

“For saving Zwolfe’s life. He is not ungrateful for that, and he gives you his word that if you will surrender quietly he will treat you only as a privileged prisoner.”

“And the alternative?” I demanded.

“If you refuse to surrender we shall be forced to see that, at least, you never leave these seas alive. We will shoot you down!”

I leant against the gun, staring thoughtfully at the black-clad pilot who had spoken to me. Certainly I was in no more mind to trust Erkunstelt than I should have been to trust a wolf. But there might still be some shred of honour left in the man. If I refused his terms I was condemning myself to certain death. Even if by some miraculous chance I escaped the bullets of these machines which had found me, I should die a slower death by exposure in the midst of the desolate waste of waters. If, on the other hand, I surrendered there did still remain to me a chance of escape—and life. A thin chance, indeed, but still it was a chance which certainly I should not have by stubborn refusal to surrender.

“Very good, I surrender!” I replied.

The pilot slumped back into his seat and, giving his engine a burst with the throttle, surged close in towards me. Kicking on rudder, he swung sharply and switched off his engine. Gradually he lost way, until his machine was lying with its wing-tips almost touching those of mine.

“What was the matter with you?” he demanded curiously. “Why did you land?”

“I ran out of petrol,” I replied.

He laughed and nodded.

“We thought you could not have much petrol left. Erkunstelt has his whole squadron out looking for you. You had better get into the rear cockpit of my machine.”

“And what about this machine?” I demanded.

“It will not drift far, and we will send a machine with a spare pilot to bring it back.”

I clambered out of the cockpit and, dropping to the floats, stepped across to the floats of the pirate seaplane. Swinging myself up to the rear cockpit I took close survey of the pilot.

I could see little of his features, which were almost enshrouded in a thick, fur-lined flying helmet, but he was a swarthy fellow with dark eyes, very small and very shifty.

“I can assure you that you are acting very wisely,” he said. “Failure to surrender would have meant your death.”

“And yours, probably,” I retorted.

He laughed and shook his head.

“Would you have gained anything by that?” he inquired.

“No, but undoubtedly humanity would,” I replied.

He shrugged his shoulders and turned to his controls. The engine thundered at full revolutions and we tore across the water to take the air in a long, upward climb. The other three machines followed us and, as they closed in behind us, we swung towards the north-east in the direction of Desolate Island.

CHAPTER IX

I MEET ERKUNSTELT ON DESOLATE ISLAND

STARK and grim appeared Desolate Island in the grey light of the Arctic morning, rearing itself from the waters of a cold and lonely sea. It was little more than a huge rock, roughly circular, and certainly no more than a quarter of a mile in diameter. No snow lay on the face of the cliffs, rising sheer and forbidding from the water, and the island stood out dark and vivid against the slowly drifting snowfields which stretched northwards as far as the eye could see.

I was to learn that Desolate Island was honeycombed with caves—caves which Erkunstelt utilised as hangars, workshops, storehouses, and living quarters. Yet, from the air, as we approached, it looked strangely deserted. Small wonder that the patrolling machines of the Arctic air route had failed to connect this rugged, sea-girt rock with the pirates' base. I wondered, indeed, if any of the patrolling machines had penetrated as far north as this in the course of their search.

As we landed on the water and taxied in towards a flat, natural jetty of rock a crowd of mechanics appeared from the interior of a huge cavern by the side of the jetty. This cavern was brilliantly illuminated by electric-light bulbs, suspended from the high rocky ceiling, and I caught a glimpse of glistening black wings and fuselages. Obviously, this was one of Erkunstelt's hangars. My supposition became a certainty as I noted the broad iron runway which led downwards from the mouth of the cavern to the water.

The mechanics moved onto the jetty as we surged in towards it, and a couple of them deftly caught the mooring rope thrown to them by my pilot as he switched off his engine. They were sullen, rough-looking fellows, and were clad in heavy clothing, surmounted by thick, warm dungarees.

They subjected me to many a lowering stare as, following the pilot, I clambered out of the cockpit and leapt to the jetty. The other machines had landed, and were already surging towards us.

"Have the machines housed at once!" said my captor curtly to the mechanics, then turned to me and added grimly: "You will follow me."

He led the way through the press of men, and I noted more than one leer which most certainly was not calculated to put me at my ease. I followed him along the jetty, then up a winding, tortuous path hewn in the face of the cliff.

He halted at a heavy iron door set in the cliff 50 feet above the sea, and knocked thunderously by means of a massive iron knocker bolted on to the door. We waited a few moments, then the door swung slowly open, and he stood aside to usher me across the threshold.

I stepped into a brilliantly lighted cave, the atmosphere of which was reeking, and thick with the fumes of tobacco smoke. The cave was large, and the ceiling so high that it was lost amidst the shadows. Stoves glowed red-hot along the walls and a rough, solid-looking table ran almost the whole length of the smooth, rocky floor.

Seated at the table was a strange miscellany of men. They were, for the most part,

swarthy, unshaven fellows. Some were eating, some were smoking, others were playing cards. They were Erkunstelt's men, and probably only Erkunstelt could say where he had found them. Recruited from the sweepings of dockland, from the scum of the seven seas, they looked what they were—bestial and brutal. But I was to learn that every man had once had a job at his finger tips and now served Erkunstelt as mechanic, electrician, or engineer.

Towards the head of the table sat fully a score of men wearing the tight-fitting, high-necked grey uniform, with the silver wings, which I had come to associate with Erkunstelt's pilots. And at the head of the table sat Erkunstelt himself.

He was peering towards me, his great bearded face thrust forward, his arms asprawl on the table in front of him.

“So you have got him, Kauterfauld!” he cried, as my captor piloted me the length of the cave and halted me by where Erkunstelt was seated.

“Yes,” replied Kauterfauld, my captor. “We found him on the water towards the south-west. He had not got far.”

“You have done well—very well,” replied Erkunstelt; then turned to me, and there was something akin to mirth in his cold, blue eyes.

“Welcome, my friend, to Desolate Island,” he said.

“Thank you,” I replied. “I trust my visit will prove to be one upon which I can look back with recollections that are not wholly unpleasant.”

Erkunstelt laughed softly.

“Meaning,” he returned, “that you hope to leave here alive?”

“Precisely,” I answered.

Again Erkunstelt laughed, but now a harder note had crept into his voice.

“Whether or not you leave here alive,” he said, “depends entirely on yourself.”

“Does it?” I retorted. “I refer to the terms of my surrender, as explained to me by the individual whom you addressed as Kauterfauld.”

“And those terms will be observed,” returned Erkunstelt, “provided you are not averse to seeing reason.”

“I fail to understand what you mean,” I replied.

“I mean that there are one or two questions which it will be necessary for you to answer,” retorted Erkunstelt.

“Indeed?” I exclaimed. “Unfortunately your Mr. Kauterfauld omitted to mention this proviso.”

“Naturally! You might have refused to surrender had Kauterfauld explained the position to you in detail. And Kauterfauld's orders were to bring you back here, alive. He has succeeded.”

“By lying to me!”

“No, not by lying to you, but by omitting to mention that I shall only adhere to the terms of your surrender provided you answer my questions.”

“And those questions?”

Erkunstelt swung round in his chair directly facing me.

“I wish to know,” he said harshly, “the guise which the Flying Beetle adopted in order to move in our midst aboard the “Denham.” And I wish to know where he is now.”

“So do I,” I retorted.

“You mean you don’t know?” he rapped.

“Yes, that is what I mean.”

I saw Erkunstelt’s eyes narrow, saw his fists clench. But his voice was under perfect control as he replied coolly:

“You are a liar!”

I take not the slightest credit for what I did then. I only know that within the last few moments there had come realisation to me that I had been tricked into surrender, that I was doomed. And those cool, insolent words of Erkunstelt snapped my self-control. I leapt forward and, before the startled Kauterfauld could stop me, I crashed my clenched fist full into Erkunstelt’s bearded face.

He went backwards with a roar, and then his men were on me. I struggled with a strength born of despair, but what chance had I, alone in that pirates’ lair? A dozen pairs of savage hands gripped me and held me tightly whilst Erkunstelt lumbered to his feet, dabbing at bleeding lips with his handkerchief.

He stood eyeing me venomously, whilst I glared back at him.

“I will give you just three minutes in which to tell me what you know about this Flying Beetle,” he said harshly. “If you speak you will save your life.”

“What?” I jeered. “After that blow?”

“I shall repay that blow with a flogging,” he replied, and his voice was shaking with suppressed passion. “That goes, whether you speak or not. But only by telling me what I wish to know can you save your life.”

“I shall tell you nothing!” I retorted. “Nothing at all!”

Erkunstelt slumped heavily into his chair.

“Nevertheless,” he said, “I will give you those few minutes for reflection.”

“I don’t want them, I tell you!” I shouted.

But he did not heed me. And there I stood in the grip of his men whilst those three minutes, which he had promised me, ticked by. Every face in that cave was turned towards me, some watching me curiously, others menacingly. I saw amongst the pilots the sullen Vorsorge. A long, black cheroot was between his thick lips, and there was a look of interest on his heavy, brutish features. I saw, also, the grinning Falze. I do not know what Erkunstelt had said to him for allowing me to slip through his fingers the previous night, but there was now a malicious triumph in his eyes which gave token of his complete satisfaction in seeing me where I was.

“The three minutes are up!” Erkunstelt’s voice cut in harshly on the silence which had fallen on the cave. “I am going to hang you!”

He pushed back his chair and rose to his feet.

“Yes, hang you!” he repeated, and thrust his bearded face close to mine, “and we will see if this cursed Flying Beetle can save you now!”

He turned to the men who held me and rapped:

“Bring him along! The sooner we get it over the sooner we’ll get back to the warmth of this cave!”

I was hustled from the cave and, with Erkunstelt in the lead, we took the winding path which led upwards to the top of the cliffs, where stood the Neon beacon which had guided me through the fog to Desolate Island the previous night.

I might have cursed myself for a fool in ever having trusted Erkunstelt when Kauterfauld had given me his message out there on the waters to the south-west. But what could I have done? To have refused to have surrendered would have brought me certain death there and then. I had looked to find some shred of honour, maybe, in Erkunstelt; a shred whereby would hang the only chance of life for me. And there was no shred; or, if there was, it was sorely frayed and rotten.

True, the man had offered me my life at a price. But I knew nothing of the Flying Beetle or his present whereabouts. If I had done so, I most assuredly would not have told Erkunstelt. No, not even to save my life would I have told him anything. As a matter of fact I am quite convinced that he would have hanged me in any case.

We reached the top of the cliffs, and Erkunstelt halted near where a spur of rock jutted out over the waters 300 feet or more below.

“Tie his hands!” he commanded brusquely, and my hands were pinioned tightly behind my back.

He rapped out another order and a fellow sprawled himself forward along the ice-coated, out-jutting spur of rock. I watched, dumbly, whilst one end of a length of rope was tied securely to the end of the spur. At the other end of that rope was a noose.

The fellow slithered back on to the cliff and, rising to his feet, slipped the noose around my neck.

“All ready, Boss!” he growled.

Erkunstelt nodded and stepped towards me. His men, a full fifty of them, stood watching in silence.

“You see the simplicity of it,” said Erkunstelt, and his voice was almost a purr, “one push and you hurtle over the cliff to dangle there till at length we sever the rope and allow your body to drop into the sea below.”

“I see,” I replied with an effort, for my tongue seemed of a sudden very dry. “It is, as you say, very simple.”

There was silence for a moment, Erkunstelt regarding me with sombre eyes.

“Where is your Flying Beetle now?” he said softly.

Indeed I did not know. And with those words there came a sudden thought to me. The Flying Beetle had failed me. I can truthfully say that I had never thought that he might be able to aid me now. But somehow I had come to look upon him as invincible—as one who never failed a comrade. Erkunstelt’s taunt struck me with almost the force of a blow. Where was the Flying Beetle? He was not here—he had failed me. I knew him well enough to realise that he would never forgive himself for my death, although not one vestige of blame for it could be attributed to him.

“Even at this eleventh-hour,” went on Erkunstelt softly, “were you to speak——”

“I will tell you nothing!” I cried roughly. “Shut your mouth and get on with this

murder!”

“All right!” he snarled, with a sudden blaze of passion. “You’ve brought it on yourself, you stubborn fool!”

He stepped back, beckoning to Falze—a Falze whose inane features were strangely pale despite their everlasting grin.

“Here, Falze,” he rapped, “here is a job after your own heart. Give the dog a lusty push and launch him into eternity.”

Falze stepped slowly towards me, his eyes shifting from Erkunstelt to me.

“Come on, you rat!” I cried hoarsely. “Why do you hesitate?”

He gripped me by the shoulders then, and pushed me towards the edge of the cliff. I saw, stretching to the dim horizon the grey waste of waters with their drifting fields of snow. And, as I lowered my eyes, I saw far below me the creamy line of foam which fringed the base of the cliffs.

With a prayer in my heart to my Maker that I should meet this death unflinchingly, I closed my eyes. It was then that I seemed to hear a hoarse shout—a shout which impinged but subconsciously on my hearing. It seemed an age that I stood there waiting for Falze to give me the final thrust. But nothing happened and, wonderingly, I opened my eyes—opened them to find Falze standing by my side, staring past me towards the path which wound upwards from the caves.

I turned my head in that direction. A man was coming up the path—a man who progressed stumblingly and more than once almost fell. It was Zwolfe, and he carried an automatic in his hand.

I looked over my shoulder to where Erkunstelt was standing apart from his men, watching the oncoming Zwolfe from under lowering brows. The men also seemed strangely interested in the stumbling figure which was almost upon us.

“Erkunstelt!” cried Zwolfe huskily, as he reached the top of the cliff where he stood. “Erkunstelt, what are you doing?”

“Hanging a spy, Zwolfe,” replied Erkunstelt harshly.

Zwolfe came onwards, reeling as he walked. He looked ill, terribly ill, and I marvelled how he had ever traversed that steep, rough path.

“You hound, Erkunstelt!” he panted. “You promised me that this man should not die!”

“I have found it necessary to alter my plans,” retorted Erkunstelt coldly, “and now you are here you may as well witness the obsequies.”

He wheeled on Falze.

“Finish him, Falze!” he rapped.

Falze took a fresh grip on my shoulders.

“Stop!” barked Zwolfe. “Falze, if you make a move I’ll shoot you dead!”

Falze froze into immobility. Deliberately turning his back on Erkunstelt, Zwolfe walked unsteadily towards us. Weakly he shoved the mute Falze aside and lifted the noose from about my neck. Then standing by my side he turned again to Erkunstelt.

“Erkunstelt,” he said, and never shall I forget the courage in his voice as he stood there confronting those blackguards and their leader, “this man faced death to save my life, and

if there had been one scrap of honour in your soul you would have spared him this.”

Erkunstelt laughed harshly.

“Your attitude both intrigues and amuses me, my Zwolfe,” he replied coldly. “More than once of late you have not seen eye to eye with me but, in this case, I shall brook no interference from you.”

“You are determined to go on with this hanging?”

“I am,” replied Erkunstelt with grim finality. “Stand aside!”

“Erkunstelt, you treacherous, lying hound,” said Zwolfe huskily, and slowly raised his gun, “I have long seen a break coming between you and me, and if this man is to be hanged, then it is a hanging which you shall never live to witness.”

I saw his finger tighten jerkily on the trigger, and in that same instant I saw Erkunstelt’s hand whip towards his own pocket.

Bang! Bang!

The two shots rang out simultaneously. Zwolfe reeled, swaying on his feet, then pitched face foremost to the ground where he lay in a crumpled heap. Erkunstelt was unhurt, for Zwolfe’s bullet had missed him. He, himself, had fired from his pocket.

I dropped on my knees beside Zwolfe. I could do nothing to aid him, for my hands were pinioned behind my back. But I think that he sensed I was there, for he turned his head toward me and his eyes flickered open.

“I tried . . . to repay . . .” he whispered faintly, haltingly. “I failed . . . and am sorry . . . you understand?”

“Yes, yes,” I replied, “I understand, and from the bottom of my heart I thank you.”

But he did not heed—for his head had slumped limply forward and he was dead. Thus passed Zwolfe, who gave his life that I might live.

Rough hands jerked me to my feet and I heard the snarling voice of Erkunstelt.

“No more of this. Get the thing over. Falze, you——”

He got no further. There came a long, reverberating, deafening roar like terrific thunder, and the rock trembled beneath our feet. Slowly, slowly, the reverberating rumbles died away, whilst the pirates stared at each other aghast. It was the sullen Vorsorge who first gave tongue.

“It is our ammunition dump!” he shouted. “It has blown up, I swear it!”

CHAPTER X

THE FLYING BEETLE APPEARS

ERKUNSTELT headed the rush towards the path which led downwards to the caves. He paused only long enough to shout over his shoulder:

“Falze, remain with the spy.”

Thus I was left on the cliff top with Falze as my only companion. By this time that individual's perpetual grin had become but a ghastly shadow of its former self.

“I do hope Vorsorge is correct in his surmise,” I murmured. “It would afford me the greatest of pleasure to think of you blackguards left without any ammunition.”

“Would it?” snarled Falze, peering down over the edge of the cliff towards where heavy black fumes were pouring out of a cave not far from the landing jetty.

“Yes, it would,” I replied. “You'd better not stand so near the edge. I might feel tempted to kick you over.”

He retreated hastily.

“I have a good mind to hang you myself,” he said angrily. “There's nothing to prevent me.”

“Nothing except the thought of what Erkunstelt might say to you for spoiling his fun,” I retorted. “By the way, how did he greet you last night when you told him that you had let me slip through your fingers?”

Falze flushed.

“You're a fool!” he snapped.

“Then we must have much in common,” I replied, for I confess to a certain pleasure in baiting the fellow.

“Do you know what I think?” he cried, wheeling on me with sudden suspicion. “If that is our ammunition dump which has blown up, then I think you have had something to do with it.”

“Indeed?” I retorted, “I wish I could lay claim to some such distinction.”

It was then that Kauterfauld came racing up the path.

“Falze,” he cried, “Erkunstelt wants the prisoner brought below to the caves at once.”

“What has happened?” chattered Falze.

“The ammunition dump has been blown up,” replied Kauterfauld grimly. “There is treachery on the island.”

“I knew it!” yelled Falze. “This dog is in some way responsible for the explosion.”

“Whether he is or not, Erkunstelt wants him, and I advise you to hurry,” returned Kauterfauld.

So I was taken below to the cave wherein I had first met Erkunstelt on the island. I walked gingerly down that twisting path, for my pinioned hands aided me not at all. I certainly did not walk quickly enough to suit the excited Falze, for that individual kept shoving me along with a vigour which more than once almost sent me plunging off the

path into the sea below. When I expostulated I received only snarls in response.

We reached the cave, however, without mishap, and I was marched in to where Erkunstelt and a half dozen grim-faced pilots were engaged in earnest conversation in front of one of the glowing stoves.

Erkunstelt stepped forward and gripped my arms in a savage, vice-like clutch. His cruel eyes were blazing.

“Our ammunition was stored in a cave fitted with double iron doors, of which I, and I alone, held the key,” he said in a voice quivering with fury, “but someone opened those doors, entered the cave, laid a fuse, and blew up our ammunition. What do you know about it?”

“Nothing. Absolutely nothing—except that I’m extremely glad to hear it,” I replied.

Then all self-control seemed to slip from Erkunstelt.

“Curse you!” he screamed. “I knew you would deny any knowledge of it. Look at that, you dog, then dare deny again that you know anything of it!”

He released one hand from my arm and thrust it, palm uppermost, under my nose. Lying crumpled in his hand was a small piece of pasteboard—a visiting card, bare of lettering, but bearing an embossed replica of a black flying beetle.

I stared at it in mute astonishment, one thought only in my brain. The Flying Beetle was somewhere here on Desolate Island. He was close at hand. But how had he got here, and in what guise?

“Where did you get that card?” I demanded.

“Where did I get it?” shouted Erkunstelt. “You know where I got it, curse you. I found it lying on the table in this cave five minutes ago. It was attached to the key of the ammunition cave.”

“But you said that you, and you alone, possessed the key to that cave,” I replied.

“Yes,” he spat out venomously, “and it was to my key that the card was attached—my key, which had been taken from me, unknown to myself.”

Well, here was a pretty problem. The Flying Beetle had obviously been in close proximity to have abstracted that key from Erkunstelt’s person. How he had done it I had not the faintest idea, but I was expected to supply the explanation, as Erkunstelt made clear to me in passion-ridden tones.

“Where is he?” he shouted. “Where is this companion of yours? I’ll have the truth out of you, even if I have to burn it out with red-hot irons!”

“I tell you I know nothing,” I retorted.

Erkunstelt glared at me for a moment, then turned away with clenched fists. He paced a few steps, then wheeled again on me.

“Listen, you!” he said, and never had deadly menace been more evident in his voice, “the Flying Beetle is on this island. I am having every inch of the island searched and am mounting a guard over every hangar. He cannot escape. I have wasted enough time on you, but I warn you if he is not found by midnight, then I shall make you talk by means of red-hot irons. You understand? You have till midnight!”

“Yes, I understand,” I replied, “but I repeat, I know nothing.”

“Well, you’ll have to know something by midnight or it will be the worse for you,” he

snarled. “And let me tell you this—your cursed Flying Beetle has not hit me half as hard as he probably imagines he has. An explosion from natural causes was not outside the bounds of possibilities in the ammunition cave and, consequently, we have a reserve supply in another cave.”

“I congratulate you on your forethought,” I replied.

“I’ll curb that insolent tongue of yours before to-morrow,” he promised with a savage intentness, then rapped out an order.

Escorted by Falze and Kauterfauld, I was taken from the cave and marched down the winding path to a small cave standing back from the jetty. It also was fitted with an iron door and, thrusting me inside, Falze clanged shut the door and I was left alone.

My prison was little more than 15 feet square, but it was warm, being heated by a stove which glowed dull red against the wall. It was illumined by a solitary electric-light bulb suspended from the high ceiling. A plank-bed covered with two thick blankets completed the furnishings. Undoubtedly the cave was one set aside solely for use as a cell. Maybe there were times when some discontented or refractory spirit amongst the pirates was given this lodging.

Well, that was the place wherein I spent the hours of that grey Arctic day. I drew my bed near to the stove and sat there pondering on what the end of it all would be. For a few brief hours I slept, and I did have a visitor later in the day in the aged Henri.

He arrived with my solitary meal, accompanied by a great, hulking brute of a fellow who wore a revolver ostentatiously thrust into the belt of his coat. This individual loosened my bonds and, whilst I ate, lounged near the stove, keeping a watchful eye on me.

As for Henri, he looked more vicious, more jaundiced than ever. His scraggy frame was enshrouded in a multitude of heavy great-coats, from the collars of which his muffler-wrapped neck and wrinkled face protruded in a manner which again reminded me of some elderly bird of prey but one which had somehow donned winter plumage.

And his conversation was quite *à la* Henri.

“So they didn’t hang you this morning, after all?” he remarked shrilly, spreading his claw-like hands out to the stove, then rubbing them as though performing ablutions. “So they didn’t hang you this morning, dirty spy?”

“No, they didn’t hang me,” I replied. “I regret that I cannot share your evident distress at the postponement of the event.”

“I’m not distressed,” cackled the old wretch. “He! He! He! I’m not distressed. They’re going to torture you. That’s better than hanging, to my mind.”

“I don’t doubt it, knowing the type of mind you possess,” I retorted. “As a matter of fact I failed to notice you at the ceremony on the cliff this morning.”

“I would have been there,” the scraggy, vicious bundle of humanity hastened to inform me. “Oh yes, I would have been there, but nobody told me about it till it was too late. I didn’t expect master to act so quickly or I’d have been there all right.”

“And how is the search for the Flying Beetle progressing?” I demanded.

“It’s going well. We’ll get the dirty spying hound before long. He’s on the island and he can’t get off. We’re going to hang you, side by side.”

“Indeed?”

“Yes, it’s all arranged,” replied this ancient fiend, rubbing his hands in diabolical anticipation. “I’m looking forward to it. We all are. He! He! He! I like a hanging.”

“Aren’t you sometimes afraid that the Flying Beetle might bring about the hanging of you all?”

“Don’t talk like that, curse you!” cried Henri shrilly, but I noted he cast a fearful glance towards the door. “How could he do that? He’s only one man and he’ll never leave this island alive.”

“Won’t he?” I retorted. “You haven’t caught him yet.”

“But we shall,” yelped the old wretch. “He can’t escape. Come on; give me that plate. You’ve had enough.”

He snatched the plate from my hands and stood aside, muttering to himself, whilst his companion bound my hands. I did not resist, for even if I made a successful dash out of the cave I should be in no better plight than before.

They left me then, clanging the iron door shut behind them and shooting home the bolts on the outside. I spent the rest of the day alone except for a few moments when Henri’s companion returned to replenish the stove. But he spoke no word to me, and nothing of incident occurred until just on midnight when the bolts on the outside of the door were drawn back and, as the door swung open, Erkunstelt and four of his men strode into the cell.

I rose to my feet, my eyes on the last man of the five to enter the cell. He was a thick-set fellow with broad, ugly features. But I was less interested in his features than in the two iron crowbars which he carried in his gloved and mittened hand.

The other three men who accompanied Erkunstelt were Vorsorge, Kauterfauld and Falze. Erkunstelt shut the door, turned a massive key in the lock, and withdrawing the key slipped it into his pocket.

He walked to the stove and, straddling his feet apart in front of it, turned his lowering gaze on me.

“Well,” he demanded roughly, “have you changed your mind? Are you going to tell us where your companion, the Flying Beetle, is hiding?”

“I presume it would be quite futile my telling you that I know nothing?” I replied.

“Yes, quite futile,” he retorted.

“I thought it would be,” I remarked, and seated myself on the bed. “It happens, however, to be true. I know no more where the Flying Beetle is at this moment than do you, yourself.”

“But you know how he came here, and in what guise!” he blazed.

“I do not.”

“Very good, I’ll loosen that stubborn tongue of yours,” he promised grimly, and turned to the fellow with the crowbars. “Put those irons in the stove and make them red-hot!” he ordered.

The fellow, obviously either a seaman or a working hand, obeyed. He opened the stove lid and thrust the crowbars deep into the middle of the glowing coals.

“I take it that your search for the Flying Beetle has been barren of result?” I remarked,

striving to keep my voice steady.

It was Falze who answered me—Falze of the chattering voice.

“Yes, the hound! There is no sign of him!”

“Silence, you!” roared Erkunstelt, and Falze relapsed into abashed silence.

Vorsorge and Kauterfauld were leaning against the wall of the cell. A lighted cigarette was between Kauterfauld’s thin lips, whilst Vorsorge chewed sullenly at the end of an unlighted cheroot. I will say this for them, that judging from their appearance neither seemed overkeen on the job which had brought them with Erkunstelt to the cave.

As for Erkunstelt, he stood in front of the stove glowering down at me.

“I cannot understand you,” he shot at me suddenly, “you have everything to gain by telling me what I want to know, and everything to lose, including life itself, by remaining silent.”

At that I leapt to my feet, for sudden, bitter anger surged through me.

“You liar!” I cried. “You know full well that if I told you where the Flying Beetle is, you would take me out and hang me as soon as you had learned all you could from me. Zwolfe was right when he called you a treacherous, lying hound. You are all that, and more, you contemptible cur!”

A savage, smashing blow in the face was my reward for that. It sent me heavily backwards to the bed, and I lay there sick and dazed. Dimly I heard the lid of the stove clang open and saw Erkunstelt withdraw one of the hot irons. He held the glowing end close to the palm of his other hand, as though testing the heat; then nodded.

“Nearly hot enough,” he growled. “Off with his boots, you!”

The seaman stepped forward and gripped me by the ankle, preparatory to wrenching off first one boot and then the other. I waited until his ugly face was bent over the task, then kicked upwards. The toe of my boot took the fellow full under the chin, sending him staggering backwards with a spluttering oath.

“Hold him, Vorsorge,” roared Erkunstelt, “and you, Kauterfauld.”

I glanced towards them as slowly they straightened themselves up from their reclining attitude against the rocky wall of the cave and advanced towards me. And then suddenly I tensed. My gaze had become riveted on the door of the cell for, unless it was imagination on my part, that door was opening inch by inch.

With a wild hope in my heart, and fearful lest my captors should follow the direction of my gaze I switched my eyes back to Erkunstelt. He was in the act of again testing the heat of the irons. I knew that he had locked the door on entering the cell and slipped the key into his pocket. Then if the door was actually opening the unknown on the other side of it must possess a duplicate key.

I risked another quick glance towards the door and my heart sank. It must have all been imagination on my part. The iron door was tightly shut, flush against its framework of rock. I think then that I resigned myself to the inevitable, for Vorsorge and Kauterfauld were holding on to my legs, whilst the great lout of a seaman had pulled himself together and was tugging savagely at my boots. I noted with vindictive satisfaction the bruised and broken skin where I had kicked him on his jaw.

For the third time Erkunstelt withdrew an iron from the stove and, letting the lid clang

shut, stood waiting with the red-hot crowbar in his thickly gloved hand.

“I will give you one more chance,” he said, glaring down at me.

Then from the doorway came a cool, drawling voice—a voice which held in it a hint of lazy, insolent laughter.

“Quite unnecessary, my dear Erkunstelt. Why waste your time in futile questioning?”

The red-hot crowbar dropped with a clatter from Erkunstelt’s hand. Vorsorge, Kauterfauld and seaman froze into immobility. Falze, standing near Erkunstelt, seemed as though rooted to the spot; his mouth was agape and his eyes appeared as though they would at any moment protrude from his head.

All this I took in with one swift glance as I jerked my head towards the door. And standing there, with his back against the closed door, was a slim figure clad in black, tight-fitting flying suit and black face mask.

“The Flying Beetle!”

It was Vorsorge who spoke, his voice hoarse, incredulous.

“Yes, the Flying Beetle,” came the drawling reply. “Do not move—not a muscle, any one of you!”

His black-gloved hand moved forward, and the light from the electric-light bulb glinted on the barrel of a squat automatic.

“Understand!”—and now his voice was of a sudden icy cold—“I shall shoot, and shoot to kill, at the first false move!”

Undoubtedly those blackguards understood. Although loath, indeed, to take my eyes from that splendid figure by the door, I could not resist another glance at Erkunstelt. The man’s bearded face was livid, his hands were clenched, his great head thrust forward. But I saw him lick dry lips with the tip of his tongue, and knew by that that he was deadly afraid.

“Beverley, are you all right?”

The words brought my eyes back to the Flying Beetle.

“Yes,” I replied huskily.

“Then come to me.”

Painfully and stiffly I hoisted myself off the bed and crossed the floor towards him, making a detour so that his gun could still keep my captors covered.

“Turn round!” he commanded when I reached him, and as I obeyed I felt a knife sever my bonds.

“Now disarm them, Beverley.”

I did so, finding a gun apiece on each man. They did not attempt to resist, for that squat automatic in the hand of the Flying Beetle flickered here and there with a deadly threat.

With three guns on my person, and one in each hand, I felt considerably better than I had done since I reached Desolate Island. I took up my position beside the Flying Beetle, wondering what the next move would be.

“Erkunstelt,” he said sharply, “come here!”

“And—and if I refuse?” demanded Erkunstelt hoarsely.

“I shall shoot you. I have no time to waste.”

None but a fool could have mistaken the grim sincerity in the tones, and slowly, step by step, Erkunstelt crossed the floor towards us.

“Turn round, Erkunstelt!”

The pirate leader hesitated, his blazing eyes on those which stared back at him so coldly through the black face-mask. Then, with an oath, he swung round on his heel.

Click!

I had but a vision of glinting steel, then handcuffs snapped shut on Erkunstelt’s great, hairy wrists.

“You will realise, Erkunstelt”—and how cool was the Flying Beetle’s voice—“the utter imbecility of resistance.”

“What—what are you going to do with me?” demanded Erkunstelt hoarsely.

“Shoot you for the murderous hound you are, if you give me the slightest excuse,” replied the Flying Beetle, “and you will do well to remember that, Erkunstelt.”

He turned to the other four men who were watching in mute impotence.

“As for you,” he said, “I am going to leave you locked in this cell. You can make as much noise as you like, but I doubt if you will be heard. The nearest guard is on duty inside the hangar beyond the jetty. However, in case he hears you and comes to investigate, I would point out that your leader and myself possess the only two keys to this door.”

He turned to me and said:

“Open the door, Beverley!”

I pulled on the heavy iron door, and it swung silently open on its massive, well-oiled hinges.

“Now walk, Erkunstelt!” rapped the Flying Beetle, and jabbed his gun into the small of Erkunstelt’s back.

Just for a moment did Erkunstelt hesitate, then he walked. And thus we passed out into the Arctic night. I swung the door shut and, turning the key which was in the lock on the outside, shot home the bolts and slipped the key into my pocket.

“And what now?” I demanded.

“Listen,” replied the Flying Beetle earnestly. “In that hangar yonder, beyond the jetty”—he gestured towards the hangar which I had noticed when I landed with Kauterfauld—“a machine stands on the runway ready to take the water. Its tanks are full and there are ten thousand rounds of ammunition aboard. But you will have to deal with the man on guard. Silence the fellow somehow, and I will follow with Erkunstelt.”

“Then we are leaving Desolate Island?” I demanded excitedly, “and taking Erkunstelt with us?”

“*You* are leaving Desolate Island, and *you* are taking Erkunstelt with you,” replied the Flying Beetle. “I remain behind.”

“But I don’t understand!” I exclaimed. “I refuse to leave you here!”

“You must leave me, Beverley,” replied the Flying Beetle sharply. “I know you do not understand, but explanation must wait. Go now, and get possession of that machine.”

Without another word I turned and made my way towards the hangar. I knew Davies, the Flying Beetle, too well to question further any order of his.

The hangar was nothing more or less than a huge cave. As I approached my heart sank, for I saw that its great iron doors were shut. I had wondered, whilst I had been on Desolate Island, how these doors and other fittings had been brought to such an isolated spot, but later I learned that the "Denham" had brought them. The fitting of them had been carried out by Erkunstelt's engineers.

I came to a halt outside the iron doors of the hangar, and looked about me. Strangely silent lay Desolate Island, wrapped in the Arctic night. Not a sound broke the stillness save the purr of some dynamo and a faint—very faint—metallic clanging.

I could not suppress a momentary grin as this latter sound impinged upon my hearing—undoubtedly it proceeded from the cave which had been my cell. Vorsorge and his companions were obviously hammering on the door with the crowbars which Erkunstelt had intended utilising for a far grimmer purpose.

Again I scrutinised the great hangar doors which confronted me. Behind them lay the machine which meant safety for me, and that machine was guarded by only one man, according to the Flying Beetle. I moved closer till I was standing on the slippery, ice-coated runway which led down to the water.

It was then that my eyes took in a small, low door, let into the solid iron of the larger ones. It was one which was obviously used for exit and entry by the mechanics when the hangar was shut up. I made up my mind there and then as to my course of action.

With a gun in my left hand I knocked with the butt on the door. There was silence for a few moments, then I heard a bolt slide back and a voice called gruffly:

"Who's there?"

I growled something unintelligible and knocked again. This time the door swung open and an unshaven, inquiring face protruded itself out into the night.

"What the——" began the owner of that face as his eyes fell on me; and then I hit him.

I hit him quite hard under the chin. He staggered back, groping for his gun. I leapt through the doorway into the brilliantly lighted hangar. Before he could draw his gun I was on him. I dropped my gun and tore into him with both fists. I think I was almost berserk in that moment but I ask you to remember all that was at stake.

In any case the suddenness of my attack gave him no chance, and a final smash to the jaw, given with every atom of strength I possessed, sent him crashing backwards to the floor, where he lay still and inert, completely knocked out.

I was busy gagging him with waste, and tying his hands behind him with his belt, when Erkunstelt walked into the hangar, followed by the Flying Beetle. It was the latter's gun which was propelling Erkunstelt. He did not arrive of his own accord.

"Good man!" cried the Flying Beetle, as pantingly I rose to my feet, leaving the guard bound and gagged on the floor.

"He won't give us much trouble," I gasped, with what was, I am afraid, a satisfaction which verged on the egotistical.

"Indeed, he won't," replied the Flying Beetle, "but we have not a minute to lose. That

is your machine there.”

I turned towards a black, glistening, double-seater seaplane standing on the sloping runway which led down to the water. It was held in place by means of a cable attached to the undercarriage. There were fully a score of machines in the hangar and the place reeked of petrol, varnish, and fabric dope.

“But how have you arranged this?” I cried. “How have you done it?”

The Flying Beetle laid his hand on my arm.

“Some day you will know everything,” he said quietly. “We have no time for explanations now. Get some flying kit off the wall there for yourself and Erkunstelt!”

“What are you going to do with me?” cried Erkunstelt hoarsely. “Where are you taking me, curse you?”

“You are going to the mainland, where you will stand your trial for murder and piracy on the Arctic air route,” replied the Flying Beetle sternly. “Resistance will mean your death, for I am in deadly earnest.”

Yes, and Erkunstelt knew that slim, black-clad figure was in deadly earnest. He submitted whilst the Flying Beetle and I pulled thick, warm flying kit on to him and, covered by a gun, he mounted to the rear cockpit of the machine.

The Flying Beetle clambered up after him and lashed his handcuffed wrists to the gun mounting.

“Now, Beverley,” he said, dropping back to the floor of the hangar, “you have him safe. Make for the Greenland coast and pick up the first wireless station you can. Get through to the Admiralty, give them the location of this island, and ask them to send an aircraft carrier to these waters.”

“And you?”

“I remain here. There is little use our just getting the ringleader and allowing the rest of the band to escape. Don’t worry about me. I shall be all right. They haven’t caught me yet and, please God, they never will.”

“But when Vorsorge and company get out of that cell, which they must do before long, won’t they take fright and vacate the island? They must realise now that the British Admiralty will shortly know the whereabouts of this secret base.”

“They will not vacate the island till they have exhausted every means of preventing you reaching the mainland with Erkunstelt.”

“You mean I shall be pursued?”

“Undoubtedly you will, and that is why I want you to get off without delay. There is another hangar, the key to which I have been unable to obtain. It is heavily guarded and contains six of the fastest fighting scouts I have ever seen in the air.”

“Can’t we try and smash ’em now?” I demanded valiantly.

“No, no! It would be madness and perhaps ruin everything. You must go!”

“But listen,” I persisted, “suppose they don’t catch me before I reach the mainland; won’t they take alarm then and clear off before we can round them up?”

“No, they will not,” replied the Flying Beetle, and there was laughter in his voice. “What! have you forgotten the mechanics, the engineers, the electricians—the ground staff, if I may call them so? Do you think they will allow the pilots to bolt and leave them

in the lurch? Never, Beverley, if they have any sense at all.”

There was sheer commonsense in the words. I certainly could not visualise the scum which comprised the ground staff standing idly by whilst the pilots cleared off by means of the only form of transport from the island. And certainly there were not enough machines to take even one-half of the ground staff I had seen.

“It looks to me as though there is going to be quite a flutter in this piratical dove-cote if I win through,” I remarked, drawing on my flying gloves.

“Yes, and I hope to be in a position to enjoy it,” remarked the Flying Beetle cryptically. “Go now, Beverley. Good-bye, and good luck!”

He held out his hand and I took it in a quick, firm clasp. I hated leaving him, but I knew the futility of argument. He was following his own mysterious course, and nothing I could say would cause him to deviate from it by a hair’s breadth.

Turning, I swung myself up to the front cockpit of my machine. Erkunstelt was writhing in his bonds in the rear cockpit; undoubtedly he was only prevented from roaring for aid by the thought of that gun in the hand of the Flying Beetle. But, even had he done so, I do not think the sleeping camp would have heard him through the heavy iron doors of the hangar.

Those doors were now slowly sliding back as the Flying Beetle pressed the electric switch which controlled them.

“All right?” he cried, “I am going to unhitch the runway cable!”

“Yes, all right,” I replied.

I heard a click as the cable slipped loose, then slowly my machine began to gather way. We emerged from the hangar into the murk of the Arctic night and, with ever-increasing speed, rumbled down the runway into the water.

I turned in my seat. Silhouetted against the light which streamed from the hangar, a slim, black-clad figure was standing at the head of the runway. He waved once to me and, as I switched on and opened up my engine with a shattering roar, he merged with the shadows and was gone.

CHAPTER XI

I AM FOLLOWED

I GAVE the engine full throttle and we tore across the water, away from Desolate Island. I watched the speedometer needle flickering upwards, then pulled gently on the control stick and we took the air in a long, upward climb.

Pressing on the rudder bar I swung the machine towards the west-south-west, where lay the distant coast of Greenland. I knew that the roar of my engine in taking-off would rouse the sleeping camp and that it would not be long before Vorsorge and Kauterfauld would be released; then, when the facts were known, I might expect Erkunstelt's wolves to come thundering on my trail.

Certainly they could have no definite knowledge as to which way I had gone. The gagged and bound guard on the floor of the hangar would be able to tell them little, for the Flying Beetle and I had conversed in voices too low for him to overhear what we said.

True, I must take either the Greenland or Spitsbergen route, but both allowed for a great deviation of compass course. The chances were in my favour of reaching the mainland without being sighted by the pursuing machines.

For long hours I drove onwards, hunched over my controls. Below were the dreary wastes of the Arctic ocean, the drifting snowfields, white and ghostly in the murk, and I grew uneasy, as there came no lightening of the sky to tell of the coming of day. Time and again I glanced outboard, and ever it seemed to grow blacker towards the north.

Then came realisation and, with it, an almost numbing despair—a storm was creeping in on me from the flank. I had wild thoughts of swinging due south and running before it, but it was essential that I should reach the mainland as soon as ever possible, and get in touch with the Admiralty.

The air grew colder and more cold, and ever that black pall of cloud crept closer in on me. Something white swirled and danced madly in the slip-stream of the racing propeller. It was a mass of snowflakes. And then, without warning, the machine was thundering through a world of blinding, eddying whiteness. The storm had swept down on me with terrible suddenness.

I pulled on the control stick in an endeavour to climb above the storm clouds. The altimeter needle crept upwards from 1,000 feet to 1,500 feet. Then it became more sluggish in its action till finally it stopped, flickering, at the 1,600 feet mark.

I glanced outboard at the white blanket of snow, which was every minute piling thicker on my wings and struts. And when I looked again at the altimeter the needle had commenced to slide backwards. I knew then that I could no longer climb; that the accumulated weight of snow was remorselessly forcing the machine down.

I could scarce see my wing-tips through the swirling whiteness. I glanced round. Erkunstelt was crouching in his cockpit, seeking some protection from the stinging, cutting flakes. Only his gloved hands, lashed to the gun mounting, were visible.

I felt in my pocket for my knife and, leaning backwards, severed the rope which held his handcuffed wrists. The rope was frozen hard and it took me almost ten minutes of

resolute sawing and cutting before it finally parted. However, Erkunstelt was then able to make himself infinitely more comfortable—if, indeed, any comfort at all were possible in the midst of that blinding snowstorm.

By this time the machine had dropped to less than 500 feet. Below us, somewhere, was the sea; but I could see nothing of it at all as I peered downwards. All was blotted out by the thick, swirling flakes. I twisted the throttle handle, striving to get another fraction of an inch out of it, but to no purpose. The thundering engine was doing its utmost, and still we dropped lower and lower as we drove on through the madly-dancing flakes which eddied about us with such blinding density.

We were 100 feet above the sea when there came a momentary lull in the storm. I had a vision of leaden waters below me fringed by the white edge of a snowfield. I decided then to face the inevitable, and take to the water with a chance, maybe, of finding some shelter in the lee of the snowfield.

I shoved the control stick forward and closed the throttle to three-quarters; but, in that instant, the white, heavy flakes came swirling with increased ferocity and the water was blotted from view. However, I kept the stick forward and eased it gently back when I thought we must be feet only above the sea. Peering over the edge of the cockpit I caught a glimpse of grey water, then came a jar which almost lifted me from my seat and sent me sagging against the side of the cockpit.

It was as clumsy a landing as one could well imagine, and I count myself lucky to this day in not having buckled the undercarriage. But we were on the water, and that was all that mattered then. Pressing on the rudder bar I swung the machine towards where, by my reckoning, the snowfield should lie. The propeller was ticking over only sufficiently to keep way on the machine, and foot by foot we crept forward through the blinding storm. Continually I was forced to pass a gloved hand across my goggles as I peered ahead, leaning outboard away from the shelter which the cockpit afforded me.

Then, through the swirling snow, there loomed what seemed to be a solid wall of whiteness. I leant back in my seat and pressed on the rudder bar. The machine swung sluggishly and, as I released the pressure on the rudder bar, there came a faint, almost imperceptible jar. The starboard wing-tips had touched the frozen edge of the snowfield.

The next half hour dragged slowly by. I sat hunched over the controls, chilled to the very bone by sheer inaction. We found little shelter in the lee of the snowfield, and I wondered if any advantage it afforded was not more than outweighed by the added chill from that icy mass.

I took the precaution of keeping the propeller ticking over, in order that the engine might not cool off, as most assuredly it would have done in the space of a very few minutes. I had nothing at all to fear from Erkunstelt, even had he not been handcuffed. We were both of us faced with a common, deadly enemy—the grim Arctic itself.

I resolutely tried to keep the thought from me of what the end would be were the storm not to ease up, and when thirty minutes had dragged their weary length, according to the watch on my dashboard, there was a thankful prayer in my heart as I noted the swirling, blinding flakes were growing less dense.

Another ten minutes and the storm had passed, sweeping southwards. Above us were the grey Arctic skies, around us the cold and desolate sea. I set to work without delay,

clearing the half-frozen snow from wings, fuselage, and undercarriage as best I could. I worked quickly, and the exercise sent the blood coursing afresh through my veins, but it was the best part of an hour that I spent before I considered the machine fit to take the air again.

Only once did Erkunstelt address a remark to me, and then his voice was hoarse and eager.

“Listen,” he said, “I have a vast fortune in the banks of Europe. Put me ashore somewhere on the mainland—let me go free—and I will make you wealthy beyond your wildest dreams!”

“Shut your mouth!” I retorted, for I knew that only a brutal reply would serve him.

He cursed me then and, relapsing into silence, watched me with angry, brooding eyes as I cleared the snow. At length I clambered back into my cockpit and prepared to take off. Continually, whilst I worked, I had swept the sky towards Desolate Island with anxious eyes; but there had been no signs of any pursuing machine.

And now, as I adjusted my goggles and my hand closed on the throttle handle, I cast a final glance in that direction. The next instant I was on my feet and, with the belt of my flying coat, was frenziedly lashing Erkunstelt’s handcuffed wrists once again to the gun mounting.

For I had seen two tiny specks in the sky, far to the north-east. I required no one to inform me what they were. They were two of Erkunstelt’s fast fighting scouts and they were flying towards me at a terrific speed. Yet I had to spend precious seconds in tying Erkunstelt’s hands. If I was forced to fight—and that seemed inevitable—then a sudden shove in the back from his handcuffed hands at some crucial moment might easily mean death or disaster for me.

Fixing the last knot with savage haste, I slumped back into my seat and, giving the engine full throttle, tore across the water.

I pulled on the control stick and we took the air in a steep, upward climb. It was height I wanted, and I had none too much time in which to attain it. The pirate machines were less than a mile away by now, coming up at a terrific rate. I estimated their height at about 15,000 feet.

I turned and ran, climbing as I went. I certainly did not want to fight if I could avoid it. My machine would prove unwieldy and cumbersome in comparison to the active little single-seaters. It did occur to me for a moment that the pirates themselves might be somewhat chary at firing on me in case their bullets hit Erkunstelt in my rear cockpit. But I staked little on that supposition, for I could not conceive men of the type of Vorsorge or Kauterfauld worrying unduly about the fate of their leader when their own safety was in question. And indeed their plight would be desperate should I succeed in reaching the mainland and civilisation.

I cast a glance behind me. The pirate scouts were very close now, and they held an advantage in height by a full 300 feet. I decided to force the issue, rather than take the risk of having my tail shot off or by getting a burst of bullets through the back, by waiting till they dived on me.

I shoved the control stick forward and went seawards in a tearing nose-dive; then hard back I yanked the control stick, and took the machine up in a wild, soaring zoom. At the

top of the loop, when my undercarriage was pointing up into the grey Arctic sky, I whipped the control across and rolled.

The pirates must have followed me when I first dived, for a quick glance over the edge of the cockpit showed me that I had obtained a momentary advantage of height. Savagely I kicked on rudder, and whipping the control stick forward went down in a corkscrew dive, which took me straight towards the nearest scout.

I knew the lubrication of my gun was satisfactory—I had made sure of that whilst on the water. I pressed tightly on the trigger and the synchronised gun roared into life. The pirate wheeled to meet me in a sharp wing turn. But one thought was uppermost in my mind—before I could have any chance of success in emerging alive from this fight, I must even the odds.

And I saw my opportunity in the instant that the pirate pulled that wing turn. I thundered straight towards him, hoping against hope that I should have room in which to pull clear before we crashed. But I knew that he must complete that turn before he could bring his synchronised gun to bear on me. It was, in that fleeting instant, like firing at a sitting pheasant, as far as I was concerned.

And thankful indeed am I to say that I made no mistake. I pressed gently on the rudder bar, and knew that my every bullet was ripping him from engine cowling to cockpit. I had a vision of the black-clad pilot leaping to his feet, hands clutching at his throat. Then, as he crashed forward over the controls and his machine fell away into the death spin, I yanked my control stick back and went upwards in a zoom.

But I had no time for coherent thought. Even as I flattened out the floor of my cockpit splintered and I felt a sudden numbing pain in the leg. The second pirate was coming at me, firing as he came.

Let me here say that there are two golden rules to be observed in aerial warfare when pilot meets pilot in a duel to the death. The first is never to forget that one has unlimited space in which to manœuvre, and to take full advantage of that space. The second is a commonplace, filched from age-old battle lore, to the effect that offence is always the best defence. But how truly applicable it is to aerial fighting only those who fought in the air above the battlefields of Flanders during those mad days of war can know.

So I did not attempt to wheel in a sharp wing turn, as though I were stunting inside a hangar; I eased forward the stick and, giving the engine full throttle, tore downwards in a long thundering drive. Kicking on rudder, I banked with an abruptness which severely tested every strut and flying wire. Then forward went the control stick and, as the machine tore seawards in a tearing nose-dive, I pulled the stick back and went upwards in a zoom.

I completed the loop and went roaring down on the pirate who had followed me grimly, and was even then coming up on the zoom which would take him over in a loop. My hand clenched tightly on the trigger of the synchronised gun. I heard its vicious rat-tat-tat-tat! above the thunder of the engine and hot flame licked back almost to the cockpit wind-shield. The cartridge belts were whirling madly through the chamber as I drove down on the pirate with gun ablaze.

He whipped his control stick forward and fell away into a spin. I banked sharply for I had overshot my mark. He came out of the spin in a dive, then went soaring up into the grey sky with engine thundering at full revolutions. I followed him grimly, for I was

determined to keep harrying him now that the offensive was mine.

He completed a whirlwind loop and came tearing downwards, his gun belching flame and steel-coated bullets. I banked wildly and, as he roared past me, I swung in on his tail and went thundering seawards in his wake. My fingers were clamped tightly around the trigger of my gun. I do not think it could have been possible for me to have missed, so short was the range during those brief hectic seconds whilst our machines held that mad, downward dive.

To this day I do not know what actually happened to the pilot of that pirate 'plane. All I know is that he never pulled out of that dive before he hit the water. Whether his controls had jammed or whether a bullet from my gun had got him through the back must remain a matter for conjecture.

Suffice it to say that his seaplane struck the water with engine thundering at full revolutions. It was only minutes later that I landed beside where his machine had gone under, but there was no sign of him save a broad stain of oil and a few pieces of floating wreckage.

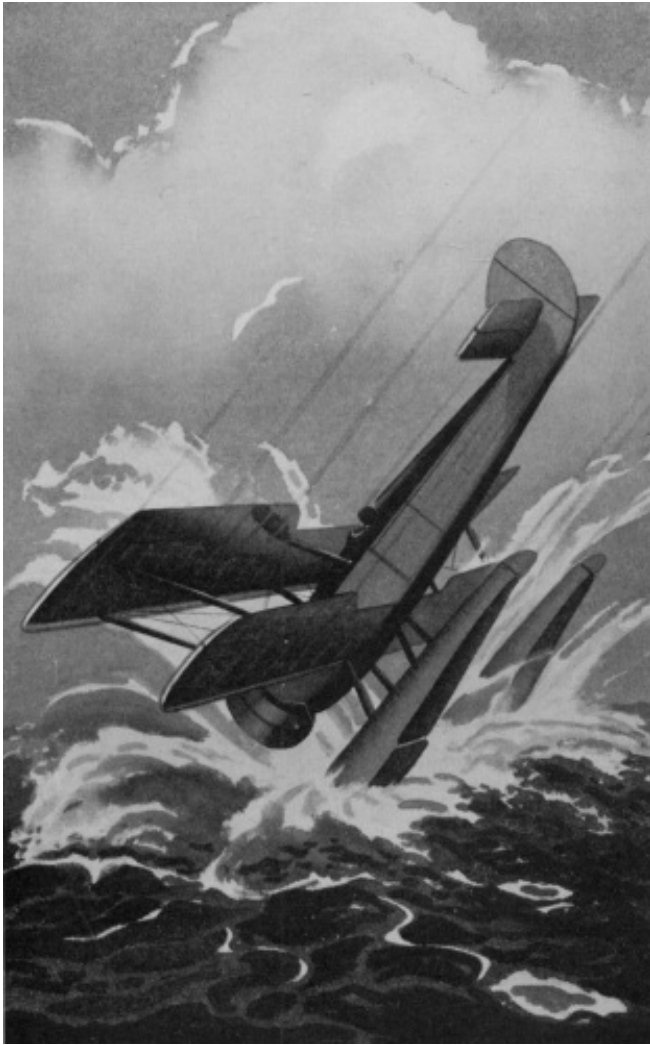
The other machine was drifting half submerged. There was nothing to be seen of the pilot and, relaxing my grip on the controls, I leant limply back in my seat, for now that it was all over I felt strangely weak as reaction set in.

I turned my head towards Erkunstelt, for, in very truth, I had forgotten all about him. He was leaning against the gun mounting, his bearded face grey with fear of the death which had stalked so close.

“You were not hit?” I asked him.

“Curse you!” was the snarled reply, “I wish I had let Zwolfe kill you that night at Four Gables.”

And he put such hearty venom into the remark that I concluded no bodily hurt could be troubling him.



[Facing page 166.](#)

HIS SEAPLANE STRUCK THE WATER WITH ENGINE
THUNDERING AT FULL REVOLUTIONS

CHAPTER XII

I REACH SKAGMIR

I WASTED no further time, but opened up the engine and took off. There was nothing I could do to aid my late attackers and, as for my wounded leg, that must perforce wait for attention until I reached the mainland.

Hour after hour we roared onwards through the bitter air, with nothing to break the eternal greyness of lowering sky and cold, inhospitable sea. I was chilled to the bone in the icy slip-stream of the whirling propeller. My leg had long since become stiff and utterly numb.

There were times, I think, when I almost lost my grip on things mundane and drifted perilously close to the unconsciousness which comes with sleep. The long, incessant, monotonous roar of the engine became something intangible and apart, its high, pulsating, thunderous rhythm striking a strangely soothing note in my scheme of things.

And then, when I had almost given up hope of ever sighting land, I saw a thin silver line far ahead on the distant horizon; it was the coast of Greenland. A few minutes later I was roaring over precipitous, snow-covered cliffs. Swinging southwards, I dropped to 500 feet, and thundered on, hugging that grim and desolate coast.

Another hour or more passed, then I saw below me the scattered buildings and wooden wharf of a small whaling station. Throttling down, I pushed forward the control stick and landed on the water.

“Ahoy!” I bellowed.

“We’re coming, mister,” bawled a fellow on the wharf, and I saw a small boat being launched.

It came shooting towards me, propelled by two pairs of strong and lusty arms.

“What is the name of this station?” I shouted as the boat neared me.

“Reyvik, mister,” replied one of the men, resting on his oars, whilst he stared curiously at the handcuffed Erkunstelt.

“Where is the nearest wireless station?” I demanded.

“At Skagmir, ninety miles further sou’ards along the coast,” was the reply.

“Right! Thank you,” I replied. “I am going to take off. Get your boat clear of my backwash.”

“Stop him!” shouted Erkunstelt wildly. “Ten thousand pounds for the man who overpowers this scoundrel!”

But the men in the boat only gaped at him, open-mouthed, and before he could give further tongue I opened up the engine with a roar.

It was considerably less than an hour later when, flying at 300 feet, I saw ahead of me, nestling in a cove the wharves and long, low buildings of the Skagmir whaling station. I saw also the towering steel mast of the wireless station, and knew that I had accomplished the last lap of my journey.

I landed on the water and ran in towards a squat, stout-timbered whaling vessel riding at anchor. A wisp of smoke was drifting idly from her ugly stack and I read her name, painted in clean white lettering, "Scottish Chieftain." Her low deck rail was lined with brawny seamen, staring at me with wondering eyes as I surged in alongside and switched off my engine.

"Is your skipper aboard?" I asked.

"Aye!" replied a tall, red-headed fellow with pleasant blue eyes and weather-beaten countenance.

"I would like to speak to him," I said. "May I come aboard?"

"Weel noo," replied the red-headed individual dubiously, "the owd man's below in his bunk and he's allus sair wild when deesturbed. As mate o' this ship, d'ye mind if I asks ye for why ye hae the handcuffs on yon feller behind ye?"

"He is my prisoner," I explained.

"Oh, aye, your preesoner," repeated the red-headed mate slowly. "Your preesoner, ye say. And for why should he be your preesoner, maister?"

"He has been arrested for murder and piracy on the Arctic air route," I replied. "I require the assistance of the master of this vessel."

"Jumpin' toads!" ejaculated the mate, galvanised into sudden action. "Murder, ye say, and piracy? Bide a wee noo, bide a wee, and I'll gan and fetch the owd man."

He vanished, to reappear within three minutes accompanied by a short, stout jovial-looking man, who addressed himself to me as he struggled into a reefer jacket.

"I'm Captain Bruce, master of this vessel," he said. "What can I do for you, sir?"

"I want you to put me ashore," I replied, "and to take charge of this prisoner until I have interviewed the overseer of the station."

"Right," replied the skipper, "come aboard and I'll talk to you in my cabin."

He rapped out an order and a rope ladder snaked down into my cockpit. I scrambled up to the deck, then stood waiting whilst the strong arms of the seamen hoisted the protesting Erkunstelt to the deck, after releasing his handcuffed hands from the gun mounting.

"Take that fellow to my cabin," said Captain Bruce curtly, and Erkunstelt was marched below, between a couple of brawny seamen. I followed with the captain after I had seen to the safe mooring of my machine.

Erkunstelt was seated at the cabin table, his handcuffed hands on the table in front of him. He lept to his feet as we entered.

"Look here, captain," he cried, "I demand to be released this instant. I——"

"Be quiet!" snapped Captain Bruce, and closing the door he turned to me. "Now, sir," he said, "I'll hear all about this business."

Briefly I put him in possession of the facts; dealing with the Admiralty's suspicions of Erkunstelt and telling how grimly those suspicions had been proved to be correct. Captain Bruce listened in silence and, when I had concluded, he turned to Erkunstelt.

"You deny this, of course?" he said.

"Yes, I deny it!" shouted Erkunstelt. "This man is lying to you. I demand to be

released at once!”

Captain Bruce splayed his hands on the table and, leaning forward, stared Erkunstelt full in the eyes.

“What will it be worth if I set you free?” he asked quietly.

I saw wild hope flash in Erkunstelt’s eyes.

“Ten thousand pounds, captain!” he cried hoarsely. “Ten thousand pounds, I swear it!”

“Then it’s you who lie!” roared the captain. “No innocent man would offer me that sum—or any sum—in return for his freedom. Everyone who sails these seas knows things have been going wrong on the Arctic air route, and I’ve heard a whisper that it’s piracy. You’ll face this thing in the courts and if this gentleman”—he indicated me with a gesture—“has really lied, as you say, then you’ll have nothing to fear.”

Then madness seemed to grip Erkunstelt when he saw his last hope fade. He raved and struggled in a frenzied attempt to free himself from the handcuffs. The two seamen who had brought him to the cabin were hard put to it to hold him. But suddenly, as though realising the futility of further resistance, he slumped heavily back into the chair and sat panting.

“Now, sir,” said the skipper, turning to me, “I’ll have that mate of mine take you ashore. You’d better see Eriksen. He’s overseer of this station. He’s a Dane, and a thundering good fellow.”

“Thank you very much,” I replied, “I’ll make arrangements to have the prisoner transferred ashore and kept there pending instructions from the Admiralty.”

“He’ll be safe enough here in the meantime,” replied the skipper grimly.

With a word to the two men who stood guard over Erkunstelt he led the way on deck. A boat was launched and two seamen rowed the mate and myself ashore. Eriksen, the overseer of Skagmir, was waiting on the main wharf. He had seen my machine land and was naturally curious to know who I was and what I wanted. He was a tall, fair-haired Dane, slow of speech, but of a commendable promptitude of action when I had put him in possession of the facts.

“I will have the man Erkunstelt brought ashore,” he said, “and lodged in the stone jail. But first I will accompany you to the wireless station.”

I thanked him, for this latter proceeding of his was very necessary. The operators at the wireless station would certainly not allow me to send out any message unless I had some one with me who was prepared to vouch for my *bona fides*.

The wireless station lay on the outskirts of the small township and, within twenty minutes of landing, I was seated at the powerful transmission set sending out a message in code to the British Admiralty. Then, for an hour I sat near the glowing stove in the operating room. Eriksen, in slow laboured speech, asked me many questions. Some I answered, some I evaded. After all there was little point in keeping much back, for within a very short time now the whole story must be given to the world.

Suddenly the Morse receiving set buzzed loudly. The Danish operator rose from his chair and turned to me:

“Message coming through for you, sir,” he said.

And, decoded, this was the message I received.

“H.M. Aircraft Carrier “Vulture” proceeding northwards under full steam. Locate one hundred miles west of Jan Mayen Island at eight a.m. to-morrow. Report to Captain Milvain in command who will remove prisoner from Skagmir. Instruct overseer to hold prisoner in meantime—Malcom.”

As I rose to my feet, vacating the operator’s chair, Eriksen asked without any show of curiosity in his voice:

“Satisfactory?”

“Yes,” I replied, and handed him the slip of paper upon which I had decoded the message.

He read it through and nodded.

“We will have Erkunstelt brought ashore at once,” he said. “I will go across to the “Scottish Chieftain” with you now.”

We left the wireless station and walked down towards the water front. It was when we rounded the wooden curing sheds and the grey waters of the bay which fronted Skagmir opened before us that I came to an abrupt halt.

A large oil-tanker was coming slowly into the bay. I only required one look at her to realise that it was the “Denham.”

The exclamation to which I gave vent drew Eriksen’s wondering eyes to my face.

“What is the matter?” he asked. “What has happened?”

I gripped him by the arm.

“You see that tanker?” I rapped. “Do you know her?”

“But yes, I know her,” he replied, “she calls here sometimes for stores.”

“And has it never occurred to you to question why such a vessel should be in these waters?”

“Yes, it has,” replied Eriksen slowly; “but I have examined her papers. She is the “Denham,” attached to the Arctic air route as a fuel ship.”

And at that I laughed aloud, although I’ll swear there was little of mirth in my laughter.

“She is Erkunstelt’s fuel ship!” I cried. “She is the pirate’s vessel. Her papers are forgeries. Come on, man! we must get Erkenstelt ashore before she drops anchor.”

I literally tumbled into the boat of the “Scottish Chieftain,” followed by a now thoroughly roused Eriksen.

“Put every ounce you’ve got into getting back to the ship,” I cried, and the seamen bent to their oars with gusto.

“You are sure she is a pirate vessel?” rumbled the overseer, balancing himself in the stern sheets as our boat tore through the water towards the whaler.

“Sure?” I repeated. “Why, man, I was a prisoner aboard her off the Faroe Islands. Her skipper is a fat little ruffian called Kurz——”

“Yes, yes,” broke in Eriksen, “that is right. Never did I like the look of either him or his crew.”

“And we’ll jolly well have cause to like the look of them less,” I replied, “when they discover that Erkunstelt, their chief, is a prisoner here.”

The “Denham” was still half a mile away, nosing her way slowly into the bay. I could see her high for’ard bridge crowded with men, and it did not require much intelligence to guess that their eyes were on the black pirate seaplane which was lying moored alongside the “Scottish Chieftain.”

As we surged in alongside the whaler I grabbed at the rope ladder which dangled overside and scrambled up to the deck. A few words sufficed to acquaint Captain Bruce with the position.

“Stay with the boat!” he bellowed, leaning over the rail and addressing the seamen in the boat below. Then turning to me he rapped, “Come on, we’ll get him ashore at once.”

He led the way at a run to the cabin where Erkunstelt was a prisoner. The pirate leader rose to his feet as we crashed open the door.

“Come on, walk!” I said, and jabbed my automatic in his back. “Get a move on!”

“What are you going to do with me?” he demanded, making no effort to stir.

“Don’t argue with the dog!” roared Captain Bruce. “Up on deck with him, lads, and quick about it!”

The two brawny seamen who were acting as Erkunstelt’s guard grabbed that struggling and protesting individual and frog-marched him up the ladder to the deck. The “Denham” was less than quarter of a mile away by now, and Erkunstelt saw her.

He wheeled on me, wild triumph in his eyes.

“I’ve beaten you!” he yelled. “I’ve——”

I pushed my rolled-up handkerchief savagely into his mouth, and snatching that of Captain Bruce, gagged Erkunstelt with a celerity of which I had not thought myself capable.

“Over with him, lads!” cried Captain Bruce, and Erkunstelt was lowered into the waiting boat. He writhed and struggled frantically, but one of the seamen growled:

“If you don’t stop it, I’ll bash you over the head.”

He stopped it then, and, with myself and Eriksen in the stern sheets, the boat shot away from the side of the whaler and headed towards the main wharf. But glasses had been on us from the bridge of the “Denham” and Erkunstelt’s bearded figure must have been plainly visible. I saw the tarpaulin being torn off the gun which stood in the lee of her deck houses. The wicked muzzle of a six-pounder swung towards us. . . .

Bo—o—om!

A shell whined over our heads, to explode with devastating effect among the sheds on the water front. I saw shivered wood and debris go spewing upwards.

“Keep going, men,” I cried, “they won’t fire on us as long as Erkunstelt is with us. That shell is merely a signal to stop.”

The seamen bent to their oars with a will and we surged in alongside the main wharf. We hauled Erkunstelt ashore, then hurried him to the stone jail which stood behind the offices and living quarters of Eriksen. A wildly excited crowd of men accompanied us. Some of them were from the curing sheds, others were seamen waiting for ships, whilst others were merely loungers and hangers-on.

“And what now?” demanded Eriksen, when we had Erkunstelt safely lodged in the solid jail.

“You realise, of course,” I said, “that the chances are we shall have to hold our prisoner by means of the gun? Kurz will make every effort to rescue him.”

“But now that he knows Erkenstelt is a prisoner,” objected the overseer, “will he and his men not realise that the game is up and that the best thing they can do is to clear out and save themselves.”

“I do not think they have that much intelligence,” I replied. “Remember, they do not yet know what has actually happened. They may look upon this capture of Erkunstelt merely as a set-back, and, in any case, Desolate Island has not fallen yet. It might well prove almost impregnable if they can reach it. I am certain they will make a determined effort to rescue Erkunstelt.”

“Yes, I agree with you,” grunted Eriksen.

“Then how many men can you arm?”

“A dozen—no more.”

“Then get them together and prepare to defend the jail in case it is attacked. I will go down to the water front and see what is happening.”

“But will not Kurz shoot you on sight?”

“He might, but I hope he will have neither the pluck nor the opportunity,” I replied.

So leaving Eriksen busily engaged in serving out rifles and ammunition to men whom he knew to be honest, law-abiding fellows, I set off for the water front, accompanied by the red-headed mate and the seamen of the whaler; and also, I may add, by a curious, excited crowd of lookers-on.

CHAPTER XIII

I SPEAK WITH KURZ

I REACHED the main wharf to find a boatload of armed ruffians from the “Denham” heading inshore with all speed. The squat Kurz was seated in the stern sheets, the tiller ropes in his hand.

“Ahoy there, Kurz!” I yelled. “Keep your distance!” and I sent a bullet from my automatic whistling over his head.

He barked out an order to the rowers, and they rested on their oars whilst he lumbered to his feet.

“I know you,” he roared, “you’re the spy they were going to hang!”

“But they didn’t,” I replied pleasantly, albeit I kept a wary eye on the men in the boat, for I did not know but that some fool might take a pot-shot at me.

“No, I can see they didn’t!” roared Kurz. “What are you doing with Erkunstelt?”

“Nothing at the moment,” I replied. “I hope shortly, however, to see him hanged for piracy.”

This seemed to take Kurz aback for the moment. Obviously the fellow was wildly anxious to know the true state of affairs.

“Has Desolate Island been captured?” he demanded.

“Kurz! Kurz!” I remonstrated, “why put your cards on the table like this? Why allow every one here, beyond myself, to associate you with the pirates’ lair at Desolate Island?”

“Answer my question, curse you!” he roared. “Has Desolate Island fallen?”

“Not unless there has been a rather violent sub-oceanic upheaval,” I replied.

“I’ll talk to you no longer,” he snarled. “Send for that fool of an overseer.”

“Sorry,” I replied firmly, “but it is quite impossible. Anything you’ve got to say, you can say to me.”

“Do you want to see bloodshed here?” roared Kurz.

“Certainly not.”

“Then send for Eriksen. I don’t know how you’ve managed to get hold of Erkunstelt, but you needn’t try to bluff me that we’re beaten.”

“Indeed?”

“No,” shouted Kurz, “I’ve got sense and I know there isn’t a warship anywhere near here. If there had been a warship within a couple of hundred miles of here you’d have taken Erkunstelt to it and not kept him here. That’s sense!”

Yes, certainly it was sense.

“So I’m going to take Erkunstelt away before a warship comes—if there’s one coming at all,” went on Kurz, “and if he’s not handed over peaceably, then we’ll take him by force, and if anybody in Skagmir’s got any sense, they’ll keep clear when I do take Erkunstelt. The gloves are off and I mean what I say.”

“You will not get Erkunstelt, either peaceably or by force,” I replied, “and if we had a

decent gun ashore, here, I'd blow you out of the water, ship and all."

"Would you?" snarled Kurz. "You wait, my man! Someone must have bungled the hanging of you, but when I get my hands on you I won't bungle."

"No," I replied, "I suppose long practice has made you perfect. Well, you're not getting Erkunstelt, so you'd better return to your ship."

For a moment Kurz stood silent. Then he roared:

"Listen to me, and I'm speaking to every man standing on that wharf. If Erkunstelt is not handed over to me within fifteen minutes, and that cursed British spy along with him, then I'll burn this station to the ground. That goes!"

He barked out an order to his men and they headed towards the "Scottish Chieftain." They made no attempt to board her, but cut the mooring ropes of my seaplane and towed the machine across to the "Denham."

I stood watching in silence, for what could I do to prevent them. To have fired on the boat as it lay close inshore would have been but to precipitate hostilities. And I wanted, if possible, to avoid a fight with Kurz and his men. The red-headed mate and two of his seamen from the whaler had revolvers. Those weapons, my own automatic, and the twelve rifles of which Eriksen had spoken, constituted our sole armoury.

It might well be asked why I, on first sighting the "Denham" standing into the bay, had not had Erkunstelt put in the rear cockpit of the machine and piloted him to safer quarters further along the coast. I would certainly have adopted that course had not the long hours I had spent in the air since leaving Desolate Island exhausted my fuel supply.

It would have been a great relief to me to have seen Kurz haul up his anchor and stand out to sea in an endeavour to lose himself and his men from the sight of the world, as many a less stubborn fool would have done on learning that his chief was captured. He would certainly not have got far, as soon every port in the civilised world would be on the lookout for the "Denham" and the whole of the northern waters would be scoured by aircraft in search of him.

I am convinced to this day—and I say it in all fairness to Kurz—that it was not loyalty to his captured chief which caused him to linger at Skagmir. It was, rather, sheer stubborn unimaginativeness, added to a savage vindictiveness against myself.

A boat shot away from the side of the "Scottish Chieftain" and was rowed rapidly towards the main wharf. Those on board the "Denham" made no attempt to fire on it and, when it bumped against the wharf, Captain Bruce and a couple of his men scrambled ashore.

"Is he going to fight?" he demanded.

"I am afraid so," I replied.

He nodded.

"I've brought you a couple of extra hands, as I thought that's how the land lay. They've got one gun between them and a box of cartridges. I would stay with you myself, but my duty is with my ship. You understand?"

"Yes, I quite understand," I replied, "and thank you very much for your assistance."

"That's all right," he replied. "I'll be getting back. Good luck to you!"

He shook hands and dropped into the boat. And in that same instant a shell from the

six-pounder screamed overhead, to burst amongst the long, low wooden buildings of Skagmir.

Another shell whined high overhead and burst full on the wireless station. Two boats, full of armed men, shot away from the "Denham" and headed towards the beach. From the prow of the leading one there came a sharp crack and a puff of grey smoke drifted slowly upwards. The red-headed mate, standing by my side, gave a choking cough. He staggered back, and would have fallen had I not caught him in my arms.

"They—they've got me!" he gasped, and his face was pallid.

I lifted him and, gently as I could slung him across my shoulder. Only too well did I know that the bullet had been meant for me.

"Make for the jail, men!" I cried. "It's hopeless staying here!"

Indeed, it was worse than hopeless, now that Kurz had shown his hand in earnest. To remain there would mean our being shot down by the pirates in the oncoming boats. But, as we turned, a great hulking lout shoved himself in front of me. He was the type of wharf rat which can be found in most any port throughout the seven seas. Big, bullying, dirty—his principal characteristic a decided antipathy to honest work of any kind.

"Ho! And what about us?" he growled. "What about us? D'ye think us is going to have a shambles made of this here station just to please you? D'ye think us is going to be shot down like dogs just because you've gotten them fellows' backs up?" and he flung a dirty hand in gesture towards the pirates' boats.

"You can fend for yourself!" I retorted. "You're a fool if you don't understand the situation by now. Keep out of the quarrel if it suits you, and no harm will come to you. Get out of my way!"

"Ho! I don't think——" he commenced, and then with creditable promptitude one of my companions hit him under the jaw.

It was a hefty blow and it sent the lout reeling out of my path. Bullets from the oncoming boats were beginning to fly thicker, and they had served the purpose of clearing the wharf of all but ourselves. And we most certainly did not stand upon the order of our going. We reached Eriksen's quarters without further casualty, and barricading the doors of both living quarters and offices, waited for the coming of the pirates.

I liked the look of the twelve men whom Eriksen had armed. They were dour, sturdy-looking fellows, and their faces were grim as they stood conversing in low, rumbling tones. Briefly, I put Eriksen in possession of what had transpired between myself and Kurz.

"Well," he replied grimly, "we will hold them off as long as we can. It is a pity they got the wireless station. We are cut off from the world now."

Yes, indeed we were. But we had little time in which to speculate upon that for, within a few moments, the pirates appeared, surging up the wide, unpaved street. And at their head rolled the squat Kurz with a white handkerchief tied on the barrel of his rifle.

Thirty yards from the windows of Eriksen's quarters he came to a halt.

"We want to speak to the overseer," he shouted.

"Yes,"—Eriksen spoke from an open window of the long, low building—"what do you want with me?"

“Hand over the prisoner, Erkunstelt, and we’ll clear out peaceably. We want the British spy as well. Hand ’em over and we’ll clear out. If you refuse, then we’ll burn down this whaling station.”

“I do refuse,” retorted Eriksen, “and you interfere with us at your peril!”

“All right then,” shouted Kurz, whipping his rifle to his shoulder, without pausing to remove the dirty white handkerchief which dangled from the barrel.

Eriksen leapt back from the window. A bullet whined within an inch of his head and spanged dully against the opposite wall.

“Fire, men!” I cried. “Let ’em have it!”

Our men leapt to the windows of the long room in which we had elected to make our stand. Blue rifle barrels slid across the sills and there came a crashing volley.

“Keep firing!” I yelled, and volley after volley was poured into the pirates.

Half blinded by the swirling, acrid smoke, I peered through the window at which I had posted myself. The pirates were dashing wildly for cover, leaving a full dozen of their number either dead or wounded on the ground. Kurz was not hit. He had escaped by throwing himself flat on the ground the instant he had fired his treacherous shot. I saw his squat form dodge around the corner of a building, and I sent a shot after it.

There came a lull then. So far we had escaped without casualty, save for the red-headed mate of the “Scottish Chieftain.” But Eriksen’s expert hands were already tending him and, as I met the kindly eyes of the Danish overseer, he nodded and said:

“A clean wound—he will pull through.”

Opposite us, across the wide, unpaved street, was a long, low, one-storied store-house, and this the pirates evidently decided to make their vantage point, for from its unshuttered windows and rude ventilation holes they suddenly poured a withering fire into us. Three of our men went down in that first furious burst of firing, and we were forced to retreat from the windows. The pirates continued to fire without cessation, and a perfect hail of bullets tore through our windows, spattering against the opposite wall.

They were firing from wide angles, and it was literally asking for death to attempt to raise one’s head to return the fire. Then, above the crash of musketry I heard a faint crackling noise. The room also seemed to be growing considerably warmer. Eriksen’s hand closed on my arm, and turning I found him crouched by my side, his face very grave.

“They’re burning us out,” he said. “They’ve set fire to the building.”

It was only too true. Covered by their comrades’ bullets, some of the pirates had placed great petrol-soaked piles of wood against the blind end of our quarters, and now, mingling with the acrid smoke of exploded cartridges, there came the pungent smell of burning.

The firing of the pirates across the street suddenly ceased, and to our ears came the bawling voice of Kurz:

“Ahoy, in there! If you come out now with Erkunstelt and the British spy, we’ll not harm you. If you refuse we’ll shoot every man of you down like a dog, when the fire drives you out.”

This then was the ultimatum. There was only one course left open to me.

“Bring the prisoner in here,” I said to Eriksen.

“What are you going to do?” he demanded.

“Surrender myself to Kurz, taking Erkunstelt with me,” I replied, although the thought sickened me.

“No, no!” he protested, “there must be some other way!”

“There is no other way, if the lives of these men here are to be saved,” I replied. “Go and fetch Erkunstelt and, in the meantime, I will have the barricades removed from the doors. Hurry, man, this room will be alight in a moment!”

Without another word Eriksen turned away and passed through the door which opened into the corridor leading to the jail. He was back within three minutes, the handcuffed Erkunstelt walking in front of him.

The heat of the room was by now almost stifling, and the crackling of the burning building had developed into a subdued roar. The room was full of blinding smoke and, coughing and gasping, the men were pulling the barricades away from the door which led out into the street.

“Ahoy, in there!” came the voice of Kurz again, “are you coming out or——”

The remainder of his words were drowned in a long, rumbling explosion. Oblivious as to what might be my end, I rushed to the window and peered out, wiping my streaming, aching eyes, which were half blinded by the smoke. Then I let out a yell, for wheeling low over Skagmir was a white seaplane, the red, white and blue circles showing vividly on the bottom of its lower planes.

The machine thundered low over the store-house which the pirates had seized. I saw a small black object hurtle down from its bomb rack, and again there came a dull explosion as a small bomb burst in the rear of the building.

“Come on, men!” I yelled, and forgetful of the handcuffed Erkunstelt, I led the rush into the street, for now our barricades were down.

The pirates were running pell-mell from the half-wrecked and flaming store-house, driven out by another bomb.

“Let ’em have it, men!” I bellowed, and we crashed volley after volley into them.

I do not know whether those pirates could have been rallied had they possessed a strong leader. I doubt it, for if ever men were utterly demoralised they were. Wildly they ran for the water front and, wheeling, the white seaplane dived on them, its synchronised gun spitting a deadly stream of lead.

That indeed was the *coup-de-grâce*. Throwing their rifles from them the pitiful remnant of the pirates dropped full length to the ground, where they lay, grovelling and howling in token of surrender.

CHAPTER XIV

ON THE "SCOTTISH CHIEFTAIN"

By the time the grey dusk of the Arctic night came creeping in across the waters, peace had once more descended on the whaling station of Skagmir. We had experienced little difficulty in rounding up the pirates and placing them safely under lock and key.

The "Denham" was ours. Kurz had left only three men on board, and they had surrendered the ship and themselves without a struggle. Eriksen's quarters had burned to the ground, and all that now remained standing there were the blackened walls of the small jail. Erkunstelt and Kurz were safely lodged in a cabin aboard the "Scottish Chieftain" with an armed guard mounted over them.

And, in an adjoining cabin, four of us sat at dinner discussing the events of the day. There were Eriksen, Captain Bruce, myself, and Chittenden, the pilot, who had come to our rescue that morning.

Never will I forget my first meeting with Chittenden, as after landing on the waters of the bay, he had come walking up the main street of Skagmir, a revolver in one hand, but merely interest in his laughing, boyish face.

"Awf'ly glad I butted in, don't you know?" he had drawled. "Have you collected all the piratical gentlemen or have a few gone to earth somewhere?"

"No, I think we have then all by now," I had replied, "but where the dickens have you come from?"

And then he had explained. His seaplane was one of the fighting machines detailed to patrol the Arctic air route. That morning, whilst flying south of Skagmir, he had received a wireless message from the main aerodrome at Belfast, instructing him to proceed to Skagmir, following a report which had come through from the Admiralty to the effect that Major Beverley was waiting there with a prisoner.

"My orders were to place myself at the disposal of this Major Beverley," he had continued. "Er—awf'ly glad I arrived in time—what?"

I had then introduced myself, and soon learned the remainder of his story. He had landed on the water near the "Scottish Chieftain," which was firing distress rockets to attract his attention. From Captain Bruce he had learned what was afoot and had promptly taken the air again.

"But how did you know which building we were in and which housed the pirates?" I demanded.

"I know Skagmir," he had explained. "I often drop down here—it is my most northerly point. I knew from Captain Bruce that you were barricaded in Eriksen's quarters, so I surmised that the johnnies popping at you from across the street were the jolly old pirates. I had to be careful to drop my bombs in the rear of the building, or I might have damaged you fellows—what?"

"A risk which we would most cheerfully have taken," I had assured him. "I'm surprised however, that the men on the "Denham" didn't attempt to prevent you taking the

air.”

“They did,” had been his reply, “they potted at me with a revolver, but I gave ’em a burst of the synchronised gun, as I swung towards ’em before taking off. That sent ’em scuttling below decks.”

And thus it was that Chittenden had arrived in the nick of time. Had he been ten minutes later I do not care to think of what might have happened. And all these things we discussed that night as we sat at dinner aboard the “Scottish Chieftain.”

How vividly it all comes back to me now, when, dinner over and the pipes of Captain Bruce and Eriksen aglow, we sat on in that cosy cabin talking of those things which are dear to the heart of all adventurers. Many were the strange tales of Arctic seas told by the whaling skipper and the slow-voiced Danish overseer. Ah, could I but recount them to you as they were told to Chittenden and me that night! grim tales of the eternal snows, of the gripping, crushing ice; grand tales of men who had died like men with their faces towards the silent Northland; weird tales of phantom ships which, manned by ghostly crews, cruised o’er those desolate waters.

And then the talk turned on flying and on the war days in France, and I told of those men—nay, boys—who, amidst the battle-smoke, had added a glorious page to Britain’s history. I told of Captain Ball, that gallant boy, perhaps the greatest fighting pilot of them all. I told of that never-to-be-forgotten day over the battlefields of France when, leading his squadron, he encountered a German squadron led by Baron Richtofen, the finest war pilot and flying ace Germany had ever known.

Waving back their squadrons Captain Ball and Baron Richtofen went forward to do battle alone, like two gladiators of old. And, whilst their wheeling squadrons watched, those two great aces fought out their duel high above the stricken fields of France. For thirty minutes they dived, looped, side-slipped and rolled, yet neither had registered a fatal hit.

It was then that Captain Ball’s gun jammed and Baron Richtofen ran out of cartridges. It seemed as though both realised that the fight was over. Circling widely they came back into line; wing-tip to wing-tip they flew whilst each pilot gravely saluted the other, then banking, they went earthwards towards their respective aerodromes.

Captain Ball of immortal memory! There came an evening in France when he flew into the heart of a golden sunset never to return. But the great tradition of Britain’s fighting airmen, which he did so much to found, will never die.

And I told of that strange, but gallant, personality who was known throughout France as the “Mad Major.” You have heard of him, have you not, that British officer whose amazing courage was a by-word both east and west of the trenches? You know, do you not, how he used to go into the mess in France a few minutes before lunch and say, “I shall go up and have a fight now if I can find anybody to fight with.”

Time and again he missed death by a hair. Vowing the aeroplanes were not exciting enough, he managed to get himself transferred to the balloons. And then, whilst up in the basket of a captive balloon taking note of enemy movements behind the line, he was shot down in flames by a German machine.

With what frenzied haste the winch party hauled the flaming balloon to earth, hoping against hope that they would not be too late to save the Major. Scarce had the blazing

mass reached the ground than out stepped the Major. And how indignant he was that they had pulled him down before he had managed to deal with the men who had set his balloon on fire.

Back to the aeroplanes he went, being disgusted with balloons; and one afternoon he flew over a deserted German aerodrome. Indignant because no enemy machine came up to fight him he dropped a note, stating:

“I shall come back at three o’clock! Send some one up to fight me!”

True to his word he arrived back over that aerodrome at three o’clock. Thirty minutes later a German aeroplane dropped the Major’s uniform on the Major’s aerodrome in France, and pinned to the uniform was a note which told its own tale in two terse and tragic words:

“We fought!”

Thus passed the “Mad Major.” But, wherever air veterans of the war foregather, there you will hear tales of his magnificent courage, his supreme daring, his superb contempt for danger.

And thus the talk ran on, till at length I rose to my feet and expressed my intention of turning in, for I had to be early astir in the morning to pick up the “Vulture” off Jan Mayen Island. Captain Bruce and Eriksen knocked out their pipes and pushed back their chairs.

“We’ll look after your prisoners till you want ’em, Major,” said Captain Bruce grimly. “I’m going to lie here, at Skagmir, till I see the end of this business. Eriksen will make my ship his headquarters till he has fixed up something ashore.”

“Indeed, it is good of you, Captain,” I replied. “I shall certainly see that the assistance which you and Mr. Eriksen have given me will be reported in the proper quarter.”

“Don’t say anything about it,” interposed Captain Bruce hastily, “we only did what was our duty.”

“And you, Chittenden,” I said, turning to that youthful pilot, “you will finish off your excellent work by remaining here until the “Vulture” comes for Erkunstelt and Kurz.”

“Yes, sir,” he replied. “Do you think any more of these pirate johnnies will pop up here?”

“No, I don’t,” I replied emphatically, and noted the disappointment in his face, “but it all depends on what is happening at Desolate Island. However, you will stand by here, in case any pirate machines are searching the coast for Erkunstelt.”

Before I turned in I went to the cabin where Erkunstelt and Kurz were prisoners. Erkunstelt greeted me with a glare, Kurz with an oath.

“Have they given any trouble?” I asked the seamen who were on guard.

“No, sir,” replied one of the men with a grin, “they’ve spent the time in calling each other every name they could lay their tongues to.”

“But why?” I exclaimed in surprise. “What is wrong between them?”

“Well, sir,” chuckled the seaman, “it seems as how Erkunstelt is mad with Kurz for not rescuing him, and that Kurz is wild with himself for ever having *tried* to rescue him. They’ve been going at each other all day, sir. Very comic to listen to, sir. Ho, yes! very comic indeed. If their hands was loose I think they’d be scrapping, sir.”

“Well, look after them,” I replied, and turned away.

Perhaps there was something quaintly humorous in the idea of Erkunstelt and Kurz blaming each other for their misfortunes; but during the days which had passed I had walked too close with tragedy to be able to conjure up a smile, neither did I wish in any way to appear to gloat over fallen foes—even if those foes were two most inhuman and blackguardly scoundrels.

Although I was utterly weary I lay awake a long time in my bunk that night. I thought of what might be happening at Desolate Island, and I thought of what the morrow might bring. The pirates were not beaten yet. Erkunstelt was lost to them now, but they could still find a worthy leader in either Vorsorge or the shifty-eyed Kauterfauld.

And I wondered how it was with the Flying Beetle, alone on that desolate, sea-girt rock, dwelling in the very midst of his enemies. If by some ill-chance they had captured him, then he would surely be dead by now.

Ah, well, even now the “Vulture” would be pounding northwards, and if harm had come to the Flying Beetle, then grim indeed would be the reckoning. And, with that thought to give me some small sense of comfort, I at length fell asleep, lulled by the lapping of the water against the stout timbers of the “Scottish Chieftain.”

CHAPTER XV

HOW I RETURNED TO DESOLATE ISLAND

I WAS early astir the next morning and, after an excellent breakfast washed down by steaming hot coffee, I pulled on my flying kit. The black pirate seaplane in which I had brought Erkunstelt from Desolate Island was undamaged. I had spent two hours the previous day in giving the machine a thorough overhaul and had replenished the fuel tanks from the supply of petrol and oil carried aboard the "Denham."

Captain Bruce, Eriksen and Chittenden were on deck to bid me farewell. They wished me good luck and God speed as I shook hands with them. Then I went overside and dropped into the cockpit of the seaplane. Five minutes later I was tearing across the water to take the air in a long, upward climb. I circled once over the "Scottish Chieftain," then swung the machine on to a south-easterly course towards distant Jan Mayen Island.

I climbed till the altimeter needle registered my height as 10,000 feet. The engine was thundering with that deep, pulsating rhythm, which gives token of perfect running. For two hours I flew, scanning the grey stretch of waters ahead, then, far away on the distant horizon, I saw a smudge of smoke from the stacks of a large vessel steaming northwards.

Shoving the control stick forward I went towards her in a long dive, and, as I approached I saw that it was indeed H.M. Aircraft Carrier "Vulture." Never shall I forget the perfect picture she made that morning as, driven by her 200,000 h.p. engines, the mighty bulk of her drove through the grey Arctic sea at a full forty-five knots.

Smoke was pouring from her great encased stacks, set aft of the flying deck, and water cascaded high from her sharp, cutaway bows. The flying deck glistened white as driven snow the whole of its 900 feet in length.

I knew that in the hangars below the flying deck were housed eight squadrons of fast fighting scouts and a squadron of big, twin-engined bombers. Her grey and mighty hull gave an impression of strength as ruthless as that of the cold grey sea. Indeed, she looked superb, that great triumph of Britain's dockyards.

As I roared low over her masthead I saw uniformed figures on the high bridge set for'ard of the encased smoke stacks. My machine was only fitted for an aquatic landing, so throttling down my engine I dropped to the water a mile ahead of her. Slowly she began to lose way and, as she came abreast of me, a boat was lowered. Five minutes later I was being conducted up the bridge ladder to where stood Captain Milvain, who was in command.

"Acting on instructions from the Admiralty, sir," I said, saluting, "I have come aboard to report."

"You are Major Beverley, who has been instrumental in locating the base of these air pirates?" he asked. "You have come on from Skagmir?"

"Yes, sir."

"Have you anything further to report apart from the capture of the pirate leader and the locating of the base at Desolate Island?"

Briefly I told him of how the “Denham” had arrived at Skagmir for stores, having, as I had learned from the sullen crew whom we had captured, made a leisurely voyage from the Faroe Islands, after fuelling Erkunstelt’s four seaplanes.

When I had concluded the story of Kurz’s unsuccessful attempt to rescue Erkunstelt, Captain Milvain turned to Colonel Carstairs, who was in command of the aeroplane squadrons aboard the “Vulture.”

“I will stand in to Skagmir and take all the prisoners aboard,” he said. “Will you question Major Beverley?”

“Can you lead us to Desolate Island if we take off now?” demanded Colonel Carstairs, turning to me.

“Yes, sir.”

“How many machines do you estimate these pirates have?”

“At least twenty, sir,” I replied. “Fifteen or sixteen double-seater fighting seaplanes and four fast fighting scouts, to my certain knowledge.”

“H’m!”

The Colonel caressed his clean-shaven chin reflectively.

“And their base, Desolate Island, is fortified, you say?” he demanded. “A regular rabbit warren of caves?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Very good! We will take two squadrons of fighting scouts and two bombers. Four additional scouts will accompany us as escort to the bombers. We will take off in ten minutes. I will provide you with a machine. You will lead the formation until we sight Desolate Island, then fall back into position behind me.”

“Very good, sir,” I replied.

Then from the bowels of that mighty vessel fast fighting scouts were brought up to the flying deck by means of hydraulic lifts. Within seven minutes the scouts and bombers were drawn up ready for taking-off, every pilot in his cockpit.

The “Vulture” was tearing through the water, her great speed helping to provide the necessary air resistance for the take off of the machines. The squadrons numbered ten machines each and, including bombers, escort and myself, we numbered twenty-seven machines all told. Out of that total twenty-one were fighting machines, as neither the bombers nor their escort would take part in any aerial battle unless forced to do so in order to defend themselves.

The thunder of the high-powered engines was deafening, and the small white scouts quivered against the chocks. My machine was in the forefront, side by side with that of Colonel Carstairs. Watching him, I saw his gloved hand shoot up. In response to the signal, the waiting mechanics whipped away the chocks in front of the tyred wheels of the undercarriages.

Our machines shot forward like greyhounds from the slips. I saw the black taking-off line swirling towards me and, as I pulled on the control stick, we took the air in a steep, upward climb. Circling, I saw the remainder of the machines take off, the bombers being last of all.

At 5,000 feet each squadron fell into V-shaped fighting formation. The escort

machines formed themselves into diamond-shaped formation around the bombers, 1,000 feet below us, and we swung northwards towards Desolate Island.

Hour after hour we thundered on through the bitter cold of the Arctic skies. I found myself thinking of that first flight which I had made to Desolate Island with Zwolfe—poor, gallant Zwolfe who had died that I, his enemy, might live. Always shall I think of him as I saw him, when weak, ill, swaying on his feet, he faced Erkunstelt and his blackguardly following. He knew full well that he was tempting the death which came his way, yet he never wavered.

It seemed strange now to be returning to Desolate Island at the head of a mighty squadron bent on wiping out, once and for all, that hornet's nest. I wondered what would be the feelings of the Flying Beetle when he saw us approach—if indeed he were still alive; and also I wondered what the pirates themselves would think.

Then far ahead, stark and forbidding against the drifting snowfields, as it reared itself from the waste of waters, I saw Desolate Island. Throttling down my engine, I fell back until I was flying wing-tip to wing-tip with Colonel Carstairs. With gloved hand I pointed ahead. He nodded, and from his cockpit there floated downwards the white Verey light, which was the signal to close up into battle formation. Below us the bombers and their escort commenced to fall back.

And then, from the grey waters which fringed the base of the rugged cliffs of Desolate Island, I saw a host of black pirate machines take the air. Hovering over Desolate Island whilst they climbed, they looked like huge black birds of prey rising from their eyrie. Steadily we thundered towards them and, falling into formation, they turned to meet us.

Our height was fully 10,000, whilst that of the pirates was scarce 6,000. They numbered twenty-two machines, and were split into two V-shaped formations, but the evenness of numbers was no excuse for their reckless fool of a leader bringing them forward to do battle with us, who held an advantage in altitude of 4,000 feet, or more.

Some may be disposed to argue that there had been no time in which the pirate machines could have attained an altitude equal to our own, but knowing we must pursue, surely their leader could have swung the formations towards the north and run before us, climbing as he went, then, when at least a greater height had been attained, he could have turned and fought.

However, I had little time for any such speculations then. A red Verey light dropped flaring seawards from Colonel Carstairs' cockpit. It was the signal of battle. Forward went our control sticks and, with engines thundering at full revolutions, we tore downwards at the pirates. Each British squadron swung on the dive, driving straight at the nearest pirate formation. Our synchronised guns blazed into life, and I felt the hot flame from my gun muzzle lick back beyond the cockpit wind-shield.

I had a vision of the pirate machines shoving up their noses to meet our thundering dive, and then we were on them. Straight through both formations went our squadrons, keeping wing-tip to wing-tip, a solid wedge of flaming guns. Then up, banking steeply on the turn, and through the scattered pirate formations again, with guns roaring a staccato accompaniment to our thundering engines.

The sudden ruthlessness of our attack had completely demoralised the pilots of the pirate seaplanes. Looking down I saw black machines spinning seawards, some in flames,

others diving with engines full on, obviously out of control, and, amongst them, I saw more than one white-winged scout, for we had not come through scatheless.

But there was no time for more than one hasty glance; we had broken formation by now, and it was every man for himself. For fifteen minutes above the waters of that desolate and lonely sea we banked, side-slipped, looped and pulled every stunt known in aerial warfare. My lower port plane was ripped a full two feet, and more than one bracing wire and flying-wire was whipping loosely against the struts.

And then, in a momentary lull, I found time to take hasty stock of how the battle was going. There still remained eight pirate machines in the air and twelve of our own, apart from the bombers and their escort, wheeling a mile away, 2,000 feet above us. On the sea below drifted smoking and burning wreckage; I could see the cliff tops of Desolate Island dotted with men, obviously anxiously watching how their black-clad pilots were faring.

We joined battle again, for it seemed as though the pirates were prepared to fight to the last man. My ammunition was all but done, and I wondered if my comrades were in a similar pass. Then from Colonel Carstairs' machine, which was still in the air, a green Verey light dropped burning towards the sea.

The four fighting scouts which had formed the escort to the bombers saw that signal and understood what it meant. They came tearing towards us in a thundering nose-dive and, as they flashed downwards like silver streaks, each gun was trained on some wildly wheeling pirate seaplane. When that mad dive was over and the four scouts came up in a soaring zoom, four pirate machines were falling seawards in the death spin.

That shrewd blow, delivered when every man of us who had fought from the beginning of the battle had but a few rounds of ammunition left, proved the end of the fight. The four pirates who still remained in the air, threw their machines into spins and went seawards, in token of surrender.

Our machines were fitted with adjustable undercarriages, which allowed us to land on the water, and as we glided downwards the bombing machines moved forward towards Desolate Island.

B—oo—om!

A reverberating, sullen explosion, scarce audible above the roar of aero engines, rolled out across the dreary waste of waters. White smoke, like some strange, fantastically shaped ball of cotton-wool hung suspended over the bombers, then slowly drifted away into nothingness.

B—oo—om!

Again came that sullen reverberating report, and again the white smoke puff appeared magically over the bombing machines. The pirates on Desolate Island—the ground staff—were firing with anti-aircraft guns. They had not done so before, in case they hit one of their own machines.

Poor, misguided fools! Had they surrendered then, instead of half an hour later, when their gun crews lay sprawled face downwards by the anti-aircraft guns, then at least some of their lives might have been saved; for the escort scouts took the air again and, roaring down on the gun emplacements, sprayed a deadly hail of lead amongst the gun crews. The guns were silenced; but only after six 112-lb. bombs had hurtled down on Desolate Island did a white flag flutter from the topmost cliff in token of surrender.

And slowly we surged in towards the flat, natural jetty of rock which lay at the base of the cliffs.

CHAPTER XVI

I AGAIN MEET THE FLYING BEETLE

SULLEN-FACED, miserable, apathetic, the engineers and mechanics of Erkunstelt stood grouped on the jetty awaiting our coming. At their head was a gaunt and skinny figure, which I had little difficulty in recognising as that of Henri.

“Do you surrender?” shouted Colonel Carstairs.

Henri was evidently the spokesman, for he stepped forward.

“Yes, we surrender,” he replied. “You can come ashore.”

“Remember, if there is any treachery, then every man of you will be summarily hanged!” the Colonel informed them sternly.

And, undoubtedly, we were taking a certain risk in landing, for we were heavily outnumbered.

“There won’t be any treachery,” replied Henri shrilly. “We’ve no means of leaving this island, and we haven’t a cartridge, so we give ourselves up.”

We surged in alongside the jetty and stepped ashore.

“So you’ve come back, have you?” Henri greeted me snarlingly. “Dirty spy! I wish we’d hanged you good and proper!”

“Silence, you!” barked Colonel Carstairs. “Understand this, you men; I have despatched a machine with word that Desolate Island has fallen and that you are our prisoners. A cruiser will come here to take you off the island, and, till then, the less trouble you give me the better it will be for yourselves. Do you understand?”

They gave a sullen growl in token that they did understand.

“They won’t give any trouble,” snarled Henri, “I’ve made them see sense. We know when we’re beat. Some of them wanted to make a stand in the caves, but since our ammunition blew up we’ve been feeding the stoves with our rifle-butts.”

“Your machines were not short of ammunition,” remarked Colonel Carstairs drily.

“That was in another cave,” replied Henri. “The synchronised gun ammunition wasn’t harmed.”

“May I question this man, sir?” I burst out, for I was anxious to know if they had found the Flying Beetle.

“Certainly, Beverley,” replied the Colonel.

I grabbed Henri by the shoulder.

“Listen to me, you old wretch!” I snapped, “did you catch the Flying Beetle, as you boasted you would?”

The old fellow cackled shrilly.

“No, we didn’t,” he replied with a leer, “but I know where he is.”

“Liar!” grunted one of the men behind him. “You’re a liar!”

“I’m not,” screeched Henri, wheeling on him, “I’ve known where he is all along. I’ve fed him and clothed him, and looked after him, and—and now I hope he’ll do something

for me.”

“You dirty hound!” roared one of the pirates and they surged forward menacingly.

“Keep them off!” yelled Henri, and dodged behind me. “Keep them off, sir! Don’t let them touch me!”

“Back!” roared Colonel Carstairs.

For a moment I thought the men were going to rush us, but all the fight was already knocked out of them, and sullenly they came to a halt.

“They won’t hurt you,” I informed the quivering Henri contemptuously. “If you know where the Flying Beetle is go and ask him to come here.”

“I can’t do that,” whined Henri.

“Why not?”

“Because he won’t come.”

“You’re telling me a pack of lies!” I snapped. “I don’t know what on earth you expect to gain by it!”

“I’m not telling lies!” yelled Henri, “I’ll take you to him if you like, so there!”

I stared at him in puzzled silence. Certainly I did not believe him. For one thing I could never visualise the Flying Beetle making an ally of a treacherous wretch like Henri.

“All right, take me to him,” I said.

“Come on then,” replied Henri, and, turning, led the way towards the path which wound upwards to the cave wherein I had first met Erkunstelt on Desolate Island.

I glanced at Colonel Carstairs and he said:

“Yes, go, Beverley. In the meantime we will have these fellows placed in one of the caves pending the arrival of the cruiser.”

So I followed Henri up the narrow, twisting path, and thus we came to the deserted cave which had once been Erkunstelt’s living quarters. I followed the old wretch inside and glanced about me with gathering wrath.

“He is not here, you old fraud!” I cried.

“Where’s your eyes?” yelled Henri. “Where’s your eyes, man?”

Then an extraordinary change took place in him. His bent figure straightened itself with a jerk and, turning, he rapidly sponged his face at a basin full of colourless, strong-smelling liquid which stood ready on the table.

Next instant he wheeled on me. Gone were his wrinkles; gone the yellow, jaundiced tint from his skin. It was the Flying Beetle himself.

“You!” I cried. “You!”

“Yes, Beverley,” he replied with a smile, and held out his hand. “Wait till I get all the varnish and make-up off, then you’ll recognise me more easily. Wait till I get the white dye off my hair and let the bald patch grow again. It’s going to take me a few days to get back to normal, but Parkin made a thundering good job of me. I think, yes, I think this is Parkin’s masterpiece.”

“Parkin, the disguise expert?” I gasped, for I knew Parkin well. Attached to the British Secret Service, he was, without doubt, the finest exponent of his art in the world.

“Yes, Parkin,” replied the Flying Beetle with another smile. “He laboured long on me

in Berwick that day I sent Sir Douglas Malcolm the telegram, asking him to send you to Four Gables. He laboured long, and he laboured well.”

“But was—was that you who chivvied me out of the drive when I applied for a job?” I demanded weakly.

“Yes, I must plead guilty. I dared not let you know my real identity,” replied the Flying Beetle, “I had to live the part of Henri every moment of the time. Often I wondered if Erkunstelt’s sharp eyes would penetrate my disguise, but he was wholly unsuspecting.”

“And I suppose you deliberately provoked that yokel, knowing that I should come to your assistance, and knowing it would give you an opportunity of getting me into the Erkunstelt household in a plausible manner?” I said.

“Yes, exactly.”

“But where—where,” I demanded wildly, “is the real Henri?”

“In gaol,” replied the Flying Beetle. “When Sir Douglas Malcolm detailed me to investigate the raids on the Arctic air route I suspected Erkunstelt, owing to his previous efforts to purchase the landing ground rights, etcetera. I waited an opportunity of getting hold of the real Henri when he came into Berwick one day. By pretending I knew more than I did, I gave him such a fright that he confessed, but the confession of a servant was not enough to occasion Erkunstelt’s arrest, neither did we know the secret location of this base. Henri did not know, because he had never been here up till then. I had Parkin with me and, to cut a long story short, I took Henri’s place.”

“The risk was frightful.”

“No, it was not as bad as that, Beverley. I got Henri to tell me all about Erkunstelt’s habits; I questioned him for three hours and the knowledge I obtained, plus commonsense, saw me through in the *rôle*.”

“I see,” I said slowly, “but why did you not escape with me the night I left Desolate Island with Erkunstelt?”

“Because I still had work to do here. As Henri, I harangued the mechanics and engineers; I told them that we mustn’t allow the pilots to bolt and leave us in the lurch. So we seized the machines and the bullion cave and kept the pilots here to fight for us in case a British squadron arrived. I made the mechanics realise that, with your escape, the game was up unless the “Denham” came to take us off.”

I told him then what had happened to the “Denham” and the fat Kurz.

“But there’s one thing more which I do not understand,” I said, “Desolate Island is ours, Erkunstelt is awaiting trial, his pilots are killed and his men prisoners; all this had happened when I stepped ashore here this morning. Now then, why did you continue to snarl at me in the *rôle* of Henri?”

The Flying Beetle threw back his head and laughed gaily:

“My dear old Beverley,” he replied, “I had to do it just once more because——”

“Yes, because?” I demanded grimly.

“Because, just once again, I wanted to see that delightful look of loathing which you kept specially for me.”

“Not for you,” I replied firmly, “for Henri!”

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Some illustrations were moved to facilitate page layout.

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[The end of *The Vultures of Desolate Island* by George E. (Ernest) Rochester]